

THE IRONIC GOSPEL

**An Examination of Mark's
Use of Irony**

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INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen an explosion of literary interest in the Bible. In 1960, Edwin M. Good could lament, “We have failed...to raise the genuinely literary question about the Bible. I mean that we have been so concerned (and properly concerned) with its truth, both factual and religious, that we have not investigated the literary means the Biblical writers used to convey their truth.”¹ This is no longer the case, as the extraordinary amount of scholarship now available concerning “the Bible as literature” indicates. One of the major breakthroughs in biblical literary criticism has been the discovery of the pervasive use of irony as a communicative strategy. As Jerry Camery-Hoggatt has pointed out, biblical literary critics have now “discovered irony in places where it would have been virtually invisible before.”² But, of course, a statement like this one raises a few eyebrows. If irony was invisible to Bible readers of the past, is it really there? Or is this a classic case of over-interpretation? These questions lead to further questions: What exactly is irony, anyway? How can it be identified? Where is irony located -- in the author’s intention, in the text, or in the understanding of the reader? All of us are familiar with the ironic in literature, but what makes irony ironic? Is irony something intuitively grasped by the reader, or is it also possible to give a philosophical account of it? What rhetorical strategies are used to communicate irony and what interpretive strategies allow us to understand the ironic properly? Are there rules for interpreting irony? This paper will seek to address just these kinds of questions, though it

¹Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965) 9.

²Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) ix.

cannot claim to do so in an exhaustive way.

MARKAN IRONIES³

While irony is a common literary feature of the Bible, no biblical writer uses irony more thoroughly than Mark. Frequently Mark employs ironic contrasts in order to create a theological impression upon the reader or summon the reader to act in a particular way.

Mark is a veritable master of ironic narrative. He piles irony on top of irony, hitting the reader in all kinds of ways at several different levels. Consider the following examples of irony in Mark:⁴

- In Mark 1:40-45, Jesus cleanses a leper. He tells the leper not to let anyone know, but the leper disobeys and begins to preach openly. Ironically, in a dramatic reversal, because of the man's disobedience and Jesus' sudden popularity, Jesus himself has to take on the life of a leper, hiding out in the wilderness and not entering into the cities, so he can avoid the crowds. But in another turn of irony, Jesus' strategy fails and the crowds come to this "leper" anyway.
- The much-discussed "Messianic Secret" (found in 1:25, 34, 43-45; 3:12; 5:43; 7:24, 36; 8:26, 30; 9:9, 30-31; 10:48) serves as a foil for several of Mark's ironic twists.⁵

Mark 1:1 "tells the reader exactly what the author's main thesis is, and as a result, any

³The propriety of beginning this paper with examples of irony rather than a definition of irony may seem dubious. But because virtually all experienced readers are familiar with irony to some degree, it seems a brief demonstration of the plausibility of finding irony in Mark's gospel is an acceptable starting point. Besides, as we will later discover, irony is hard to define precisely and can be better grasped through the use of illustrations.

Examining irony in Mark will provide examples for later analysis.

⁴All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version.

⁵Of course, it goes without saying that Mark's concept of messiahship is intrinsically ironic: he presents a messiah who not only tries to keep his identity secret on several occasions, but also ends up crucified! When the time finally comes for his identity to be openly proclaimed (after the resurrection), his closest disciples remain silent (16:7-8)!

confusion, secrecy, or misunderstanding about Jesus in the story strikes the reader as ironic because the reader always perceives the incongruity between the confusion about who Jesus is in the story and the relative clarity about who Jesus is in the mind of the storyteller.”⁶ Thus, when we see demons properly identifying Jesus, while his disciples and own family members do not understand who he is, we sense a great deal of irony. As the story goes on, the reader feels less sympathy for those who do not perceive who Jesus is, and the irony of the situation increases. The disciples seem to become more and more blinded, while things become more and more clear for the reader. What “goes over the heads” of the disciples is easy for the intelligent reader to grasp.

- In light of the “Messianic Secret,” Mark 4:21-22 is ironic. Jesus makes the obvious point that no one lights a lamp in order to hide it away. Yet, when Jesus persistently refuses to let his identity be made public, he seems to be hiding his light. The public teaching of Jesus and his actions simply do not seem to fit, giving rise to an ironic tension that seems to be intentional on the part of Jesus.
- In Mark 3:1-6, the Pharisees watch Jesus closely to see if he will heal on the Sabbath. Jesus asks them pointedly, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or evil, to save life or to kill?” When they refuse to answer him, Jesus goes ahead and heals the man. Immediately -- on the Sabbath -- the Pharisees join with the Herodians in plotting Jesus’ destruction. As Camery-Hoggatt explains, this is a dramatic reversal, in which,

⁶Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 19. See also, Richard Hays, *Moral Vision of the new Testament* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 75.

“For the reader, the Pharisees’ damnation of Jesus is self-damnation.”⁷ Apparently, the Pharisees, despite all their scruples about the Sabbath, believe it is lawful to kill on the Sabbath! In terms of Mark’s narrative, the Pharisees certainly do not intend the irony, but the narrator has contextualized their action in such a way that the reader may see the irony in their response to Jesus.

- Herod is called a king in 6:14, 22, 25, 26, 27. Virtually any contemporary of Mark, familiar with the political situation of Palestine, would be caught off guard by this description. In reality, Herod was no king. The highest title he ever held was that of tetrarch.⁸ According to Josephus, Herod was actually deposed by Caligula for asking one too many times for a monarchical title!⁹ At best, his so-called kingship is an ironic parody of Jesus’ kingship. Under Herod the people are “like sheep not having a shepherd” (6:34), with the obvious implication that Jesus is the remedy to this problem.¹⁰
- Camery-Hoggatt perceives an ironic style employed in 6:14-29. John the Baptist and

⁷Camery-Hoggatt 119.

⁸I am sure some commentators would want to dispute the presence of irony in this passage because a tetrarch could technically be referred to as a king. However, the fact that Matthew and Luke generally use the more proper term tetrarch instead of king seems to indicate Mark is up to something in his repeated use of the word king. Mann says Mark may only be reflecting local usage in calling Herod a king, but offers no support. If anything, the unpopularity of Herod with his largely Jewish constituency would seem to make it highly doubtful he was “popularly” hailed as a king, especially considering the emperor, much to Herod’s embarrassment, refused to grant him this title. See C. S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1986) 295. Thus, I believe I am justified in seeing Mark hurl a subtle but ironic barb at Herod in this text. Mark is mocking Herod’s kingship just as the Jews and Romans will later mock the kingship of Jesus.

⁹Camery-Hoggatt 145.

¹⁰Perhaps this explains the otherwise strange detail in 6:39 that Jesus commanded the people to sit on “the green grass.” Mark might be giving us an intertextual echo of Psalm 23:1-2, with Jesus taking on the role of Lord and Shepherd.

Herod are, of course, at opposite ends of the moral spectrum. The story of John's beheading is quite horrifying, but is told in such an understated, matter-of fact tenor, that one cannot help but notice

this tension between text and subtext which creates the story's underlying dynamic movement. It is this tension that establishes the backdrop of John's execution, in the process assassinating the character of Herod. The old king has been outfoxed, it appears. He executes John to save face, but in the act exposes his debauchery. The head on the platter is a burlesque of the feast. It is the king's own head, blood-splattered, ghastly, gagging on the monstrosity he has created. The actual details of John's execution may have been more horrible than Mark cares to write about. The story is gruesome enough as it stands, and the reader's reaction is deepened by the rambling, unedifying language in which it is told.¹¹

- While the disciples have been unable to see who Jesus is, ironically, blind Bartimaeus does (Mark 10:46-52; see also 8:22-26).
- Irony is heavily concentrated in Mark's passion narrative, sometimes in a layered

¹¹Camery-Hoggatt 145. Obviously Camery-Hogatt has gone far beyond Mark's narrative in his detailed description of John's execution -- but, then, that is just his point. Mark could have said something as grotesque as Camery-Hogatt, but instead gives us a very cold, matter-of-fact description of what was clearly a very gory event. Considering the greatness of John and his important role in the story, we might have expected a full description of his death (as we get with Jesus' crucifixion). But instead we get a quite sterile account. It is this understatement that makes the text ironic.

fashion. All the mockery of Jesus is ironical in terms of Mark's unfolding story. The soldiers give Jesus a mock coronation in 15:16-20, complete with a robe of purple and crown of thorns. But in doing so, of course, they do not realize that Jesus is indeed being made king as he suffers, a point Mark's sensitive reader grasps.

- In Mark 14:65, the soldiers mock Jesus as a false prophet. "Prophecy!" they sneer. But, ironically, in the very next scene we find an explicit prophecy of Jesus coming to pass as Peter denies him three times before the cock crows twice.
- The scene in which Peter denies Jesus also has an ironic twist on Peter's name. The one called "Rock," who had so confidently declared he was even willing to die with Jesus rather than deny him (14:29-31), crumbles before a lowly slave girl (14:66-72).
- Mark informs us that the crowds blaspheme in 15:29. The irony in this is explained by Fowler:

"Blasphemy" here may thus carry the ordinary connotation of "verbal abuse" or "ridicule." Nevertheless, it could also entail much more. Blasphemy par excellence is an offense against God. Should not the reader discern that both senses of the word are appropriate here? Does not the narrator want us to discern that in knowingly blaspheming this dying man, they are unknowingly committing a far more serious blasphemy?¹²

- Mark 15:30 may be seen as kind of ironic riddle. The crowds taunt Jesus by calling on him to save himself as he has saved others, to come down from the cross. But

¹²Fowler 159.

Jesus has already taught the only way to save one's life is to lose it by taking up one's cross (8:35)! The high priests and scribes get in on the ironic act as well, giving to Jesus a title they believe to be false (15:32). But ironically, at another level, their mockery turns out to be true. From the narrator's perspective, it is indeed the case that Jesus is "the Christ, the king of Israel."

Additional examples of Markan irony could be given, but this list is too long as it is. Obviously some of these examples could be debated. But too many of them are clear cut (and too commonly recognized) for us to doubt the deliberate use of irony on Mark's part. The gospel writer has given us a narrative thick with irony. But what enables us identify irony? How can we move past an intuitive grasp of the ironic to an understanding of the marks of irony and how irony works? How do we know if we have interpreted an ironic text properly? What makes Mark a successful ironist (if indeed he is), where other authors have failed? To these issues we now turn.

THE ANATOMY OF IRONY

WHAT IS IRONY? TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Enough examples of what is commonly called "irony" are now on the table for us to take up a more formal analysis. We shall begin by seeking a definition. Cicero's definition ("Irony is saying one thing and meaning another") has served many a literary critic quite well over the centuries and in many ways it is still a helpful starting point. But contemporary scholars usually (though not always) search for a more precise, more sophisticated understanding of irony. This has not proven to be an easy task: "There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic

claim...that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it.”¹³ Irony is often used as a catch-all term for a literary device in which there is tension between text and subtext, between what is said and what is actually meant. As a result, irony cannot be thought of in a very narrow sense. Rather, it is a family of literary techniques, all intended to shock the reader into rethinking what has been read. Irony is closely related to tragedy, comedy, sarcasm, invective, parody, satire, and metaphor. Frequently it overlaps with these other literary phenomena, but it usually may be distinguished from them in some way, even if it is hard to specify how.¹⁴ Sometimes irony is intended to be funny; other times it is deadly serious. Irony always (or almost always) has a victim, but it does not aim to merely hurt and destroy, but make the reader consider something previously ignored.

Complicating matters further is the fact that irony is located below the surface of the text. It is a subtextual phenomenon that one has to “read between the lines” to get.

Alan Culpepper explains:

[I]rony [is] a two-story phenomena. Below is the appearance or apparent meaning. Above there is a meaning, perspective, or belief that is contradictory, incongruous, or incompatible with the lower level. The victim, where there is one, is unaware of the higher level or is blindly hostile to it. The reader is invited by the irony to leap to the higher level and share the perspective of the

¹³Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) ix.

¹⁴Good 25ff.

implied author.¹⁵

Irony, then, is a kind of sophisticated literary art that requires cleverness on the part of the writer and quite a bit of effort on the part of the reader. The author “winks” at the reader and expects the reader to pick it up. As in the case of metaphor, when an author speaks with irony, the simple or naive reading is a misreading, though this misreading is almost always a stage that one must pass through (however rapidly) on the way to the proper interpretation of the text. The ironic writer always risks being misunderstood, at least by his duller or less experienced readers. When a writer employs irony, what is said cannot be understood without rejecting what it *seems* to say at first glance. The reader has to deconstruct the face value meaning of the words and then reconstruct the meaning in a more appropriate fashion. But this does not mean all ironies can easily be translated into non-ironic language. In fact, sometimes this is virtually impossible.

At this point, we have still not arrived at a formal definition of irony that really captures the unique literary features of ironic language (though the Culpepper quotation above comes very close). At most we have sketched out the basic qualities of irony. Virtually all literary critics and philosophers of language who deal in irony agree that it is very difficult to define. It seems the best we can do is draw a boundary around the ironic to hem it in; pin-pointing irony has proven to be nearly impossible for even the greatest of minds. While we can be clear about irony, it seems no really adequate, yet simple definition for it has ever been given.¹⁶

¹⁵Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 167.

¹⁶Towards the end of this paper, we will return to matters of definition and see if we can

WHAT MAKES IRONY TICK?

It is easy to see why irony is so hard to define adequately. Therefore, it may be more profitable to turn from an attempt to define irony to a discussion of the inner workings of irony. Perhaps a more precise understanding of irony will emerge from an examination of its dynamics.¹⁷

There are two features that are indispensable to all irony. First, as we saw from Culpepper in the previous section, irony requires that there be two or more textual levels. Only one level is available to the victim of the irony, but both are available to the observer of the irony. In general, we may refer to these two levels as text and subtext, but in the case of a narrative like Mark it may be helpful to also distinguish between the story level and the discourse level of the text. The story level is simply what takes place in the narrative itself, focusing on characters, settings, and events. The discourse level includes the story level, but also embraces the narrator's rhetorical strategies in telling the story. In the next section of this paper, we will look at how Mark uses irony at both the story and discourse levels in his gospel.

The second feature of irony is a tension between these multiple levels. Perhaps this is best illustrated in a case of narrative irony, such as we have in Mark. Throughout Mark, the disciples are oblivious at the story level to the many ironies swirling about them at the discourse level. The reader can see them, thanks to privileged information from the narrator. The disciples are unwitting victims of irony after irony because certain things have been revealed to the reader that are withheld from those within the story. The

come any closer to arriving at our goal of defining irony.

¹⁷It should be noted this is the procedure of most literary critics, who explain irony not so much by a precise definition, but by characterizing its main features and analyzing

disciples often speak ironically without knowing they are doing so. These unintentional *double entendres* arise out of the tension between the story and discourse levels. As Mark progresses, the two levels are almost ripped apart,¹⁸ as the disciples seem more and more determined to misunderstand Jesus, while the reader becomes more and more certain of Jesus' true identity and destiny.¹⁹

Thus, the definition of Cicero with which we began, while too broad to adequately distinguish irony from other types of speech, is not far from the truth. Irony really is "saying one thing, but meaning another," though irony does this in a way that is different from metaphor and other figures of speech. Irony requires a certain amount of incongruence between what is said, at one level, and what is to be understood, at another level. Text and subtext run counter to run another. Irony produces a kind of cognitive dissonance, a kind of shock, in the reader. The reader then realizes that the plain meaning of the text is not the actual meaning and rejects it in favor of a reconstructed meaning.

TYPES OF IRONY

Classifying irony types presents its own challenges. Just as irony virtually defies definition, so types of irony virtually defy classification. However, many literary critics have attempted to classify irony and, depending on the scheme, one may identify as many

concrete examples.

¹⁸That is to say, at just the point when the disciples flee Jesus (Mark 14:50), the sympathetic reader is compelled to follow Jesus. The disciples, as victims of irony (due, mainly, to their own hard-headedness, no doubt), do not grasp what is going on in the story, while the reader, as the perceiver of irony, can see why the plot must take the turns that it does.

¹⁹Or, if the reader was already aware of Jesus' identity and knew the eventual outcome of the story prior to reading it completely (as was the case in much Greek drama), the irony in Mark's narrative would have been quite evident from the outset.

as nineteen types of irony, or as few as two.²⁰ For our purposes, it will be sufficient to break down irony into four overlapping categories based on two classification schemes.

First, it is helpful to distinguish verbal irony from dramatic irony. Verbal irony is the standard form of irony. In a narrative, verbal irony typically takes place at the story level. For example, when the soldiers mock Jesus and call him “King of the Jews” (Mark 15:18), they don’t really mean what they say. In fact, they mean the opposite. To them, this pathetic man is anything but a king and when they call him a king they mean it only in an ironic sense.²¹

In dramatic irony, which occurs at the discourse level, the characters in the story are blind to the irony of the situation.²² But the reader is able to perceive the irony. In this sense, when the soldiers mock Jesus, their taunts *really turn out to be true* as part of the overall drama of the narrative. Coming from their own lips in the story, these taunts were false in what they said, but true in what they meant. Coming from Mark’s pen, the situation is reversed -- what they said is now true and what they meant is false! It is this kind of tension and playfulness that makes irony so delightful to read and so hard to

²⁰Camery-Hoggatt 60.

²¹Obviously, this is the simplest form of irony, and it is probably the type of irony that Cicero, and others who have shared his definition, have in view when they explain irony as “saying one thing, but meaning another.”

²²Consider some textbook-type definitions of dramatic irony. George Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) says “Dramatic irony is a form of speech which assumes a double audience, the first understanding nothing but the face value of the words, the second seeing both the deeper meaning and the incomprehension of the first...Dramatic irony differs from simple irony in that the contrast between what is said and what is meant is intended by the writer of the story, but there is always some character within the story, whether the speaker or another, who does not understand” (104, 134). Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992) says “Dramatic irony consists of discrepancy between what we as readers know and the ignorance of characters in the story” (19). In short, dramatic irony sets a story’s characters against its readers.

describe.

Dramatic irony includes another kind of irony at the discourse level. Not only are there ironic statements, but there are also ironic situations.²³ Dramatic irony may not be explicitly stated, but may be a feature of the plot. Mark 3:1-6 creates an ironic situation of this sort. Nothing said by anyone, including Jesus, the Pharisees, and the narrator, is actually ironic. But the whole scene is. When the Pharisees plot the destruction of Jesus on the Sabbath because he healed on the Sabbath, we are dealing with an ironic situation.

Wayne Booth's seminal work *The Rhetoric of Irony* develops another important distinction. Booth divides ironies into two types: stable and unstable. Unstable irony is ironic "all the way down." As Booth describes it, "The author -- insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed -- refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies."²⁴

For our purposes, stable irony is much more important. All of the examples of irony taken from Mark (as well as most, if not all, of our encounters with irony in daily conversation and reading) are stable. Booth outlines four features of stable irony.²⁵ First, it is intended by the author. The author says something in such a way that the attentive reader will know the author cannot really mean it. The author *wants* his surface level meaning to be rejected.²⁶ As Booth explains, "Whether a given word or passage or work

²³Situational irony is sometimes seen as a third kind of irony, distinct from both verbal and discourse irony, but it seems best to include it under discourse irony. The classic case of situational irony is the burning fire station.

²⁴Booth 240. One can see why the deconstructionists would be drawn to unstable irony. Of course, many scholars question whether unstable irony can really exist at all.

²⁵Booth 4f.

²⁶Of course, in saying that stable ironies are intentional Booth assumes we can know at

is ironic depends, in our present view, not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act.”²⁷ Secondly, stable irony is covert. The author does not write, “Isn’t it ironic that...”²⁸ Rather the irony is lurking just below the surface of the text, waiting to be discovered by the deep reader. Thirdly, stable irony is “fixed, in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions.”²⁹ In other words, there is limit as to how completely the ironic reading of the passage can displace the surface level meaning of the passage. Stable irony is finite in that it has a definite stopping point. The irony is played off against some non-ironic truth at rock bottom. Finally, Booth says stable irony is of a limited scope. It is not universal. Only certain parts of the text (usually easily recognizable) are ironic. We should not necessarily suspect irony under *every* sentence, but only when there is good reason to do so.

PRESUPPOSITIONS OF IRONY

Philosophically, what makes the phenomenon of irony possible? What presuppositions (conscious or unconscious) must the author and reader embrace if irony is to be successfully communicated? What types of belief networks can create and receive irony? While unstable irony (if it exists at all) seems to inhabit a universe of relativism, stable irony (which is our concern here) “postulates a meaningful universe, a moral universe, if you like.”³⁰ Stable irony presupposes an overarching “vision of

least something of the author’s intention. See 11, 126n13. Booth carefully and succinctly dismisses the so called intentional fallacy.

²⁷Booth 91.

²⁸Of course, statements of this sort are not really ironic at all but are attempts to identify or explain an irony.

²⁹Booth 6.

³⁰Good 25. See also Culpepper 178.

truth.”³¹ Because irony takes its stance in some given truth, it is able to offer criticism. Irony requires the assumption that something *ought* to be the case. In fact, very often irony arises out of incongruence between the “is” and the “ought.”³² Since irony requires the presupposition of a moral order, “ironic criticism [cannot be]... nihilistic.”³³ Good is optimistic that ironic criticism is not “meant to destroy...[but] aims at amendment of the incongruous rather than its annihilation.”³⁴ Whether or not irony is always corrective, Good’s point that irony presupposes an absolute morality is clearly on target. Irony implies a norm and contradicts, exposes, and invalidates whatever is out of line with the norm. It is a deeply moral literary phenomenon. As Good goes on to say, “Precisely the health of a vision of truth, ‘a genuine faith,’ makes irony possible.”³⁵ Even better is the summary of Booth:

Dozens of books and thousands of articles have discussed the literary effort to cope with various nihilisms -- with “the death of God,” with emptiness, negation, denial, nothingness, the void, the abyss, the heart of darkness in man and in the universe. But for our purposes it is enough to see clearly that the deeper a man’s doubt runs, the harder it will be for him to write ironically *with intention* that someone should cut through the ironies to some underlying true statement. At the point of extreme doubt, all statement

³¹Good 26.

³²Good’s book is filled with illustrations of just this kind of irony, as is Mark’s gospel.

³³Good 31.

³⁴Good 27.

³⁵Good 32.

becomes suspect.³⁶

MARKS OF IRONY

Identifying irony leads us into an apparent epistemological quagmire. How do we *know* a given text is ironic? I suppose any ironic interpretation could be challenged, but in general, most stable ironies are not too difficult to spot.³⁷

Generally, intelligent readers can identify irony intuitively, even if they cannot explain exactly what is happening. I would be surprised if any serious reader of Mark's gospel thinks that the chief priests or Roman soldiers *really* believed Jesus to be the king of the Jews. I would be equally surprised to find a reader who believes Mark does *not* want to portray Jesus as king of the Jews.

But certainly it is possible to go further in giving an epistemological account of ironic readings. Attentive, experienced readers are capable of recognizing irony with a high degree of certainty. Genre considerations are important in detecting irony. One should not normally look for irony in an automobile repair manual. But a good reader will be open to the possibility of irony in more literary texts, in which the author is assumed to have a certain degree of skill in using words.

In addition, certain clues within the text often indicate the presence of irony. A writer's tone of voice may signal irony, such as we saw above in Camery-Hoggatt's exposition of Mark 6:14-29, where Mark's tone is one of deep understatement. But not

³⁶Booth 244. Booth goes on to show that nihilism would not only destroy irony, but all literary writing and interpretation, if taken seriously. He also quotes Kierkegaard on page 252: "[I]rony is a healthiness in so far as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity." Some have pointed out that, because irony presupposes an absolute truth and morality, it leads to a kind of elitism in which those who grasp the irony look down on those who do not get it. While this may frequently be the case, it certainly does not have to be so. See Booth 29.

only can understated language indicate irony, overcoded language can as well. Consider again Mark 3:6. Mark does not simply tell us the Pharisees wanted to silence or even kill Jesus. He uses virtually the strongest language he can muster: he says they wanted to “destroy” Jesus. Obviously Mark intends for the reader to connect this with the rhetorical question of 3:4, creating a dramatic irony.

Contextual considerations are also crucial in identifying irony. Consider again the words from Mark’s gospel, “Hail, King of the Jews!” (15:18, 32) and Booth’s explanation:

We can easily imagine an early scene with a crowd of admirers shouting these words in absolute devotion. But when the busy little ironists conducting the crucifixion shouted the message, the words became ironic, not of course by virtue of any verbal change, but by a change in intentions. The new context, a religious, social, and political situation had to be seen for what it was by any bystander who hoped to understand the ironic meaning. Then, when Mark reported the words in his gospel account, *his* intentions, discovered in a totally new context (unlike the first two this one could be called “verbal” or literary) displayed double irony. And it would not be hard to imagine another literary work, written by a passionate anti-Christian, in which Mark’s words would be once again

³⁷Again, irony is easier to identify than define.

reversed by the new satiric context into one more ironic message: poor misguided Mark, who thought that the man mocked for being called King of the Jews was in fact King of the Jews, when really he was a fanatical paranoid!³⁸

Irony must fit into a broader context, either linguistic, non-linguistic, or both. It never stands alone. In fact, without proper contextualization, what Booth calls the “clarifying or ‘fixing’ context,”³⁹ irony is almost sure to be misunderstood.

Dramatic irony is often set up in a narrative when the narrator gives the reader privileged information the characters in the story do not possess. Mark’s “Messianic Secret” plays off this principle. Mark immediately clues in the reader to who Jesus is in 1:1-3. He also allows the reader to overhear the voice out of heaven in 1:10-11, which otherwise appears to be a private revelation to Jesus. Thus, the reader shares the narrator’s point of view, in watching the disciples bumble their way through the gospel, never quite figuring out what the reader has known from the very beginning. There is never a messianic secret for the gospel reader, and this is what makes the bulk of Markan irony so ironic.

The extra-linguistic context is also crucial to detecting irony in many texts. We encountered an example of this above, in Mark 6:14, 22, 25, 26, 27. The implied reader of Mark, as a mirror image of the implied narrator, knows the historical background of Herod and can see through the title ascribed to him. However, if the reader lacks the requisite background, the irony may be invisible to him.

Thus, we have seen several marks of irony: genre considerations, tone of voice

³⁸Booth 91-2.

(especially understatement), coded language, contextual indicators, privileged information, and statements contrary to known fact. Booth adds that irony can be created through an author's title or epilogue as well.⁴⁰ But have we really answered the epistemological question? Do we really *know* irony when we see it? How can we be sure? As Booth points out, "To use words like 'knowledge' and 'knowing' for the ironic exchange may seem unduly ambitious to anyone who has taken part in controversy about how to read this or that ironic work."⁴¹ Any interpretation of a supposedly ironic passage should be offered in humility. But just because we cannot take irony into the lab and run tests on it, to determine if it is really irony, doesn't mean we have to be skeptics. As Booth says, "It is no doubt true that according to some criteria of proof such knowledge is not knowledge at all, but rather only belief, or hunch, or intuition."⁴² We cannot have empirical or deductive certainty of irony, but we can achieve a reasonable certainty *by other criteria*.⁴³ Again, Booth: "All I would claim is that we have here discovered a form of interpretation that gives us knowledge of a firm (and neglected) kind, a kind quite unrelated both to ordinary empirical observation and to standard deductive or logical proofs."⁴⁴

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE IRONIC

³⁹Booth 93.

⁴⁰Booth 84.

⁴¹Booth 14.

⁴²Booth 14.

⁴³Thus, knowledge of irony may be considered a form of what has been classically called "poetic knowledge" rather than "analytic knowledge."

⁴⁴Booth 14. One problem involved in the interpretation of irony is that irony requires a more complex reading of a text than we may want to grant. Ordinarily, we want to employ a criterion of simplicity in our reading -- the simplest sensible interpretation is best. But the presence of irony in a text will not allow us to do that. Irony requires the reader to dig deeper and employ a "criterion of complexity," in which the more

An examination of how ironic readings are deconstructed and then reconstructed can further help us understand how irony works and how it is identified. Booth describes this process in great detail and all we can do is summarize it here. He outlines several steps in what he calls the “reconstruction” process (although part of the process is really a deconstruction).

In coming across irony, the reader realizes that the plain meaning of the text must be rejected because it involves too many tensions or even contradictions. The reader may be aware of the irony because he has been tipped off by one of the signals discussed in the preceding section or because what is stated conflicts with a network of beliefs -- either his own, or that of the author, or that generated by the text. In short, the reader realizes that “if the author did not intend irony, it would be odd, or outlandish, or inept, or stupid of him to do things in this way.”⁴⁵

Once the reader realizes he must reject the literal meaning of the passage, he will frequently backtrack and consider the possibility that the author has been careless, or has “gone off the deep end.” After all, people do write stupid things in all seriousness sometimes. Are there alternatives more plausible than irony? Given what we know of our author, what *could* he have meant? Is there anything in the tone of voice or vocabulary that could point towards irony? What about generic and contextual indicators? In such cases, if we assume our author is intelligent (or at least give him the benefit of the doubt), we will consider the possibility of irony and begin to decode it.

In order to judge if the author is being ironic, as opposed to careless or stupid, one must reconstruct, at least to some extent, the author’s network of beliefs or world view.

complicated reading is seen to be superior.

If we find he could not have been serious, we must choose a new meaning. This may (but does not have to) involve para-phrasing the irony into non-ironic language as closely as possible.⁴⁶

Choosing this new meaning completes the reconstruction process. Of course, a good interpretation of the ironic statement will require choosing the meaning best in accord with the author's known network of beliefs and the rest of the text.

THE LOCATION OF IRONY

Where is irony located?⁴⁷ The location of irony requires us to take up the larger question of the location of meaning in general. Where is meaning found? Is it in the author's intent? Is it in the text? Is it in the reader's interpretation? Obviously, there are numerous contemporary scholars arguing for each one of these positions and not all the issues involved can be addressed here. Author-centered approaches, text-centered approaches, and reader-centered approaches all have their various strengths and weaknesses. But it seems best to say that successfully communicated irony is found in all three of these, author, text, and reader, because all three take part in the communication process and in some sense "coinhere" in one another. It would be a mistake to exalt any one of these to a position that excludes the other two.

Certainly authorial intent carries a certain normativity. A good interpretation will be concerned with discovering what the author himself intended to communicate. Of course, there is an element of subjectivity in this. Our own beliefs may interfere with our

⁴⁵Booth 52-3.

⁴⁶Booth acknowledges this para-phrase can never capture the richness of the original irony and may not even be possible at all. See 6, 39.

⁴⁷Obviously, this is a metaphorical question. Irony is not an object that can be put somewhere. But surely an exposition of irony cannot be expected to use exclusively

understanding of the author's intention. Or, in reconstructing the author's own world view, we may attribute beliefs to the author that he does not hold, causing us to misconstrue his intentions. But it is important to recognize that authorial intent possesses a normative authority for all interpretation. It is the standard against which all interpretations must be measured. If we want to support an ironic reading of a text, we must demonstrate that the author did, or at least could have, intended the irony.⁴⁸

But it is not enough to look for irony in the intention of the author. After all, the author's intentions are largely closed off from us, apart from what has actually been written. Authorial intent can never be separated from the text itself. Our greatest point of access to the author's intentions are in the text as it comes to us from the author.⁴⁹ In a sense, we might say the author's intentions are embedded in the text. The text is the medium through which the author conveys his communicative intentions; it embodies his

literal language!

⁴⁸Another complicating factor, and one which makes it unwise to focus exclusively on authorial intent, is that authors can, due to human fallibility, mis-communicate their intentions. Some authors poorly manage their media of communication and as a result their intentions are opaque. Thus, while we must never grant a text pure autonomy by cutting it loose from the intentions of the author who wrote it, we must also affirm that, in some sense, texts have meaning independent of authorial intent. Consider a student taking a test. He knows the answer, but for whatever reason, writes it incorrectly. The teacher will only be concerned with what is written on the page and will disregard the student's true (mental) intention. Or take a baseball analogy: Texts are like pitches after they leave the pitcher's arm. The pitcher may have aimed for the strike zone, but may misfire and end up throwing a ball. His intentions will not persuade the umpire to call a strike. This is not to say texts take on a life of their own once they leave the author's pen, but it does mean authors should carefully consider how their texts will be received and do their best to communicate exactly what they intend. In other words, follow the old cliché and "say what you mean" (even when using irony!). An interesting question which flows out of this, but which cannot be pursued here, is how responsible authors are for what communities of readers do with their texts, especially long after the text has been written.

⁴⁹Of course, if we know an author personally we can just ask him, but in cases where we do not have this personal access to the author, the text itself reveals more about his intentions than anything else we have.

intentions. Applied to irony, this means that if a reader wants to argue for an ironic interpretation of a text, he must show marks of irony in the text itself.⁵⁰

Because no text is written into a void,⁵¹ the response of the audience to the text matters as well. In order for irony to be successfully communicated, it must be found not only in the author's intention and the text he has used to transmit that intention, but in the response of the audience to the work. An author must consider the audience he has in view: Will they have the requisite mental equipment and background beliefs to spot the irony? How should the irony be couched, so as not to be misunderstood by the intended audience? How can the author best insure that his intended irony will show up in the interpretation of a competent reader? If the intended audience does not grasp the irony intended by the author, the author has mis-communicated, and we may question whether or not irony is really present in the text at all.

The response of the reader to irony has too long been overlooked but if a successful ironic communication (or "exchange") is to take place, the reader must be involved. There is no *communicative* meaning apart from the reaction of the reader to the author through means of interaction with the text. Consider the insight of Camery-Hoggatt on this point, in his treatment of the narrative text of Mark's gospel:

[T]here is growing recognition that, though that range of reactions is informed and shaped by the narrative itself, as a kind of coinage exchange, there is more involved. The narrative is not all that matters in the narrative exchange.

⁵⁰We have already examined the most important textual marks of irony in an earlier section of this paper.

⁵¹Even if the author writes for himself, such as in a personal journal, there is still an

The “reader” is someone who possesses specific competencies -- skills and bodies of knowledge -- against which the details of the narrative work out their rhetorical play. Those competencies can only be understood within the social and linguistic matrix which the author or redactor assumes. Thus sociology of knowledge is receiving increasing attention in literary scholarship. In the study of irony, this has entailed a subtle shift even in the way that irony is recognized and understood. Rather than viewing irony as a property resident within the *text*, scholars now recognize irony as somehow resident within the reaction of the reader. This is a shift which reflects increasing interest in the narrative exchange as a genuine human transaction, worthy of exploration in its own right.⁵²

The next to last sentence of this quotation goes too far -- successfully communicated irony is present in *both* the text and the response of the reader, and we could add, it is also present in the original intention of the author, as we have already seen. But thus qualified, Camery-Hoggatt has made an important point: the response of the reader is crucial to the transmission of irony. In fact, the response of the reader is probably more important in the case of ironic texts than with most other literary devices since irony “requires of its hearers [or readers] the burden of recognition.”⁵³ Irony forces the reader

audience -- himself!

⁵²Camery-Hoggatt x.

⁵³Good 31ff.

to share the communication burden with the author by “reading between the lines.”⁵⁴

Is it possible for a reader to find irony where it is not? Can a reader “create” an irony on his own apart from the author? In one sense, yes. A text may end up having an ironic effect on a reader when it was not intended by the author and we should not totally dismiss this. An author may have said something in a literal fashion, which, due to a change in circumstance, becomes ironic in some sense.⁵⁵ However, cases such as these are unique and should be separated from cases where irony is an intended act of communication.⁵⁶ On the other hand, we can also answer the above question with a flat no. Readers may not be given a blank check that allows them to do whatever they like with a text. A case of irony that is the sheer creation of a reader is not a good interpretation. A competent reader will discover irony where it is intended and where it shows itself in the text, but will refrain from finding irony where it is not.⁵⁷

In concluding this section, we should note that the ideal case of irony leads to a harmony between author, text, and reader. The author’s intentions are smoothly transmitted through his text, and then received by the audience in such a way that their interpretation matches what the author originally wanted to communicate.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Thus the ironic author always risks misunderstanding. See Good 31f.

⁵⁵It is also possible for an ironic text to lose its ironic features. See Good 23f.

⁵⁶For more on irony that goes beyond authorial intent, see Good 32f.

⁵⁷For a more extended discussion on how we judge who is a competent reader, as well an examination of competencies that are assumed by a text and generated by a text, see Camery-Hoggatt 59ff and David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 142ff.

⁵⁸I think Booth has, in language quite different from mine, reached this same conclusion: Whether a given word or passage or work *is* ironic depends, in our present view, not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act. And whether it is *seen* as ironic depends on the reader catching the proper clues to those intentions. It has become conventional to say that the reader discovers these clues “in the context.” This is a safe enough way of putting it,

THE INTERPRETATION OF IRONY

All we have said so far about the marks of irony, the way irony works to achieve its effect, the procedure by which irony is deconstructed and reconstructed by the reader, and so forth, contribute to the proper interpretation of irony. In examining these features we have laid the ground rules for the interpretation of irony. But a word of caution should be added here. As we have seen, irony is a complex literary technique. The complexity of irony is appropriate since irony is almost always used to draw attention to the complexities of the world, language, and our experience. It would be ironic indeed if such a complex literary device were used only to communicate the simplest ideas! Interpreting irony involves all the ambiguities and problems we have already looked at. Therefore, we must avoid the temptation to reduce it to a matter of a few simple rules, just as we must avoid simplistic definitions. Interpreting irony is more of an art than a science, more like a skill or craft acquired and perfected by repeated experience and imitation of others, than a mechanical technique. One can not simply expect to press a few interpretive buttons on a text, as though it were a machine or computer, and expect the meaning to pop out. Irony requires the interpreter to reflect, to work, to experiment, to discuss. Perhaps the difficulties involved will make some skeptical of all ironic interpretations or cause them to cave in to simpler explanations, but that is their loss. The difficulties and ambiguities involved in interpreting irony are present in the interpretation

provided we remember that we cannot know in advance which of many possible contextual matters will be relevant -- other parts of the work itself, knowledge about the author's life and times, or the reader's deepest convictions about what authors are likely to say in earnest. Even those of us who believe that "the text" is always in some sense final arbiter of meanings will find ourselves using many contexts that according to some critical theories are extrinsic (91)

Note how Booth considers authorial intent, text, and reader response to each be important

of all art, language-based or not. Literary art rarely accommodates itself to the mind that must have everything neat and tidy. We must always remember: texts don't have decimal points.

UNDERSTANDING IRONY AND OTHER LITERARY DEVICES: BACK TO MATTERS OF DEFINITION

We have now come full circle in our discussion of irony. Have we made any progress in our understanding of the ironic? Are we better able to interpret and perhaps even create our own ironic texts? Are we now able to distinguish irony from its closely related literary cousins? Can we now offer a more precise formal definition of irony?

Whether or not our discussion of irony aids us in understanding, interpreting, and creating ironic texts must be tested "in the field," i. e., through reading ironic texts and seeing what we can now do with them. Hopefully some light has been shed on the ironic.

But what about the relationship of irony to other literary devices? Certainly irony has much in common with other types of literary texts and is sometimes defined in such a way as to be hardly distinguishable from them. Culpepper accurately describes the problem:

To say simply that irony "consists in saying one thing and intending the opposite" or that it is "the disparity between the meaning conveyed and the literal meaning of the words" does not adequately distinguish irony from metaphor, symbol, or mockery. Muecke astutely diagnosed the problem inherent in such simple definitions: "The

in its own way.

principal obstacle in the way of a simple definition of irony
is the fact that irony is not a simple phenomenon.”⁵⁹

Singling out what makes irony unique is difficult and may even be impossible in some cases. While it would be a worthy project to compare irony to a whole host of related literary techniques, for our purposes it will be sufficient to compare irony to two similar literary devices, sarcasm and metaphor.⁶⁰

Most dictionary definitions of irony include sarcasm as a form of irony in at least one of their definitions, implying that irony and sarcasm are virtually synonymous. Conversely, most dictionary definitions of sarcasm include a mention of irony. Certainly there is a great deal of overlap between sarcasm and irony but there are also some crucial differences. Sarcasm can perhaps best be seen as a subset of irony, because, whereas all sarcasm is biting in tone, often times irony is more humorous than invective. Sarcasm usually does not aim to correct anything, but only mock, whereas irony, because of the reflection it requires to decode, usually does aim at reformation in some way. Sarcasm is usually simpler than irony and does not require the complicated deconstruction/reconstruction process that irony forces us to go through.

Metaphor and irony are probably further apart than sarcasm and irony. Metaphor speaks of one thing in terms of the parts (not the whole) of something else. Metaphor makes a comparison, in which certain relevant features of one thing are attributed to something else. Metaphor draws two things together, placing them side by side in some respect, so that their similarities become evident to the competent reader. But in irony, there is not so much a comparison as there is a contrast. In ironic language, the writer

⁵⁹Culpepper 166.

contrasts truth and reality in such a way that the words mean virtually the opposite of what they appear to say.

This difference between metaphor and irony (the fact that one is comparative and the other contrastive) has a bearing on the decoding process used for each. The process of deciphering metaphor is quite different from the deconstruction/reconstruction process involved in irony. Take a common metaphor as an example: “All the world’s a stage.” Deciphering this metaphor requires us to pick out just what properties of a stage are applicable to the world. If we say the world has a curtain in front and seats facing it from below and costs \$5.00 to see when a show is playing, we have missed the point of the metaphor. Metaphorical language may not be any easier to unravel than ironic language, but the process is substantially different. In metaphor, the reader reflects on the *comparison* between the two objects and decides what features of the one are being applied to the other. Metaphor exploits some analogous relationship between two things. The role of the reader is to puzzle out the analogy. In irony the reader reflects on the *contrast* between the text’s surface level meaning (which is only the apparent meaning) and the subtextual meaning (which is the intended meaning). Irony presents an indirect contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs; it exploits the contrast between “is” and “ought” or between expected conditions and actual conditions. The role of the reader is to feel this tension in the text and resolve it.

While being able to distinguish irony, as much as possible, from other related literary devices is helpful, it is not the same as producing a definition of irony. Earlier in this paper we sought to move towards a definition of irony without ever really arriving at

⁶⁰For a fuller comparison of irony to other literary devices, see Good 25ff.

our goal. Even here, near the conclusion of this paper, we are doomed to fall short of a truly adequate definition. However, our failure to give a formal, precise definition does not make our project a failure. We can still experience the pleasure of irony -- and even achieve a great deal of clarity and certainty about it -- without a Webster-type explanation. Perhaps, even in this, there is something revealing about irony. Irony is better enjoyed than explained, better delighted in than dissected.

MARK'S USE OF IRONY AND MARKAN INTERPRETATION

MARKAN IRONY IN LIGHT OF THE HISTORY OF MARKAN INTERPRETATION

We have found irony to be a rather elusive language game, but one which can be used to great effectiveness if successfully executed. Now we must turn back to Mark: Has Mark successfully communicated his ironic message to his readers? Have his winks, sly smiles, and raising of the brow been totally lost on the part of his reading community? To make this evaluation, we must consider the history of the interpretation of Mark's gospel.

If Mark's gospel is ironic by design, as this paper has claimed, why was it missed for so long? Perhaps it was not. After all, the vast majority of Markan readers have not left us a record of their interpretation. Perhaps many of Mark's readers through the centuries have intuitively sensed his ironies, but lacked the wherewithal to correctly label them. Nonetheless, we still must reckon with the fact that, with few exceptions, prior to the last twenty years, Mark's use of irony was largely overlooked by commentators. A

notable exception, and perhaps the scholar who did the most to alert modern readers of Mark to the use of irony in his gospel, was Thomas Hobbes.⁶¹ But, on the whole, why did so many readers for so many years overlook irony in Mark? What blinders kept Mark's readers from perceiving his many ironic touches? Perhaps genre considerations had something to do with it -- since Mark was read as religious literature, it was taken too seriously to be seen as ironic. (Never mind the repeated and obvious use of sarcasm by Jesus and Paul against their opponents!)⁶² Perhaps Markan irony was missed because those who would be most inclined to see it -- the scholarly establishment -- were too concerned with other aspects of the text, such as matters of theology and history.⁶³ Perhaps most readers of Mark have simply been unlitrary and obtuse (somewhat like the disciples!). It must be noted, however, with the rise of interdisciplinary biblical studies, literary analysis of biblical texts is becoming much more common and is paying rewarding dividends to those who have taken the time to look at the Bible from a literary standpoint. As far as Mark is concerned, numerous special studies have focused on irony, such as those by Camery-Hoggatt and Fowler, and these insights are beginning to trickle down to the commentators. It is now quite standard to see any scholarly study of Mark include at least some reference to Mark's employment of irony.⁶⁴

It may be objected that in these literary studies on Mark, modern literary-critical techniques are being applied illegitimately to ancient texts. In some cases this may be a

⁶¹Booth 28. Hobbes noted irony at Mark 15:18 in particular.

⁶²For more on this point, see Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1964).

⁶³Ryken, 20, offers this explanation.

⁶⁴For evidence, see Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993) 389f. For more on why Mark's use of irony was overlooked or ignored for so long, see Camery-Hoggatt 13ff.

valid complaint, but in the case of irony there is no reason why it would be. Literary critics have found irony to be a virtually universal cultural phenomenon, and certainly it was known among the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, whose civilizations and literature form the cultural backdrop for Mark (and the rest of the New Testament). To read Mark ironically is quite natural in its historic, social, and literary setting.

THE PURPOSE OF MARKAN IRONY

Mark has seasoned his gospel with an ironic flavor. The irony is clearly in the text by design. It is the result of the storyteller's intention. Textual strategies are deliberately employed to evoke ironic responses. And, if the communicative act is successful, irony will show itself in its effect on Mark's reader. Interpreters of Mark might wonder why he has used irony so thoroughly. Surely it has to do with the purpose of his gospel, which, given the abrupt ending,⁶⁵ is to call on the reader to "finish the story" by becoming a true disciple of Jesus.⁶⁶

Ironologists have also noticed that irony builds a sense of community among those who "get it" and this could be part of Mark's purpose as well. Irony divides readers into insiders and outsiders, those who can decipher the irony, and those who fail to do so. By using irony in a deliberate but covert fashion, Mark has produced a narrative with power to form community. Whether or not Mark's use of irony is, in the end, persuasive -- that is, whether or not it makes the reader want to join the community his gospel has created --

⁶⁵Assuming, of course, that the text should end at 16:8.

⁶⁶As Fowler says (248), "How the reader responds to the end of Mark's gospel is what the end of Mark's gospel is all about." That is not to say that a call to discipleship is the only purpose Mark had in writing, but clearly it is one of his major goals. It is part of an overarching rhetorical strategy aimed at persuading readers to see the ministry of Jesus as Jesus himself saw it, to win their loyalty to his cause, even if it means undergoing persecution from "outsiders" who don't "get it," and to accept the paradoxical pattern of

is up to every reader of Mark to decide for himself.

living in the kingdom of God, as Jesus himself did (Mark 8:34-35). See also Hays, 90.