

‘Debtors to the Spirit’ in Romans 8.12? Reasons for the Silence

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This article discusses the Pauline anacoluthon in Romans 8.12. The usual interpretations consider it a communicative accident on the part of Paul or as a case of laudable laconicism. Against such an understanding the present author proposes to consider the anacoluthon as a figure of speech, deliberately chosen by the Apostle both to emphasize the total character of the filial relationship of Christians to God, as opposed to their past dependences, and to help them discover this particularity of their new status on their own.

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ὁς σιγῶν πλείονα δύναται τῶν μάταια λαλούντων
His silence has more force than those who vainly chatter.¹

To hear the specialists on the Letter to the Romans, the twelfth verse of its eighth chapter would constitute an example of a communicative failure on the part of the Apostle to the Gentiles; a failure not as striking, of course, as the famous anacoluthon of Rom 5.13, and yet serious enough to bring upon Paul the reproach of not being capable of mastering his own reasoning and not knowing how to submit the passion of his thinking to the rigors of syntax and style.

In what precisely would consist the ‘fault’ of the Apostle? In the verse which is the object of criticism, instead of a neutral formulation: ‘we are not debtors to the flesh’ (οὐκ ἐσμεν ὀφειλέται τῇ σαρκί), he preferred the following one: ‘we are debtors, not to the flesh’ (ὀφειλέται ἐσμεν οὐ τῇ σαρκί). Thus far nothing serious. Nevertheless, changing the place of the negation from the verb ‘to be’ (οὐκ ἐσμεν) to the expression ‘to the flesh’ (οὐ τῇ σαρκί) would strongly require that an expression such as: ‘but to the Spirit’ (ἀλλὰ τῷ πνεύματι) be added

¹ Ignatius of Antioch *To the Philadelphians* 1.1. The slight change to the accustomed translation of the last two words (‘those who say vain things’) is justified by the utilization of the expression in Hellenistic sources which indicate specifically ‘idle gossip’ and ‘chatter’, cf. A. Debrunner, ‘λέγω etc.’, *TDNT* 4.76–7.

immediately after, precisely that which occurs in the analogous constructions in 8.4, 9, 15 and 20, to mention only those from the immediate context.² Such an addition, however, does not follow. The Apostle proceeds instead with the caution of v. 13a: ‘because, if you live according to the flesh, you will die’; and then, with its natural complement: ‘but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live’ (v. 13b). The proposition begun in v. 12 in this way remains ‘incomplete’,³ ‘without sequence’,⁴ ‘abandoned’;⁵ an oversight that according to many would reveal the intensity of the emotional involvement of Paul the thinker, but at the same time would represent a failure on his part as a master of the word.⁶

The conditional in this preceding sentence was obligatory, because such a judgment is not shared by all the commentators. For some—few, as a matter of fact—the anacoluthon of Rom 8.12, while still a formal anomaly, could, however, represent an admirable case of laconicism,⁷ and there is even one who calls it elegant.⁸ Who is right? Surely, those whose opinion better respects the semantics and the syntax of the verse in its immediate context and at the same time corresponds to the literary tastes not of twenty-first century readers but of the contemporaries of the Apostle. Before lining up with one of the two opposing fronts, therefore, it is worth our while to dedicate some attention to the concept of ‘debt’ at the time of Paul and then to the phenomenon of anacoluthon in the ancient world.

1. Debt and Debtor in the Greek World and in the Bible

The words formed from the root ὀφειλ- (ὀφείλω; ὀφειλέτης; ὀφειλή; ὀφείλημα) belong to a group of terms that express, in classical and Hellenistic

2 Respectively: μή κατὰ σάρκα περιπατοῦσιν ἀλλὰ κατὰ πνεῦμα; οὐκ ἐστὲ ἐν σαρκὶ ἀλλὰ ἐν πνεύματι; οὐ γὰρ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα δουλείας πάλιν εἰς φόβον ἀλλὰ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υἰοθεσίας; and οὐχ ἐκοῦσα ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸν ὑποτάξαντα.

3 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985) 393. In his *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) the author speaks of the Apostle’s forgetting to complete the proposition begun in v. 12, after interrupting himself to introduce the warning of v. 13.

4 R. Penna, *Lettera ai Romani* (Scritti delle origini cristiane 6/2; Bologna: EDB, 2006) 2.157.

5 D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 494.

6 This failure is spoken of expressly by Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 394, while for T. J. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981) 69, we are dealing only with imperfect syntax.

7 The opinion of L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) 311.

8 See, for example, the opinion of J. A. Bengel who, referring to the missing part, says, ‘sed hoc eleganter subaudiendum relinquitur’ (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti* [London: Williams & Norgate, 1862] 529). A similar interpretation of the construction, even if without explicit appreciation of its elegance, one finds among the German commentators, according to whom the complement ‘but to the Spirit’ is left to be understood. E.g., O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 257–8 and n. 1; H. Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (HThK 6; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1987) 249–50; O. Kuss, *Der Römerbrief* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1963) 2.597.

Greek, the awareness that, in the conditions of this world, individuals and everything that happens do not enjoy autonomy and self-sufficiency but are necessarily subject to destiny, to the obligatory nature of norms or to binding restrictions.⁹ The fate of 'being at the mercy' of destiny, for humans and—if you believe Plato¹⁰—even for gods, is denoted by ἀνάγκη. The verbs ἀπόκειμαι and μέλλω, in turn, underline the inevitability and the inexorability of what must happen. The impersonal δεῖ, on the other hand, extends to the maximum the sense of being subject: the power to constrain extends from humans all the way to the gods, passing through laws and magic, and concerns the life of everyone and everything.¹¹

Ὀφείλω and its derivatives, in contrast to the meanings and nuances described above, all of them rather fatalistic, articulate not that which happens/must happen to the world and to persons, but rather the obligations of humans in relation to their peers and to the gods. In classical and Hellenistic Greek this linguistic stock is utilized especially in its juridical and economic-commercial meaning, but a good number of its occurrences contain also the positive sense of obligation and commitment.¹²

The verb tied to a direct object means 'to owe something' (and also 'to someone' if it is followed by an indirect object), while the infinitive construction expresses 'having to do (undergo) something'. One's due in the first place regards things, especially debts or monetary compensations; but also, and not seldom, spiritual realities (e.g., 'life for everyone', ὀφείλουσι καὶ ἐκεῖνοι τὴν ψυχὴν πᾶσιν, Claudius Aelianus *Varia Historia* X.5; 'I owe many thanks to the gods', ὀφείλω τοῖς θεοῖς πολλὴν χάριν, Sophocles *Antigone* 332; 'the just man owes injury to his enemies and profit to his friends', τοῖς μὲν ἐχθροῖς βλάβην ὀφείλεσθαι παρὰ τοῦ δικαίου ἀνδρός, τοῖς δὲ φίλοις ὀφελίαν, Plato *Republic* I 335e). The one to whom something is owed is usually a human being, as the creditor or the offended party; and yet there are not a few cases where one has an obligation also to a god, offended by the lack of observance of his regulations, or obliging by means of his benevolence; this requires an act of worship in order to settle the debt.¹³

9 Cf. J. E. Louwe and J. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Society, 1989), where the root is treated under the entry 'Necessary, Unnecessary'.

10 Cf. *The Laws* 818e ('necessity grounded in nature constrains us, against which we say that no God contends, or ever will contend').

11 Cf. the entry 'Necessity. Must, Obligation', *NIDNTT* 2.662-9.

12 Cf. F. Hauck 'ὀφείλω', *TDNT* 5.559-66, especially 560.

13 See the frequently cited case of Socrates, who at the point of death reminded Kriton: 'We still owe a rooster to Asclepius. Give it to him, do not forget', τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρούνα. ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε (Plato *Phaedo* 118).

Both senses of the verb ('to have a debt' and 'to have to act according to what is prescribed') are found in biblical Greek where, however, the tally of the word is notably less frequent. In comparison with its profane usage, what hits us instead is the fact that in the Greek of the Septuagint ὀφείλω is never used to describe the obligations of a human being with regard to God.¹⁴ This phenomenon is still more surprising because it is also true for the NT, with the exception of the parables of the unfaithful servant in Matthew (18.23–25) and the two debtors in Luke (7.41–43). In both of these, the images of the debtor and the creditor indicate in fact the relationship of a human being with God: the essence of this relationship, however, consists not in the obligation of loans or payments, but in the person's being a sinner (= a debtor who has not paid and is not even able to pay) from whose debt only the mercy of God can free him.

In a similar way the noun ὀφειλέτης also means, in secular Greek, both 'debtor'—especially in the economic field—and 'one who is obligated to a service'. In the case of the verb, the second meaning is present above all in the infinitive construction, while the first is found in constructions with the dative indicating the creditor and the genitive indicating what is owed to him. Both of these meanings are present in biblical Greek, yet still surprising is the very low preference for the term ὀφειλέτης. This word, indeed, is never used by the LXX and occurs in the NT only seven times.¹⁵

In Matt 18.24 the word appears in the sense of monetary debt and describes one who owed ten thousand talents (εἷς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων τάλάντων). In the sense of obligation it is present, on the other hand, in the writings of Paul: in Gal 5.3 referring to the obligation, on the part of whoever lets himself be circumcised, to observe the whole law (ὀφειλέτης ἐστὶν ὅλον τὸν νόμον ποιῆσαι); in Rom 1.14 to the obligation of a universal mission on the part of the Apostle (Ἑλλήσιν τε καὶ βαρβάροις, σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνοήτοις ὀφειλέτης εἰμί) and in Rom 15.27 to the debt of gratitude of the Gentiles towards the Judeo-Christians of Jerusalem (ὀφειλέται εἰσὶν αὐτῶν), from whom they received the spiritual gifts that oblige them to material support in return. The denial of the debt, which, given the context, cannot be other than moral (the Christian is no longer subject to the absolutism of the flesh), is found in Rom 8.12: ὀφειλέται ἐσμὲν οὐ τῇ σαρκί.

The NT uses this word also in the sense of 'culpable'. Such a use occurs in the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6.12), where the term describes one who is guilty in regard to other people, and in Luke 13.4, where God himself is the

14 Cf. J. Lust, E. Eynikel and K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1996) 344.

15 Matt 6.12; 18.24; Luke 13.4; Rom 1.14; 8.12; 15.27; Gal 5.3. The noun is absent in Philo and in Josephus. However, it appears twice in intertestamental literature: *The Testament of Job* (11.12: ὀφειλέτης μου) and the *First Book of Enoch* (6.3: ὀφειλέτης ἁμαρτίας μεγάλης), with the sense of monetary debtor in the first case and a great sinner in the second.

offended party. As is indicated by the parallelism between vv. 2 and 4 of the Lukan text, the term in this context is effectively synonymous with ἁμαρτωλός.¹⁶ The latter meaning finds no correspondence in profane Greek; it corresponds instead to the use of דָּבַר ('debt')—in the sense of sin—which is also found in rabbinic Judaism.¹⁷ For our analyses it is important to note that such a use represents the only case in biblical and intertestamental Greek in which a human being is spoken of as an ὀφειλέτης of God.

Concerning the other two nouns of this group, ὀφειλή and ὀφείλημα, the former is rare in the secular texts and means literally 'monetary debt'. In the NT it is used also in a figurative sense to indicate obligatory behavior (fear and respect toward authority in Rom 13.7) and even to describe euphemistically marital sexual intercourse (1 Cor 7.3). 'The sum owed' and 'obligation' in general are the secular meanings also of the second noun, ὀφείλημα. This word keeps this sense in the NT (Rom 4.4). In Matt 6.12 we find instead another nuance, foreign to the Greek world but perfectly compatible with Judaism, that is to say, sin as being in arrears with God.

What conclusions can be inferred from this short review of the use of the root ὀφείλ-, for the understanding of the anacoluthon in Rom 8.12?

What has been said about the significations and the connotations of the verb ὀφείλω and of its derivatives in biblical and intertestamental Greek easily explains why the Apostle does not want to and is not even able to utilize them to describe the new status of believers in regard to God. The association between debt and sin, already widespread in Judaism and present in the NT, was the only one perceived when the root was used to describe the relationship of humanity to God. That rendered the term 'debtor' (ὀφειλέτης) too ambiguous, even misleading, to be utilized in the argument that would serve the purpose of justifying the thesis (*subpropositio*) that 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8.1) and to proclaim the state of peace and friendship between God and those justified by faith (cf. Rom 5.1–11).¹⁸

Apart from the association with sin, ὀφείλω and ὀφειλέτης prove to be inadequate for describing the situation of the believer *vis-à-vis* God, even in their purely neutral sense (= obligation in regard to another). Given their economic connotation the LXX and the NT do not use them ever in such a

16 Cf. M. Wolter, 'ὀφειλέτης, ὀφείλημα', *EDNT* 2.550, who lists only two meanings, whether for the first noun ('debtor' and 'sinner'), or for the second ('debt' and 'sin').

17 Cf. M. Jastrow, *The Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac, 1903) 428–9 and G. H. Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu* (Leipzig: Hinrichs 1930) 336–7.

18 On the subject of the general *dispositio rhetorica* of Rom 5–8 and, in detail, of Rom 8 see A. Gieniusz, *Romans 8:18–30: 'Suffering Does Not Thwart the Future Glory'* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1999) 40–51 and recently J.-N. Aletti, *La Lettera ai Romani. Chiavi di lettura* (Roma: Borla, 2011) 48, 81–5.

context¹⁹ because such a usage would represent a distortion *per excessum* of the nature of the relationship with God. Indeed, this way God would appear venal and the gratuitous nature of his acting would be reduced. Consequently, the very foundation for a free response would be lacking for the believer as the receiver of unmerited gifts. Everything would become a ‘*do ut des*’ typical among business partners.²⁰ On the other side, however, and paradoxically, in the field of monotheistic religion, both words would prove to be even too weak to express adequately the depth of religious dependence on the part of the believer. Indeed, the latter does not owe something to some god, in such a way as to have to repay the debt, and be able to do so, as soon as possible,²¹ but rather has received, and continues to receive, everything from the One God and thus depends on him totally and at all times, and as such has neither the possibility nor the obligation to pay back a debt of this sort. It is therefore perfectly understandable that in order to do justice to this absolute character of the believer’s dependence upon God, both the OT and NT employ not the concept of debt but rather that of ownership or its equivalent.²²

For the above reasons, the hypothesis of those who see in the anacoluthon of Rom 8.12 a laudable example of laconicism and elegance does not hold up. According to them, Paul would have left to the intuition of his readers exactly what he did not want to and was not able to say (‘we are debtors to the Spirit’). Must we therefore resign ourselves to the hypothesis of a failure in communication on the part of the Apostle? No, or at least not before taking a look at the phenomenon of the anacoluthon in the ancient world.

2. Anacoluthon: Only an Accident in the Course of Communication?

As the etymology itself of the term suggests (ἀνακόλουθος means ‘without sequence’), we have an anacoluthon where a link necessary to the syntax of two or more elements of a sentence is skipped, in such a manner that the element with which the phrase begins remains without a prop, ‘suspended’ with respect to the

19 Cf. F. Hauck ‘ὀφείλω’, *TDNT* 5.560–1, who notes that the Greek verb has a corresponding verb in Hebrew only in its meaning ‘to be in debt for an amount’.

20 So write E. Tiedke and H.-G. Link, ‘ὀφείλω’, *NIDNTT* 2.667.

21 As the polytheistic Socrates was, on the contrary, able to do (cf. the text of Plato mentioned in n. 13).

22 See, for example, λαὸς περιούσιος (Exod 19.5; Deut 7.6; 14.2; 26.18; Titus 2.14), ἀπόδομα ἀποδοδομένοι (Num 8.16), μερίς σου (Deut 9.26), λαὸς ἔγκληρος (Deut 4.20), κληρὸς σου (Deut 9.29), μερίς κυρίου λαὸς αὐτοῦ Ιακωβ σχοίνισμα κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ Ισραηλ (Deut 32.9), χρῆσις τῷ κυρίῳ (1 Sam 1.28), σὺ κατακληρονομήσεις ἐν πάσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν (Ps 81.8), αὐτὸς ἐποίησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ οὐχ ἡμεῖς λαὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ πρόβατα τῆς νομῆς αὐτοῦ (Ps 99.3), τὸν Ιακωβ ἐξελέξατο ἐναντῶ ὁ κύριος Ισραηλ εἰς περιουσιασμὸν αὐτοῦ (Ps 134.4), λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν (1 Pet 2.9), τὰ ἴδια (John 1.11).

following elements.²³ Such a gap is usually caused by the spontaneity of the discourse and gives the impression of a lack of planning and of proceeding too rapidly in the expounding and unfolding of ideas. These conditions are typical of spoken communication in which, from antiquity until today, the anacoluthon is a phenomenon at the same time both widespread and commonly censured. The history of the evolution of the term already says as much: in Greek, from the original and neutral 'without sequence' ἀνακόλουθος quickly came to mean 'anomalous', 'inconclusive' and 'incoherent'.²⁴ Thus it is not surprising that Philo, in *On Flight and Finding*, giving the list of the three adulterated goods (infidelity, incoherence and ignorance), for the second employs precisely τὸ ἀνακόλουθον.²⁵ Neither does it amaze us that Marcus Aurelius uses the term to describe an inconsequent way of acting (ἀνακόλουθον), proper to an irrational creature, while with its opposite (ἀκολουθία) he denotes being conformed to the image of the immortals.²⁶ For him ἀνακόλουθον, exactly as in our times for I. Asimov and for C. Collodi,²⁷ was therefore not only an ominous outcome and simultaneously a clear indication of incapacity and of ignorance, but even a sign of a humanity that was limited or perhaps not yet fully developed. ἀκολουθία in reality expresses the dignity of humankind and is the sign of its affinity with the divine.

Rebuffed and barely excusable in speech, seen as a sign of inadequate command of a language, the anacoluthon finds instead a more benevolent reception and even an appreciation in writing, where the ancients intentionally employed it as a mimesis of speech in order to exploit one of its effects. The deliberate rupture of syntax, in fact, served the purpose of reproducing the spontaneity and unprogrammed nature of off-the-cuff discourse. In such a

23 Cf. B. Mortara Garavelli, *Manuale di retorica* (Milano: Bompiani, 1991) 298–300.

24 Such a use can already be found in the writings of Epicurus (IV cent. B.C.): *Epistula ad Pythoclem* 95.4–5 ('dwelling on what is inconsistent', ἀναβλέπων εἰς τὰ ἀνακόλουθα as opposed to keeping in mind 'consistent assumptions', τὰς ἀκολουθους ὑποθέσεις). Cf. Liddell–Scott, 109.

25 'Now the genuine good things are faith, the connection and union (ἀκολουθία) of words with deeds, and the rule of right instruction, as on the other hand the evils are, faithlessness, a want of such connection (τὸ ἀνακόλουθον) between words and deeds, and ignorance' (152). Translation of C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 334.

26 *Meditations* 3.9.1–2.

27 The robots of Isaac Asimov's science fiction stories, with the clear intent of pointing out their subhuman status, speak in anacolutha (*I, Robot* [New York: Gnome, 1950]). The ungrammatical speeches of Pinocchio, the protagonist of C. Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (Florence: R. Bemporad & Figlio, 1883), when he relates his own adventures to the kind Geppetto, have the same effect and not incidentally decrease with the growth or rather with the humanization of the protagonist, disappearing totally in Chapter XXXVI, where the puppet becomes human.

manner the authors not only made manifest their emotional involvement (= they wrote with the passion of the heart rather than with the coldness of the head), but also reinforced their attempts to convince the reader of their sincerity. Referring to an example taken from the discourses of Demosthenes, Hermogenes of Tarsus in his *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* explains such a use of anacoluthon in the following manner:

Besides what has been mentioned previously there is also another method of spontaneous discourse, and especially of discourse that seems brought forth by anger: it consists not in safeguarding the material continuity (ἀκολουθία) of the word figures but in seeming almost lost in emotion... Thanks to this the discourse appears both more animated and sincere (B7; my translation).²⁸

In writing, therefore, rather than being a sign of oratorical and/or literary incapacity on the part of the one who employs it, the anacoluthon becomes a respectable and recommendable figure of speech which serves the ends of both the ethos and the pathos of the author.

Modern research perceives yet another advantage in the anacoluthon: its exceptional power as a means of publicity, thanks to its breaking of normal syntactic usage.²⁹ The one who uses it is contravening the rules, and precisely in the act of upsetting the cards on the table achieves a stronger expressive purpose and makes the contents more engaging.³⁰ In writing, therefore, besides being a mimesis of speech, the grammatical irregularity can also attract the attention of the audience and direct its interest toward the content of the reasoning.³¹ In a nutshell, the anacoluthon serves not only the ethos and the pathos of the writer, but even the logos of his discourse.

What can be the importance of the above-mentioned considerations for the Pauline anacoluthon? None at all, if one lends importance to the typically oral character of his literary output. In this case the anacoluthon would remain only

28 Ἔστι δὲ παρὰ τὰς προειρημένους ἑτέρας τις μέθοδος ἐνδιαθέτου λόγου καὶ μάλιστα τοῦ δοκοῦντος σὺν ὀργῇ προϊέναι, τὸ μὴδὲ τὰς ἀκολουθίας σφίξειν τῶν τοῦ λόγου σχημάτων ἀλλ' οἷον ἐξίστασθαι δοκεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους [...] διὸ καὶ μᾶλλον ἔμψυχος καὶ ἀληθής ὁ λόγος εἶναι δοκεῖ (from the critical edition by H. Rabe, *Hermogenis opera* [Stuttgart: Teubner, 1969] 357–8). The anacoluthon is treated by Hermogenes in the chapter dedicated to sincerity of discourse (*περὶ ἀληθινοῦ λόγου*). See also the comment of M. Patillon in regard to this text, in his monograph *La théorie du discours chez Hermogène le rhéteur. Essai sur la structure de la rhétorique ancienne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1988) 132–3.

29 Mortara Garavelli, *Manuale di retorica*, 298–300.

30 Quintilian was already aware of this, as his treatment of the solecism in *Institutio oratoria* I, V, 51–3, shows.

31 Cf. R. H. Stacy, *Defamiliarization in Language and Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1977) 61.

a communicative accident.³² It is of capital value, however, when one takes into consideration recent discoveries about the modalities of writing in antiquity, that do not leave much room for the possibility of errors caused by oversight and a lack of control due to haste and spontaneity. The works of E. R. Richards³³ and especially of T. Dorandi³⁴ prove beyond all reasonable doubt that in antiquity each of the stages of composition of a written text (dictation–written on a tablet–clean copy–private reading–publication) offered the author abundant opportunities to correct himself or to be corrected. The remaining grammatical irregularities, if not attributable to the carelessness of the copyist, must be therefore interpreted as conscious, intentional and functional. In Paul, as in the other literary works of his time, with the exception of emergency situations, we find anacolutha not because they happen, but because they are planned. The duty of the exegete is not, therefore, that of apologizing to his readers for the presumed mistakes of the text on which he/she is commenting, perhaps even supplying—as happens not rarely in the case of Rom 8.12—the missing part; but of understanding the reason for the irregularity.

3. The Reasons for the Silence

One of the few commentators on the Letter to the Romans who have not limited themselves merely to observing the presence of the anacoluthon in Rom 8.12, but have attempted to understand its function, is R. Penna. As others have done, he notes the formal necessity of adding to the words 'debtors not of the flesh' in v. 12 a positive construction in the adverse form. And yet, the fact that Paul has not inserted it he interprets not as an involuntary slip in the thought and/or its form, but as a deliberate choice of the Apostle, having the purpose of underlining and emphasizing the negative part: 'the necessity for Christians not to feel debtors toward the flesh'.³⁵ In the light of what we have just said about the use of the anacoluthon in ancient literature, such an attempt seems more than justified. The question remains open, however, about that to which the Apostle effectively wanted to give prominence. The previously presented semantics of debt, and the composition of Rom 8.12–14, with which we will deal shortly, seem to point in a direction different from that proposed by R. Penna.

32 So says F. W. Farrar, 'The Rhetoric of St. Paul', *Expositor* 10 (1879) 26: 'I do not reckon anacoluthon, or unfinished construction, among St. Paul's figures of speech, because his numerous anacolutha are accidental, not rhetorical. They are due to his eagerly pressing forward with his subject... Perhaps the nearest approach to a rhetorical anacoluthon in St. Paul is Gal. ii. 6; 2 Thess. ii. 3, 7'.

33 *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (WUNT 2/42; Tübingen: Mohr, 1991).

34 *Nell'officina dei classici. Come lavoravano gli autori antichi* (Frecce 45; Rome: Carocci, 2007).

35 *Lettera ai Romani*, 2.157.

Indeed, the parallelisms which can be found within our three verses (12–14) confer upon them a strong unitary character and at the same time reveal their argumentative disposition and the literary construction in the form of a chiasm. Here is a graphic presentation of this set of phenomena:

Ἄρα οὖν, ἀδελφοί,

Flesh	a negation	α ὀφειλέται ἐσμὲν οὐ τῇ σαρκὶ
		β τοῦ κατὰ σάρκα ζῆν,
	b justification	γ εἰ γὰρ κατὰ σάρκα ζῆτε, μέλλετε ἀποθνήσκειν.
Spirit	a' affirmation	γ' εἰ δὲ πνεύματι τὰς πράξεις τοῦ σώματος θανατοῦτε, ζήσεσθε.
	b' justification	β' ὅσοι γὰρ πνεύματι θεοῦ ἄγονται,
		α' οὗτοι υἱοὶ θεοῦ εἰσιν.

This unit as a whole does not seem to have an explicitly hortatory character³⁶ (commands or imperatives are totally absent!) but, as R. Penna rightly notes,³⁷ it still forms part of the Christian indicative. The Apostle, indeed, informs the Christian reader about what are his/her new possibilities (negatively in 'a' and positively in 'a') and justifies these affirmations respectively with the ominous consequences of the past dependence upon the flesh (b) and with the new status of the believer who is now led by the Spirit and as such is a son of God (b').

Inside this argumentative arrangement (negation–justification–affirmation–justification) the chiasmic construction also has its own logic: the past of the flesh, which no longer exists (ἐσμὲν οὐ), presented in parts α–β–γ, is set in

³⁶ Of a contrary opinion is, for example, T. J. Deidun, who interprets vv. 12–14 as a 'fraternal paraclesis' and thus as the imperative which necessarily follows from the indicative of the proclamation of the newness of Christian existence in vv. 1–11 (*New Covenant Morality in Paul*, 78). The fact that in vv. 12–14 no imperative is found does not help the soundness of the proposal. In Rom 6.12–14, the classic place of the indicative-imperative sequence in Paul, besides three regular imperatives we also have a categorical imperative. To base oneself instead, as Deidun does, on the notion of a mandatory sense expressed in ὀφειλέται of v. 12 is, in the light of our semantic analyses, without foundation: Paul denies only a type of submission (towards the flesh), but he holds back from proclaiming positively another type thereof. Other authors prefer to see there instead an implicit exhortation or, even more generally, an ethical application (cf. A. Pitta, *Lettera ai Romani. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (I Libri biblici. Nuovo Testamento 6; Milano: Paoline, 2001) 293.

³⁷ Of the same opinion are J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968) 293; T. R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT 6; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998) 419; S. Légasse, *L'épître aux Romains* (LeDivCom 10; Paris: Cerf, 2002) 491.

opposition to the present of the Spirit (εἰσίν), which is made manifest in corresponding parts γ'-β'-α'. The abundant quantity and the exact correspondence of the terms and of the paradoxical expressions in the two central parts (β, γ, γ' and β') make their parallelism clear. They also help the reader to become aware of the symmetry of the peripheral elements (α and α'), associated by the fact of their both being nominal phrases, while being frugal in the presence of obvious verbal repetition. The progression inside this chiasm is clear: from the negative formulation of the status of the Christian ('debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh'—α and β) and from the indication of the ominous results of such a dependence (γ), one passes to the proclamation of the favorable possibilities, present and future (γ'), describing finally in a positive ('led by the Spirit'—β') and surprising ('son of God'—α') manner the basis for the whole situation: the new status of the believer.

From this reconstruction of the argumentative and literary logic of the passage it becomes clear that the initial part (vv. 12-13a) does not remain autonomous and even less does it constitute the principal exposition of the Apostle. It serves rather as a dark background against which the positive content of vv. 13b-14 stands out more clearly. Indeed, the blacker the blackboard, the more visible will be that which one wants to write on it. As a result, the principal function of the anacoluthon of v. 12 is not so much to underline the negative part as to make clearer the positive: the announcement of the divine sonship of believers in v. 14.

We note in passing that not only the expression 'but to the Spirit', but any positive addition whatever to v. 12, would have whitened the blackboard in a counter-productive manner. As a premature anticipation of the content of v. 14, such a complement would also have ruined both the logic of the argumentation of the text, which begins with negation and ends by affirming, as well as the formal beauty of the chiasm, which is based solely upon the contrasts. For these reasons Paul could not have desired any positive integration, or even to lead us to believe as much. The silence he maintains after 'debtors not to the flesh' is necessary, at the risk of losing the WOW effect in vv. 13b-14. And so the question returns: Why does the Apostle not simply remain silent, but with an unusual formulation (ὀφειλέται ἐσμὲν οὐ τῆ σαρκί) raise in his readers the expectation of a completion which he had no intention of satisfying?

First of all, because in this way his silence is not a mere absence of content, but a provocative absence, that irritates and questions; a suspense that lays the ground for the final surprise. Paul's reticence regarding the addition which should almost automatically be placed here allows the reader not only to understand his/her status over against the mournful slavery of the past, but also to become aware of the incomparability of being a son of God set against other benefits of his/her being Christian. Being children of God means not only not being debtors to the flesh, but even not being debtors to God himself. He is not simply a creditor who would have given something which sooner or later the

believer would take account of and would be expected to repay. He is the Father, the gratuitous and inexhaustible source not only of individual gifts but of the existence itself of his children who depend on Him *in toto* and at all times.

Furthermore, the value of the anacoluthon is precisely that it makes one think. Thanks to it the totality of divine sonship is not proclaimed to the reader only from the outside: one is rather enticed into using one's own legs to arrive there by oneself. Instead of remaining a passive recipient of some content thought up by others, one must become oneself a protagonist of the communicative process and, as a result, one is helped to appreciate more one's relationship with the Father, as a personal discovery. The anacoluthon, which in the telling of so many would pass as a failure of communication, becomes in the hands of Paul an efficacious instrument of a particular midwifery, such that 'his silence speaks with more force than those who vainly chatter'.