

## The Semitic rhetoric in the Koran and a Pharaonic papyrus

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**Abstract:** Besides the Greco-Latin classic rhetoric, there are other rhetorics, as the Semitic rhetoric, rediscovered at first in the study of the Bible, but the presence of which is also noticed in the Koran, and in other isolated texts of the antique Middle East. According to this rhetoric, texts are built on the basis of a complex set of symmetries, at various textual levels. The “rhetorical analysis” is the technique which allows bringing to light the composition of texts according to this rhetoric. It establishes the coherence of texts which, at first sight, seems muddled. It is also the way towards a faithful interpretation of the text. Three brief texts are analyzed, two chapters (Suras) of the Koran and a Pharaonic magic text, giving evidence of the extension of this rhetoric, in space and time. It is suggested that it represents the writing techniques of the scribes of the antique Middle East.

**Key words:** Semitic rhetoric; rhetorical analyses; symmetry; Sura

### 1. Brief history and description of Semitic rhetoric

The subject of *The XVIIth Biennial Conference of the International Society of the History of Rhetoric* (Montreal, 2009), “Innovative perspectives in the History of Rhetoric”, invited scholars to investigate other rhetorics than the Greco-Latin one which has dominated the western literary culture. Among them, the Semitic rhetoric drew special attention to these last years, because of its presence in two major sacred scriptures: the Bible and the Koran. Its rules have been gradually discovered in the field of biblical studies since the middle of the 18th century. They were recently systematized and theorized by Roland Meynet, professor of biblical exegesis at the Gregorian University, at Rome, in his two works: *Rhetoric Analysis* (1998) and *Traité de Rhétorique Biblique* (2007) (see references at the end of the article). A collective work, *Rhétorique Sémitique* (1998) also showed the relevance of this rhetoric in the Islamic traditions (hadiths). The author was able to demonstrate the omnipresence of this rhetoric in the text of the Koran, in several articles and in the author’s recent book *The Banquet, a Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur’an* (2009)<sup>1</sup>. Notice that the meaning of rhetoric as Semitic rhetoric is some narrower than the classical Greco-Latin one: it must be understood as “the art of composition of the discourse”, which corresponds to the “disposition” in classical Latin rhetoric.

The Semitic rhetoric allows scholars to understand why certain books of the Bible (like the Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the prophetic books, etc.) or the Koran appear so disordered, apparently made of independent fragments (laws, narratives, exhortations, oracles, etc.) without clear logical link between them. The main reason for this is that the Semitic discourse is not based on a principle of continuous and progressive development, as the Greek rhetoric (with its five classic parts of the discourse: introduction, story, confirmation, refutation, and peroration), but on the principle of symmetry.

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<sup>1</sup> A complete bibliography of the author’s researches on the Koran can be found in the bibliography of this work, as well as a study on “The question of the coherence of the Koran through the history of the Koranic exegesis”, in appendix.

The symmetry, in Semitic rhetoric, can take three forms or “figures of composition”: “parallelism”, when related textual units reappear in the same order (ABC//A’B’C’); the “mirror composition” (or chiasmus or inverted parallelism), when related units reappear in inverted order (ABC//C’B’A’); “concentric composition” (or “ring composition”), when a center connects the opposite sides of an inverted parallelism (ABC/X/C’B’A’) (Douglas, 2007).

These symmetries can be located in the text by signs of composition which are correspondences of terms in a mutual relationship of identity (repetition of the same terms), of synonymy (in the broad sense of “terms of nearby sense”), of antithesis, of homonymy (or quasi-homonymy, or assonances), or same grammatical shape.

What makes the Semitic rhetoric particularly subtle and complicated, is the fact that since these different figures of composition exist at various levels of the text, one must carefully distinguish in the analysis:

(1) The “member” which is the minimal rhetoric unit; it corresponds generally to a syntagm (a brief verse, a proposition);

(2) The “segment” which counts one, two or three members linked together; thus there can be unimember segments (or “monostychs”, in Greek terminology), bimember segments (or “distychs”) or trimember segments (or “tristychs”);

(3) The “piece” which counts one, two or three segments;

(4) The “part” which counts one, two or three pieces.

And so on for the four “superior” levels: the “passage”, the “sequence”, the “section” and finally the “book”, each counting one or several units of the previous lower level.

A text can, for example, be made of parallelisms at the level of segments and pieces, then, possibly, of a mirror composition (chiasmus) at the level of a part, and of a concentric composition at the level of the passage, etc. Many combinations are possible, what gives this rhetoric much flexibility.

Here are two short examples, extracted from the Koran, illustrating the first two figures of composition (parallelism and mirror composition), and a Pharaonic text, illustrating the third figure (concentric composition). This last example shows that Semitic rhetoric is not limited to the Bible and the Koran, but seems to have been used long before in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

The texts are presented in the following tables so to better illustrate their rhetorical composition.

## 2. Three examples of Semitic rhetoric

### 2.1 Sura 114: “Mankind” (see Table 1)

This Sura is the last one of the Koran, a prayer which the believer is invited to say for seeking refuge in God against the temptations (“whisperings”) which can come to him from Satan as well as from the Jinn or the people.

Table 1 Sura 114: “Mankind”

<sup>1</sup> Say:			
– «I take refuge	<i>with (bi)</i>	<i>the Lord</i>	of <b>Mankind,</b>
– <sup>2</sup>		<i>the King</i>	of <b>Mankind,</b>
– <sup>3</sup>		<i>the God</i>	of <b>Mankind,</b>
+ <sup>4</sup>	<i>from (min)</i>	the evil	of the stealthy <i>Whisperer,</i>
+ <sup>5</sup> which <i>whispers</i>	in the breasts		of <b>Mankind,</b>
+ <sup>6</sup> [whether]	among ( <i>min</i> )	Jinn	or <b>Mankind.</b>

After the initial imperative “Say”, the Sura is made of a single complex sentence. It consists of two antithetic

trimember segments, commanded by the opposite prepositions: “with” (“bi”, in Arabic), “from” (“min”).

The three members of the first segment (1-3) are synonymic, with three names referring to God (Lord, King, God), and the final triple repetition of “mankind”.

The three members of the second segment (4-6) are complementary: members 5 and 6 explain member 4 (5= what does the Whisperer do? 6=who is he?). Several signs of the composition link these three members together. The extreme members of the segment (4 and 6) begin with the same Arabic particle “min”. The first two members (4) and (5) are connected by words of the same root: “whisperer” (4)/“whispers” (5). Both last members (5 and 6), are connected by the same final term of “mankind”.

## 2.2 Sura 101: “The calamity”

This is a short eschatological Sura, warning people of the Last Day of Judgment. Here the author will show the different stages of the rhetorical analysis of the Sura.

### 2.2.1 The first level of the text: The members

Table 2 First level of Sura 101: The members

1	The calamity.
2	What is the calamity?
3	And what will let you know what the calamity is?
4	On the day when the people shall be like moths scattered,
5	and the mountains shall be like carded wool.
6-7	Then as for him whose balance is heavy, he shall be in a pleasant life,
8-9	but as for him whose balance is light, his mother shall be the abyss.
10	And what will let you know what it is?
11	A burning fire.

On Table 2, the text has been rewritten, its members superimposed in the style of poetry.

### 2.2.2 The second level: The segments

At a second level (see Table 3) it is noticed in fact that certain members are regrouped in parallel pairs:

Table 3 Second level of Sura 101: The segments

- <sup>1</sup>	The calamity				
= <sup>2</sup>					<i>What is the calamity?</i>
= <sup>3</sup>	And	what will let you know			<i>what the calamity is?</i>
+ <sup>4</sup>	On the day when	<b>the people</b>	shall be like	<i>moths</i>	<i>scattered,</i>
+ <sup>5</sup>	and	<b>the mountains</b>	shall be like	<i>wool</i>	<i>carded.</i>
- <sup>6-7</sup>	Then	<i>as for him whose balance is heavy,</i>			<i>he shall be in a pleasant life,</i>
- <sup>8-9</sup>	but	<i>as for him whose balance is light,</i>			<i>his mother shall be the abyss.</i>
= <sup>10</sup>	And	what will let you know	what it is?		
+ <sup>11</sup>	A burning fire.				

The members 1, 10 and 11 remain isolated, and the others form parallel pairs or bimember segments:

(1) Members 2 and 3 take up a similar question, slightly modified.

(2) Members 4 and 5 are constructed grammatically in the same manner, and have a similar meaning: on the Day of Judgment, the people are scattered as the mountains explode.

(3) Members 6-7 and 8-9 are equally of the same grammatical construction but of opposite meaning. We notice that the numbers of the verses in the official text of the Koran does not correspond to the rhetorical

members, since we have two verses in single members.

The whole Sura is thus composed of six segments: three of a single member, and three of two. Now it is a rule of Semitic rhetoric that the higher level of segments, which we call the piece, cannot contain more than three segments. In fact, it can be seen (see Table 4) that these six segments can regroup themselves in two pieces of three segments.

### 2.2.3 The third level: The pieces

**Table 4 Third level of Sura 101: The pieces**

A - <sup>1</sup> <b>The calamity</b>					
B	= <sup>2</sup>		What is	the calamity?	
	= <sup>3</sup>	and what will let you know	what is	the calamity?	
C	+ <sup>4</sup>	On <b>the day</b> when	the people	shall be like	moths scattered,
	+ <sup>5</sup>	and	the mountains	shall be like	wool carded.
A' - <sup>6-7</sup>	Then	as for him whose balance is heavy,		he shall be in a pleasant life,	
	+ <sup>8-9</sup>	but	as for him whose balance is light,		his mother shall be <b>the abyss</b> .
B'	= <sup>10</sup>	And what will let you know	what it is?		
C'	+ <sup>11</sup>	<b>A burning fire.</b>			

At first, the two pieces seem to be composed in a parallel style (ABC/A'B'C'): one term is put in the first segments ("the calamity"/"the abyss" at the end of member 9), followed by a question in the second segments ("what will let you know...") and its reply in the third segments ("the day"/"a burning fire").

But more numerous signs of composition show that the two pieces are above all set out in inverted symmetry (ABC/C'B'A') (see Table 5).

**Table 5 The mirror composition of Sura 101**

A - <sup>1</sup> THE CALAMITY ( <i>qÂrI'A</i> )					
B	= <sup>2</sup>		What is	the calamity?	
	= <sup>3</sup>	And what will let you know	what is	the calamity?	
C	+ <sup>4</sup>	On the day when	the people	shall be like	moths scattered,
	+ <sup>5</sup>	and	the mountains	shall be like	wool carded.
C'	+ <sup>6-7</sup>	Then	as for him whose balance is heavy,		he shall be in a pleasant life,
	+ <sup>8-9</sup>	but	as for him whose balance is light,		his mother shall be the abyss.
B'	= <sup>10</sup>	And what will let you know	what it is?		
A' - <sup>11</sup> A BURNING FIRE ( <i>hÂmIyA</i> )!					

At the two ends (AA') isolated terms appear: "the calamity" (evoking a cosmic upheaval)/"a burning fire" (evoking Hell). The correspondence of these two extreme terms is emphasized by their assonance: qÂrI'A/hÂmIyA. In median position (BB') appears questions, partly identical. In central position CC' appears two segments, each one of strictly parallel grammatical structure. Moreover, the two segments form between them a complementary parallelism: the first (C) describes the cataclysm of the Last Day, the second (C') the Judgment.

From the rhetorical point of view, the Sura is thus constituted of a single part, evoking the Day of Judgment in two complementary pieces, set out in a mirror composition or chiasmus, the first describing the cosmic upheaval of this day, the second the Judgment and its retribution.

### 2.3 A Pharaonic text: The papyrus of Moutemheb

The French Egyptologist Yvan Koenig, specialist of Egyptian papyri, presented the author with some Pharaonic magic texts, dating from around the first millennium B.C., to verify if the rules of the Semitic rhetoric also applied in these texts. The one analyzed here aims at neutralizing the spirit of a (male or female) ghost, who attacks a woman named Moutemheb (see Table 6).

**Table 6 The papyrus of Moutemheb**

<p>-<sup>1</sup> <math>\bar{O}</math> [male] <i>enemy</i>, [female] <i>enemy</i>,          -<sup>2</sup> dead [male], dead [female],          -<sup>3</sup> <i>opponent whatever it is</i>,</p> <p>=<sup>4</sup> <b>who comes to assail Moutemheb born from Ese</b></p> <p>+<sup>5</sup> <i>during the night</i>,          +<sup>6</sup> <i>during the day</i>,          +<sup>7</sup> <b>at any moment.</b></p>
<p>=<sup>8</sup> <i>One shall destroy you in your vault</i>;          -<sup>9</sup> <i>One shall look for you with violence.</i></p> <p>+<sup>10</sup> <i>One shall place a net against you in the sky</i>;          *<sup>11</sup> <b>SETH</b> will be <i>against you on earth.</i>          +<sup>12</sup> <i>One shall make that you navigate northward without being able to land.</i></p> <p>=<sup>13</sup> <i>I shall destroy your vault</i>,          -<sup>14</sup> <b>I shall break your sarcophagus.</b></p>
<p>-<sup>15</sup> <b>With you who made malignant demonstrations in Moutemheb.</b>          -<sup>16</sup> <i>It is her; Horus in the nest of Chemnis.</i>          -<sup>17</sup> <i>She is this teenager, son of Bastet.</i></p>

The text consists of a part counting three pieces (1-7/8-14/15-17), arranged in concentric composition.

### 2.3.1 The extreme pieces (1-7/15-17)

The first piece contains three segments: the first one (1-3) identifies the aggressor, the second one (4) identifies the attacked (Moutemheb), the third one (5-7) indicates the time of the attack. Both extreme segments (1-3 and 5-7), each consisting of three brief members, end by a formula of indefinite generalization: “whatever it is” (3)/“at any moment” (7).

Both extreme pieces (1-7/15-17) match. They are negative identifications of the aggressor (enemy, dead, opponent, 1-3/you who made malignant demonstrations, 15) and positive identifications of the attacked (Moutemheb, 4 and 15), likened to the young Horus cured by Isis in the nest of Chemnis, and declared “son of Bastet”, a protectress goddess (16-17). While the first piece gives indications of time (during, at any moment, 5-7), the third one gives local indications (in, 15-17).

The link between both pieces is underlined by the repetition of synonymic formulae, at first in the center of the first piece (4), then in the extreme members of the last piece (15 and 17): “who comes to assail Moutemheb born from Ese” (4)/“who made malignant demonstrations in Moutemheb”, “son of Bastet” (15 and 17), what corresponds to the “fourth law of Lund”, a rhetorical rule of Semitic rhetoric, according to which “there are many instances of ideas, occurring at the centre of one system (here, the first piece) and recurring in the extremes of a corresponding system (here, the last piece), the second system evidently having been constructed to match the first”<sup>2</sup>.

The discontinuity of the text does not need to be underlined: Both extreme pieces follow from the semantic

<sup>2</sup> Law of shift from centre to the extremes. See Meynet, R. 1998. *Rhetorical analysis*, 144. The American scholar Nils Wilhelm Lund published the results of his analysis of the texts of the Bible from 1930 onwards.

point of view, but they are separated by the central piece (8-14).

### 2.3.2 The central piece (8-14)

The central piece (8-14) contains three segments, arranged in a concentric composition.

The extreme segments (8-9/13-14) describe the action of the magician against the ghost: One shall destroy the vault of the ghost, or his sarcophagus. The first members of those segments (8 and 13) are almost identical; both of the last ones are synonymic: “with violence” (9)/“I shall break” (13). The magician will look for the malefic spirit “with violence”, by breaking his sarcophagus: from a semantic point of view, both members follow, although separated by the central segment (10-12): This is a new discontinuity of the text.

The central trimember segment (10-12) describes the consequences of the action of the magician: the sky and the earth will be hostile to the ghost, in sort that he will only be able to roam northwards on the Nile, without being able to land. The three members cross the three elements: sky/earth/water.

Seth’s central place, in the central member of all the text (11), emphasizes him particularly, especially since it is the only divinity quoted in the central piece. In the central member, Seth is subject of action, while in both members who frame it, the subject is anonymous (one shall place, 10/one shall make, 12). Seth is a particularly redoubtable divinity, in the Egyptian pantheon.

The center, in Semitic rhetoric, always plays a particularly important role. It is often the key to the interpretation of the whole text. It often contains the name of God or a divinity, as here we see.

## 3. Some conclusions on the extension and the meaning of Semitic rhetoric

These three examples are only small samples of vaster studies, especially as regards the Koran. R. Meynet, in his numerous books, has described the Semitic composition of many biblical texts, of the Old and the New Testament. He has also published some examples of Ugaritic and Akkadian texts, dating from the second and third millennium B.C. (Meynet, 1998, pp. 357-358), and of a Pharaonic text, *The Prayer of a Blind Person to Amon* (Meynet, 2007, pp. 600-602). All these soundings authorize learners to widen the field of Semitic rhetoric well upstream and downstream to biblical times, and to extend it to the whole of the Middle East. Everything inclines us to admit that the rhetorical analysis represents the rediscovery of the writing techniques of the scribes of the antique Middle East.

Finally, we must underline that the knowledge of the structure of a text according to all the symmetries and the correspondences of the Semitic rhetoric is a condition for the exact understanding of this text. The structure is pregnant with meaning. This shows the importance of knowing the rules of rhetorical analysis, in particular for the interpretation of the difficult sacred texts of the antique Middle East world<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In the perspective of translating those texts, the translation would have to respect as much as possible their rhetorical composition, what supposes an important preliminary work of rhetorical analysis of the source-text in its language.