

## RHETORICAL ANALYSIS A New Method for Understanding the Bible

I have often been asked to give an hour-long lecture to explain «rhetorical analysis»<sup>1</sup>. At the request of the journal *Brotéria*, I eventually put that short account in writing<sup>2</sup>. The present version, which in substance reproduces the Portuguese article, has, however, benefited from the remarks and suggestions by several readers whom I wish to thank warmly.

The subtitle of this article is at once quite true and entirely false<sup>3</sup>. It is true because up to now this method has been applied systematically only to a relatively small number of texts<sup>4</sup>; more to short texts like the psalms, much less to whole books<sup>5</sup>. The method is new also because it has been undergoing an important development only for a few years; an ever-growing number of exegetes is actually taking an interest in the composition of the texts they are studying. It must be added that it is still at its early stages, to the extent that very few authors handle it with real competence. However, it is incorrect to say that rhetorical analysis is new, seeing that its beginnings go back to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* by R. Lowth (1753), and especially to the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the work by J. Jebb and especially T. Boys, two major authors with whom the vast majority of exegetes, however, are unacquainted<sup>6</sup>.

Another point needs to be made concerning the subtitle. Is rhetorical analysis really an exegetical *method*? It would of course be more precise to say that it is one of the operations, one of the many stages in exegetical work, along with textual criticism, of lexicographical

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<sup>1</sup> With the title of «analyse structurelle» (in French) the method has been employed by several authors, including: J. RADERMAKERS, *Au fil de l'Évangile selon Saint Matthieu*, Heverlee – Louvain 1972; *La Bonne Nouvelle de Jésus selon Saint Marc*, Brussels 1974; with P. BOSSUYT, *Jésus, Parole de la grâce selon saint Luc*, Brussels 1981; see also M. GIRARD, *Les Psaumes. Analyse structurelle and interprétation*, vol. 1, Montréal – Paris 1984; ID., *Les Psaumes redécouverts. De la structure au sens*, vol. II: Ps 51-100 (624 p.); vol. III: Ps 101-150 (564 p.), Bellarmin, Montréal 1994 (see my two-part review in *Rivista Biblica* 45 (1997) 92-96; *Rivista Biblica* 45 (1997) 229-230; see also my article, «Analyse rhétorique du Psaume 51. Hommage critique à Marc Girard», *Rivista Biblica* 45 (1997) 187-226.

<sup>2</sup> «A Análise retórica. Um novo método para compreender a Bíblia», *Brotéria* 137 (1993) 391-408. For a short account of traditional exegesis and of rhetorical analysis, see R. MEYNET, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, *Rhetorica semitica*, Miami FL, 2010, 45-63..

<sup>3</sup> This is also the title of the French edition of the book I wrote about the method: *L'Analyse rhétorique, une nouvelle méthode pour comprendre la Bible: textes fondateurs et exposé systématique*, Paris 1989; English edition: *Rhetorical Analysis. An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, JSOT.S 256, Sheffield 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See the bibliography by A. DI MARCO, *Il chiasmo nella Bibbia, contributi di stilistica strutturale*, Turin 1980; see especially the one kept updated by Bernard Witek on our internet site: [www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org](http://www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org).

<sup>5</sup> Especially: A. VANHOYE, *La Structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Paris 1963 (1973<sup>2</sup>); ID., «*A different priest*»: *the Letter to the Hebrews*, *Rhetorica semitica*, Miami FL 2011; See the volumes published in the «Rhétorique biblique» (French), «Retorica biblica» (Italian), «Rhétorique sémitique» (French) and «Rhetorica semitica» (Spanish and English) series ([www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org](http://www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org) > Specialized series).

<sup>6</sup> The whole of the first half of *Rhetorical Analysis* is devoted to the history of the origin and development of the method, illustrated with extensive quotations from the main authors (pp. 43-166); the first chapter in R. MEYNET's, *Traité de rhétorique biblique*, *Rhétorique Sémitique* 4, Paris 2007, reproduces, in a slightly shortened form, that history of the method; it is also shortened in the English transl., *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, *International Studies in the History of Rhetoric* 3, Leyden – Boston 2012, 27-47.

research, of grammatical and syntactical analysis, of the history of the text, and others. That, in a way, reduces its signification but, on the other hand, confers greater importance on it. From this point of view, rhetorical analysis is not really one method among others which could be adopted or overlooked; it is an indispensable stage in exegetical research. Anyone preferring not to commit themselves on this matter will always be able to say that it is a question of an «approach» to the biblical texts.

Like all other exegetical approaches, the aim of rhetorical analysis is to understand the texts. It is convinced that, to achieve that aim, it is important, indeed indispensable, to bring out the *composition* of the text and, firstly, to establish its limits. Just as the linguist is concerned with identifying the limits of the sentences of the corpus he is studying. Biblical texts, apart from the psalms, do not contain any division marked either by titles or by typographical layout (such as starting a new line to mark paragraphs). The problem is not new; all exegetes have the same difficulty in fixing the beginning and the end of literary units. The only indisputable limits of a biblical book are the beginning and end of the book; inside the book, however, some division really is necessary! Most often it is done in a purely empirical way. And historico-critical exegesis, which has held sway for a century, has taught us to take only small units, the «forms» into consideration (miracle story, apophthegm, parable...). Most often, it has got us used to reading those small units separated from each other; in fact, as far as it is concerned, the gospels (but also the prophets) are only collections, somewhat disparate, of small units that circulated among the early communities, and which an editor (a collector!) one day decided to put together, without any real composition. Rhetorical analysis, however, claims that, even if one can reasonably imagine that short accounts may have circulated separately at the beginning, the evangelists are real authors who arranged their material in very well-planned compositions. Rhetorical analysis also maintains that these compositions do not conform to the rules of Graeco-Latin rhetoric, but to the specific laws of Hebrew rhetoric of which the New Testament authors are the direct heirs<sup>7</sup>.

But let us be done with principles and generalities! The following examples will speak for themselves. Let us start at the beginning, that is to say with the smallest unit, the bimember segment, or distich (in a very literal translation):

|                          |                         |           |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| For <b>not</b> in my bow | DID I TRUST             |           |
| and <b>my sword</b>      | DID <b>not</b> SAVE ME. | (Ps 44,7) |

The simple fact that the same thing is expressed twice, in two different forms, «directs attention to a meaning that can exist only ‘between the lines’. Understanding that leads me to an *idea*, different from all the concrete forms it may take but not separable from them»<sup>8</sup>. The reader could read the whole of Ps 44 and see how the whole poem, which contains 28 distichs (or bimember segments), walks on two feet from beginning to end. What, following R. Lowth, is called «parallelism of members» is the fundamental characteristic of all Hebrew poetry; in a broader sense, binarity marks all biblical literature. Things are always said twice, because truth cannot be enclosed in one statement but is there to be read either in the interaction of two complementary statements or in the clash of two contrary ones.

<sup>7</sup> See R. MEYNET, «Presuppositions of Rhetorical Analysis», in *Rhetorical Analysis*, 168-181.

<sup>8</sup> P. BEAUCHAMP, preface to *Rhetorical Analysis*, 13.

As, among very many other examples, in this short text in parallel composition:

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+ <sup>31</sup> **The queen** of **THE SOUTH** *will rise up* *at the judgment*  
 – *with* the men of *this generation*  
 – and *she will judge* *those people;*  
 . *FOR* she came from the ends of the earth  
 : to *LISTEN TO* **THE WISDOM** of **Solomon**;  
 = AND BEHOLD THERE IS MORE THAN **Solomon** HERE!

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+ <sup>32</sup> **The men** of **NINIVEH** *will rise up* *at the judgement*  
 – *with* *this generation*  
 – and *they will judge* *that one*  
 : *FOR* *THEY WERE CONVERTED* at **THE PROCLAMATION** of **Jonah**;  
 = AND BEHOLD THERE IS MORE THAN **Jonah** HERE!

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The second part of this short text (Luke 11,31-32)<sup>9</sup> might seem to be a simple repetition of the first part, a «doublet» as it is called, redundant, if not useless. And yet, to the function of insistence that cannot be denied it (repetition is the first figure in rhetoric!), complementarity is added, in this case multiple: the double sexual complementarity, between a woman («the queen») and the «men», and the geographical one, between the South and the Nord («Niniveh»), is one way of indicating totality (all the pagans will judge this generation); there is also, and especially, chronological and necessary complementarity between «to listen to» and «to be converted»; there is also complementarity between «the wisdom» of the king («Solomon») and «the proclamation» by the prophet («Jonah»), which is a way of saying that Jesus is at once king and prophet; lastly complementarity between the centripetal movement bringing the queen of the South «from the ends of the earth» to Israel and the centrifugal movement bringing Jonah from Israel to Niniveh. This example pinpoints the fact that when two literary units seem quite similar, one should not neglect to bring out the differences, because they have meaning, perhaps even more than the resemblances.

The following example is of the same order, but shows a fine concentric construction (Luke 14,7-14):

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<sup>9</sup> See R. MEYNET, *L'Évangile de Luc*, Rhétorique Sémitique 4, Paris 2005, 530; Rhétorique sémitique 8, Pendé 2011, 530; ID., *Treatise*, 139-140.

<sup>7</sup> *He said* to those who had been invited a parable,  
 noticing how they chose **THE FIRST PLACES**  
*saying* to them :

• <sup>8</sup> **«WHEN YOU ARE INVITED** by someone to a wedding,  
 – do not recline at **THE FIRST PLACE**,  
 : *lest* someone more worthy than you may have been invited by him,  
 : <sup>9</sup> and coming *the one who invited you and him* *say to you:*  
 . ‘Give the place to this man’.  
 = *Then* you will go with **SHAME** to occupy **THE LAST PLACE**.

• <sup>10</sup> But **WHEN YOU ARE INVITED**,  
 + go and fall at **THE LAST PLACE**,  
 : *so that* coming  
 : *the one who invited you* *may say to you:*  
 . ‘Friend, go up **HIGHER**’.  
 = *Then* there will be for you **GLORY** in the sight of all the guests. .

<sup>11</sup> For every man who **WHO EXALTS HIMSELF** **WILL BE HUMBLLED**  
 and **HE WHO HUMBLDES HIMSELF** **WILL BE EXALTED»**.

The re-writing of this text aims at showing how verse 10 is in every respect parallel with, and opposed to, verses 8-9; with, however, the variations necessary to avoid too mechanical a parallelism. In verse 10, the opposition between «falling» and «going up» will be noticed, as will the variation «higher» (and not «to the first place» which would be expected) which make way for the opposition «exalted»–«humbled» in verse 11.

These are the boundaries set for this text by almost all modern editions of the Bible. Indeed, for the western reader, heir to the Graeco-Latins, it is normal that a parable should end with the lesson drawn from it, as the fables of Aesop or La Fontaine often do. Verse 11 fulfils that function admirably.

Yet that is not how biblical texts are arranged. In fact, Jesus’ discourse is not over. To end it at verse 11 would be like cutting off the next segment from its second member:

If the Lord does not build the house,  
 in vain do the builders work (Ps 127,1).

Everyone sees clearly that the sentence is not finished! In fact, after addressing the guests, in verses 7-10, Jesus now addresses, in verses 12-14, «the host»:

<sup>12</sup> And he said to the one who had invited him:

- |       |   |   |                                 |
|-------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| •     | «WHEN YOU ARE HAVING  | a lunch or a dinner,                        |                                 |
| –     | do not invite   | <b>YOUR FRIENDS,</b>                        | or <b>YOUR BROTHERS,</b>        |
| –     |   | or <b>YOUR RELATIVES,</b>                   | or <b>YOUR RICH NEIGHBOURS,</b> |
|       |   |   |                                 |
|       |   | : lest they too invite you <i>in return</i> |                                 |
|       |   | : and you have a gift <i>in return</i> .    |                                 |
| ----- |   |   |                                 |
| •     | <sup>13</sup> But, WHEN YOU ARE HAVING                        | a feast,                                    |                                 |
| +     | invite  | <b>POOR-PEOPLE,</b>                         | <b>CRIPPLES,</b>                |
| +     |   | <b>LAME,</b>                                | <b>BLIND-PEOPLE.</b>            |
|       | = <sup>14</sup> And <b>BLESSED</b>                            | will you be                                 |                                 |
|       | = because they have nothing to give you back <i>in return</i> |   |                                 |
|       | = for it will be given back to you <i>in return</i>           |   |                                 |
|       | = at the <b>RESURRECTION</b>                                  | of the just.                                |                                 |

Here, too, the parallelism between the two pieces (12b-e and 13b-e) is striking; to the four terms in the list of those not to be invited there correspond the four terms of the list of those that should be invited. Note, as a major variation, the final addition of «at the resurrection of the just».

The parable is therefore double: in a complementary way, it is addressed to all, both to the one who had invited as well as to those who had been invited. And verse 11, «Every man who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted», is not just the conclusion of the first half of the parable, but also, in a way, the introduction to the second half. If each of the two halves of the parable is parallel in composition, the whole is concentric in construction. The «moral», or the proverb that sums up the whole, is not at the end, in conclusion, but at the centre; it is the heart of it, like the keystone. To my knowledge, only the translation of the New Testament into modern Hebrew<sup>10</sup> does not separate what Luke put together; it entitles the whole of Luke 14,7-14: «Lesson in morals for the person inviting and for the invited»<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> The Bible Society in Israel, Jerusalem 1976, 1995<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> By even inverting the terms, no doubt to attract the reader's attention.

|                               |  |                                   |                           |
|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| . <sup>7</sup> <i>He said</i> | to those who had been invited                                    | a parable                         | <b>FIRST PLACES</b>       |
| . <i>saying</i>               | noticing how they chose the                                      | to them:                          |                           |
| <hr/>                         |  |                                   |                           |
| :: <sup>8</sup>               | « <b>WHEN</b> <i>you are invited</i>                             | to a wedding by someone,          | <b>FIRST PLACE</b>        |
|                               | – <b>do not</b> recline  | at the                            |                           |
|                               | : lest someone worthier than you be invited by him               |                                   |                           |
|                               | : <sup>9</sup> and coming  | <i>he who invited you and him</i> | <i>should say to you:</i> |
|                               | . “Give the place to this person.”                               |                                   |                           |
|                               | = <b>Then</b> you you will begin with SHAME to occupy the        |                                   | <b>LAST PLACE.</b>        |
| <hr/>                         |  |                                   |                           |
| :: <sup>10</sup>              | But <b>WHEN</b> <i>you are invited,</i>                          |                                   | <b>LAST PLACE</b>         |
|                               | + go and recline   | in the                            |                           |
|                               | : so that coming   |                                   |                           |
|                               | :  | <i>the one who invited you</i>    | <i>may say to you:</i>    |
|                               | . “Friend, go up   |                                   | <b>HIGHER.”</b>           |
|                               | = <b>Then</b> there will be for you GLORY before all the guests. |                                   |                           |

|                   |         |                        |                          |
|-------------------|---------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| <sup>11</sup> For | whoever | <b>EXALTS HIMSELF</b>  | <b>WILL BE HUMBLD</b>    |
| and               | whoever | <b>HUMBLES HIMSELF</b> | <b>WILL BE EXALTED.»</b> |

|                                    |  |   |   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| . <sup>12</sup> <i>And he said</i> | to the one who had invited him:              |   |   |
| <hr/>                              |  |   |   |
| ::                                 | « <b>WHEN</b> <i>you give</i>                | a lunch or a dinner,  |   |
|                                    | – <b>do not</b> invite                       | <b>YOUR FRIENDS,</b>  | <b>YOUR BROTHERS,</b> <b>YOUR KINSMEN,</b> <b>YOUR RICH NEIGHBOURS,</b> |
|                                    | : lest they too invite you <i>in return</i>  |   |   |
|                                    | : and you have a gift <i>in return.</i>      |   |   |
| <hr/>                              |  |   |   |
| :: <sup>13</sup>                   | But <b>WHEN</b> <i>you give</i>              | a banquet,  |   |
|                                    | + invite                                     | <b>THE POOR,</b>  | <b>THE CRIPPLED,</b> <b>THE LAME,</b> <b>THE BLIND-PEOPLE.</b>          |
|                                    | = <sup>14</sup> And <b>HAPPY</b> will you be | because they have nothing to give you back <i>in return</i> |   |
|                                    | = for it will be given back to you in return | at the resurrection of the <b>JUST.</b> »                   |   |

(see *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, 148-149)

Let us now take another example, surely the best known text in the whole of the New Testament, the one that all Christians know by heart and recite most often, the Our Father (according to Matthew)<sup>12</sup>. Everyone knows that this prayer contains seven petitions; when recited by two groups, it is divided into two unequal parts, the first containing the first three petitions (which have «you» in them), the second containing the last four (which have «us» in them):

Our Father who art in heaven,

- + hallowed be **thy** name,
- + **thy** kingdom come,
- + **thy** will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

- 
- = Give **us** this day our daily bread,
  - = forgive **us** our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,
  - = and lead **us** not into temptation
  - = but deliver **us** from evil.

That is how the quite recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* still presents it<sup>13</sup>. Of course there is nothing wrong in noticing this difference in the pronouns in the second person singular in the first three petitions and the pronouns in the first person plural in the four last ones. But that is only one clue to the composition. There are others, however, just as important. By keeping to only one clue, the chances are that the true arrangement of the text will be missed and much of its meaning will be lost.

In fact it should also be noted that the last three petitions envisage freedom from evil things, «trespasses», «temptation», «evil» (or «the evil one»); on the other hand, the «bread» in the fourth petition is not a bad thing, but a good thing, like those in the first three petitions, i. e. «the name» (of God), his «reign», his «will». It can be seen that from the morphological point of view the fourth petition is linked to the last three (in «us»), but that from the semantic point of view it is linked to the first three ones (the good things).

Moreover, the third and fifth petitions are the only ones that end with an expansion which, in Greek, starts with the same «as»: «as in heaven so on earth» and «as we forgive those who trespass against us». This provides a good frame for the fourth petition, that is to say the numerically central petition.

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<sup>12</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the Our Father, see my article «La composition du Notre Père», *Liturgie* 119 (2002) 158-191; revised and corrected in [www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org](http://www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org): *Studia Rhetorica*, n° 18, 04.05.2005 (updated 04.03.2011). See also *Treatise*, 183-185.

<sup>13</sup> §§ 2803-2806.

But that is not all; the fourth petition differs from all the others in that its two members are strictly parallel (in a literal translation):

**THE BREAD** of us *daily*  
**GIVE** to us *each day*

At the beginning, the two main terms in the sentence (direct object and the verb), followed by «of us» and by «to us», then by the synonyms «daily» and «each day».

#### THE OUR FATHER IN MATTHEW (Matt 6,9-13)

|                |   |   |
|----------------|---|---|
| <i>Our</i>     | hallowed be thy NAME,   | 1 |
| <i>Father</i>  | come thy KINGDOM,   | 2 |
| <i>who</i>     | be done thy <i>WILL</i> , AS in heaven so on earth;                                     | 3 |
|                | the <b>BREAD</b> of us daily<br>give to us today;                                       | 4 |
| <i>art</i>     | and forgive us our <i>TRESPASSES</i> , AS we too forgive those who trespass against us; | 5 |
| <i>in</i>      | and lead not us into TEMPTATION   | 6 |
| <i>heaven,</i> | but deliver us from EVIL.   | 7 |

Lastly, and this is not the least important thing, the request for daily bread is the one that best befits the name of the One to whom the prayer is addressed. Indeed, if one had to prefix each of the three first and the three last petitions with the divine name that best suited it, it would obviously be «Our *King*» in the case of the second petition («thy *kingdom* come»), it would of course be «Our God» in all the others. However, strictly speaking, only the central petition requires the name of Father; the general experience of all children – at least in those days – is that it is the father who provides the daily bread.

Taking into account the convergence of all these indications, it is not a bipartite division, but a concentric arrangement that emerges (see the previous page). One could then ponder, surely with better results, in particular on the relations that there may be between the petitions that correspond in mirror fashion on either side of the central petition: for example, between the «holy» name of God at the beginning and that of the «Evil» at the end, on the «kingdom» of God and the «temptation» (of the «Evil») which are, in the gospel, two



realities into which one «enters», or does not enter<sup>14</sup>; and, by bringing out the parallelism between the two petitions that frame the centre, one might wonder in what «the will» of God really consists!

The reader will surely have noticed that the form taken by the Our Father strangely resembles the form of the seven-branched candlestick<sup>15</sup>. This kind of construction is not an exception in the Bible, quite the contrary. If a good number of texts are parallel in composition, a still greater number, especially at the higher levels of textual arrangement, are concentric in construction<sup>16</sup>.

Rhetorical analysis, as we have seen in the last example, is useful, indeed indispensable in analysing short texts, the pericopes (that is to say the smallest units in a story, such as the account of a miracle, a parable, a short speech), and firstly to find its boundaries. However, its main contribution is at higher levels, that of whole pericopes that constitute sequences (and sub-sequences), that of groups of sequences forming sections (and sub-sections), and finally the book in its entirety.

Without going into the details of the precise analysis of each pericope of Mark 10,35-52 and Matt 20,20-34, it will be enough to show how each evangelist used different means to work out a generally similar construction.

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<sup>14</sup> «Whoever does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a small child will not *enter* it» (Luke 18,24; see also Luke 18,24-25 and 23,42).

<sup>15</sup> The text describing the chandelier (Exod 25,31-37 = 37,17-22) is itself a good example of concentric construction (see the analysis in R. MEYNET, *Quelle est donc cette Parole? Analyse «rétorique» de l'Évangile de Luc (1-9 et 22-24)*, Lectio Divina 99, Paris 1979, vol. A, 135-137, vol. B, plate 1; ID., «Au cœur du texte. Analyse rhétorique de l'aveugle de Jéricho selon Luc», *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 103 (1981) 696-697; see also the version in Exod 37,17-22 in *Treatise*, 108-109.

<sup>16</sup> Even in the third gospel, of which, however, the author is generally said to be of Greek and not Jewish culture. See R. MEYNET, *L'Évangile selon saint Luc*, Rhétorique biblique 1, Paris 1988, II, 260-261; especially *Traité*, 170-172.



disciples, Jesus says: «You do not know what you are asking for» («you do not see», as suggested by ordinary experience and also a very probable word play on the two Greek verbs); and the master sets himself to open their eyes to the conditions they will have to fulfil to obtain what they are asking for, «drinking the cup» and «being baptized with the baptism» of the passion.

In the middle, the words addressed to the whole group of the Twelve (42-46a). Jesus starts with what they know very well: «you know that» in 42 which is opposed to the «you do not know» in 38, that is to say the wisdom of the world (42), to which he will oppose his own wisdom (45); in the middle, lastly (43), the Law they will have to follow (which recalls the «For every man who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted» in Luke 14,11).

It is quite clear from this example that there is no need artificially to give a so-called «spiritual» meaning to the cure of the blind man of Jericho, which would be merely a bodily cure. The gospel points at this: the blindness of the blind man refers to the blindness of James and John; and to that of the other ten as well who «are angry» with the two brothers (41), probably because each of them is a candidate for the place of honour!

Matthew has the same setting (Matt 20,20-34), but achieves it with other rhetorical means. Apart from those already mentioned, Mark used what may be called a textual curtain rod to unite the three passages of his construction (as a curtain rod is used to hold curtains together): James and John are actually called «sons of Zebedee» at the start of the first passage (35), and the blind man is called «son of Timaeus» at the start of the third passage (46)<sup>17</sup>; in his turn, Jesus who himself is called «Son of man» (45; this title designates the one who will triumph, but after undergoing the passion) is called «son of David» by the blind man (47 and 48).

The text in Matt 20,20-34<sup>18</sup> is demarcated by the same inclusion formed by requests similar to those in Mark; it also indicates the relation of the extreme passages by repeating the word «seated», but it does not use the same connecting rod as Mark. We know, actually, that in the first gospel it is not one blind person that Jesus cures on the way out of Jericho, but *two*. And the exegetes have for a long time wondered whether Mark or Matthew recounted the real historical truth. As if that were the question! The reason for such a difference is of a rhetorical nature (it should be added that Matthew likes linking up his characters); whereas Mark speaks of the «sons of Zebedee», Matthew has their mother call them «my *two* sons» (Matt 20,21), then, at the beginning of the central passage, we are not told, as in Mark 10,41 «the other ten were angry with James and John», but «with the *two* brothers» (Matt 20,24), and, quite naturally, it is then a question of «*two* blind men» (Matt 20,30). The usefulness of rhetorical analysis can be seen clearly from this example: it provides the means of reading texts as a whole which, with a great variety of means, were written to go together<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Of the three synoptics, Mark alone mentions the name of the blind man of Jericho; as if he had to do so for the purposes of his literary construction.

<sup>18</sup> There is no point in giving it here.

<sup>19</sup> For more details about these two constructions by Mark and Matthew, see R. MEYNET, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 176 sqq (an earlier study of these texts had appeared in *Initiation à la rhétorique biblique*, «Qui donc est le plus grand?», Cerf, Paris 1982). The reader will have noticed, among so many other symmetrical constructions, that Mark uses two verbs from the same root to begin his first and

Since we have just seen how Mark and Matthew integrated their account of the blind man, or of the two blind men, of Jericho in a series of three passages, it is natural to ask what the third gospel did with the parallel passage. Luke does not record the episode of the sons of Zebedee; nevertheless he linked the story of the blind man of Jericho (18,35-43) with that of Zacchaeus, a passage that it is proper to him (19,1-10). These two stories both take place at Jericho; Zacchaeus «seeks to *see* who Jesus is» but he is unable because of his short stature and in that sense he resembles the blind man; both will finally be «saved». But the most important point is to fix the boundaries and the composition of the sequence into which Luke has fitted his account of the blind man. Here it will suffice to sketch the broad outlines. The sequence contains seven passages (again a kind of seven-branch candlestick):

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|   |  |          |
|---|--|----------|
| + Jesus announces his fate to his disciples   | <i>who do not understand</i>               | 18,31-34 |
| = near Jericho,   | the <b>SON OF DAVID</b> saves a blind man  | 18,35-43 |
| = in Jericho,   | the <b>SON OF MAN</b> saves a sinner       | 19,1-10  |
| <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">The parable of the <b>KING</b> and the pounds</span> |  | 19,11-28 |
| = near the Mount of Olives,   | Jesus is <b>ENTHRONED</b> on an ass's colt | 19,29-36 |
| = near the Mount of Olives,   | Jesus is acclaimed as <b>KING</b>          | 19,37-40 |
| + Jesus announces the fate of Jerusalem   | <i>which has not understood</i>            | 19,41-46 |

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There is no question here, of course, of going into detail<sup>20</sup>. It will be enough to point out some of the most marked symmetrical constructions. The blind man in the second passage calls Jesus «*son of David*», as the disciples in the last passage but one acclaim him saying «Blessed be he who comes, *the King*, in the name of the Lord»<sup>21</sup>; on the other hand, in both passages, there are some people who want to silence both the blind man and the disciples. Like, in the central parable, the fellow-citizens of the man of high birth who say: «We do not want this one to *reign* over us.» Similarly, as Jesus announces in the first passage, the Son of man (the one destined to receive regal glory) will be rejected and finally killed by his fellow-citizens. As for Zacchaeus, he resembles the king's servants in the central parable: he repents and «gives» from his possessions, like the good servants who put their pounds to good use. Just like the disciples in the fifth passage who, in a twofold gift like Zacchaeus', lay their garments on the ass's colt as well as on the king's path. At the end of the sequence, Jerusalem will suffer a fate like that of the king's enemies, in conclusion to the central parable. This example well shows how the centre of a construction is the key to its interpretation. Not that it is the most important passage, as there would sometimes be a tendency to think; the key to a coffer is not more «important» that the jewels it contains.

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last account. An analysis of the whole sequence in Mark 10 (in parallel with the one in Matt 19–20) will be found in ID, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*.

<sup>20</sup> See R. MEYNET, *L'Évangile de Luc*, Rhétorique Sémitique 4, Paris 2005, 707-754; Rhétorique Sémitique 8, 715-761.

<sup>21</sup> Luke alone uses this title of «King», at the time of the Palm Branches.

The key, with which one closes (like a parable, which is always enigmatic, which hides the meaning), also makes it possible to open, without forcing either the coffer or the text open.

We shall end this excursion with a visit to one of the most beautiful monuments in the New Testament and, of course, of all literature, the famous chapter 15 of Luke<sup>22</sup>. It is customary to call it «the three parables of mercy», namely the parable of the lost sheep, the one about the lost drachma, and lastly the one about the prodigal son. Now the fact of the matter is that, as long as this text is considered as three parables, we are prevented from grasping an important aspect of its logic. In reality, when Jesus addresses the Pharisees and scribes who are criticizing him for eating with publicans and sinners, it is not said that he recounts *two* parables, but *one* parable (15,3). We will also have to wait for the start of the parable of the prodigal son to find a second introductory phrase: «He said:» (15,11). Luke has to be taken seriously and we must realize that the parable of the sheep and the drachma, lost and then found, is one unique parable. It is a double parable, like the one about the grain of mustard which a *man* threw into his garden and about the yeast which a *woman* buried in three measures of flour (Luke 13,18-21). Like this last parable, the first double parable in Luke 15 features firstly a man, then a woman. Even the most unattentive reader cannot fail to notice that the two halves of the parable (4-10) are quite parallel to each other, as the illustration on the next page is intended to show. However, a first difference will have been noticed: the end of verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6 have no equivalent in the second part in verse 9. It is true that the scene of the finding of the drachma is not so spectacular as that of the sheep, and the breathless shepherd carrying on his shoulders the sheep that has been found and holding it by its feet has inspired painters and sculptors more than the woman with her small coin between her thumb and index finger! The second difference is that the end of verse 7 is not repeated at the end of the second part of the parable; which is a way of focussing the whole, not on the repentant «sinners», but on the «just that have no need of repentance»; the word «just» appears only at this place in the text. It really must not be forgotten that the people for whom the parable is intended are not «the publicans and sinners» (1), but «the Pharisees and scribes» (2a)!

But there is still a difference that usually escapes the reader. It concerns the places where sheep and drachma are lost: the sheep is lost «in the desert» (4), while the drachma is lost in «the house» (8); one is lost far away, the other quite near. Putting it another way, although it did not leave the house, unlike the sheep that had gone off outside, in the distance, into the desert, the drachma, too, is nonetheless lost.

And there we have something that is not unrelated to the second parable, likewise a double parable, since it features two sons. The younger had actually got lost «in a distant land», like the sheep; as for the elder brother, although he had never gone out of his father's house, like the drachma, he too was none the less lost; he is a sinner because, like the Pharisees and the scribes, he criticizes the one who eats with the sinner.

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<sup>22</sup> See R. MEYNET, *L'Évangile de Luc*, 2011, 636-653.

<sup>3</sup> He said for **THEM** this parable saying:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>∴ <sup>4</sup> «<b>WHAT MAN</b> among you having a hundred sheep<br/>does not leave the ninety-nine in <b>THE DESERT</b></p> | <p>and having lost one of them,<br/>and go off after the lost one<br/>until he finds it?</p>            |
| <p><sup>5</sup> And having found it,<br/><sup>6</sup> and coming to his house,</p>  | <p>he puts it on his shoulders, joyfully,<br/>he calls his friends and neighbours<br/>telling them:</p> |
| <p>= <i>Rejoice with me</i></p>   | <p>because I have found my lost sheep.</p>  |
| <p>– <sup>7</sup> I say to you:<br/>= in the same way <i>there will be more joy</i></p>   | <p>in heaven<br/>over one <b>SINNER</b> repenting</p>   |

than for ninety-nine **JUST** who have no need of repentance.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>∴ <sup>8</sup> Or <b>WHAT WOMAN</b> having ten drachmas,<br/>does not light a lamp<br/>and does not search carefully</p> | <p>if she loses a drachma, only one,<br/>and not sweep <b>THE HOUSE</b><br/>until she finds it?</p> |
| <p><sup>9</sup> And having found it,</p>  | <p>She calls her friends and<br/>neighbours saying:</p>   |
| <p>= <i>Rejoice</i> with me</p>   | <p>because I have found my lost drachma.</p>  |
| <p>– <sup>10</sup> In the same way I say to you,<br/>= <i>there will be joy</i></p>   | <p>before the angels of God<br/>over one repentant <b>SINNER</b>».</p>                              |

It can be seen from this example that when two literary units seem similar in all points the difference must be sought, because in all likelihood it will be pertinent. Conversely, when two literary units do not seem to have anything in common, the resemblance must be sought, because that will make it possible to understand better the relations they have. As regards the two sons, they seem opposed in every respect. And yet they are strangely alike. Despite his repentance, the younger one has not yet understood what being a son means, since he intended to close what he said with these words «treat me like one of your *hired servants*» (15,19). His father will not give him time to utter such blasphemy. The elder brother is no better, considering himself also like a slave: «For all these years *I have been serving you...* » (15,29). While the father got the fatted calf ready, not only for his brother but for him as well, he dares to say to him: «and never have you *given* me a young goat» (15,29)! Like his younger brother who discovered, when he was in trouble, that «no one *gave* him» (15,16).

It has long been recognized that the story of the two sons is incomplete: it is not known actually whether, in the long run, the elder son accepted his father's invitation and went to

take part in the communal feast. The parable is open-ended, for it is addressed, like the first one, to those who, like the elder brother, consider themselves just («never have I gone against any one of your orders»:15,29) and who not only refuse to mix with people whom they continue to consider as sinners despite their repentance, but criticize Jesus who eats with them (15,2). This open-endedness is the sign of the proposal, the invitation that Jesus makes to them, like the father in the parable.

Iconography has always liked representing the sheep that was found and has generally neglected the drachma; in most of the depictions of the second parable, we see the father welcoming the younger son in his arms. The older son does not appear in them, or at best he is relegated to a dark corner. But, of the two sons, he is the principal one; the one whom the elder son represents is the one whom Jesus and the evangelist address. So why is he so conscientiously rejected, not only in iconography but also in our own mental images? It is surely because the reader unconsciously prefers to be identified with the person who plays the outstanding part, with the one who was a sinner, to be sure, but who came back! Whereas it is the Pharisee within him that Jesus is addressing.

After such an example, should we conclude? Surely not, except to say that there is still a lot to be discovered in the treasure of the Scriptures, and that rhetorical analysis is probably not a key to be neglected.

English translation by Leo Arnold, S.I.

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