

Luisa Maria ALMENDRA

The central enigma of God's justice, according to Job 32–37

The significant contribution of Biblical Rhetorical Analysis

Notwithstanding its presence across the full message of the Old Testament, the question of justice and principally divine justice assumes a unique place in the reflection of the sages of Israel of which the book of Job is unanimously accepted as the greatest exponent. I propose that we look briefly at the unique reflection that the book of Job offers us on this subject. It is excellently set out in the literary (con)text. This is why I am concentrating on chapters 32–37 applying to the studies of R. Meynet, mainly to his new and surprising notion of literary context, fully developed and assumed in *Biblical Rhetorical Analysis*.¹ The uniqueness of the reflection on the justice of God which I want to present emerges as a fruit of this new idea of context. It deals with a study of the Book of Job never done before, in which the newness is based on the challenge of a careful reading that propels the text into new horizons of understanding.²

1. THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY OF THE COMPOSITION

A. IMPORTANT LINGUISTIC AND THEMATIC ASPECTS

Chapters 32–37 encompasses the vast poetic collection of the book of Job, in which are found the deeply elliptical character of Hebrew poetry, the parallelism, the inclusion and the concentric structures that are frequently the structural base to indicate the different literary units.³ As to whether the author

¹ Cf. R. MEYNET, R., «Le vin de la nouvelle alliance. La parabole du vieux et du neuf (Lc 5,36-39) dans son contexte», *Gregorianum* 86 (2005) 5-27 ; ID., *Traité de rhétorique biblique*, Paris 2007, 345-502.

² This study was presented in the XVIth Conference of the *International Society for the History of Rhetoric*, Strasburg 2007, and summarises some details intensively studied in L. ALMENDRA, *Um debate sobre o conhecimento de Deus. Composição e interpretação de Jb 32–37*, Lisboa 2007.

³ Among some the most important studies cf. M. DAHOOD, «Chiasmus in Job: a text-critical and philological criterion», Rome 1974, 121-130; J.P. FOKKELMAN, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible at the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis*, Assen 2004; G.B. GRAY, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry: Considered with Special Reference to the Criticism and Interpretation of the Old Testament*, New York, NY 1972; P. VAN der LUGT, *Rhetorical Criticism and the Poetry of the Book of Job*, Leiden 1995; G.W PARSONS, «The Structure and

was or was not aware of the structures created is open to discussion. Nevertheless they are clear and well constructed. At the formal level the chapters 32–37 appear thematically well divided from what went before - the end of Job's speaking (31,40b) and what follows – God's discourses (38,1–42,6). The section opens with an *introduction* which is distinct from the poetic part by its narrative form (32,1-6a). The discourse seems marked by a rhythmical repetition of an introductory formula which seems to indicate a new moment of the discourse.

32,6a	<i>wayya'an</i>	<i>'ēlihū' ben-barak'el habbūzî</i>	<i>wayyō'mar</i>
34,1	<i>wayya'an</i>	<i>'ēlihū'</i>	<i>wayyō'mar</i>
35,1	<i>wayya'an</i>	<i>'ēlihū'</i>	<i>wayyō'mar</i>
36,1	<i>wayyōsep</i>	<i>'ēlihū'</i>	<i>wayyō'mar</i>

32,6a	Replied	Elihu son of Barachel of Buz,	saying:
34,1	Replied	Elihu	saying:
35,1	Replied	Elihu	saying:
36,1	Continued	Elihu	saying:

A careful analysis identifies each one of these new moments as a sequence, revealing a clearly defined section composed of four sequences, each one divided into three passages, with the exception of one sequence which has only one passage. The first and last sequence seems marked at the philological level by an intense concentration on the theme of *knowledge*, while the central sequences concentrate on the theme of *justice*. This parallel composition evokes the characteristics of Semite thinking which returns to the same theme but never in the same way. In the first sequence (chaps. 32-33), the theme of knowledge is clearly identified with wisdom teaching while the last sequence in chapters 36-37 shows a clear orientation towards the knowledge of God. This thematic repetition extends to the two central sequences (chap. 34 and chap. 35) in which firstly the close-knit defence of divine justice and secondly the justice of Job, are argued. This composition allows us to attribute a structural model of the type A1 B1 B2 A2.

A1	- My Knowledge	(Jb 32–33)
B1	- GOD'S JUSTICE	(Jb 34)
B2	- HUMAN'S JUSTICE	(Jb 35)
A2	God's knowledge	(Jb 36–37)

These structural model is marked by two important linguistic and thematic aspects: the root *yd'* (know) and the root *byn* (understanding). The weight of the root *yd'* emerges from an analysis of the symmetry between the sequences, namely the initial (A1) and final passage (A2). At the start of the discourse (A1) this root expresses the desire to explain a particular knowledge (32,6b) and indicates the certainty that only this knowledge will offer the response that the friends of Job did not find. At the end (A2), it appears to emphasise the impossibility of knowing God. From the author's viewpoint, it is because God is great (36,26) and because God does things that we cannot understand (37,5). The root *byn* (understand) establishes a curious association between the affirmation *it is the spirit-she (wisdom)... that gives us understanding* (32,8) and the declaration that the elders *do not understand judgement* (32,9), suggesting that they do not understand because they place themselves outside this spirit (A1). This association finds a parallel at the very end of the discourse (A2), in the question *who can understand...?* (36,29) and in the exhortation *pay attention, understand* (37,14), allowing us to glimpse the true response to the question found right at the beginning (A1) *who can understand the inscrutable action of God?* (A2): those who open themselves to the spirit of wisdom.

Sequence A1 a (32,6b-22)

<p>^{6b}«I am young in years and you are old, therefore I was timid and fearful, to tell you my knowledge .</p> <p>⁷ I said: "let days speak, And many years teach wisdom".</p> <p>⁸ But, (it is) the spirit-she in human being, the breath of Almighty, that gives understanding.</p> <p>⁹ It is not who are many that are wise neither only the aged who understand judgement ».</p> <hr/> <p>¹⁰ Therefore I say: "LISTEN TO ME, I too will tell you my knowledge</p> <p>¹¹ Behold, I waited for your speeches, I gave ear to your reasons...</p> <p>¹² I tried to understand you, But there was in fact no censor to Job, No one among you that answered his words...</p> <hr/> <p>¹⁷ I also will give my answer, I too will tell you my knowledge,</p> <p>¹⁸ For I am full of words, a spirit within me constrains me.</p> <p>¹⁹ Behold! My belly is as a bottled-up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst.</p> <p>²⁰ I must speak, so that I may find relief, I must open my lips and answer...</p>
--

Sequence A2 a' (36,26–37,24)

<p>²⁶ Behold! God is great, and we do not know, The number of his years is unsearchable...</p> <p>²⁹ Who can understand the spreading of the dark cloud the thundering of his pavilion?...</p> <p>^{37,1} At this also my heart trembles And leaps out of its place.</p> <p>² LISTEN! LISTEN the roar of his voice And the rumbling that comes from his mouth ...</p> <hr/> <p>⁵ God thunders marvellously with his voice, he does great things that we cannot know ...</p> <p>⁷ He seals up the hand of every human being that all men know his work ...</p> <hr/> <p>¹⁴ Give ear to this Job, Pay attention, understand the God's wonders.</p> <p>¹⁵ Do you know when God disposed them, and caused the light of his cloud to shine?</p> <p>¹⁶ Do you know the balancing of the dark cloud the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect...</p> <p>²² Out of the north comes golden splendour, God is feared with majesty.</p> <p>²³ The Almighty, we cannot find him... and in plenty of justice, he will not answer.</p> <p>²⁴ Therefore, men fear him, without seeing him, all those are wise of heart ».</p>

Although found across all the chapters 32–37, the terms *right and justice* occupy a particular place in the two central sequences (B1 34,2-37 e B2 35,2-16), conferring on them a strong philological and thematic unity. This unity appears in the insistent use of the root *s-dq* (to be just) in a close relationship with the term *mišpāt* (right). The insistence with which Job speaks, focuses the debate in the declaration: *I am just but God has taken away my right* (34,5ab), which is strategically placed between the discernment of the sages concerning right (34,3-4) and the images attributed to Job of drinking sarcasm or scorn like water and *keeping company with evil-doers* (34,7-8). The result is the drawing of a demarcation line between those who are sages and Job. While the sages succeed in discerning what is right and understanding what is good, Job limits himself to considering himself as just and confining the question of divine justice to the equivalent of an egocentric benefit which he said did not exist (34,9). The relationships between justice and reward reappear at the beginning of the sequence B2 (35,2-3), limiting Job's justice to the human level (35,8).

Sequence B1 a (34,2-15)

² «Hear wise men my words,
and you that have knowledge give ear unto me!
³ For the ear the words tests,
as the mouth tastes food.
⁴ Let us choose to us what is **right**,
let us know among ourselves what is good.
⁵ For Job has said: "I am **just**,
But God had taken away my **right**.
⁶ Against my **right** I am counted as a liar;
I am wounded with arrows,
though I am without transgression.
⁷ Who is like Job,
Who drink up scorning like water?
⁸ Which go in company with the workers of iniquity,
And walked with wicked men?
⁹ For he had said: "it is useless for the strong one
to try to please God".
¹⁰ Therefore, men of heart, listen to me!
Far be it from God to do evil
and from the Almighty injustice.
¹¹ For the work of human being he rewords,
and cause every man to find according to his ways.
¹² Surely God not do wickedly
and the Almighty not pervert what is **right**.
¹³ Who had given him a charge over the earth?
or who put him in charge of the whole world?
¹⁴ If he sets his heart upon man,
And if he gather to himself his spirit and his breath,
¹⁵ all flesh shall perish,
and man shall turn again unto dust.

Sequence B2 (35,2-16)

² Do you think this (to be) **right**?
to say "My justice (is) before God",
³ when you said: what advantage will it be unto thee?
What profit shall I have by not sinning?
⁴ I will return to your words
and to your friends with you.
⁵ Look unto the heavens, and see,
And behold the clouds which are higher than you.
⁶ If you sin, what do you do against him?
If you increase your rebellion, what do you do to him?
⁷ If you are **just**, what do you give to him?
What does he receive from your hand?
⁸ To a man like you your wickedness
and to a son of man your **justice**.
⁹ Under great oppressions they cry,
they shout under the arm of the mighty,
¹⁰ but no one says: "Where is God my maker,
who inspires me songs during the night?
¹¹ Who teach us more than the beasts of the earth
and make us wiser than the fowls of heaven?
¹² There they cry but he does not answer,
because of the pride of the wicked.
¹³ Surely God will not hear the empty
neither the Almighty regard it,
¹⁴ How much less, when you say that he does not pay attention,
that a judgement is before him and you are waiting for him,
¹⁵ that his anger never punishes,
neither knows the excess of folly.
¹⁶ So, Job opens his mouth to empty
He multiplies words without knowledge.

It is in this context that the affirmation God is just because he does not practice evil nor wickedness....requiting human action (34,10-11) leaves Job's

affirmation without foundations it is useless for the strong one to try to please God (34,9). Divine justice is defined by the certainty of a good act and by recognition of all human behaviour. Job's justice is confined to the narrow limits of his human comprehension, being however justice for Job and for any human being like him (35,8). The text makes very clear that the words of Job, which are locked in the idea of a mechanistic justice, are empty discourses revealing a lack of knowledge of God and of God's justice. In the heart of the great discourse, the totality of correspondences permits the singling out of a debate motivated by the desire of a wise discernment of divine justice. The rhetorical composition reveals that this discernment includes attention to the dangers of a comparison between human justice and divine justice, and the enigma of the absolute difference of God's way of acting which is impossible to influence or determine with good or bad human actions.

B. THE UNITY AND COHERENCE OF JOB 32–37

Chapters 32–37 seem to be based on a desire to manifest knowledge (A1) and at the same time to do justice to the creator (A2). In the central part, the author permits an opposition between divine justice and human justice as a bitter criticism of the previous words of Job and of his friends. The verdict emerges as *erroneous language* concerning God's justice. It is considered as *senseless words* (B1) and *empty discourse* (B2). This composition attributes a great unity and coherence to the discourse, determining also the unusualness of the reflection offered. The question of divine justice and human understanding of it are something which appears to involve the question of human knowledge of God. The question of divine justice is something which has to be balanced with the inner knowledge which a human person has or has not of God. Further still it would seem that the question of divine justice includes a debate between *traditional wisdom* and *God's wisdom*.⁴ The former has a strong tendency to express itself in the language of certainties, often incapable of dialogue and response, the latter is a wisdom which does dialogue and respond within the framework of faith in all the vicissitudes of human existence.⁵ As the climax of his argument the author places what is most true in Israel's wisdom namely *the fear of the Lord*, with which he opens and closes the discourse (Jb 32,6 / 37,22.4). Therefore if in the prologue, Satan puts the question of divine and human justice in terms of challenge and proves the gratuitousness of faith, in

⁴ About this debate cf. A. BONORA, «Retribuzione», *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica* (eds. P. ROSSANO – G. RAVASI – A. GIRLANDA) Torino 1988, 1331; ID., «Giustizia», *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, 713-722. P. ZERFAFA, «Retribution in the Old Testament», *Ang* 50 (1973) 485-494.

⁵ Cf. L. ALMENDRA, Um debate sobre o conhecimento de Deus. Composição e interpretação de Jb 32–37, 346-347.366-374.

this discourse, human and divine justice are presented in the form of a discernment which emphasises the path of fear of the Lord as the only one that can sustain the gratuitousness of Job's faith and of the human person who is tested in every age.

2. THE SINGULAR CONTRIBUTION OF BIBLICAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

A. A NEW UNDERSTANDING AND A NEW DEBATE WITHIN OF THE BOOK OF JOB

The author of chapters 32–37 does not simply repeat the traditional theory of retribution. He considers it, submitting it however, to the absolute freedom of a God who believes in human life (34,21-29). His words condemn the dangers of Satan's challenge (1,9; 2,3): that of yielding to the temptation of measuring the rewards of divine justice, and consequently, the benefit of the relationship with God. Like his friends, Job situates himself within the ambit of a divine justice that is retributive and automatic.⁶ Conforming to his existence as a sufferer he questions himself. He did not commit any transgression therefore he deserves a life blessed with a peaceful relationship with God and with all other human persons. The author of chapters 32–37 seems to recognise some reason for Job's non-conformity. He suggests to him a retribution situated within the scope of a saving intervention of God in human history. He assures him that God rewards the human person, but according to a plan which does not force. (34,11.13). Job clamours for a divine justice that is adjusted to his behaviour as a just man. The author proposes to Job that it may be he who has to adapt himself to God's justice, anticipating the reaction of Yahweh in 38,2; 42,3.⁷ It is necessary to wait for God's response in 40,8 where God himself denies that for the human person to be justified, it is necessary to accuse God. Human justice is not saving oneself, independent of God. Job finally understands it when he is confronted by the mystery of divine justice in 42,6.

The absolute necessity to defend God's justice causes the friends to coldly accuse Job of being a sinner, developing different kinds of theodicies.⁸ For the

⁶ To a more complete view of this question cf. A. BONORA, «Retribuzione», *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, 1323-1331; P. ZERFA, «Retribution in the Old Testament», *Ang* 50 (1973) 485.

⁷ This idea of God's justice as a project of salvation appears very well presented in cf. A. BONORA, «Giustizia», *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, Torino 1988, 713-722.

⁸ Many authors study this aspect, among the most important cf. J.L. CRENSHAW, «Introduction: The Shift from Theodicy to Anthropodicy», *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (B.W. Anderson) Philadelphia, PA 1983, in *Urgent Advice and probing Questions* (ed. J.L. Crenshaw) Atlanta, GA 141-154; E.W. NICHOLSON, «The Limits of Theodicy as a Theme of the Book of Job», *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, J. Day – R.P. Gordon – H.G.M. Williamson, ed.,

author of chapters 32-37 the certainties of this knowledge do not answer Job and they are silent (32,11-16). The reply to Job requires a wisdom that the friends do not encounter because it belongs only to God (28, 12; 32,13). Such wisdom is only humanly possible through the gift of the spirit. (32,8-9.17-19). According to the author, certainties and human constructions will never come from God. But they will come from a contemplation of the unfathomable, inscrutable action of God where the salvation of the human person is seen as totally realised by God. This understanding offers a completely new horizon to these chapters and to the entire book of Job and consequently to the understanding of the biblical question of divine and human justice.

B. A NEW BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE JUSTICE OF GOD IN HUMAN LIFE

Job thinks he can resolve his problem with a knowledge of God and God's action which destroys the barriers which exist between himself and God (19,25-26). In the composition which the author gives to chapters 32–37, he emphasises the alternative of a knowledge which respects the difference and the sovereignty of God.⁹ This comes from contemplating God's otherness (*Look up at the skies and see... 35,5*) and from his work, i.e. his creative intervention in history (*...remember to magnify God's work ...all humankind contemplates it 36,25*). This is the only knowledge capable of changing the logic of a reward into a logic of gift (*God brings all human strivings to a standstill so that each must acknowledge his hand at work 37,7*). The transforming power of this contemplation is very visible in the last words of Job in 42, 2-6 where the interrogation is exchanged for exclamation. The debate gives way to a relationship which is embraced by an immense mystery (42,2-6). The knowledge, which at the beginning (A1) had been declared as a gift of the spirit (herself wisdom), is taken up again and oriented to a knowledge of God (A2) who is unfathomable. But such knowledge is possible through the contemplation of God's power in creation, the seal which proves his power and action in nature and in human life (36,31; 37,13). This perception of divine justice includes a deep evaluation of the language used in the time of adversity. It does not reject the opportunity and the place of questioning even to the extent of shouting. However, it does denounce a false accusation of God, emphasised also by Yhwh, *Who is this who obscures my designs with his empty-headed words?*

New York, NY 1995, 71-82; A. LO, *Job 28 as Rhetoric. An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22-31*, Leiden 2003, 62-69; D.J.A. CLINES, «The Arguments of Job's Three friends», *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, D.J.A. Clines – M. Gunn – A.J. Hauser, ed., Sheffield 1982, 206-210.

⁹ Cf. M.P. GALLAGHER, *Dive Deeper. The human poetry of Faith. Dive Deeper. The Human Poetry of Faith*, London 2001, 49: «Job had fallen into their level of thinking by imagining God in a merely human way – as if God 'should' reward his goodness».

(*millîn belî-dā* 'at 38,1); *Do you really want to reverse my judgement or put me in the wrong to justify yourself?* (40,8 cf. 42,3-4).

The way of biblical rhetorical analysis permits us to pick out a moment strongly rooted in certainties, is questioned by a new way of looking at reality and consequently at faith in God. This new look provokes deep questioning, causing at times a very strong and thorny debate about God, well testified in the books of Job and Qohelet.. The composition of Job 32-37 permitted detection of only some of the outlines of this debate as an excellent exit horizon foreseen by the author. The author of chapters 32-37 is one, who in the crisis situation, sees the languages of defence and certainty and points towards the only certainty of a presence and just action of God who cannot be dominated by any other knowledge which is not a story of salvation. The organisation of his words makes it very clear that it was not enough to say that the wisdom in Israel took a route marked by moments of deep crisis. It was necessary that *the Word* through his words left clearly signed the perspectives of a horizon, foreseen in their own wisdom, which in spite of everything never veered away from the great distinctive mark of *fear of the Lord*.

Conclusion

The linguistic arguments used frequently in a diachronic study to protect against the fragmentation of the book and the separation of chapters 32-37 were made in the light of rhetorical biblical analysis directed towards new horizons for reading and comprehension.¹⁰ This orientation caused an inevitable confrontation with the fragility of some considerations of modern exegesis. Concentrating on a careful study of the composition in its parallelisms, symmetries, its oppositions and identical relationships, the rhetorical analysis is seen to be an indispensable step in modern exegesis. The results permit understanding of a wisdom debate about the knowledge and justice of God

¹⁰ In the case of Job 32–37, it demonstrates how to overcome naturally and convinced, many of the reductive considerations that over many years restricted Elihu to the limits of a *comic figure* whom the author exposes and ridicules (cf. W. WHEDBEE, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, Cambridge 1998); *a young brash bystander*, probably one of several witnesses to the debate... a middle ground between Job and the friends (cf. R. GORDIS, «Elihu the Intruder: A Study of the Authenticity of Job (Ch. 32-33)», *STLI* 1 [1963] 60-78); *un espontáneo* and *un intruso*...habla y habla, sin encajar en la representación y estropeando la obra (cf. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *Job. Comentario teológico y literario*, Madrid 1983), *a pompous, insensitive bore*: an opaque thinker and an unattractively self-important character (cf. E.M. GOOD, *In Turns of Tempest. A Reading of Job, with a Translation*, Stanford, CA 1990).

which has hermeneutical implications for the believer of every age. The author focuses these implications in our human languages about God. These are frequently reduced to debates and explanations that are undermined by defensive tendencies which limit the always surprising dimensions of revelation. They make us unable to live the certainty of God's justice which must coexist in an enigmatic way with a God's knowledge which can not be fathomable.

© *Studia Rhetorica Biblica et Semitica*

[19.10.2007]