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In recent years an increasing number of interpreters have found dramatic and verbal ironies widely distributed in Mark's Gospel. This lucid study makes an important contribution to our understanding of Marcan irony, and combines a literary-critical approach with insights gained from the sociology of knowledge. Professor Camery-Hoggatt argues that the Marcan ironies are intentional, and that irony comprises an integral factor in Mark's overall strategy of composition: irony is a subtle means to achieve apologetic and paradigmatic ends.

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# Irony in Mark's Gospel

Text and subtext

**JERRY CAMERY-HOGGATT**

*Associate Professor of New Testament,  
Southern California College,  
Costa Mesa, California*



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## PREFACE

Anyone familiar with the study of irony in the biblical narrative will be struck by two outstanding developments. First, before 1970 discussions of irony were widely scattered. When it was discussed, it was primarily as a matter incidental to some other concern. Studies which focused on irony *as such* were exceptional, and were often dismissed as speculative. Since 1970 however, something remarkable has happened. There has been a growing interest in irony, not only in the Gospel of Mark, but throughout the biblical narrative. Studies of irony have appeared more frequently, have treated irony as a literary phenomenon worthy of exploration in its own right, and have discovered irony in places where it would be virtually invisible before. In this essay, I have argued that the wide distribution of irony suggests that it was born of the author's conscious intent. Irony lies close to the narrative's core.

We are brought in this way to my second point: I would go so far as to say that the interest in irony is evidence that the interpretative paradigms employed in the study of the Bible are undergoing a fundamental shift. The shift raises basic questions which bring into focus important dimensions of the current hermeneutical climate. If irony lies close to narrative's core, why has it been noticed with regularity only within the last two decades? Why was it for so long overlooked? What configuration of intellectual resources converged in the 1970s to make the shift possible? These are large questions, and they raise large implications. Some of those implications will occupy our attention in the pages which follow. For now, however, three want special attention.

First, the hermeneutical shift is an indication of increasing cross-over scholarship from other academic disciplines, in particular, literary scholarship and folklore study. Folklore study finds ready hearing here because of biblical criticism's ongoing concern for the laws which govern the transmission of oral literature. Among the

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concerns which were operative for the folklorists were the reiteration of formal elements and plot functions, and the distinctiveness of the story-telling event as performance, rather than as a receptacle for historical or traditional information. Understood in this way, a story could be discussed in a manner which stressed its disconnectedness from its sources, from other forms of narrative, and from all previous performances.

Second, with the conception of the story as performance has come also a growing respect for the integrity of the narrative *as such*, and a resistance against the habit of historical scholarship to dismantle the narrative in search of earlier strata of the tradition. Respect for the integrity of narrative requires sensitivities which are more clearly attentive to the dynamic movements of the narrative transaction. For literary scholarship, what this means is a refinement of our understanding of what constitutes narrative meaning. Rather than identifying the meaning of the narrative with its historical antecedents, or with specifically theological or devotional nuggets which can be mined beneath its surface, the literary scholars have understood “meaning” more broadly to include the range of reactions evoked within the reader.

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

Part of that interest has been nourished and informed by the influence of cross-over interdisciplinary scholarship by those trained elsewhere in the classical humanities. The literary scholars brought with them the insistence that the complexities of language are seldom explicit. Systematic and logical discourse is exceptional in its effort

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to prune its vocabulary of extraneous and ambiguous nuances. Narrative, in contrast, heightens and exploits suggestive ambiguities and connotative subtleties. Narrators strategize the presentation of information by timing the story elements against the literary repertoire they know they can assume on the part of their readers. They also overload language with allusions and connotations. Narrative tries to surprise. This conviction on the part of the literary scholars stands as a needed corrective to the historian's habit of dismantling the narrative in search of information about history. It also counterbalances the theologian's habit of stitching the narrative together with other biblical narratives in the hope that the combination will tell us something more about God than the Bible itself tells us about God. Either approach treats the account itself as something of secondary worth. When we ignore the non-logical aspects of language we necessarily miss important dimensions of the Bible's depth and power.

None of these ideas is entirely new in the study of scripture. What is new is the clarity and force with which they are converging. I would go so far as to say that the study of irony provides a unique access to that convergence. We do not uncover irony by looking for it, exactly. Irony requires no skills which are different in kind from those we use when we read anything naturally. Irony is simply uncovered in the course of normal reading. Yet if it is to be recognized, it calls for refined levels of sensitivity, which are different not in kind, but in degree.

I am privileged to have been taught by members of the scholarly guild in whom those sensitivities appear with special grace: Howard Clark Kee and Carolyn Williams of Boston University read my manuscript with care. Dr. Kee was the adviser of the dissertation upon which it is based. Both he and Dr. Williams have made thoughtful suggestions which make this at once more readable and more true. Amos Wilder provided special insight in a semester of conversations which took place in his office in the depths of the Harvard Divinity School. If you find something here not to your liking, do not blame them. They did the best they could with me.

I am grateful also to my readers and copy-editors at Cambridge University Press, particularly Graham Stanton and Gail Turner, whose comments have made the manuscript both more accurate and more readable.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Shaleen.



## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BibRes</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BibZeit</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EpTheolLov</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Interp</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JRel</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RevBib</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>SBK</i>	Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud and Midrasch, by H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, 5 vols. (1922–55)
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society for Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SJTh</i>	<i>Southwestern Journal of Theology</i>
<i>StEv</i>	<i>Studia Evangelica</i>
<i>StTh</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, 10 vols. (1964–76)
<i>TheolZeit</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>