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THE NARRATOR'S *POINT OF VIEW* AND THE RHETORIC OF THE *NARRATIVE SPEECH* IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract: This article proposes to address the relationship between the narrator's point of view and the rhetoric of *narrative speech*, within the scope of the Hebrew Bible. Biblical exegesis, over several centuries, has not given due attention to the question of the pragmatic configuration of the narrative argument. It is assumed here that the artistic-literary arrangement of the biblical text not only reveals the narrator's *point of view* about the *thematic unit of the narrative*, but also constitutes an important tool for dialogue between the *narrated world* and the world of the modern-day listener-reader of the Scriptures. Therefore, as an empirical exercise, this presupposition will be demonstrated through a brief analysis of the LORD's speech on Mount Sinai, in Ex 19:4-6a, when he gave the preamble to the legislation of Ancient Israel. Therefore, it is proposed that the narrator's *point of view* about the *thematic unit* of the exodal narrative is established by the rhetoric of the *narrative speech*, which asserts that the legitimacy of the power of the sovereign of Israel is proven by the fair behavior of the speaker.

Keywords: Narrator's point of view; rhetoric of narrative speech; narrative analysis; narratives from the Pentateuch; sovereignty and legitimacy of power.

INTRODUCTION

Taking the perspective of Northrop Frye, in his work entitled: *The Educated Imagination*,¹ that the Bible must not be studied "as" literature, since, among other things, it "is" literature, a brief approach is proposed through this text that demonstrates the literary sophistication of biblical narratives.

1 FRYE. *The Educated Imagination*, p. 97.

2 YAMASAKI. *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, pp. 111-149.

3 BREY. *O SENHOR evoca o passado para reiterar o presente e anunciar o futuro*, pp. 245-246.

4 By the author's aesthetic preference, the spelling of the word LORD will be presented in capital letters whenever it is a direct reference to the tetragrammaton: YHWH.

5 YAMASAKI. *Insights from Filmmaking for Analyzing Biblical Narrative*, pp. 33-34-84.

6 SAILHAMER. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 1-7.

7 AUERBACH. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, pp. 3-23.

By lending his voice to the protagonist of the exodal plot (Ex 19,4-6a), the narrator establishes the angle from which the reader – through the mind's eye – is led to experience that moment in history. Through linguistic devices, discursive rhetoric proposes the point of view through which the narrated world is accessed by *narrative speech*.²

The underlying themes of the referential substrate of the history of the exodus of the Hebrews, therefore, have as their main reading key the pragmatic configuration of the discourse that is constituted as a preamble to the legislation of the *kingdom of priests and holy nation*.³ To the Lord⁴ evoking the past (Ex 19,4) to reiterate the present (Ex 19,5) and announce the future (Ex 19,6a), a fundamental literary structure of the speech acts of the protagonists of the hero's journeys of the screenplays is observed, where the speaker's reputation – established in his past behavior – constitutes the rhetorical foundation that guides the point of view of his argument.⁵ The sophistication of this artistic-literary arrangement proposes new possibilities of interpretation to the contemporary reader of biblical narratives.

A *synchronous* reading of the biblical text, therefore, provides the listener-reader with the opportunity to get in touch with a series of techniques for the composition of literary structures, configured during the canonical edition of the text.⁶ Among several strategies to establish the *thematic unit* of a narrative, therefore, there is the verticalization of protagonist characters through the synchronization of their speech acts with the *narrative speech that permeates the plot*.⁷ Thus, the rhetoric of the LORD's speech in Ex 19,4-

6a is constituted, through an epicization of everything that had been narrated until then, as a gateway to the *point of view* about the whole theme brought by the subtext of the exodal metanarrative.

THE POINT OF VIEW IN THE NARRATIVES OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

The point of view, according to Gary Yamasaki,⁸ has been “the problem child of Biblical Narrative Criticism”, since, since the biblical scholars, around the 1970s, began to seek *insights* in the discipline of secular *literary criticism*, the adequacy of this concept in biblical exegesis has encountered difficulties in coexistence with the theological nature of the interpretation of the texts of the Bible. That is, according to Adele Berlin,⁹ the recognition of literary manifestations from the *point of view* of a work can be constituted as a recipe to abstract the thematic vestiges of it,¹⁰ however, the theological *spoiler* coming from the interpretive tradition subsequent to the founding context of the text, due to its *systematizing-conceptual character*,¹¹ may encounter certain inadequacies with a poetic-literary approach to Scripture.¹² The interpretive potential, however, of recognizing a text’s *point of view* can only be discerned with greater credibility when it is possible to demonstrate the movements of this literary assumption within the narrated plot itself.¹³

Furthermore, the question of *point of view* can be alluded to through a slightly more subjective approach to the world of the text. When, for example, Northrop Frye asserts that the Bible is the major constitutive element at the center of the Western literary imagination,¹⁴ his argument suggests that the *point of view* of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures on diverse ethical-social issues was incorporated by the philosophical thought of the West.¹⁵ This relationship, however, subjectively alluded to, can be verified, through critical-literary processes, when it moves away from concerns with *authorial unit* and approaches the *thematic unit* of biblical narratives.¹⁶ In other words, it is possible to identify the adherence of the thematic *point of view* of the texts of the Bible in the Western imagination independently of the direct mediation of the doctrinal-theological interpretation.

Thus, when Robert Alter argues that biblical narratives – by virtue of their ancient vocation for recitation –, when the papyri are unrolled, are equivalent to the unwinding of a movie projector reel,¹⁷ it is suggested that just as a filmmaker prints his *point of view* by editing the script,¹⁸ it is reasonable to keep in mind the rhetoric of the *narrative speech* of the stories of the Bible as a literary resource manifesting from the *thematic point of view* of narration,¹⁹ according to which the narrative limits of everything that is narrated are

8 YAMASAKI. *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, pp. 1-8.

9 BERLIN. *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, p. 15.

10 BÜHLER. *La ise en intrigue de l'interprète: Enjeux herméneutiques de la narrativité*, pp. 94-95.

11 ROGERSON. *Old Testament*, pp. 6-10.

12 MARGUERAT. *Lexègèse biblique à l'heure du lecteur*, p. 15.

13 PARMENTIER. *Dieu a des histoires: La dimension théologique de la narrativité*, p. 112.

14 FRYE. *The Educated Imagination*, pp. 66, 96.

15 FRYE. *The Great Code*, pp. xi-xxiii; KUSCHEL. „Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter“ – Literarisch-theologische Poträts, pp. 15-16.

16 FRYE. *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 173, 480.

17 ALTER. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 113-114.

18 BORDWELL. *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, pp. 1-18; BORDWELL. *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 4-8.

19 YAMASAKI. *Insights from Filmmaking for Analyzing Biblical Narrative*, pp. 35-50.

established.²⁰ These rhetorical manifestations, therefore, constitute a narrative mechanism through which the ideals that underlie the text emerge to be represented in the actions and dilemmas of the characters.²¹ As far as biblical narratives are concerned, therefore, the *point of view* is presented, to some extent, in the way the story is told.²²

THE RHETORIC OF THE LORD'S SPEECH AND THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE EXODAL NARRATIVE

Since the *narrative speech* that constitutes the Hebrew Bible impresses its listener-reader

through the form of its literary composition, being even, many times, more important than the reported events themselves,²³ "Narrative requires active contribution on the part of the reader to become what it really is. Of course, this contribution is not arbitrary, and the narrative will set the rules for it, but the reader's part is not expendable for that reason".²⁴ Thus, in Ex 19,4-6a, the rhetorical configuration of the LORD's speech wants to gain the attention of the listener-reader for its potential access to the *thematic unit* of the exodal metanarrative, which, in turn, shelters the *point of view* of the plot narrator.

A		
אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם	19.4a	<i>You saw</i>
אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם	19.4b	<i>what did I do to the egyptians</i>
וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל־כַּנְפֵי נְשָׁרִים	19.4c	<i>and that I lifted you up against the wings of vultures!</i>
וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי	19.4d	<i>I, therefore, have brought you!</i>
B		
וְעַתָּה	19.5a	<i>Now,</i>
אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְקוֹלִי	19.5b	<i>if you listen carefully to my voice</i>
וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי	19.5c	<i>and keep my covenant,</i>
וְהִיְיִתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מְבִלְהֵעַמִּים	19.5d	<i>you shall be my peculiar possession among all peoples,</i>
כִּי־לִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ	19.5e	<i>because all the Earth is mine!</i>
C		
וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מְמֻלְכֵת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קֳדוֹשׁ	19.6a	<i>You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!</i>

20 FOKKELMAN. *Reading Biblical Narrative*, pp. 73-78.

21 BAR-EFRAT. *Narrative Art in the Bible*, pp. 47-48.

22 BERLIN. *Reading Biblical Poetry*, pp. 2184-2191.

23 MARGUERAT/BOURQUIN. *Pour Lire les Récits Bibliques: initiation to the narrative analysis*, p. 32.

24 SKA. *Sincronia: L'Analisi Narrativa*, p. 139.

As it was evidenced by the author of the present text in a previous publication²⁵—where it is possible to verify more extensively the syntactic-semantic resources that, as Erich Auerbach asserts,²⁶ constitute vestiges of the rhetorical configuration of the text —, in his speech, in Ex 19,4-6a, the LORD evokes, as a rhetorical appeal, his past behavior (A), thus reiterating his sovereignty, which is, in turn, the rhetorical foundation of all discursive argumentation (v.5e). Thus, it is his reputation that gives him legitimacy to reiterate the dignity of the alliance proposed to the people (B). For it is the representation of the character of the LORD before the nations of the earth that legitimizes the announcement of the election (C) of the people as a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.

Assuming that, regarding the narrative composition preamble to the legal texts of the Pentateuch, the loan of the narrator's voice to the legislator-protagonist constitutes a literary strategy that aims to bring the reader closer to the rhetorical foundation of the law,²⁷ it is reasonable that the LORD's speech in the opening scene of the enactment of ancient Israel's legislation therefore harbors the narrator's *point of view* of the exodal plot. The speech act of the legislator-protagonist aligns with the *narrative speech* that emanates from the *thematic unit* of the metanarrative and establishes the *point of view* of the one who narrates the story. Thus, the *legitimacy of power* as a rhetorical foundation for the establishment of an *alliance* that aims to *elect* the Hebrew people to the *status of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* seems to correspond to the *point of view* of the narrator of the Exodus.²⁸

25 BREY. O SENHOR evoca o passado para reiterar o presente e anunciar o futuro, pp. 228-250. The translation, even made by the author, finds its justifications in that publication.

26 AUERBACH. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, pp. 3-23.

27 BARTOR. *Reading Law as Narrative*, pp. 1-15.

28 BREY. O Projeto do Êxodo e a legitimidade do poder, pp. 73-86; BREY. Soberania e [i]legitimidade do poder desde o ponto de vista do preâmbulo à legislação do Antigo Israel, pp. 106-118.

29 SKA. *Sincronia: L'Analisi Narrativa*, p. 139.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

“Narratives sleep until the reader wakes them from their sleep.”²⁹ Perhaps the new possibilities of interpretation proposed to the present-day listener-reader of the biblical narratives, alluded to in the introduction of this text, emanate from the recognition of the sophistication of the artistic-literary arrangement used when composing/editing them. This, however, requires that, using literary analysis tools, one transcends access to biblical texts as if they were a mere encyclopedia with their theological entries, ready to substantiate some anachronistic argument to the context of the world narrated in the Scriptures.

In this sense, therefore, the investigation about the *point of view* of the narrator of biblical stories has the potential to contribute to the access to layers of meaning alien to the theological *spoiler*, which usually characterizes traditional biblical interpretation. This is because, due to the primary interest in solving theological questions of later times, biblical narratives are read from the *point of view* of theology, rather than the rhetoric of the text itself. Not that the entire Judeo-Christian theological tradition must be rejected and/or considered irrelevant. On the contrary, much wisdom has been extracted from biblical reflection over the centuries. What is proposed here, however, is a look through the eyes of the narrator, to contribute, and not replace what has already been thought about the narratives of the Hebrew Bible.

What was suggested, therefore, in this brief text, was that access to the *point of view* of those who narrate the biblical stories can occur

through the recognition of certain traces left in the rhetorical configuration of the *narrative speech*. These clues, therefore, give access to the *thematic unit* of the narrated story, being, precisely, this lens that guides the narrator's gaze. In the case exemplified here, in turn, the strategic adjustment of the discursive rhetoric of the LORD to the pragmatic arrangement of the narrator was alluded to when conducting, through the mind's eye, the *point of view* of his narratee, the listener-reader.

Perhaps at a time when there is so much discussion about the sovereignty of nations and the legitimacy of their rulers, the *point of view* of the legislator-protagonist of the exodal plot on these themes can give rise to some *insight* into wisdom.

By dialoguing with the past and with its most striking voices, it is precisely, in the present time, that resistance can arise to those who insist on evil and in postures marked by solidarity with those who find themselves in a situation of risk when fighting for their dignified survival.³⁰

Finally, Vilém Flusser, a contemporary philosopher, is evoked, who, in a provocative text entitled: "*Design als Theologie*" (*Design as theology*), addresses an interesting question about the fusion between philosophical abstraction and aesthetic fruition as an expression of the highest theological level. that no religion in history has achieved in isolation. The *Design*, he says, represents the completeness of a sensory experience with an underlying wisdom.³¹ This idea, which he still considers essayistic, is in line with the perspective of *narrative analysis*, as a method of biblical exegesis, regarding his object of study: if the Bible was conceived to be artistically experienced, theology must flow from this encounter between the listener-reader and the *point of view of the narrative speech* that emanates from the text.

30 GRENZER. A proposta ímpar do amor ao imigrante (Lv 19,33-34), p. 14.

31 FLUSSER. Vom Stand der Dinge: Eine kleine Philosophie des Designs, pp. 26-31.

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