

Lecture 4: Rhetorical Criticism: Poetics

I. Introduction

A caveat regarding an accredited use of form criticism is necessary. Form critics tended to stress the commonalities of forms and to neglect the rhetorical features that distinguish the psalms. In 1968, in his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, **James Muilenberg**, called for a correction of this imbalance and first used the term “rhetorical criticism.”¹ Rhetorical criticism empowers the exegete to move beyond form criticism to recognize the biblical authors’ known methods of literary composition. These considerations are important for theology, for the exegete does not know what a text means until he knows how it means. In addition to adorning the text, structure and texture direct the exegete to the poet’s meaning. Theologians of all persuasions embrace rhetorical criticism

II. Definition

Poetics is “an inductive science that seeks to abstract the general principles of literature from many different manifestations of those principles as they occur in actual literary texts.” It aims “to find the building blocks of literature and the rules by which they are assembled.”² Moreover, just as the rules of grammar change from era to era and language to language, literary methods also change. Modern writers generally use linear thought patterns; biblical writers tend to use more circular thought patterns. For that reason, English readers sometimes find it difficult to follow the Biblical writer’s train of thought.

III. Authors, Not Redactors.

Ancient Near Eastern writers fused sources but whereas source critics, whose approach is diachronic, assume a bungling redactor, a literary critic, whose approach is synchronic, sees an author in full command of his material, using each word and device to his or her desire.

¹ James Muilenberg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969):1-18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 20. Her exact statement is: “And we must look not only for *what* the text says, but also *how* it says it.”

IV. Poetic Techniques

A. *Leitwort* (Leading/key word)

Leitwort (“lead word”): a word or a word-root and its synonyms that is meaningfully repeated within a text, or a sequence of text, or a complex of text; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate, made more emphatic.³ Cf. Psalm 139:1-6

B. *Motif*

Robert Alter defines “motif” as “a concrete image, sensory quality, action, or object that recurs through a particular narrative’ . . . it has no meaning in itself without the defining context of the narrative. . . .”⁴ Cf. “fire” in Psalm 78, 24, 21, 63.

C. *Sequence of action*

Sometimes an action is repeated three times, or three plus one, “with some intensification or increment from one occurrence to the next, usually concluding either in a climax or a reversal. Psalm 103:20-23; Psalm 24.

D. *Refrain*.

Refrain means a repetition of a phrase or sentence. Psalm 136; 43-44

E. *Contrast*.

Writers uses contrast when they associate or juxtapose things that are dissimilar or opposite. Bonchek writes, “It has been said that a sign of the creative individual is his ability to perceive the differences in similar things and the similarities in different things.”⁵ Psalm 77

F. *Comparison*.

Comparison is an association or juxtaposition of things that are alike or similar. Psalm 107

³M. Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, trans. L. Rosenwald and E. Fox (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), 114.

⁴ Alter, *Art of Narrative*, 95.

⁵Bonchek, *Studying the Torah*, 59.

G. Logic: Causation and Substantiation.

The writer brings order to the text by connecting events through cause and effect. Psalm 95

H. Climax/Intensification.

Normally, there is escalation in the text, a sense of movement from the lesser to the greater. Psalm 150

I. Patterns of Structure.

1 .Symmetrical (A-B-C — A'-B'-C'):

“Parallel patterns tend to invite comparison of the parallel sequences and of individual parallel elements. Comparison often reveals progression, but not necessarily opposition or contrast, between the parallel components.”⁶ This structure can be likened to one wave being followed by a larger wave. Psalm 148 (TNIVSB), Psalm 8: Creator (A: 1, A' 3), Redeemer, B, 2, B' 4-3).

Chiasmic pattern (A-B-C-X-C'- B'-A')

A chiasm is characterized by balance and inversion and is the most common pattern.⁷ An extended form of chiasmism systematically serves to focus the audience's interest on the pivot (i.e., the pivot).⁸ In other words, the pivot is the key to meaning (i.e., to the message). Moreover the pivot often also functions as the peripeteia (“turning point”) of the narrative. This structure can be likened to throwing a stone in a lake and watching it ripple expand outward. This pattern is attested generally in the prose and poetry of ancient literatures, documented in Sumero-Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic, prose and poetry, Talmudic-Aggadic narrative, the New Testament and ancient Greek and Latin literatures.⁹ John Welch says: “One of the most salient developments in the study of ancient literature over the past few decades is the growing awareness of the presence of chiasmus in the composition of ancient

⁶Jerome Walsh and David Cotter eds. *I Kings* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996). xiv

⁷The term is derived from the form of the Greek letter *chi* (X, i.e., a cross or cross-over). Other terms and patterns include “ring patterns,” “mirror patterns,” “concentric pattern,” “chiasmic patterns,” or “inclusio” (see Timothy A. Lenchak, “Choose Life!”: *A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of Deuteronomy 28:69-30:20* [Rome: Pontificio Istitutio Biblico, 1993], 175, n. 17).

⁸ David Noel Freedman, “Preface” *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* John W. Welch. ed (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 7.

⁹See essays on each literature in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* John W. Welch. ed (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981),

writings.”¹⁰ Radday claims the chiasm was *de rigueur* in times.¹¹ His claim that it is mandatory to write proper literature is extreme, his hyperbole suggests the frequency of chiasmus.¹²

A Question: who may dwell in *I AM*'s sanctuary? v. 1

B Summary and particulars of required action and speech vv. 2-3

1. Summary of prescribed virtues

a Summary: walks with integrity

b Action: does righteousness

c Speech: speaks truth

2. Particular proscribed vices

a' Speech: No going about as slander

b' Action: No evil to neighbor

a' Speech: No reproach against neighbor

X Fears *I AM* v. 4

1. Socially: reject non-God-fearers but honors them

2. Personally: no changing of vows (i.e., fears *I AM*)

B' Particulars & summary of righteous action & speech v. 5A-Ba

1. Particular proscribed vices

a Action: No interest from poor

b Speech and Action: No bribes against innocent

2. Summary: Does these things

A' Benediction: Assurance of eternal security v. 5Bb

¹⁰ Welch, "Introduction," *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 9.

¹¹ Yehuda Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Narrative," *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 51.

¹² Jerome T. Walsh (*1 Kings*, David W. Cotter, editor (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry [Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996], 151) in his otherwise brilliant analysis unfortunately misses the pivot. By including "Solomon Builds Rival Buildings" as part of F ("Solomon Builds the Temple" 6:1-7:51) he obscures the peripeteia and the message.

J. Janus

Janus refers to a literary unit that looks back and forth to unite the units before and after. This term comes from the Roman god of doorways, a god with one head and two faces looking both ways. It finds its way into our vocabulary in the term “January,” the month that looks back on the past year and forward to the new year. Psalm 23:4

K. Gaps and Blanks

1. Gap is an intentional omission. Ps. 22:21, 22
2. *Blank* is an inconsequential omission. Ps. 78:40-51. No mention of gnats, boils, darkness.

L. Anachrony

Anachrony is a textual feature where the story is told out of order. Information is withheld for dramatic effect. Psalm 105:28-36 (TNIVSB).

M. Generalization and Particularization.

The focus of text moves either toward becoming more specific or more comprehensive.

Ps 73:1, 28

N. Scenic Depiction

The depiction of the environments in which the psalm takes place enriches the text's meaning. Psalm 5:3

O. Preparation/Foreshadow

A foreshadow refers to an element in the psalm that hints at a later development in the plot. Ps. 51:1-2

The situation existing at the beginning of the action is presented in what is usually called the exposition. This serves as an introduction to the action described in the narrative, supplying the background information, introducing

P. Inclusio

Inclusio refers to a repetition of features at the beginning and end of a unit. An inclusio may function to frame a unit, to stabilize the enclosed material, to emphasize by repetition, or to establish a nexus with the intervening material for rhetorical effect. Ps 38. Petition, Lament, Petition

Q. Interrogation

The author may raise a question or a problem to give his message in the answer that follows. Psalm 15

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