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WHICH MAN IS CURSED? A SHORT SYNTACTIC-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF JR 17:5

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Abstract: “Cursed is the man that trust in man” (Jr 17:5). Here is one of the most known texts in the Hebrew Bible. The present study was presented orally at the I SIMPEB (Symposium Paulista of Biblical Studies) of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), in April 2021, as result of the author’s participation in the Research Group Translation and Interpretation of the Old Testament (TIAT), CNPq of PUC-SP. The intention, therefore, of this brief syntactic-semantic analysis of Jr 17:5, is to demonstrate that this expression, which is often interpreted casually as a statement that people should not be trusted, is only one of the three components of a major grammatical construction. In addition, even the curse condition does not correspond to divine retaliation, but a direct consequence of human behavior concerning their own life choices.

Keywords: Cursed is the man that trust in man; Hebrew Bible; Narrative Analysis; Old Testament Exegesis; Biblical Theology.

INTRODUCTION

Bearing in mind what Erich Auerbach¹ asserts about the plexus between the syntax and the semantic dimensions of the words that make up biblical literature, the present text intends to demonstrate that, both in the syntactic configuration and in the choice of words, the speaker of Jr 17:5 makes use of an artistically planned rhetorical resource. Because, according to Adele Berlin,² the way a message is said is as important as its content. Thus, following some literary patterns observed by Cynthia L. Miller,³ it is reasonable to interpret the speech-writer-protagonist’s words as a thematic key-reading of his narrative context. This context is the

narrative discourse, which flows from the *thematic unity* of the narrative, is recognizable in the rhetorical arrangement resulting from the syntactic configuration and the semantic play between the words of the LORD’s speech through his servant Jeremiah.

The expression “cursed is the man who trusts in man” is, in fact, just one component of the three dependent adjective clauses, configured through synonymous parallelism, which qualify the subject *man*. Furthermore, the two words rendered as *man* are, in turn, translated from two different Hebrew words נָבִי and אָדָם, person and humanity, respectively.⁴ Finally, observing the action verbs that qualify the subject in relation to its predicate, it is perfectly plausible to say that the *cursed* condition is a result of the individual’s own choices rather than a divine condemnation.

Such reading, however, does not seem to be accompanied by some contemporary translations into English and Portuguese. For example, it can be observed that the New International Version (2000) of the International Bible Society says that “cursed is the man who trusts in men”. It seems to feed the idea of the famous saying that says that “cursed is the man who trusts in another man”. The New Translation in Today’s Language (2001) of the Biblical Society of Brazil presents the Lord’s speech as “I will curse him who departs from me”. It seems to emphasize divine action as a kind of vengeful act, like a despot. In contrast, however, one can mention the Jerusalem Bible (1968), which presents its translation “cursed is the man who trusts in man”, as well as the Portuguese translation of the Hebrew Bible (2016) by Publisher Sêfer, whose translation is “cursed is the man who

1 AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, p. 3-23.

2 BERLIN, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, p. 13-21

3 MILLER, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: a linguistic analysis*, p. 399-407.

4 ALTER, *Prophets (Nevi'im)*, p. 918.

trusts only in the human being”⁵

Perhaps the *narrated world* in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, observed from the point of view provided by the relationship between form and content of the message,⁶ can provide the listener-reader with sufficient subsidies to make a reasonable judgment of value over the interpretive contrasts exemplified by the translations listed in the previous paragraph. According to Shimon Bar-Efrat,⁷ the interpretation of the meanings of a narrative depends fundamentally on an earlier investigation that seeks to match the stratum of words and phrases with the stratum of the actions described in the plot. Thus, as stated by Robert Alter,⁸ the intentions and motivations of the characters can be verified in the representation of their actions, as well as in the way they are retro referenced in the discursive voice of the protagonist character.⁹

CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO THE NARRATED WORLD IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

Following the methodological-exegetic perspective asserted by Jean Louis Ska,¹⁰ about the need to penetrate the story’s world, one must consider that the plot is an essential constituent element of a narrative.¹¹ Thus, when observing the peculiar structure that

configures the book’s narrative flow of the prophet Jeremiah, it is possible to notice several literary forms present in the text. These literary forms are poetry, biographical data, visions, sermons, and prose in of parables.¹² All these forms are organized around the prophet’s goal of making his text in a thematic rather than a chronological perspective,¹³ namely, to sternly warn Judah so that its people should abandon sin and idolatry to avoid imminent exile.¹⁴

Therefore, the thematic configuration of Jeremias’ text follows a non-teleological flow of narration, where events are remembered in the perspective in which they become elucidative for the *narrative discourse*.¹⁵ According to John Bright,¹⁶ literary forms constantly follow one another depending on the thematic intent of the book. Furthermore, as Joel Rosenberg argues,¹⁷ manipulating the interleaving of the various literary forms with the prophet’s utterances becomes a sophisticated system for exposing his message. For Patricia K. Tull,¹⁸ the prophet presents himself through a dramatic dialogue. It is a dialogue between God and his prophet, transmitted to his audience as a preaching.

Following the structural analysis of the book of the prophet Jeremiah, as presented by Peter Craigie, Page Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard,¹⁹ we present below a portrait of

5 Other translations can be translated here, such as: The Jewish Study Bible by the Jewish Publication Society (2004), which reads “cursed is he trust in man”; King James Version (1997) with “Cursed is the man who trusts in man”; The New American Standard Bible (1995) featuring “Cursed be the man who trusts in mankind”.

6 YAMASAKI, *Watching a Biblical Narrative: point of view in biblical exegesis*, p. 44-46.

7 BAR-EFRAT, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 197.

8 ALTER, *The art of Biblical narrative*, p. 202.

9 MILLER, *Discourse Functions of Quotative Frames in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*. p. 156; MILLER, *Introducing Direct Discourse in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, p. 218-219.

10 SKA, *Sinchronia: L’Análisi Narrativa*, p. 157.

11 MARQUERAT; BOURQUIN, *Pour Lire les Récits Bibliques: initiation à l’analyse narrative*, p.55-81.

12 ROSENBERG, *Jeremiah and Ezekiel*, p. 184-185.

13 TULL, *Narrative among the Latter Prophets*, p. 216-217.

14 BRIGHT, *Jeremiah: introduction, translation, and notes*, p. 119.

15 RÖMER, *Jérémie*, p. 435-438.

16 BRIGHT, *Jeremiah: introduction, translation, and notes*, p. LVI-LXII.

17 ROSENBERG, *Jeremiah and Ezekiel*, p. 184-185.

18 TULL, *Narrative among the Latter Prophets*, p. 216-217.

19 CRAIGIE; KELLEY; DRINKARD, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 220-225.

four structural frameworks that aim to from the macro perspective of the narrative to the locus of Jr 17:5.

- 1 – 45 → *Prophecies against Judah and Jerusalem*
 - 1 – 20 → *In the reigns of Josiah and Jehoiakim*
 - 21 – 39 → *During various periods until the fall of Jerusalem*
- 46 – 51 → *Prophecies against the Nations*
- 52 → *Historical Appendix*

Table 1: general structure of the book of Jeremiah

- 2 – 20 → Six sermons
- 1st Sermon – *the sin of the nation* – (2:1 – 3:5)
- 2nd Sermon – *devastation comes from the North* – (3:6 – 6:30)
- 3rd Sermon – *Threat of Exile* – (7 – 10)
- 4th Sermon – *the broken covenant: sign of the linen belt* – (11 – 13)
- 5th Sermon – *the drought: sign of the single prophet* – (14 – 17)
- 6th Sermon – *sign of the potter's house* – (18 – 20)

Table 2: dialogic structure of Jeremiah's sermons - period: Josiah and Jehoiakim

- 14:1-22 → The drought and the doom of the nation
 - (1-6) *description of the terrible calamity*; (7-9) *empty ritualistic prayers of the nation*; (10-12) *the LORD's rejection of ritualism*; (13-16) *the false prophets who had no divine credentials*; (17-22) *Jeremiah laments the fate of the nation*.
- 15:1-21 → The LORD's answer to Jeremiah
 - (1-9) *intercession was rejected, and the nation's fate sealed*; (10-21) *the LORD's response to the prophet's grief*.
- 16:1-21 → The impending catastrophe, the wages of sin
 - (1-4) *denial of the prophet's marriage: inexorable fulfillment of the word of God*; (5-9) *marriage denied until the celebration*

of funerals and festivities; (10-13) *sign of impending trials because of Judah's apostasies*; (14-21) *after the judgment would come definite blessings*.

17:1-27 → Judah's terrible sin
 (1-4) *description of sin*; (5-11) *curse and blessing declared to the people*; (12-17) *Jeremiah's worship and prayer*; (18-27) *warnings about the desecration of the Sabbath, a sign of the people's disloyalty to the LORD*.

Table 3: structure of the Fifth Sermon – The Drought

- A. *indictment of Judah for her sins – written on the heart – and judgment for Judah's sin* (17:1-4)
- B. *the cursed man* (17:5)
- C. *the abode of the cursed man* (17:6)
- D. *the blessed man* (17:7)
- E. *the fruit of the blessed man* (17:8)
 - F. *deceitful heart above all* (17:9)
 - F'. *LORD searcher of the heart/inner part* (17:10a)
 - E'. *the LORD gives to each according to his fruit* (17:10b)
 - D'. *he who gathers up riches unjustly will lose them* (17:11)
 - C'. *the abode of the LORD* (17:12)
 - B'. *LORD, the hope of Israel* (17:13a)
 - A'. *accusation on those who forsake the LORD – written on the heart – and judgment for forsaking the LORD* (17:13b)

Table 4: concentric structure, in thematic perspective, from the first to the third part of the fourth section of the fifth sermon of Jeremiah

Therefore, the passage, which is the object of the present communication (Jr 17:5), is found in a section that presents a sermon mixed with a parable. This passage is structured as a *Chiasm*,²⁰ encompassing chapter seventeen from v.1 to v.13, centering on v.9 and the first part of v.10. This concentric structure delimits the pericope that contains the text to be analyzed here. Its sequence being presented as

20 CRAIGIE; KELLEY; DRINKARD, *Jeremiah 1-25*, p. 220.

follows: the indictment of Judah for its sins – God evaluates the heart – judgment of Judah’s sin. In this sense, it is reasonable to think about the verbal expression *it’s cursed* (אָרוּר), in Jr 17:5, as a direct consequence of the choices of those whose hearts turn away from the LORD, as will be demonstrated in the next section of this text.

SYNTACTIC APPROXIMATION TO THE TEXT OF JR 17:5

First, the segmentation and translation of the Hebrew text of Jr 17:5 into English is presented to highlight the rhetorical-syntactic configuration.

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה	v.5a	<i>Thus said the LORD:</i>
אָרוּר	v.5b	<i>It’s cursed</i>
הַגִּבֹּר	v.5c	<i>the man</i>
אֲשֶׁר יָבֹטֵחַ בְּאָדָם	v.5d	<i>who trusts the human being,</i>
וְשֵׁם בְּשָׂר זָרְעוֹ	v.5e	<i>who trusts in the strength of mortal flesh,</i>
וּמִן־יְהוָה יִסּוֹר לִבּוֹ	v.5f	<i>who turns his heart away from the LORD.</i>

The first clause (v.5a) is simple. When composed of the verb אָמַר, introductory speeches, it has as subject the nominal, singular, masculine noun יְהוָה, however, it does not have a complete meaning. The complement required by the verb is provided by the following clause, which is the direct speech of the LORD, which functions as the direct object of the English language.

The second clause runs from v.5b to v.5f. Note, however, in v.5b, the word אָרוּר, which, being a Qal, passive, masculine, singular verb, performs the function of what would be the predicate of the subject in English. That

is, the subject of this clause is composed of v.5c to v.5f, whose nucleus is the word הַגִּבֹּר (v.5c), composed (in v.5d, v.5e, v.5f) of *three dependent adjective clauses*,²¹ which would correspond in English to *restrictive adjective subordinate clauses*.²² The clause v.5d starts with the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר. The clause v.5e, in turn, is terminated by the relative particle וְ, which prefixed to the noun זָרְעוֹ, is called the retrospective pronoun. Finally, the clause v.5f is introduced by parataxis through the conjunction וְ.²³ This syntactic arrangement makes it possible for, in English, Jr 17:5 to be read as follows:

	Thus said the LORD:	
	<i>who trusts the human being,</i>	
	<i>who trusts in the strength of</i>	
THE MAN	<i>mortal flesh,</i>	IT’S CURSED.
	<i>who turns his heart away</i>	
	<i>from the LORD</i>	

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Within the scope of the last observations intended in this brief communication, there are also some semantic considerations about the expression *it’s cursed* (אָרוּר). According to Victor P. Hamilton,²⁴ this cursed person can mean prevented from enjoying blessings through his own fault. Thus, as Michael O’Connor asserts,²⁵ it is characteristic to note that Jeremias displaces terms whose semantic field evokes the thematic premises of the *narrative discourse* into the verbal structure.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the semantic load of the synonymous parallelism (v.5d, v.5e, v.5f) used to qualify the subject *man* (v.5c) who *it’s cursed* (v.5b), is contrasted in a parallelism with the simile extended in

21 WALTKE; O’CONNOR, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, p. 632-646.

22 EASTWOOD, John. *Oxford Guide to English Grammar*, p. 317-320. Similarly, as can also be seen in the grammar of the Portuguese language. Cf. SACCONI, *Nossa gramática completa Sacconi: teoria e prática*, p. 407.

23 BARTELMUS, *Einführung in das Biblische Hebräisch Mit einem Anhang Biblisches Aramäisch*, p. 144.

24 HAMILTON, אָרוּר, p. 75-76.

25 O’CONNOR, *Hebrew Verse Structure*, p. 8.

v.7 and v.8,²⁶ where the cause of the curse is contrasted with the fruits of the blessing achieved by the man who trusts in the LORD. That is to say, with the individual's heart as a point of contrast, curse or blessing are the result of choosing where to place trust. Either one trusts divinity or humanity.

The *cursed man* is the one who, in the face of danger, decides to trust in the resources coming from humanity itself, thus rejecting both the wisdom and the provision promised by the LORD to those who trust him.

²⁶ WATSON, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: a guide to its Techniques*, p. 260.

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