

# Ancient Biblical Satire

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## Ancient Biblical Laughter

He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.

(Psalm 2: 4, *Authorized Version*)

Asked to name the world's funniest book, few would mention the Bible. Yet, somewhat perversely perhaps, I have for many years thought that one of the funniest scenes I have ever read occurs in the Gospel of John when Jesus has a lengthy conversation with the Samaritan woman at a well where she has come to draw water (John 4: 4–42). The woman is amazed that Jesus should ask her for a drink, since, as John notes, “Jews and Samaritans . . . do not use vessels in common” (4: 9). When Jesus asks her to get her husband and return, she says, “I have no husband” (4: 17). Jesus agrees, but adds, with an intense look most likely, “although you have had five husbands, the man with whom you are now living is not your husband” (4: 18). To which the Samaritan woman replies, “Sir . . . I can see that you are a prophet” (4: 19). From my high-school days, I have always found that a very funny response, an apparently thorough *non sequitur* covering an embarrassing moment in a talk that has turned decidedly personal and intimate.

At an older period of my life, I know now that the woman's comments were not as off the point as I had once thought. Like many readers of the Bible, I had assumed that a prophet was in the business of prediction, foretelling the future. What could the Samaritan woman have meant by calling Jesus a prophet, a designation frequently applied to him by those who heard his message? What I had not realized was that prophets, at least their Hebrew incarnation – or their contemporary embodiments, like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King – rarely, if ever, predict. The future they envision is the likely consequence of present behavior. Conduct and consequence are causally related. Prophets criticize that conduct: they judge, and, in an almost strictly

legal sense, they render sentence, God's sentence, a sentence of built-in, coming disaster for current misbehavior. Prophets disparage their society. They have unflattering things to say about their hearers. So Jesus is indeed speaking as a prophet when he talks with the Samaritan woman. However many husbands the woman might have had, the man she is currently involved with sexually is not her husband. Later illumination notwithstanding, I still think it is a funny exchange, even if the Gospel of John does not intend it that way.

Whatever my enjoyment in the remark, the Samaritan woman was not likely amused by the observation. That awareness highlights a needful caution about the laughter that Scripture can induce in us. We easily assume that laughter is always the sign in us of an agreeable emotion, a response that puts us in a most complimentary light. Psychologists, physicians, and therapists, to name but a few, tell us repeatedly of the mental and even physical benefits of laughter. To understand much of the laughter evoked in Scripture, and especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, however, we must admit that laughter does not always reveal our most attractive side. We reveal another face of laughter, a most unsympathetic one, which many of these same psychologists, physicians, and therapists warn about. Enjoy the laughter of comedy, they urge, but beware the laughter of satire. Yes, in the laughter of comedy, we laugh *with*, we laugh sympathetically and identifiably. We cheerfully recognize others in situations like our own, and we enjoy our common fallibility. But in satire, we laugh *at*. We laugh with hostility. We imply a superiority in our laughter because our laughing *at* implies that we do not share in the object of derision. The laughter of comedy is a *we* laughter. We participate in what amuses us. The laughter of satire is a *you* laughter, mocking, malicious, finger-pointing, and gloating.

Jonathan Swift once disturbingly reminded us in an adaptation of a maxim of Rochefoucauld that he much admired that there is something in the misfortune of our friends that does not displease us. How much more satisfaction must there be in the misfortune of our enemies, in seeing them brought down for behavior we find reprehensible and which, by implication at the very least, we do not discover in ourselves? We stand apart from what we deride. We are not implicated in what we mock. It is important to bear this distinction in mind because the laughter of Scripture, and especially of Hebrew Scripture, is prevailingly satiric and especially so in the text of the fifteen canonical prophets, often in the narratives of other prophets to whom a text has not been assigned, and in the so-called wisdom writings, conduct books of a sort that place a premium on one's social standing and how that status can be maintained or damaged.

Two examples. Elijah meets on a mountain top the priests of Baal, a false god, of course (1 Kings 18: 17–40). As the priests, in increasing fury and fever, seek a response from their unresponsive divinity, Elijah offers help – sarcastically. Baal, he suggests, might be “engaged,” that is, attending to his bodily needs (18: 27), urinating or defecating and hardly in a position to respond at once. The scene reminds one of the Phantom Poet Contest in Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* (1743), when the contemptible and thieving publisher Edmund Curll, momentarily at a loss in the

exercise, sends up a prayer to a Jove likewise engaged. More helpfully than with the priests of Baal, Jove can assist Curll, signaling his help with a tissue-like note wafting down to Curll and “signed with that Ichor which from gods distills.” So for a believing Israelite, contemptuous of the worship of false gods, this passage about Elijah has to have been quite funny indeed. It vindicated, and it amused. Only the priests of Baal and their cronies would have recoiled at the insult. This joke is told at the expense of the non-believer.

Or take the famous Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” A favorite, for example, at the internment of a deceased person, the psalm evokes most pleasant pastoral images, the security of being in the hands of a loving, providing shepherd. The psalm envisions satisfaction and plenty. What could be more innocent, innocent in a root sense: devoid of harm? Yet, as the psalm anticipates the various pleasures of pastoral protection given by the Lord, it revealingly celebrates as one of the divine bounties a table that will be spread before the psalmist in the presence of his enemies. The psalmist’s satisfaction also anticipates the dissatisfaction of his enemies witnessing, for themselves, a most galling sight. What biblical readers might be disinclined to realize is the pervasiveness with which the Scriptures speak of a divinely granted satisfaction that comes as the consequence of divinely granted punishment. The bystanders and onlookers denied heaven-sent satisfaction in the Scriptures are very often consumed with jealousy, envy, impotent rage, and humiliation, all of which underscore a key feature in the enjoyment of divine satisfaction. The lesson, sometimes mockingly enforced, is clear: don’t fool around with God. He can have a nasty sense of humor.

The believing Israelite himself, however, may become the target of chastisement or ridicule, a victim of that divine nastiness and malice, for the examples drawn from Elijah and the Psalter present, thus, only one side of a picture that appears equally often in the Hebrew Scriptures. From the point of view of the Israelite believer, the episodes such as those with the prophets of Baal or the reassurances of Psalm 23 are encouraging. The Israelite will rejoice in the discomfiture of his enemies. In a society and culture as keenly attuned, however, to the pain of humiliation, embarrassment, and ridicule, a considerable part of Hebrew Scripture speaks of the humiliation felt by the just at misfortune or embarrassment. Indeed, the sanctions cited for misbehavior on the part of the just highlight, and sometimes keenly, the humiliation, ridicule, and embarrassment that will be felt by those who misbehave or whose misfortune, as in the Book of Job, is seen to be a deserved punishment for wrongdoing.

The Book of Psalms is a particularly useful source for bringing out the power and pain of humiliation and ridicule because the psalms, as passed on and as written, span at least a millennium of Israel’s history and testify throughout that time to the power of shame and ridicule. Psalm 23 is by no means unique. Psalm 137, set in the Babylonian captivity, brings out the humiliation sharply felt by Israelites in captivity and closes with a hair-raising curse on their Babylonian captors. Psalm 109 speaks of the malicious tongues of those who speak against the psalmist and, like Psalms 35

and 73 (and, of course, Psalm 137), curses those responsible for this situation. Since satire originated from the curse, the proximity to satire of these violent feelings is clear.

In addition, biblical narrative and those conduct writings known as wisdom literature provide more instances of the keen sense of ridicule felt in Scripture. Sarah, in Genesis (16: 1–6), becomes jealous of the successfully pregnant Hagar and demands that Abraham send her away. The Philistines, “when they grew merry,” call for the blinded and impotent Samson “to make sport for us” (Judges 16: 25). (To escape humiliation at the hands of the victorious Philistines, Saul asks his armor-bearer to run him through “so that these uncircumcised brutes may not come and taunt me and make sport of me” [1 Samuel 31: 4].) Despite his suicide, Saul is regarded as one of the heroes of Israel. David rejects the advice of Ahitophel, which is a public humiliation, and the counselor returns immediately to his home and hangs himself (2 Samuel 17: 23). In Ecclesiasticus, in Proverbs, and even in Ecclesiastes, counsels of conduct are reinforced by the threat of shame that will accompany misbehavior – in oneself, in one’s wife, or in one’s children. Proverbs can reinforce its catechism of avoidable shame with humor, as for example, in dramatizing the hallucinations of the drunkard as part of its endorsement of sobriety (23: 29–35). The writer of Ecclesiasticus is so convinced of the efficacy of shame as a spur to righteous behavior that he carefully and extensively delineates “proper shame” so that his attentive and presumably obedient listener “will be popular with everyone” (Ecclesiasticus 41: 14–24).

No biblical writing speaks more powerfully of the power of shame than the story of Job, who, like his friends, believes that he has been cursed by God, but who, unlike his friends, feels that the curse and shame of misfortune are undeserved. Job’s intense response to what he believes to be unjustifiable misfortune leads to self-imprecation – cursing the day of his birth – that parodies Psalm 8. He nastily calls God the “man watcher” (7: 17), spying on his creatures to find them at fault, ironically reducing God to the role of the overseer or Satan who prompted God to test Job in the first place. Job repeatedly expresses his sense of shame at his misfortune. As the exchange with his friends continues, the sarcasm and the satire of the four increase, because Job’s three friends cannot admit the theology-shattering possibility for them that the innocent might indeed suffer. To suggest the vacuous and the insubstantial, the disputants trade deprecating wind imagery back and forth among themselves anticipating by centuries the same Swift-like image that courses through *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) to picture the inane and the unconvincing (a basic image in Ecclesiastes as well). The intensity of these exchanges concludes with Job’s self-imprecation and demand that God appear as witness to respond. However much the Book of Job restores and increases Job’s good fortune, it is well to remember that the God who appears in Job neither answers Job’s questions nor even informs him that his test has been the result of a wager on his justice. In *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*, I observed: “If the lexicon of the Hebrew Scriptures does not include *satire* and *irony*, it certainly includes innumerable instances of many words associated with both: *byword*, *contempt*,

*bate, humiliate, laughingsstock, reproach, scoff, shame, taunt*, and related terms like *honor, regard*, and *repute*" (Jemielity 1992: 37). These words are certainly central to the lexicon of Job.

When the Hebrew Scriptures give us such humor, they create disgust or dismay in the audience that is its target or believes that it is being unjustifiably targeted. Consciously or not, this is satire, that is, criticism, judgment, or censure that amuses. It is not a conscious literary artifact, written, as in Horace, to entertain. In the Hebrew Scriptures, as diverse as the writings are, the moral purpose, the instruction, is always primary and close, one assumes, to exclusive. These diverse writings instruct, uplift, reassure, and criticize. They do not entertain, except peripherally. Ancient biblical satire is satire, but not intentionally so. It is not a deliberately designed literary artifact. While it can amuse and entertain those who share, say, the prophet's viewpoint, it discomfits those who do not. The laughter of the Hebrew Scriptures is frequently hostile and aggressive toward those who stand outside of or neglect the faith of Israel or, as in the Psalms and in wisdom writings, feel the humiliation directed at them by enemies or by the consequence of their own misbehavior. The laughter directed at the enemy or at unethical conduct simultaneously reinforces and amuses anyone who shares the same point of view. Like satire, consequently, ridiculing passages in the Hebrew Scriptures are directed at a twofold audience: one whose behavior is being criticized and one who agrees with the prophet or wisdom writer or storyteller that such behavior deserves to be criticized. Ancient biblical satire is thus punitive and persuasive.

A simple comparison. Husband and wife argue in the presence of the wife's friend. The wife insults her husband with a remark that her friend finds amusing. Here, in a nutshell, we find the double audience of satire: the target, whose reformation the critic (the wife) might genuinely desire, and the friend who agrees with the wife's point of view. The wife's remark discomfits one hearer and amuses another. In the Book of Amos, for example, Amos utters judgments against the nations of Damascus, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and the Northern Kingdom. Amos' targets there were not amused. Amos' supporters, on the other hand, those whose faith Amos sought to reinforce, were amused. Amos was directing God's laughter at the unbelievers of the North. Those who agreed with him shared in God's laughter at the expense of the Northern Kingdom. These are the two audiences of all satire: the targeted and the reinforced. The same comparison, moreover, illustrates two criteria of effectiveness. If every critical statement – prophecy, satire, or editorial – speaks to a double audience, it speaks with two criteria of effectiveness as well: the rhetorical and the historical. The wife's friend, who laughs at the insults directed at her friend's husband, has no way of knowing how effective her friend's chastisement will be, what the insult in fact or in history will effect. She laughs because she enjoys the language skill of the censure, how it is crafted rhetorically. Effectiveness can thus be rhetorical and historical. Judged by the latter, the Hebrew prophets, for example, were colossal failures. Not one single catastrophe they threatened was avoided. But, the same may be said about the historical effectiveness of most satire. Did, for example, Jonathan

Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) alleviate Irish poverty? If the potato famine in Ireland a century later is any indication, *A Modest Proposal* must be regarded as a failure.

What becomes a common denominator between prophetic satire in particular and its classical and later equivalents is their frequent complaint about the ineffectiveness of their criticism. Alexander Pope's concluding note to *Dialogue II* (1738) threatens to abandon satire because it is useless: "Ridicule was become as unsafe as it was ineffectual." Jeremiah frequently complains about the indifference of his listeners, and the Christian gospels are studded with Jesus's frequent complaints about the refusal of those who have ears to hear. But, aside from a shared perception of historical ineffectiveness, these satires, biblical, classical, and modern, also share a quality of rhetorical effectiveness, by which we may evaluate how well the language has been put together. As we leave church on Sunday and comment on the excellence of the sermon, we surely are not speaking historically or empirically. Did the sermon change hearts? We don't know. The excellence we speak of pertains to an effectiveness of language: a sermon coherent, well organized, effectively illustrated and the like, a sermon worth our time to listen to.

The analysis that follows is concerned with the rhetoric of ancient biblical satire, its uses of language that make biblical censure often funny. What I propose to do here is to examine the language of ancient biblical satire as it appears especially in Hebrew prophecy and in wisdom writings. The language and strategy of the Hebrew prophets, for example, bear striking and pervasive resemblances to satire, however unconscious those resemblances. The Hebrew prophets did not speak to entertain: they spoke to proclaim the judgment of the Lord. The basic similarity that prophecy has to satire is that both are criticism, both are judgment. The rhetorical strategies of prophecy bear remarkable and sustained similarities to the rhetoric, that is, to the language fashioning, of satire. Any biblical writing that ridicules is treading in the domain of satire.

This chapter on ancient biblical satire, therefore, pursues a limited, but accessible focus as a study of the historical effectiveness of any satire might not. It will draw on relevant material from several of the texts in the Hebrew canon (what Christians somewhat colonially call the Old Testament), especially from the canonical Hebrew prophets, from prophetic narrative within and without these texts (for example, Elijah), and from biblical narrative and wisdom writing. Although Jonah is also listed among the prophetic writings, Jonah is a narrative, a parable and, significantly, a satire on the reluctant prophet. All the other prophetic books present the so-called oracles or preaching of the prophets. The narrative component is sometimes more extensive, as in the case of Jeremiah, or sometimes non-existent. In the prophetic books we read primarily not the story of the prophets, but their preaching. Earlier in the Hebrew Scriptures, as mentioned, we have long narratives of earlier prophets, prophets like Samuel and Elijah, but no extensive account of their oracles forms any part of the text. Theirs is essentially a narrative. Before considering those extensive similarities with satire, however, an important question arises: what do we mean by satire?

## What is Satire?

*Ridentem dicere verum*

(Horace, *Satires* 1.1)

Satire, prophecy, conduct books, sermon, editorial – what do they have in common? A content comprised of criticism or judgment. As Northrop Frye observes in his analysis of satire in the *Anatomy of Criticism*: “essential to satire... is an object of attack.” What distinguishes satire from the attack or judgment that might appear in an editorial or the like is a second essential feature: “wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd” (1968: 224). Satire seeks to make its criticism funny and does so by employing the empirically impossible or unlikely. The world of satire calls to mind an infinite host of the fantastic: the Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, and Flying Island of *Gulliver’s Travels*; the sylphs of *The Rape of the Lock*; Juvenal’s sexual gymnast, the Empress Messalina; Mr Joyboy in Evelyn Waugh’s *The Loved One*; the talking animals in Horace and in George Orwell; Philip Roth’s Trick E. Dixon, in *Our Gang*, in hell and campaigning against the devil for the leadership of the underworld. Even Philip Roth’s recent *The Plot Against America* rewrites past history to allow for the election of the anti-semitically inclined Charles Lindbergh as president. The improbabilities and impossibilities of satire call to mind the unbroken, empirically improbable sequence of catastrophes in *Candide*; the unbroken sameness of the cycle of disappointment in *Rasselas*; the stripping away of any certainties in the Howard Campbell of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night*. Satire’s humor, however disturbing it might be, derives from fantasy: from the weird, the improbable, the grotesque, or the impossible.

This fantasy-like quality of criticism that is satire finds frequent expression in the Hebrew Scriptures whose mocking is often couched in the fantastic or the grotesque. Jealous of David’s recent success against the Philistines, for example, and hoping for David’s death in the venture, Saul demands as a bride-price from David “the foreskins of a hundred Philistines” (1 Samuel 18: 25). David slays two hundred Philistines, returns with their foreskins, and counts them in the presence of Saul. This Parade of the Philistine Foreskins cannot be without a strong element of deeply and grotesquely enjoyed satisfaction at the discomfiture of a legendary enemy of Israel and amusement as well at the continuing discomfiture of a king made uneasy by the unending triumphs of the rival of whom he is insanely jealous. The Saul who earlier rankled at the songs that celebrated the havoc David made “among tens of thousands,” compared to Saul’s “havoc among thousands” (1 Samuel 18: 7), now witnesses a second installment of David’s version of “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better.”

Perhaps the most shocking and certainly very extensive use of the critical fantasy in prophecy that is satire occurs in Ezekiel 16, the longest single unit in the prophecy and one so offensive it is not used in public Jewish worship. Ezekiel plays on the theological and sexual meanings of infidelity, terms whose relationship



appears in the sexual license that often accompanied the worship of the false gods denounced by the prophets. Israel is unflatteringly compared to Samaria and to Sodom, reminded of the care bestowed on her by Yahweh before she undertook her career of cosmic whoredom, and hears the resumé of her career as a sexual exhibitionist who could rival Juvenal's later Empress Messalina. Her depravity shocks her infidel Philistine neighbors, and Ezekiel piles on graphic images and ever-increasing outrages until Yahweh, in a terrifyingly cathartic moment, concludes the vignette with a threat: "I will spend my fury against you and my rage at you shall subside; I will grow calm and not be vexed any more" (16: 42). Yahweh's admonition is a paralyzing and fearful but finally satisfying release of pent-up fury. This passage can rank with anything in Swift or in Juvenal for the violent pleasure it registers in successful and obscene scorn.

In addition to providing a most useful and seminal definition of satire as critical fantasy, Northrop Frye also provides a basis for understanding the kinds of satire and irony that do and do not appear in ancient biblical texts. He introduces, first of all, a basic distinction: satire is explicit criticism, irony implicit. What does Umbricius dislike about Rome in Juvenal's third *Satire*? His dissatisfactions are many and detailed. In Samuel Johnson's 1738 adaptation of Juvenal's poem, what Thales dislikes about London Johnson's poem also makes abundantly and specifically clear. But, when the text does not make that criticism explicit, we are dealing with irony, irony as a device of satire. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (1776–88) alludes to the fact that Origen, bothered by a different limb, was moved to self-castration because he read literally the text about cutting off a hand or foot should it prove an occasion of sin. Gibbon states only that it seems a shame that the prominent theologian and intellectual, famous for allegorical readings of Scripture, should have read this text literally (Matthew 18: 8). Frye's basic distinction is between explicit and implicit criticism, that is, between satire and irony. The viewpoint of satire is explicit and unmistakably clear; that of irony, on the other hand, is implicit and often mystifying. Was there irony in the Hebrew Scriptures? Like *satire* that word does not appear in the lexicon of biblical writing. Anyone, however, reading the contribution of the Yahwist, perhaps writing in the Davidic monarchy, can answer that question with a confident and resounding "Yes!"

## The Phases of Ancient Biblical Satire and Irony

A mighty maze! but not without a plan.

(Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, I, 1733)

Especially seminal for an analysis of ancient biblical satire, however, is Northrop Frye's paradigm of the three phases of satire and the corresponding and parallel phases of irony. At first glance, Frye's analysis is very off-putting: the terminology is



cumbersome and inconsistent (for example, irony is also a device of comedy, romance, and tragedy); not all of the phases are descriptively titled. Not surprising, therefore, is Terry Eagleton's short shrift of Frye's *Anatomy* as a whole – along with his parenthetical warning that “Frye is a clergyman.” (Eagleton, by the way, is *still* a Marxist.) But Frye focuses on satire as a literary artifact, as a verbal construct designed to amuse. Used flexibly, with no suggestion of mutual exclusion – that is, no assignment to a “slot,” as Eagleton dismissively calls it (1983: 93) – and with some addition of descriptive phraseology, Frye's patterning of satire provides a useful paradigm for describing the various kinds of ancient biblical satire. Frye offers an insight into the panorama of satire that can and does include writers as diverse as Horace and Juvenal, Pope and Swift, Orwell and Vonnegut – and the panorama of ancient biblical satire that appears in texts as diverse as Genesis and Amos, 1 Samuel and Job, or Ecclesiastes and Hosea.

One example. Horace would appear to be the paradigm of the genial satirist, lightly mocking the follies of human behavior, a first-phase satirist Frye would term him, writing satire of the low norm. Yet, when Horace takes on the rationalizations of the well-named Cupiennus for adulterous relationships (*Satires* 1.2), he uncharacteristically uses the obscenity most often associated with Juvenal. Cupiennus' rationalizations about desiring a married woman for this or that apparently sophisticated or chic reason are brutally destroyed by Horace's statement of what Cupiennus really wants, *cunnus*. Against those rationalizations Horace posits his alternative, of enjoying whatever fantasy about his partner that comes to mind “*dum futuo*” (1.2.127) – that is, while he fucks her (*futuo* having no polite translation). In Frye's terminology this would be an exception to Horace's pervasive use of first-phase satire, a laughing at avoidable human folly, with this emphatic burst of third-phase satire: namely, the use of scatological and obscene language and associations most often banished from polite conversations, as pervasively present in Swift and Juvenal and, by the way, in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. At issue here is the critical stance taken by the text, the degree to which the text allows for accommodations within an admittedly flawed context, social, political, or what have you, or the degree to which such adaptations, as in Juvenal or in Jeremiah, are not morally possible.

Like comedy, satire focuses on the individual in society, as opposed to the focus on the individual as individual in tragedy and romance (the other two main story forms in Frye). In satire, as in comedy, we will always be made aware of the conventions, patterns, systems, theories, and the like which operate in any society and quite often operate without awareness on the part of those living by those norms. Where we marry, what subject we major in, what political ideas we subscribe to, how we are educated, what we believe – the answers to these and like questions are the conventions we live by. In the critical laughter generated by satire (and irony), these conventions in their many, many forms will be the target. What determines the quality and tone of satire and irony is the attitude the satirist or the satire takes toward these conventions. Always critical, but critical in varying degrees of intensity, that attitude underlies the three phases of satire and their corresponding phases of

satiric irony. Ancient biblical satire runs virtually the full gamut of these satiric and ironic possibilities.

Let us look at what Frye calls first-phase satire or satire of the low norm. The satire asks whether a constructive life is possible within the admittedly limited conventions of the society at issue. This is, obviously, non-revolutionary satire: it does not call for the overthrow of institutions, political, marital, economic, or whatever; it looks for a way to live advantageously within those conventions or systems however flawed they might be. Orwell's severe questioning of totalitarian societies and their utopian fantasies hardly qualifies as first-phase satire, for the system cannot be accommodated; it must be overthrown. Ezekiel's denunciation of Israel's religious whoredom allows for no accommodation.

Satire of the low norm seeks no displacement of the satirized society. Here the satire emphasizes discretion or an unillusioned central character who recognizes the limitations of the context but works perceptively and shrewdly within them. Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett will not allow her mother's ga-ga attitude toward any suitor to become her own. This shrewd, cheeky, early-twenties heroine turns down two proposals of marriage before finally, and only at the second bidding, accepting Darcy. She will not allow desperation to dictate her choice, as it does in the case of her best friend, Charlotte Lucas. Elizabeth is clear-headedly aware as well that her six years junior status vis-à-vis her friend gives her no small advantage in treading warily on the road to marriage. Elizabeth, furthermore, has a sense of moral responsibility, something she sees sadly lacking in her father, an awareness she keeps to herself. In an ironic parallel – what I might term as the irony of the avoidable – Horace, in *Satires* 2.3, does not tell Damasippus that he is a fool, that his supposed wisdom about everyone's being mad is morally useless without differences of degree. His laconic concluding remark to the garrulous, long-winded, pseudo-philosopher asks only that the greater madman spare the lesser. Horace keeps his wisdom to himself in the second book of the *Satires* and affirms the possibility that a constructive way of living is possible within admittedly limited contexts by maintaining an unillusioned view of what is going on. What is recommended is a street savvy that recognizes the less-than-ideal quality of the neighborhood but knows how to survive there without relocating.

Ecclesiastes repeatedly exhibits a good deal of this approach. Its narrator does not, for example, claim that the edicts and wishes of the king are without fault. What is said is that the king is the king, and it is well to be circumspect in his presence and to do what he orders: "For the king's word carries authority" (Ecclesiastes 8: 4). The king might not be right, but he is powerful. Much of Proverbs pursues the same sort of advice, about the supposedly beneficial life that will be enjoyed by the discreet and the sensible. Frye's term for this is "flexible pragmatism." The frequent emphasis in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs on propriety, on the seasonableness of behavior, implies an awareness of the social context within which an individual arrives at the street savvy for surviving the king's presence regardless of limitations seen there. Keep your eyes open, analyze the situation discreetly, and know when to make your move and what

kind of move to make if any. If satire of the low norm, first-phase satire, is, admittedly, not a prominent component of ancient biblical satire, the reason is clear. In matters of faith, there is but one God: "You shall have no other god to set against me. You shall not make a carved image [of the kind Hosea ridicules in 4: 12] for yourself or the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous god" (Exodus 20: 3–5).

This attitude pervades the prophets and explains why no first-phase satire appears there. Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, like other wisdom writings, however, focus very much on such worldly behavior in contexts where bedrock religious attitudes are not an issue. One can be flexibly pragmatic with the world. One cannot be flexibly pragmatic, however, in the face of false gods. Even the narratives of exemplary Israelites, like Daniel or Mordecai in Esther, reinforce this awareness of the non-compromising quality of faith in Yahweh. Daniel is a success even in captivity. But called upon to worship a false god instead of or in addition to Yahweh, Daniel refuses. His steadfastness is, of course, rewarded. Daniel, like Mordecai, will not compromise his faith. Nor is Mordecai's steadfastness without its grimly humorous component, as the treacherous Haman is hanged on the very gibbet he had prepared for his Israelite enemy. The humor is reminiscent of David's foreskin triumph in 1 Samuel.

The corresponding and first phase of irony, irony of the avoidable, pursues the insight that much of the trouble we suffer as human beings is not determined at all but the product of our own folly. In the climax of *Pride and Prejudice* – Darcy's second proposal – Elizabeth Bennett realizes that she, who has always prided herself on good judgment, has been suckered by George Wickham's account of his controversy with Darcy and not even considered the possibility of another point of view. As much as she resents Darcy's unflattering comments about her family, she must admit her own opinions are no different. The story of Oedipus seems to present us with ritual or tragic inevitability: a man doomed to kill his own father and marry his own mother. A comic or satiric ironist might have much fun with that story and suggest that a forewarned man, after all, who kills a man old enough to be his father and marries a woman old enough to be his mother isn't doomed, he's foolish. Perhaps there's a Woody Allen movie in there somewhere. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jonah, although a narrative and parable, might satisfy the expectations of the irony of the avoidable. Simply, had Jonah accepted God's commission, he might have avoided all the troubles that followed from his seeking to refuse it.

What happens, however, when the satirist's attitude challenges the very conventions themselves because they are worthless and must be discarded? This is Frye's second-phase or quixotic satire (are we to think of the unconventional Don Quixote?). We do not find a *modus vivendi* with the conventions – we challenge them head on. Austen, as noted, works out in her fiction how a woman might marry advantageously despite the limitations for women in getting and in being married. Part of her toughness is the awareness she leaves us with that even where a woman is successful, at least on her own terms, the price can be high, as in the case of Charlotte Lucas Collins.

However, what if the satirist challenges the sources, the bases, the values of the conventions themselves, ridicules the systems or theories, and points out their inadequacy? Any convention, any theory, system, ideology, or pattern assumes it has the answers: capitalism, Marxism, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, the worship of Baal – these are all systems, and all claim the truth. The satirist sets theory against practice to show the inadequacy of the theory. In Part 3 of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) the theorizing of the academicians at the Grand Academy of Lagado – where Progress is not the most important product – is constantly set against the catastrophic and ludicrous practical consequences of their theorizing.

Driving home one day, I saw an accidental combination of a building sign and a bumper sticker that brought out unmistakably for me the difference between these two satiric approaches, these two phases of satire or irony. A sign on a building across from me confidently asserted: "A helping hand is as near as the end of your elbow." The point was clear: just make the effort, and you will be a success. Glancing over at a car next to me at the light, I read: "If you think the system works, ask someone who doesn't." The first buoyantly affirms a cardinal tenet of capitalism: effort brings reward. The second challenges that view: the system does not work. No theory, pattern, system, or the like has all the answers. In *Candide* (1759), Doctor Pangloss, Doctor Explain Everything, becomes more and more ridiculous as he insists on his theory despite the catastrophic quality of his experiences and that of all those others in the tale. *Rasselas* (1759) explodes the myth of perfect happiness on this earth, but acknowledges that the itch to find it will not disappear. The unresolved dialectic of human life is unsatisfied desire always desiring. The satirist in this kind of satire prefers experience to theory.

Ecclesiastes and Job are the finest examples in Scripture of this continuing challenge to the optimism of systematic explanation. An irony pervades Ecclesiastes as a whole, the irony experienced by a believer in God who nonetheless realizes that his behavior among men is capable of no convincing intellectual explanation. The just suffer, the evil are honored, a situation Ecclesiastes finds senseless (Ecclesiastes 8: 6). The viewpoint, consciously or not, challenges the buoyant optimism of Proverbs (or the optimism of Job's three friends) that God works in the world according to identifiable norms. Ecclesiastes counters, however, that if we saw God punishing evildoers, we would stop doing evil. We don't stop because we don't see God doing that: "I perceived that God has so ordered it that a man should not be able to discover what is happening here under the sun. However hard a man may try, he will not find out." Then, with the cocky theorist perhaps in mind, Ecclesiastes cautions: "the wise man *may think* that he knows, but he will be unable to find the truth of it" (Ecclesiastes 8: 17, emphasis added). I know what the theory is, Ecclesiastes says, but the theory doesn't work. God's behavior in this life has no rational explanation. This is not to deny God – Ecclesiastes does not do that – but to deny a human capability to fathom the ways of God. The day-to-day world answers the theorizing. The relentless turning of the inexplicable cycle of life and experience, a cycle prominent in second-phase irony (the irony of the cycle?), pervades Ecclesiastes. In

a way, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes to enjoy the life that is life's one certainty for as long as one will have it parallels the final wisdom of *Candide*, itself a relentlessly ironic exposure of inane and unconvincing rationality: skip the theory, and cultivate the garden. The inside knowledge that would resolve these inexplicabilities is denied to human ken. Like *Candide*, the irony of Ecclesiastes is not simply a literary device but a mirror of the irony that is the condition of human life itself.

Northrop Frye observes that in second-phase satire or irony, the conventions of art can themselves be ridiculed. The complete title and author identification of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) – over two dozen lines long – is certainly one such instance, as is his division of the less than two hundred pages of *Cat's Cradle* (1963) into one hundred and twenty-seven chapters. The designation of chapter becomes hilariously meaningless. In ancient biblical satire, no artistic conventions are ridiculed. But Amos allows himself to parody the call to worship by satirically urging those in the Northern Kingdom to seek out their places of worship for sinfulness: "Come to Bethel – and rebel!" he taunts. "Come to Gilgal – and rebel the more!" (Amos 4: 4). Isaiah provides a lengthy mock-lamentation for the departed King of Babylon (14: 12–21). The shades of the forgotten dead mockingly review the pretensions of this tyrant and his final doom, "brought down to the depths of the abyss." In a culminating indignity, the shades describe the king's dishonorable burial and the slaughter of his sons. He is "unburied, mere loathsome carrion," of a "breed of evildoers [who] shall never be seen again." Throughout this passage, the text of Isaiah ironically and mockingly uses the form of the funeral lament. Elijah, as noted, makes fun of a busy Baal, defecating or urinating, and hence too busy to answer the call of his priests. This is hardly the way we would expect liturgy or a divinity to be treated. In this kind of satire, the satirist or ironist overturns conventional forms with parody. The upside-down formulas embody the thrust of experience over theory like Socrates' idiotic experiments and theories in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the oldest surviving literary fun that parodying writers have had with theorizing academics and philosophers. The jump between Aristophanes' *Clouds* to Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972) is a short jump indeed.

Satire, thus, can argue the possibility of a constructive life within admittedly limited conventions or challenge the conventions themselves as unworkable and unreasonable. In Frye, these are the first two phases of satire (with corresponding phases in irony). In challenging whatever conventions are at issue, the satirist, of course, assumes that sensory data provide a reliable basis upon which to challenge conventions: that we can rely on what we see, hear, feel, smell, and taste. What if we can't? After all, at this very moment, I am assuming a stationary position. I am not moving. Actually, I am, at a speed so fast I cannot even begin to fathom it, being whirled around in a circle around a circle. From a different perspective, physical stability or immobility is an illusion. Third-phase satire, satire of the high norm, challenges the very bases of our sense perception. It casts doubt on the reliability of sensory experience. Such satire repeatedly places us in singularly uncomfortable, threatening situations, situations that force us to see ourselves in ways that overturn

conventional experiential associations. We see ourselves sexually and scatologically, naked and diseased, insignificant and transitory, without value, without dignity. This satire at its most disturbing is the cattle car stuffed with human beings who must urinate, defecate, and copulate, treated as herded animals for whom, of course, private facilities are hardly provided – *Schindler's List* as Nazi satire. Such a context does not disturb a cow; it profoundly disturbs a human being. This is, as Frye observes, critical fantasy at perhaps its most critical and most intense, breaking down all those customary associations we unconsciously assume in order to maintain our dignity as human beings.

The satirist who has concentrated a great deal on the upsetting assumptions of modern science is Kurt Vonnegut. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with its Tralfamadorians profoundly amused by human questions about purpose and meaning, relentlessly undermines the stability we assume in order to maintain our place in the universe. How does one deal with the possibility that human beings are an accident in what might be more than one universe, and that human pride in human dignity is as ludicrous as Lilliputian claims to cosmic importance? While Horace encourages us with the possibility that life can be constructively lived in the world as we know it, Vonnegut profoundly upsets us with the possibility that any such plans for constructive living are meaningless in a wider picture of which we have no sure knowledge. Gulliver, as he arrives in Brobdingnag, speculates on the relativity of human greatness. Throughout Part II, in fact, Gulliver behaves like a pet, a human on a leash, entertaining his owners. Likewise, this is Horace's momentary use of obscenity in *Satires* 1.2 to strip away Cupiennus' rationalizations about his supposedly high-quality, tasteful, sexual desire for the Roman matron. Swift's *Modest Proposal* presents one-year-olds as a market commodity. Even architecture can adopt the satirist's use of the sexual and the scatological to break down the taboos we observe to maintain our dignity. Presented with an opportunity to construct a fountain outside the headquarters of the Dominican Order he despised, Renaissance architect Giovanni Bernini obliged by having the Piazza della Minerva prominently feature an elephant whose hindquarters are the first thing one sees on leaving the Dominican headquarters in Rome, an insult of now more than three centuries' standing!

This third phase of satire can often feature a verbal exuberance to embody and reinforce its stripping away of customary, dignified associations with the human. The prophecy of Isaiah affords one such instance, a passage Frye himself cites for this words-gone-mad quality not uncommon in satire. Isaiah 3: 16–25 begins with a ridiculing catalog of the demeanor, appearance, and even the strutting of the stately matrons of Jerusalem with a detail of ornamental dress and accoutrements that would be so heavy as to weigh down these fashionably minded women. In the day of the Lord, Isaiah, however, warns, all this finery will be taken away. What will be left is a nakedness, the state of the slave. The married women of Jerusalem shall be transformed not by the vanity of insouciant ornamentation but by the humiliation of slavery and exile. Jeremiah pictures the unfaithful Israel as “a she-camel, twisting and turning as she runs, rushing alone into the wilderness, snuffing the wind in her lust;



who can restrain her in her heat?" (Jeremiah 2: 23–4). She is the contemptible streetwalker, oblivious to the despite she occasions in those who witness her behavior (Jeremiah 4: 30). Such images take ordinarily respected subjects and present them in humiliating pictures, images of nakedness, as in Isaiah, or images of contemptible hypersexuality, as in Jeremiah.

In the prophets, dissatisfactions with the prophetic life itself can themselves be the target of demeaning presentation. Jeremiah often complains of the hardship of a prophet's life and sounds like a second Jonah, seeking to cast off the burden of God's call. In one instance, Jeremiah accuses Yahweh of having tricked him: "O Lord, thou hast duped me, and I have been thy dupe; thou has outwitted me and hast prevailed. I have been a laughing-stock all the day long, everyone mocks me" (Jeremiah 20: 7). The prophet presents himself here as the victim of a confidence game, left only with the mocking laughter of others after the deception has been revealed. If the language is sexual, as has been suggested, and Jeremiah is seduced into prophecy, then he becomes in a shocking image the sexual victim of Yahweh's enticement left to experience the mocking of others in his abandoned situation. Whatever dignity might ordinarily be associated with prophecy, the picture of the prophet conned or seduced is hardly respectable.

The ironic parallel to satire of the high norm, third-phase satire, is the irony of the nightmare, where human life is presented as a prison, a madhouse, an inexplicable confinement without the hope of release. Such a picture emerges in the apocalyptic triumph of the forces of cultural disorder in Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*, in Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, or in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, terrifying destinies that have no end or end in suicide. What if Yahweh announces that He will no longer be? The terrifying and religiously numbing answer to this question is the prophecy of Hosea, studded with unintelligible language (for reasons of personal safety?) and frequently and pervasively reversing or parodying earlier biblical texts. Hosea's recapitulation of Israel's history is not a reassuring courtship by Yahweh but a record of infidelity and even the ritual murder of children. Hosea is replete with unpleasant and seamy reversals of Yahweh's earlier courtship of Israel, of the covenant assurances predicated of Abraham and Moses, and a stunning reversal of the bedrock assurance of old: "you are not my people, and I will not be your God" (Hosea 1: 9). The *I am* of Exodus becomes the *I am not* of Hosea. For its contemporaries, this statement must have been the height of blasphemous parody and flippancy, but it is Hosea's picture of the void and, in its power, anticipates a twentieth century of Beckett and Sartre. In ancient biblical satire, Hosea is probably the most completely and searingly ironic text. In *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*, I commented:

The Book of Hosea thus satisfies Frye's requirements for irony of the void, with its view of human life as largely unrelieved bondage, its parody of religious symbols, its disturbing note of being watched constantly by a hostile eye, its abundance of sinister parental or authority figures, its revelation of a demonic epiphany. In Hosea, this irony finds expression repeatedly in the reversal of the past language of assurance . . . Yahweh's



People are no longer his (1: 9); Israel returns to Egypt and to the wilderness, hungry, not fed (5: 10), thirsty, not slaked (2: 5), wandering, not settled (9: 17), deprived of children, not spared the last and worst of the plagues that humbled Egypt (9: 16). These, after all, are Israelites slaughtering their own children in fertility rites. Yahweh reverses himself indeed. The Psalmist surely speaks perceptively when he sings: "He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn; the LORD shall hold them in derision." (1992: 116)

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Some material in this chapter substantially expands earlier discussions in my critical study, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

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