

Irony in the Opening of God's Speeches (Job 38:2–3)

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The study focuses on the ironies in the opening of God's first speech to Job (Job 38:2–3). The analysis is based on Edgar Lapp's linguistic study, which defines irony as a simulation of insincerity. In 38:2, ironies are discernible in the peculiar shape of the rhetorical question and in the allusions to Job's initial lament (Job 3). Similarly, 38:3 alludes to Job's challenge in 13:22–23. The ironic tone comes to the fore by comparing the specific use of the words and locutions in 38:2–3 with their occurrence in the book and in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. These ironies have a mitigating effect as they partly hide the criticism of Job in the unsaid.

Keywords:

Book of Job; God's speeches; irony; rhetorical questions; mitigation

It is widely acknowledged – yet not always duly taken into consideration – that various kinds of humor are an important stylistic device in the Hebrew Bible.¹ Among these different forms of insincere utterings, irony is a rather serious matter.² Nonetheless, like with humor in general, irony points to the tensions between reality on the one hand and common ideals and norms on the other hand, and therefore enables one to view a given situation or oneself from a distance.³ The pioneering study by Edwin Good (1981), and the more recent monographs by Sergio Gaburro (2013) and Carolyn Sharp (2009) on irony in the Hebrew Bible and the Old and New Testament, have evidenced this rhetorical effect of ironic elements in a wide range of biblical texts such as the Ehad narrative (Jdg 3:12–30, cf. Klein 1988: 46–47) and the Book of Jonah (Spangenberg 1996). With Gaburro, irony may be termed as a “honest deceiver” (“ingannatrice leale”, Gaburro 2013: 193) that – as highlighted by Sharp – invites us “into an experience of alterity that moves us toward new insight by problematizing false understandings” (Sharp 2009: 24). In the book of Job irony is

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¹ An overview on humor in the Hebrew Bible is given in Radday and Brenner (1990).

² As the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel already remarked: “Irony is something one simply cannot play games with.” (Firchow (1971: 267).

³ Regarding humor in the Old Testament, Gisela Matthiae points out: “Die Inkongruenz von vorfindlicher Wirklichkeit und Verheißung, von ‘noch nicht’ und ‘schon jetzt’ ist Thema der Komik aus theologischer Perspektive (...). Aus der Wahrnehmung dieser Spannung zwischen Wirklichkeit und Möglichkeit gelingt Distanz sowohl zu sich selbst, als auch zu den Verhältnissen.” (Matthiae 2009).

of particular importance as is evidenced e.g. by the commentaries by Habel (1985) and Seow (2013).

“Yahweh is speaking ironically – that is plain.” (Clines 2011: 1180). Similar to David Clines, several commentators use the term “irony” resp. “ironical” to describe the rhetorical functions of God’s speeches to Job (Job 38:1–39:30, 40:1–2, 40:6–41:26).⁴ Yet, in most cases, these commentators neither explain what the irony exactly consists of nor deepen what might be the aim of the ironical tone in this crucial part of the book. The most important exceptions in this regard are, on the one hand, Petra Ritter-Müller’s linguistic study on God’s first speech that dedicates a subchapter on irony in Job 38–39 (Ritter-Müller 2000: 263–277) and, on the other hand, Michaela Geiger’s recently published paper on irony and ambiguity in Job 40:6–32 (Geiger 2018).⁵ These two brief studies indicate that the rhetorical – and in particular the ironical – aspects are key for understanding God’s speeches. Therefore, the form and function of irony in Job 38–41 invites further research. As part of a more extensive study, in the following I want to focus primarily on the ironical aspects in the opening of God’s first speech (Job 38:2–3).⁶ My aim is to outline a refined methodological approach concerning the localization of irony in biblical texts and to propose a reading of Job 38:2–3 that takes into due account the ironic aspects of God’s address to Job. As we will see, the ironies in this opening passage have a mitigating effect by smoothing the criticism of Job. For that purpose, I will firstly revise the criteria for locating irony in biblical texts and analyzing its rhetorical effects by evaluating some approaches to irony in literary studies and linguistics. Secondly, I will analyze the particular form of the rhetorical question in Job 38:2 by comparing it to similar questions in the Hebrew Bible and I will discuss evidence of the parallels in Job 38:2–3 with previous passages in the book (namely Job 3 and 13:22–23). Finally, I will highlight the conspicuousness of the ironies in this passage by rephrasing it in

⁴ See e.g. Fohrer (1989: 521), who mentions the “überlegene[n] Ironie der Gottesworte”, or Ebach (1996: 144), who highlights the “ironisch-sarkastischen Aufforderungen” of YHWH to Job.

⁵ 60 years ago, MacKenzie (1959: 441–443) already underscored some ironic aspects in God’s speeches. In the seventies, irony in the book of Job in general and in Job 38:1–42:6 in particular was pointed out by Williams (1971); Williams (1977), Robertson (1973), and Whedbee (1977). In the new millennium, the question was taken up by Geeraerts (2003) and Meshel (2015). More recently, Ingram (2017) argued that the book of Job should be looked at as a satire, whereas Lauber (2017), based on the understanding of irony in classic rhetorics, pointed out ironic aspects in the dialogue between Job and his friends as well as in God’s speeches. Gaburro (2013: 101–102); Good (1981: 234–240); Sharp (2009: 190–196) also deal with Job 38–41. Finally, let me also mention the commentaries by Janzen (1985: 225–247) and Clines (2011: 1039–1224). However, in general these studies neither deepen what is meant by the term “irony” nor evidence in detail the rhetorical functions of irony in Job 38–41.

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an unironic way and describe the rhetorical effects of the ironic elements. Although the present study is limited to 38:2–3, I will give a brief overview of how similar ironic effects are found throughout YHWH's first speech.

Irony in Literary and Linguistic Studies

In the field of literary studies an important benchmark on irony is Wayne C. Booth's "Rhetoric of Irony" (1974), which delineates a four-step method to identify and evaluate irony in literary texts (1974: 10–14). Booth calls this four-step process "reconstruction" (1974: 10–39 pass.) of irony and compares it to the reader ascending to a "complex dwelling place" (1974: 34) from which they look down to the rejected overt meaning (1974: 33–39). By this simile Booth points out the performative aspect of the reconstruction of irony and consequently how the ironic meaning cannot be completely verbalised in a non-ironic statement. Concerning the rhetorical effect of irony, Booth underscores its communicative efficiency as it requires an intuitive, almost instantaneous comprehension of the counterpart. This leads him to the conclusion that irony can be termed as a "key to the tightest bonds of friendship" and "[r]eal intimacy" (Booth 1974: 13–14).

In the field of linguistics, Edgar Lapp (1997), after a thorough analysis of a broad range of theories on irony, comes to define irony as a "simulation of insincerity" (Lapp 1997: 146). In contrast to the lie which he defines as "simulation of sincerity"⁷, irony, according to Lapp, is a second-level simulation where the speaker/writer *pretends* to lie resp. to be insincere. In other words, whereas by lying the speaker (or author) wants the hearer (or reader) to believe that a certain proposition is true, in irony the speaker (author) wants the hearer (reader) to recognize that the proposition is untrue. Furthermore, the proposition conveys a value judgment, criticism or sentiment (Lapp 1997: 133–152). This means that irony is a partly transparent simulation of a lie and is most likely to be successful when it is evident to both parties what disagreement is with respect to the background information, i.e. when it is obvious that the proposition, within the given context, is unacceptable. As Lapp points out, this definition of irony is valid also for ironic questions and prompts that *simulate* someone to ask insincerely resp. *pretend* to prompt falsely (Lapp 1997: 148). Finally, Lapp explains that this second-level simulation is not a simulation in the sense of deception (*dissimulatio*), but of doing-as-if (*simulatio*) (Lapp 1997: 146–149).

⁷ „Die Lüge ist eine **Simulation der Aufrichtigkeit**; die Ironie ist eine **Simulation der Unaufrichtigkeit**.“ (Lapp (1997: 146), accentuation by Lapp).

Both Booth and Lapp offer helpful specifications on the literary forms and rhetorical functions of irony. However, they do not offer detailed criteria for the identification of irony in a literary work. By contrast, Marika Müller (Müller 1995) and Hannele Kohvakka (Kohvakka 1997) both sketch out a methodology for analysing ironic elements in literary texts and apply it to a set of contemporary texts in German print media. Based on an overview of the cultural history of irony, Müller differentiates between three types of irony: stylistics of irony („Stilistik der Ironie“, Müller 1995: 135–175)⁸ – which comes close to what is generally termed as verbal irony⁹ –, irony of allusion („Anspielungsironie“, Müller 1995: 177–212), and ironic parabasis („ironische Parabase“, Müller 1995: 213–241)¹⁰. Concerning the former (i.e. verbal irony), she lists a series of textual (and paratextual) signals such as exaggerated or stereotyped adjectives or adverbs, ventured metaphors, rhetorical questions etc. With regard to irony of allusion, Müller distinguishes between syntagmatic allusions and references to either single texts or more generally to sorts of texts or motifs. Kohvakka instead focuses on the analysis of the inner logic of the argumentation (Kohvakka 1997: 49–80). Her four-step analysis is therefore mainly adapted for texts that develop logically organised arguments, yet her approach can be viewed as a helpful supplement to that of Müller as it highlights contradictions to expectations („Erwartungswidrigkeiten“) and pseudo-conclusions as signals of irony (Kohvakka 1997: 75–80).

Finally, let me also mention the signals of irony that are pointed out by the biblical scholar Franz J. Backhaus (1998: 206–259) in his study on irony in Ecclesiastes. On the one hand, Backhaus underlines the significance of semantic ambiguities as an indicator of a second, possibly ironic, meaning. On the other hand, he also foregrounds the relevance of the use of citations and intertextual references (Backhaus 1998: 211–212, 255–259). As we will see, these textual marks are of particular importance in the book of Job.

How can we summarize the outcome of these theoretical approaches? Based on Lapp's definition of irony and the signals of irony pointed out by Müller, Kohvakka and Backhaus, the textual analysis will proceed in two steps:

⁸ In Müller's definition, stylistics of irony „umfaßt alle sprachlichen Erscheinungen, die in einem Text den Eindruck erwecken, daß der Autor den darzustellenden Sachverhalt ohne das Bemühen ohne das Bemühen um Objektivität abbildet. Ironisch zu sein bedeutet, subjektiv und bewertend zu sein, und zwar in einem solchen Maße, daß der Rezipient seinerseits zu einer Stellungnahme herausgefordert ist.“ (Müller (1995: 135).

⁹ On verbal irony, cf. e.g. Muecke (1982: 56–66), Lapp (1997: 11–12), and Gaburro (2013: 33–37). According to Japp (1983: 37), verbal irony is the „semiotic 'homeland'“ („semiotische 'Heimat'“) of all other forms of irony; cf. also Febel (2003: 47–48). Schoentjes (2001: 26–27) differentiates between socratic, situational, verbal and romantic irony.

¹⁰ This third form of irony gains importance in the Romantic era and in later periods and is therefore not relevant for biblical texts.

- First, the interpreter has to identify signals of incongruity based on the context and/or shared knowledge in order to locate first-level insincerities.
- Second, these passages come under close scrutiny with regard to (seemingly) unfitting or otherwise unusual vocabulary or locutions, as well as allusions and references, which hint at the doing-as-if mode of the identified first-level insincerities.

Concerning the background of shared knowledge, the analysis relies on the use of words, locutions and rhetorical devices in the larger context of the book and in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. With the help of this broad comparison, the peculiarities of the wording that hint at ironic meaning come to the fore.

The Rhetorical Question in Job 38:2

In the following, I will focus on the question in Job 38:2 in order to point out the first and second level of insincerity in the opening question:

מי זה מחשיך עצה במלין בלידעת

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?¹¹

In this verse, insincerity on the first level is indicated by the fact that it starts with a question that does not require an answer but is merely rhetorical. Being directed at Job, the question is not aimed at asking who (מי זה) is “darkening counsel”, as the subject is clear.¹² In fact, as we will see below (ch. 3), the verb מחשיך hints at Job by alluding to his opening lament (Job 3).¹³ In other words, YHWH’s question is insincere in the sense that it implies a rebuke of the addressee, Job.

In order to grasp the second level of insincerity in this covert blame, we have to compare it to other rhetorical questions (RQs) in the Hebrew Bible. According to Adina (Moshavi 2014), there are three possible implications that RQs in biblical texts usually convey: the specific (e.g. Exod 4:11), the extreme scalar value (e.g. Gen 3:13), and the negative. Of these three,

¹¹ Here, as in the following, translations of biblical texts are my own.

¹² In linguistics, rhetorical questions are defined as insincere speech-acts in the sense that they share the interrogative form of non-rhetorical, information-seeking questions, but instead of requiring an answer they convey an indirect assertion; cf. Meibauer (1986: 160–185) and Bechmann (2010: 11–30).

¹³ Against the common assumption that the reproof implied in Job 38:2 is directed at Job, Wilcox (1998) brought up the thesis that it is the previous speaker Elihu who is criticized here. This thesis was refuted by Bimson (2000), but supported by Brinks (2010), although, as argued above, somewhat unconvincingly.

the latter, where the implied answer is inferred by replacing the interrogative word with a negation – e.g. “nothing” for “what” or “nobody” for “who” – is the most common (Moshavi 2014, 95–97). Often, RQs with negative implications begin – like Job 38:2 – with מי (“who”), e.g. the series of RQs in Isa 40:12–14:

מי־מדד בשעלו מים (...)

מי־תכן את־רוח יהוה (...)

את־מי נועץ ויבינהו (...)

Who measures the waters in the hollow of his hand (...)? (v.12a)

Who estimates the spirit of YHWH (...)? (v.13a)

Whom does he consult, that he may give him insight (...)? (v.14a)

We also encounter this type of rhetorical who-questions with negative implications in the dialogue part of the book of Job (e.g. Job 4:7, 9:12). However, we observe that the opening question in Job 38:2 does not fit the scheme, as the implied answer is not negative but specific (“Job”). According to (Moshavi 2014: 96), this implication is the least frequent, present only in 11 out of 300 RQs in Gen–2 Kgs.¹⁴ When it occurs, it is usually followed by an elliptic clause that starts with הלא (“isn’t it”), as in Isa 40:26–28:

שאו־מרום עיניכם וראו מי־ברא אלה (...)

הלוא ידעת אם־לא שמעת אלהי עולם יהוה בורא קצות הארץ

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? (...)

Don’t you know? Don’t you hear? The everlasting God is YHWH, creator of the ends of the earth. (Isa 40:26a, 28a)

Job 38:2 does not follow this pattern. Rather, the implication is indicated here by the deictic זה. Yet again a comparison with similar questions underscores the unusual form of God’s first question. In RQs that begin with מי זה (or מי זאת), the subsequent specification of the subject conveys a positive evaluative judgment, as e.g. in Ps 25:12:¹⁵

¹⁴ Moshavi (2014: 96/note 12) lists Exod 4:11 (2x), 33:16; Judg 9:2; 1 Sam 9:20, 29:4; 1 Sam 24:15 (2x); 2 Sam 11:21, 16:19; 2 Kgs 18:20.

¹⁵ Besides Job 38:2 and the (almost verbatim) repetition by Job in 42:3, nine times in the Hebrew Bible a question is opened by מי זה (“who is this ...?”): 1 Sam 17:55–56 (cf. above); Pss 24:8, 25:12; Isa 63:1; Jer 46:7, 49:19, 50:44; Lam 3,37; cf. מי הוא זה in Esth 7:5; Ps 24:10; Jer 30:21; cf. also מי הוא in Job 4:7, 9:24, 13:19, 17:3

מי זה האיש ירא יהוה יורנו בדרך יבחר

Who is the man that fears YHWH? He will guide him on the way he should choose.

A positive judgment, associated with admiration or surprise, is also implied in the non-rhetorical question in 1 Sam 17:55:

וכראת שאול את־דוד יצא לקראת הפלשתי אמר אל־אבנר שר הצבא בן־מי־זה הנער אבנר

When Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army: Whose son is this, Abner? (1 Sam 17:55a)

In addition, only in Job 38:2 is the question of to whom מי זה is referring to considered, whereas in other cases the answer is given in the subsequent clause, as e.g. in Ps 24:8:¹⁶

מי זה מלך הכבוד יהוה עוזו וגבור יהוה גבור מלחמה

Who is the king of glory? YHWH, strong and mighty, YHWH, mighty in battle.

In sum, the comparison with other RQs shows that God's initial question resembles in its form the rhetorical מי-questions, but the specific shape of this type of question is very unusual. We can classify therefore the RQ in Job 38:2 as doing-as-if mode and consequently as second-level simulation (in Lapp's terms). The harsh criticism of Job as one who "darkens counsel" and has spoken "words without knowledge" is wrapped in a type of question that usually either implies a negative answer or conveys a positive judgment. Conversely, here a specific answer is required and instead of admiration the question implies a criticism.

Allusions to Job's Initial Lament (Job 3) and his Call for Answer (13:22–23)

The second-level simulation in Job 38:2 is not only discernible by the digressive mode of the RQ, but also by allusions to Job's previous speeches. The most salient example in this regard is situated in the first phrase by the verb form מחשיך. Whereas the locution "by words without knowledge" (v.2b) contains an unveiled rebuke of Job, the reproach in v.2a is

and Isa 50:9, and מי זאת in Song 3:6, 6:10, 8:5. As Ham (2013, 532) points out, the rhetorical interrogative זה is not dismissive, but "serves to emphasize the person represented in the answer to the question."

¹⁶ As Brinks (2010: 200–201) remarks, the use of this question mode is unusual in Job 38:2 as in (almost) all other cases the question is not referring to the person being directly addressed.

subtler, as *מחשיך* hints at the beginning of Job's initial lament (Job 3).¹⁷ This allusiveness contributes substantially to the ironic tone since it reinforces the doing-as-if mode of the rhetorical question, holding the charge partly covert.

A closer look at the use of the root *חשך* in Job 3 and in the Hebrew Bible may sharpen our perspective on the tongue-in-cheek allusion in 38:2. In Job 3 the motif of darkness is present throughout the core (vv.4–9) of the first Canto (Barbiero 2015). In the first strophe (vv.4–5) Job wishes the day of his birth to be “darkness” (*חֹשֶׁךְ*), in the second strophe (vv.6–7) he extends this desire to the night of his birthday, and the third strophe (vv.8–9) resumes the motif of darkness in the last verse (v.9a). At the same time, the root *חשך* forms an *inclusio* (vv.4 and 9) around the three strophes of the Canto. In sum, both structurally and thematically the motif dominates the beginning of Job's speeches.

In the Hebrew Bible as a whole, the verb *חשך* is used 11 times in *qal* and 6 times in the *hiphil* stem.¹⁸ Where it appears in *qal*, the subject belongs to the realm of light or of sight, which indicates that the verb is always used in a literal, i.e. non-metaphorical way.¹⁹ Also, the position of the verb in *hiphil* bears a non-metaphorical meaning, the only exception being Job 38:2. With regards to the subject of the transitive uses, it is mostly YHWH who “darkens”.²⁰ Again, Job 38:2 stands out as lonely exception.

In conclusion, we can state firstly that the allusion to Job 3 in 38:2 is highly significant in light of the importance of the root *חשך* in 3:3–10. Secondly, the reference to Job 3 reveals that the reproach against Job of “darkening” is justified, in the sense that it corresponds to the use of the motif of “darkness” in Job's initial lament. Thirdly, by the fact that the transitive form of the verb is only attested with God as subject, we grasp a subtle hint of the limitedness of Job, who – in contrast to God – is not able to “darken” anything. Therefore, on the one hand, the unique metaphorical use of *חשך* functions as a signal of irony as it captures the reader's attention and directs them towards the allusion to Job 3. On the other

¹⁷ According to Keel (1978: 51–125, 159), God's first speech answers to Job 3; this thesis has found broad consent, cf. e.g. Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2007: 224).

¹⁸ In *qal*, the verb is used in Exod 10:15; Isa 5:30, 13:10; Mic 3:6; Ps 69:24; Job 3:9, 18:6; Qoh 12:2, 3; Lam 4:8, 5:17; in *hiphil*, it occurs in Jer 13:16; Amos 5:8, 8:9; Pss 105:28, 139:12; Job 38:2.

¹⁹ The subjects of *חשך* *qal* may be e.g. אור (“light” Isa 5:30, 13:10; Job 18:6) or עין (“eye” Ps 69:24; Lam 5:17), cf. DCH 3: 331.

²⁰ יהוה is subject in Jer 13:16; Amos 5:8, 8:9; Ps 105:28, and Jer 13:16. In Ps 139:12, the verb form appears in a *figura etymologica* with *חשך* as subject and is negated; cf. DCH 3: 331.

hand, the rhetorical effect of the ironic question comes to the fore on the background of this allusion, since Job's lament is now reinterpreted as action against God's "counsel" (עצה), i.e. the divine administration of the world.

Another allusion to Job 3 comes into view in 38:3 with the noun גִּבֹר (3:3). Its proximity to חֲשֵׁךְ (3:4, 38:2) in both passages underscores the connection of the rhetorical command in 38:3 to Job's lament in 3:3:²¹

יאבד יום אולד בו והלילה אמר הרה גבר

Let perish the day in which I was born,
and the night that said: A man-child is conceived. (Job 3:3)

אזר-נא כגבר חלציד ואשאלך והודיעני

Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (38:3)

As we can see, in 3:3 Job recalls his birth using גִּבֹר in the sense of "newborn male". YHWH instead in 38:3 challenges Job to prepare himself for a struggle like a "warrior". Unlike חֲשֵׁךְ, it is not the unusual metaphorical use that sets the ironic tone, but the play with the semantic range of the word.²² Taken up in God's rhetorical call, the noun גִּבֹר subtly indicates that Job standing before God resembles a newborn child rather than a warrior.²³ Therefore, this second

²¹ Previous to God's speeches, the noun גִּבֹר appears 13 times in the book, where it can be found twice in Job's lament (3:3 and 23) and 4 more times in Job's speeches (10:5, 14:10, 14, 16:21). Only in Elihu's speeches is the noun again used repeatedly (5 times), where it twice refers to Job (34:7, 9).

²² On the semantic range of the noun גִּבֹר cf. Kosmala (1973); according to Clines (2011: 1097), the noun refers here to Job's "capacity for fight"; cf. also Gross (1986: 130–131). Elsewhere in the book, however, גִּבֹר is merely used in the sense of "man" resp. "human being", cf. Kosmala (1973, 917–918). As Strauß (2000: 337, 357) points out, it might allude here to Job's repeated (self-)designation as גִּבֹר.

²³ Fohrer (1989: 500) and Pope (2008: 291) grasp in the locution אזר חליץ a supposed ancient custom of belt-wrestling; however, as Strauß (2000: 357) remarks, in the Hebrew Bible the locution seems to have become a common metaphor, cf. Isa 5:27, 11:5. With Low (2011: 23–26) we can state that the command to "gird the lions" oscillates between highlighting Job's inferiority and inviting him to a communicative interaction with God.

allusion to Job 3 ironically contrasts Job's limitedness and weakness with YHWH's power and greatness.²⁴

A third allusion, finally, comes to the fore in the second command in 38:3b as it resembles Job's plea in 13:22–23:

וקרא ואנכי אענה אוֹ-אֲדַבֵּר וְהִשִּׁיבֵנִי

כִּמָּה לִי עֹנֹת וְחַטָּאוֹת פִּשְׁעֵי וְחַטָּאתֵי הַדִּיעֵנִי

Then call, and I will answer, or I speak, and you reply to me!

How many are my iniquities and my sins? My transgression and my sin make me know!

There is no verbal correspondence between 13:22 and 38:3b, but logically God's rhetorical challenge echoes 13:22a and inverts 13:22b.²⁵ 13:23 instead ends with the identical verb form as 38:3 (הוֹדִיעֵנִי). Interestingly, in his previous speech Job also calls to God for an answer in a similar way:

אֹמֵר אֶל-אֱלֹהִים אֶל-תִּרְשָׁעֵנִי הוֹדִיעֵנִי עַל מַה-תִּרְיַבֵּנִי

I will say to God: Do not condemn me,
make me know why you contend against me! (Job 10:2)

Considering the frequency of the verb יָדַע in the book of Job – it recurs 45 times in the dialogue between Job and his friends (Job 3–31) and 71 times in total – this doubled correspondence does not appear conspicuous. However, the verb only occurs in transitive form once more within Job 3–31²⁶ and in 38:3 God takes up – in reversed direction of speech – the exact wording that Job had used before twice. Moreover, the same call for knowledge is addressed to God several times in the Psalms, e.g. in Ps 25:4:²⁷

דַּרְכֵיךָ יְהוָה הוֹדִיעֵנִי אֲרַחֲוֶיךָ לְמַדֵּנִי

Your ways, YHWH, make me known, your paths teach me!

²⁴ This irony in Job 38:3a is noticed also by Alonso Schökel and Sicre Diaz (1985: 622) and Ritter-Müller (2000: 271).

²⁵ There is a consensus among commentators that 38:3b reminds of 13:22, cf. e.g. Clines (2011: 1097); Fohrer (1989: 500); Strauß (2000: 357).

²⁶ In Job 26:3b, Job (ironically) replies to Bildad: ותושיה לרב הודעת ("you have declared plentiful insight"). In Elihu's speeches, יָדַע hiphil turns up twice (32:7, 37:19). Interestingly, in 37:19 Elihu ironically challenges Job: הוֹדִיעֵנוּ מַה-נֹּאמַר לָךְ ("Teach us, what we shall say to him").

²⁷ The same verb form (יָדַע hiphil imperative with suffix first person singular) that is taken up in Job 38:3, 40:4, and 42:4 recurs in the Hebrew Bible only in Exod 33:13; Pss 25:4, 39:5, 143:8; in all four cases, the imperative is directed to God.

Never does God ask man for knowledge, except in the rhetorical command in Job 38:3 that is repeated at the beginning of the second speech (40:7) and cited by Job in his second answer (42:4). In sum, we can conclude that here God parrots Job's prayer language of 10:2 and 13:22–23 and in doing so ironizes his call for knowledge. Similar to the effect observed with גבר in the previous verse, the irony highlights the contrast between the two interlocutors. In particular, God's ironic call questions Job's desire for knowledge and highlights the audacity of his challenge.

Conspicuousness of the Ironies

Lapp in his aforementioned linguistic study on irony differentiates between two levels on which irony may occur: the illocutionary and the propositional (Lapp 1997, 160–168). Ironies may lie on one of these levels or on both at the same time. As Lapp shows, the negation of the proposition and the change of the illocution enable us to discern on what level the irony is located. In the following, I will apply this method to Job 38:2–3 in order to evaluate the conspicuousness of the ironies in this passage.

If we change the illocution in 38:2 by transforming the question into an assertion, we get this sentence:

אתה מחשיך עצה במלין בלי־דעת

You darken counsel by words without knowledge.

In the direct reproach, the ironic tone we observed in the specific implication of the RQ gets lost. The replacement highlights the irony on the illocutionary level. The irony on the propositional level instead can be marked out by replacing מחשיך with a similar verb:

מי זה מסכל²⁸ עצה במלין בלי־דעת

Who is this that foils counsel by words without knowledge?

Again, we observe that the ironic tone is weakened. A similar result is achieved by applying the same method to Job 38:3. Turned into assertions (= change of the illocution), the two sentences might be rephrased as follows:

²⁸ The verb סכל piel is chosen because in 2 Sam 15:31, similarly to חשך in Job 38:2, עצה is object to that verb; alternatively, in Isa 19:3 עצה is object to בלע piel.

אתה תאזר כגבר חלציך ואשאלך ואתה תודיעני

You gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you will declare to me.

As in the foregoing verse, the change brings to the fore the irony on the illocutionary level. Here again, this irony interacts with that on the propositional level, as we can see by replacing גבר and ידע:

אזר־נא כאיש חלציך ואשאלך וענני

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall answer me.

The ironic tone provoked by the allusions to Job's speeches in 3:3 and 13:22–23 gets lost by the change of words, although in this case we might suppose an allusion to Job 31:35 by the verb ענה.

Finally, if we eliminate the irony completely by turning the rhetorical question and commands into assertions and by replacing the allusive lexemes, and compare this paraphrase with the original wording, we can assess the conspicuousness of the ironies:

אתה מסכל עצה במלין בלי־דעת

לא תאזר כאיש חלציך ואשאלך ולא תענני

You foil counsel by words without knowledge.

You won't gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, but you won't answer me.

The changes and replacements show that, on the one hand, the ironies in the introduction to the first divine speech are covert. Firstly, the illocution in both verses is not directly contrary to the implied meaning as God is not doing as if to praise Job instead of reproaching. Secondly, the ironies on the propositional level are allusive and therefore require the recognition of the references to Job's speeches. On the other hand, the ironies are clearly recognizable firstly by the fact that the literal meaning on the illocutionary level is unacceptable – it is obvious that God is neither asking Job who he is in 38:2 nor commanding him to gird and to declare in v.3 – and secondly by the abnormality of the specific use of the lexemes that allude to Job's previous speeches. In sum, we can conclude that it is the combination of ironies on the illocutionary and the propositional level that causes the conspicuousness of the ironies in Job 38:2–3.

Functions and Effects of the Ironies

Evidently, the main function of the irony in Job 38:2–3 is to criticize Job. He stands out as subject of the *מַי*-question, addressee of the rhetorical commands and the criticism is directed at him by the allusions to his previous utterings. But there is also another important effect I want to point out here. According to Moshavi (2014: 98–99), rhetorical questions, beside strengthening the argumentation, may have a mitigating effect at times. As I will try to show, this effect is discernible also in the ironies of our paragraph. Mitigation in Bruce Fraser's words "involves a reduction in the unwelcome effect of what is done." (Fraser 1980: 343). As Claudia Caffi (1999) points out, similarly to ironies, we can distinguish between forms of mitigation that occur on the illocutionary or on the propositional level, or on both. Regarding the Biblical Hebrew, according to Marco di Giulio (2008) we find forms of mitigation on both the propositional and the illocutionary level. An example of the first form would be the particle *נָא* after an imperative, as we find in 38:3a (*אֲזַרְנָא*). In addition, as a third mode of mitigation he identifies the "shift of the deictic centre" (Di Giulio 2008: 52) by the avoidance of the utterance source, the ego-hic-nunc. In a similar way, in 38:2 deictic precision concerning the addressee is avoided by the *מַי*-question instead of an assertion with the personal pronoun in second person singular (*אֵתָהּ*). But the rhetorical commands in 38:3 also have a mitigating effect, inasmuch as they replace a straightforward criticism. Instead, by asking Job to do something he is not able to accomplish, the calls urge him to deduce by himself the criticism that follows from the recognition of this inability.

In this sense, the introduction to the first divine speech conveys, as Michael Fox points out, "compassion and gentleness, albeit a stern gentleness. God does remind Job of the limitations of his human wisdom, (...), but at the very same time he shows Job the significance of the wisdom Job does have. (...) God demands humility, not humiliation." (Fox 1981: 58). Similarly, Ronald Hyman (Hyman 1983) in his study on rhetorical questions in the Book of Ruth and elsewhere remarks that the use of the question mode for a criticism maintains a desired ambiguity and vagueness and therefore, we can conclude, has a mitigating effect. Van Rensburg also remarks that the use of an interrogative framework is "a polite (and respectful) way of saying things", that "stimulates the rethinking of accepted truths." (van Rensburg 1991: 246). In sum, we

can state that the ironies in Job 38:2–3, although implying a sharp criticism of Job, have a mitigating effect as they attenuate the rebuke by avoiding a direct attack.

Rhetorical Questions and Allusions in Job 38–39

Ironic effects similar to those in Job 38:2–3 turn up again throughout YHWH's first speech. The ironic criticism that comes to the fore in 38:3b is echoed throughout the first five strophes of the speech up to v.21, where the verb ידע recurs in the indicative, pointing out again Job's lack of knowledge:

ידעת כי־אז תולד ומספר ימיך רבים

You know (it), for you were born then, and the number of your days is great.

In total, the root ידע is used no less than ten times in the first speech and the semantic field of "knowledge" is the most important one in the speech as a whole.²⁹ Additionally, a considerable portion of the rhetorical questions in Job 38–39 highlight Job's ignorance of the subject matter of the question.³⁰ The prominent positions of these questions in the structure of the speech highlights their importance, as 14 of the 17 strophes of the speech begin – and five of them also end – with a rhetorical question that points out Job's lack of knowledge.³¹ Additionally, ironic allusions to Job 3 that are similar to those in Job 38:2–3 are found repeatedly in God's first divine speech to Job. In 38:7, we may assume a subtle allusion to 3:7–9:

ברן־יחד כובבי בקר
ויריעו כל־בני אלהים

When the morning stars rejoiced together,
and all sons of God shouted for joy? (38:7)

²⁹ Cf. Ritter-Müller (2000: 57, 154–155). The verb ידע recurs nine times (38:3–5, 12, 18, 21, 33; 39:1–2) and is the far most frequent verb in YHWH's first speech.

³⁰ Among the more than thirty yes-no-questions in Job 38–39, in the four questions with the verb ידע (38:12b, 33a; 39:1a, 2b), but also in 38:4–6, 16–19, 22; 39:1–2, 26, Job is (rhetorically) interrogated about his knowledge.

³¹ The exceptions are the strophe on the sea (38:8–11), that does not begin with a rhetorical question; in the strophe on the ostrich (39:13–18), a rhetorical question is used only in the second colon (v.13b); the opening questions in the strophe on the wild ox (39:9–12) highlight Job's impotence rather than his ignorance.

The “morning stars” (כובבי בקר) remind of the “twilight stars” (כובבי נשפו) in 3:9, whereas their “rejoicing” (רנן) contrasts Job’s denial of a “joyful cry” (רננה) in 3:7 and the “cursing” (קבב) by the “cursers of the day” (אררי־יום)³² in 3:8.

Further on, 38:21 by reminding of Job’s birth subtly alludes to the motif of birth in 3:3 and 10–12:

ידעת כי־אז תולד

ומספר ימיך רבים

You know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great! (38:21)

Beside the antiphrastic verbal irony in the opening “you know” – for Job obviously does not know “the way to the dwelling of light” nor “the place of darkness” (38:19) he was asked about before –, there is also a subtly allusive irony in YHWH’s reference to Job’s birth, since it reverses the latter’s wish to have the day of his birth eliminated (Job 3:3). This allusion to Job 3 is underlined by the recurrence of the motif of birth in 38:8–9, 28–29 and 39:1–4.³³

Finally, the strophes on the wild ass and the wild donkey (39:5–8, 9–12) point out the freedom from labor of these two species, whereas Job in 3:18–19 imagined this freedom for those in the Sheol. In particular, 39:7b echoes 3:18b:³⁴

ישחק להמון קריה

תשאות נוגש לא ישמע

It [= the wild ass] scorns the tumult of the city,
it does not hear the shouts of the driver. (39:7)

יחד אסירים שאננו

לא שמעו קול נגש

There [= in the Sheol] the prisoners are at ease together,

³² Together with Clines (1989: 86), I do not follow the proposal of – among others – Albright (1938: 227), to amend יום (day) in Job 3:8 to ים (sea), and to claim here a reference to the sea-god Yam of Canaanite mythology.

³³ The motivic link is corroborated by lexical correspondences, as e.g. Job 38:8 shares with 3:10–11 the use of דלת (plur.), רחם, and יצא, whereas 38:29 takes up the verb ילד and the locution יצא מבטן from 3:3 and 11.

³⁴ Further lexical correspondences in this context are כח (Job 3:17; 39:11), יגיע (3:17; 39:11, 16), חפשי (3:19; 39:5), עבד (3:19; 39:9).

they do not hear the voice of the driver. (3:18)

Further motifs that are taken up from Job 3 might be mentioned, as e.g. 38:17 (and 39:30) echoes Job's longing for death (3:11–23) and in 39:16, 22, 24 the motifs of fear (פחד) and unrest (רגז) turn up again (cf. 3:25–26).

The brief examples demonstrate that the ironic allusions evidenced in 38:2–3 continue in the whole of YHWH's first speech to Job. The main effect of YHWH's allusive irony is mitigation: instead of attacking and rebutting Job directly, the divine speech partly conceals the critique and thereby softens its harshness and rigor.

Conclusion

Let us conclude with a brief evaluation of the methodology I adopted for the study of irony in the introductory paragraph of the first speech of God. Firstly, Lapp's definition of irony as a second-level simulation, i.e. as pretending to lie (resp. to be insincere), combined with the signals of irony listed by Müller, Kohvakka, and Backhaus, have proven to be a suitable starting point for the analysis of irony in biblical texts. Secondly, concerning the rhetorical question in Job 38:2, a close look at the forms and functions of rhetorical questions in Biblical Hebrew has turned out to be crucial for understanding the ironic function of God's first interrogative to Job. More generally, we can conclude that the comparison of the specific use of a word or a locution, motif, form of speech etc. in the given context with occurrence in the respective book and in the Hebrew Bible as a whole is a suitable method to evaluate how far a certain phrase or word might function as a signal of irony. Thirdly, a close examination of the allusions to preceding passages in the book has shown the modifications in the contextual use of a certain word or locution and, by consequence, the ironic effect of the altered reuse. Finally, the non-ironic rephrasing has proven to be a useful method to determine on which level (illocutionary and/or propositional) the ironies are situated and to evaluate their degree of conspicuousness.

Concerning the introductory paragraph to the first divine speech (38:2–3), the analysis has demonstrated that an ironic effect is provoked, on the one hand, by the unusual mode of the initial rhetorical question and, on the other hand, by the allusions to Job's initial lament (with the verb חשך and the noun גבר) and to Job's plea for answer (with the verb form והודיעני). Although sharpening God's criticism of Job, these ironies have a mitigating effect inasmuch as they partly hide the rebuke in the sphere of the unsaid.

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