

# The Literary Form and the Message of John 8:31-36

ADAM KUBIŚ

Institute of Biblical Studies, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin  
address: Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: akubis@gmail.com

**SUMMARY:** The paper deals with the relationship between the literary form and the message of the pericope John 8:31-36 (along with its immediate literary context). Our examination of five different possible literary forms demonstrated that identifying the precise form bears directly on grasping the correct semantics and pragmatics of this Johannine passage. John 8:31-36 actually reflects the merging of at least two different literary forms: misunderstanding (also called riddle and test) and the covenantal offer of freedom. The ultimate meaning of the text, taken as a whole, should be seen as the *offer of freedom*. This, however, is *misunderstood* and eventually rejected by Jesus' interlocutors, who failed to recognize in Jesus God, the Redeemer and Liberator, and thus did not pass the *test* of being his true disciples.

**KEYWORDS:** Gospel of John, form criticism, literary form, literary genre, freedom, liberation, midrash, covenant, misunderstanding, riddle, test, forensic process

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** Ewangelia Jana, krytyka form, gatunek literacki, wolność, wyzwolenie, midrasz, przymierze, nieporozumienie, zagadka, test, proces sądowniczy

## I. Introduction

The only passage in the Gospel of John which speaks explicitly of both *freedom* (a static reality of being free expressed by the adjective ἐλεύθερος – *free*) and *liberation* (a dynamic reality of setting free conveyed by the verb ἐλευθερώω – *to set free*) is John 8:31-36. There, the means of acquiring freedom consists in remaining in the word of Jesus, which leads to knowing the truth, which ultimately sets one free (8:31-32). The truth indeed is identified in the Gospel as Jesus himself (cf. 14:6), therefore in John 8:36 it is said that it is the Son who will set free, and only the Son's action makes someone *really* (ὄντως) free (8:36).

The pericope John 8:31-36 has been the subject of many studies, but of these none deals solely with the literary form of this text and the relationship of its literary form (or forms) to the meaning conveyed by the text.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the two-fold aim of the following study is not only the presentation or mere classification of the literary form(s) identified in John 8:31-36, but – what is no doubt a more fundamental issue – the exposition of the role which those alleged genres play in advancing the meaning of this pericope. The inspiration for adopting such an approach with this study was a bold statement by Hirsch (1967, 67): “All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound.”<sup>2</sup> For purposes of our discussion, a literary genre is understood as a group of texts which, owing to certain criteria (on the linguistic-syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels), are recognized as sharing the same set of features.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, it is not implied that John 8:31-36 is necessarily a self-contained unit determined by a precise sort of literary genre or literary form, although one cannot exclude *a priori* such a possibility. By all means, this pericope is a part of both a larger literary composition, i.e. the gospel (which itself is already the main literary genre), and at the same time of another, smaller literary unit found in the immediate literary context

- 1 Among the monographs dedicated to this pericope, especially noteworthy are Tuñi Vancells 1973 and Manns 1976. See also la Potterie 1999, 789-866. The published articles which discuss the text of John 8:31-36, include Steck 1955, 439-445; Lategan 1968, 70-80; Schilson 1969, 25-56; Casabó Suqué 1972, 225-242; Atal 1974, 283-299; Lona 1974, 300-313; Sabugal 1974, 177-181; Hoang 1977, 550-565; Hoang 1978, 193-211; Lindars 1984, 271-286; la Potterie 1988, 185-200; Zevini 1991, 163-182; Mongillo 1995, 215-226; Marcheselli 2005, 83-103.
- 2 In a similar vein, Sparks (2007, 113) states: “according to most modern generic theories, all interpretation is based on acts of generic comparison, so that, in the end, there is no aspect of interpretation that cannot be subsumed under the rubric of ‘form criticism’.” See also Holladay – Walker (1996, 143-144), who highlight the importance of classifying biblical text according to its literary form thus: “First, the literary form of a text is often a clue to its meaning. For example, how we interpret Genesis 1–3 depends on whether it is read as a creation myth, allegory, or scientific history. The meaning we see in a text often derives from our prior judgment about its literary form. Second, the literary form is often a clue to its life setting. [...] Third, properly recognizing a literary form enables us to compare the text with similar literary forms in both biblical and nonbiblical writings. Such comparison often enables us to see things in a text we would otherwise miss.”
- 3 Wellek and Warren (1956, 221) state: “Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific meter of structure) and upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose – more crudely, subject and audience).” Aune (1987, 13) argued: “a *literary genre* may be defined as a group of texts that exhibit a coherent and recurring configuration of literary features involving form (including structure and style), content and function.” The above definitions are focused on classifying a literary work and as such are hotly contested in today’s postmodern climate. In the wake of the development of hermeneutic theory, scholars now recognize two further dimensions imbedded in the notion of genre, namely that genre (1) “is a part of the process of coming to understanding (epistemology)”, and (2) it “develops a literary world into which one enters (ontology).” After Osborne 2005, 252.

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(variously delimited) of the pericope. Before proceeding, it seems useful to apply greater methodological precision to the use of the terms *literary genre* and *literary form* in this paper. By the former, we mean a complex literary formulation of a complete work developed out of simpler units, e.g. gospel as the *literary genre* of the whole book. The latter we understand as a particular set of literary characteristics bound to one simple unit of the larger whole, e.g. the parable as one *literary form* within the larger whole called the gospel (cf. Pearson and Porter 1997, 134).

The paper deals with five proposals for classifying the literary form of John 8:31-36, including its immediate literary context, specifically midrash, the offer of covenant, misunderstanding, riddle, and the test as part of a forensic process.<sup>4</sup> In each case, the focus will be on revealing the importance of the precisely defined literary form in understanding the meaning of the pericope John 8:31-36.

## 2. Midrash

Frédéric Manns, in his doctoral dissertation from the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem discussed in 1973, elaborated a hypothesis that John 8:31-59 is a *Christian midrash* (1976, 180-198). Although his idea did not find any followers among later commentators of John's Gospel, Manns claims that it offers some merits in the exposition of this particular text. Concerning the definition of midrash, a highly debated issue, its essence might be distilled into the general concept of a commentary on a scriptural passage.<sup>5</sup> Following Gertner's methodology, which is useful for testing claims that a particular NT text is a midrash to an OT text,<sup>6</sup> Manns (1) pointed to Ps 118 as the commented-upon text behind John 8:31-59; (2) suggested a particular meaning for this Johannine pericope, based on its midrashic

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- 4 The various proposals regarding the existence of literary forms in the Fourth Gospel were usefully surveyed by Beutler 1985. Cf. also Attridge 2002; Sheridan 2010, and literature mentioned by them.
- 5 For precise definitions of the particular genre called *midrash* see Wright 1967; Le Déaut 1969, 395-413; Herr 2007, 182-185. Manns (1976, 177-178) refers to the opinion by Le Déaut (1969, 403), who states: "S'il est impossible de définir le Midrash, c'est qu'il fait partie de la vie juive où il a connu une immense popularité, de ce domaine de l'existential, qui se refuse à la conceptualisation, qu'il est d'abord la réponse à la question : 'Que veut dire l'Écriture pour la vie d'aujourd'hui ?'"
- 6 Gertner (1962, 269) listed three criteria: (1) "The basic scriptural text on which the midrashic interpretation has been placed." (2) "The particular notion and meaning of the text contained and established by that interpretation." (3) "[T]he special hermeneutical technique by which the interpretation has been achieved."

character; and finally (3) listed some of the midrashic techniques employed within the Johannine text. His identification of Psalm 118 as the OT source text was based upon the liturgical setting of John 8:31-59, which is determined to be the Feast of the Tabernacles, coupled with the use of this very psalm during the liturgical celebration of this feast, as testified to by early rabbinic sources. Also significant is the fact that the Judeo-Christian community (and presumably also the Johannine congregations) retained the custom of celebrating this feast, thus the Christian re-interpretation of Psalm 118 is a very likely scenario. Obviously, the text of John 8:31-59 does not follow the stylistic features of psalmic poetry, however, as Manns argued, midrash is not obliged to follow the literary genre of the source text.

The weak point of Manns' hypothesis is the lack of any significant direct, verbal links between Psalm 118 and John 8:31-59. He can only resort to a few, sometimes vague, thematic parallels, e.g., "day" (Psalm 118:24; John 8:56); "joy" (Psalm 118:24; John 8:56); "not dying" (Psalm 118:17; John 8:51-52); the persecuted just man: the Psalmist (Psalm 118:5.13) and Jesus (John 8:37.40.59); and the saving God (Psalm 118:5.7.13-14.21), corresponding to Jesus, who sets free (John 8:32.36). Manns (1976, 187-192) focuses especially on the theme of "God who gives light" (Psalm 118:27). In ancient Judaism the idea of the enlightenment pertains to acquiring knowledge of the Torah, the source of freedom. Its Johannine re-interpretation would point toward knowledge of the Truth, Jesus, who truly sets free. An ingenious methodological procedure adopted by Manns consists of pointing out a common theme of Abraham (and also the Feast of Tabernacles) found both in John 8:31-59, allegedly a *Christian midrash* to Psalm 118, and in the *rabbinic midrash* to Psalm 118 – but absent in the Hebrew and Greek texts of the psalm itself.

As for the rabbinic techniques employed in John 8:31-59 which are distinctive of midrash, Manns points to *petihah*, *tartey mashma'*, *mashal*, *kal va-homer*, and *gezerah shavah*. In the case of *petihah*, its actual occurrence in the Johannine text is highly questionable when one compares the use of *petihah* in the rabbinic midrashim and in the alleged Johannine midrash. *Petihah* is the combination of two scriptural passages (often with a third added) which commences a midrash or a synagogal sermon or homily.<sup>7</sup> It is a feature not attested, however, even in an allusive way, in John 8:31-59. The identification of *petihah* in John 8:31-59 can only be justified by the very broad definition of this literary form adopted by Manns (1976, 178):

7 Goldberg (1999a, 297) notes: "Die Petiḥa verbündet in der Regel zwei Schrifverse miteinander und verwendet häufig einen dritten für den Beweisschluß [*footnote*: Der dritte Schrifvers ist in den vorliegenden Texten oft ausgelassen, wenn der Beweisschluß offensichtlich ist, ist aber doch meist impliziert.]" For a detailed presentation of *petihah* see Heinemann 1971, 100-122.

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“généralement le Midrash commence par une ouverture que l’on appelle *Petihah* qui annonce le sujet.” Following this criterion, the subject of liberation, the focus of John 8:31-36, has little bearing on the subsequent section which is concerned with, among other things, Abrahamic and diabolic paternity, Jesus’ origin and his pre-existence. In the end, Manns states only that the introduction of the subject *can correspond to pēṭihah*.<sup>8</sup> The identification of another midrashic technique, namely *tartey mashma’*, is also questionable. This procedure consists of a play on a double sense of words with the same consonantal script. Manns’ cited example, the change from σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ (John 8:33.37) into τέκνα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ (John 8:39), even in the retroversion into Aramaic, Syriac or Hebrew (in the latter case producing זרע אברהם *versus* בני אברהם), hardly reflects any play on meanings based on the same consonantal root. As for the claim of three other techniques, namely *mashal*,<sup>9</sup> *kal va-ḥomer*,<sup>10</sup> and *gezerah shavah*,<sup>11</sup> occurring in John 8:31-59, these are

- 8 Manns (1976, 193) states: “annonce de sujet, bien qu’elle ne contienne pas de citation de l’Ecriture, pourrait correspondre à la *Petihah* des Midrashim”.
- 9 Its example is discerned in John 8:35. Some exegetes see here a *parable*. See Dodd 1965, 380; Dodd 1968, 30-40; Brown 1966, 355; Lindars 1984, 274. They even suggest that this *parable* was indeed the nucleus from which the whole pericope of John 8:31-36 was developed. Manns (1976, 77) contended that reference to the idea of a *parable* is not necessary, since the content of v. 35 can simply be classified as a *proverb*. He also (77, note 55) gives an example of a similar Arabic proverb *There is no greater joy than living in a house*. After Pax 1972, 325. As a matter of fact, under the classification *mashal* there is room for both *parable* and *proverb*.
- 10 This technique designates an argument proceeding from the minor premise (*kal*) to the major (*homer*): the devil was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44), so you are the sons of the devil because you want to kill me (8:37.40). The problem with the application of this principle to the Johannine text is that chronologically, in the flow of the narrative, the major premise (the statement about the Jews wanting kill Jesus) comes first, and only afterwards the minor premise (the devil as the originator of this killing). A more complex example of *kal va-ḥomer*, namely “If A, which lacks Y, has X, then B, which has Y, certainly has X”, was applied by Manns (1976, 193) as follows: “Si Abraham n’a pas fait cela, mais a obéi (sous-entendu); seul sera authentique fils d’Abraham celui qui fait les œuvres d’Abraham et obéit à la Parole de Jésus.” In fact, the Johannine juxtaposition of Abraham and the sons of Abraham fits better the simple pattern of the *kal va-ḥomer* principle, to wit “If A has X, then B certainly has X” – If Abraham obeyed God, then the sons of Abraham will certainly obey God. Although, even this reasoning is not explicitly present in the Johannine text. There is rather a negative argument: If someone is from God, then he/she hears the words of God; if someone is not from God, then he/she does not hear the words of God (John 8:47). And, the children of Abraham do the deeds of Abraham; you are not the children of Abraham and consequently you are not doing the deeds of Abraham (because you want to kill me, this Abraham did not do) (8:39-40).
- 11 The principle consists of the comparison of similar expressions. In the case of scriptural commentary, i.e. midrash, it should refer to the comparison of two scriptural texts. In the case of Manns’ analysis the only plausible comparison occurs between the phrase *Our father is Abraham* (John 8:39) and *You are of your father the devil* (John 8:44). In each case Manns referred to targumic traditions about Abraham (Genesis 15) and the devil (Genesis 3). In fact, Manns (1976, 194) states: “Jean n’applique pas ce principe de façon rigoureuse. Il se contente d’évoquer d’autres textes et cela dans la forme que ces textes ont pris soit dans l’aggadah soit

likewise not substantiated very convincingly. It goes without saying, however, that such rabbinic exegetical techniques would not necessarily indicate the midrashic character of our pericope. They can be accounted for simply by the common Jewish background of both John's Gospel and midrashic literature.

In summary, Manns exposition of John 8:31-59, as a Christian midrash on Psalm 118, is, for the most part, unconvincing. Referring to the very definition of midrash, Goldberg (1999b, 83, cf. Goldberg 1982, 1-46) argued:

Midrash never deals with what is in this world but exclusively with the meaning of words or sentences in Holy Scripture. It speaks of language, so its propositions are also meta-linguistic propositions approximately such as: Scripture says, and by this Scripture means. [...] It speaks of what Scripture means. From the point of view of form analysis, each Midrash can be described as realizing a functional form, and in such a way that sentences are always generated which can be described thus: 'The lemma X is (or the meaning is) Y' (with the addition: as long as certain exegetical operations are used).

Apparently, John 8:31-59 as a whole betrays no explicit signs of being an exposition of Psalm 118, or of any other scriptural passage. The references to Psalm 118 are so vague and general that one gains the impression that any number of other psalmic texts could provide a similar number of common themes and lexemes. Even if Manns (1976, 180) adopts a very broad definition of midrash and declares that "non seulement une citation implicite, mais aussi une allusion historique peuvent suffire à déceler un Midrash", the Johannine text in question does not seem to evoke any event from biblical history which could be the background of the whole section 8:31-59. While the idea of a Christian midrash based on Psalm 118 is ultimately unconvincing, the Christological re-lecture of the Hebrew Bible found in this section of John (with the central motif being a comparison of Abraham and Jesus) is undeniable.<sup>12</sup> Drawing attention to this fact in itself stands as a valuable contribution of Manns' study.

dans la tradition targumique." Assuming an Aramaic *Vorlage*, the principle of *gezerah shavah* might have occurred between the phrase *sons of freedom* (בני חורין) – the most probable Semitic counterpart of ἐλευθεροί in 8:36) and *sons of Abraham* (בני אברהם) – 8:39). Cf. Preiß 1947, 78-80. Although, again, those phrases do not evoke any precise scriptural texts.

- <sup>12</sup> Manns (1976, 195) states: "Le Midrash chrétien, s'il garde l'Écriture comme point de référence, opère cependant un retournement complet. C'est le Christ qui devient le centre du Midrash chrétien. Non seulement les Écritures sont interprétées en fonction de lui, mais c'est lui-même qui devient catégorie herméneutique: c'est lui qui interprète et donne le sens final au texte sacré. Toute la recherche est centrée sur lui et le texte de l'Écriture n'est qu'une préparation de sa Personne. Le sommet de ce Midrash est certainement la comparaison entre Abraham et Jésus. Le Patriarche n'existe qu'en vue de Jésus. Il s'est réjoui de voir son jour. On devine sous ce texte une invitation adressée par la communauté aux Juifs à relire l'Écriture pour y trouver une préparation au Christ."

### 3. The Offer of Covenant

Domingo Muñoz León (1988, 140-144), followed by Lorenzo Camarero María (1997, 290-295), specified the literary form of John 8:31-32 and 8:36 as a formula of an offer of liberation with the promise of covenant (“fórmula de oferta de liberación con la promesa de una alianza”). They draw such a conclusion from the parallels between the Johannine text and the septuagintal and targumic versions of Exodus 6:6-7 and 19:4-6. Let us look first at the parallel between John 8:31 and Exodus 19:5:

<b>John 8:31</b>	<p>a) ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ <i>If you abide in the word, this mine,</i></p> <p>b) μαθηταί μου ἔστε... <i>you are my disciples</i></p>
<b>Exod 19:5 (LXX)</b>	<p>a) ἐὰν ἀκοῇ ἀκούσητε τῆς ἐμῆς φωνῆς καὶ φυλάξητε τὴν διαθήκην μου <i>If you by paying attention listen to my voice and keep my covenant,</i></p> <p>b) ἔσεσθέ μοι λαὸς περιούσιος ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν... <i>you shall be for me a people special above all nations</i></p>
<b>(Tg Neof.)</b>	<p>a) <i>If you hearken to the voice of my Memra and observe my covenant,</i></p> <p>b) <i>you shall be to my name a beloved people, as a special possession from all the nations...</i></p>

In the literary form identified as a formula of an offer of liberation with the promise of covenant there are two essential elements: the condition and the promise. In the text of the Fourth Gospel there is (a) the condition: *If you shall abide in my word* and (b) the promise: *You will be my disciples... You will come to know the truth*. The similarity of the Johannine text to Exodus 19:5 is noticed in both the condition and the promise: (a) the conditions of *abiding in the word* (John) and *attentive listening to voice (of the Word)* (Exodus); and (b) the promises of *being my disciples* (John) and *being my special (chosen, beloved) people* (Exodus) (Cf. Muñoz 1988, 133, 140-142; Camarero 1997, 291).

A similar parallel occurs between John 8:32 and the covenant text of Exod 6:6-7:

<b>John 8:32</b>	γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς. <i>You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free</i>
<b>Exod 6:6-7 (LXX)</b>	<i>Go! Tell the sons of Israel, saying, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from the domination of the Egyptians, and I will deliver (ῥύσομαι) you from slavery (δουλείας), and I will redeem (λυτρώσομαι) you by a raised arm and great judgment. And I will take you for myself (ἐμαυτῷ), as my (ἐμοί) people, and I will be your God, and you shall know (γνώσεσθε) that I (am) the Lord, your God (ἐγὼ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν), who brought you out from the oppression of the Egyptians.</i>
<b>(Tg Neof.)</b>	<i>By an oath; say to the children of Israel: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out redeemed from beneath the yoke of the servitude of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from your toils and redeem you with a strong hand and with numerous judgments. And I will set you aside to my Name as a people of holy ones, and my Memra will be to you a redeemer God (ויהווי מימרי לבון לאלה פרוק) and you shall know that I am the Lord your God who redeemed and brought you out from beneath the yoke of the servitude of the Egyptians.</i>

Here the links between the two texts are not so evident and pertinent, although there is an emphasis in both on liberating (the verb ῥύομαι) / redeeming (the verb λυτρώω) and knowing (γινώσκω). Interestingly, the LXX underlines the *personal* character of taking into possession the one to whom the covenant is offered (see the use of the personal pronouns ἐμαυτῷ and ἐμοί), while Tg points out that the redemption / liberation will take place by means of *My Word* (מימרי). The idea of *being enslaved* is also a dominant theme for both Exodus 6:6-7 and John 8:33-35 (note the use of the lexemes δουλεία in Exod and δουλεύω / δοῦλος in John). If the parallels between John 8:31-32 and Exod 19:4-6; 6:6-7 are intentional, then Jesus is depicted as the divine liberator and the divine party in establishing the covenant. It follows that Jesus, paralleled with God himself, would be the fulfilment of the covenant.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Camarero (1997, 292-293) also draws attention to other parallel texts whose literary genre might likewise be defined as the formulae of covenant (*fórmulas de alianza*). In Deut 27:26 (πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ὃς οὐκ ἐμμενεῖ ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς λόγοις τοῦ νόμου τούτου – *any person who does not remain in all the words of this law*) and John 8:31 (ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ) one can find the same terms: ἐμμένω / μένω and λόγος. Cf. also 30:16 (ἐὰν εἰσακουσῆς τὰς ἐντολάς κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου ἃς ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι σοι σήμερον ἀγαπᾶν κύριον τὸν θεόν σου – *if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, to love the Lord your God...*). The idea of keeping the commandments (ἐντολή and λόγος are interchangeable in John's Gospel) and thereby loving God is also present in the Fourth Gospel, although its application is Christological (see 14:15 – Ἐὰν ἀγαπᾶτέ με, τὰς ἐντολάς τὰς ἐμὰς τηρήσετε – *If you love me [=Jesus], you will keep my commandments*). The idea of keeping the word is applied to Jesus himself: οἶδα αὐτὸν καὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ τηρῶ – *[I] know him*



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In order to reveal the covenantal character of John 8:31-36, Camarero (1997, 293) points to another set of texts: Jer 24:7 MT (*And I will give them a heart (לב) to know me, for I am the YHWH, and they shall be my people*),<sup>14</sup> LXX (καὶ δώσω αὐτοῖς καρδίαν τοῦ εἰδέναι αὐτοὺς ἐμὲ ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι κύριος καὶ ἔσονται μοι εἰς λαόν – *and I will give them a heart that they may know me, that I am the Lord, and they shall become a people to me*) and 1 John 5:20 (δέδωκεν ἡμῖν διάνοιαν ἵνα γινώσκωμεν τὸν ἀληθινόν – *he [=the Son of God] has given us understanding to know him who is true*). In the text of 1 John ἀληθινός (*the one who is true*) corresponds with *I am the YHWH* found in Jeremiah; consequently its basic meaning might be *the one who truly exists*, the equivalent of the phrase *I am* (ἐγὼ εἰμι) in Deutero-Isaiah and the Fourth Gospel. In this way, the substantive ἀλήθεια in John 8:32 might be an allusion to the idea of *God who truly exists*, and consequently to the expression *I am the Lord* from the phrase *you shall know that I am the Lord* (Exod 6:7), as well as to the title *I am* (ἐγὼ εἰμι) in John 8:24.28. The whole of John 8:31-32 set in parallel with the covenantal texts from Exod 6 and 19 might appear as follows:

John 8:31-32	Exod 19:5-6; 6:7
<i>If you abide in my word, you will be my disciples</i>	<i>You listen to my voice (of my Memra-Word) you shall be a chosen (beloved) people</i>
<i>you will know the Truth (the One who is true)</i>	<i>you will know that I (am) the Lord, your God</i>
<i>And the Truth (the One who is true) will set you free</i>	<i>And my Memra-Word will be to you a redeemer God</i>

The focal point is the final targumic affirmation that *my word will be the redeemer (liberator) God*.<sup>15</sup> Jesus indeed is the Word (cf. John 1:1.14),

(= God Father) *and I keep his word* - 8:55). This sentence reflects Deut 29:8 (cf. 28:69) where an important expression *words of the covenant* occurs: φυλάξεσθε ποιεῖν πάντα τοὺς λόγους τῆς διαθήκης ταύτης – *you shall be watchful to perform all the words of this covenant* (29:8).

<sup>14</sup> See also Jer 31:33 MT.

<sup>15</sup> Muñoz (1988, 143) comments: “esta fórmula expresa un dato central de la teología targúmica. Este título ha sido aplicado a Jesús.” This targumic background of John 8:31-36 was also noted by Manns (1976, 72-73) who drew attention to *Tg. Neof.* Exod 14:30 and 29:45 where the *liberation* from Egypt is accomplished by means of the *Word of God*: *On that day the Memra of the Lord redeemed and delivered Israel from the hands of the Egyptians* (14:30); *I will make my Shekinah dwell in the midst of the children of Israel, and my Memra will be for them a redeeming God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt so that the Glory of my Shekinah might dwell among them* (29:45-46). Camarero (1997, 294) also pointed to *Tg Neof.* Gen 49:18 (*to the redemption of him does my soul look that you have said to bring your people, the house of Israel. To you, to your redemption, do I look, O Lord*); Exod 11:4 (*In the middle of the night my Memra will*

which is *God*, the redeemer and liberator. Consequently, he is the *Son of God* who sets free (John 8:36).<sup>16</sup> Camarero (1997, 294-295) also noted that the introduction of the theme Jesus-liberator dovetails with the previous divine identification of Jesus by means of the title ἐγώ εἰμι (8:24.28). Faith in Jesus, as the true God (8:30), is the condition for entering into the covenant and experiencing liberation.

#### 4. Misunderstanding

Even a very superficial reading of John 8:31-36 will clearly discern some tension between the two sides in the dialogue: Jesus and the Jews. Jesus offers his interlocutors freedom, while they claim that they are already free and do not need any further liberation. In fact, Jesus assumed that the Jews do not possess *real* (ὄντως – 8:36) freedom. This “tension” is often called a *misunderstanding*. In fact, misunderstanding is currently regarded by many Johannine scholars as a distinctive feature of the Gospel of John, since at many points throughout its narrative, secondary characters misunderstand Jesus. Whether one describes the Johannine misunderstandings as a “motif”, “technique”, “form”, “genre”, or “device” is probably of little consequence, as long as their frequency, variability, and effects are recognized as a distinctive feature of a given text.<sup>17</sup>

Already John Henry Bernard (1928, cxi-cxii) drew attention to a salient feature of the Johannine text called “schematism.” An intrinsic part of this literary feature was isolated misunderstanding. Bernard (1928, cxi) explains the Johannine “schematism” in the following way: “A saying of deep import is uttered by Jesus; His hearers misunderstand it, after a fashion that seems stupid; and then He repeats the saying in a slightly different form before He explains it and draws out its lesson.” Bernard (1928, cxii) enumerated six instances of such a pattern in John 3–4 and 6, and explicitly denied its occurrence in the following chapters: “Cc. 5, 7–12 are full of the discourses

*be revealed in the midst of Egypt*); 12:42 (at the appointed time the Memra will lead the flock to its final redemption being set between Moses and the king Messiah) and Deut 32:39 (*Tg. Neof. – See now that I, I in my Memra, am he, and there is no other god beside me; Tg. Ps.-J. – When the Memra of the Lord shall reveal itself to redeem his people, he will say to all the nation: “See, now, that I am the one who is, was, and I am the one who shall be in the future, and there is no other god besides me; I by my Memra put to death and bring back to life.* The translations after McNamara 1992; McNamara 1997; Clarke 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Jesus is the Truth and the Liberator-Redeemer because he is the envoy of God, the True One and the Redeemer. As Muñoz (1988, 133) noted: “concerán que El es el enviado del Padre (la verdad), que es el Dios Redentor.”

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Leroy 1968b, 196-207; Culpepper 1983, 55; Beutler 1985, 2555-2556.

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of Jesus, but Jn. does not report them on the lines of those which have been cited, viz. Saying of Jesus; Misunderstanding of it; Saying repeated, expanded, and explained.” Actually, John 8:31-36 follows this scheme perfectly; a fact regrettably overlooked by Bernard.<sup>18</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann (1971, 135, n. 1) tried to pinpoint a common factor inherent to all Johannine misunderstandings, arguing that they arise from “concepts and statements, which at first sight refer to earthly matters, but properly refer to divine matters. The misunderstanding comes when someone sees the right meaning of the word but mistakenly imagines that its meaning is exhausted by reference to earthly matters.” In the case of John 8:31-36, both the Jews and Jesus are speaking of *spiritual* freedom,<sup>19</sup> yet the way of attaining it differs: the Jews speak of their *physical* descent from Abraham (the spiritual freedom is transferred by national status and religious affiliation), whereas Jesus points toward *spiritual* union with God’s family. Apparently, John 8:31-36 could fit Bultmann’s definition of a Johannine misunderstanding, although its narrow criterion (the confusion of the heavenly and earthly) excludes some other passages which fit the pattern in other respects.<sup>20</sup>

Herbert Leroy (1968a), devoting a major study to the issue, criticized Bultmann’s definition and contended – apparently trying to inject more precision into the discussion – that the Johannine misunderstandings should be seen as *concealed riddles*.<sup>21</sup> The Johannine community used a peculiar vocabulary (“Sondersprache”), he contends, understandable only to the members of this

- 18 Nevertheless, the first scholar who explicitly drew attention to misunderstanding as the characteristic feature of the Johannine style was Windisch 1923, 199. Later, Percy (1939, 5) observed that “der durch beständige Mißverständnisse der Zuhörer über die Aussagen des Lehrers bewirkte Dialog.” Percy (1939) traced parallels to this feature in the corpus of the Hermetic literature.
- 19 It is rather obvious that the Jews cannot be thinking about political or social freedom. One can think of the historical impact of Egyptian slavery, Assyrian occupation, the Exile in Babylonia, Persian, Greek (Alexander the Great) and Syrian (Seleucid) domination, and finally Roman conquest. In fact, the last of these the people still endured (cf. John 19:15 - οὐκ ἔχομεν βασιλέα εἰ μὴ Καίσαρα). If one wishes to see the semantics of political liberation in the response of the Jews, then one should find it also in the proposal of Jesus (verses 31b-32), however Jesus apparently does not imply here any *political* or *social* reality. Surprisingly, Brown (1966, 355) sustains the view that the Jews speak of political liberation: “The Jews’ seem to misunderstand Jesus’ words about freedom and take them in a political sense. Even on this level, however, their boast is ill founded, for Egypt, Babylonia, and Rome enslaved them. Perhaps they mean that, being the privileged heirs to the promise to Abraham, they cannot be truly enslaved, although occasionally God has allowed them to be chastised through temporary subjection”. Also Bauer 1933, 124.
- 20 To give an example, Bultmann (1971, 399, note 6) explicitly excludes John 11:11-13 as a misunderstanding, arguing that its present form is defined not by the literary form of misunderstanding but rather by the source which lies behind this text. Actually, the form of this passage perfectly fits the pattern of misunderstanding, but it does not follow Bultmann’s narrow criterion concerning the content, namely the confusion of the heavenly and earthly. Cf. Culpepper 1983, 153.
- 21 Leroy 1968a, 6-7. The summary of his proposal is found in Leroy 1968b, 196-207.

community (and, at the same time, to the first readers of the Fourth Gospel) and which reflected a twofold meaning (“*einem doppeldeutigen Begriff*”). That is, the device of “misunderstanding” is part of this Johannine “*Sondersprache*” and stems from the style of preaching and catechetical teaching of that community. As such, it is then impenetrable to outsiders, particularly those the Fourth Gospel calls “the Jews” (cf. Leroy 1968a, 46, 157-160, 183-193).

Herbert Leroy was in turn criticized by François Vouga (1977, 32-33, 36), Donald A. Carson (1982, 59-91) and Alan R. Culpepper (1983, 153-155), who blamed him for overly rigid criteria of literary form which caused him to exclude other important passages from his analysis (e.g., 11:11-15.23-26; 12:32-34; 13.1-11.27-29). Vouga opted for a broader definition of misunderstandings, arguing that their use is integrated into the wider use of irony in John’s Gospel and as such they are intrinsic elements of the kerygma.<sup>22</sup> The main impact of Carson’s study lies in tracing misunderstandings not to the Johannine community, but to Jesus himself. Culpepper (1983, 152, 155-160, 161-162) argues that all Johannine misunderstandings follow the same pattern: (1) Jesus makes a statement which is ambiguous, metaphorical, or contains a double-entendre; (2) his dialogue partner responds either in terms of the literal meaning of Jesus’ statement or by a question or protest which shows that he or she has missed the higher meaning of Jesus’ words; (3) in most instances an explanation is then offered by Jesus, while in others (less frequently) the narrator comments or the conversation moves on with the implicit assumption that the reader can resolve the misunderstanding.<sup>23</sup>

22 Vouga (1977, 36) states: “On comprend maintenant que les malentendus johanniques ne soient ni des énigmes pour la pédagogie catéchétique (Leroy), ni seulement des expressions double sens que l’interlocuteur comprend ou mécomprend selon qu’il sait ou non qui est Jésus (Bultmann, Cullmann). Ils s’intègrent dans toute l’ironie johannique ; or celle-ci est *constitutive* du kérygme de l’évangile dans la mesure où elle est un procédé rhétorique *en lui-même signifiant théologiquement*”. Similarly, Brown (2003, 289) points to a theological reason which would explain the use of the Johannine misunderstandings: “one must recognize that Jesus belongs to another world above (17:16; 3:31) and has come below as a stranger. When he wishes to speak of the heavenly world of his origin, he has only the language of this world to use. [...] [W] hether John narrates the misunderstanding of outsiders or the nonunderstanding of disciples, readers of the Gospel can find themselves confused by Jesus. That may well be intentional on the part of the evangelist, for Jesus always remains the stranger from above”. In fact, the theme that appears most frequently in the misunderstandings is Jesus’ own death, resurrection and glorification (eight occurrences: 2:19-21; 6:51-53; 7:33-36; 8:21-22; 12:32-34; 13:36-38; 14:4-6; 16:16-19).

23 Culpepper refers to the following eighteen passages, with the reservation that several others contain variations of this pattern and may be considered as related passages: 2:19-21; 3:3-5; 4:10-15; 4:31-34; 6:32-35; 6:51-53; 7:33-36; 8:21-22; 8:31-35; 8:51-53; 8:56-58; 11:11-15; 11:23-25; 12:32-34; 13:36-38; 14:4-6; 14:7-9; 16:16-19. These same passages are taken into account by Rahner 1999, 212. Leroy (1968a, 1, 49-156, 158-160) noted only twelve instances, all in John 2-8 (cf. 2:19-22; 3:3-5; 4:10-15; 4:31-34; 6:32-35; 6:41ff; 6:51-53; 7:33-36; 8:21-22; 8:31-33; 8:51-53;

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Referring to the goal of the Johannine misunderstandings, it is generally held that they provide an opportunity to disclose the meaning of Jesus' words and to further develop significant themes. In fact, Painter (1979, 82) speaks of their "pedagogical purpose in the structure of the Gospel." Culpepper (1983, 152) reaches a similar conclusion but expresses it in terms of narrative art: "their effect on the reader is greater than if the meaning had merely been stated plainly from the beginning." By means of misunderstanding, the author of the Gospel can easily remove any doubt or misperception about key points in his theological vision.

Culpepper (1983, 162-163, 164) points to two other functions of misunderstandings. In his opinion, their most obvious function is to enforce a marked distinction between *insiders* and *outsiders*, between those who understand Jesus and those who do not. From this point of view, the misunderstandings sharpen the Gospel's characterizations (e.g., "the Jews" represent complete lack of understanding of Jesus from the Johannine viewpoint – cf. chapters 7 and 8). Moreover, explanation of the misunderstandings draws the reader further into the circle of *insiders* (believers and the children of God). The reader feels a judgmental distance between himself, as an *insider* who understands the elusive implication of Jesus' revelatory discourses, and those who have rejected Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

The second function of the Johannine misunderstandings pointed out by Culpepper is teaching readers *how* to read the gospel. Culpepper (1983, 165) deems it the most significant function and explains it in the following way: "The misunderstandings call attention to the gospel's metaphors, double-entendres and plurisignations. They also guide the reader by interpreting some of these and ruling out the literal, material, worldly, or general meanings of such references. Readers are therefore oriented to the level on which the gospel's language is to be understood and warned that failure to understand identifies them with the characterization of the Jews and the others who cannot interpret the gospel's language correctly" (cf. also Rahner 1999, 216-218).

8:56-58). Vouga (1977, 32) expanded the list of *misunderstandings* to fifteen and grouped them according to the dialogue partners: *the Jews* (2:19-22; 3:3-5; 7:33-36; 8:21-22; 8:31-36; 8:56-58); *the crowd* (6:32-35; 12:28-29); *the disciples* (4:31-34; 11:15-16; 13:36-38; 14:4-6; 14:8-9); *Martha* (11:23-25); and *Mary* (20:15-16). Neyrey (1987, 519) gives the same number of instances, i.e. fifteen, however differently placed (cf.: 3:3-5; 4:10-12; 4:32-38; 6:41-47; 8:32-37; 8:38-40; 8:41a-47; 8:51-55; 8:56-58; 11:11-15; 11:23-25ff; 12:27-30; 13:27-31ff; 14:4-7; 16:25-33). As we see, most of chapter 8 in John's Gospel is regarded as one long misunderstanding.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, however, one should be very careful not to go too far in characterizing the reader as an *insider*, i.e. a *believer*. See Carson (1982, 77-78), who states: 'Jesus' audiences *within the gospel itself* may fail to grasp his meanings, *but the readers will not, even if they do not become Christians*. The 'special meaning' requires no profound or spiritual intuition, but lies on the surface of John's text. [...] But understanding that 'special meaning' does not [...] make a person a Christian. If the evangelist thinks it does [...] he is foolish.'

Applying the pattern of misunderstanding described by Culpepper to John 8:31-36 one reads:

- (1) Mysterious declaration of Jesus (8:31-32)  
*The truth will set you free*
- (2) Incomprehension of the Jews (8:33)  
*We are Abraham's descendant*  
*We have never been enslaved to anyone*  
*How can you say: "You will be free?"*
- (3) Jesus' twofold clearer declaration (8:34-36)  
*Everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin*  
*If the Son sets you free, you will be really free*

The misunderstanding, then, turns on the meaning of being free. The Jews took it in an offensive sense, as suggesting their imperfect spiritual freedom. They thus respond: *We are Abraham's seed and have never been enslaved to anyone*, affirming that they belong to Abraham's offspring, which grants them inner, spiritual freedom. Jesus' answer points out the source of their slavery, i.e. *sin*, and once again the source of true freedom, i.e. *the Son*. In fact, in this case the reason behind the misunderstanding is Christological, namely the true identity of Jesus as the liberator-redeemer. Jesus' interlocutors are unable to understand the real meaning of Jesus' promise because they do not possess the correct understanding of his identity. It calls into question their alleged status as his believers (*the Jews who had believed him* – 8:31).<sup>25</sup> From the viewpoint of narratology, as Culpepper (1983, 157) rightly observes, "The resolution of this misunderstanding is left for the reader to work out on the basis of clues provided elsewhere in the gospel." These clues should be identified as the typically Johannine meaning of certain terms: *remaining*, *word*, *knowing*, *truth*, "*to do the sin*", *house*, and *the Son*. The reader at once perceives two levels of meaning in the dialogue, and quickly identifies himself as one who rightly understands Jesus' promise reserved for the *insiders*.

## 5. Riddle

Tom Thatcher (2000; cf. 2001, 263-277) presented a new thorough, systematic study of the Johannine misunderstandings as *riddles*. As we have already noted, this is the analytical perspective adopted previously in the works by Herbert Leroy. The novelty of Thatcher's approach lies in his giving

<sup>25</sup> On this issue see Swetnam 1980, 106-109; Segalla 1981, 387-389; Wróbel 2004, 117-126; Hunn 2004, 387-399.

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due importance to the findings of folklore research. Indeed, folklore studies deem riddle to be an important element (“code”) of the oral form of expression used by members of a particular group (here the Johannine Christians). Such an exclusive code could only be misunderstood by the outsiders.

By riddle, Thatcher basically understands any statement that is *intentionally ambiguous* (it can reasonably refer to more than one thing at once and the listener cannot determine which is correct) and that *challenges the audience* to resolve its ambiguity (the riddle must *seek an answer*). Moreover, he takes the stance that riddles can be answered only by those who possess *special group knowledge* (information) and *a particular type of logic*, which allows them to recognize that statements are intentionally ambiguous and that an answer is expected (cf. Thatcher 2001, 264-267).

For riddles embedded in narratives, such as we encounter in the Fourth Gospel, Thatcher establishes four criteria for identifying which sayings are intentionally ambiguous: (1) *The narrator* may directly inform the audience that a particular character is using language which could be understood in more than one way; cf. John 2:19-21; 10:6. (2) *A character* may introduce discourse with the type of framing signal one might expect with a riddle; cf. 3:3.5; 4:7.10.32; 6:32 etc. (3) “*The characters* in the story *to whom a statement is made* may respond in a way which indicates that the statement is ambiguous”; cf. 7:33-36. (4) “Some statements are ambiguous because they seem to require answers that the listener would consider impossible [...] Such riddles ask the audience to go beyond the bounds of normal logic”; cf. 6:51; 7:23.<sup>26</sup>

Applying these four criteria to the text of the Fourth Gospel, Thatcher identifies 38 riddles, while making it clear that his list may not be exhaustive. Two-thirds of Jesus’ riddles appear within major dialogues: 2:16-19 (twice), 3:1-15 (twice), 4:7-15 (twice), 6:26-52 (twice), 13:10–16:25 (six riddles) and, what is for us most interesting, in 8:21-59 (eight riddles). Such a distribution suggests that the Johannine discourses contain many sayings that may be identified as belonging to this widely used oral form, the riddle. Thatcher (2001, 272) argues that the evangelist intended to portray the dialogues as “*riddling sessions*” in which he notes a consistent, underlying narrative pattern: “Each time Jesus poses a riddle the person to whom he is speaking becomes confused. Jesus then provides his own often elaborate answer. The answer may introduce another riddle, which again confuses the audience, and which Jesus again answers.” This pattern applied to the text of John 8:12-58 (the structure and translation by Thatcher) appears as follows:

<sup>26</sup> All quotes after Thatcher 2001, 267-268.

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**Riddle 1:** *I witness on behalf of myself and the father who sent me witnesses (8:18).*

**Confusion:** *Where is your father? (8:19).*

**Answer:** *You know neither me nor my father... (8:19).*

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**Riddle 2:** *Where I am going you cannot come (8:21).*

**Confusion:** *He will not kill himself, will he? (8:22).*

**Answer:** *You are from below, but I am from above. You are from this world, but I am not from this world... (8:23).*

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**Riddle 3:** *Unless you believe that I Am, you will die in your sins (8:24).*

**Confusion:** *Who are you? (8:25).*

**No Answer:** *What have I said from the first? (8:25-26).*

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**Riddle 4:** *What I heard from the one who sent me I speak in the world (8:26).*

**Confusion:** *Narrator – They did not realize that he was speaking to them about the Father (8:27).*

**Answer:** *When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am... The one who sent me is with me. He will not leave me alone, because I always do what pleases him (8:28-29).*

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**Riddle 5:** *If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and [then] you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (8:31-32).*

**Confusion:** *We are Abraham's seed and have never been enslaved to anyone (8:33).*

**Answer:** *Everyone who does sin is a slave of sin... Should anyone be set free by the son, they are truly free. I know you are Abraham's seed, but rather you seek to kill me... (8:34-37).*

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**Riddle 6:** *I speak what I have seen with the father, and you also should do what you heard with your father (8:38.41).*

**Confusion:** *Our father is Abraham... We were not born of fornication. We have one father, God (8:39.41).*

**Answer:** *If you are children of Abraham, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill me, a man who has spoken the truth to you which he heard from God. This Abraham did not do... If God were your father, you would love me... You are of your father the devil (8:39-40.42-47).*

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**Riddle 7:** *Should anyone keep my word, they will not see death unto eternity (8:51).*

**Confusion:** *Abraham died, and the prophets, and now you say, 'Should anyone keep my word, they will not taste death unto eternity?' You are not greater than our father Abraham who died, are you?... What do you make yourself? (8:52-53).*

**Answer:** *Should I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my father who glorifies me, whom you say is your God... I know him and keep his word (8:54-55).*

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<b>Riddle 8:</b>	<i>Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad (8:56).</i>
<b>Confusion:</b>	<i>You are not fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham? (8:57).</i>
<b>Answer:</b>	<i>Before Abraham was, I am (8:58).</i>

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The merit of Thatcher's approach lies in showing an overall structural or rhetorical unity to the entire discourse in John 8. One might be tempted to argue that this whole section is the product of a complex redactional process which lent it a structural unity through the introduction of the riddle "technique" or "genre." Our pericope creates a fifth link in the carefully elaborated chain of eight riddles, and all the basic elements of the defined pattern are found in it: (1) Jesus' *riddle* – (2) *confusion* of audience – (3) Jesus' *answer*.

According to Thatcher, two criteria apply to the passage John 8:31-36 which make it clear that a riddle is intended here. First, Jesus himself makes his statement about the truth that sets free in the wider context of a discourse where some ambiguity has already appeared. Therefore, in this case also, an intentional ambiguity could be expected. Second, the audience responded (8:33) in a way which showed that Jesus' interlocutors did not understand his statement in the way intended by him. The answer of the Jews clearly points out the ambiguity of Jesus' pronouncement.

Looking at the list of riddles prepared by Thatcher, one notes that the most frequent "riddler" (the person who proposes the riddle) is Jesus (35 cases out of 38) and the most frequent "riddlee" (the immediate audience of the riddle, the character who is challenged to answer it) is the Jews (15 times). This demonstrates that the case of John 8:31-36 fits very well into the global use of riddle within the Fourth Gospel.

## 6. A Test in a Forensic Process

Jerome H. Neyrey (1987, 509-541; reprint 2009, 227-251) has thoroughly elaborated the text of John 8:21-59 in terms of a *forensic process*. In his opinion, this text contains all of the formal elements of a typical Jewish lawsuit, to wit a judge, plaintiffs, a norm of judgment or law, testimony from witnesses, a judge's *cognitio* and forensic proof.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the elements

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<sup>27</sup> Although the elements are present, this should not be taken to mean that this passage follows precisely the typical form of a report of legal proceedings. See Motyer 1997, 144-124. Stibbe (1996, 99-102) skilfully analysed the section 8:12-59 as an example of Aristotle's judicial rhetoric (the legal oratory of the law court). As the great ancient philosopher stated, "Forensic

of forensic procedure – situations where testimony is scrutinized, where charges are made and where Jesus acts as judge – are likewise evident in other parts of the Fourth Gospel (cf. 3:1-21; 5:16-46; 6:24-66; 7:32-53; 8:12-20; 9:13-41; 10:19-39; 11:45-53).<sup>28</sup> This is an important perspective, as it allows us to speak about *forensic process* as a distinctive literary genre (“motif” or “device”) in this Gospel. Moreover, Jesus’ judgment in 8:21-59 deserves to be seen in connection with the larger pattern of judgment of ὁ κόσμος which is developed throughout John’s Gospel (cf. 1:10; 7:7; 14:17; 15:18-19; 17:14.25; another perspective is found in 3:17; 17:21-23; perhaps also in 12:19).<sup>29</sup>

Concentrating on chapter 8, following the findings of Neyrey and Lincoln, three separate *forensic processes* can be differentiated: (1) In 8:12-20 Jesus, who states that he does not judge (8:15 - ἐγὼ οὐ κρίνω οὐδένα), is the plaintiff, and the assembled Jews are his judges. This section fits very well the same forensic scheme found in ch. 7.<sup>30</sup> (2) The next section 8:21-30 sets the stage for a new forensic process which is played out in 8:31-58. A shift in forensic roles occurs here: Jesus, who was the plaintiff, becomes the judge (8:26 - πολλὰ ἔχω περὶ ὑμῶν λαλεῖν καὶ κρίνειν), and the role of the assembled Jews is also reversed: instead of the judges they become plaintiffs.<sup>31</sup> (3) The

speaking either attacks or defends somebody” (Aristotle, *Rhetorica* 1.2.10-11). This is clearly happening in our section, where Jesus is both defending himself and attacking his accusers.

<sup>28</sup> The most extensive study on the topic in question is Lincoln 2000. Regarding John 5:16-46; 6:31-59; 8:13-59 and 10:22-39 see von Wahlde 1981, 385-404; 1984, 575-584. On the subject of *witness* in the Fourth Gospel, see Beutler 1972.

<sup>29</sup> At present, commentators underline that in John 8:12-59 there are many intertextual resonances with Deutero-Isaiah’s trial scenes, whose function is to answer the question ‘Who is the true God?’ – obviously very close to the central Johannine motif of Jesus’ identity seen in this section (cf. Stibbe 1996, 98-99). Lincoln (2000, 91), with reference to John 8:31-36, states: “As scriptural background, Isaiah is again not remote from this discussion. The message of its trial scenes and their surrounding context comes to those in exile, those in Babylonian captivity, and Yahweh’s self-announcement as ‘I am’ also announces Yahweh as Israel’s sole Savior and Redeemer (e.g., Isa 41:14; 43:14; 44:22-24; 47:4; 48:17.20; 52:3; 59:20). The notion of redemption includes liberation from slavery and oppression. Yahweh recalls the people to their Abrahamic descent (cf. 41:8; 51:2) and promises to free and restore them (cf. 45:13; 49:6.25; 51:11.14; 61:1-4). What is required of them is an acknowledgment of their condition of sinful rebellion, which has led to their external condition of slavery (cf. 42:24; 50:1; 43:4-6; 55:6.7; 59:1-16.20). The motifs are replayed here as Jesus, after revealing himself in terms of ‘I am’ and as the one who delivers Israel from death in its sins, now presses for an acknowledgment by these particular Jews that they are indeed in a sinful condition and in need of his liberation.”

<sup>30</sup> (1) Legal Claim (8:12 → 7:37.38); (2) Basis for Testimony: First-Hand Knowledge (8:14 → 7:17); (3) Demand for Impartial Judgment (8:15 → 7:24); (4) Acceptable Testimony: Two Witnesses (8:16-18 → 7:26-27); (5) Authorized Testimony: Agent Sent From God (8:16 → 7:18); (6) Setting of the Forensic Dispute (8:20ab → 7.14.30a).

<sup>31</sup> Stibbe (1996, 101) observes: “The irony of the chapter is the fact that Jesus himself becomes the prosecutor. Having begun a process of questioning and prosecuting Jesus, [...] [the Jews] find themselves almost imperceptibly taking on the role of defendants. The old irony of the judged becoming the judge is played out here”.

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last section *8:31-59* (as well as the second section, above) uses the literary pattern *statement – misunderstanding – explanation* as the official criterion for testing the truth of the plaintiff's claims of innocence. Neyrey (1987, 519) identifies five such sequences in this section and calls them the *tests*.<sup>32</sup>

Tests	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
Statement	8:32	8:38	8:41a	8:51	8:56
Misunderstanding	8:33	8:39a	8:41b	8:52-53	8:56
Explanation	8:34-37	8:39b-40	8:42-47	8:54-55	8:58

The *charge/crime* is identified as the refusal to believe that Jesus is “I AM” (ἐγώ εἰμι – 8:24.28; cf. also 8:58). The threat of dying in sin (of unbelief) is the *sentence* of this process (ἐάν γὰρ μὴ πιστεύσητε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ἀποθανεῖσθε ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ὑμῶν – 8:24). The judge's (i.e., Jesus') *cognitio* consists of discerning whether the Jews are in fact telling the truth that they are authentic believers (8:30.31). Neyrey (1987, 518) explains:

The audience of Jesus pleads ‘not guilty’ to the charges, for as 8:30 indicates, ‘As he spoke, many believed in him’. But this is just the issue that must be investigated, inasmuch as it belongs to plaintiffs to plead innocent. The charge still stands; the testimony of the plaintiff [Jews] must be tested. The trial, then, has just begun: are these plaintiffs telling the truth that they are Jesus’ disciples?

In the course of the larger section 8:31-59, Jesus discovers that the plaintiffs are not truly his disciples and believers. The clinching demonstration comes when they take up stones to throw at him in response to his revelation that he is ἐγώ εἰμι (cf. a final test in 8:58-59). Jesus’ interlocutors have demonstrated beyond any shadow of doubt that they do not in fact believe in Jesus as ἐγώ εἰμι, and so they stand condemned to die ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ὑμῶν (8:24; cf. 8:51 – ἐάν τις τὸν ἔμὸν λόγον τηρήσῃ, θάνατον οὐ μὴ θεωρήσῃ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα).

It is worth noting that the Jews themselves bear testimony against themselves. In forensic proceedings this is considered the strongest possible testimony in a trial, namely to have unwilling witnesses testifying against themselves. Their testimony is elicited thanks to the technique of misunderstanding.

Let us see how this works in the case of our pericope, looking at the first test of the veracity of Jesus’ plaintiffs. In the opinion of Neyrey (1987, 519-520,

<sup>32</sup> Neyrey’s “structure” is a bit different from Thatcher’s (riddle 6 = test 3 & 4).

536), in 8:31 Jesus abruptly establishes the first test to see whether the claim that *they believed in him* (πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν – 8:30) is true. Jesus states that they are truly (ἀληθῶς) his disciples if they remain in his word, that is, if they *understand* Jesus' words correctly (i.e., if they perceive the "spiritual" meaning of these words) and *agree* with them. Their reaction to Jesus' words, then, will determine whether their protestations of innocence in 8:30 are true. In fact, Jesus' interlocutors named themselves Abraham's seed, believing that they do not need Jesus' freedom and consequently do not need his word, i.e. his teaching (note the conditional clause which connects the reality of abiding in Jesus' word with being set free). In this way they have evidently failed this test. They do not want to remain in Jesus' word and consequently they do not believe him and cannot truly be his disciples. Jesus strongly states this, saying: ὁ λόγος ὁ ἐμὸς οὐ χωρεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν (8:37). Belonging to Abraham is more important to them than belonging to Jesus. The first goal of the trial is accomplished: the plaintiffs are liars when they say that they believe in Jesus.

The next four tests develop the first *cognitio*, but by evoking new themes: true offspring of Abraham, true fatherhood and Jesus' identity. The negative, oppositional stance of the plaintiffs becomes clear when they (1) misunderstand Jesus constantly, (2) dispute his assertions, and (3) make false claims. The whole forensic process in 8:31-58 serves, then, according to Neyrey (1987, 537-538), to draw firm boundary lines between true and false disciples, between authentic offspring of Abraham (their father is God) and bastard descendants (their father is the Devil), and between God's covenant community (of free sons) and members of Satan's household (slaves).

## 7. Conclusion

This study has discussed five suggestions for classifying John 8:31-36 and its immediate literary context in terms of a precise literary form. The first proposal, which sees in John 8:31-39 a *Christian midrash* on Psalm 118, does not seem adequately substantiated, even though it highlights a very crucial issue in interpreting any Johannine text, namely the use of the OT in this narrative. The second proposal of reading John 8:31-32.36 in line with the OT covenantal formulae, with the help of septuagintal and targumic versions, yields relatively sound conclusions: Jesus, identified with God, the Liberator – Redeemer (cf. the title ἐγώ εἰμι), and with God's liberating Memra (cf. the title λόγος in the Prologue), offers the (new) covenant to those who are under the bondage of sin. The third and fourth proposals analyze the text of John

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8:31-36 as reflecting a particular literary characteristic defined variously as either misunderstanding or riddle. Regardless of the specific criteria and effects of these two phenomena, and even questions about how to classify them (e.g. motif, technique, form, genre, device), their prolific occurrence in John's Gospel prove that they constitute a distinctive and salient literary feature worthy of scrutiny. The misunderstanding in John 8:31-36 centers on the reality of spiritual *freedom*. Two concepts are confronted: the Jews speak about their freedom as having its source in belonging to Abraham's offspring, while Jesus refers to *real* freedom, understood as liberation from the diabolic bondage of sin (meaning unbelief) and death, and entering into mystical communion with the triune God (expressed as living in God's household). The pattern of misunderstandings or riddles might be seen as the structural framework for the whole discourse unfolded in John 8. Fifth, using a related paradigm, other scholars have noted that the large section 8:12-59 contains all the formal elements of a typical Jewish lawsuit and can be interpreted as a series of three *forensic processes* (8:12-20; 21-30; 31-59). Here, each process is expressed through a set of five successive *tests*, of which John 8:32-37 is one. The issue at stake is the true discipleship of those who claimed to believe in Jesus (8:30). Jesus' claim is that these Jews, who profess belief in him, must understand Jesus' words and agree with them in order to gain true discipleship. The Jews, however, claiming that they are Abraham's offspring, reject any need for Jesus' word. They failed the test and proved not to be Jesus' disciples.

The present study raises a question which begs to be considered: whether the single text of John 8:31-36 might, at one and the same time, belong to two or more *different* literary genres or forms. In fact, this is entirely reasonable. Specifically, it is possible to view John 8:31-36 as the merger of two literary forms: the basic structure of the pericope based on the form variously called *misunderstanding*, *riddle* or even *test*, with the crucial statements or elements of this form (8:31-32.36) couched in terms of another OT literary form, the *covenantal offer of liberation*. In a nutshell, the essential meaning of the pericope is intrinsically intertwined with its literary form(s): it is the *offer of freedom* which is *misunderstood* and eventually rejected by Jesus' interlocutors. They did not recognize in him the true Liberator and thus did not pass the *test* of being true disciples, previously described as those who had believed in Jesus (8:30).

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