

## INTRODUCTION

A few years back, I was sitting in Evensong at the Peterhouse Chapel in Cambridge. During the service, the first scripture reading was taken from the Book of Job, the 26th chapter, beginning at the second verse: 'How you have helped one who has no power! How you have assisted the arm that has no strength! How you have counseled one who has no wisdom, and given much good advice!' (Job 26:2–3 NRSV). This was read in a tone that conveyed all the grace and solemnity appropriate to the liturgical setting. The passage sounded as if Job was addressing pious thanksgiving unto God. I must confess to having repressed a chuckle with some difficulty, knowing that what sounded so sincere in this context was Job's bitingly sarcastic indictment of his false comforters. While I do not fault a student reader for mistaking the tone of a passage for which they had no context, this situation well illustrates the exegetical importance of being able to accurately identify sarcasm. Simply put, taking a sarcastic utterance literally or reading a literal utterance sarcastically both have the potential to generate serious misreadings of a text.

With as much at stake for Pauline scholarship in determining whether a given statement is meant sincerely or sarcastically, it is surprising that there has been no dedicated study of sarcasm in Paul's letters. This work is meant to address this gap in scholarship, but not only for the sake of filling a void. Its first major contribution will be exegetical. I aim to determine systematically when Paul engages in sarcasm throughout his undisputed letters, and how the presence of sarcasm influences the interpretation of each passage. Because sarcasm is about implicit rather than explicit communication, sarcastic passages include some of the most difficult and disputed texts in the Pauline corpus. A methodologically grounded analysis of sarcasm can, therefore, bring a measure of clarity to several debated texts.

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This analysis also contributes to the well-established study of Pauline rhetoric. Examining Paul's use of sarcasm throughout his undisputed letters enables investigation of how Paul uses sarcasm as a means of navigating his interactions with his congregations and opponents. The systematic scope of this research, surveying the full breadth of the undisputed letters rather than a single epistle, also creates an avenue for exploring how Paul's use of sarcasm differs depending on which congregation and situation he addresses and what this reveals about the tone of his relationships with different early Christian communities. With the Corinthian correspondence, we may also observe how these relationships develop over time.

However, with no previous studies of sarcasm in Paul, and very few even in classics, significant work remains to be done before we are ready to embark on our analysis of Paul. Much previous discussion of potentially sarcastic passages in Paul consists of commentators asserting whether a given verse is or is not ironic or sarcastic without sufficient supporting evidence. There have been a few dedicated studies of irony in Paul, but these tend to suffer from two methodological shortcomings. First, as we shall see in the next chapter, most Pauline scholarship is thoroughly out of date where irony research is concerned. Second, studies that treat 'irony' in general run the risk of ironing out the distinctions between different forms of irony, such as situational irony, verbal irony, and sarcasm. Because ironic situations and ironic comments are very different phenomena – both in terms of how they are communicated and recognized, and in terms of their functions – conflating different forms of irony leads to problematic conclusions. We cannot assume that what other scholars have argued about irony in Paul will necessarily hold true for sarcasm. Therefore, by focusing on sarcasm, a specific form of irony, this study can nuance previous discussions of irony in Paul.

With the field as it stands, three fundamental questions remain to be answered before we turn to Paul's letters: What is sarcasm? How is sarcasm expressed? And what does sarcasm do? These questions will form the basis of Part I of this study. The first chapter will address method and review the history of scholarship on sarcasm and irony in Paul. It will provide a detailed answer to the first question and a partial answer to the second. Here we provide an account of how the term *eirōneia* (εἰρωνεία) develops from its earliest references to the grammatical and rhetorical treatises of Paul's day, by which time it has come to mean something like what we call

'irony'. We focus especially on sarcasm (σαρκασμός) and how ancient authors define it in relationship to other forms of irony. We then lay out the major developments within the last several decades of irony studies, which have gone almost entirely unnoticed by previous Pauline scholarship. Surveying ancient and modern treatments of irony and sarcasm will enable us to disambiguate sarcasm from other forms of irony and facilitate the creation of a working definition of sarcasm that will serve throughout this project. Modern accounts of verbal irony will also furnish us with information about how sarcasm is normally expressed, allowing us to begin analyzing instances of sarcasm in ancient Greek texts.

The next two chapters will focus on the final two major questions – how sarcasm is communicated and its typical rhetorical functions. Our first comparative study on the Septuagint, which focuses on the texts where most of the evidence appears: the book of Job and the prophets, will address both issues to some extent with an especial focus on establishing the normal rhetorical functions of sarcasm in an ancient context. The next comparative study will look more broadly at ancient Greek texts, with special reference to the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata – also including Aristophanes, the New Testament (outside Paul), and ancient satirical epigrams, among other texts. It will focus more on describing the typical signals for communicating sarcasm in ancient Greek.

These choices of comparative texts may strike some readers as unintuitive, especially when there is perhaps no ancient figure more associated with irony than Socrates, so here some preliminary justification is necessary. My choice to avoid Socrates, beyond discussion of his association with the term *eirōneia* in the next chapter, is intentional. As we shall see, the *eirōneia* attributed to Socrates is different from the use of irony as a figure of speech that we find in the later rhetoricians and grammarians. It is this latter form of irony that is associated with sarcasm, and is therefore the more relevant to this study. Furthermore, in her reassessment of the concept of Socratic irony, Lane questions whether much of Socrates' 'ironic praise' of his interlocutors – which, if ironic, would also be sarcastic (see Chapter 1, §1.1.2) – is really ironic at all.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, because the sort of *eirōneia* associated with Socrates in Plato is different from sarcasm, and because it is debatable whether Plato's Socrates makes use of

<sup>1</sup> Lane 2010, 249–57.

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sarcasm to a significant degree, Socrates would be a problematic point of comparison for a study of ancient sarcasm.

Why then the Septuagint? First, between the book of Job and the prophets, the Septuagint furnishes us with many, approximately thirty, examples of sarcasm with which to work. The Septuagint also has the advantage of being a Jewish text. Without intending to spark debate about Paul's self-identification *vis-à-vis* Judaism, Paul is at the very least 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews' (Phil 3:5 NRSV), and intimately familiar with this body of texts. Furthermore, because of this familiarity, the Greek of the Septuagint impacts the way Paul writes in Greek. There is therefore linguistic overlap between the two corpora. While I will not argue that the use of sarcasm in the Septuagint directly influences Paul's use of sarcasm, greater linguistic and cultural overlap make for better analogical comparison.

With Paul writing in Greek, doubtless Hellenistic Jewish texts from the apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, and beyond would also make for interesting comparison. However, for our purposes, LXX *Job* and the prophets make for better case studies not only because of Paul's well-established familiarity with the Septuagint, but also for their relatively higher density of sarcasm. I have, to date, surveyed eleven Hellenistic Jewish texts for the presence of sarcasm, finding about ten examples. This is less sarcasm than we see in the book of Job, spread across a body of texts more than eight times as large. Considering these factors, LXX *Job* and the prophets simply allow for more detailed, focused analysis. I direct readers interested in Hellenistic Judaism to Appendix C, which lays out the examples of sarcasm I have found in these texts along with translations and notes.

Our next major case study leans more in the direction of classics. Being the first large-scale study of sarcasm in ancient Greek and having to establish the common signals that indicate sarcasm in this language create a need for assembling many examples of sarcasm. Lucian is the perfect author for this task. His works will furnish us with hundreds of examples of sarcasm.<sup>2</sup> This dataset will then be bolstered with an eclectic selection of ancient Greek texts – including the Hellenistic Jewish texts mentioned above – with the full chapter

<sup>2</sup> Although Lucian is not Paul's contemporary, he is closer to Paul's context than authors such as Plato and Aristophanes.

treating 400 examples of sarcasm in total. These data will provide considerable linguistic information about how ancient Greek speakers normally indicated sarcasm. While further research across time and dialects of Greek still has the potential to nuance these findings, the signals of sarcasm identified in our chapter on Lucian and other ancient Greek texts will play a significant role in facilitating the identification of sarcasm in Paul.

Following these chapters, Part II will take each of the undisputed Pauline letters in which sarcasm occurs in turn, beginning with Galatians, then Romans, and finally the Corinthian correspondence. For each letter I will exegete sarcastic passages, discuss how sarcasm fits into Paul's rhetoric in each letter, and provide pushback in places where previous scholarship has misidentified certain passages as ironic or sarcastic.

At the same time, much of this discussion will also be of interest to the New Testament generalist with no specific research interest in sarcasm or irony. Paul's opening in Galatians (1:6), which some consider an epistolary formula for expressing 'ironic rebuke', features in our chapter on the letter. Here I not only address whether this opening is sarcastic, but its relationship to similar letter openings across the documentary papyri. This enables the determination of whether Paul opens Galatians with a stock epistolary formula, and of the tone Gal 1:6 would probably convey.

Diatribes will play a major role in our discussion of Romans. To clarify the presence of sarcasm in certain rhetorical questions throughout the letter, I will offer a revised conception of authorial voice in dialogical passages. While this discussion is of direct relevance to scholars interested in the relationship between Romans and ancient diatribe, our conception of voice in Romans also contributes to the debate surrounding the identity of Paul's hypothetical interlocutor. Romans 13 has also generated considerable debate over the extent to which Paul's rhetoric submits to or subverts the imperial power of Rome. Our treatment of the passage contributes to this discussion by assessing the viability of ironic readings of Rom 13:1–7.

First Corinthians will provide the opportunity to address how closely or loosely the letter's often-discussed 'Corinthian slogans' represent the perspectives of the Corinthians. Establishing a broader range of possibilities beyond mere quotation will enable us to determine whether any slogans are likely to be sarcastic. I will also treat Paul's use of sarcasm in 1 Cor 8:1–11, a pericope which has (almost)

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never been considered ironic or sarcastic in past scholarship. This reading leads to a reassessment of Paul's rhetorical approach in dealing with the issue of idol-food. I then address the difficulties presented by 1 Cor 11:19, an exegetical crux that some interpreters have attempted to resolve with recourse to irony.

Paul's fool's speech in Second Corinthians has been the focal point for the lion's share of scholarship on Pauline irony. One of the major findings of our chapter on Second Corinthians will be the fact that Paul does not actually use sarcasm within the fool's speech itself. Paul does, however, use significant sarcasm throughout 2 Cor 10–13, although less frequently than he uses self-deprecating irony, *asteismos* in Greek. We shall define *asteismos* in §1.1.2 of the next chapter and discuss its rhetorical functions briefly in our work on Lucian. The relationship between sarcasm and *asteismos*, which we find only in 2 Cor 10–13, will be a major focus of our treatment of Second Corinthians. Our concluding chapter will review the major findings of the study and compare Paul's use of sarcasm across the letters surveyed.

PART I

**What Is Sarcasm? How Is Sarcasm Expressed? What Does  
Sarcasm Do?**

## 1

**METHOD, DEFINING SARCASM, AND THE  
SCOPE OF THE PROJECT**

This chapter will begin with a discussion of method before moving on to review Pauline scholarship on irony and sarcasm. We will be in a better position to assess Pauline scholarship having first treated irony and sarcasm in their own right. The first two sections, then, will survey ancient and modern treatments of these subjects.

These surveys will make an important methodological contribution to this study by defining my approach to irony and sarcasm and by focusing the scope of the project. Beginning with ancient discussions will ground the study in terminology relevant to Paul's linguistic context, providing a theoretical vocabulary for analyzing different forms of irony, including sarcasm, in language from Paul's day. Ancient treatments of irony and sarcasm, however, are not systematic accounts of language and there is much helpful nuance to be gained from modern scholarship. The first methodological contribution of modern irony research will be in narrowing the scope of this study by defining the relationships between different forms of irony. I will define sarcasm as a subcategory of verbal irony, which is itself distinct from other forms of irony. We will then go on to discuss the major paradigms for describing verbal irony that have been significant in recent scholarship before developing a working definition of sarcasm. I will not adopt a single approach to verbal irony but will instead consider each of the modern accounts as exegetical tools that can be used to explain why a given utterance is or is not sarcastic as we move forward with the study. Our working definition of sarcasm will aim to encapsulate as much of the insights of recent scholarship as possible while still maintaining continuity with the way sarcasm was defined in the ancient world.

Although surveying ancient and modern treatments of sarcasm and irony will provide a methodological framework for analyzing instances of sarcasm in ancient Greek texts, we will continue to develop our method for detecting sarcasm and evaluating its effects



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throughout this study. Determining how ancient Greek speakers normally communicated sarcasm and what its typical rhetorical functions were will be the major tasks of Chapters 2 and 3. These findings will create a baseline for comparison when we turn to the Pauline corpus itself.

Having surveyed ancient and modern discussions of sarcasm and irony, we will be well situated to evaluate the contributions of previous Pauline scholarship. Our review will focus on dedicated studies of irony or sarcasm in Paul, establishing which scholars will serve as conversation partners in discussing specific letters of Paul, and in what capacity past scholarship on Pauline irony will be relevant for our analysis of sarcasm. The background in modern irony research provided in §1.2 will enable us to fit Pauline scholarship into a chronology of developments in irony studies. This contextualization shows scholarship on Paul to have been significantly out of date in its understanding of irony, an issue that the present chapter aims to remedy.

### 1.1      **Ancient Discussions of Irony and Sarcasm**

We begin by overviewing ancient treatments of irony (*eirōneia*, εἰρωνεία). The concept of *eirōneia* develops over time, referring to patterns of behaviour in earlier works before becoming a dedicated figure of speech or trope as we move closer to Paul's historical context. We will focus on irony as a figure of speech in greater detail, as here we find specific reference to sarcasm (*sarkasmos*, σαρκασμός) as well as other forms of irony that will play a role in this study.

#### 1.1.1    *eirōneia* from Aristophanes to Aristotle

The meaning of *eirōneia* changes over a few generations across the earliest extant texts to employ the term. Lane argues that in Aristophanes, *eirōneia* means something like 'concealing by feigning', an act associated with deception.<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes' *Wasps* provides an apt illustration: when Philocleon, who is obsessed with sitting on juries, is locked in his house to prevent him from sitting on a jury, he makes several desperate attempts at escaping (*Wasps*, 110–64). At one point, he claims he needs to take his donkey to the

<sup>1</sup> Lane 2006, 54–56; 2010, 248; cf. Vlastos 1987, 80–81.

market (*Wasps*, 165–173). Seeing through the scheme, one of his captors remarks to another: ‘What a pretext he dangled in front of you [i.e. like bait on a hook], how cunningly deceptive’ (οἶαν πρόφασιν καθῆκεν, ὡς εἰρωνικῶς, *Wasps*, 174–75 [Lane]). Here Philocleon is behaving ‘with *eirōneia*’ (εἰρωνικῶς) because he is attempting to hide his true motives by deceptively pretending they are otherwise, making the scene fit well with Lane’s definition of *eirōneia* in Aristophanes.<sup>2</sup>

The description of the *eirōn* (εἴρων), the person characterized by *eirōneia*, in Theophrastus lies closer to the Aristophanic meaning of *eirōneia* as concealing by feigning than it does to Aristotle – whose definition we will discuss presently.<sup>3</sup> Theophrastus portrays the *eirōn* as someone who hides his real opinions and motives, ‘he praises to their faces those whom he has attacked in secret, and commiserates with people he is suing if they lose their case’ (*Char.* 1.2 [Rusten, LCL]). Theophrastus assesses the *eirōn* negatively, characterizing him as a non-committal coward who deceives to avoid responsibility (*Char.* 1.2–6). We also find *eirōneia* depicted as the cowardly avoidance of responsibility in Demosthenes (*Orat.* 4 [*Phil* 1], 7, 37; *Ex.* 14.3).

With Aristotle, *eirōneia* comes to mean self-deprecation: ‘disavowing or downplaying qualities that one actually possesses’<sup>4</sup> (cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1127a: ὁ δὲ εἴρων ἀνάπαλιν ἀρνεῖσθαι τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ἢ ἐλλάττω ποιεῖν). Aristotle’s ethical works set virtues in contrast to their corresponding vices. Aristotle depicts *eirōneia* as a vice, a deficiency in truthfulness (ἀλήθεια). Boastfulness (ἀλαζονεία) is *eirōneia*’s opposite vice, an excess compared to truthfulness:

Ὁ δ’ ἀληθής καὶ ἀπλοῦς, ὃν καλοῦσιν αὐθέκαστον, μέσος τοῦ εἴρωνος καὶ ἀλαζόνος· ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ τὰ χεῖρω καθ’ αὐτοῦ ψευδόμενος μὴ ἀγνοῶν εἴρων, ὁ δ’ ἐπὶ τὰ βελτίω ἀλαζών

The one who is truthful and straightforward, whom they call forthright, lies between the self-deprecator [*eirōn*] and the boaster. The self-deprecator is not at all ignorant of the

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, and the above translation, see Lane 2006, 54–55. For other uses of *eirōneia* in Aristophanes, see *Av.* 1211; *Nub.* 449.

<sup>3</sup> Theophrastus’ *Characters* discusses traits of character rather than character types in a literary sense (Rusten and Cunningham 1993, 12–13). The description of *eirōneia* in Theophrastus does not therefore provide evidence for the *eirōn* as a stock character in ancient Greek theatre or literature.

<sup>4</sup> Lane 2006, 79, cf. 77–80.