The Book of Job as a satire with mention of verbal irony

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Introduction

It is generally agreed that there is irony in the Book of Job, yet there are few detailed scholarly analyses concerning the specific type of irony to be found therein. Moreover, there is even less scholarship on the relationship between irony and genre. Further, there is considerable confusion regarding the different types and grades of irony. One common error is to assume that verbal irony is necessarily spoken irony. Another shortcoming concerns the relationship between verbal irony and the genre of satire. Verbal irony is often discussed without reference to satire. Yet a pervasive sense of verbal irony is definitive of satire. The following discussion aims to clear up some of this confusion.

There are three different sections in this paper. In the first section I discuss the theory of irony, in the second section I offer examples of verbal irony in the Book of Job and in the last section I conclude that Job is a satire and discuss the possible purpose of the book. Given that the purpose of satire is to bring about social, political, or religious reform, it can be argued that the purpose of the Book of Job is to bring about reform. In particular, the Book of Job challenges a narrowly retributive conception of justice and, as a consequence, offers a more expansive image of God; God should not necessarily be seen as always dispensing justice understood in narrowly retributive terms.
Theory of irony

Most scholars recognise that there is irony in Job, and some commentators suggest that there is more irony in Job than in any other book in the Bible.1 (Indeed, this may well be the case.) Yet few scholars discuss the irony in Job in a detailed manner and even fewer scholars discuss the irony in Job in terms of the genre of the narrative. In this paper I discuss the irony in the Book of Job in a specific and systematic way, and consider what this means as far as the genre of Job is concerned.

The most striking difficulty that irony poses for interpretation is that the true message is always hidden and may be the opposite of what is explicitly said. If I were to say, for example, ‘great day today’ when there is a storm outside, although I am saying that it is a great day, the message I am trying to convey is that it is, in fact, a lousy day. In the cases of overstatement and understatement the true message is exaggerated or diminished. In the case of ‘misrepresentation’ it may be that the literal message is inconsistent with the intended message. Imagine an academic reference for an applicant (Dr Smith) for a job as a theology lecturer that only states that Dr Smith is an excellent tennis player. The intended content of the message is that Dr Smith is a lousy theologian. In addition to the problematic hiddenness of irony, we must also consider what type of irony is found in a narrative since different types of irony have different purposes. This endeavour is complicated by the fact that there are numerous taxonomies of irony which tend to be individualistic and imperfect. So when we discuss irony in an academic setting it is important to be specific. In this paper I rely on a modified version of Douglas Muecke’s taxonomy of irony as it is found in the book, The Compass of Irony.2 I have chosen this taxonomy for Muecke’s detailed description of verbal irony which I will discuss shortly in relation to the Book of Job. Initially, however, I will present Muecke’s definition of irony.

Muecke argues that all forms of irony have three essential elements which are: (1) two different levels in a text—the upper and lower level; (2) a conflict between the levels; and (3) an element of innocence. As far as the first element is concerned, the lower level is the state of affairs as the victim of irony (or the person who does not notice the irony) sees things. This is the explicit level. The upper level is the superior all-seeing level of the ironist. This is the implicit level.3 In my earlier example of the weather, the lower level comprises the literal expression that the weather is great. The upper level of the narrative comprises the ironist’s dissimulation and
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the true message that the weather is terrible. The second essential element of irony assumes a conflict between the two levels. In the weather example the conflict arises due to the direct opposition between the literal words and the true message. As noted earlier, the conflict need not be a direct opposition as it is in this case (although it often is), but could present as exaggerated and diminished effects, or contradictions. The third essential element of irony is innocence. Innocence can present in two ways, either in the feigned ignorance of the ironist—so here we have a pseudo-innocence so to speak—or the innocence may be present in the victim of irony. This is the person who misses the irony and is the ‘victim’ of irony as the irony is had at his or her expense. In the case of the weather example, if my response to ‘great day today’ when it is storming is to say ‘oh, I didn’t know that you liked rain’, then I am the victim of irony and am an innocent as far as irony is concerned.

Muecke further distinguishes between two distinct groupings of irony that he calls situational irony and verbal irony. Situational irony is described as being a state of affairs that can be observed to be ironic. There is no moral judge or moral judgment in situational irony, instead the irony is artistic, philosophical, and non-judgemental. (This is not to say that situational irony does not sometimes present situations that have a moral aspect.) A common response to situational irony would be ‘isn’t it ironic?’ Situational irony includes dramatic irony, romantic irony, and general, cosmic, or world irony (the latter three instances being different names for the same phenomenon). An example of situational irony is a scene where a pickpocket gets his pocket picked while going about his business picking pockets. Such irony is playful or whimsical without pejorative criticism or moral judgement. Verbal irony, in contrast, is characterised by an ironist who is being deliberately ironical, the specific presence of an object of ironic attack, and a corrective intent. This kind of irony is militant, confrontational, and intended to make moral judgements. This is the kind of irony that is found in satire. To build on our weather example, let us assume that the Bureau of Meteorology has made a confident forecast for a sunny day. My comment ‘great day today’, assuming it is storming, has a pejoratively critical intent. The Bureau of Meteorology is the object of my attack because of their confident assurance to be able to predict the weather. Verbal irony seeks to expose any form of intellectual hubris and therefore has a corrective intent. Note here that the object of the ironic attack can also be the victim of irony if he or she misses the
irony, but the victim of irony is not necessarily the object of attack. If I said ‘great day today’ to the Bureau of Meteorology and they miss the irony in my remark, they are both the object of ironic attack and the victim of irony. On the other hand, if I make the remark to my mother and she misses the irony she is merely the victim of irony and not the object of ironic attack.6 The object of ironic attack can be something general and impersonal, such as an entire theological system, or it can be personal and specific, such as a particular person.7 In summation, verbal irony has the presence of an ironist being deliberately ironical, the presence of an object of attack, and a moral focus. Furthermore, verbal irony is the most important and most heavily utilised element in satire. The constant use of irony sets up two different levels in a text, one which presents the situation as it appears to the object of the attack, and another which is critical of the object of attack. This duality, then, represents the struggle of two different perspectives or, indeed, societies.8 Verbal irony is essential to satire, therefore, since it sets up the two levels and forces the audience to make a judgement between the contrasting values embodied in these two different levels.

Examples of verbal irony in the Book of Job

Muecke mentions twenty possible types of verbal or satirical irony.9 It is not possible in a paper of this length to work through all of Muecke’s types, nor to discuss all of the examples of verbal irony in Job. Instead I will concentrate on some of the more interesting types and examples whilst noting that there are numerous additional types and examples of verbal irony in the Book of Job.

Praising in order to blame

A good example of praising in order to blame is 26:2–3 which reads, ‘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!’10 It is unclear if Job is talking to Bildad or God in this example. Regardless to whom Job’s message is addressed, however, it can reasonably be assumed that Job is praising neither Bildad nor God for the sake of exalting them, but instead is using irony. Therefore, we may assume that the intended message of the irony is the opposite of what Job says—that those without power have not been helped. That those who have no strength have not been assisted, and that those without wisdom have not
been counseled with good advice. In this category we might also include blessing in order to curse.11

**Pretended agreement with the victim**

A good example of this type of irony is 12:2 which reads, ‘No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you.’ This view would seem to be discounted in the following verse (12:3) where Job indicates that he does not believe this to be true. There he states, ‘But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?’

**Pretended advice to the victim**

A good example is 5:1–27. Although Eliphaz is explicitly giving Job advice to trust in God’s justice, the implication is that Eliphaz believes that Job is guilty. Note that with the type of irony we are discussing here, the ironist is not a character in the narrative but rather the author or the narrator. The author’s persona is therefore evident in the words and actions of different characters.12 In the case of Job, nearly all of the characters make ironic comments or are a party to ironic actions, presenting numerous different explicit and implicit perspectives.

**The rhetorical question**

There are numerous rhetorical questions in the Book of Job. Indeed, chapter 38 contains one rhetorical question after another. Take, for example, 38:12–13: ‘Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?’ We can assume that this is not an ordinary question or request for information as God knows that Job is not the creator of the world. Instead, this question is a pejorative rhetorical question which is intended to put Job in his place.

**Parody**

A good example is 7:17–18 which is a parody of Psalm 8:5. Psalm 8:4–5 states, ‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.’ In 7:17–18 Job says, ‘What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment?’ Notice that Job’s view
of God parodies Psalm 8:4–5 and is in direct opposition to the view of God held by the psalmist.

**Overstatement**

The narrative introduction to the character of Job in 1:1–5 overstates his righteousness. For instance, his children are of a perfect number, the number of his animals appears to be exaggerated, and the verses are peppered with superlatives relating to Job: he was *blameless*, the greatest of *all* of the people of the East and *continually* ensuring that his children were pure. The conflict in this passage concerns the matter-of-fact presentation of Job’s uprightness in contrast to the implication that Job is not as righteous as Job is represented to be.

**Irony displayed**

This sub-category of verbal irony requires an in-depth explanation. Irony displayed is similar to situational irony (being largely focused on the irony of events), but it can be distinguished from situational irony by the presence of the ironist being ironical, or pejoratively critical in the arrangement of events and by the presence of an object of ironic attack (as opposed to situational irony which views events as whimsical coincidences). Of the two types of irony displayed in this sub-category, I only intend to discuss the type that is particularly helpful to the interpretation of the Book of Job. Muecke explains this sub-category of verbal irony in the following way: ‘. . . to accept the situation or the victim’s position but develop it according to the victim’s premises until the absurdity of the conclusion confronts the plausibility of the beginning.’ Or, in other words, accept the explicit or literal presentation of facts but develop them according to the victim’s premises until the absurdity of the findings confront the veracity of the literal presentation of events. This sub-category of verbal irony is particularly helpful when it is applied to 1:6–12. In these verses the literal presentation of facts consists of God, in league with *haššāṭān* (‘the satan’), testing Job unjustly. For the sake of this exercise it is necessary that we accept that God is in league with the satan and testing Job unjustly, but develop this according to the victim’s premise to see whether or not this will lead to an absurdity. If it does lead to an absurdity we can argue that this presentation of events is ironic and that the true message of the events is hidden and in opposition to the literal presentation of facts. The unknowing victim of irony (as opposed to the object of ironic
attack) in this instance is Job as he accepts the notion that God is testing him unjustly (or in other words the explicit presentation of facts). Therefore, we must develop the literal presentation of facts along with Job’s premise, which is, in this case, a model of retributive justice, whereby God is directly concerned always to punish people proportionately according to their sins. In this situation, however, Job’s suffering far outweighs any transgression he may have committed. Therefore, in line with his premise of retributive justice God must be testing Job or afflicting Job unjustly. The development of this premise leads to absurdity in 19:25, where Job calls out for a gōʾēl, an avenger of blood, who according to Numbers 35:19 and Deuteronomy 19:6, would vindicate Job’s suffering by punishing and potentially killing the guilty, in this instance, God. So in line with irony displayed, the absurdity of this conclusion (killing God for unjustly afflicting the righteous) must confront the plausibility of the beginning, which is in this case the testing scene (1:6–12). The testing scene is directly attributed to the conception of retributive justice since God and haššāṭān discuss the possibility that Job is only righteous for the sake of reward.

It might also be argued that in a world that is organized by the premise of retributive justice, the only way that the innocent would then suffer is at the hands of a capricious God. This example could be discussed in line with Muecke’s three essential elements of irony in the following way. In the lower level of the narrative, which is the explicit level of the narrative, we see God and the satan testing Job and Job calling out for a blood redeemer to potentially kill God. In the upper level of the narrative is the implication that Job’s understanding of God is incorrect. The conflict is the opposition between the literal presentation of events and the absurdity that they create. Job and his friends are the victims of irony as they do not see the absurdity of the situation which is a product of their belief in a narrow and rigid view of retributive justice. Furthermore, a narrow and inflexible model of retributive justice is the object of attack. In line with this absurd presentation of God we can conclude that the representation of God in these passages is merely a God-construction in line with the premise of retributive justice. It is a God-construction in as much as any representation of God in the Hebrew Bible is an expression of an imperfect understanding of God. The representation of the testing God in Job might also be understood as a God-construction as it leads to an absurdity and contradicts the later understanding of God in the Book of Job. For instance, in 40:8 God castigates Job by saying, ‘Will
you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?’ If we were to accept the testing scene in the Book of Job at face value, this statement of God’s would seem to be inconsistent. The God in 1:8, in discussing Job with the satan, remarks, ‘There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil’. Yet, despite this, God in league with the satan goes on to ensure that Job’s family are killed, that he loses all of his wealth and standing in society, and that his health is sorely afflicted. If these events are truly caused by God then it would be consistent for Job to justify himself with a claim against God’s unjust behaviour, particularly if God is afflicting Job merely to test his faith. If this is the case, then Job is an innocent, and the unjust affliction of the innocent was a serious crime in the Ancient Near East. Yet, it would appear that the God-image that emerges in the latter portion of the Book of Job challenges this view of reality which could be considered further evidence that 1:6–12 is an example of irony displayed.

Given that a pervasive sense of verbal irony is the only essential element of satire, the pervasive use of verbal irony in the Book of Job indicates that it should be understood as a satire.15

**The Book of Job as a satire**

Traditionally satire is distinguished by elements other than irony, albeit none of these are essential. Non-essential elements which may be present in a satire, and which have not already been discussed, include fantastic events, ridicule, grotesqueries, and rhetorical features.16 Fantastic events are otherwise described as events that are impossible or highly improbable.17 As far as the Book of Job is concerned there are a few fantastic events including the gathering of the heavenly court where God and the satan discuss Job’s righteousness (1:6–12) and the Leviathan could be considered a fantasy creature (40:1–34). Ridicule is described as making fun of a person by any means.18 One example of ridicule in the Book of Job is 30:1–15 where Job ridicules himself as he is now one of the poor by whom he is disgusted. Grotesqueries are described as actions which are characterised by violence, violations, or obscenities.19 ‘There are numerous grotesque elements in the Book of Job including the following: ‘they will suck the poison of asps’ (20:16), ‘they will flee from an iron weapon: a bronze arrow will strike them through. It is drawn forth and comes out of their body, and the glittering point comes out of their gall; terrors comes upon them’ (20:24), and ‘They lie down alike
in the dust, and the worms cover them’ (21:26). Furthermore, rhetorical features signify that a work has been artistically crafted which is a further indication of satire. The rhetorical features that are notable in satire include paronomasia, repetitions of verbs, homophones, homographs, colloquialisms, obscene language, *hapax legomena*, and chiastic patterns. According to Lindsay Wilson, the Book of Job has more *hapax legomena* and rare words than any other book of the Hebrew Bible. There are also a number of puns, among other features, including 6:21. There the similarity between the words ‘see’ (*rāʾāh*) and ‘be afraid’ (*yārēʾ*) constitutes a pun in Hebrew. Given these examples, it can be concluded that there are numerous non-essential elements of satire in the Book of Job. Taken in conjunction with the pervasive sense of irony in the Book of Job, which is the essential element of satire, one can reliably claim that the Book of Job is a satire.

What is the purpose of the Book of Job if it is a satire? The purpose of satire is to bring about social, political, or religious reform, and therefore it can be argued that the purpose of the Book of Job is to bring about reform. In particular, the Book of Job challenges a narrow and inflexible concept of justice. It does this by presenting a lived experience which is contrary to the narrow, inflexible, retributive notion presented, and by detailing the absurdity of this proposition when it is considered in terms of the contrary lived experience. Notably, Job’s lived experience does not reflect his understanding of a just God. Therefore, Job challenges God. Job’s friends either challenge the veracity of Job’s claim or suggest that he is ignorant of possible transgressions he may have made. Neither Job nor his friends entertain an alternative explanation—that their understanding of God’s nature is wrong. Instead, Job comes to the erroneous decision that God must be unjust in order to accommodate his lived experience. His friends come to the erroneous decision that he deserves his suffering, even if they are otherwise seemingly supportive of him. Yet herein lies the greatest hubris in the narrative. Job and his friends are seemingly righteous men who would not dare to transgress less they end up like the poor. According to the beliefs that Job and his friends hold dear, the poor and disadvantaged have transgressed, possibly in an unmitigated way, depending upon how much suffering (or punishment) they endure. Yet, in reality, it is Job and his friends’ belief in the nature of God which oppresses the poor and disadvantaged. I suggest this is the reason that God castigates Job and his friends in the speeches—because they are speaking wrongly of God’s nature. Indeed, in the speeches God
clearly indicates in a lengthy dialogue that Job is ignorant when it comes to his understanding of God (38:2–40:2).

In the speeches we see a new, unformulated image of God emerge. Satires are popular in times of change, and their purpose is to challenge the status quo whilst still not presenting a new and settled theology. In this case, satire has largely done a negative job in terms of saying what God is not instead of fully explicating God’s nature. Saliently, the satire has challenged the idea of God who rigidly adheres to a narrow concept of retributive justice. Yet, there is evidence of an evolving image of God in Job. This understanding goes beyond a puny conception of a capricious and prosecuting God to the God of creation and infinite imagination. The theological movement in the narrative, then, is from a God of retributive justice to a more expansive image of God.

Importantly, this evolution of understanding comes about by working though conflicting discourse. Although Job comes to the erroneous decision that God must be unjust, Job is still in a better position than his friends because Job has cried out against that which is inconsistent to him, even if it appears to him that God is unjust. Job is seeking the truth while his friends are content to distort the truth in order to fit their view of reality—which is a reality that is truly unjust to the poor and disadvantaged. In railing against a perceived injustice, even if Job is unclear as to how this injustice could occur, Job is following his conscience. Surely this is why God supports Job for speaking out (42:7), whilst still warning Job that he is speaking what is wrong of God. In other words, Job has dared to challenge a God-construction that is harmful. This is the reform that the satirist as a critic of religion hopes to bring about. This reform is indicated in the narrative by Job’s change in his God-understanding as is evident in 42:1–6.

This movement away from a God-construction based on narrow retributive justice was very important in the ancient world because this premise oppressed the poor and disadvantaged. It could even be argued that there are vestiges of this way of thinking today. For instance, the argument that those who live on the streets deserve their status as God would not have allowed their suffering otherwise. Equally important is a commitment to an evolving understanding of God. This understanding of God must be benevolent and grace-filled as history has shown us that sick gods create sick people and sick societies. Nowhere is this more clearly indicated today than in the theology of the terrorist organisation ISIS.
Conclusion
The Book of Job presents the clash of two different ways of thinking: a belief in a narrow conception of retributive justice and a negative belief that the world is not organised according to this premise. We have reached this conclusion by discussing the theory of irony. There it was conveyed that the three essential elements of all irony are as follows: (1) two different levels in a text (an upper and a lower level), (2) a conflict between the two levels, and (3) the presence of innocence. According to Muecke the types of irony could then be distinguished according to whether they were situational or verbal irony. Situational irony was described as the observation of events which were deemed to be ironic. This type of irony is playful and non-judgemental. Verbal irony, on the other hand, is distinguished by the presence of an ironist who is being deliberately ironical in order to be pejoratively critical, an object of attack, and a corrective intent to the irony. Importantly, it is this kind of irony that is found in satire. Verbal irony can be broken down into a number of different sub-categories including praising in order to blame, use of rhetorical questions, overstatement, and others.

It is claimed that there are numerous examples of verbal irony in the Book of Job which in itself strongly suggests that the narrative is a work of satire. However, it is also argued that satire is determined by a pervasive sense of irony which is the essential element of satire and by the presence of a range of non-essential features of satire. The non-essential features included fantastic events, ridicule, parody, distortions, grotesqueries, and rhetorical features. It is argued that the Book of Job has examples of all of the non-essential elements of satire, along with a pervasive sense of irony that is the essential element of satire. Therefore, it is claimed that the Book of Job is a work of satire. It is argued that the purpose of the Book of Job, like all satire, is reform. In particular, it would seem that a movement away from the image of a God of narrow and inflexible retributive justice is the reform that is hoped for in the Book of Job.

Endnotes
1. One such example is Yair Hoffman, A Blemished Perfection: The Book of Job in Context (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 212.


5. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 34.

6. Ingram, ‘A King and a Fool?’ 73.


10. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

11. See the first section of J. Richard Middleton’s paper in this issue, 1–4.


