ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the effect of speech upon the hearers and discusses the role of the verbal effect, known as rhetoric, on biblical religion. Furthermore, the paper claims that biblical rhetoric, as an argumentative discourse is a manifestation of “democracy” in terms of the struggle between the proclamations of authority and the voice of human criticism that challenges the ultimate. Hence, the biblical speech is instrumental in forcing authority to explain or justify its deeds, therefore substituting the power of authority with a matter of rational human persuasion.

INTRODUCTION

Ever Since the appearance of the earliest written texts their authors do not cease to express their appreciation of the word and its impact. Thus, we find in the early Egyptian literature of the Middle Kingdom (1940-1640 B.C.E.) a poem recited by a companion of an Egyptian commander who returns after an unsuccessful mission. The poem is known in the literature as “The tale of the shipwrecked sailor”. We read:

Listen to me, my Count,

/.....

Wash yourself; pour water on your hands,

So you may reply when you are addressed

and speak to the king with self-possession

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1 Professor Gitay is an Extra-Ordinary Professor of Stellenbosch University.
2 This essay reflects my interest in the relationship between biblical rhetoric and biblical religion and continues a previous essay on the subject (Gitay 2005:859-866).
and answer without stammering.

_A man’s utterance saves him_

_His speech turns anger away from him …_

(My emphasis; cited in Carey 1999:2)

Human speech signifies life. People must use words if they seek to present themselves and their personality; without words they are meaningless, even dead. Words create status; words shape the human reality and determine the human image. In this regard, the issue to be discussed in the present paper is: How, and to what purpose, do biblical figures use words?

**THE REALM OF RHETORIC**

Our first goal is to shed light on the art of speech and its history. The art of using words as a means of communication is known as rhetoric, that is, the “art of discourse” claiming to produce utterances on a wide range of matters. A linguistic analysis of the term rhetoric reveals that the Greek root _rhe_ means “to say”, “to use discourse”, _logos_. The connotation of this use is of fullness. Rhetoric is therefore a comprehensive, total way of using discourse. Nevertheless, rhetoric does not limit itself to conveying neutral, sterilized facts (_docere_) but its aim is to carry away the audience; to produce an effect on them; to leave them different as a result of the impact of the words (cf. Barilli 1989:vii-xi). This aim of influencing the audience and carrying them away has raised serious concerns regarding the ethics of the discipline of persuasion employed by speakers. Such concerns were raised already in ancient Greece and continue to this day. Socrates discussed the issue in his dialogue with Phaedrus as follows:³

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³ _Phaedrus_, 262-263.
S: When one says ‘iron’ or ‘silver’ we all understand the same thing, do we not?
P: Surely.
S: What if he says ‘justice’ or ‘goodness’? Do we not part company, and disagree?
P: Certainly.
S: Then in which of the two we are easier to deceive, and in which has rhetoric the greater power?
P: Evidently in the class of doubtful things.

The point is that the answer regarding the ultimate definition of words pertaining to values, such as “justice” or “goodness”, as a matter of ultimate truth is not self-evident; it is doubtful. Thus, under such a situation, how can rhetoric sincerely influence and carry the audience when the issues might be debated and undetermined? The question Socrates is dealing with is: What is rhetoric? Is it a bombastic technique of illusion? Is it a science, a discipline of reaching the truth? Or is it a matter of manipulating the audience?

The conclusion is that Socrates did not make the necessary distinction between two notions of reasoning: dialectical and analytical. In referring to rhetoric as an argumentative endeavour we need to make a distinction between logic and argument. Logic is a conclusion about truth and the justification of its acceptance. Logic is without appeal: its propositions are true. Logic is demonstrative, impersonal. However, argumentation, which also deals with propositions, i.e., truth-values, is no more than a substitute, appropriate in non-scientific contexts. A proposition is the point of departure of an argument, which is rhetoric. Consequently, argumentation is more personal and is based on assumptions which are generally accepted (eulogos) (compare Aristotle, *Topics*, 100.20-24). Rhetoric works therefore with the conflict between propositions that truth is not convincing “as such” (consult Meyer 1994:67-68;
Thus, a distinction is made between dialectical and analytical reasoning: analytical reasoning deals with truth while dialectical reasoning deals with justifiable opinion (Schopenhauer 1896; also Perelman 1982:1-8). Each field of reasoning requires a different type of discourse. Analytical reasoning derives from facts (undisputable data) and is impersonal. However, dialectical reasoning – the realm of rhetoric – begins with theses that are generally accepted (such as universal moral concepts) with the purpose of gaining the acceptance of other theses which could be or are controversial. Thus, dialectic argument is personal because “it derives its value from its action upon the mind of some person” (Perelman 1982:3).

Indeed, Aristotle (Rhetoric 1357a) regards rhetoric as the art of the orator’s techniques in addressing a crowd – a group of people who lack both specialized knowledge and the ability to follow a lengthy chain of argument (versus the analytical reasoning of the professionals). Nevertheless, when speakers select and put forward the premises that are to serve as foundation for their argument, they rely on their hearers’ adherence to the proposition from which they will start (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:65). These propositions are taken from three sources: truth and facts, presumptions, and values (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:74-79). That is to say, rhetoric is derived from the specific cases when there is no agreement or causal link between the claim and the conclusion. In other words, the speaker actually seeks adherence between positions. Adherence does not mean that the persuasion is a matter of a deduction but a bridge between positions. This is the realm of the “real life” which intends to communicate between positions, concepts or worldviews. Thus, rhetoric is ultimately a complex area of communication because there is no “mathematical” link between the claim and the conclusion.

How does this dialectical reasoning apply to biblical rhetoric? Is the biblical text an instance of analytical reasoning given the assumed authoritative nature
of the biblical discourse?

**RELIGIOUS RHETORIC? THE BIBLE AND RHETORIC – IS IT POSSIBLE?**

The conventional view regarding religious rhetoric is as follows: “All religious systems are rhetorical because they strive to communicate truth. It argues for a distinctive rhetoric of religion, based on authoritative proclamation, not rational persuasion, with the speaker’s character as dominant” (O’Rourke Boyle 2001:662). The assumption is that authoritative proclamation determines the nature of religious rhetoric and, as such, religious systems call for a distinctive rhetoric rather than persuasion by reason (the Aristotelian way). The premise is that religion and reason are disharmonized.

However, the rhetorical notion of authoritative biblical texts is not self-evident. The question revolves around our reading of specific biblical texts where God responds to human criticism regarding His justice. Actually, God’s authority (in terms of “the power or a right to command, enforce obedience”, Webster) is demonstrated to human beings through the account of creation; as the creator of human beings He is the authority. However, the meaning of the creation of human beings in God’s image has been perceived by the poet of Psalms to mean that humankind is actually quiet similar to God just a little bit less: “For you have made him a little power than Elohim” (בְּאֹדְמֶךָ מַעַן סְעֵדֶךָ) (Ps 8:6). The application is – as I have argued earlier (Gitay 2007:1-14) – that human beings are privileged to possess the unique power of speech as the creators of new realities or new situations through their verbal skill. This unique human verbal skill is correlated to the notion of the biblical world of the word as a power of creation as the following citations demonstrate:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אָרֶץ (וְיָדַע אָרֶץ) (“God said: Let there be light, and there was light”, Gen 1:3; see vv. 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26);  "The voice of the Lord is
over the waters … The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars”, Ps 29:3). The act of creation is a speech endeavour. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty mastered by doing, destroying and building.

It is important to note that the first utilisation of God’s authority regarding His relationship to Adam, the first human being (given the narrative of Gen 2), conveys authority as the following command demonstrates:

ורא או אלתים על אהלים - לאמר

עץ כל - תאפ אהל. תאמר הדעת שבר לא אמל ממון כי בור תאמל ממון מות.

And the Lord God commanded the man: ‘Of every tree of the garden you might freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die’ (Gen 2:16-17).

God’s communication to Adam constitutes two elements, a command and a threat. However, the threat implies that in spite of God’s authority Adam might refuse to obey God. Thus, the ability to decline God’s authority is Adam’s privilege that constitutes, in fact, the major difference between animals (nature) and human beings. Notice, animals (nature) are created exactly as humans are – through the word, which carries a creative power. But only human beings have the ability and the power to disobey God’s word. Thus, human beings are creatures that, given their freedom of will or independence, have forced God to add a further element to the command – referring to their potential disobedience, which is a threat to punish them.

Furthermore, in addition to the threat, God might seek to affect people through a personal promise, which reflects the addressee’s personal wish or interest. Abraham’s situation is demonstrative as it is promised that he will be the father of a nation (Gen 12:3). However, Abraham is childless; thus, the promise might be his last chance of fatherhood (Gen 12:1-3 cf. Gen 11:30). The
promise might motivate him – rather than God’s command itself – to follow in
God’s steps. That is to say, God’s authority is unquestionable but there is – for
the human being – a way to refuse Him. Still, human beings may reject God’s
authority and choose their own way, but the question is: Are they in a position
to argue with Him in order to change His conduct?

In this regard, we might ask whether the people of the Bible are in the same
situation as Prometheus at the end of Aeschylus’s horrible tragedy regarding the
tyrranical power of the gods: "see how I suffer, how unjust this is". In the
dramatic present of Prometheus bound, Zeus’s government of the universe is
represented as despotism of the most brutal kind (see Scully & Herrington
1975:11). Aeschylus presents a concept of the supreme tyrant, the enemy of the
human, who is ruling the world. This supreme tyrant stands up against mankind
(consult Murray 1968:56).

Thus, the question regarding the biblical literature is whether we are in the
status of the transformation from mythos to logos. That is to say, does the
biblical discourse reflect a mythical mode of thinking, which is dominated by
the realm of the imagination and the fantastic, or does the biblical discourse
reflect a logical mode of argumentation which is the realm of rhetoric? The
tension between the mythos and the logos in this regard applies to the status of
God in terms of His behaviour and attitude to humankind: tyrant or rational?
The work of Rudolph Otto regarding the transformation from the mythical-
pagan approach to monotheism may justify the employment of logos as the
inference between the premise of cause and effect, which is a fundamental
concept of the moralistic principle of biblical monotheism, justifying the causal
notion of retribution: righteousness and reward or wickedness and punishment.
In other words, the notion of retribution is based on the relationship between
cause and effect that is determined on the foundation of demonstration, reason.

However, the inclination is still to regard biblical religious thought as an
authoritative discourse that borrows its religious power, that is, truth, through
the nature of its existence which is God’s absolute authority. Hence, given its nature biblical rhetoric might be analytic rather than dialectic, an ultimate discourse rather than argumentative.

Still, we might ask: Does the God of Abraham and Moses control His subjects only through threats and punishment (or rewards) with no real sense of a meaningful dialogue between him and his human subjects? In other words, is there no act of persuasion as an appeal to human reasoning or self-understanding in order that the person will be persuaded by God – not just as a result of command or fear or a fulfilment of self-interest in light of what seems to be impossible by the course of nature? Actually, as the study of rhetoric may demonstrate, the biblical situation is not parallel to that of Prometheus. Thus, the prophets communicate God’s will to His people, reasoning with the audience through vivid rhetoric and urging the people to argue with God: “Come now, let us argue it out, says God” (Isa 1:18. Consult Gitay 1991:14-34).

God Himself communicates directly to certain individuals by means of dialogue which is a rhetorical endeavour (and see further below). The cases of Job, Jonah and Abraham can be cited to demonstrate God’s rhetoric when He replies to specific inquiries regarding the meaning of His deeds and through His responses He seeks to justify Himself (compare Gitay 2005:859-866). Thus, for example, Abraham’s claim that God’s decision to destroy the entire population of two cities might not be justified in accordance with human criteria of morality is a case to be considered through an act of argumentation, that is, rhetoric:

And the Lord said, ‘Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great …’

And Abraham drew near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous
who are in it? Will you then destroy the place? … Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?’ And the Lord said, ‘If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the entire place for their sakes’ (Gen 18: 23-26).

A chain of questions follows the plea: !? Each of the questions is fully answered by God as Abraham argues in terms of the principle of quality versus quantity as the criterion of justice that might affect God’s decision. Abraham continues to argue, reducing the number of potentially righteous persons to ten. God nevertheless responds that even this small number of righteous people does not exist. Consequently, God’s punishment has been justified in terms of Abraham’s reasoning. That is to say, God’s determination to destroy the two cities is not a mere demonstration of His power, but is presented – given Abraham’s appeal – as a critical decision, which is assessed and argued between humankind and God in accordance with human moral standards and reasoning. The debate between Abraham and God, between the “dominant character” and a human being, might be defined as a verbal argument that falls into the realm of rhetoric.

What is the meaning of God’s reasoning with human beings in terms of His authority? The point is that when God seeks to appeal to His human addressees, He actually shares with them His concerns, expecting them to accept His authority in light of His reasoning in human dialectical terms and not just because He is God (cf. Gitay 2007:30-44).

This act of reasoning, which is, in fact, participation with the authority’s decision making, might be seen as an exercise of “democracy” in the context of religious authority. At first glance, one might claim that democracy and religious authority are not well harmonized and such a comparison has certain limitations as there are principles that are non-negotiable for the religious authority (Berger 2004:77-78). However, the following definition of democracy
(formulated by the Chair of the International Panel on Democracy and Development (IPDD)) may work for us as a guideline for the inclusion of democracy in the realm of religious authority:

[Democracy is] a system whereby the whole society can participate … in the decision making process and keep control over it … democracy can be defined as a political system that is capable of correcting its own dysfunctions (Boutros-Ghali 2003:7-8).

The democratic principles revolve around participation and control in the process of decision making. In this regard, biblical rhetoric plays a significant role in the act of “democratizing” the religious authority. Thus the prophet Isaiah, seeking to justify God’s punishment (given the people’s moral misbehaviour), calls for a debate with God, i.e., the religious authority. Therefore, the prophet encourages the community not just to participate in the act of the decision making but, in fact, to control God’s decision to punish through their reasoning. Thus says Isaiah (1:18):

Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord.
Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow.

The style is distinctive as the particle “let us” (נא לכו) softens the command “go”. The audience is politely (see GK 105b, compare Gen 18:3) invited to consider the issue rather than forced to accept it (Gitay 1991:33). In other words, the audience – if successful in their argument – might affect God’s decision as the red colour will turn to white. This is the height of God’s relationship with the people in terms of participating and controlling God’s decision. Isaiah seeks to present God’s justice, not through the manifestation of His ultimate superiority and the exercise of His authority as such, but through reasoning in human terms. Thus, God’s authority is not autocratic but subject to
human criticism that might influence God to alter His decision. Therefore, God’s verbal reasoning with His subordinates democratizes His ultimate authority as He is not above criticism, and He is open to sharing His reasoning and be persuaded that He misjudged the case. Rhetoric is instrumental in democratizing the religious authority.

In this regard, we need to remind ourselves of the place of rhetoric in the course of the human struggle to be free of the power of magic and the irrational. As noticed, in midst of the fifth century B.C.E., the Greek Sophists introduced a new intellectual dimension to human culture. *Mythos* was replaced by *logos*. “The aristocracy of the myths was losing its authority to a democracy of public arguments,” writes Poulakos (1995:13). The high achievement of the Greek Sophists is the secularization of human thought, which is the replacement of magic by reasoning.

Thus, when human beings reason with God we can take it almost as an act of democracy (a term which in this context is preferable to “secularization”), that is, a reflection of a debate between people transferred to the highest religious sphere. This is the case of the Greeks when the Sophists who developed the art and technique of verbal persuasion replaced the religious means of communication through the power of irrational techniques (e.g., Delphi) that rejected reasoning. In this respect, God’s speeches in the (Hebrew) Bible are based on human rhetoric in terms of reasoning and might be looked at in terms of the rhetorical principles of reason, common sense, and *absurdum*. Rhetoric is therefore the means of manifesting God’s democratization, which contrasts the communicative medium of the mysterious that manifests God’s power – the numinous. That is to say, God’s speeches in the Hebrew Bible function to ensure that His will is not perceived as demonic. In this respect, God’s rhetoric is harmonized with the matter of His moralisation.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of a God who reasons is paralleled in the development of the Hebrew religion. In terms of the history of religions, Rudolf
Otto revealed in biblical monotheism a moralistic dimension, which substitutes
the demonic conception. Thus, Otto proposes in his monumental work The idea
of holy that “the venerable religion of Moses marks the beginning of a process
which from that point onward … charged with ethical import, until it becomes
the ‘holy’ in the full sense of the word. The culmination of the process is found
in the Prophets and the Gospels. And it is in this that the special nobility of the
religion revealed to us by the Bible is to be found” (Otto 1969:75).

What Otto has observed as a historian of biblical religion regarding God’s
moralisation, rhetoric demonstrates in terms of God’s reasoning. Biblical
rhetoric is therefore the literary-linguistic manifestation of reasoning in human
perception, which is a true reflection of the democratisation of biblical religion
in response to human criticism.

The biblical discourse provides numerous examples of argumentative
speeches, based on dialectical reasoning that might reflect conflicts of thoughts
between God and human beings. In other words, there is a need to argue and
justify the position rather than to take it as inference or as a matter of God’s
authority. The following examples may demonstrate the polemic situation.

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light;
As if someone fled from a lion,
And was met by a bear;
Or went into the house and rested
A hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.
Is not the day of the Lord darkness not light and doom with no
brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20)

The prophet, God’s messenger, introduces a new concept of the day of God
which is considered by his audience as a day of salvation. However, the prophet
argues that the concept of the day of brightness is actually wrong because this
day is a day of punishment. He appeals rather than imposing the concept upon
the audience. His technique is the analogy, actually a chain of analogies which
refer to the human conception.

In the next example, the prophet argues with his audience regarding the role
of God who in their view is their defender rather than the God of punishment.
Amos reasons with his audience through a chain of examples taken from the
world of facts and nature.

Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment?

Does a lion roar in the forest when it has no prey?

…. [consequently]

Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it? (Amos 3: 3-8)

God’s deeds and behaviour are not taken for granted but are demonstrated
through a human means of appeal: !?... This is the reductio ad absurdum (compare Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:205), a
purely formal contradiction on the basis of reason, which justifies the logic of
the principle of God’s punishment.

THE LANGUAGE OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOD
AND THE PEOPLE

We find that God Himself rather than His agents justifies His deeds through an
appeal to reason. But how does God reason? Are human beings capable of
perceiving God’s reasoning as an act of persuasion rather than a proclamation of
authority? The point is that the process of communication between God and
humankind through a linguistic medium is not something that can be taken for
granted. Nevertheless, the concept of communication between God and human
beings is based on a fundamental hermeneutical principle that has been
introduced through medieval Jewish and Christian exegesis of the Bible. The presupposition is that the Torah speaks in human language, *Scriptura humane loquitur*. That is to say, God’s verbal revelation is adjusted to the human ability to understand Him. This leading principle of communication has been understood by the great Sephardic Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra (1092-1164) to mean that linguistically the Torah adjusted itself to conventional human perception (consult Funkenstein 1991:72-81). This hermeneutical principle enables human beings to perceive God’s word (and argumentation) in their language.

**THE RHETORICAL STRATEGY: THE DISCURSIVE REASONING**

I shall start with the great debate between Abraham and God regarding His decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. This argument in itself indicates that God’s premise is a subject of justification and is not taken as such. How does Abraham argue with God? He reasons through a question (Gen 18:23):

רשע עם צדיק תספה האף!?

Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?!

This sort of question is the device of *erotesis*, or interrogation, or, as we might call it today, the rhetorical question. Aristotle deals in length with this device at the end of *Rhetoric*. He writes as follows:

> Something is self-evident and it is clear to the questioner that the opponent will grant another point. Receiving the expected answer to this, he should not ask about what is self-evident but should state the conclusion to which it points, as Socrates did when Meletus
denied that Socrates believed in the gods; he asked if daimones [spirits in which Meletus admitted Socrates believed] were not either children of gods or something divine, and when Meletus said ‘They are’, Socrates asked [drawing the conclusion]: ‘Does anybody think there are children of gods but not gods?’

The expected answer creates common ground (agreement) between the arguers and their addressees; in the case of Abraham, this forms the basis for his argumentation. What sort of agreement serves as the premise in this particular case of Sodom and Gomorrah? Values are the sort of agreement which have been elected by Abraham as “the generally accepted”. Common value is not just a commonly agreed ground but has in itself a persuasive power. Thus, speaking about the types of objects of agreement, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969:74) regard values as follows: “Agreement with regard to a value means an admission that an object, a being, or an ideal must have a specific influence on action and on disposition toward action and that one can make use of this influence in an argument”. The premise of the value is utilized by Abraham, functioning as the premise of the inference. That is, Abraham through his rhetorical question created a moral situation that has influenced God to explain his decision challenged on the accepted moral-value standards. Isaiah argues similarly:

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth:
For the Lord has spoken:
I reared children, and brought them up,
But, they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
And the donkey its master’s crib,
But Israel does not know,
My people do not understand! (Isaiah 1: 2-3)
Isaiah appeals to the universal value of common sense as the generally accepted value. Even though he aims to reach his own audience, the citizens of Jerusalem, he appeals to common human norms, which are based in this particular case on accepted human moral standards. It appears that the prophet makes a special effort to reach his audience; he is not just accusing them but seeks to appeal to them in their terms. That is, the emphasis is not on God’s judgment as such but on the people’s own realization of their deeds given the prophet’s appeal.

Thus, Isaiah, in order to reach a causal link between the punishment and its cause, employs the rhetorical technique of analogy. Hence, the abstract accusation of misbehaviour has been concretised through the analogy which is taken from the well-known and undisputable realm of nature. Through the analogy one lets the object to speak for itself as self-explanatory.

THE RHETORICAL STRATEGY: THE PRESENTATIONAL REASONING

The discourse of Micah 1 represents a rhetorical model that differs from the Aristotelian model of causal link that characterises the prophetic mode of argumentation of Isaiah and Amos, for instance. Rather, Micah presents a chain of descriptions such as:

Yahweh is coming out of his dwelling-place
To descend and walk on the heights of the earth.
Mountains dissolve beneath him,
Valleys are split open,
Like wax before fire,
Like torrents pouring down a hillside …
So I shall make Samaria a heap of ruins in open country,
A place for planting vines,
I shall cast her stones into the valley
And lay bare her foundations … (1:2-6)

The description is dramatic, presented in a lively manner in the form of the genre of the “alive performance poetry”, which constitutes in this case the unit of 1:2-16 (Gitay 2003:131-140). Nevertheless, the determination of the genre paves the road for the functional question of the impact; how this “alive performance poetry” seeks to affect the audience? The chain of descriptions creates, as a whole, a total notion of disaster. God is punishing the people. God’s punishment is the goal of the discourse, which is designed to “show” the audience through a vivid language that God brings upon them the awful disaster as a punishment. The argument itself constitutes the chain of the descriptions. One dramatic description follows another, creating, as a whole, a total impact. That is to say, the chain of descriptions creates a series of parallels which establishes a meaning as a whole. This is – in argumentative terms – the presentational discourse (parallels/comparisons), which differs from the discursive (causal) discourse. One verse is presented after the other, tending to work on the readers’/listeners’ minds through parallels. The series of parallels expands the meaning. This accumulating list of parallels is, in fact, a process of argumentation. It is different mode of argumentation, which does not seek to affect the readers/listeners by the argumentation process of deduction. Rather, the list of details, the examples, cited one after the other is a mode of argumentation in itself. Parallels replace the causal argument (compare Gitay 2001: 45-56 and 2003: 131-140).

This presentational process has been introduced by the philosopher of art,
Suzanna Langer (Langer 1942), who recognized the concept of argument through parallels when she made a distinction between presentational and discursive style. Objects are recognized by their relation to one another. Langer succeeded in demonstrating that these two genuinely distinctive modes of thought – discursive and presentational – are equally legitimate forms of logic (compare Douglas 1993) who studied the art of argumentation in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, claiming that Leviticus represents the presentational argument while Deuteronomy is based on the causal mode of argumentation). Each mode serves a different purpose; the discursive isolates elements while the presentational projects patterns as a whole.

The emphasis on the dramatic effect resembles in classical rhetorical terms the Ciceronian approach. Cicero, the Roman rhetorician of the first century B.C.E., was concerned less with the Platonic truth than with reaching the people. In his monumental work De Oratore, he speaks about three sources of persuasion: we show that our case reflects the truth through the device of probabilities, winning the audience, turning their minds/heads to the appropriate emotions given the instance (2.11.15). He categorises style into three modes: plain = teaching, the grand = moving, the middle = giving pleasure. Emotion and the style of repetition and the device of probabilities – together with delivery – are his strength.

Cicero’s powerful speeches are structured through a chain of rhetorical questions, possible and impossible-probability, past fact/future facts, repetitions of asyndeton (What an age! What morals!), absence of connecting particles, assonances, alliterations, polyptoton (same word repeated in different cases), metaphors, parallel phrasing, anaphora, and varied length of sentences to create emphasis. There are repetitions, powerful impressions. The causal appeal to reason is not the first priority, but the impression, the effect on the audience is the goal.

The comparison with biblical rhetoric such as that found in Micah is
instructive. In both instances – the Ciceronian approach and in Micah’s discourse – there are numerous repetitions also in the sound: breaking down the parallel structure for the sake of impression through the repeated sound, dwelling on the subject not for the sake of information but to capture the audience: (the comparison indicates the universal nature of rhetoric based on the oral performance which looks for devices of attraction).

**GOD’S REASONING**

Rhetoric is therefore the foundation of critical thinking, which is the core of democracy and moralisation as well. Rhetoric functions to enable the society to participate in decision making, referring in our case to the realm of religious authority.

As a rule, God Himself does not address the entire community (the Mount Sinai revelation is exceptional) but rather individuals, and not under abstract situations but rather in crises. For the sake of demonstration we can think about Jonah, Job and Abraham as individuals who challenged God’s morality and received His arguable response. Thus, in these three cases God’s behaviour is under question. Why does God not punish Nineveh, the cruellest enemy of Israel (Jonah)? Why does God torture His most devoted servant (Job)? Why is God ready to destroy righteous people just because they are surrounded by wicked (Abraham)? God’s morality is at stake. Therefore, His reasoning is instrumental in justifying His behaviour in human terms and rhetoric is the method of inquiry in these sensitive and crucial cases.

Thus, the argument that takes place between Jonah and God – challenging God to explain His behaviour – is fundamental in democratising His authority. Nevertheless, Jonah’s own behaviour is strictly anti-rhetoric. He does not talk to
God but runs away. His utterance to the people of Nineveh is deliberately brief (only five words, Jonah 3:4), lacking any rhetorical appeal (Gitay 1995:197-206). However, after Jonah accuses God of distorting the proper historical course of punishing the evil (4:1-3), God speaks to him. When Jonah prays to God, blaming God for being too merciful (4:2), God explains His reasons for being tolerant and not exercising Jonah’s sense of justice in terms of human vengeance. God reasons in human terms (4:10-11). The goal is to persuade Jonah (and the readers) rather than to perpetuate His deeds as such. Here, God seeks persuasion through the rhetorical means of the analogy:

Yahweh replied: ‘You are only upset about a castor-oil plant which cost you no labour, which you did not make grow, which sprouted in a night and has perished in a night. And am I not to feel sorry for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all animals!? ‘ (4:10-11)

This is rhetoric par excellence as there is no mystery but reason in God’s response. The analogy to the castor-oil plant that had protected Jonah from the terrible heat and had now disappeared is illumining as self-demonstration. However, God explains through an analogy that intends to demonstrate in human perception the unexplained, transferring the known to the unknown, through comparison that has as its purpose the clarification, structuring and evaluation of the theme in terms of what one knows (Perelman 1982:114-125). God’s authority (ethos) has been established through His reasoning that democratised His authority rather than forced His ultimate power as such. Nevertheless, Otto’s warning that God’s moralisation and rationalisation is not
His substitute is crucial in understanding the notion of biblical religion: “This moralizing and rationalizing process does not mean that the numinous itself has been overcome, but merely that its preponderance has been overcome. The numinous is at once the basis upon which and the setting within which the ethical and rational meaning is consummated” (1969:75). This warning regarding the essence of God is applied to His rhetoric as well in terms of its democratisation. Rhetoric, the art of reasoning, does not substitute God’s authority but is “charging it with a new content”. Thus, God responds to Job’s request: “I will ask and you will inform me” (42:4). His reply is through a chain of rhetorical questions that Job is incapable of responding to appropriately, such as: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation … Who decided the dimensions of it, do you know?” (38:4-5). Indeed, Job is presented as a limited human being but as a human, he is capable of asking difficult questions and can receive answers which are designed to persuade him as to why he is incapable of understanding, rather than merely have his inquiries ignored or simply dismissed (consult Gitay 1999:1-12). That is to say, Job challenged God to appear before him and to answer his questions, and indeed God spoke to him. Thus, Job was able to assess his criticism of God through His rhetoric, rather than be a mere victim (also see Habel 1985:87).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Martin Heidegger opened his lecture on language as follows:

Man speaks … we are always speaking … we speak because speaking is natural to us … only speech enables man to be the living being he is as man. Language belongs to the closest neighbourhood of man’s being … On the tenth of August 1784 Hamann wrote to Herder: ‘If I were eloquent as Demosthenes I
would yet have to do nothing more than repeat a single word three times: reason is language, logos’ (Heidegger 1971:189-191).

The biblical discourse bears testimony to the power of the word. People speak and God speaks as well. They speak for the sake of communication. Nevertheless, biblical verbal communication is also a reflection of reasoning: human reasoning as well as God’s reasoning. Biblical rhetoric reveals that reason is a language of communication and persuasion. And as people always speak, God speaks to them in their language. Consequently, biblical rhetoric is not distinctive in religious terms but is rhetoric in human language and reasoning. Furthermore, reason (language) is the vehicle of moralisation and democratisation because rhetoric (reason, language) forces the religious authority to justify His deeds. By doing so humans might assess God’s morality and participate actively in His decision-making (under a certain limitation, however: humans do not substitute God; they never replace Him).

The fact that God explains His deeds in human terms of cogency (in contrast, say, to Zeus) enlightens a specific dimension of biblical religion, referred to as the democratisation of God’s image. God’s justification is carried through His speeches designed for specific human beings who ask Him for a moral explanation for His deeds. God explains His reasons through the medium of language and reason, that is, rhetoric.

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