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INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF IRONY IN MARK

The subtitle of this book – “Text and subtext” – is taken from a discussion of the relationship of language and thought in James Miller’s “rhetoric of imagination,” *Word, Self, Reality*. In that essay, Miller puts his finger on the pulse of the linguistic reality which makes irony possible. The passage in view discusses the view held in theatrical circles that there are often differences of nuance between the surface meaning of the dialogue – the “text” – and the underlying connotative meanings – the “subtext.” Often, the “play” itself resides in the interplay between these two: “When actors come to understand the subtext of the play, they can then give the interpretation that makes for great performances.”¹ Miller’s distinction between text and subtext lies at the core of this rhetoric of irony. Irony occurs when the elements of the story-line provoke the reader to see beneath the surface of the text to deeper significances.

Sometimes the two dimensions of stress are extensions of each other, but sometimes they stand at odds. When the former takes place, the basic thrust of the message can be heightened by the congruity with its form; when the latter takes place, the incongruity can evoke reactions which are downright visceral. For this reason, the relationships between text and subtext can be extraordinarily complex or subtle. We are prone to overlook them whenever we insist that the “meaning” of the language can be reduced to a single, unified field of reference. Because irony is complex, our natural tendency is to treat the ironic as something exceptional, something created by conscious literary artifice, and therefore as somewhat removed from the ordinary operations of language. But this is misleading. Miller has pointed out that ordinary language is replete with subtexts. If this is so in English, then perhaps also in the “ordinary” language of the Bible. Thus we are brought to the subject of irony in the Gospel of Mark.

The state of the question

The observation that there is dramatic irony at work in the Gospel of Mark is not a new one. As early as the seventeenth century, Sir Thomas Hobbes noted in his “York Tile Maker’s Play” the presence of irony in the mockery of the soldiers in Mark 15. 18: “Hail, King of the Jews.”² This first example provides an opportunity to refine more closely a methodological distinction which will later prove critical in our discussion of the social implications of Markan irony: sometimes the irony of an event or a saying is available to the characters “inside” the story. That is the case with the clear verbal sarcasm of the soldiers’ mockery. It is clear that their mockery is precisely that. By hailing Jesus “King of the Jews” they intend exactly the opposite of homage. The gallows humour by which they have dressed him up to die is intended as an affront, not to Jesus only, but to the Jewish nation itself. What they *mean* is in balanced dissonance with what they *say*. The text and the subtext are in diametrical opposition. The soldiers are quite aware of that opposition, as is everyone else inside the story. But the soldiers have no way of knowing that for Mark’s readers the designation of Jesus as “King of the Jews” is exactly right. In their impudence, the soldiers have made an unknowing acclamation. The soldiers have no way of knowing that, for Mark’s readers, the spindles of the crown of thorns would have appeared a peculiarly appropriate corona. There is, therefore, a second sense in which the dramatic ironies of the soldiers’ sarcasm are available only to the reader, who stands outside the narrative action and views it from a different vantage-point. It is this latter level of irony – dramatic irony – which interests us here. Simply put, dramatic irony occurs when the story-line itself plays upon the reader’s own repertoire of knowledge and convictions to produce a distinctive subtext. Though the reactions of the *reader* are orchestrated against that repertoire, the reactions of the story’s characters cannot be. The characters are participants in the event, but they cannot know that the story about the event will be told in precisely this way.

I mention this now because, in the earliest discussions, the distinction between irony which is *within* the narrative and that which is *carried* by the narrative is often obscured or ignored. The result is that such studies were sometimes truncated or distorted by an interpretative point of view which was blinded to the literary dimensions of the story-line *as such*. A primary example is Jakob Jónsson’s

Humour and Irony in the New Testament, which appeared in 1965.³ A good deal of Jónsson's discussion is concentrated on the gospels, but for all its attention to the humour of the Jesus sayings, this book misses entirely the obvious ironies the Jesus story would have held for the gospels' reader.

Sometimes the two levels are congruent, and differ primarily in degree. In 1950 Albert Descamps briefly called attention to the irony of the saying in Mark 2. 17, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."⁴ The ambiguity here is quite subtle. On the surface of it, Jesus could simply have meant that the zeal of the "righteous" stood them in good stead already, and that the call of God was now extended beyond them to include sinners. But the context here militates against that view. The open hostility of the "righteous" sets them against the sinners who are called, and thus over against the one who calls them.⁵ Put another way, because Jesus has come to call sinners, his call positively excludes the "righteous". All of that would have been accessible to Jesus' listeners, but we can suppose that, in Mark's context, in which questions of ritual purity and the extension of salvation to the Gentiles had raised the antagonism of Jewish detractors to a higher pitch (see Mark 7. 1–23), the saying "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" would have become a good deal more potent.

At other times the second level of irony is so thoroughly embedded in the narrative *as such* that it is available to the reader in a sense which completely excludes the story's characters. A good case in point is the irony of the trial of Jesus in 14. 55–65, which has been interpolated into the story of Peter's denial in 14. 54, 66–72. Here, because the reader has been guided into the story-world by the narrator, he is able to follow events which are happening simultaneously for two sets of characters. He has also been privy to Jesus' prophecy of Peter's denial which had appeared earlier in the chapter (14. 30). With these resources in hand, he is able – as a reader – to perceive a critical irony in the unanswered demand that Jesus prophesy in v. 55. William Lane's analysis comes closest to recognizing Mark's narrative strategy here:

The irony inherent in the situation is evident when the force of juxtaposing verse 65 and verses 66–72 is appreciated. At the precise time when the court attendants were heaping scorn and derision upon Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, the prophecy that Peter would deliberately deny him was being fulfilled.⁶

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But there is something subtler here, which Lane overlooks. The scorn heaped upon Jesus centered upon his failure to prophesy, while Peter's denial in the courtyard was a precise vindication of Jesus' prophetic ability. If the prophecy in 10. 33 is drawn into the picture, the very fact that Jesus is standing trial further vindicates his prophetic identity. The reader is called upon to pass judgment against the authorities at the very moment they pass judgment against Jesus. So this is a trial with two verdicts, one leveled by the authorities, and one leveled against them.

From here it is but a short step to the realization that the ironies in the narrative force the reader to a decision. This is one means of leveraging the opinion of the reader for or against the actions of the story's characters. In that way, a clever ironist can ask the reader to consolidate his or her commitments to the values of the group which considers the story sacred. That remark has been made already by Wayne Booth, in a comment on the irony of the soldiers' mockery which Thomas Hobbes had pointed out:

It is true that Mark may in part intend an irony against the original ironists, but surely his chief point is to build, through ironic pathos, a sense of brotherly cohesion among those who see the essential truth in his account of this man—God who, though *really* King of the Jews, was reduced to this miserable mockery. The wicked and foolish insolence of those who mocked the Lord with the original “hail” is no doubt part of Mark's picture, but it is surely all in the service of the communion of Saints.⁷

This note is significant for its clear observation that irony creates a sense of community which — as Booth goes on to insist — is “larger . . . with fewer outsiders, than would have been built by non-ironic statement” (p.29). The idea that irony contributes to community will occupy a significant portion of our attention in the pages which follow. As we shall see, there are three areas in particular in which irony contributes to the survival of the group. First, because it forces the reader to decision, and because the direction of that decision is clearly indicated, irony can serve legitimating functions, by which the group's institutions and practices are secured against threats and challenges. Second, because it divides its listeners or readers into “insiders” and “outsiders,” irony aids in group-boundary definition. Third, because it can “overcode” language with new dimensions of significance, irony helps to keep the group's “language-world” open-

ended and pliable. Traditional stories can be made to yield new, ironic meanings, and in that way can be appropriated for new and different circumstances. These are dimensions of the biblical tradition which have thus far hardly been noticed, much less explored.

One implication of what we have just suggested is that irony, which is carried through the medium of the narrative, itself can serve the sociological needs of the group. Sometimes those functions are also served by irony which lies within the narrative, as Madeleine Boucher pointed out in her discussion of Jesus' parables, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study*. In this discussion, which appeared in 1977, Boucher ranges irony under the wider category of "trope," along with metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and – as a special instance of metaphor – allegory:

A trope, as its name implies, is a turn or change which occurs when an unexpected word is placed in a syntactic structure and is thereby given another meaning in addition to its literal one ... In every trope, then, the word has two levels of meaning, the direct and literal, and the indirect and tropical. Between the two levels of meaning there is both similarity and dissimilarity, with sometimes the one predominating, sometimes the other.⁸

In irony, though, the dissimilarity dominates (pp. 19f), and it often sharpens the dissonance between the two levels of meaning. In this way, the tropical qualities of irony and the tropical qualities of parables can be connected and compared. That a duality of meaning is constitutive of Jesus' parables Boucher understands to be patent (p. 22). It is for this reason that the parables can be understood as riddles or mysteries (Mark 4. 11 f): they imply a comparison between two dimensions of reality which – since one is only implied in the other – "require insight on the part of the hearer if it is to be grasped" (p. 25). Yet that insight is not freely formed. It is, instead, patterned in response to the elements of the trope as they unfold against the backdrop of the reader's own knowledge and convictions. In the terms which we have used thus far, the tropical dimensions of a text are intended to be grasped against a particular subtext. "Insight" is as much a product of the parabolic event as it is a native skill possessed by the reader.

What is intriguing in our discussion of Markan irony is the possibility that Mark's narrative itself may have "tropical" nuances, may be parabolic, may shift in significance as it is appropriated for

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new and different circumstances. If that is so, the literary insights employed in parable research may prove helpful if applied to the narrative as a whole. That observation, which will later prove to be critical in our evaluation of Mark's rhetoric, has been made most recently in Werner Kelber's discussion of Mark's genre.⁹ For Kelber, the programmatic key lies in the famous crux at 4. 11f:

To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God,
 But for those who are outside everything is in riddles;
 so that they might indeed see
 but not perceive,
 and may indeed hear
 but not understand;
 lest they should turn again and be forgiven.

The following comments come just after Kelber's discussion of the parabolic quality of the book as a whole:

The intriguingly difficult verses 4:10–12 contain the germ of Mark's so-called parabolic theory. In response to a question concerning parables Jesus states that "to those about him with the twelve" (4:10; au. trans.) the mystery has been given that pertains to the kingdom of God, whereas "to those on the outside" (*ekeinois de tois exo*) everything is "in parables" (4:11). One immediately observes an insider–outsider dichotomy. Insiders are admitted to the mystery of the kingdom, while outsiders are barred from it ... This, then, is the heart of the so-called theory on parables: parabolic discourse is the carrier of a cryptic message that casts to the outside those who cannot fathom it, while confirming as insiders those to whom it is revealed. (p. 121)

Here, Kelber concurs with – and quotes – Boucher: "Mark has not taken clear, straightforward speech, the parable, and transformed it into obscure, esoteric speech, the allegory. He has rather taken what is essential to the parable, the double-meaning effect, and made it the starting point of a theological theme concerning the audience's resistance to hearing the word."¹⁰ But Kelber runs beyond Boucher in discovering the "double-meaning effect" in the book as a whole.

If Kelber is right, we should not be surprised to discover that dramatic ironies are widely distributed throughout Mark's narrative. That suggestion has already been made by Gilbert Bilezekian, whose study of tragic action in Mark appeared in 1977.¹¹ Bilezekian based

his understanding of irony on the definition set forth by Joseph T. Shipley: irony is “a device whereby . . . incongruity is introduced in the very structure of the plot, by having the spectators [in our case, the readers] aware of elements in the situation of which one or more of the characters involved are ignorant.”¹² With that definition in hand, he simply listed a wide variety of places in which irony or *double entendre* may play a role in the unfolding rhetoric of Mark's story. His list is organized under three headings:

1. Irony expressed as sarcasm or humour;
 2. Irony emerging from the use of esoteric language which would have been clear to the audience; and
 3. Irony which occurs “when the reverse of an expected course of action takes place, or when an effect or paradox or contrast is introduced”.
- (p. 123)

Of these, we are interested primarily in the second and third. Of the examples given, perhaps half are open to question, and it remains regrettable that Bilezekian did not explore the literary and verbal dynamics by which the ironies he lists have been brought about.

In 1977 there also appeared in print Donald Juel's 1973 doctoral dissertation, *Messiah and Temple: The Trial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark*.¹³ In this study, Juel carried forward the observation of his mentor, Nils Dahl, that the Messianic Secret¹⁴ is hidden only from the characters in the story. The reader has already been informed in Mark 1.1 that Jesus is the “Christ the Son of God.” With that knowledge in hand, the reader's reaction to the elements of the narrative is leveraged over against the reactions of the story's characters. This basic assumption, that the narrative operates on two levels, forms the basis for Juel's analysis of the “temple charge” brought against Jesus in his trial before the sanhedrin in 14.58. He begins by noting the clear-cut ironies in the mockery of the soldiers (15.16–20; Juel, p.47), and in the taunts leveled at Jesus on the cross (15.29, 31f; Juel, p.48). In both instances, the taunts carry secondary levels of meaning for the reader. Since the charge brought against Jesus in 14.58 parallels these in content, it must also carry secondary levels of meaning (p.57). The movement between the superficial facts of the story and their theological implications Juel then notes in a series of Markan complexes, all related in one way or another to the trial and crucifixion.

That central thesis he developed more broadly in 1978 in the treatment of Mark in his introductory level survey of the NT as

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literature.¹⁵ Although brief, and written for laymen, Juel's discussion here is in many ways the most exegetically responsible treatment of Markan irony yet to appear. He begins with the observation that the passion in Mark operates on two levels, and that therefore "dramatic irony runs through Mark's passion story" (p. 179). Those two levels – "revelation" to the reader and "mystery" for the characters – form the basic structures of his discussion. The narrative strategies by which the content of the revelation has been disclosed to the reader are surveyed, but only briefly, as follows:

1. The disclosure in the prologue,
2. Aspects of the trial and crucifixion,
3. Peter's confession,
4. The affirmations of Jesus as God's son, and
5. Notes about the special demands of discipleship.

In effect, what Juel has suggested is that irony in the narrative results from the skillful use of rhetorical devices which structure the reader's reactions in various ways. But Juel was not the first to point this out. Robert Fowler's 1973 doctoral dissertation included a systematic tabulation of the "reliable commentary" against which the Markan ironies could be articulated.¹⁶ Note that the term "reliable" here implies a literary judgment, not an historical one. What Fowler had in view was the voice of the narrator as a reliable guide into and around the story-world. The reader or listener is expected to trust the narrator, and that expectation is rewarded appropriately.¹⁷ We may, with Fowler, review briefly some of the rhetorical devices by which Mark's narrator builds up the reader's distinctive perceptions of the story and its elements:

- I. Direct comments to the reader
 - A. The title and epigraph
- II. Linking statements
- III. Parenthetical constructions
 - A. Explanations of foreign customs and concepts
 - B. Translations of foreign words
 - C. Winks at the reader
 - D. Explanatory clauses
 - E. Markan insertions
 - F. Intercalations
 - G. Doublets
- IV. Inside views
- V. Unanswered questions

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VI. Reliable characters

- A. Jesus
- B. The voice from heaven/the cloud
- C. The demons
- D. The centurion at the cross
- E. The young man at the tomb

VII. Prospective passages: build-ups and introductions

The idea that an author must provide guidance for the reader has a variety of collateral implications which will command our attention in the pages which follow. Fowler devotes an entire chapter to this question.¹⁸ What he has left unexplored, however, is the implication that the very fact that such guidance is necessary implies a tension between the points of view of the characters inside the story, and those of its readers.

That dimension of the literature was explored in 1980 by Robert Tannehill, in an article, "Tension in Synoptic Sayings and Stories."¹⁹ According to Tannehill, when the points of view of the story's characters are understood to be reliable or normative, their elucidation may be a call for conversion. On the surface of it, this point is obvious. But what about the points of view of the characters who are unreliable, or who are condemned in the narrative? When the characters or their actions are condemned – whether implicitly or explicitly is irrelevant – the reader is called upon to share the point of view from which the condemnation proceeds. Thus the challenges in the text may be sociologically or theologically potent. For Tannehill, that potency is heightened by Mark's ironic paradoxes, all of which reach a kind of acme in the passion.

In the passion story the paradox is turned into drama in the mocking scenes which follow each of the main events in Jesus' way to the cross (the two trials and the crucifixion), for the same words that reject the dying Jesus are ironic confessions of him. The dramatic tension of these events is heightened by a series of suggestions of ways in which Jesus might escape. Those inclined to seek such escape from death are enticed to false hope: then hope is crushed as the ways of escape are closed one by one. Mark's readers must face the conflict between the way of Jesus and their own desire for security, a desire which will make them like the faithless disciples. And the tension is heightened by presenting Jesus' way as paradox and as triumph by irony. (p. 150)

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If this implies a dimension of narrative meaning which runs beyond the communication of mere information, it does so intentionally. Irony implies that more is going on than mere information can grasp, and that discipleship must be an activity of personal response as well as an activity of intellectual assent; that is, the ironic dimensions of the passion may *effect* the kind of commitment which for Mark lies at the core of discipleship.

There are other passages in which irony may be used in the service of deepening discipleship. One such pericope has been noted already by the director of this dissertation, Howard Clark Kee. In 1983, Kee published the fourth edition of his survey, *Understanding the New Testament*.²⁰ In this new discussion, he paused to focus briefly on the irony of the blind Bartimaeus story in Mark 10. 46–52. It is, after all, an unexpected turn of events that a *blind* man should be the only one who sees clearly who Jesus is. When Bartimaeus hails Jesus as “Son of David” (in vv. 47f), it is not the political but the eschatological implications of that name which inform his pleading (v. 51; cf. Isa. 35. 5). This is only a passing note, but it is not without its broader significances. The story of blind Bartimaeus parallels the report of the healing of the blind man Bethsaida in 8. 22–6. Together these two pericopae form an *inclusio* which frames the third major section of the narrative.²¹ That major section has to do with the demands and disillusionments of discipleship, and is riddled with indications of the disciples’ persistent blindness. It is not insignificant, then, that blind Bartimaeus, after he receives his sight, “follows Jesus on the way” (v. 52).

So there is tension here, tension which forces upon the reader the necessity of deciding who will command his loyalties and on what terms. We may return briefly to Tannehill, whose larger study of tense language in the Jesus sayings traditions – *The Sword of His Mouth* – is the source of the following quotation:

Thus the tension in the text is necessary to its purpose. This tension enables the text to resist being digested by the prevailing patterns of interpretation and instead to challenge those patterns. The tension enables the text to speak with the necessary depth, to address the self on the level of the basic structures of his personal world rather than on the level of technical decisions, thereby awakening an answering tension within the self, which can lead to change.²²

But what if the internal tensions generated by the story are not entirely resolved by the story’s end? In that case we would have an