



Faculty Publications

2015-10-09

The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies

Noel B. Reynolds

Brigham Young University - Provo, nbr@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture, 17 (2016), 91-98.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Reynolds, Noel B., "The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies" (2015). *Faculty Publications*. 1916.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1916>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

THE RETURN OF RHETORICAL ANALYSIS TO BIBLE STUDIES

Noel B. Reynolds

Review of:

Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism. Hebrew Bible Monographs 45* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 354 pp., \$130.00.

Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 256* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 392 pp., \$200.00.

Abstract: There is now a growing consensus that the eighth and seventh centuries produced a distinctive Hebrew rhetoric that enabled writers, even down into New Testament times, to use both words and structures to communicate with readers in ways that have been largely invisible to modern Western interpreters. In this essay, the efforts of two leaders of this movement in Biblical studies to explain and defend their respective versions of this developing approach are reviewed.

Over the last six or seven decades, the stranglehold that nineteenth century historical or source criticism had established over advanced biblical studies was gradually loosened to the point that today many Bible scholars now see literary approaches in the ascendancy. I have selected these two authors' writings over the last two decades for a joint review because of the thoughtful and systematic treatments they give to these new approaches and their development. My larger agenda is to acquaint students of the Book of Mormon with developments in biblical studies that may significantly enhance in-depth readings of the Nephite scripture.

Book of Mormon readers benefitted from a jump-start in this direction famously provided by the 1960s discovery of chiasmus in that

text by John W. Welch — while serving as a missionary in Germany. But as biblical rhetorical studies have matured and developed more systematically in subsequent decades, we can now see that this rhetorical form is only one part of a much larger picture. We are now in a position to see chiasmus as one of a tool chest of rhetorical devices that had been developed by Hebrew writers in the eighth and seventh centuries — and which are on rich display in biblical texts such as Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and the wisdom literature. Scholars who learn those rhetorical strategies are helping us to find much richer meanings and relationships within those biblical texts. Inasmuch as the Book of Mormon and the plates of brass come out of that same seventh century milieu, we might profitably ask to what extent their insights might help us understand that keystone Restoration scripture better as well.

Jack R. Lundbom

The collection of Jack Lundbom's papers published in 2013 by Sheffield Phoenix Press offers the best starting place for this joint review. Today Lundbom is a recognized leader in the approach styled "rhetorical criticism" ever since that label was proposed by James Muilenburg in his 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature to signal that it was time to move on beyond the "form criticism" approach that he had championed to that point.¹ Lundbom positioned himself as an early leader in what has now become a substantial movement within biblical studies responding to Muilenburg's proposal. Using the methodology of rhetorical criticism, he has recently published a 1000-page commentary on Deuteronomy and is the author of the three-volume Anchor Bible commentary on Jeremiah completed in 1972. Lundbom sees these two books exemplifying best the rhetorical techniques that developed among Hebrew writers in the two centuries before Lehi. *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* offers a convenient compilation of Lundbom's best published papers across a distinguished career and features those papers that explain and teach the methods of rhetorical criticism as it has developed for biblical studies.

The compilation is divided into four sections. The first four chapters will be of great value to readers who want to learn the basic principles and methods employed in rhetorical criticism. In these, Lundbom discusses the development of a Hebrew rhetoric in centuries eight and seven and relates this to other contemporary literatures. He traces the growing

1 James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (March, 1969): 1-18.

recognition of this Hebrew rhetoric in the writings of eighteenth and nineteenth century linguists and Bible scholars, several of whom appear to have independently discovered the importance of parallelism in Hebrew writing. Englishman Robert Lowth has been widely appreciated for his late eighteenth century attempt to define various types of Hebrew parallelism. But as Lundbom points out in detail, we now know that a German scholar, Christian Schöttgen, had produced an even more sensitive analysis fifty years previously — demonstrating “the rhetorical nature of parallelism” and showing “how parallelism *functions* for the Hebrew poet.” (15)

In the third chapter, Lundbom goes on to provide us with a brief account of the twentieth-century revival of classical rhetoric as an area of study in the American university that provided a place for the birth of rhetorical criticism at Cornell around 1920. Distinguishing their program from *literary* criticism, *rhetorical* criticism focused on audience effect — going beyond all earlier rhetorical studies in trying to explain how rhetorical “figures *function* in discourse.” (20)

As Muilenburg and others forged the new approach, they distinguished their efforts from form criticism, which sought to identify known literary forms that may have influenced Bible authors, and from classical rhetoric, which looked for the rhetorical figures long studied in ancient Greek and Roman literature. They recognized that they were not just looking for the occurrence of standard forms or recognized rhetorical figures but were rather looking for the unique elements of a text that would allow them to identify the specific rhetorical devices invoked or created by any particular author. The key dynamic for launching rhetorical criticism emerged from James Muilenburg’s graduate seminar on Deuteronomy in San Francisco and led to his 1968 SBL address.

Muilenburg’s *modus operandi* was straightforward. He taught that the first step in analyzing a text would be to define the limits of the literary unit as the author’s themes would be introduced and resolved within those limits. The second step would be to “perceive the structure of the literary unit,” the “configuration of its component parts,” (24–25) by closely analyzing included poetry, keywords, figures of speech, and strategically placed particles or repetitions — including chiasmus. Once the structure is clarified, the interpreter can move on to discern author intent, thought development, and meaning. In chapters three and four, Lundbom helpfully illustrates how this methodology can be profitably applied throughout the book of Jeremiah — the long-time focus of his own studies. Although the *inclusio* and *chiasmus* are frequent structural

elements that delimit textual units, an extensive range of rhetorical devices can be demonstrated to provide structure at all levels of textual units in Jeremiah. Lundbom even includes a list of fourteen criteria that he uses in delimiting the textual units within this book and provides examples of all of them from the text.

The last three sections of the book illustrate different applications of rhetorical criticism to (1) the primary history, (2) the prophets, and (3) the New Testament. In the process, Lundbom develops and presents a detailed handbook or manual for those who would like to learn how to perform rhetorical criticism in their study of Hebrew scriptures or texts that, like the gospels, are heavily influenced by the Hebrew rhetorical style that permeates the Old Testament.

In chapter six, Lundbom uses a comparison of the theological presentations of Abraham and David in the Bible to illustrate the scholarly methodological evolution of scholars away from Julius Wellhausen's powerful nineteenth-century source criticism to other methods such as form criticism, tradition-historical criticism, and finally rhetorical criticism, which he feels is now the majority approach. Scholars using these methods generally assume key findings of the source critics but often find themselves rethinking old certainties when they see pieces of text assigned by source critics to different authors fitting together perfectly into rhetorical structures designed almost necessarily by a single author.

In chapter seven, the author explains the deep differences in the "hypotactic" rhetorical strategies of Greek and modern western writing and the indirect "paratactic" logic of Hebrew rhetoric as exemplified in the Bible. In chapter eight, Lundbom explores possible scribal contributions to Old Testament theology. Chapter nine takes up one infrequently used device of Hebrew rhetoric — the *idem per idem* used to terminate debate. In Exodus, God tells Moses "I will be what I will be" (3:14) and "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." (33:19) Esther closes discussion of her dangerous plan by saying, "And if I perish, I perish." (4:16) Book of Mormon readers will see this same pattern when Nephi concludes explanation of his writing decisions saying, "I, Nephi, have written what I have written..." (2 Nephi 33:3).

Chapter eleven powerfully illustrates Lundbom's success in identifying rhetorical structures that signal delimitations of Hebrew texts. He argues persuasively that Deuteronomy as originally written only included the first twenty-eight chapters of our modern version. His evidence for this consists in the discovery of two forms of repetition

used throughout those chapters to set off smaller and larger units of the text. “The *inclusio* is seen to be the pre-eminent closure device” in these chapters, and many times the concentric repetitions of chiasmus perform the same function.² (118) Consequently, he sees chapters 29–34 as addenda added to this text during the reign of Josiah (part of which could be the book of the law found in the temple) and dates the original as a probable product of the days of Hezekiah a century earlier. Lundbom sees the books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah as classic exhibits of Hebrew rhetoric. Chapter thirteen provides further support for these conclusions by means of a detailed rhetorical analysis of Deuteronomy 32 — the Song of Moses. A similar approach to 2 Kings 2 provides a highly original interpretation of Elijah’s chariot ride in chapter fourteen.

Of great value to students of rhetorical criticism will be Lundbom’s chapter fifteen, which lists, explains, and provides textual examples of fifty rhetorical devices that scholars have identified in biblical Hebrew rhetoric. While many of these overlap classical rhetoric handbooks, most have distinctively Hebrew characteristics. Chapters 16–24 provide examples of detailed rhetorical analysis of passages from Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah. The final two chapters present rhetorical analyses of passages from Matthew, Paul, and Mark to illustrate how the Greek-speaking Christians were in fact heirs to the Hebrew rhetoric of their traditional scriptures.

Roland Meynet

Less well known in the USA is the French tradition of “rhetorical analysis,” which also received its initial inspiration from the same eighteenth and nineteenth century British Bible scholars who focused on the dominant role of different uses of parallelism in ancient Hebrew rhetoric. Meynet lists mid-twentieth century predecessors Enrico Galbiati, Paul Lamarche, and Albert Vanhoye, with Marc Girard, and Pierre Auffret from his own generation. While there continues to be some sibling rivalry and effort to distinguish themselves from the blossoming “rhetorical criticism” embraced by American commentators, newcomers will not easily find important differences between the two approaches. In this 1998

2 It may be of interest to readers of this review that the *inclusio*, by which is usually meant the beginning and ending of a text unit by repetition of the same thematic word or phrase, has proved to be key to the identification of three authoritative expositions of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2015, 2): 218–234.

exposition, Roland Meynet criticized the American inclusion of categories of classical rhetoric of the Graeco-Roman world and emphasized that the goal of *rhetorical analysis* is to establish “specific organizational laws of biblical texts,” and “to identify the rhetoric which presided over the composition of these texts.”(37–8) He describes the French tradition as focused exclusively “on the structure and composition of these texts” — and not concerned with figures of speech, other aspects of elocution, or the search for certain ideas in a text — as is standard in classical rhetorical studies. The examples Meynet offers do seem to support his claims to a difference of emphasis, but it is not hard to imagine that over time these two streams may merge as each recognizes the strengths and contributions of the other.

One of the principal contributions of Meynet’s volume is the compilation of key excerpts from the largely inaccessible writings of the early discoverers of Hebrew rhetoric. Meynet has selected long passages that seem to have the most lasting value to show the evolution of the rhetorical approach as it developed and expanded over three centuries. Any student of biblical rhetoric will appreciate the opportunity to read and study these early writers, including Robert Lowth; Christian Schöttgen, who discovered Hebrew parallelism; Johann-Albrecht Bengel, who recognized concentric parallelism (*chiasmus*); John Jebb and Thomas Boys, who are labeled respectively by Meynet as the inventor and founder of rhetorical analysis; and later nineteenth century scholars who embraced and elaborated the methodology, including Friedrich Köster, David Heinrich Müller, Johannes Konrad Zenner, John Forbes, and Ethelbert William Bullinger.³ In spite of Meynet’s protestations already mentioned, many of these did not abandon their training in classical rhetoric but included its insights as appropriate in their analyses of Hebrew writings. In chapter three, Meynet continues with the presentation of key contributions from the writings of twentieth-century scholars such as George Buchanan Gray, Charles Souvay, Marcel Jousse, and Nils Wilhelm Lund, whose massive study of the rules of *chiasmus* continues to inform and inspire contemporary scholars.⁴ “Lund’s great

3 For a much more expansive history of the rhetorical dimensions of biblical studies at different points in time and a broader presentation of the full range of literary approaches in recent centuries as the context of rhetorical criticism, see Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

4 Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1942; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992).

originality lies in the fact that he was the first to attempt to ascertain the organizational laws of the concentric structures.” (143) Finally, Meynet credits BYU’s own John W. Welch, whose 1981 book re-ignited chiasmus studies and helpfully provided the world of biblical scholars with the first complete bibliography of chiasmus publications, enabling contemporary scholars to get a grasp on the extent and quality of the work that had already been done.⁵

The impressive second half of Meynet’s book is offered as a first-ever effort to systematize all the important findings about Hebrew rhetoric and to reduce these to a handbook for those who would engage in rhetorical analysis. To that end, chapter five provides an exhaustive inventory “of the relationships which can exist between linguistic elements, at the successive organizational levels of language.” (183) The levels referred to here are 1) lexical, 2), morphological, 3) syntactical, 4), the level of rhythm, and 5) the level of discourse. Meynet’s object in this inventory is to show “that the linguistic elements at their different organizational levels can have a rhetorical function, on top of their semantic and syntactic functions.” By taking “into account the whole ensemble of elements,” the rhetorical analyst will be able “to detect those that are relevant on the rhetorical level, that is to say those that serve as marks in the composition of the text.” (198)

The paragraph introducing chapter 6 summarizes the formal assumptions of Meynet’s theory of Hebrew rhetoric and is worth reproducing here in full.

The linguistic elements in a relationship of identity or opposition are not distributed at random. Their position in the text does not only obey the syntactic and semantic rules and constraints; at all organizational levels of the text, it follows the structuring laws of discourse. The *position* of the related elements can confer on them a function of indication or mark of *composition*. Their disposition forms figures of composition which all obey the great law of symmetry. The two basic forms of symmetry are parallelism and, at the cost of creating a neologism, *concentrism*; parallelism when the related elements are reproduced in the same order, concentrism when they are reproduced in the reversed order. (199)

5 John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim, Germany: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981).

Having inventoried the possible linguistic elements of a composition, Meynet now proceeds to classify the various ways in which these elements can be related in successively larger units of a composition. Meynet revises the earlier proposal of Albert Vanhoye and its nomenclature to produce a model of composition that can exhibit eight levels, beginning at the low end of rhetorical organization with the “member,” and rising successively through aggregation to the “segment,” the “piece,” the “part,” the “passage,” the “sequence,” the “section,” and finally, the “book.” The chapter systematically describes and explores, with actual textual examples, the various possibilities for rhetorical organization at each level. This is not casual reading. Meynet acknowledges that few practitioners of rhetorical analysis fully understand or exemplify this kind of systematic analysis, but he offers this manual as a means of taking the approach to an appropriate next level of formality and uniformity of practice.

In his final two chapters, Meynet discusses the actual process of rhetorical analysis and its fruits. The analyst must essentially rewrite the text with typographical formatting to show the rhetorical function of every word — producing “an objectivization that does not allow approximation.” (310) He further notes that this can only work completely when the original text is available as translations inevitably “deform the text, in that they mask or destroy the rhetorical figure.” (310) Those who are forced to work with a translation, should not expect their rhetorical analyses to be complete. No doubt, part of Meynet’s reservations about rhetorical criticism would be the disinclination of its practitioners to push their analyses to this level of microscopic detail for every line of text.

The literature of rhetorical criticism or analysis is now very large and continues to grow with new and better studies being published every year. Again, my motivation for reviewing these two volumes is the hope that students of the Book of Mormon may find enhanced support therein for their close readings of that text, which comes from the same time and cultural milieu as the Hebrew rhetoric that these scholars find in the Bible.

Noel Reynolds (*PhD, Harvard University*) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught a broad range of courses in legal and political philosophy, American heritage, and the Book of Mormon. His research and publications are based in these fields and several others, including authorship studies, Mormon history, Christian history and theology, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

