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## On the Binary Principle of Biblical Texts Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

*The language of religion is more closely related  
to the language of poetry than to the language of science.*<sup>2</sup>  
[Heisenberg 1987: 118]

### Introduction

Undoubtedly, *The Bible* constitutes a work of extraordinary literary beauty. This can be particularly seen in the poem *Enûma Eliš*, i.e., the creation myth from *The Book of Genesis*, but also in *The Books of Job*, *Wisdom*, *Song of Songs* or *Psalms* – just to invoke the best known and acclaimed examples. It has always been captivating with its richness of symbolism, metaphorical

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<sup>1</sup> For the first time, the results of research discussed here were presented at the nationwide scientific conference titled “Dostrzec różnicę(e)” [“See the difference(s)”] organized by the University of Bielsko-Biała on 26-27 November 2012. In 2013, they appeared in print in Polish in my thesis titled *Językowy obraz człowieka w profetycznych księgach Starego Testamentu* [*The Linguistic Picture of Man in the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament*] in Bielsko-Biała.

<sup>2</sup> Translations of quotations within the article were provided by its translator, Dominika Pieczka, unless stated otherwise in the corresponding footnote.

nature, and imagery as well as genre diversity. It is worth remembering, though, that while assessing the artistic value of *The Bible*, the analyses carried out so far have often referred to the literary categories derived from the tradition of European literary studies. Identifying the forms of Semitic literature that underlie the biblical text is still a task to be undertaken – as important as it is complicated, which even very experienced researchers, such as Roland Meynet, assert. “Dealing with the biblical language is [...] a challenge,” writes the French researcher, theologian, linguist, biblical and literary scholar, “which should discourage even the unreasonable” [Meynet 2006: 11].

Following in Meynet’s footsteps, I have adopted the basic tools for the rhetorical analysis to examine selected texts of the *Old Testament* in the hope of indicating at least a few specifically Semitic features of beauty in this remarkable work. I have therefore assumed three presuppositions of rhetorical analysis, believing them to be true not only in relation to textual units, i.e., distiches or tristiches, ‘excerpts,’ pericopes, sequences, chapters, and books,<sup>3</sup> but also linguistic units ranging from phonemes, through morphemes and lexemes to sentences:

Thus the three presuppositions of rhetorical analysis are as follows: biblical texts form a well composed whole, are constructed according to the laws of particular rhetoric (Semitic rather than Western rhetoric), so you have to trust the texts as they are, because they have their own logic [Meynet 2001: 192].

Among the special features that distinguish Hebrew rhetoric from Greco-Roman, Meynet includes the following: “it is more concrete than abstract, it uses parataxis more than hypotaxis, it is more involutive than linear” [Meynet 2001: 184]. Parataxis is, according to Meynet, the most important feature of biblical language, and it is based in binary, seen – in Meynet’s terminology – at all levels of the biblical message organization: at the first level, i.e., ‘language or grammar;’ [Meynet 2006: 12] at the second level, i.e., ‘words or discourse;’ [Meynet 2006: 12] at the third level, i.e., the whole book. It is worth emphasizing that binary does not presuppose a simple repetition, but the interplay of doubled form and doubled content – between them, a deep sense is hidden, which should be unveiled and brought up to date.

Pietro Bovati clarifies this principle as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Text units (from the smallest to the largest) according to Roland Meynet [2001: 180-182].

The phenomenon of binary repetitions in biblical literature does not only apply to small units, but also to large units of the text, conditioning the form of discourse and the whole book. There is one and the other, thus states the form of biblical scripture, there is the beginning and the end. Between one and the other, between two texts, there is no simple identity of the content [sic! – J.S.], nor even the homogeneity of form and textual extension; at the same time, there is an easily recognizable and commonly used principle of repetition, which speaks of similarity and simultaneously of difference, novelty, supplementing the first text [Bovati 2002: 26, cited in Meynet 2006: 20].

## PART I

### Examples of binary at the ‘language or grammar’ level [Meynet 2006: 12]

#### PHONOLOGICAL LEVEL

The first example is provided by *The Book of Ezekiel* with its description of theophany known as the *Vision of a Scroll*:

<sup>1</sup> And He said unto me, “Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.” <sup>2</sup> And the Spirit entered into me when He spoke unto me, and set me upon my feet, so that I heard Him who spoke unto me. <sup>3</sup> And He said unto me, “Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against Me. They and their fathers have transgressed against Me, even unto this very day; <sup>4</sup> for they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, ‘Thus saith the Lord God.’ <sup>5</sup> And they, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear (for they are a rebellious house), yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them. <sup>6</sup> “And thou, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns be with thee and thou dost dwell among scorpions. Be not afraid of their words nor be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house. <sup>7</sup> And thou shalt speak My words unto them, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear, for they are most rebellious. <sup>8</sup> But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee. Be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house. Open thy mouth, and eat what I give thee.” <sup>9</sup> And when I looked, behold, a hand was sent unto me; and lo, a scroll of a book

was therein.<sup>10</sup> And He spread it before me; and it was written within and without, and there were written therein lamentations and mourning and woe (Ezk. 2, 1-10).<sup>4</sup>

This long pericope ends with a sentence crowned with three lexemes that are particularly important for the analysis undertaken. In his commentary, Józef Homerski emphasizes the ‘unusual content’ expressed in the 10<sup>th</sup> verse of the examined pericope: “The scroll [...] symbolizes the fullness of prophetic mission. ‘Within and without’ against the established custom, written with such unusual content (‘lamentations and mourning and woe’), it implies the momentous imminence of God’s judgment, painful to the people who awaits it” [Homerski 1998: 24].

wayyiprōś ׀ôṭāḥ ləpānay wəhîṣ kəṭûḇāḥ pānīm wəʾāḥôr wəḵāṭûḇ ʿēleʾyḥā  
qīnīm wāheḡeḥ wāhî

וַיִּפְרֹשׂ אוֹתָהּ לִפְנֵי, וְהִיא כְּתוּבָה פְּנִים וְאַחֶר; וְכָתוּב אֵלֶיהָ, קִנִּים וְהִגָּה וְהִי.  
And He spread it before me; and it was written within and without, and there were  
written therein lamentations and mourning and woe.

(Ezk. 2, 10)

The ending of the last verse of this pericope, translated into Polish (in the *Millennium Bible*), consists of three synonymic verbal nouns (in Polish: *narzekania, wzdychania i biadania*, i.e., ‘lamentations, mourning, and woe’ in English), created with the help of the same suffix ‘-anie’ and used in the same grammatical form (plural denominator), and yet the communication goal could have been achieved by using only one lexeme. The coordinate syntactic series discussed here is a kind of multiplication which enhances the expression of the text, emphasizing the gravity of warnings and threats directed by Yahweh through the prophet to the obdurate people [Cf. Boadt 2001: 749]. Not devoid of elegance, the Polish translation, which attracts the recipient’s attention by reiterating the same grammatical form (inflectional and morphological)

<sup>4</sup> I am quoting the biblical texts after: the Polish text – *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych* (Biblia Tysiąclecia) [*Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments in translation from the original languages* (Millennium Bible)], 5th ed., Poznań 2000; the Hebrew text – K. Elliger, W. Rudolph, *Hebraica Stuttgartensia Bible*, 4th edition, Stuttgart 1990; [www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm](http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm) (Accessed: 1 April 2019). I am adopting the principles of transliteration of Hebrew texts after: *Transliterated BAS Hebrew Old Testament 2001*, [in:] *The BibleWorks Program, version 5.0; the English text – 21st Century King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Gary, South Dakota 1994, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel+2&version=KJ21> (Accessed: 1 April 2019).

thrice, does not, however, like other translations into European languages, reflect the essential characteristics of the original text, namely the speech sound instrumentation:

*qīnīm wāhēge<sup>h</sup> wāhī*

קִינִים וָהֶגֶה וָהִי

The Hebrew syntactic sequence consists of three lexemes, the last two of which are clearly harmonized in tone. Alliteration binds together the words that are in singular; the third lexeme (which occupies the first position in the syntactic order) has been used in plural and does not contain the phoneme *hē*. The second and third lexemes correspond formally to each other (*masculinum singularis*), which emphasizes the similarity of their sound. Semantically, the first and second words seem to be closer to each other. The first of the lexemes קִינִים can denote both ‘a funeral’ and ‘a funeral song, a hymn or a lament;’ as for Ezk. 2, 10, it is interpreted as a literary form rather than a single complaint [Cf. WSHP II: 163-164]. The second noun, וָהֶגֶה translated as a ‘sigh,’ comes from the root הִגָּה, i.e., *mruczeć, gruchać, wzdychać, zastanawiać się, myśleć, rozważać, mówić, wychwalać* (‘purr, coo, sigh, wonder, think, consider, speak, praise’) [PSHP: 91], from which several Hebrew nouns originated that are used to describe the growl of a lion, thunder of lightning (e.g., Jb. 37, 2) or meditative, prayerful chanting [Cf. WSHP I: 226-227]. The third lexeme, וָהִי, is interpreted either as an exclamation of ‘woe!’ [WSHP I: 232] or as a noun ‘wailing’ [Cf. PI: 1196]. Józef Homerski adopted this version while translating the Hebrew text as *skargi, wzdychania i biada*, i.e., ‘complaints, sighing, and woe’ [Homerski 1998: 24].

The first lexeme conceptualizes the external signs of mourning, determined – which is worth emphasizing – by custom. The second noun refers to the inner experiences of a human being; it contains an image of inner torment, which is the fruit of heartfelt commitment, but it also conceptualizes the grief born from reflection on the situation. The third lexeme can be interpreted as a cry of terror. Its source is a full awareness of the inevitable punishment. It is also worth emphasizing that the next three words are in paratactic relation: they are clasped together with *waw*, juxtaposed rather than subordinate to each other. In vain would we look for formal signs of logical relationships known, for example, from Greek syllogism (e.g., ‘given that... it follows that,’ ‘therefore,’ ‘whereas,’ ‘consequently’) [Meynet 2001: 185]. The power of expression has its origin in the image, but it must be extracted from it

[Cf. Meynet 2001: 184]. The eloquence of the original text seems more dramatic and more engaging than the Polish translation.

Another example of binary construction at the phonological level can be seen in the sentence from *The Book of Jeremiah* (34, 17):

*lākēn kō<sup>h</sup>-amar yhwh(ʔādōnāy) ʔattem lō<sup>ʔ</sup>-šəma<sup>c</sup>tem ʔēlay liqrō<sup>ʔ</sup> dərōr ʔiš  
ləʔāhīw wəʔiš lərē<sup>c</sup>ēhū hinnī qōrē<sup>ʔ</sup> lākem dərōr nəʔum-yhwh(ʔādōnāy) ʔel-  
hahēreb ʔel-haddēber wəʔel-hārā<sup>c</sup>āb wənāṭattī ʔetkēm (lizwā<sup>c</sup>ā<sup>h</sup>) [ləza<sup>c</sup>āwā<sup>h</sup>]  
ləkōl mamləkōt hāʔāreš*

לְכֹ, כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה, אַתֶּם לֹא-שָׁמַעְתֶּם אֵלַי, לְקַרְא דְּרוֹר אִישׁ לְאָחִיו וְאִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ; הִנְנִי קֹרֵא  
לְכֶם דְּרוֹר נְאֻם-יְהוָה, אֶל-הַחֹרֵב אֶל-הַדֹּבֵר וְאֶל-הָרָעָב, וְנִתַּתִּי אֶתְכֶם לְזוּעָה (לְזֹעָה), לְכֹל  
מַמְלְכוֹת הָאָרֶץ.

Therefore thus saith the Lord: Ye have not hearkened unto Me, in proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and every man to his neighbour. Behold, I proclaim a 'liberty' for you, saith the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth.

(Jer. 34, 17)

This sentence is part of a pericope dating back to 588-587 before Christ, i.e., during the Babylonian occupation which was seriously threatening the freedom of the chosen people. After experiencing the first deportation ten years earlier [Cf. Wstęp 2006: 1020; Couturier 2001: 677-678], the threat of a further attack led the Judeans to pledge they would free their slaves in accordance with the Israeli law (slavery was not allowed to last for life) [Cf. Stachowiak 1997: 179]. The temporary change in Nebuchadnezzar's tactics and the withdrawal of his troops from Jerusalem results in its inhabitants refraining from fulfilling their commitment made to God through King Zedekiah. The analyzed sentence begins a sequence dedicated to Jeremiah's intervention, which announces the punishment of the Judeans for breaking the Law and the oath sworn to Yahweh. The punishment was known: "The prophet proclaims the fulfilment of the curse contained in the provisions of the covenant in case of its violation: the fate of the guilty shall be similar to that of sacrificial animals – a cruel death" [Stachowiak 1997: 180]. The cruelty and inevitability of this death are expressed by three nouns paratactically held together with a clasp *waw*:

*miecz, nóż, sztylet, żelazo, dhuto* ('sword, knife, dagger, iron, chisel')

[PSHP: 126]

*zaraza* ('plague, pestilence') [PSHP: 83]

חֹרֵב  
דֹּבֵר

*glód, laknienie* ('famine, thirst') [PSHP: 332]

רָעַב

What consolidates these nouns is the similarity in sound (paronomasia,<sup>5</sup> or the so-called pun), because each of them contains two identical consonants, i.e., *bêth* and *rêš*, though set in different arrangements. All are used in the same singular form. They are semantically complementary to one another. Moreover, each of them denotes annihilation. Positioning them together creates an image of total and inevitable desolation, thus acting as a hyperbole.

<sup>2</sup>*el-haḥéreb* <sup>2</sup>*el-haddeber* wə<sup>2</sup>*el-hārā'āb*

אֶל-הַחֶרֶב אֶל-הַדִּבֶּר וְאֶל-הָרָעָב

חֶרֶב

דִּבֶּר

רָעַב

3 x ר

3 x ב

## MORPHOLOGICAL LEVEL

At the level of the smallest linguistic units, the differences between Biblical Hebrew and Indo-European languages can be seen as easily as at the phonetic level, but obviously, it has certain – very serious – consequences for the structure of the text. As I wrote in the Introduction above, the carrier of meaning is the triconsonantal root, while the meanings of words are diversified through vowel alternations and the process of affixal derivation [Cf. Terminińska 2003:

<sup>5</sup> Cf. "paronomasia" [dictionary entry], [in:] *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Terms] [STL: 345]: "a combination of similarly sounding words, both etymologically related and independent, emphasizing their meaningful closeness, strangeness or opposition. Semantic functions of paronomasia are truly diverse. It was counted among the rhetorical figures. Paronomasia constitutes the basis for various forms of word play; it can be a source of language jokes [...]. It is sometimes treated as a way of highlighting and even revealing the deep and hidden relationships between phenomena; [...] Other names: adnomination, annomination. Cf. etymological figure, homonyms, speech-sound instrumentation, play on words, paronyms, parechesis, polyptone;"

"parechesis" – 1. a variety of paronomasia, consisting of a combination of words that differ in one speech sound or in the order of syllables. [...] Cf. adideation, anagram, metagram, paragram; 2. a combination of words, the first of which ends with the same syllable as the beginning of the next word, traditionally regarded as a violation of sound harmony (euphony), especially in prose. Another name: parechesis. Cf. *hiatus*.

228]. This specific feature of the Hebrew language makes it possible to exploit in the text an extraordinary play on words that cannot be rendered in Indo-European languages.

An example of implementing the binary principle at the morphological level can be found in *The Book of Jonah* (1, 16):

wayyîrʾû hāʾānāšîm yirʾā<sup>h</sup> ḡəḏôlā<sup>h</sup> ʿet-yhwh(ʾāḏōnāy) wayyîzbəḥû-  
zəbāḥ lyhwh(lāʾḏōnāy) wayyiddərû nəḏārîm

וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה, אֶת-יְהוָה; וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-זֶבַח, לַיהוָה, וַיִּדְּרוּ, נְדָרִים.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord and made vows.

(Jnh. 1, 16)

Mariners who participate in the sea voyage to Tarshish experience the horror of a storm on the high seas. When they discover it to be an expression of God's wrath for Jonah's betrayal, since he escaped from the prophetic mission to the Nineveh people, their human fear turns into the fear of God expressed in words:

wayyîrʾû hāʾānāšîm yirʾā<sup>h</sup> ḡəḏôlā<sup>h</sup>

וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה

The basis of the phrase is the root **יָרָא**, which once appears in the text as a verb in 3rd person *masculinum pluralis qal imperfectum*, and once as a noun in *singularis*: “the men feared the Lord with great fear,” which should be interpreted as a hyperbolic expression of great fear **וַיִּירָאוּ יְרָאָה**. The result of this horror is a sacrifice to the unknown and powerful Yahweh and a vow, i.e., a public declaration that they have experienced his extraordinary power [Cf. Ceresko 2001: 840]. In Hebrew, this thought is expressed by two binary pairs of verbal phrases: ‘they made a sacrifice’ **וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-זֶבַח** and ‘they made vows’ **וַיִּדְּרוּ נְדָרִים**, which should be read as an expression of fulfilling one's duty to God. The binary structure of the verse would be recognized in the European tradition as a tautology with a hyperbolic function, while the biblical tradition obliges us to perceive it also as an expression of beauty and artistic exquisiteness.



## PART II

## Examples of binary at the ‘word or discourse’ level

[Meynet 2006: 12]

## LEXICAL LEVEL + SYNTACTIC LEVEL + TRANSITION TO DISCOURSE LEVEL

The principle of binary at the lexical level can be observed in *The Book of Isaiah* (3, 5).

wəṇiggaś hāʿām ʔiš bəʔiš wəʔiš bərēʿēhû yirhābû hannaʿar bazzāqēn  
wəhanniqle<sup>h</sup> bannikbād

וְנִגַּשׁ הָעָם, אִישׁ בְּאִישׁ וְאִישׁ בְּרֵעֵהוּ; יִרְהָבוּ, הַנֶּעֱר בְּזֶקֶן, וְהַנִּקְלָהּ, בְּנִכְבָּד.  
And the people shall be oppressed, every one by another and every one by his neighbor; the child shall behave himself proudly against the elder, and the base against the honourable.

(Isa. 3, 5)

זֶקֶן

AN AGED MAN

כְּבֹד

BE RESPECTED / REVERED

נֶעֱר

A CHILD/A LAD

קְלָה

BE INSIGNIFICANT

Through the description of interpersonal relations, the text draws an image of lawlessness and degradation of the system of values under the Assyrian occupation [Cf. Jensen and Irwin 2001: 619]. This disturbance of the social order receives a negative assessment, namely the subsequent lexemes used in the sentence in identical grammatical forms comprise the following oppositions: a young man, a lad *versus* an aged man (*masculinum singularis*) and a simpleton or a plebeian *versus* a noble or a dignitary (*participium niph'al masculinum singularis*). In a normal situation on the left-hand side of the opposition, we would see those who are in a relationship of subordination to the right-hand side of the opposition. The old age and experience, in accordance with the tradition of Israel, deserve great respect and even a particularly privileged position in the family [Cf. *Komentarz historyczno-kulturowy* 2005: 668]. In the text, this order is reversed: a young man/lad insults an old man, a person

of little significance is raised above someone respectable. The symmetry of grammatical forms contrasts strongly with the opposite meaning of words.

## SYNTAX

The binary principle on the syntax level is rendered by the first sentence of the examined verse. The truth about human persecution by man is expressed by a double nameplate construction: ‘every one by another,’ ‘every one by his neighbour.’

וְאִישׁ בְּרֵעֵהוּ

EVERY ONE BY HIS NEIGHBOUR

אִישׁ בְּאִישׁ

EVERY ONE BY ANOTHER

The first of the used nouns, אִישׁ, denotes a human: ‘a man, husband, man; a male, someone, one’ [PSHP: 31; WSHP I: 42–43]. The second one, רֵעַ, is an ambiguous word<sup>6</sup> expressing the idea of common origin, kinship, and spiritual closeness, but also common work, e.g., grazing cattle [Cf. PSHP: 326]. As I have already mentioned, from the point of view of a Polish person, this very large semantic span between two aspects of meaning seems unusual, unnatural, but easy to explain by the conditions of life in Palestine: a neighbour is the one who pastures cattle with me and whom I can trust in a situation of danger. So, the noun רֵעַ refers not only to a fellow countryman, a tribesman, a compatriot, but also to a friend, a companion, and even a lover [Cf. PSHP: 332].

As clearly indicated by the analysis of the studied word connections, in the biblical vision humans were created as relational beings: consent, kindness, cooperation – these are the natural conditions of social functioning for them, while betrayal, oppression, falsehood, isolation constitute a reversal of the natural order for humans and – in the biblical order – are treated as degeneration.

<sup>6</sup> A detailed analysis of the semantics of the root and the nouns created from it is presented in the third chapter of the work that has already been mentioned here, namely *Językowy obraz człowieka w profetycznych księgach Starego Testamentu* devoted to אִישׁ in syntactic structures, [Cf. Szarlej 2013: 154–169] as well as in the article *Semantyka frazemów określających relacje międzyludzkie (na hebrajskim materiale ksiąg prorockich)* [*Semantics of phrasemes defining human relations (on the Hebrew material of the Books of Prophets)*] [Szarlej 2019: 273–293].

## THE LEVEL OF DISCOURSE

At the discourse level, binary constitutes a characteristic feature of *The Book of Psalms*<sup>7</sup> and *The Book of Proverbs*; it serves as their constructional principle. The latter is less known, so perhaps it is worth referring to the examples of Semitic *m<sup>o</sup>šālīm*.<sup>8</sup> A specific feature of Biblical proverbs is their close connection with religious tradition; unlike, for example, Polish folk proverbs, they cannot be regarded as a manifestation of secular wisdom since, as Stanisław Potocki writes, they have developed “on the grounds of Yahwist religion and morality” [Potocki 1990: 425]. “The foundation of the truths expressed in the proverbs are the Law and the Prophets, and they themselves preserve and express the spiritual achievements of the chosen people in an accessible form” [Cf. Potocki 1990: 425]. The aforementioned author describes *m<sup>o</sup>šālīm* as “short [lexical units], concise statements containing a description and assessment of various elements that make up human life and its determinants” [Potocki 1990: 403]. A biblical proverb usually consists of two sentences collated on the basis of similarity (synonymous parallelism), contrast (antithetic parallelism) or complement (synthetic parallelism) [Cf. Potocki 1990: 403].

One of the most important differences between European and biblical proverbs can be seen in a short statement from *The Book of Proverbs*: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18, 21). This sentence, known to European readers of *The Bible*, is usually interpreted as a hyperbolic statement, an expression of the poetic craftsmanship of the biblical author. Whereas for a Semite, the meaning of this sentence is close to reality. The difference in interpretation results from a different understanding of the word (as well as different ways of thinking and acting) in two distant cultures: European and Jewish, on which I elaborated more extensively in the *Foreword* to the aforementioned book titled *Językowy obraz człowieka w profetycznych księgach Starego Testamentu* [*The Linguistic Picture of Man in the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament*] [Cf. Szarlej 2013: 11-33].

<sup>7</sup> A detailed stylistic analysis of *The Book of Psalms* is provided by Danuta Kowalska in her monograph *Sztuka słowa Mikołaja Reja. Studium stylistycznojęzykowe „Psalterza Dawidowego”* [*The Art of the Word by Mikołaj Rej. A Study of the Style and Language in “David’s Psalter”*] [Cf. Kowalska 2013: 247-356].

<sup>8</sup> A wider interpretation of the phenomenon can be found in my article titled “Myśl-słowo-działanie w przysłowiaach europejskich i semickich” [“Thought-Word-Action in European and Semitic proverbs”], published in: *Parémie národů slovanských III* [Cf. Szarlej 2007: 151-161].

The power of human word and its close connection with action can be clearly seen in the following pericopes from *The Book of Proverbs*:

<sup>18</sup> There is he that speaketh like the piercings of a sword,  
but the tongue of the wise is healing.  
(Prov. 12, 18)

<sup>24</sup> Pleasant words are as a honeycomb:  
sweet to the soul and health to the bones.  
(Prov. 16, 24).

<sup>15</sup> By much forbearance is a prince persuaded,  
and a soft tongue breaketh the bone.  
(Prov. 25, 15).

<sup>1</sup> A soft answer turneth away wrath,  
but grievous words stir up anger.  
<sup>4</sup> A wholesome tongue is a tree of life,  
but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.  
<sup>5</sup> A fool despiseth his father's instruction,  
but he that heedeth reproof is prudent.  
(Prov. 15, 1.4-5).

The presented texts allow us to discover a certain characteristic of biblical expression: the word is understood as a thing, described as a real object, an element of reality that is fully concrete, almost tangible.<sup>9</sup> In a sentence, the attributes of a word are usually expressed not with the use of a comparative clause 'words are as ...,' like in Polish or English, but a characteristic of a real object is transferred to the word and becomes its characteristic, i.e., 'words are something,' 'the tongue – a healing remedy,' 'words are a honeycomb, candy, medicine,' 'speeches are unsheathed swords.' The most important content is expressed with morphosyntactic parallelism, and not with a simile.

A proverb from *The Book of Amos* (5, 19) has a binary structure:

<sup>9</sup> I describe the concept of Hebrew *dābār* in more detail in the *Foreword* to my book *Językowy obraz człowieka w proroczych księgach...* as well as in the article titled "Dabar – lógos – verbum – słowo. Odmienne sposoby wyrażania myśli w językach semickich i europejskich" ["Dabar – Lógos – Verbum – Word. Different Ways of Expressing Thoughts in Semitic and European Languages"] [Szarlej 2009: 107-123].

ka'āšer yānûš ʾiš mippənê hā'ārî ûpəgā'ô haddōb ûbā' habbāyit  
wəsāmaḵ yādô 'al-haqqîr ûnəšākô hannāhāš  
כְּאִשֶּׁר יָנוּס אִישׁ מִפְּנֵי הָאָרִי, וּפָגַעוּ הָדָב; וּבָא הַבֵּית--וְסָמַךְ יָדוֹ עַל-הַקִּיר,  
וַנִּשְׁכּוּ הַנָּחָשׁ.

as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned  
his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.

(Am 5, 19)

'a lion' [PSHP, p. 44]

'he- and she-bear' [PSHP, p. 82]

'snake' [WSHP, vol. 1, p. 649]

אָרִי  
דָּב  
נָחָשׁ

The paradox of fate and the inevitability of suffering/unhappiness are expressed in two images:

1. the escape from an external threat (a lion), which ends in the claws of an equally dangerous bear,
2. the illusory security at home (leaning against the wall as an indication of security) where there lurks the snake.

The sense that arises from the binary system of content: none can escape fate, the judgments of Providence, suffering – either external or internal threat. The comparison is not expressed using the comparative link 'as,' but by means of morphosyntactic parallelism [Cf. Meynet 2001: 186].

The pericope from *The Book of Isaiah* (9, 10) has an equally sophisticated binary structure at the discourse level:

wayyigzōr 'al-yāmîn wəra'ēb wayyō'kal 'al-šəmo'wl wəlō' šābē'û ʾiš  
bəšar-zəro'ô yō'kēlû

וַיִּגְזֹר עַל-יְמִינוֹ וְרַעֲב, וַיֹּאכַל עַל-שְׂמֹאול וְלֹא שָׂבְעוּ: אִישׁ בְּשֵׁר-זָרְעוֹ, יֹאכֹלוּ.  
And he shall snatch on the right hand and be hungry; and he shall eat on the left  
hand, and they shall not be satisfied; they shall eat every man the flesh of his own  
arm.

(Isa. 9, 19)

The terrible image of cannibalism (שָׂבַע, רָעַב), less detached from reality in times of famine and siege wars than one might think today [Cf. *Komentarz historyczno-kulturowy* 2005: 679], expresses, as Joseph Jensen puts it, "the anarchy prevailing in the last years of the existence of Israel" [Jensen and Irwin 2001: 626], just before the Assyrian attack. This visual image of

degenerated interpersonal relations builds up a general metonymic statement: literally, “everybody devours his own body’s arm” [PI: 770], preceded by two sentences of a parallel inflectionally sophisticated binary construction, which provide an example for the first statement. The meaning of the verse: doing evil, living at the expense of one’s fellow human being shall not satiate and shall not give happiness.

וְרָעֵב  
IS HUNGRY

וַיִּנְזֹר עַל-יְמִין  
ON THE RIGHT BITES OFF

וְלֹא שָׂבֵעַ  
IS NOT SATIATED

וַיֹּאכַל עַל-שְׁמָאוֹל  
ON THE LEFT DEVOURS

*The Song of the Vineyard* from *The Book of Isaiah* (5, 1-7), a parabolic image of Yahweh’s love for the chosen people, also has an extremely elaborate binary structure. The sentence explaining the parable concludes an extensive description of the difficult grapevine cultivation in the rocky territory of Israel, which involves a great deal of labour, such as clearing the soil of boulders and stones, levelling the ground, constant care for soil moisture, digging and weeding shrubs so that it does not overgrow, watching over the harvest at the right time so that no crops are robbed [Cf. *Komentarz historyczno-kulturowy* 2005: 669]:

*kî kērem yhwḥ(ʔādōnāy) šəbāʔôt bêt yiśrāʔel wəʔiš yəḥûdā<sup>h</sup> nəṯaʿ šaʿāšûʿāyw wayəqaw ləmišpāṭ wəhinnē<sup>h</sup> mišpāḥ lišdāqā<sup>h</sup> wəhinnē<sup>h</sup> šəʿāqā<sup>h</sup>*

כִּי כֶרֶם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת, בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאִישׁ יְהוּדָה, נָטַע שְׁעִשְׁוּעִיו ; וַיִּקְוּ לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהִנֵּה מִשְׁפָּח, לְצַדִּיקָה וְהִנֵּה צָעָקָה.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah, His pleasant plant. And He looked for judgment, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry.

(Isa. 5, 7)

The ‘house of Israel’ and the ‘men of Judah’ are examples of merism [Cf. Meynet 2006: 13], which refers to the entirety of the chosen people. Both

Judah and Israel did not produce the ‘pleasant plant’ that a caring ‘gardener’ could expect.

בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל  
HOUSE OF ISRAEL

כֶּרֶם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת  
VINEYARD OF THE LORD

נֹטֵעַ שְׁשׁוּעִי  
CHOSEN / PLEASANT PLANT

אִישׁ יְהוּדָה  
MEN OF JUDAH

In its expression, it is a poignant description of the tragically failed ‘investment’ of God, who expected justice from his people and only sees violence and unlawfulness. The harvested fruit defies the plans and expectations of the Creator. This truth is expressed by two parallel segments of the text composed using contrast:

מִשְׁפַּח  
BLOODSHED

מִשְׁפָּט  
LAWFULNESS

צַעֲקָה  
CALL FOR HELP

צְדָקָה  
JUSTICE

The lexemes present on the right side of a segment often appear together in *The Bible*, thus creating the so-called ‘permanent expression,’ ‘a few coordinate words’ or *sintema* [Cf. Meynet 2006: 12]. These are synonyms most often translated as ‘justice and law:’ *mišpāt* “is not so much an impartial and thorough analysis, but rather a merciful vindication of the rights of the poor” [Jensen and Irwin 2001: 621], whereas *šəḏāqāh* “indicates a behavior, which takes into account circumstances and not only unconditional norms” [Jensen and Irwin 2001: 621]; this term is often used to describe God’s mercy, which should be a model for interpersonal relationships. In the examined sentence, they do not appear next to each other, but form a *parallelismus membrorum* [Cf. Meynet 2006: 15], as they begin subsequent segments of the verse.

The left segment is made up of synonyms that represent doing evil and violence: *mišpāḥ* signifies ‘iniquity, bloodshed’ [PSHP: 213], *šəḏāqāh* – ‘shouting, crying (for help), lament’ [PSHP: 301].

The phonic order of the text is also remarkable: words with opposite meanings are similar in terms of sound: *mišpāt* : *mišpāḥ* differ only regarding the

mid-word position of *śîn* and *šîn* as well as the word-final position of *tāw* and *hêth*, while the pair *ṣəḏāqā<sup>h</sup>* : *ṣə<sup>h</sup>āqā<sup>h</sup>* – with the consonant *dâleth* and *‘ajin*.

In one verse of *The Book of Isaiah* (5, 7), binary can be seen at the level of phonics (paronomasia), lexical (merism) and discourse (*parallelismus membrorum*, parabolic structure of the text).

### PART III

#### Examples of binary at the ‘entire Book’ level [Meynet 2006: 12]

The use of binary structures at the level of the whole book can be seen in many cases, because, according to Roland Meynet, the principle of binary “is not a fact, which can only be seen in some places. It is present throughout the biblical text” [Meynet 2006: 19]. I wrote about many relationships between *The Old* and *New Testaments* years ago in the text titled *Zwizski Starego Testamentu z Nowym – jako podstawa budowy biblijnych znaczeń* [*The Relationship Between The Old and New Testaments As a Basis for Building Biblical Meanings*] [Cf. Szarlej 2005: 23-33]. Perhaps it is only worth reminding here that I showed them in three selected spheres:

1. the mutual permeating of *The Old* and *New Testament* topoi (e.g., images of Paradise, Promised Land and New Jerusalem),
2. the dependencies in the symbolic sphere (the snake symbol), and
3. the sphere of image (relations between the theophanic texts of *The Old* and *New Testaments*).

To illustrate the thesis, let me use the third of the aforementioned spheres, i.e., the sphere of image. I will use one very clear example of an epiphany text.<sup>10</sup>

A classic text of this type is the description of Theophany on Sinai from the *Book of Exodus*:

<sup>16</sup>And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup>And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the nether part of the mount. <sup>18</sup>And Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of

<sup>10</sup> A detailed description of epiphany texts can be found in my book titled *Epifanie biblijne* [*Biblical Epiphanies*] [Cf. Szarlej 2002].



a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.<sup>19</sup> And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long and waxed louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice.<sup>20</sup> And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mount; and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount, and Moses went up.<sup>21</sup> And the Lord said unto Moses, "Go down. Charge the people, lest they break through to gaze unto the Lord, and many of them perish."<sup>22</sup> And let the priests also, who come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them."<sup>23</sup> And Moses said unto the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for Thou charged us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mount and sanctify it.'"<sup>24</sup> And the Lord said unto him, "Away! Get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou and Aaron with thee; but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the Lord, lest He break forth upon them."<sup>25</sup> So Moses went down unto the people and spoke unto them (Ex. 19, 16-23) [CKJ].

The presence of God is illustrated in the text by such epiphany symbols as: 'thunders and lightnings,' 'a thick cloud,' 'the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud,' 'smoke,' 'fire,' and 'earthquake.' Invading both eyesight and hearing of man, these symbols of God's presence have become fixed in *The Bible* as signals of God's presence in general, also in texts other than the theophanic ones. In *The Old and New Testaments*, they become a linguistic reflection of the Jews' ideas about Yahweh. They are used in the texts to define the holiness and majesty of God, His strength and mystery, terror, inaccessibility, and omnipotence.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Bible*, a storm along with the accompanying thunders and lightnings create an image of God's power, of His great majesty and force that exceeds human imagination, of transcendence [STB: 110-111]. Since they evoke certain emotions, these phenomena serve to convey how humans understand the wrath of Yahweh. As *A Practical Biblical Dictionary* states, "lightning is considered to be His arrows [...] and thunder represents the sound of His voice" [PSB: 120].

<sup>11</sup> Scientific research has proven that many of the epiphany symbols indicated in *The Bible* are universal in nature. They can be found in many other cultures. Rudolf Otto describes this phenomenon in a comprehensive way in his work titled *Świętość. Elementy irracjonalne w pojęciu bóstwa i ich stosunek do elementów racjonalnych* [*The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*] [Otto 1968]. Fr Antoni Tronina writes about the connections between the religious consciousness of Israel and the Canaanite cult in his book titled *Bóg przybywa ze Synaju. Staroizraelskie formuły teofanijne a początki religii Izraela* [*God Is Coming from Sinai. Old Israeli Theophanic Formulas and Origins of Israeli Religion*] [Tronina 1989].

In theophanic descriptions, fire symbolizes the presence and holiness of God, both enticing and terrifying [STB: 615]. It is a sign of God's destructive power, but also of His purifying force. The smoke rising from a sacrificial pyre represents both Yahweh's acceptance of the sacrifice and the trace of His passage. References to light and radiance are signs of heavenly reality that is out-of-this-world, purified, and perfect. They also symbolize the caring presence of the transcendent (as opposed to the fatal forces of darkness) [Cf. STB: 72-73, 615-620, 958-963 and PSB: 883-884, 1213].

The cloud enveloping Mount Sinai is a sign of God's presence; it also beautifully illustrates the mysterious nature of the Creator. In the Elohist and priestly tradition, a column of clouds was identified with the angel of Yahweh. Combined with fire, the cloud served as a veil from people's eyes, but at the same time it announced the coming of the glory of the Lord. "Because of the freedom with which clouds move in the skies, they are a symbol of God's omnipresence" [PSB: 858 also STB: 589-591], states *A Practical Biblical Dictionary*.

The afore-discussed visual and acoustic elements of the revelation are regularly referred to in a great number of epiphany texts, either in the form close to the description found in Theophany on Sinai, or similar to this model, but differently realized in the surface structure of the text.

In the description of the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor (Matt. 17, 1-8; Mrk. 9, 2-8; Luk. 9, 28-36), the elements of Theophany on Sinai are repeated almost in their entirety: the place of the event is a high mountain, the divinity of Jesus is emphasized by the supernatural, dazzling radiance of His face and clothing, the cloud surrounding Christ and His disciples is a sign of the presence of God, His voice testifies to the filiality of God the transfigured.

Descriptions in angelic revelations, i.e., angelophanic ones, often mention the glow or brightness that emanates from these creatures. It highlights the transcendent origin of God's messengers. For example, this is the function it performs in the description of an angel in the *Book of Daniel* (Dan. 10, 5-6.11).

There are still different manifestations of epiphany symbols in texts considered to be hierophanies which include descriptions of objects and persons "that, by virtue of direct or indirect divine action, are marked with a trait of transcendence and sacredness" [EK VI: 848]. In the description of God's chariot from the Book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 1, 4-28), we easily find traces of the vertical arrangement (the chariot is located in the top part, above the firmament) and mentions of a cloud, fire, and a voice of One who spoke. The brightness of the unusual object is indicated by comparisons to gold and precious stones.

Already centuries ago, translators of *The Bible* were aware of the many vital relationships between *The Old* and *New Testaments* as well as between individual books and pericopes. Many researchers of the modern era also mention this particular attribute of the biblical text, e.g., a synthetic approach to the problem is proposed by Joanna Sobczykowa in her monograph *O naukowej polszczyźnie humanistycznej złotego wieku: Wujek – Budny – Murzynowski* [*On the Scientific Polish Humanities of the Golden Age: Wujek – Budny – Murzynowski*] [2012: 166-167].

The prophetic books provide many more examples of binary at the entire Book level. It is enough to quote the four *Old Testament Songs of the Suffering Servant* and the evangelical description of Christ's Passion.

## Conclusion

Pope Pius XII wrote about the power of God's Word contained in *The Bible*:

Nor does "the word of God [...]" need artificial devices and human adaptation to move and impress souls; for the Sacred Pages, written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, are of themselves rich in original meaning; endowed with a divine power, they have their own value; adorned with heavenly beauty, they radiate of themselves light and splendor, provided they are so fully and accurately explained by the interpreter, that all the treasures of wisdom and prudence, therein contained are brought to light [...] [Pius XII 1943a, cited in Pius XII 1997: 10].

The words of Pius XII may arouse anxiety in a linguist who, as a researcher, wants to explore exactly this 'human adaptation' and scrutinize the properties of these 'artificial devices.' He or she may find comfort in the conviction that it does not lie within the competence of any linguist to judge the effectiveness of God's word. What can encourage them is the awareness that they do not exceed their authority when they attempt at discovering the mechanisms that determine the effectiveness and beauty of the human message.

It is incomprehensible and astonishing that the majestic God, the mighty Creator of the universe, the Lord of history, whose nature, according to Rudolf Otto, is most fully expressed in 'darkness,' 'silence,' 'void,' or 'spatial emptiness'<sup>12</sup> as well as 'the vastness of the desert' and 'the depth of the night' which – as Jean Daniélou [1953: 132] adds – speak to humans in their language so that God's words acquire the shape of human speech [Pius XII 1943b,

<sup>12</sup> The terms by Rudolf Otto come from chapter XI of his book titled *Świętość. Elementy irracjonalne w pojęciu bóstwa...* [1968: 102-107].

after 1998: 142]. Though perforce very limited, the linguistic material presented here shows how colorful this ‘emptiness’ is, how sonorous the ‘silence,’ and how dynamic the ‘void.’

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## ABSTRACT

Identifying the forms of Semitic literature that underlie the biblical text is still a task to be undertaken – as important as it is complicated, which even very experienced researchers, such as Roland Meynet, assert. The authoress adopts the basic tools of rhetorical analysis, formulated by Meynet, and then examines selected texts of *The Old Testament* in search of a few specifically Semitic features of beauty in the remarkable Book of Books.

Parataxis is, according to Meynet, the most important feature of biblical language, and it is based in binary, seen – in Meynet’s terminology – at all levels of the biblical message organization: at the first level, i.e., ‘language or grammar;’ at the second level, i.e., ‘words or discourse;’ at the third level, i.e., the entire Book. Therefore, the authoress has assumed three presuppositions of rhetorical analysis, believing them to be true not only in relation to textual units, i.e., distiches or tristiches, ‘excerpts,’ pericopes, sequences, chapters, and books, but also linguistic units ranging from phonemes, through morphemes and lexemes to sentences. Through the analysis of subsequent texts, the authoress wants to prove that binary does not presuppose a simple repetition, but the interplay of doubled form and doubled content – between them, a deep sense is hidden, which should be unveiled and brought up to date.

**Keywords:** *The Bible*, rhetorical analysis, Semitic literature, binary principle, Indo-European languages vs. biblical Hebrew, conceptualization

## ABSTRAKT

### O zasadzie binarności w interpretacji i przekładzie tekstów biblijnych

Rozpoznawanie form literatury semickiej, leżących u podstaw tekstu biblijnego, jest ciągle zadaniem do wykonania – tyleż ważnym, co skomplikowanym, czego nie ukrywają nawet bardzo wytrawni badacze, tacy jak chociażby Roland Meynet. Autorka przyjmuje podstawowe narzędzia analizy retorycznej, sformułowane przez Meyneta, po czym dokonuje oglądu wybranych tekstów Starego Testamentu, poszukując w Księdze Ksiąg specyficznie semickich cech urody tego niezwykłego dzieła.



Parataktyczność – zdaniem Meyneta – najważniejsza cecha języka biblijnego, wspiera się na binarności, dostrzeganej na wszystkich poziomach organizacji przekazu biblijnego – w terminologii Meyneta – na poziomie pierwszym, czyli „języka lub gramatyki”, na poziomie drugim, czyli „słowa lub dyskursu”, na poziomie trzecim, czyli całości Księgi. Autorka przyjmuje zatem trzy presupozycje analizy retorycznej, wierząc, iż są prawdziwe nie tylko w odniesieniu do jednostek tekstowych: dystychów bądź trystychów, „urywków”, perykop, sekwencji, rozdziałów oraz ksiąg, ale także do jednostek językowych od fonemu przez morfem, leksem i zdanie. Poprzez analizę kolejnych tekstów autorka pragnie udowodnić, że binarność nie zakłada prostego powtórzenia, ale współgranie zdwojonej formy i zdwojonej treści – pomiędzy nimi ukryty jest głęboki sens, który należy odsłonić, zaktualizować.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Biblia, analiza retoryczna, literatura semicka, zasada binarności, języki indoeuropejskie a hebrajszczyzna biblijna, konceptualizacja