

**IRONY IN THE BOOK OF JOB**

by YAIR HOFFMANN

I

In his book on irony, Kierkegaard argues with Hegel about whether or not Socrates was being ironic when he described himself to people as ignorant. After all, Socrates sincerely meant what he said. Still, Kierkegaard sees irony here because Socrates knew he was superior to others in that he, at least, recognized his own ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Such philosophizing on the nature of irony (or knowledge) is characteristic of the methodological dilemma that arises whenever irony in any literary genre, and especially the Bible, is put to exegetical use. In its very essence, irony is an evasive form of expression in which the speaker disguises his intentions: that which is said is precisely the opposite of what is meant.<sup>2</sup> This

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יאר הופמן, "האירוניה כאמצעי ביטוי מרכזי בספר איוב", עיונים במקרא; ספר זכרון ליהושע מאיר גרינץ. (תעודה, ב), תל-אביב, תשמ"ב, ע' 157–174.

Translated by Gila Brand.

1. S.A. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (London, 1966), pp. 283–285.

2. So as not to deviate from our subject, I will not attempt to formulate a precise definition of irony. E.M. Good opens his book with the following sentence: "Irony, like love, is more readily recognized than defined" (p. 13). This does not prevent him, and rightly so, from distinguishing among various kinds of irony. I would suffice with the accepted general definition that irony is a mode of speech in which the speaker actually means the opposite of what he says; in Kierkegaard's words: "The phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence" (*op. cit.*, p. 254). For a detailed discussion of irony and similar modes of expression, see E.M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 13–33.

being the case, if someone says a particular statement is ironic he must show proof — which is not always an easy task. It is doubtful, for example, that a computer could be programmed to “understand” an ironic statement<sup>3</sup> (unless the statement were phrased in special vocabulary, which is not very common when irony is used in daily conversation). Irony is determined more by context than phrasing; therefore, the same statement could be ironic in one context and totally unironic in another. When I propose viewing irony as a central exegetical key to the Book of Job, I knowingly expose myself to opposition and disagreement without being able to prove myself unequivocally right. Still, it is comforting to know that my critics fare hardly better in this regard. Whatever the case, let us not reject the irony option out of hand; after all, no one disputes the fact that irony is one of the most important expressive tools in any natural language.

The attempt to make wide use of irony as an exegetical tool specifically with regard to the Book of Job, is the function of a special exegetical problem which probably appears nowhere else in Biblical literature with such force, i.e., what is the attitude of the book towards the central issue being raised. The central issue, of course, is not which stance is preferable — that of Job or his friends; for this, there is an unequivocal divine reply in the epilogue.<sup>4</sup> The real problem is whether Job was justified in his bitter complaints to God. (To be more precise: Were the complaints themselves justified? The author seems to be justifying Job’s *right* to complain by the divine reply in the epilogue.) To state this in a more impersonal, abstract manner: how does the Book of Job relate to its own answers to the problem raised by the protagonist? This may sound absurd, because we would expect the attitude of the work to be expressed in the direct answers it provides to the problems raised. However, the controversy surrounding the significance of the divine reply shows that things are not so simple. Since the author may be ambivalent, the exegete cannot ignore the fact that irony is a classic way of taking a stand on complex matters. Thus, there is certainly room for the paradoxical formulation suggested above as the central exegetical problem of the Book of Job. As paradox and irony have much in common, it is worth investigating the extent to which a wide application of the principle of irony can help us to understand the work.

However, such an exegetical stance cannot be adopted uncritically. Correct methodology requires that we first justify and establish a case for it before employing it as a means of exegesis. Otherwise, we face the danger of distortion, which looms before anyone who undertakes ironic exegesis without caution. For

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3. In general, it is questionable whether irony is at all meant to be wholly understood. See Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

4. At present, I will not go into the question of whether the epilogue was once a separate unit, unconnected with the Book of Job. On this issue, see below.

a person attentive to the nuances of the work, there can be no margin of error in identifying this important component. However, the lack of objective criteria constitutes an obstacle of which he must beware. Several examples will make this clearer.

The wealth of metaphors used by the author of the Song of Songs to describe his mate (“I have likened you, my darling, to a mare in Pharaoh’s chariots” (1:9); “Your belly like a heap of wheat” (7:3); “Your nose like the Lebanon tower” (7:5), etc.), could be seen as ironical when taken out of context. Only the anti-ironical tone of the work as a whole would make such an interpretation unreasonable — although I do not reject the idea that certain portions of the work would take on a new dimension, and the poem in its entirety would achieve more balance, if the element of irony were considered. However, we will not go into this now.

The injudicious application of irony to a whole series of Psalms could completely distort the author’s meaning. Take, for example, “Who struck Egypt through their firstborn, His steadfast love is eternal” (136:10) or “And slew mighty kings, His steadfast love is eternal” (136:18). Killing and destruction as proof of steadfast love (rather than of heroism, justice, etc.) — what could be more ironic? Nevertheless, the context of these verses — of this psalm in particular and the Book of Psalms as a whole — invalidate such an interpretation. The same holds true on a wider scale. “The Lord supports all who stumble, and makes all who are bent stand straight. The eyes of all look to You expectantly... and You give them their food when it is due” (145:14–16). Is there not irony in describing God in one breath as both handing out “charity” and “making the bent straight”? In another context — perhaps; here — certainly not. In the same way, “Let them shout for joy upon their couches, with paeans to God in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands” (149:6), could be seen as an ironic juxtaposition when taken out of context. In other words, the literary unit and the genre to which it belongs, dictate to the reader the conventions by which it should be read. Without these, the exegete is in a vacuum; he has nothing to lean on or, better still, lacks a graph of coordinates upon which to plot his ideas. However, there are times when the writing is so evasive it is difficult to be sure one is doing the right thing by forgoing the irony option in advance. At the beginning of Psalm 44 we find: “We have heard, O God, our father have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in the days of old.” Is this praise of the Lord for past deeds, which are described at length further on, or an ironic statement meaning, “we have heard the stories, but we ourselves have only seen suffering and hardship”?<sup>5</sup>

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5. Compare to Gideon’s response to the angel: “Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us, saying, ‘Truly the Lord brought us up from Egypt?’” (Judges 6:13).

As we have said, irony is evasive by nature and must be handled with care. However, this should not make us reject it as an important tool in exegesis. What we need do is to exercise caution.<sup>6</sup>

## II

In keeping with the above, it would be methodologically wise to point out the special role of irony in Biblical and non-Biblical wisdom literature as a whole before going on to the Book of Job, which is a part of it.<sup>7</sup>

One of the dominant characteristics of wisdom literature is its speculative nature: the attempt to devise generalizations about the workings of the world, particularly in the social sphere, but in others as well.<sup>8</sup> Of necessity, such a formulation of generalizations must distinguish between phenomena that belong to the system by their very "essence," and "deviant" or "exceptional" phenomena whose existence cannot be allowed to disturb the lawfulness that is otherwise portrayed. Making such distinctions is certainly difficult and, by its nature, non-objective. Often as not, it is unreliable as well: moral principles may guide the choice of "essential" phenomena a priori, and determine what is deviant, so to speak, in the absence of any real objective criteria. A writer of this type of literature — who is intelligent enough to see the difficulty — will have no choice but to adopt a skeptical attitude toward the various phenomena he tries to string together on a single chain, all the while aware (though this is not always clear to the reader) that he might have created a completely different chain by using the phenomena rejected as incompatible with the whole. When this attempt to push worldly phenomena into the straitjacket of fixed order is accompanied by a practical, educational bent — by advice to man on what mode of behavior he ought to choose for his own benefit — contradictions begin to spring up between what is worthwhile and compatible with that order, and what is proper. It is up to the author to find a compromise, sometimes to the detriment of the "proper." Being thus faced with the relativity of different values, it seems that only the ironic, dialectical approach is feasible. We find then that delving into "wisdom" produces an ambivalent attitude towards reality and a dialectical interpretation of many of its components. Hence the ironic tone in much of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

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6. For this reason, I am not content with many of Good's assertions; often, he associates irony with passages that are merely bitter. For example, Job 3:11–15; 6:4–7; 14:7; 29:18–20; 31:3–4, etc. Recently it has been proposed that the phrase "curds and honey" in Isaiah 7:15, 22 be seen as ironic. I see no justification for this. See G. Rice, "The Interpretation of Isaiah 7:15–17," *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 363–369.

7. Stating that the Book of Job belongs to the genre of Biblical wisdom literature does not diminish the importance of Westermann's theory regarding the strong ties between Job and the literature of psalms and lamentations. See C. Westermann, *Der Aufbau des Buches Hiob* (Tübingen, 1956).

8. See G. Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London, 1972).

Here are several examples: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). Is this not ironic in a book whose main purpose is to preach wisdom and knowledge? And what of Prov. 2:1–2, 5; “My son, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments; If you make your ear attentive to wisdom and your mind open to discernment... Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain the knowledge of God”? Only a thin veil of irony arising from the dialectic between man’s wisdom and the fear of God, which are not always compatible, would seem to set the balance right. Prov. 6:30–31: “A thief is not held in contempt for stealing to appease his hunger; Yet if caught he must pay sevenfold.” The author is clearly being ironic about just and moral laws which under certain circumstances become an instrument of injustice, yet are still necessary (and thus just?). This is not satire, as the author knows there is no other way, but irony is certainly there. Prov. 7:18: the alien woman takes care to fulfill her vows and make the proper sacrifices in the manner of the pious, but she uses them as an instrument of seduction. Prov. 19:21: “Many decisions are in a man’s mind, But it is the Lord’s plan that is accomplished.” A statement such as this, in a book which upholds the idea that foresight, intelligence and good counsel always lead man toward the good, must surely be ironic.<sup>9</sup> Other examples may be found in Proverbs 19:4; 25:21–22; 26:4–5; and 30:2.

There is no need to elaborate on the ironic character of Ecclesiastes. It is sufficient to cite Eccles. 2:3: “to grasp folly, while letting my mind direct with wisdom”; 2:13: “I found that Wisdom is superior to folly” but “the same fate awaits them both”; 11:9: “O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes — but know well that God will call you to account for all such things.” Portions of text which are seemingly designed to praise creation, such as the passages on time in Chapter 3, take on an ironic guise when summarized as follows: “...but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass” (3:11).

Non-Jewish writings which come under the heading of “Wisdom Literature” also make use of irony as, for example, the Egyptian “Protest of the Eloquent Peasant”<sup>10</sup> and the Mesopotamian “Pessimistic Dialogue Between Master and Servant.”<sup>11</sup>

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9. The subtle irony here becomes the central ironic motif in Ecclesiastes as, for instance, in Chapter 3. Also see below.

10. A. Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (London, 1927), pp. 116–131; Pritchard, *ANET*<sup>3</sup>, pp. 407–410. Scholars have already noted the ironic character here: “The mixture of seriousness and irony, the intertwining of a plea for justice with a demonstration of the value of rhetoric is the very essence of the work”: M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1973), p. 169.

11. *ANET*<sup>3</sup>, pp. 437–438, 600–601; W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (London, 1960), pp. 144–149.

### III

The power of irony lies in its subtlety. The more hidden it is, the greater the intellectual satisfaction of both discerner and ironist.<sup>12</sup> The subtlety of irony is also a function of its object. It is easier for Reuben to discern Simeon's ironic thrust about Levi than to appreciate a similar remark about himself. It is even more difficult to see irony that is self-directed, as this is less expected than from others. The Book of Job contains various degrees of irony, which we shall classify as follows:

- A) Ironic remarks voiced by the different characters, which they direct at each other and are discernable by all: Job, his friends and the reader.
- B) The ironic attitude of the author toward his protagonists, which is understood by the reader but not by Job or his friends (in keeping with literary convention).
- C) Irony (not necessarily a remark; sometimes an ironic situation) which the author directs against the reader.
- D) Irony which the author directs against his work or, if you will, against himself.

#### **A) Ironic remarks by Job, his friends and God**

These are interspersed throughout the book. Irony of this type is meant to be understood by the speaker, his listeners and the readers. I shall cite only a few examples:

6:25: "How trenchant honest words are." (Job to his friends)

9:2-3: "Indeed I know that it is so: Man cannot win a suit against God." (Job to his friends; here he is ironically agreeing with his friends, who believe man cannot come out ahead of God, whose righteousness is total. Job, however, seems to agree only with the outcome: he attributes this to God's strength — not to His righteousness.)

12:2: "Indeed, you are the (voice of) the people and wisdom will die with you." (Job to his friends. The irony becomes even more pointed upon reading the continuation in verses 7-9: "But ask the beasts, and they will teach you... Who among all these does not know.")

4:3: Eliphaz's words, "See, you have encouraged many," are interpreted by Fullerton as sharply ironical.<sup>13</sup> On the surface, these are words of comfort; actually, they are criticism of Job's hypocrisy. Eliphaz continues in the same vein,

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12. "Irony is in the process of isolating itself, for it does not generally wish to be understood... the more the ironist succeeds in deceiving and the better his falsification progresses, so much the greater is his satisfaction" (Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 266).

13. K. Fullerton, "Double Entendre in the 1st Speech of Eliphaz", *JBL* 49 (1930), pp. 320-374.

as we see in 4:6: “Is not your piety your confidence...?” Dhurme states: “The irony of Eliphaz is perceptible in every word.”<sup>14</sup>

For additional examples, see 13:5 (and compare with Proverbs 17:28); 5:1; 15:4; 26:2–3; 27:2; and 32:14.

The entire divine reply to Job is founded on irony. The questions are presented as if parenthetical, preceded by the remark: “Speak if you have understanding” (38:4), directed to Job. It is clear in advance that these are not questions that a mortal could answer. The same holds true for 40:6–14, in which God ironically suggests that Job take over the world.

### **B) Irony between the author and the reader, not perceived by Job and his friends.**

The type of irony cited in the above examples is easily perceived, and its function is to characterize the arguments, bitter and sardonic, which permeate the work. However, this irony has yet another function for the reader: it prepares him and sensitizes him to irony of a more subtle kind. In other words, the abundance of blatant, unquestionable irony justifies the search for deeper layers of irony embedded within the work.

In this connection, we shall first relate to the structure of the work and the special role of the prologue. While the dialogues constitute a report on what was said — for the consumption of Job, his friends and the reader — in the prologue, the author adopts an omniscient stance, sharing with the reader material that is concealed from Job and his friends. This puts us in a position in which we are better informed than the protagonists, this awareness accompanying us throughout the work, like it or not.

The position in which the reader finds himself is also a key alienating factor. It prevents simple, naive identification with the protagonists, and requires constant examination of what is being said on two planes: the plane which is obvious to Job and friends, and another plane created by the reader’s added knowledge. An ironic viewpoint is almost inevitable, forcing us to see everything from another angle, unknown to Job and his friends. Hence we can point to a series of remarks which are clearly ironic when viewed from the special plane of the reader, who has “peered behind the scenes.” We are not “filling in the gaps” or delving into the “background” of the plot,<sup>15</sup> but viewing the story in a different light than Job and his friends because our background differs from theirs.

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14. E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (London, 1967). On the stylistic character of Eliphaz’s speech, see: Y. Hoffmann, “The Use of Equivocal Words in the 1st Speech of Eliphaz,” *VT* 29 (1979).

15. The terminology is that of E. Auerbach in *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1953), pp. 3–23. “Filling in the gaps” is used by M. Perry and M. Sternberg in their essay “Hamelekh be-mabat ironi”, *Ha-Sifrut* 1 (1968), pp. 263–292.

1. This is the case with the basic assumption we are given to the effect that Job's wealth is evidence of God's favor. After all, we know that without this wealth, the Satan would have had no cause to say: "Does Job not have good reason to fear God? ...You have blessed his efforts..." (1:10). Ironically, what Job sees as a divine blessing might better be seen as the opposite. Moreover, the question which plagues Job and his friends — why Job suffers *despite* his righteousness — immediately takes on an ironic cast for the reader, who knows that Job suffers *because* of his righteousness. If God had not made much of it, the Satan would not have proposed putting Job to the test. The direct causative link between Job's righteousness and suffering, known only to the reader, places us in a different position than that of Job when God responds to his complaints. Thus, not every reply that satisfies Job and his friends will necessarily satisfy us, the readers.

2. The words of Bildad in 8:3: "Will God pervert the right?" and in 8:20: "Surely God does not despise the blameless," constitute rhetorical questions founded on the axiom that God does not pervert justice or punish the innocent — and as such are understood by Job, too. However, we, who know why Job suffers, i.e. precisely because he is blameless, cannot fail to perceive the ironic nod of the author in our direction, as if to say: You see how valid this axiom is?

3. The next two examples achieve irony through the associative linking of two texts. Job says to God: "You would call and I would answer You" (14:15). This juxtaposition of "call" and "answer" is very common; it is a well-known formula in the Book of Psalms and prophetic literature. There it denotes man's call and God's willingness to save him from evil and death,<sup>16</sup> but here the author reverses the usage: it is God who calls and man who complies with an order to die. This scene is ironic in itself, all the more so when phrased to create associations with a formula designed to express the opposite. As the irony here is so subtle, and based on linguistic associations, it is difficult to ascertain whether the author intended Job to be consciously ironic (as in the first type of irony, cited above), or is using irony only for the reader's benefit. In another example of irony deriving from linguistic association, there is no doubt that only the reader is involved, and that Job does not know how close he has come to the ironic truth. In 13:14–15, Job decides it is better to say what is on his heart. If God killed him, it would only be to his benefit, death being preferable to life. The irony in this assumption is obvious only to the reader, who is well aware that Job will continue to suffer without death to redeem him — in keeping with a bargain made with the Satan,

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16. See Psalms 3:5; 4:2; 17:6; 22:3; 27:7; 91:15; 108:1; 118:5; 119:145; 135:3. Apart from Psalms, cf. Isa. 50:2; 58:9; 65:12; Jer. 33:3; 35:17; Zech. 13:9; Prov. 21:13; Job 9:16; 12:4; I Ch. 21:26. The phrase appears in slightly different context in I Sam. 26:14; I K. 18:26; Prov. 1:28; Job 13:22; 19:16; Cant. 5:6.



ostensibly for Job's sake. Sensing that the reader's awareness may not suffice for perceiving the irony of Job's words, the author provides added emphasis by drawing a literary association with the verse in the prologue that tells us of this bargain: 2:5–6: "But lay a hand on his bones and flesh (*besaro*), and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face (*'al panekha*)... only spare his life (*nafsho*)"; 13:14–15: "How long! I will take my flesh (*besari*) in my teeth; I will take my life (*nafshi*) in my hands. He may well slay me; I may have no hope; Yet I will argue my case before Him (*el pahav*)."<sup>17</sup>

### C. The author's ironic attitude toward the reader.

We have already cited the preferred status of the reader in the prologue, in that he knows more than Job and his friends. Thus the reader is protected from errors of judgement and evaluation that could arise from ignorance of the true heavenly background to the events — errors that might be made by Job and his friends. For instance, we know that the various strategies proposed by Job's friends cannot solve his problem. This situation also creates identification with Job: though unaware of what has taken place in heaven, he rightly senses that his friends' words are empty and their cures ineffective; his suffering is not due to sin, and repentance will not help him. Eliphaz and his friends represent the dogmatic believer who encircles his faith with philosophies and theories derived from the sphere of human justice. However, by placing us, the readers, one step higher in knowledgeability, the author frees us from this type of thinking which, however comprehensible and human, is limited and confining. Thus, we may see ourselves as impervious to enticements to provide rational-moralistic justifications for the suffering of Job.

But are we really impervious? It seems to me that in at least one case, the author has set a trap to teach us that we "clever ones" are prey to the same thinking as Job's friends. Despite our greater knowledge, our human weaknesses and conventional ideas take precedence. I refer to the remarks about Job's children. In two places, Job's colleagues suggest that they died in sin. Eliphaz alludes to this in 5:4: "May his children be far from success; May they be oppressed in the gate with none to deliver them." Bildad is more explicit, when he tells Job: "If your sons sinned against Him, He dispatched them for their transgression" (8:4). It seems as if the author intentionally presented things in the prologue so as to bring the reader to agree with, or at least to consider, the fleeting supposition that the sons were punished for their sins. The description in 1:5 of their lifestyle — i.e.

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17. Good, *ibid.*, finds this type of irony in Job's statement: "May that day be darkness," which he says brings up associations with "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. God saw how good the light was, and God separated the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:3–4). However, I believe the link between these two verses is not strong enough for us to claim intentional irony on Job's part.

daily feasts — and Job’s own fears that they might have sinned or blasphemed God (even in their thoughts) lures the reader into agreeing that the sons’ deaths followed the simple principle of recompense for their deeds. Certain traditional exegetes have accepted this; for example, *Mezudath David* states in its interpretation of 8.4: “When your sons sinned by constant feasting, which causes lightheadedness, You drove them from this world at the site of their crime; in the banquet house they died. The trial takes place where the evil is committed.” However, the reader, unlike Job and his friends,<sup>18</sup> must make no such mistake, because he knows that Job’s sons were killed solely at the advice of the Satan, and through no fault of their own. Thus, we can say that the way in which the author builds the story propels the reader into conventional thinking, while he should be measuring things on two dimensions. The irony is now directed at anyone who prides himself, in view of his greater knowledge, in not being simplistic like Job’s friends, and not giving in to superficial, unfounded claims.<sup>19</sup>

#### D) Self-irony of the authors

At the start of this essay, I wrote that the major exegetical problem in the Book of Job is its attitude toward the central topic being dealt with — an attitude supposedly summed up in God’s speech in chapters 38–41, which is clearly defined as a reply to Job.<sup>20</sup> However, what answers does this speech give to the criticisms voiced by Job? Anyone trying to understand the work must confront this problem, for which there are a multitude of solutions. If we classify them in three major groups, the possibilities are as follows:

- (a) God’s speech is a proper reply to Job’s protestations.
- (b) The speech contains no convincing rebuttal of Job’s accusations, although this is what the author intended — i.e. he has failed.
- (c) The speech contains no convincing rebuttal, with the author knowingly and intentionally putting evasive words in God’s mouth.

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18. Job’s silence on the death of his sons is surprising; he does not mention them at any point in the book. Tur-Sinai suggests (in his *Job*. p. 112) that Job’s response was included in the original version, but was somehow left out. This seems too simple a solution. I believe Job’s silence on this matter is an expression of his uncertainty about whether his sons died as punishment for their sins. He will not lament anything unless it is as certain as his own righteousness.

19. It is obvious from this argument that I believe the prologue and epilogue belong to the same source. While prologue may be based on a folk tale, the author of the dialogues put it into its final form so as to suit the needs of the rest of the work. I spoke about this at length at the 7th World Congress on Jewish Studies held in 1978 in Jerusalem. See the Proceedings of the Congress: *Divrei ha-Kongress... Mehkarim ba-Mikra uva-Mizrah Ha-Kadmon* (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 53–61. For an English version of the same see my “Prologue and Speech — Cycles in Job,” *VT* 31 (1981), pp. 160–170.

20. Unlike the openings of the speeches of Job and his friends, which use the term *va-ya’an* without any object (i.e. Job “spoke up”), we find in 38:1 and 40:1 *va-ya’an elohim et Iyov* (the Lord replied to Job), which we therefore know to be a response to Job’s protests and not just poetry (cf. Ex. 15:21; Num. 21:17; Ps. 137:7 for *ya’an* in the sense of “to sing.”)

The author's personality, as reflected in chapters 1–37, more or less rules out possibility (b), which assumes the author's incompetence.<sup>21</sup> We must examine (a) and (c) before concluding that the author was unable to judge his work properly or make a convincing statement.

Examination shows that (a) and (c) share a common denominator: the assumption that the author is not making his intentions explicit. This is obvious in (c), because the author does not say that God is being evasive and has no convincing reply; he puts a detailed speech in His mouth, leaving it to the reader to discover that the response does not fit the question.

Looking at the solutions offered in possibility (a), we find a similar situation. Anyone who says God's reply is a persuasive and honest answer to Job's queries is actually basing himself upon what has not been said. What is given is only background or, at most, a basis for analogy. Allow me to demonstrate this briefly using a few of the traditional solutions, without taking a stand on them:

1. The divine revelation is in itself an answer. Thus, God proves to Job that the suffering human being is not forgotten or forsaken.<sup>22</sup> However, God makes no mention of this claim Himself, so that anyone who claims this to be the solution is not basing himself on what is explicit in the text.<sup>23</sup>

2. Creation is described as something whole and perfect. The analogy is that all God's deeds and his treatment of human beings (including Job) are perfect. When man makes himself partner to the beauty of nature, his sufferings cease and nature becomes a key to the truth.<sup>24</sup> Again, we must admit that these things are not explicit; at most, they may be read between the lines.

3. The same holds true for the opinion that the description of creation teaches that divine justice is greater and more sublime than human justice — and that this is what the author was trying to tell us.<sup>25</sup>

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21. That is, if we assume that God's speech and the rest of the book were written by the same person. Most scholars accept this, but not all. See, for example: E.G. Kraeling, *The Book of the Ways of God* (London, 1958), 144ff; K. Fullerton, "The Original Conclusion of the Book of Job," *ZAW* 42 (1942), pp. 116–136.

22. Y. Kaufmann, *Toldoth Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisraelith*, II: p. 614; H. Rowley, *Job* (London, 1970), pp. 18–21; R. McKenzie, "The purpose of the Yahweh speeches in Job," *Biblica* 40 (1959), pp. 435–445; W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the O.T.* (London, 1964), p. 491. Also see G.B. Gray, *Job* (Edinburgh, 1921), p. lx.

23. Essentially, this approach would require only a short speech, because revelation itself would be sufficient. This, in fact, is Kuhl's argument; he says the entire speech is a later addition. See: C. Kuhl, "Neuere Literarkritik des Buches Hiob," *ThR* 21 (1953), pp. 163–205.

24. R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago, 1965).

25. M. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York, 1960), p. 195, writes: "Designedly man is lacking in this presentation of heaven and earth in which man is shown the justice that is greater than his".

4. According to another explanation, by the detailed description of creation, God proves to Job that “Thou canst not understand the secret of any thing or being in the world, how much less the secret of man’s fate”.<sup>26</sup> Here, too, the main point is not stated openly, but derived from an inference *a minori ad majus* (in itself doubtful).

5. Tsevat offers a different kind of explanation.<sup>27</sup> He says the divine reply implies that God is not fettered by the “moral” code imposed upon him by man. Morality is an independent human-social ideal, upon which the conduct of the entire universe need not depend. Tsevat admits that this is not explicit, arguing that such a view so contraverts the conventions of the time that the author avoided voicing it outright. As we have seen, lack of explicitness in the central theme is not unique to this solution; it is also true of the other solutions not at odds with contemporary conventions at all.

If I am right in saying that approaches (a) and (c) are alike in that they depend upon what is *not* present in the text, we must ask this: why should the author of the Book of Job, who could say such harsh, bitter things against the Creator openly and bluntly, choose this particular manner to present God’s words? Obviously, he thought this would be the best way to express his point of view. It is our duty to discover the essence of that message *which is most appropriately revealed through concealment*, choosing between possibility (a) in its different variations, and possibility (c). It is my belief that solutions 1–4 for possibility (a) are unacceptable. Why shouldn’t the author put in God’s mouth at least one sentence that sums up what is supposedly being implied by the whole, yet is too vague to be understood by all?

The various interpretations according to which God’s remarks constitute an unequivocal reply to Job must explain why the response (which is wholly conventional in terms of content) should be formulated in such an indirect, hazy manner. If art constitutes complete harmony between form and content, then this would be a clear example of anti-art. Tsevat’s solution, which attributes the haziness to the unconventional idea lurking behind the speech, does not solve the problem either. We have already seen that the author has no qualms about voicing very biting remarks, without need for haziness or obscurity.

Now we have reached option (c), which I believe is the right one, ruling out (b) and the idea that the author has failed. It is my claim that the author has

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26. This is Buber’s formulation, *op. cit.*, which he sees as part of the solution. A similar opinion is held by A. Kahana, *Sefer Iyov* (reprinted: Tel Aviv 1968).

27. M. Tsevat, “The Meaning of the Book of Job”, *HUCA* 37 (1967), pp. 73–106. Similarly, see E.M. Good, *Irony in the O.T.* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 239.

ironically presented himself as someone who knows the answer to the questions he has raised. However, in the manner of irony, that which is written (i.e.: here is the well-ordered answer to the questions raised heretofore) implies the exact opposite. What is really being said is: I cannot answer the difficult questions I have presented, and they are still as problematic as before.

What we have here is *self-irony*, in that throughout the book the author creates the impression that he knows the answer and will tell us at the end.

To elaborate on this idea of the author's self-irony,<sup>28</sup> may I again quote Kierkegaard:

“The first potency of Irony lies in formulating a theory of knowledge which annihilates itself” (p. 98).

“When an ironist exhibits himself as other than he actually is, it might seem that his purpose were to induce others to believe this. His actual purpose, however, is merely to feel free, and this is through irony” (p. 273).

By introducing himself as possessing the solution, the author has achieved free range, both in the presentation of problems and the formulation of an answer in a lengthy, complicated speech. The creation of a self-annihilating theory (which the divine reply is) is an expression of the author's uncertainty. It is a disguised confession: I tried to solve the problem but this is the best I could do. It is an ironic admission of failure.<sup>29</sup> This personal admission has another, deeper significance: we are led to consider that the failure may not be due to inability on the author's part; it may be wholly objective, since God's methods do not indeed coincide with the accepted principles of justice and morality.

Hence we arrive at the self-irony of man as man: All I, as a human being, can do is to delude myself that there is a solution to the problem of divine recompense and mask my delusions one way or another. The ironic truth is that I must accept my fate, come what may. Thus the irony which the author directs toward himself (which it is difficult for the reader to identify) becomes the irony that man (the reader) directs toward himself (which the reader finds it difficult to accept). In this

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28. Good, *op. cit.*, has much to say about the self-irony of Job, which is very different from the self-irony of the author. As an example of Job's self-irony, Good cites verses such as 14:7; 16:6. In my opinion, these are evidence of bitterness rather than irony (See note 6, above). I also disagree with him that in the divine reply, God's irony is transformed into the irony of love and conciliation. See, mainly, pp. 238–240.

29. Even in everyday speech, a long, detailed, evasive reply is sometimes a code to the listener that “I don't know the answer, but let's play the game: I respond (not necessarily to the question) and you pretend I've convinced you.” This constitutes an euphemistic disguise for “I don't know”, but it is not irony because it is standard social behavior.

way, the borderline between the kinds of irony classified in group 3 and group 4 becomes indistinct. This brings us to yet another aspect of the divine pronouncement: the reader, who has been pampered all along with a sense of superiority over the protagonists (i.e. he knows things that they do not), now finds that all have fared equally, and that he, the wise one, has no advantage. His knowledge of what has taken place behind the scenes has not helped him understand the ways of the Lord any more than Job and his friends. On the contrary, for him, the problem (i.e. what is the *justification* — not the reason — for Job's suffering) has been exacerbated now that the author admits a solution does not exist.

#### IV

Considering the importance of the prologue in structuring the work and shaping its ironic tone, we should say a few words about the epilogue, too. Some scholars have argued that it is lacking in unity, that it was put together in a piecemeal fashion, either by the author himself<sup>30</sup> or by the intervention of a later editor.<sup>31</sup> Above all, they are perturbed by the mythical, placating tone of the ending, which contradicts the nature of the work and the problems it poses. However, the epilogue is problematic only for those who seek in it a simplistic continuation of the divine “reply”. This is not the case if we apply the principle of irony, as we have up till now. It is my belief that the epilogue is ironic in the full sense of the word. By telling us of Job's return to good fortune, the author is saying that the problem has been solved — but only in the world of myth; in reality, it has no solution. The ironic intensity lies not only in the fact that a pessimistic conclusion is outwardly clothed in optimism, but in the fact that the problematics of the work and all the injustice done to Job are reduced to a passing episode. In accepting the “bribe” of wealth, sons and daughters, Job relinquishes his fundamental protest. All the ideological tension of the reader is snuffed out: all's well that ends well — and if Job himself is satisfied, who are we to persist? Here, as in all complex truths, only a dialectical approach is valid. Is it proper that life be resumed as usual and all be forgotten, now that Job has been restored to his former state? On a fundamental level, the answer would be an emphatic “no”; on an empirical level, this would not be so. After all, such is the way of the world: one cannot be overly concerned with fundamental problems that have no concrete translation into reality. Thus, if you were concerned with such problems in the past and actively disturbed by them, it must have been the product of needless and transient oversensitivity. The mythical character of the epilogue is actually an important contribution to the ironic message of the work. This, along with its style, creates an effective balance with the prologue.<sup>32</sup>

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30. N.H. Snaith, *The Book of Job* (London, 1968).

31. K. Fullerton, *op. cit.* (n. 21).

32. Therefore, there is no justification for the following comment by Gray, *op. cit.* (n. 22), p.

## V

I have tried to show that irony is one of the most important components in the Book of Job — so much so, that it is doubtful whether it may be properly understood unless irony is considered. Moreover, it is the use of irony as a literary and ideological device that makes the Book of Job unique, setting it apart from Eastern literature of a similar genre.

Earlier, we mentioned several examples of non-Biblical “wisdom” literature in which irony also plays a role; none of them deals with theodicy, around which the book of Job revolves. However, we do know of other ancient Middle-Eastern works based on the same theme as Job. The “Babylonian Job”<sup>33</sup> and the “Babylonian Ecclesiastes”<sup>34</sup> are commonly cited examples, which also involve protest against the supernatural forces responsible for mans suffering. Towards the end of the “Babylonian Job,” God’s messenger appears, purifying the sufferer and making amends. The protagonist then thanks God for his return to the good life, his gratitude taking up nearly half the work. The “Babylonian Ecclesiastes” is built as a dialogue between two friends, one complaining and the other responding. At the end (which is cut short), the sufferer pleads with the gods to have mercy on him. One of the main differences between the Book of Job and these works is the total absence of any kind of irony. This, as we shall see, affects the character of the works in a number of ways.

When a dialogue is devoid of irony, it becomes shallow. What emerges is not a true picture of suffering, and the reader becomes less able to identify with the protagonists. Furthermore, the lack of irony makes the complaints and responses sound superficial and schematic. Without a dialectical point of view, they are unconvincing and even banal — at least in comparison with Job. Whether it is the absence of irony that *creates* the shallowness, or a simplistic outlook that precludes its use, I find it hard to say. However, the existence of a causal relationship between the two seems to me indisputable.

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373: “If the whole of the epilogue and prologue are from one hand — that hand had lost its cunning before it reached the epilogue.” I wrote at length about the role of the prologue in the Book of Job in my article “The Mutual Relations between the Prologue and the Dialogues in the Book of Job” (*Heb. op. cit.*, n. 19, above).

33. The “Babylonian Job” is another name for “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom”, a work from the end of the second millennium BCE (*ANET*<sup>3</sup>, pp. 434–437; 596–600).

34. I refer to “A Dialogue about Human Misery” (*ANET*<sup>3</sup>, pp. 438–440; 601–604), sometimes called the “Babylonian Theodicy”. The text is inscribed on tablets from the 7th or 8th century BCE, but was probably composed much earlier.