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The Poetic and Narrative Shape of the Hebrew Bible and Literary Forms of Antithesis

We can perceive something unifying in the use of concepts and metaphors in the Hebrew Bible. When dealing with literary properties it becomes particularly clear that a literary approach has to embrace all existing evidences of a thematic and of a literary interrelationship between individual parts: phrases, rhetorical figures, metaphors and literary genres. The basic methodological consideration in examining various forms of antithesis in the Hebrew Bible proceeds from the fact that virtually all the antithetic units that go beyond the mere formalism of antithetic parallelism, and thus display the personal style of individual authors, are mostly unique and therefore, strictly speaking, without parallel. They vary in every respect: in theme and motif, in topic and symbolism, in genre and rhythm, in length and in their function in their respective contexts. In most cases, one can recognise that the antithetic forms arise from the specific concern and the creative dynamic force of individual authors rather than from the rules and regularity of the laws of parallelism. Intellectual and emotional tensions have moved all great poets to overcome any kind of monotony and formalism. The fact that antithesis is much more relevant in the Hebrew Bible than in other Near Eastern literatures from the same time justifies the question of the relationship between antithetic forms and fundamental belief.

1. The Biblical Foundations of Narrative Theology

The modern biblical orientation for understanding the human condition within the broadest context of historical and literary scrutiny of biblical stories has bridged the division between literature in general and biblical literature. The methods of "Narrative Criticism," "Narrative Theology," and "New Hermeneutics" within biblical and theological discourses are based on the principle of narrative and poetry in the Bible.

The most fruitful aspect of narrative theology is the increasing interest in understanding the Bible as literature. Appreciation of narratives in such basic genres as history, myth, autobiography, biography, parable or allegory is fully in accordance with the temporal and historical shape of human existence, which is inextricable from memory and anticipation. Biblical stories resonate with common experience and have considerable educational advantages. All the more important is the function of language. The ultimate goal of narrative theology is communicating the word of God. Language is grounded in “being” and not just in thought, and language is therefore essential for understanding human existence in a shared experience. This fact is best exemplified in the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus there is a unity of existence, word and deed.

The stories of the Bible and interpretation of biblical understanding of universal history as an overarching story of the world from creation to its eschatological consummation constitute the basic theological framework and are therefore embodied also in liturgies, creeds and symbols. Since narratives are the main genre of the Bible, they are the basic way to express human experience and identity and to lay bare the underlying structure of Jewish and Christian creeds and liturgies. Since all religions and cultures have their stories, narratives provide not only a way to imaginatively approach the relationship of historical fact, but also a forum for encounter and dialogue between various religions and cultures, as well as between theology and other disciplines, such as literary studies, history, psychology and anthropology.

Herein lies the real foundation of the modern concern in biblical understanding of the natural law in terms of humans’ orientation towards the ultimate goal by asserting and practicing goodness, compassion and love. All human beings know natural law experientially, but biblical representation of the relationship between God and humans in a teleological orientation of history as a whole to its completion enriches our understanding of natural law. In the Bible, there are many texts emphasising that God’s love is connected with human ordering of life in accordance with wisdom. The book of Proverbs includes numerous passages that praise personified wisdom as a lovable and loving woman who is the beloved of God. Especially dignified is the poetic description of Wisdom’s part in Creation in Prov 8:22-31. In 8:17 Wisdom asserts: “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.”

The Book of Sirach and the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, both of which are especially rich in expressing practical rationality, stem from later tradition. In the framework of Chapter 24 of the book of Sirach

(verse 9), Wisdom claims itself to be eternal: “Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be”. The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon expresses the recognition of the loving nature of Wisdom in the passage 7:22-30. The important idea that love and wisdom go together has equally important implications. God has inscribed Himself in the universe through wisdom and therefore makes natural order intelligible and persuasive. Wisdom literature strongly influenced the Christologies of the Gospels. In the New Testament the Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18) is particularly valuable in this regard. According to the Prologue the Word is not merely created but is divine. The beginning verse states: “And the Word was God.” The divine Word is clearly the Creator and is present in the creative ordering of the universe. When the Creator has become the incarnate Word, a self-giving love, wisdom and love can be seen to be fully united. This explains, why the command to radical love is at the very core of natural and of the revealed law. Dante Alighieri expresses this conviction in the closing part of his Divine Comedy (*Paradiso* XXXIII.142-145):

At this point high imagination failed;
But already my desire and my will
Were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed,
By the love which moves the sun and the other stars.

Judaism and Christianity share basic biblical propositions because they imitate biblical modes of thought and expression. Interpreters wish to uncover the deepest layer of truth, beneath the surface, beneath the literal meaning of biblical texts. Thus they come to the grounds of belief in science, rational discourse and natural theology. Among the Jewish philosophers, Maimonides and Spinoza discovered the fundamental presupposition of the Bible as having practical implications, namely that God’s love is the supreme good of the universe and of human race. Biblical grounds of belief appear to support some rather practical, moral considerations. The law becomes most effective in a human life when obedience follows in consideration of its grounds.

Representations of life in artistic and literary ways of expressing the meaning of life examines complex psychological and sociological mechanisms and specific life situation that lead to moral strength, failure, delusion and conflict. Situations of inordinate craving, distorted loves, impurity of ritual, violation of ancestral bonds, general social distortion, diversity of religious and moral beliefs, practices and convictions and especially emerging moral sensibilities require a fundamental openness

to multiple critical, comparative and constructive interpretations in inter-related developments. The descriptive or narrative dimension of representing human life in relation to its humanity implies that psychologically realistic characters play a crucial role in terms of the practical dimension of actual life, in decision making and judgment, in striving to accord the ways of life with the truth about the cosmos, in aspiring to achieve the highest level of moral life, in revelations and mystical insights, and in moral challenges and possibilities emergent in our globalised times. Practical experience, however, leads thinkers and sages of all cultures and religions to promote their beliefs and values in normative forms, in terms of norms and laws defined to guide human life.

For understanding the meaning of basic concepts in the Bible in all its multiple representations and interpretations it is important to consider the relationship between descriptive or narrative and normative or doctrinal ways of expressing beliefs and values. Considering the Bible as a whole leads to the recognition of a remarkable diversity of descriptive and normative ways of expression that are interrelated and that support each other. At this point, mention may be made of a statement by Gabel/Wheeler/York:

Every piece of writing in the Bible expresses a *subject*, not an object. The difference between the two is crucial. As ordinarily understood objects are things that exist externally to ourselves and independently of us. They do not have to be material—objects can be ideas, events, even possibilities—but they are “out there.” In respect to a piece of writing, the object would be whatever portion of this external existence the author captured and put on paper. [...] There had been only one set of divine acts in the beginning—one object—but there is more than one perspective from which to view it, that is, more than one subject¹.

Subjects in the Bible are presented as points of view and messages, predominantly in literary figures and stylistic variations from one section to the next. The Bible contains numerous literary kinds of material in the span from most popular genres (historical narratives, genealogies, ritual regulations, proverbial wisdom, parables, allegories, prophetic oracles, prayers, letters, etc.) to other kinds of material that are more difficult to classify. Abstract ideas are sometimes summarised as short expressions of doctrine, but in most cases they are replaced by something specific and concrete, though in the sense of something behind the words,

¹ See *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, pp. 5–7.

metaphors, symbols and literary properties there is an appearance of unity, shared meaning and general significance. In the authors' choices of literary means, which are metaphors and symbols are of crucial importance because they extend meaning into the areas where meaning would not normally be found.

There is general agreement that sense can be restated in another language, and in translation of the Bible this rendering is of the greatest practical importance for every community, for translation both interprets and recreates the original text. The multiple meaning of words determined by various literary structures and contexts presents the greatest challenge for translators of biblical and cognate texts. The problem of translation manifests itself especially clearly in discussion on the relationship between the senses of the original and the linguistic and literary means by which that sense is achieved. Words, idioms and stylistic structures in one language seldom correspond exactly with their "equivalents" in the other; therefore it is impossible to attain a completely faithful translation in another language. Semantic accuracy is largely an illusion. There are, further, some literary elements that can be rendered as an equivalent but not translated, as for instance: rhythm, rhyme and word-play. The worldwide discourse about two possible basic attitudes in translation is determined by two different approaches, characterised by the terms "formal correspondence" and "dynamic equivalents." In the balance between the two options some translators are led too far in their freedom, while the opposite direction extends sometimes too far in choosing a translation that embodies a higher degree of formal correspondence so as to produce a work that is more Hebrew or Greek than the vernacular language.

A higher degree of knowledge and translation experience normally leads to combination of formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence. When a translator pays heed to the organic unity of linguistic and literary structures and considers the question of distinctiveness of biblical thinking in terms of a synthetic method of survey of the Bible, the semantic value of words within the translated structure does not misrepresent the semantic value of the original structure taken as a whole. The extent of loss is rather limited. An appropriate combination of formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence can overcome also bad literary criticism and cultural conflict. In the final analysis, it becomes clear that the distinctiveness of biblical thinking lies to a great extent within the realm of stylistics. As James Barr puts it:

The relation between the meaning of sentences and larger units on the one hand and the mode of their expression on the other is a stylistic matter and cannot be fully handled by the lexical methods discussed above. And the other important point is that, unlike the lexical distribution and the syntactic mechanisms of Hebrew, the biblical style is to a fairly large degree preserved in translation, and thus preserves important elements of the relation of the linguistic expression to the thinking of the men of the Bible².

There is, indeed, a recognisable biblical style, or series of biblical styles, and this is why the research into them is a particularly rewarding field. One aspect of the recognisable biblical style is repetition of keywords and stereotypes both in biblical narratives and in poetry. The stereotypes, broken up for poetic reasons, fall into the following categories: divine names (El Shaddai, Adonai 'Elyon, El 'Elyon, Elohim 'Elyon), divine appellatives (gracious and merciful), place names (Bethlehem Ephrata, Massah and Meriba, etc.), expressions of the hendiadys (an idol and a molten image, the molten calf, a snare and a trap, horses and chariots, a prince and a judge, horror and hissing), compound nouns (doers of iniquity, fortified cities, a desolate wilderness, flowing water, a flaming fire, heaven and earth, the right hand, etc.).

The specific theological framework of the Bible shows most clearly where the key reason lies for striking distinctive elements in using a Word in its most narrow and its most comprehensive sense in the Bible, as contrasted with other ancient and later civilisations. This fact challenges the established understanding of the nature of comparative study of literature. A purely formal comparison would contribute very little to the understanding of various texts if the investigation did not go into essentials and into the total perspective of beliefs as well as into the values of the conceptual world in which they are embedded. The key contrast is the antithesis between the polytheistic worlds and Hebrew monotheism. In polytheistic cultures gods reveal the same limitations as human beings and become a subject merely to the horizontal dimension of life. Hebrew monotheism, in contrast, goes beyond the anthropocentric subjectivism by its very nature, because the faith of the Bible is based on the worship of the one acknowledged LORD and on the conviction that the commandments enlighten humans in their moral predicaments and demand clear decision-making in every life situation.

Comparative studies show first of all, that there are similarities in the situation and intellectual orientation of all ancient cultures. Their world-view was based on the belief in the coherence and purpose of the

² See *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, p. 272.

universe. In addition to this basic common point the Hebrew Bible contains the notion of a historical goal in a final consummation of the universe. But the most important aspect of the Hebrew belief is the consistent concept of God as the person. When God is speaking, a living Word is present and communicating with humans. This means that the quality of beliefs and moral decisions does not depend on material or social conditions but on conditions of the human heart, which involves a variety of meanings for humanity as a whole.

The central values are the following: personal faith, faithfulness, justice, righteousness and love. The infinite range of possible meanings of personal values means that various texts are infinitely richer and manifest infinitely more substance when compared with one another in relation to the meaning of the text itself, in relation to its existential orientation and in relation to all other texts. The concept of Word in terms of communication between God and people in all existential circumstances implies that truth should never be confused with reality, facts or events. The purpose of biblical accounts is not to convey knowledge of external events but to transmit the meaning of what is lived. The construction of biblical texts reflects their careful arrangement of all elements. Each and every word used in the construction of biblical texts contributes to a particular aspect of meaning. But the aspects are often selected according to so different viewpoints that authors obviously deliberately include hidden dimensions in their larger constructions and also some contradictory accounts. Only a larger context can help one to recognise how contradictory accounts can be reconciled.

The central notion expressing various kinds of communication in the Hebrew Bible is the word *dabár*, which in Greek is normally translated as *lógos*. *Dabár* does not describe only God's utterances (cf. Gen 1:3, 6, 9; 3:9, 11; Ps 32,9, etc.), for it is used also as a figure of speech designating God's activity or action. The Hebrew Scriptures invoking the concept of *dabár/lógos* does not indicate the existence of a separate entity within God. The uttered Logos (Word) of God implies the manifestation of God within God and is expressed in various forms. The central form of God's communication is wisdom, which is presented sometimes as personified Wisdom, created "in the beginning" (cf. Prov 8:22-30; Sir 24:9), projected in the creation and remaining as the immanent power within the world and in human beings. In the Hebrew culture there was a part of the metaphorical and poetic language describing divine wisdom as God's attribute. The central issue of the New Testament is the manifestation of God in His Word Incarnate – Jesus of Nazareth. The Hebrew concept of *logos* is mentioned in the Prologue of the

Fourth Gospel by St. John (John 1:1-18) by fusing the concept of Hebrew Logos with that of Wisdom. The issue arises, how it is possible to present various semantic and stylistic forms to indicate the concept of personal God in anthropomorphic terms.

2. Literary Forms of Antithesis in the Hebrew Bible

A particularly striking and peculiar Semitic figure of speech is the stylistic-rhetoric device called “merism” – the way of expressing a totality by mentioning only parts, usually two extremes, and “polar expression,” juxtaposing two polarised notions in order to convey the idea of totality of a given idea, quality or quantity. Polar expression is the most usual form of merism. Merism is a substitution for abstract words like “all,” “every,” “always,” etc. The parts it mentions are of a figurative or metaphorical sense. Some ancient and the most modern translations constantly put one word into different vernacular equivalents for the sake of fluidity and supposed precision in defining nuances of meaning. Many standard versions, however, retain identical words and uniformity of phrasing. It is very important to express the same key notion with the same particular word, thus responding to stylistic distinction between individual books. An appropriate translation of stereotypes and merisms can, in general, reveal the congruence with the original texts.

Merism should not be confused with antithesis, for “in contrast to merism in antithesis opposed extremes do not express the same aspects of the same idea in its totality, but opposite aspects of the same idea in their mutual exclusion”³. Instances of merism appear in all world literatures quite independently of the underlying world view or belief, whereas the literary phenomenon of an antithetic mode of expression clearly reflects ideological or moral contrasts with far-reaching implications. A comparative examination of the literature of the ancient Near East shows that all literatures do offer instances of anthropological antithesis. But K. van der Toorn is right in claiming that the marked presence of the antithetic scheme of the opposition between the righteous and the wicked is characteristic of the entirely different theological framework of the Hebrew Bible, where the focus is not on social hierarchy but on moral and spiritual opposition: “The overall situation confirms that the antithesis is a distinctive feature of the sapiential literature of the Old Testament”⁴.

³ See J. Krašovec, *Merism – Polar Expression Biblical Hebrew*, “Biblica,” 1983, nr. 2 (63), p. 232.

⁴ See *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study*, p. 101.

And, in the other place: “The very emergence of the antithetic model in Israel indicates the distance which separated Israel from Mesopotamia”⁵. Van der Toorn concludes:

“In retrospect the religious antithesis does not appear as a foreign body forced upon the Old Testament faith by a twist of history. It is foreshadowed in the opposition between pure and impure, a dualist classification of the universe which distinguished Israel from Mesopotamia, where these categories remained contingent on circumstance. Just as things are pure or impure only in relation to a God who is holy, so one is either righteous or wicked in regard to the one God of righteousness. His unrestricted claims can in the end be answered only by allegiance or insubordination. Faced with his demands, class distinctions are obliterated and the neutral territory between for and against disappears”⁶.

Despite the great abundance of antithetic literary and stylistic units, there are not many extensive antitheses in the Hebrew Bible. Most examples are shorter or longer antithetic parallelisms. This fact might lead to the conclusion that there must be various clear categories of antithesis, for shorter formulations tend – much more than the longer ones do – to give rise to various literary clichés. Yet, the actual situation does not confirm this hypothesis. In their total literary form nearly all units of antithesis differ from one another. In most cases only the following are common features: the relationship of parallelism; single antithetic pairs, as, for instance, the pair righteous // wicked, and its synonyms; the basic images. If all or nearly all other elements are different, an attempt to subsume single examples under various categories appears rather contrived.

However, some antitheses have so much in common that they provide sufficient justification of searching for categories. Sometimes a particular author creates similar formulas and thus demonstrates his originality. One such example is Jeremiah. In the book of Jeremiah the similar formulas are composed according to the same principle of contrast: desolate present // the coming splendour of return. Furthermore, there is a basic consistency in the antitheses which comes across as contraposition: miraculous processes in nature // the contradictory behaviour of the people (Jer 2:32a//32b; 8:7abb//7c; 18:14//15b); the splendour of nature as a symbol of the special position of the people before Yahweh // the opposing future (or present) lot of the people (Jer 11:16a//16bc;

⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

22:6b//6c); the interpretive antitheses based on previous descriptions of human behaviour or natural processes (Jer 18:1-12; 24:1-10; 27:1-11).

The antitheses within other books of the Hebrew Bible are much harder to categorise in a convincing manner. Because of this, the existing basic structural similarity of some antitheses within the entire Hebrew Bible appears even more noteworthy. There are some basic categories of antithetic structure: illusion // reality, blessing // curse, pride // humiliation⁷. The existence of identical or similar as well as of different forms of antithesis in the Hebrew Bible and in other world literature that are not considered dependent on one another can have the most varied reasons; these reasons may be associated with objective nature, with the psychology of human perception, with the peculiarities of human society and – last but not least – with the principles of language. These background factors are usually so closely connected and intertwined that it is difficult to treat them systematically. Yet, the need to discuss this question makes a relatively systematic treatment unavoidable.

We may find out that antithesis is conditioned by nature. The term “nature” here refers to various objective circumstances external to man, by which he is addressed or challenged in some way. One of the most original of such given circumstances is surely physical nature with its contrasting phenomena, such as light // darkness in the realm of light, black // white in the realm of colour, male // female in the realm of sex, etc. These contrasts can be perceived in quite different ways, depending on the situation and viewpoint of the observer. As already mentioned, the same contrast can be the source of two diametrically opposed styles: merism and antithesis. Interestingly enough, the more predominant the presence of antithesis in a literature is, the less prominent merism will be, and vice versa. In the most ancient literatures, especially in poetry, merism appears frequently while antithesis is absent. With the rise of new tendencies, a new sensitivity for language and new literary genres, the development gradually takes a reverse turn.

That development has not happened accidentally. Obviously man has only slowly developed a sensitivity for the antinomies in various areas of life. Many factors were at play in this. In later periods it was probably the question of social conditions and the philosophy of life. Social antinomies were felt ever more distinctly as the original patriarchal-familial structure was becoming replaced by urban collectivisation. Now there were more possibilities for man to be treated unjustly. Social relationships started to be a problem, a problem that men used to solve in

⁷ Cf. J. Krašovec, *Antithetic Structure in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 124–134.

various ways, every one according to his own innate sensitivity and his philosophy of life.

If evidence of such attempts can be established only for relatively late periods, it does not necessarily imply that such contradictions as the elementary antinomies health // illness, etc. were not also painfully felt in earlier times. But the lack of documents makes the precise examination of this question impossible. There can be no doubt, however, that an elaborate literary style could establish itself only when it was in agreement with the “official” taste and the needs of society. A certain way of thinking that had gone through a great intellectual development was an important prerequisite for such a process. The time was ripe for it. This does not mean, though, that single individualists, such as the biblical prophets who usually had to swim against the stream, were not possible to appear. However, even for them, certain prerequisites concerning “fulfilment of time” had to be given.

Another important reason for the use of antithetic forms is the way of thinking and the concept of life. Since objective nature is basically the same everywhere we might assume that all humans perceive it in the same way. In reality this is not the case. People of different cultures experience certain points quite differently. The investigation for the reason of such diverse perceptions proves – at least with regard to the question of antithesis – that the degree and the quality of sensitivity to physical, moral and social antinomies is not the same for all humans. But it is difficult to determine whether their own innate psyche or the way of thinking and looking at the world inherited and acquired from tradition plays the more significant role in their perception.

Whatever the case may be, the philosophy of life, religion, is of great importance. To recognise this clearly with regard to the antithesis, one only has to look at the great intellectual movement of the 5th century in Greek culture set in motion by the activity of Heraclitus⁸.

⁸ E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance II*, p. 18, states: “Dem gewaltigen Ephesier, der seinen Weg einsam und im Gegensatz zu aller Welt verfolgte, haben sich zum ersten Mal die Antinomien des Seins und des Scheins geoffenbart, und ihm, der da lehrte, dass aus dem Verschiedenen die vollendete Harmonie entstehe, haben sich die Gegensätze mit einer gewissen logischen Konsequenz auch in der Sprache hypostasiert.” See also his remark about the “Geistestitanen jener Zeit” on pages 20–21: “Das gemeinsame Band, welches sie alle umschließt, ist der Kampf gegen das traditionell Bestehende, und er findet seinen sinnlichen Ausdruck in der antithetischen Sprache. Heraklit, der Verächter der sophistischen Rhetorik, war in Wahrheit ihr Vater.”

A somewhat similar intellectual revolution took place in Israel a little earlier⁹. But due to the philosophy of life, religion, the manifestations of antithesis in Greek and Hebrew literatures are quite different. The basic antithesis between God and man, which is barely recognised by the Greeks, results in Israelite's thought in long chains of unique ontological and ethical antitheses. To be sure, both the Greeks and the Israelites observed the world and the social order; yet, each saw something different. Not the objects as such, but the ways of perceiving and approaching existing problems were diametrically opposed. And these differences again led to divergent verbal expressions and different literary genres¹⁰.

This phenomenon is especially striking in the relationship between the New Testament and Hellenism, since the language is the same. The apostle Paul, in particular, gives such a prominent position to antithesis, because of his specifically Jewish way of thinking and his literary forms differ decisively from the Hellenists, with the result that he appears as a unique literary personality.

The fundamental ontological and moral structure of antithesis has a meaning for humanity as a whole and generates many kinds of antithesis under various perspectives: the opposition between truth and lie, true worship and all possible forms of ideology and magic, honesty and clarity in public language and doublespeak, truthful witness and propaganda, etc. Possible further research questions include the following: What are the characteristics of the doublespeak in everyday life? What are the features of propaganda, and how does it differ from persuasion? What are the psychological and socio-political effects of propaganda? How does propaganda work in modern society? How the government, business, advertisers and others use language to deceive people?

3. Conclusion

The article provides an intellectual assessment of the pristine Jewish and Christian perception of interpersonal relations as presented in the language of its very nature and of the Bible. Imagery, metaphors and allegories found in pastoral and agricultural life most often reflect every-

⁹ One should remember how much the early Hebrew poetry has in common with the other Canaanite literatures. Strictly speaking, the prophets were the ones to break off definitely the continuity of Canaanite religion.

¹⁰ In the Hebrew Bible not so much the fact of the existence of antithesis is decisive, but rather the reason, the duality, the peculiarity of the antithesis.

day experience, the actual and visual realities, while manifesting a special resonance in relation to the hidden and all possible meanings behind them. Literary texts are not reduced to one clear meaning; especially ambiguity is an inherent poetic ideal. Semantic and literary means of expression, such as figures of speech and wordplay, point in most cases to the incomprehensible depths of the relationship between God and humankind. The basic literal meaning of particular words allows for the creative possibility that they may be taken out of their common meaning and used in a context of some other kind. Primacy of the literal sense, as opposed to the various allegorical readings, remained as the leading principle of both, Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation. What the literal and the metaphorical meanings have in common is the area of shared meaning, but the metaphorical meaning transcends the basic meaning for the areas where meaning would not normally be found. When abstract ideas are replaced by something specific and concrete, we can speak of “incarnation” of the word in everyday living experience within the entire perspective of life.

Regarding the literary properties of the Hebrew Bible, the focus is on the function of opposition or antithesis. The etymological meaning of antithesis – namely, ‘contraposition’ – is so general that it can also refer to merism, which is a stylistic figure that is diametrically opposite to antithesis. In both cases there is a contraposition of opposite concepts, such as the opposing word-pairs: day//night, good//evil, heaven//earth, etc. The two figures do not differ from each other in terminology, but in the semantic contents they express. That difference becomes obvious only in the stylistic function and literary structure of the two different figures of style. The fundamental trait of antithesis is that two opposing elements exclude each other in relation to a common idea. The peculiarity of the contrast of thought in the sense of exclusion has implications for the extent of the antithesis. The characteristic antithetic form appears in small units: single words, word groups or sentences are counter posed. The contrast of meaning does not, however, necessarily depend on having a perfect conceptual counterpart for each single word. Antithesis can be understood in a wider sense than merely an antithetic parallelism or parallelism within a sentence. Antithesis can appear in stanzas (strophe//anti-strophe) and in longer dialogues. It is obvious that the peculiarities of different literary forms can only become perceptible after a thorough comparative examination of the entire literary contextual material, to which these forms belong. In the examination of the antithetic literary forms special attention must be paid to the structure and function of each individual unit in its own context.

Abstract

Linguistic and stylistic properties of various literatures can only be assessed when evaluated on the basis of the specific way of thinking, of the philosophy of life in general and of the religion in particular, as related to their specific concerns and answers. While dealing with the Hebrew Bible it becomes evident, that the most characteristic unifying force is the following fundamental antithesis: the verticality and radicality of God, evident in his promises, his deeds, and by the attitude of those who follow him versus the horizontality of idols and of human disobedience and its consequences. In spite of thematic and formal variety, the same vertical-horizontal dimension is conspicuous everywhere. The fundamentally inadequate relationship between transcendental realities and our available expressive categories is the main reason for using poetic and narrative means of expression. Literary forms of antithesis are used to express theological-moral motivations by conjoining terms, sentences and larger units and by disjoining sense regarding the nature, quality, or action of persons or things. The concept of antithesis appears to have multiple meanings, and it is therefore necessary to state at the outset that in this paper on the concept of antithesis is treated primarily in the rhetorical-stylistic sense. As regards the Hebrew Bible, the theological principles are always of prime significance. Most antitheses in the Hebrew Bible are constructed in the form of antithetic parallelism; nevertheless most antithetic units are original in terms of theme as well as the form.

Key words:

narrative theology, the Hebrew Bible, the concept of word, wisdom, stylistics, antithesis, merism, translation and comparative research

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Jože Krašovec obtained a doctorate in Biblical Studies from Rome at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in 1976. In 1982 he gained a PhD at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1986 he received a combined doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris: in the History of Religion and Religious Anthropology (Sorbonne), and in Theological Studies (Institut Catholique). All of these dissertations have been published in book form: 1. *Der Merismus im Biblisch-Hebräischen und Nordwestsemitischen* (BibOr 33; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977); 2. *Antithetic Structure in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (VT.S 35; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984); 3. *La justice (sdq) de Dieu dans la Bible hébraïque et l'interprétation juive et chrétienne* (OBO 76; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988). Since 1992 he has been Full Professor of Biblical studies at the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana, since 1995 - a Full Member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. His bibliography consists of ca. 300 monographic studies and articles published in Slovene, English, German, French, as well as other languages. The most important work carried out under his supervision in Slovenia is the new Slovenian translation of the Bible: the Slovenian Standard Version (1996) and since 2007 the Slovenian Jerusalem Bible. On 6 August 2004 he was elected President of the *International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament* (IOSOT) for the period 2004-2007, a position which included the responsibility for the preparation of the Organization's World Congress. The XIXth IOSOT Congress took place from 12th to 20th July 2007 at the University of Ljubljana. Since 2012 he is a member of the Senate of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts (Salzburg) and delegate of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts in the Union Académique Internationale (Brussels). E-mail: joze.krasovec[at]guest.arnes.si