The title of Roland Meynet’s book might lead the reader to expect another isagogical work on the Synoptic Gospels, but this is not what the book is about. It does derive from the author’s experience of teaching introductory courses in which he devotes all his teaching time to analyzing Gospel texts, leaving it to the students to familiarize themselves with isagogical matters by reading a standard introduction on their own (17). Like these courses, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* offers a detailed treatment of some selected texts of the triple tradition from the viewpoint of “biblical rhetorical analysis,” a mode of analyzing the composition of Old and New Testament texts that Meynet has developed in numerous publications over the years.

Biblical rhetoric, according to Meynet, differs in various respects from the classical rhetoric of Greek and Roman antiquity. Its origins are with the Hebrew Bible and other Semitic literature. As opposed to the logical progression displayed in Greek and Latin rhetorical composition, biblical rhetoric builds on structures of parallelism and concentricism. The latter feature means that the “peak” of a text will occur at its center. This applies to all levels of the composition: the passage (pericope or episode), the sequence (usually consisting of several passages), the section (a larger division of the Gospel), and the book (the entire Gospel). For example, at one end of this spectrum, the
center of Luke 18:35–43 is the blind man’s cry “Son of David, have mercy on me” (83); at
the other extreme, Luke’s Gospel as a whole culminates at 9:51, and the sections of the
book have been ordered so as to mirror each other around this peak (408). In-depth
comparative treatment of Synoptic parallel material will often reveal that the center of
gravity is located differently in what may at first glance seem to be more or less the same
passage, which indicates that the Evangelists had different persuasive aims.

After the introduction, in which Meynet explains the nature of biblical rhetorical analysis,
its relationship to form and redaction criticism, and the typographical system used in the
abundant tables that present his analyses, chapter 1 deals with two passages related by all
three Synoptists: the healing at Jericho (Matt 20:29–34 par.) and the calling of the rich
man (Matt 19:16–22 par.). For each of the Synoptic variants of these episodes, Meynet
first analyzes the rhetorical composition of the passage, then sets it in its biblical
context—that is, identifies terminologically or conceptually relevant parallels to the
passages elsewhere within the canon—and, finally, offers an interpretation of the passage
that, in the case of the Markan and Lukan passages, also draws on the differences between
the Synoptic parallels as recognized through the analysis of rhetorical composition. The
result is that the pivotal statements of the passages vary between the Synoptic parallels,
implying different interests on the Evangelists’ part. In the case of the passage about the
calling of the rich man, these interests can be conveniently correlated with what is
commonly thought about the character of each Evangelist’s audience: Matthew, writing
for Jewish Christians, emphasizes the commandments of the Torah; Mark, addressing a
mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, places these commandments in parallel with
those of Jesus; and Luke, whose audience is made up of Gentiles, stresses only Jesus’
commandments (150).

In chapters 2 and 3, these two passages, which were studied as detached units, are placed
first within their immediate contexts (the “sub-sequence,” ch. 2) and then within their
broader contexts (the “sequence,” ch. 3). Meynet analyzes both the rhetorical composition
of these two textual levels as wholes and that of the individual passages that make them
up. He argues that, in contradistinction to the form-critical insistence on each pericope’s
lack of real connectedness with its surrounding context, rhetorical analysis discovers the
coherence and careful planning of the Evangelists’ composition. Among the many
distinctive features noted here are the different ways in which the Synoptic Gospels
contextualize the passage about the healing at Jericho. In Luke, this passage is set in
parallel to the conversion of Zacchaeus, and several similarities between the blind man
and Zacchaeus can be detected (188–90). Mark and Matthew instead have the healing at
Jericho as a parallel to the request of the sons of Zebedee (Mark) or of their mother
(Matthew); here the spiritual blindness of the disciples is implied, and Matthew’s
depiction of “two blind men” at Jericho can be seen as a rhetorical device that establishes a link to the “two sons” of Zebedee (178–80).

Finally, chapter 4 discusses how Luke 18:31–19:46, the sequence containing the passages about the healing at Jericho and the calling of the rich man, fits within the section 9:51–21:38 and the Gospel as a whole. The book ends with a brief epilogue.

Meynet is to be acclaimed for taking the pains to engage in such a profound reading of the original texts. In one of several digressions in the course of the investigation, he expresses his view of the interpreter’s task:

Working on a text while expecting to find in it what one already knows—or imagines one knows—is certainly not a good methodology. A formal analysis, which demands technical skill and rigor, is the guarantor of greater objectivity. This is the condition *sine qua non* of the respect of the other who is addressing me through the text. A text is not a mirror in which we contemplate our own image. … Reading a text is a confrontation, a row, hand-to-hand fighting, which one can only leave marked and changed. (213–14)

That this sentiment is sincere can be seen on every page of the book, for Meynet’s study of the rhetorical compositions is consistently meticulous and, as a result, also demands a lot of the reader. In many cases those who do not fall away will be rewarded with an ability to see textual structures and links between passages that would otherwise go unnoticed. At the same time, the book goes far beyond such detailed work, as Meynet interprets the texts within a broader theological paradigm. Not only does Meynet relate the texts to the “biblical context,” but his interpretations are also clearly guided by Catholic principles, as these are expressed in various Church documents that Meynet explicitly recognizes as authoritative (see, e.g., 57, 204–5). In fact, by not being restricted to pure description but also including hermeneutical application, his work seems to correspond quite well to what the Second Vatican Council expected and demanded of Catholic exegetes. It is a truly theological book.

Meynet’s emphasis on *biblical* context and rhetoric, while broadening the theological implications of the study, at some points entails an exegetical perspective that I find too narrow. For example, the choice to interpret *παλιγγενεσία* in Matt 19:28 solely in the light of Titus 3:5, with no regard for the use of the word elsewhere in early Jewish literature, is difficult to justify from a historical point of view (288–89). There is, deliberately, no interaction with Greek rhetoric and Hellenistic compositional techniques. Without denying that the parallel, concentric, and chiastic structures of ancient Hebrew poetry have left their marks also on the Gospels, I would insist that the Greek language and at
least quasi-biographical genre of these writings suggest that one needs to look beyond the biblical canon in order to understand their structure. Also, as it seems virtually certain that the Gospels were composed for oral delivery, I wonder how the detection of larger concentric patterns in these texts square with their oral character. The many charts in Meynet’s book that demonstrate the presence of such patterns are not always easy to grasp, even for a trained scholarly eye. How much more difficult would it have been for an original audience to perceive the concentric structures of sequences, sections, and entire books through their ears!

These remarks are intended to encourage continued dialogue between the proponents of different paradigms of rhetorical criticism. In no way are they meant to obscure the solid and stimulating character of Meynet’s work. Apart from offering new insights into the texts, it made me reflect extensively on how a text-centered introductory course on the Synoptic Gospels may be taught.