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THE RHETORIC OF PROPHETIC DISCOURSE IN ISAIAH

Doctoral Thesis
-Summary-

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KEY WORDS:

Rhetoric, biblical rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, exegesis, rhetorical analysis, discourse, homiletics, cult.

The authors of the books of the Bible present in their works the truths that God revealed to them. Inspired by the Holy Ghost, they employ in their writings various words, structures and techniques that are easily regarded as rhetorical in nature. Rhetoric is one of the main sciences in Antiquity¹ the Church Fathers were familiar with (they studied and used it in preaching). Nowadays, rhetorical analysis is included in exegesis, bringing a new/innovating perspective on biblical texts.

Even though prophetic speeches were delivered a long time ago, they still represent a real source of inspiration for those who want to meet the challenges the Church and the world face today. If we go back to the text and if we manage to get the true meaning of the prophetic speech, we will see that all facts and events that occurred at that time recur today. For these reasons, we think that the content of the prophetic speech could be explored in order to identify some solutions or communication models which can be applied to the present times. Rhetorical criticism is in perfect accord with this approach, and therefore it offers the tools for understanding a passage or a context correctly, for identifying the theme and the author's purpose. In this way, rhetorical analysis emphasizes the fact that when delivering prophecies, biblical authors used certain rhetorical devices in order for their fellow countrymen to get the best understanding of the message.

The rhetorical criticism approach to the biblical text (in this case certain passages from The Book of the Prophet Isaiah) represents the innovative contribution of our thesis. The present paper provides an analysis of certain texts from The Book of the Prophet Isaiah that

¹ **Rhetoric** is the art of speaking well, the art of persuading and moving the audience through the soundness of the ideas that are stated, through the powerful and rigorous arguments highlighted by a refined style; *one of the main school disciplines in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, left aside for a period of time, but redeemed and invigorated by modern linguistic and aesthetic thinking, especially as the study of linguistic devices concerning literature; eloquence, oratory; the total number of rules that helps someone master this art. Eugenia DIMA, "Retorică," în *Dicționar Explicativ Ilustrat al Limbii Române (DEXI)* (Chișinău: Arc&gunivas, 2007): 1671. *Formerly, sophistic existed. Men learnt how to think about anything and what to answer to anyone. Later on, for many centuries, men learnt rhetoric. Children learnt how to speak; they learnt which the parts of the discourse are and how to say something where nothing can properly be said. But today, sophistic and rhetoric are not studied anymore.* Constantin NOICA, Jurnal filozofic (București: Humanitas, 1990), 30; *Rhetoric is the discourse technique... it is the other side of dialectics because both of them refer to issues common to the whole mankind, without implying a specific science.* Mircea FLORIAN, *Introducere, la Topica*, în *Aristotel, Organon*, vol. 2, trad., studiu introd. și note de Mircea FLORIAN (București: IRI, 1998), 240; *Rhetoric is the crowning achievement of culture, being more than a set of rules* Olivier REBOUL, *Introduction à la rhétorique* (Paris: PUF, 1991), 80; Pierre GUIRAUD, *La stylistique* (Paris: PUF, 1972), 24.

are susceptible of rhetorical criticism. We suggested certain pericopes from The Book of Isaiah to be the object of our analysis because the Romanian biblical literature has not yet approached rhetorically the text of the famous prophet of Israel. Embracing this position, we will notice that recurring significant rhetorical devices facilitate the precise demarcation between thematic and stylistic passages; they also link the two types of passages whose unity is therefore outlined, they emphasize the main theme and clearly present the author's purpose.

From the point of view of the structure, our thesis has three parts: I. *Conceptual and methodological preliminaries*; II. *An exegetical-rhetorical approach to the selected corpus*; III. *Isaiah in the cult of Christianity*.

Rhetoric somehow remained obscure since it was considered alien to Eastern spirituality. Therefore, nowadays, the rhetorical analysis of biblical texts usually represents a cumbersome approach due to the lack of a definite research methodology. For this very reason and because our topic is encompassed in the background/field of rhetorical analysis, we considered that it is an utmost necessity to dedicate **the first chapter** to the outline of various conceptual and methodological considerations that will be useful to our approach. In order to meet this objective, we divided the research into **five subchapters**: the first two subchapters clarify the notions of *biblical rhetoric* and *rhetorical criticism*; another chapter presents the most important *rhetorical devices* (*inclusion, repetition, chiasmus, wordplay*) that are employed in The Book of Isaiah and that are a key to establishing the precise framing of a passage, of the theme/topic, of the structure of some lines in a stanza. The next subchapter is dedicated to *the scholarly literature* or to *the current stage of research* on the international and national levels. In the last subchapter we offer an *isagogical overview* of The Book of Isaiah (*the personality of the prophet and the structure of the book*). In order to establish a connection with the next chapter, we will also present some rhetorical devices² (*metaphors, analogies, interjections, rhetorical questions, irony etc*) that are used by the prophet Isaiah in the 66 chapters of his book.

² In rhetoric, a **figure of speech** is defined as a deviation from the ordinary language use, as a change at a certain language level that facilitates poetic or oratorical expression; it has a different level of expressivity and persuasion from the ordinary mode of speaking. **The figure of speech** is not a mere adornment since it also implies language restructuring according to its own rhetorical code, which is based on figurative use of terms and specific syntactic structures. The totality of figures of speech (*metaboles*) is organized at different language levels. The structuring typology of every figurative level takes from Quintilian the way every figure of speech is generated: addition, omission, rearrangement of elements and permutation. FONTANIER, *Figurile*, 46-8.

Moreover, we will mention the texts that we suggest to be the object of our rhetorical analysis.

Biblical rhetoric cannot be defined without taking into consideration *classical rhetoric* because the latter forms the bedrock of the former. For this reason, it is necessary to establish the relation between *biblical rhetoric* and *exegesis* and other *rhetorical fields* because this connection facilitates, on the one hand, the identification of different text components and, on the other hand, it emphasizes the convergence and the divergence of these elements. When referring to rhetoric, we have to mention the fact that biblical rhetoric and classical rhetoric are different from each other. Rhetoric, which is generically called *classical*, was born in Ancient Greece and Rome and it was considered the art of speaking well/ persuasively in public. It establishes five golden rules³ of designing a persuasive discourse based on powerful arguments. We can state that today rhetoric is the key of communication. The distinctive features of classical rhetoric are: *understanding the way any type of discourse operates, facilitating the critical reading of texts* and *designing various types of discourse applied to different communication situations*. Its main functions are: *the persuasive function* (different ways to persuade), *the hermeneutical function* (it is seen as an endless interpretation of the adversary's rhetoric), *the heuristic function* (it provides solutions to intractable problems) and *the pedagogical function* (it allows the interpretation and creation of literary texts or discourses).

Biblical rhetoric is a distinct research branch addressed when biblical texts cannot be interpreted from the historical-critical approach. Biblical rhetoric is distinct from classical rhetoric since it focuses chiefly on the way a text is created. Quite recently, rhetorical criticism emerged inside the field of biblical rhetoric. James Muilenburg, the researcher who set forth this type of analysis, stated that the main concern of rhetorical criticism is the identification of models and composition methods used to emphasize the unity of a biblical passage. Although this type of analysis does not go hand in hand with the classical research, it broadens the horizons of classical rhetorical analysis. Therefore, it can be stated that even if *biblical rhetoric* is different and distinct from *classical rhetoric*, its bases are laid in *classical*

³ 1. *inventio*, namely the search for arguments, 2. *dispositio*, namely *the arrangement* of the matter, 3. *elocutio* or *decoratio* or *elaboratio*, namely *the adornment* of the discourse with rhetorical figures, 4. *memory* or *mnemonics*, namely discourse *memorization techniques*; with the aim of diversifying the style, the speaker promptly chooses from a great variety of synonyms, famous quotations of great authors, poets or historians, anecdotes, reasoning examples, law articles, 5. *action*, namely the way the discourse is uttered, the way the speaker masters his voice and body. Sanda GHIMPU, Alexandru ȚICLEA, Cornel BISTRICEANU, *Introducere în retorică* (București, 2002), 89-90.

rhetoric. *Biblical rhetoric* emerged in the field of biblical interpretation when it was agreed that exegesis cannot explain satisfactorily the deep meaning of the text, when there was a need to complement the exegetical approach with other methods of interpreting Scripture. Therefore, rhetorical analysis enriches the results of text criticism, text translation and interpretation.

The approach to Scripture from the point of view of *rhetorical criticism* reveals that biblical authors employed various *rhetorical devices*. If these are correctly identified and analysed, it will be easy to establish *the author's purpose* and the *unity of certain passages* which are the object of our analysis. The analysis of the main rhetorical devices employed by the prophet Isaiah in the 66 chapters of his book has the purpose of delimitating passages, pointing out the topic, identifying the structure of certain lines in a stanza, establishing the unity of the passages. This rhetorical analysis facilitates the thematic and stylistic resystematization of the 66 chapters of the book. Therefore, it can be stated that a unitary approach to the text is generally preferred to a divisional one (hypothetical sources, fragments, insertions). This research method is mainly focused on the text, on the way certain literary genres are employed or on the history of text elaboration and not on the history of Israeli religious beliefs. The method is embraced by many biblists whose intention is to explain the message of biblical texts. Rhetorical analysis provides an insight into biblical texts that goes further than the logical explanation of certain words. Benefit is derived from this analysis since it is of use to communicating today the message of the Holy Scripture. We can convince our fellow men of the truth of the Bible not only through the message of the text, but also through the way words are used.

Romanian biblical research is not particularly concerned with rhetorical analytical models; therefore, literature on the topic is scarcely delivered. One of the possible reasons of this lack of interest is the actual top priority given to essential Bible study papers: overall Bible commentaries, biblical-theology papers, hermeneutical treatises; in other words, researchers are interested in papers that are fundamental to applied further research. Nonetheless, we consider that our national scholarly literature, particularly secondary sources, is of equal importance to our paper for the main reason that the topic we tackle finds its bibliographical support in three different areas: *rhetoric- biblical rhetoric*, *rhetorical criticism* and *prophetic books*. Therefore, even if we may not find studies on rhetorical criticism, we can definitely find papers on classical rhetoric or we can derive a benefit from the studies

on the prophetic corpus. The task we need to accomplish is to coherently combine these elements and to eventually state the double perspective and relevance of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis: to the biblical text in general and to The Book of Isaiah in particular.

In our opinion, it is crucial to offer some explanations related to the isagogics of The Book of Isaiah. Irrespective of the approach employed when interpreting The Holy Scriptures, it is compulsory to have some basic knowledge of the book's isagogical elements: the author, the writing period and the structure of the book. All this information is of great use in establishing some reference points for the future analysis. Moreover, in order to connect the first chapter of this paper with the second one that deals with the exegetical-rhetorical analysis of certain passages, it is necessary to outline the rhetorical devices we can identify in the book.

Before doing the rhetorical analysis of the selected passages, it is imperative to delimit the rhetorical passages from The Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Because of their great number, we selected ten passages that will be addressed from the point of view of an extensive exegetical approach, of a rhetorical analysis; we will finalize our approach with a theological synthesis. These passages are: *Is.* 1, 16-17; *Is.* 58; *Is.* 6; *Is.* 9, 1-6 – from the first part of the book; *Is.* 56, 1-8; *Is.* 59, 1-21; *Is.* 61, 1-11; *Is.* 62, 1-12; *Is.* 63, 1-6; *Is.* 66, 1-24 – from the second part of the book. We have chosen the passages from the two parts mentioned because, as we could notice, on the one hand, they are linked through thematic connections⁴ and, on the other hand, the red thread that connects all these passages is *justice*, a main theological theme present not only in the Isaiahian discourse, but also in that of other prophets. The theme of justice is of paramount importance to Judaism and Christianity, since it is an Old Testamentary expression of the compliance of our deeds with God's will. In this way, the selected texts tackle Isaiahian topics that are of utmost importance to both Judaism and Christianity: justice/ holiness as a telos of human life, the messianic and eschatological discourse, - although the latter is differently comprehended by the two religions. The objective of our approach is to get a deeper insight into the text and,

⁴ For example, the theme of *justice* can be found not only in the passage 1, 15-17, but also in chapters 58 and 59, 1-21. Moreover, there is another link between chapter 58 and *Zechariah* 7 and 8, whose common theme is *fasting*. The recurrent word *vai* relates to the punishment of Israel from *Is.* 5, 1-30; this information is synthesized in chapter 6 in the form of the prophet's exclamation *Vai mie*. Also contained in chapter 6 is the glory of the Lord that fills the temple; it makes us think of the sanctifying of the temple in the times of Solomon (*3 Rg.* 8, 10-13). The other thematic connections will be presented every time they occur in the analysed passages.

implicitly, into its theological message to which our contemporaries can still relate as to a source of illumination and spiritual understanding.

The second chapter of the thesis- *An Exegetical-Rhetorical Approach to the Selected Corpus*- is of central importance. It contains the analysis of the ten pericopes selected from the first part (chapters 1-35) and from the third part (chapters 56-66) of The Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The first text (Is. 1, 15-17) represents a summary of the prophetic message and its main idea is *justice*. Succinct passages from Is. 1-6 and other chapters of the book clearly connect. A proper example of thematic connections is the relation between Is. 1, 15-17 and Is. 58, 1-14, because the ideas presented in the passage Is. 1, 15-17 are intertwined with the theme of the chapter 58. Therefore, if the overarching themes in Is. 1 such as *justice* and *adoration* are just outlined, they are presented in greater detail in Is. 58. Later, Is. 58, 5-9 is an answer to the way in which the prophet presents the importance and the significance of *offerings*; the answer is supported by the references in Is. 1. Therefore, from both a theological and literary point of view, we can state that the two passages are clearly linked.

The red thread that connects all the chapters in The Book of the Prophet Isaiah is *God's mystery* or *transcendence*. There is a prevalent usage of sacred names such as *The Holy One of Israel* or *Our Holy God*. No other biblical writer could have better illustrated this fact, since Isaiah is the prophet who *saw the Lord*, as it is beautifully presented in *chapter 6*. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the passage is the use of the first person or direct speech, two defining features of vision experience. The presence of the passive voice and of two less used verb forms *va șterge* (the correct form: *va fi șters*) and *va curăți* (*va fi curățit*) is a way of portraying the fact that only God can give total forgiveness and it is another stylistic particularity. The chiasmic structure *heart, ears, eyes* and *eyes, ears, heart* is interesting and powerful; in the second part of the verse there is another chiasmic structure: *otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears*. *The sight* the prophet refers to is a gift from God that will be refused by His stubborn people, even if the message has the nature of a prophecy.

In opposition to the previous chapter (Is. 8), in Is. 9, 1-6 the prophet announces a new message of hope. In the passage Is. 9, 1-7 *the past tense* is used. *The future* conveys the meaning of something that has already happened because it belonged to *prophetic consciousness*, of something from the past times; but later, the glorious deeds of God that are clearly visible ensure us that God has already kept His promise. Because of this thrust, Isaiah can place *the*

light from 9, 1 in the vicinity of *darkness* in 8, 22, not because this will soon happen, but because it can be seen with faithful eyes. As we could notice, the text can be spiritually interpreted as it follows: *darkness* symbolizes the sin, and *the light* is Christ. One of the distinguishing features of this passage is the emphasis placed on *the way a child is born* and not on what the child *will do* when he grows up. Judaism does not emphasize *for us*, but *the advent*. The names that occur in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah bear a lot of significance and give it a magic touch (cf. 7, 3; 8, 1) concerning the foreshadowing of future events and the embodiment of God's word.

The passage *Is. 56, 1-8* establishes a connection with the third section of the thesis, which is dedicated to the rhetorical analysis. In this pericope, God tells His people that He will soon come. The prophet makes use of rhetorical and structural devices to state that God will gather others to Him when He comes. This section is regarded as both the *introduction* to the third part of The Book of Isaiah, and a *promise* that those who stay in faith will be blessed. In this passage, certain words of comfort are pointed out in the light of the charges that will be pressed in further passages.

In the passage *Is. 59, 1-21* the *warrior image* is employed to indicate that God will return to Israel. Through this image, the prophet highlights that God will come *to save* those who faithfully honour their pledges and to repay His enemies according to their works. This passage can be seen as the *conclusion* to the topic stated in chapter 56: *Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.*

In chapter 61, Isaiah carries on with the theme of *reverse fate*, which he tackled in chapter 60. However, in this chapter, the prophet makes a change on the content level through the use of *direct speech*; the topic of *the salvation brought by Messiah* is presented at the beginning of the passage; its final part inserts a short statement based on a comparison whose aim is to emphasize the fact that God's justice and glorification will stand in front of all nations: *For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.* Exactly like chapter 60, this chapter rhetorically portrays the fact that *the reverse fate* of Jerusalem is prophetically prefigured.

Isaiah moves from *prophecy accomplishment*, which was the red thread of the passage *Is. 60-61*, to the theme of *state changing* in *Is. 62*. Although the salvation of Jerusalem is promised (verses 10-12), the previous verses portray the *rhetoric of looking for God*. This is supported by

the advice offered to the people of God: *you who call on the Lord... give Him no rest* because of the *rearrangement* of Jerusalem that God promised that will soon occur. Therefore, the passage *Isaiah* 60-62 encompasses the future promise of salvation and restoration of Jerusalem. This promise is actually the fulfilment of God's initial wish that the chosen people may be a light unto the nations. These three chapters are bordered by other two important sections that deal with the way God rewards the wicked people. The middle chapters are considered passages of comfort and hope for those who lived in times of injustice and oppression.

The pericope *Is.* 63, 1-6 brings up again the theme of *revenge*. It also insists on the direct speech model employed in *Is.* 59, 16-20 and *Is.* 61, 2. This theme was also of relevance to verses 16-21 from chapter 59. After presenting the theme of the restoration of Jerusalem in chapters 60-62, the prophet employs a vivid image in order to catch the readers' attention to the dreadful judgement of those who *rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit*. The passages of *confession* and *repentance* from *Is.* 63, 7- 64, 12 aim at stimulating the repentance of the inconstant nation. These texts remind us about the goodness of God and the blessing He pours out on the people during their painful history.

The final passage *Is.* 66, 1-24 presents certain prophecies that possess a pedagogical function; people's attention is drawn to the *divine justice*. It will be eternal and merciless for those who *rebelled against God*. The passage is divided into two segments: verses 1-6 and verses 15-17 and 24, and it represents a *warning* for those who will not mend their ways. The prophecies between the two segments act rhetorically as a *piece of advice* for repentance for all the nations. The particular feature of the phrase *the new heavens and the new earth*, that we can also find in *Is.* 65, 17-25 gives the promise of a future in which in the case of those who have faith *the former things will not be remembered... but be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create*. The theme of the divine justice is beautifully emphasized in *Is.* 66, 24 and works as a warning advanced to the Israelis to be aware of the punishment that God's enemies will get.

The prophet Isaiah had a complex personality. He distinguished himself among his fellow countrymen by being a politician and an orator. His powerful speeches, prophecies and narratives have not ceased to be a valuable contribution because his teachings can still be used in contemporary society. In the 66 chapters of the book, messianic prophecies blend nicely with the unique literary passages. As a consequence, the whole book stands out for its elegant style and image variety.

For these reasons, I found it necessary to insert a **chapter** dedicated to the presence of the *Book of Isaiah in the Cult of Christianity*, since it is also linked with the section of exegetical-rhetorical analysis. While rhetorical analysis facilitates the highlighting of the theme of a pericope, this type of analysis taken from homiletics offers a clear and precise vision of the truths revealed in the Holy Scriptures. After presenting the wealth of homiletics as it arises from The Book of Isaiah, we could not neglect its presence in the cult of Christianity because after *David's psalms*, certain passages from The Book of Isaiah have the greatest use in divine services. A succinct analysis of the church books with a schedule of sermons (the Menaion and the Triod) will disclose that more than one hundred pericopes belong to the prophet Isaiah. Moreover, many passages from different chapters are uttered during all divine services. Therefore, priests should read carefully Isaiah's prophecy and value it from a homiletical point of view; they will find not only new resources for the teachings they preach, but also helpful ideas and allegories that ought to be conveyed to other people. The aim of the rhetorical criticism that we carried out was to highlight new meanings, new stylistic structures and new shades of significance that lead to theocentrism, messianism, pneumatology and eschatology that are Christian foreshadows. We are hopeful that all these ideas resulted clearly from the presentation of the way The Book of Isaiah is used in the cult.

Therefore, we can conclude that addressing the biblical text from the point of view/ with the help of rhetorical criticism is a new issue in the field of Romanian theology. We hope that the novelty of this approach will generate a clearer and more precise understanding of the text of the Holy Scripture in general and of the text of the prophet Isaiah in particular; therefore, it will be much easier to make sense of his message.

Another purpose this paper serves is to underline the importance of prophetic texts on the liturgical level, which also represents an element of novelty of the present thesis.

The primary objective of our approach was to design an instrument of valuing Isaiah's rhetorical discourse within the framework of contemporary homiletic practice.

Moreover, the research we performed represents the beginning of the new critical-rhetorical approach that can be addressed thematically to other passages from The Book of the Prophet Isaiah and why not to other books of the Old and New Testaments.

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