August 1, 2018, 9:00 AM to 10:30 AM, Room 16 - Fabianinkatu 33, Päärakennus (30 min)

God's Questions

Irony in God's First Speech in the Book of Job (Job 38:1–39:30)

1. Introduction

אֵיפֹה הָיִיתָ בְּיָסְדִי־אָרֶץ הַגֶּד אִם־יָדַעְתָּ בִינָה׃

Where were you when I founded the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding. (38:4)

Commentators on the divine speeches in the book of Job agree – as far as any agreement in the research on the book of Job is possible – that in the divine speeches (Job 38:1–39:30; 40:6-41:26) irony is involved.[1] But what are the criteria to identify irony in biblical texts? And what is its rhetorical function in the divine speeches?

These are the questions I want to address in my paper. For this purpose, I firstly want to give a short insight into the challenges that research on irony in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is facing. Then I want to show how literary und linguistic theories on irony can contribute to the research on irony in biblical texts, and finally I will turn back to the first divine speech in the book of Job and the rhetorical function of irony in this text.

2. Irony in Biblical Research

Increased interest on irony in biblical texts was launched by Edwin Good's "Irony in the Old Testament" (1981). It was followed more recently by two further monographs on irony in the Hebrew Bible (resp. Old and New Testament) by Carolyn Sharp (2009) and Sergio Gaburro (2013).[2] The vast majority of research on irony was done, however, in regards to single books. Concerning narrative texts, let me mention "The Triumph of Irony in" by Lilian Klein's study on the Book of Judges (1988) and Christina Duncker's monograph on 1 Kgs 1–11 (2010). With regard to poetic texts, intense research on irony was focused particularly on Ecclesiastes, where the articles by I. Spangenberg[3] in 1996 were followed by a series of studies by e.g. F.J. Backhaus, B. Willmes and W.H. Anderson.[4]

But also the book of Job has become object of intense research concerning irony: After Mackenzie's seminal article "The Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job" in 1959, in the seventies, a series of articles by D. Robertson, E. Good and W. Whedbee followed in reaction to Williams' study on irony in Job.[5] Later on, the question was taken up

[1] Some examples may serve as a demonstration: Budde 1913, S. 244, 38:21 is a "direct irony" ("direkte Irony"), similar to 15:7; Weiser 1980, S. 244 uses (in regard to 38:3b) the expression "irony of divine supremacy ("Ironie der göttlichen Überlegenheit"); According to Janzen 1985, 225-230 (here 227, 230), the "rhetorical strategy" of the "ironic mode of Yahweh's speaking" opens up for Job "a possibility for transformed self-understanding"; Alter 2010, S. 161 sees in 38:21 an ironic echo to Job's wish never to have been born (cf. Job 3).
[2] Sharp 2009; Gaburro 2013.
[3] Spangenberg 1996a, 1996b.
[4] Backhaus 1998; Willmes 2000; Anderson 2010.
[5] MacKenzie 1959; Williams 1971; Robertson 1973; Good 1973; Whedbee 1977; Williams 1977; Good 1981, S. 234–240.

by Y. Hoffman and D. Geeraerts as well as in J.G. Janzen's commentary.[6] Perhaps the most thorough study on irony in in the first divine speech has been published by Petra Ritter-Müller in 2000.[7] Finally, most recently, Virginia Ingram gave a noteworthy contribution to the research on irony in the book of Job.[8]

This brief overview gives witness to the increased interest that irony has found in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in general and in the analysis of Ecclesiastes and Job in particular. Yet, my impression is that there two major challenges which the research on irony in biblical texts is facing: On the one hand, concerning the localization of irony, there is a tendency to ubiquity – scholars, once they have started to identify elements of irony in certain text passages, risk to find more and more ironic aspects in the same text and to end up in overinterpretation.[9] On the other hand, when it comes to determining the rhetorical function of a certain ironic element, interpreters tend to arbitrariness, as sometimes we find a broad range of interpretative approaches to the same text passage. On the whole, on the one side some tend to emphasize the stability of irony, highlighting its subversive power of questioning dominant views, on the other side others underline its elusiveness and therefore tend to a deconstructive or nihilistic interpretation.[10] In the following, based on literary and linguistic theories on irony, I will try to revise the criteria for localizing irony in biblical texts and determining its rhetorical effects.

3. Irony in Literary and Linguistic Theories

In the field of literary theory, the most prominent benchmark on irony is W.C.Booth's "Rhetoric of Irony" (1974). He delineates a four-step-method to identify and evaluate irony in literary texts,[11] and calls this four-step-process "reconstruction"[12] of irony, comparing it to the ascending of the reader to a "complex dwelling place"[13] from where he looks down to the rejected overt meaning.[14] By this metaphor, Booth points out the performative aspect of reconstruction of irony, from what results that the ironic meaning cannot be completely verbalised in a non-ironic statement. Concerning the rhetorical effect of irony, Booth points out 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".[15]

[6] Hoffman 1983, 1996, S. 212–221; Geeraerts 2003; Janzen 1985.
[7] Ritter-Müller 2000, S. 263–277.
[8] Ingram 2017.
[9] This may be partly the case e.g. with Duncker 2010; as Baumgart 2011, S. 310–311 remarks, the study on irony in 1 Kgs 1-11 might need clearer criteria for the localization of irony.
[10] Referring to W.C. Booth's distinction between stable and unstable irony, Janzen 1985, S. 227–228 underlines the necessity to distinguish "between stable ironies (those which subvert one position in order to establish another which the writer intends to be taken as itself a stable and unsubvertible ground), and unstable ironies (those in which every position is in turn a candidate for subversion)." Concerning the book of Job, an example of the former interpretation of irony is given by Ingram 2017, an instance of the latter is what Hoffman 1983 identifies as the fourth level or irony in the book, i.e. the self-irony of the author.
[11] Cf. Booth 1974, 10–14.
[12] Booth 1974, 10-39 pass.
[13] Booth 1974, S. 34.
[14] Cf. Booth 1974, 33–39.
[15] Booth 1974, S. 13–14.

In the field of linguistics, *Edgar Lapp*, after a thorough analysis of a broad range of theories on irony, finally comes to define irony as "simulation of insincerity"[16]: In difference to the lie which he defines as "simulation of sincerity"[17], irony, according to Lapp, is a second-level simulation, where the speaker/writer *pretends* to lie resp. to be insincere. So, whereas by lying the speaker (resp. author) wants the hearer (resp. 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, critique or sentiment. This means that irony is a partly transparent simulation of a lie and is most likely successful when the disagreement to the background information shared by both sides is evident, i.e. when it is obvious that the proposition, in face of the given context, is unacceptable. As Lapp points out, his definition of irony is valid also for ironic questions and sollicitations, which *simulate* to ask insincerely resp. *pretend* to summon falsely. Finally, Lapp clarifies that the second-level-simulation is not a simulation in the sense of deception (*dissimulatio*), but of doing-as-if (*simulatio*). [18]

Both Booth and Lapp offer helpful specificiations on the linguistic form and rhetorical function of irony. However, they don't offer detailed criteria for the identification of irony in a literary work. This is different with the studies of Marika Müller and Hannele Kohvakka, who both sketch out a methodology of analysing literary texts in view of ironic elements and apply it to a set of contemporary texts in German print media.[19]

Based on an overview of the cultural history of irony, *Müller* differentiates between three types of irony: stylistics of irony[20] – which comes close to what is generally termed as verbal irony[21] –, irony of allusion[22], and ironic parabasis[23]. Concerning the first one (verbal irony), she lists a series of textual (and paratextual) signals such as exaggerated or stereotyped adjectives or adverbs, ventured metaphors, rhetorical questions etc.[24] In terms of irony of allusion, she distinguishes between syntagmatic allusions and references to either single texts or more generally to sorts of texts or motifs.[25]

[16] „Simulation der Aufrichtigkeit" (Lapp 1997, S. 146).
[17] „Die Lüge ist eine **Simulation der Aufrichtigkeit**; die Ironie ist eine **Simulation der Unaufrichtigkeit** [accentuation by Lapp]." (Lapp 1997, S. 146).
[18] Cf. Lapp 1997, S. 146–149.
[19] Müller 1995, Kohvakka 1997.
[20] „Stilistik der Ironie". In Müller's definition, stilistics 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, S. 135).
[21] On verbal irony, cf. e.g. Muecke 1982, S. 56–66; Lapp 1997, S. 11–12; Gaburro 2013, S. 33–37. According to Japp 1983, S. 37, verbal irony is the "semiotic 'homeland'" ("semiotische 'Heimat'") of all other forms of irony; cf. Febel 2003, S. 47–48. Schoentjes 2001, S. 26–27 differentiates between socratic, situational, verbal and romantic irony.
[22] „Anspielungsironie" resp. "Ironie der Anspielung" (Müller 1995, S. 177).
[23] „ironische Parabase", Müller 1995, S. 213–241. This form of irony, however, is not relevant in respect of biblical texts.
[24] Cf. Müller 1995, S. 135–175.
[25] Cf. Müller 1995, S. 177–212.

Kohvakka instead focuses on the analysis of the inner logic of the argumentation.[26] Her four step-analysis therefore is adaptad mainly for texts that contain logically organised reasoning, yet her approach can be viewed as an important supplement to that of Müller, as it points to the relations between words and phrases and highlights contradictions to expectations ("Erwartungswidrigkeiten") and pseudo-conclusions as signals of irony.[27]

Finally, let me mention also the signals of irony that are pointed out by the biblical scholar *Franz Josef Backhaus* in his study on irony in Ecclesiastes:[28] On the one hand, Backhaus underlines the significance of semantic ambiguities as indicator of a second, possibly ironic meaning. On the other hand, he also foregrounds the relevance of the use of citations and intertextual references.[29] As we will see, these textual marks are of particular importance in the book of Job.

In conclusion, let us try to give a brief summary of our insights into theories on irony. What regards the localization of irony, the textual analysis should proceed in two steps:

1) First, the interpreter has to identify signals of incongruity based on the context and/or shared knowledge, in order to locate first-level insincerities.

2) Second, these passages come under close scrutiny in regards to (seemingly) unfitting or otherwise unusual vocabulary and/or metaphors as well as allusions and references, which hint at the doing-as-if-mode of the identified fist-level insincerities.

Concerning the rhetorical effect of irony, the analysis has to focus on the mode and level of communication. Also, with Booth I'd like to highlight the accord between hearer and speaker (resp. author and reader) that is produced by the process the recipient has to undertake in order to reconstruct the unsaid resp. – in Booth's terms – the "complex dwelling place".

4. Irony in God's First Speech (Job 38:1-39:30)

4.1 Rhetorical Questions

In the first divine speech, insincerity on the first level is given to a large part by the fact that it consists to a wide extent of rhetorical questions.[30] The latter are insincere speech-acts as they pretend to ask as far as they share the interrogative form with non-rhetorical, i.e. information-seeking questions, but convey an indirect assertion and have a primarily persuasive intention.[31]

So, when God asks Job in 38:4

[26] Cf. Kohvakka 1997, S. 49–80
[27] Cf. Kohvakka 1997, S. 75–80
[28] Cf. Backhaus 1998, S. 206–259.
[29] Cf. Backhaus 1998, 211-212, 255-259.
[30] 33 of the 70 verses in God's first speech contain an interrogative word (ה־, מי, אמ, על־מה, אי־זה, איפה); in addition, also 38:18a and 39:2, although without question word, are doubtlessly identified as questions, and also the phrases that are linked to a foregoing interrogative clause by a connecting ־ו or או may be understood as questions; cf. Ritter-Müller 2000, 56–57, 62–64; Engljähringer 2003, S. 168–169. On the rhetorical questions in the dialogue between Job and his friends cf. Regt 1994.
[31] Cf. Meibauer 1986, S. 160–185; Bechmann 2010, S. 11–30.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?",

the indirect assertion reads as

"You were nowhere when I founded the earth".[32]

Yet, in non-ironic rhetorical questions, the indirect proposition, i.e. the argument which the speaker wants the addressee to persuade of (or to reflect upon) is controversial.[33] So e.g. behind Cain's rhetorical question in Gen 4:9

"Am I my brother's keeper?",

we grasp a controversy about Cain's relationship to his brother.[34] In the book of Job itself, 12:9 may serve as example:

"Who does not know among all these that the hand of YHWH has done this?"

Job's by this rhetorical question contests the friends' implicit claim to have a superior knowledge.[35]

The indirect assertions in the rhetorical questions of the first divine speech, however, are not controversial, as they either affirm that God is the creator and sustainer of the world or deny Job's participation or detailed knowledge concerning the divine creative work – all this is not contested by Job. Therefore, when God in 38:5 asks

"who set its [the world's] measurements?",

the question is not aimed against a contradictory assertion by Job. We can grasp, therefore, a second-level-simulation, as God is in some way doing-as-if to ask rhetorical questions.[36] God's questions are rhetorical in form as they contain an indirect assertion, but don't function as rhetorical questions as they don't convey a persuasive intention in regards to the implied assertion. The function of the irony, however, has to be viewed at in the context of the introductory question in 38:2 and the implied blame that Job is "darkening" (מחשיך) God's "counsel" (עצה) – we will come back on that.

Some of the rhetorical questions are also ironic in a second way. When God asks

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4),

or *"Have you entered into the springs of the sea?"* (38:16),

[32] Cf. Fox 1981, S. 59; Ritter-Müller 2000, S. 277.
[33] As Bechmann 2010, S. 110 points out, rhetorical questions want to persuade the addressee of a subjective fact which is not self-evident.
[34] On the rhetorical questions in Gen 4:1-16 cf. Craig 2005, S. 27–48. Similarly, in 1 Sam 17:29, David by asking rhetorically "what have I done now?" denies to have done anything for which his brothers could blame him.
[35] Job 12:9 with YHWH: secondary, interpretation.
[36] As Lapp 1997, S. 148 remarks, someone who asks ironically pretends to be someone who asks insincerely (i.e. rhetorically) ("Jemand, der ironisch fragt, spielt also jemanden, der unehrlich fragt …").

the implied assertions, that Job would have been present at the origin of the cosmos or dived to the bottom of the sea, seem unreasonable by themselves. The questions, therefore, point to something different, unsaid.[37]

Thirdly, an ironic tone is discernible in God's ironic question due to their incongruity to the assertion implied in the introductory question in 38:2, i.e. that Job is speaking "words without knowledge". This contradiction between the declaration on Job's *ignorance* and the following questions that ask about his *knowledge*, is fundamental for the ironic form of large part of the first divine speech, as Ritter-Müller has shown.[38] However, the function of this irony is discernible only in context of the allusions to Job's foregoing speeches, which, as we will see now, are ironically subverted by YHWH in his first speech.

4.2 Allusions to Job's Speeches

In the introductory question to the first divine speech, YHWH blames Job of "darkening counsel". The reproach does not attack Job directly, but is embedded in a rhetorical question ("who is this…?" instead of the direct "you…"). But also the reason for the reproach at first is not formulated overtly – YHWH does not ask

*"Who is this that **speaks** words without knowledge?"*,

but *"Who is this, that **darkens counsel**…?"*.

Whereas the locution "words without knowledge" contains an unveiled accusation, the verb מחשיך alludes to the beginning of Job's lament in Job 3. It is this allusiveness that gives the question its ironic tone, as it reveals the doing-as-if-mode of the rhetoric question. By the allusiveness, the charge remains partly covert.

The allusion to Job 3 in the first question is of seminal importance for the ironic tone of the first divine speech, as it is followed by a sequence of parallels and resemblances between the two texts. In the following, I want to highlight briefly three ways how the rhetoric of irony is functioning here:

1) Firstly, lexemes and motifs are transposed into another context. Job in 3:4 wishes the day of his birth would have remained in darkness, i.e. would not have happened at all. YHWH instead transfers the word חשך into the realm of knowledge and wisdom by linking it to the noun עצה. In a similar way, in 38:8-11 the motif of birth is transposed into a metaphor for the creation of the sea.

2) Secondly, in 38:3 we can observe a shift within the semantic range of the noun גבר. Whereas in 3:3, Job by recalling his birth uses the word in the sense of "newborn male", YHWH instead challenges Job to prepare himself for a struggle like a "warrior", ironizing thereby Job's wording.

[37] Ritter-Müller 2000, S. 272 points out in this regard that the manifest deviousness of the question turns the rhetorical question into a rhetorical one ("Die offensichtliche Abwegigkeit der Frage macht aus der rhetorischen eine ironische Frage.").
[38] Ritter-Müller 2000, S. 269–277.

3) Thirdly, motifs and themes of Job's lament are taken up in inverted mode. Job initiates his lament with the imagery of "night" and "darkness" (3:3-9), the divine speech puts ahead "light" and "morning" (38:7, 12-15).

These examples show how the allusions to Job 3 reveal the doing-as-if-mode of the rhetoric questions and how the first divine speech playfully undermines Job's initial lament.

4.3 Conspicuous Vocabulary and Imagery

As stated above, seemingly unfitting vocabulary or metaphors may hint at the doing-as-if-mode of a text passage and may therefore be a signal of irony, defined by Lapp as a "second-level-simulation". In the following, I will give some examples in this regard.

The semantic field of "speaking/uttering" is present throughout the first divine speech.[39] Conspicuously, verbs that belong to that field do not only occur with God or Job as subject, but also cosmic elements and animals are reported to "speak" in some way:

- In 38:7, the "morning stars" and the "sons of God" "cry out" and "shout". While also in Isaiah and the Psalms "heaven" (שמים) and "all the earth" (ארץ) may "shout" (רנן) or "rejoice" (רוע), the phrases of Job 38:7 are unique in the Hebrew Bible.[40]

- Perhaps even more conspicuous is the repeated laughing of animals in the second half of the divine speech (39:7, 18, 22). Whereas in some narratives animals may speak *to human beings*, here wild ass, ostrich and horse laugh *for themselves*.[41]

On the other hand, God in his rhetorical questions prompts Job to speak to meteorological phenomena and animals:

- The prompt to Job in 38:12 to "command (צוה) the morning" reminds of Ps 78:23, yet there it is God who is reported to have "commanded the clouds".[42]

- Similarly, in Job 39:23 YHWH rhetorically asks Job to give command (על־פיך) to the vulture (נשר), whereas elsewhere the same bird is described as flying and nesting in height that are unreachable for man.[43]

As these examples show, various passages of the first divine speech tend to verge on the absurd, as they contain incongruities to world knowledge and to the linguistic usage observed elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. By this, they disclose the doing-as-if-mode of the rhetorical questions and by this contribute to the ironic tone of the speech.

5. Conclusion

[39] Ritter-Müller 2000, S. 140–147 lists the lexemes of the semantic field that occur in 38:1-39:30, but doesn't analyze peculiarities of their usage.

[40] רנן has שמים as subject in Isa 44:23 and 49:13, שמים וארץ in Jer 51:48; cf. also Prov 8:3 (תבונה, חכמה); רוע is used with ארץ as subject in Ps 66:1; 98:4; 100:1, cf. also 4Q Shirb 3:7; Isa 44:23 (תחתיות); 4Q Instrd 69,2:9 (מוסדי רקיע); cf. Clines und Elwolde 1993-2016, VII, 451-452; 502-504.

[41] Speaking animals in narratives appear in Gen 3:1-5 and Num 22:21-34, cf. Riede 2002, S. 22–24. In Job 38:1-39:30, also the lightnings (ברק 38:35) and the horse (סוס) are speaking (אמר 39:25), the latter does also exult (שוש).

[42] Cf. also Ps 57:9; 108:3 (אעירה שחר).

[43] Cf. Prov 30:19; Jer 49:16; Obd 4.

In conclusion, we have seen that Lapp's definition of irony as "simulation of insincerity" is a useful starting for the analysis if irony in the divine speeches. The signals of irony listed by Khovakka and Müller helpfully complement Lapp's theoretical approach. Yet, what regards irony in rhetorical questions which dominate the first divine speech, specific aspects have to be taken into consideration, what I could only touch briefly in this paper. In addition, as the examples have shown, allusions to previous passage in the book play a crucial role for the ironic grounding of YHWH's first speech to Job, as the starting point of the ironies is laid with the verb form מחשיך which alludes to Job's initial lament (Job 3).

Concerning the effect of irony, we could observe that by the opening up of gaps of the unsaid, Job is led beyond the acceptance of his ignorance. By filling in these gaps, Job – contrarily to the accusation of having spoken "without knowledge" – necessitates a certain kind of knowledge. That he has and applies this knowledge gets evident within the narrative by his answers to God (40:3-5; 42:1-6). With Michael Fox we can conclude that "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. He has the ability to (…) recognize God's orderly, constant rule. (…) God demands humility, not humiliation."[44] On the level of the interplay between text and reader, with Job, the reader is induced to move beyond ignorance and to find renewed trust in God. We might take up here Booth's remark on the effect of irony, which, "when it succeeds, reveals in both participants a kind of meeting with other minds" [45]. This success however, lays in the hand of the reader resp. interpreter. And that is why irony has always been a risky business.

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[44] Fox 1981, S. 59
[45] Booth 1974, S. 13.

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