

Interpreting the Word of God: Rhetorical analysis

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The courses, 'La Pasqua del Signore Gesù' and 'L'Analisi Retorica' of Professor Roland Meynet S.J. held at the Gregorian University in Rome, introduced me for the first time to the word, or better to the 'world' of rhetorical analysis. Here we are not speaking of a method or an approach in studying the biblical text but of an 'operation' to analyze the text. Since it is an operation then it can accept any method or approach. It consists in individuating the composition or the 'architecture' of the text at different levels, studying the formal relations and their significance, beginning obviously from the lower level. We have the *member* consisting of two or three terms, the *segment* consisting of one, two or three members, the *branch* consisting of one, two or three segments, the *part* consisting of one, two or three branches, and the *passage* consisting of one or more parts, the *sequence* which can have one or more passages, the *section* which consists of sequences, and the *book* made up of all the sections. Analyzing for example the composition of a given *passage* and then the relations between other passages in the sub-sequence, to arrive then to an overall view of the whole sequence. Such an approach tries to above all give light to its biblical context, finally arriving to an authentic interpretation of the text. Hence rhetoric analysis is the rediscovering of the principles of communication which the authors of the bible had used. It views the evangelists and all the other biblical authors as true authors, composing the text with an organized and unified structure for the efficiency of 'communication' of their inspired message among Christian, Jewish and pagan communities. Obviously like every operation or task or job it is not always easy, it needs time and patience!

I will try to explain this operation, working with the passage of Peter's denial of Jesus in Mt 26,69-75, found in the first sub-sequence (Mt 26,57-75) in the second sequence (Mt 26,57-27,26): the Judgment of Jesus in the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. (Every parallel in the text will be evidenced by a particular font type).

:⁶⁹ Meanwhile Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard,
:and a **servant-girl** came up to him saying;

=“YOU TOO, WERE WITH JESUS THE GALILEAN.”

-⁷⁰ But he **DENIED** it in front of them all, saying;

+“**I DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT.**”

:⁷¹ When he went out to the gateway **another servant-girl** saw him
 ...and said to the people there;

=“THIS MAN WAS WITH JESUS THE NAZARENE.”
⁻⁷² And again, he **WITH AN OATH, DENIED** it,
 +“*I DO NOT KNOW THE MAN.*”

 :⁷³ A little later the **bystanders** came up
 :and said to Peter;

=“YOU ARE CERTAINLY ONE OF THEM TOO!
 your accent gives you away.”
⁻⁷⁴ Then he started **CURSING AND SWEARING**,
 +“*I DO NOT KNOW THE MAN.*”

<p>:And at once <i>the cock crowed</i>, ⁷⁵and Peter remembered what Jesus had said, “Before the <i>cock crows</i> you will have DISOWNED (DENIED) me three times.</p>
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<p>:And he went outside and wept bitterly.</p>

The first procedure as we can see, implies a re-writing of the passage, an ordering of the text to make more vivid its rhetorical architecture by elements of identity and opposition using the ‘grammar’ of rhetorical analysis. A ‘just’ translation of the text from the original biblical languages is always fundamental.

In describing the **composition** of our passage after its re-writing, we can see that it consists of two parts (vv. 69–74b) and (vv. 74c-75). The first part has three divisions where we find three different accusers (vv. 69b, 71a, 73a), and the progression of Peter’s three denials. First he simply denied; “I do not know what you are talking about” (70a), the second denial is done with an oath (72a), and the third with cursing and swearing (74a). The last two denials being identical; “I do not know the man”. We can see also three different versions of the accusations in vv. 69c, 71c, 73c. The second part which is very short (vv. 74c-75), consists in Peter repenting and weeping after the cock had crowed.

It is interesting to note the word ‘outside’, *ekso* in vv. 69a and 75c giving a sense of inclusion and hence justifying the limits of our passage studied.

After this important initial stage we can talk about the **biblical context**. As we said before, our passage forms part of the first sub-sequence of the second sequence (Mt 26,57-27,26). Such a sequence consists of different sins performed by diverse persons in the Passion of Christ, and surely recalls the first sins performed in the book of Genesis. We can recall here the killing of Abel by his brother Cain, where after the killing, God asks Cain where is his brother, and Cain responds, “I do not know” (Gn 4,9). This is the same answer which Peter gives in his three denials, *oûk oida*.

The timing of this passage is during the ‘night’, during the third Roman watch extended from midnight to 3.00a.m. The ‘cockcrowning’ being the indicative as it is very significant during the hush of the night in typical Mediterranean cities and villages. The place being the courtyard, *antè* of the high priest. It is important also to understand the nature of Peter’s denials which were intensified with cursing and swearing. The verb for cursing in Greek means to *invoke anathema* or to *devote to destruction* (Hebrew *herem*). Leviticus 19:12 forbade calling upon God to witness a lie. Peter feared that he might be subjected to a destiny similar to that of Jesus. It is also possible to view Peter’s denials as an attempt to cover his unintentional failure. In Mt 26,33-35), Peter asserted that he will always be loyal to Jesus even if he had to die. But in the confusion and fear of that terrible ‘night’ of evil when Jesus was arrested, Peter failed to keep his promise. Peter’s failure was in being an unfaithful disciple, and in not protecting his master by lying about his relationship with Jesus. Then in order to protect his honour (which is very important in Mediterranean cultures) with the bystanders, he actually lost it! This episode which I examined then comes to a restoration after the Resurrection of Jesus in the Galilean appearances in the three-fold question: “Do you love me?”

After the biblical context comes the **interpretation**. One cannot interpret the Bible in just a couple of seconds. Bible interpretation is not easy, it needs time, work, thinking and above all prayer. A doctor cannot interpret a sickness in just one second, but he has to investigate with certain procedures, such as medical tests, X-rays and so forth. In rhetorical analysis it is after a series of authentic procedures that one arrives for the interpretation.

Obviously in our passage we see the movement of the gravity of Peter’s sin. In the first denial, *ernēsato*, Peter demonstrates his fake ignorance of the fact (70b) that he was with Jesus the Galilean. The second denial is done with an oath that he was not with Jesus the Nazarene, saying that he did not know the

man, *ton anthrōpon*, rendering his master as a common ‘man’ (72b). The third which tries to identify Peter as one of the group of Jesus (73c) because of the similar dialectal accent, is done with cursing himself and swearing (74a). Hence the denials of Peter are sins against his Master and also his companions (73c); exactly like Cain who sinned against his brother and above all against God. In fact, theologically, sin is a rupture with God and with the ecclesial community. Then the crowing of the cock which broke the hush of that evil night, brought Peter face to face with his sin, as he remembered the prophetic words of Jesus (Mt 26,30-35). Peter repented, recognized his sin, but did not despair like his companion Judas Iscariot.

After this operation on this single passage one can work with other passages to obtain an overall view of the whole sequence. Since our text is from a synoptic gospel it will be ideal to make a synoptic comparison with the parallel passages in Mk and Lk. Surely interesting things would come out and some answers can be given to the famous synoptic problem with the aid of rhetorical analysis. The biblical ‘operation’ proposed during these courses emphasizing the rhetoric in and of the text, brings the reader into a fertile field of Biblical Theology with new voices, ideas, and insights for his pastoral ministry in the parish and mission life.

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