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Jonah, parody and satire: the Bible in conversation with itself

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The main problem with scholarship on *Jonah* is that there is little agreement on what the book is about. Few these days would regard it simply as 'history' and the consensus has certainly shifted over the last century. Most commentaries regard it almost entirely as fiction, although probably based on an historical character who is mentioned in the book of Kings as prophesying during the reign of king Jeroboam II. The days when scholars would discuss the feasibility of surviving inside the belly of a fish or when commentaries would include seafaring tales of sailors being swallowed by a whale and living to tell their story are well behind us. For some time the trend in scholarship was to regard the book as a polemic against the particularism and exclusivism of Ezra and Nehemiah, and while there are still some adherents to this idea the consensus has moved in a different direction.

Until recently it was generally accepted that the message of *Jonah* emphasised the universalistic nature of God's compassion.¹ Whether or not the writer was reacting to the particularism and exclusivism identified in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the consensus has been that the message of the story is that God will respond favourably to anyone who repents and turns to him. For some scholars this represented a shift in the theology of Israel towards a position that the God of Israel was calling on them to reach out to other communities, and to be a "light to the nations." It was thought that *Jonah* was similar in this respect to the ideologies of Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah, but that the history of Judaism in the second temple period demonstrated that the community did not take up the call and they maintained their exclusivism. For many Christian scholars it was thought that Christianity responded positively to the message and by taking the *evangel* to non-Jews there was a parting of the ways with Rabbinic Judaism. Sadly, this often resulted in the appearance of anti-Semitic stereotypes even in academic literature and the prophet Jonah was sometimes seen as a trope for Jews who, it was alleged, were unwilling to share their God or hope with foreigners.

The trend is shifting yet again, and recent research has focussed on the presence of irony and satire in the Hebrew Bible and *Jonah* is now read by many scholars as either containing some of these elements together with hints of comedy and humour, or being wholly satirical or parodic in nature.² Yet the majority have still maintained that

¹ This emphasis pervades much of the scholarly literature on *Jonah*. The following is indicative only and certainly not exhaustive. H.M. Orlinsky, "Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel," in *Translating & Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May* (eds. Frank and Reed; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 206-36; Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), 185-91; Hans W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: a Commentary* (trans. Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), 85-88; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 434-35; André LaCocque and Pierre-Emmanuel LaCocque, *Jonah: a Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), passim; Tova Forti, "Of Ships and Seas, and Fish and Beasts: Viewing the Concept of Universal Providence in the Book of Jonah through the Prism of Psalms," *JSOT* 35, no. 3 (2011): 359-74.

² Scholars who read *Jonah* as primarily ironic include Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*. (London: SPCK, 1965), passim; George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual

the overriding message of the story is that God is concerned about all people and will act compassionately to those who turn to him, and that the writer has used irony and satire to convey this message.

It is difficult to determine whether the character Jonah changes his position in the course of the story, and amongst those scholars who think he does there is little agreement about when the change took place, or what actually changed. There is considerably more agreement that God has the final word and asserts, via a rhetorical question, that he cares about Nineveh. I argued in my PhD thesis³ that the story is structured in such a way that the writer has intended that the reader's *perception* of Jonah is meant to change, not that a change necessarily took place in Jonah, and that the story ends with a statement that God is *not* troubled over Nineveh rather than with a rhetorical question, so that ultimately God shows no concern for Nineveh. I demonstrated how the writer develops the main character so that the audience is able to relate to Jonah's concerns about divine justice and mercy in the aftermath of catastrophe, and that the main purpose of the book is to challenge theodicy of the exile in a satirical manner.

Several scholars have noted the presence of irony in *Jonah* to varying degrees, and it is my impression that while some scholars resist a categorisation of the book as a whole as ironic, satiric or parodic, almost all recognise the presence of at least some irony. In my view, it is not hyperbole when André and Pierre-Emmanuel LaCocque exclaim "irony in the book of Jonah is everywhere."⁴

One of the greatest ironies of the book is that if Jonah had not been such a 'successful' preacher in bringing the city to repentance, and if Nineveh had actually been overthrown in forty days, as the prophet foretold, then there may not have been a Sennacherib, born in Nineveh, or an Assyrian empire, of which Nineveh became the capital, and Israel may not have been destroyed, at least not by the Assyrians. While irony is "everywhere" in Jonah, not all irony is satirical; although irony is an essential feature of satire. It is often difficult to distinguish between the two as there is

Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm," *Interpretation* 21, no. 1 (1967): 3-21; Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 176-86. Those who read it either as satire or see significant satirical elements in the story include Millar Burrows, "The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May* (eds. Frank and Reed; Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1970), 80-107; James S. Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (eds. Halpern, et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 213-46; John C. Holbert, "Deliverance Belongs To Yahweh!: Satire in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 6, no. 21 (1981): 59-81; LaCocque and LaCocque, *Jonah: a Psycho-Religious Approach*, passim; David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah - Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Brown Judaic Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), passim; Thomas M. Bolin, "Jonah as subversive literature? The Book of Jonah and its biblical context" (Ph.D., Marquette University, 1995) whole thesis; Virginia Ingram, "Satire and Cognitive Dissonance in the Book of Jonah, in the Light of Ellens' Laws of Psychological Hermeneutics," in *Psychological Hermeneutics for Biblical Themes and Texts: A Festschrift in Honour of Wayne G. Rollins* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 140-55. Those who read it as parody include J.A. Miles, "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (eds. Radday and Brenner; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 203-16; Arnold J. Band, "Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody," *Prooftexts* 10, no. 2 (1990): 177-95; William H. Hallo, "Jonah and the Uses of Parody," in *Thus Says the Lord: Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R. Wilson* (eds. Ahn and Cook; New York; London: T & T Clark, 2009), 285-91.

³ Stephen Cook, "'Who knows?' Reading the Book of Jonah as a Satirical Challenge to Theodicy of the Exile" (University of Sydney, 2019). Accessible through University of Sydney e-scholarship <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/20685>

⁴ LaCocque and LaCocque, *Jonah: a Psycho-Religious Approach*, 31.

no clear-cut division between satire and irony, or between satire and humour. The difference between them is in mood and tone, and these are mainly subjective. In humour and irony there is more a mood of forgiveness, whereas in satire the dominant tone is that of animosity or insult.⁵ Wit is also one of the essential features of satire, as a literary device for conveying double entendre.⁶ While wit is also employed in other genres, its purpose in satire is to evoke disdain and contempt rather than to simply arouse laughter. Bearing in mind that the use of later and modern terms such as *satire*, *parody* and *irony* for the study of ancient literature is risky business, we do need to use terminology to explain what is happening in the texts before us, even if such terminology is anachronistic or if the meaning has changed over the course of time.⁷ To find a suitable biblical Hebrew term for satire we could use something akin to the biblical *שְׁנִינָה* *cutting word, taunt* which is sometimes coupled with *מִשְׁלַּח* *proverb* as the hendiadys *וְלִשְׁנִינָה וְלִמְשָׁל* *a proverb and a taunt*,⁸ which conveys the idea of the kind of wit used in satire. Semantically equivalent biblical terms could include *לְעַג* *to scorn, mock*, *תָּלַל* / *הִתְלַל* *to mock, deceive* and *שָׂחַק* / *צָחַק*⁹ *laugh/laughter*.

David Marcus' definition of satire highlights that the main difference between irony and satire is that satire has a *target*:

A text may be identified as a satire if it has a target which is the object of attack, either directly or indirectly, and has a preponderance of the essential attributes of satire. These latter consist of a mixture of unbelievable elements (absurdities, fantastic situations, grotesqueries, and distortions), ironies, ridicule, parody, and rhetorical features. It is not enough for these techniques just to appear in a work in an isolated fashion, they must dominate it by being the very essence of the work.¹⁰

We get all these elements in *Jonah*. Marcus not only identifies a target as a distinguishing characteristic of satire, he also notes that we should expect to see a cluster of features, and I will come back to this later.

Several scholars, including Marcus, have identified the prophet Jonah himself as the target of the book's satire.¹¹ There are, for example, some significant ironies in Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish. First, and most strikingly, is the apparent irrelevance of the prayer to Jonah's actual situation, inasmuch as the prayer is a thanksgiving for not drowning, ignoring the very real horrors of being slowly digested in a fish's stomach. I cannot imagine a more awful situation than the stench and suffocating confinement of being inside an animal's stomach, or a more dreadful way to die than being slowly digested. Yet there is nothing in Jonah's prayer which indicates

⁵ Zeev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (32; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 8.

⁶ Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, 3.

⁷ Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, 1.

⁸ The hendiadys *וְלִשְׁנִינָה וְלִמְשָׁל* *a proverb and a taunt* appears in Deuteronomy 28:37; 1 Kings 9:7; Jeremiah 24:9 and in a parallel account in 2 Chronicles 7:20.

⁹ Brenner argues that while these two roots are usually regarded as etymological and semantic variants they are not fully interchangeable and that at some stage there might have existed a sense differentiation between them. Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (eds. Radday and Brenner; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 46-7.

¹⁰ Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah*, 9-10.

¹¹ Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah*, 96. See also Izak J.J. Spangenberg, "Reading the Old Testament in the 21st Century Using the Book of Jonah as Reference," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 2 (2013): 5; Holbert, "Satire in the Book of Jonah," 64.

any realisation that he had gone from a bad situation to a worse one, or that he understood the fish to be a means of deliverance, or that he was aware of his situation at all. His prayer, in a nutshell, was “thank God I didn’t drown!” This incongruity between Jonah’s prayer and his actual situation, probably more than any other factor, has no doubt influenced some scholars to regard the psalm as a misplaced late addition, composed under other circumstances and incorporated into *Jonah* simply because of the somewhat appropriateness of its drowning metaphors. The psalm may very well have come from another hand, but rather than being the result of ‘misplacement,’ its inclusion here is a strong indication that it should be read as something other than, or in addition to, thanksgiving, such as satire or parody. A further problem with the Jonah-psalm is that it presents Jonah as a pious person, apparently disregarding his disobedience in the introductory scenes. There are no words of contrition or repentance in the prayer and it is devoid of any utterance that would suggest a change of heart on Jonah’s part. Jonah is presented first as disobedient, then as pious yet hypocritical, and with no evidence of contrition. However, if it is satire then the narrator may be implying that it is possible to be disobedient and appear to be pious at the same time. If so, the prayer could form an integral part of a caricature of the prophet as a hypocrite or one who was completely out of touch with reality.

There seems to me, however, to be little purpose in ridiculing Jonah as a person, regardless of whether he is an historical or fictitious character, unless it serves some other purpose. I agree with Virginia Ingram that there is no point in making fun of the main character unless the writer has some other theological or political intention.¹² She suggests the actual target of the satire is a worldview of legalism and retributive justice and an erroneous view that God is responsible for the ills of the world. She observes a tension in the story between a growing realisation of the nature of God’s grace, and Jonah’s irrational commitment to the idea of retaliatory justice. I believe Ingram’s contribution to the discussion of the message of *Jonah* is significant, yet I see no evidence in the story that Jonah is committed to the notions of retaliatory justice. What I do see is a character who is wrestling with divine justice and the unpredictability of mercy, and a narrative style which suggests the writer is in a dialogue about the matter but draws no satisfactory conclusions from it. Ultimately, his main point is found in the question posed by the king of Nineveh (3:9): מִי יוֹדֵעַ *Who knows [what God will do]?*

Some scholars argue that the book’s satire targets the guild of prophets.¹³ If so, the satire would serve a theological purpose, although the motivation for it, or its authorship, is uncertain.

Ackerman thinks the target of *Jonah*’s satire is the Zadokite priesthood and sees it as primarily a subtle critique of the re-establishment of the emphasis in post-exilic Judaism on Zion and the temple, and consequently the Zadokite priesthood.¹⁴ His arguments, in my view, rely heavily on one or two wordplays and are not convincing.

Yehoshua Gitay argues that “the book of *Jonah* is a response to current theological debates that have taken place since the early Babylonian exile in order to

¹² Ingram, “Satire and Cognitive Dissonance in the Book of *Jonah*,” 151.

¹³ For scholars who read *Jonah* as a parody of prophets, see Alan J. Hauser, “*Jonah*: In Pursuit of the Dove,” *JBL* 104, no. 1 (1985): 21-37; Hallo, “*Jonah* and the Uses of Parody,” 285-91; Band, “Swallowing *Jonah*: The Eclipse of Parody,” 177, 86 and references there.

¹⁴ Ackerman, “Satire and Symbolism in the Song of *Jonah*,” 245-46.

shape the religious-political policy towards the foreign ruler.”¹⁵ The issue, as he sees it, was how Israel should relate to its enemies against the background of the prophets who called for divine revenge yet in the new circumstances of restoration dominated by the Persian empire. He thinks the aim of the book was to “pave the way for cooperation with foreign rulers and the normalization of life under the theological frame of God’s dominion and universal care.” However, as I read it, the king of Nineveh is ridiculed in the court scene. He is portrayed as a ruler who responds to a decision made by the people (to fast and put on sackcloth, 3:5). He simply ratifies their decision but by going to a ridiculous extreme and requiring the city’s cattle to also fast (even denying them water), put on sackcloth, repent and call upon God (3:6-8). If the writer wanted to pave the way for cooperation with foreign rulers he has certainly gone about it in a strange way. This decree gives the *appearance* that the king was in control and was leading effectively with a solution which would avert a calamity. The *reality* was the people had already taken the initiative and the king is mockingly portrayed as being in command only of dumb animals and making absurd demands.

The trend in scholarship has moved away from reading Jonah’s satire as against the notion of exclusivism, yet it is often re-framed as primarily a message about a universal and impartial God who does not belong to a specific group.¹⁶ Yet the overwhelming irony of *Jonah* is that God seemed to favour the foreign city at the expense of his own people, and that his justice – at least from Israel’s perspective – did not seem to be impartial. If the city of Nineveh did repent – and there is no historical evidence for this outside of *Jonah* – then it did not produce a lasting change. The subsequent Assyrian invasion of Israel displayed a hostility to God’s people that would be incompatible with any awareness of God’s requirements for repentance as they are detailed in the prophets. Ironically, the Assyrians destroyed the very nation whose prophet had saved their city of Nineveh from calamity. It also raises the question of why God set such a high standard for Israel while Nineveh was spared without any lasting or meaningful change.

The book may have targeted some other theological position, or a combination of these.

How do we recognise satire and identify its target? What follows is a brief overview of the patterns which enable us to identify the purpose and target of Jonah’s satire, and later I will apply these patterns to some texts outside Jonah.

First, we should note that satire is produced by a cluster of literary devices such as irony, humour, puns and wordplays.

Second, satire by its very nature is ambiguous. The presence of internal contradictions, conflicts and opposing statements within the text point to this ambiguity. These are things which are often regarded as “difficulties” which scholars need to resolve. They may, in fact, be markers pointing the reader or listener to recognise that one or more of the conflicting statements is satirical. It sometimes uses puns and wordplays as rhetorical devices to create within the hearer feelings of ambiguity and curiosity, as a kind of “marker” that something more than simply being humorous is going on with the text. For example, there is a clever ambiguity in Jonah’s

¹⁵ Yehoshua Gitay, “Jonah: The Prophecy of Antirhetoric,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in honor of David Noel Freedman in celebration of his seventieth birthday* (eds. Beck, et al.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 206.

¹⁶ For example, Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, *The Book of Jonah in the Context of Post-Exilic Theology of Israel: an Exegetical Study* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2013), 299; James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 272.

between Jeremiah's failure to bring about repentance and Jonah's outstanding success in converting first the sailors – without even trying – and then the city of Nineveh – with a five-word oracle – is a parodic and comical way of exposing the failings of a retributive theodicy which Jeremiah championed.

As I see it, the problem which *Jonah* addressed was that sometimes God is compassionate, and sometimes he is not. He was merciful to Assyrian Nineveh, but not always to Israel whose destruction came at the hands of Assyria. The various scenes in the story reveal different aspects of the problem. The calamity facing the sailors was the result of Jonah's disobedience, not their own sin, and they were saved because "the LORD does as he pleases." Jonah "knew" God to be compassionate, but during the storm he made no appeal for mercy and instead expected only retributive justice. Then, in the belly of the fish, he used absurdly pious language which was not appropriate to the reality of his situation, showed no sign of contrition, and yet he was delivered by God from his predicament. The Ninevites on the other hand were over-the-top in their repentance, implying that they did not really understand what they were doing, yet this brings about mercy. Finally, Jonah confronted God about his mercy, although his appeal to a creedal formula about God's attributes tellingly removed the elements about transgenerational punishment, indicating that his real issue was God's mercy, and less so his punishment of evil doers. Running through these scenes is a thread about human knowledge of divine behaviour. The sailors apparently knew that God does as he pleases; the king of Nineveh on the other hand declared that he could not be sure what God would do; Jonah was certain that he "knew" God to be compassionate, dogmatically at least if not experientially, yet one moment God is merciful by providing Jonah with shade, and the next moment, for no apparent reason, he is not merciful because he takes the shade away and sends bad weather. No one can predict what God will do. In a sudden turn at the end – again confirming that God is unpredictable – God declares that he is really not concerned about Nineveh, leaving some hope that he *is* concerned about Israel which he 'planted' and caused to grow.¹⁸ It is by realising that this is an ironic twist that we are most likely to understand the purpose of the book as a satire challenging a theology of divine justice with its rewards and punishments. The application of mercy to one (such as Nineveh) may simultaneously be an act of caprice to another (such as Israel), making God merciful and capricious at the same time. Such a theology had no satisfying explanation for why the covenant people suffered while the wicked prospered, no solution to avoiding divine wrath and obtaining mercy, and no satisfying explanation for the exile.

Irony, satire and humour in Samuel

By recognising satire in other biblical texts, we can gain fresh insights into the conversations which lay behind them, locate the texts within their rhetorical and historical contexts, and recognise their contribution to the development of ideas. I will briefly look at one example of this in the books of Samuel and Kings (the Former Prophets), in the accounts

¹⁸ Scholars who read Jonah 4:11 as declaratory rather than interrogatory include Alan Cooper, "In Praise of Divine Caprice: The Significance of the Book of Jonah," in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image, and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* (eds. Davies and Clines; Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993); Philippe Guillaume, "The End of Jonah is the Beginning of Wisdom," *Biblica* 87, no. 2 (2006); Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*; Catherine L. Muldoon, *In Defense of Divine Justice: An Intertextual Approach to the Book of Jonah* (CBQMS 47 47; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2010). For an interpretation which allows for both readings, interrogatory and declarative concurrently, see Ehud Ben Zvi, "Jonah 4:11 and the Metaphoric Character of the Book of Jonah," *JHS* 9, no. 5 (2009). For a thorough review of the arguments see my thesis: Cook, "Who knows?," 32-62.

of the ascension of David to the throne. An ironic *style* seems to pervade the so-called “succession narrative” if not the entire book of Samuel.¹⁹ The introduction to the “succession narrative” in 2 Samuel 11, for example, says:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

The writer, or redactor, couldn't have been any clearer in highlighting the remarkable irony that when kings should have been fighting battles king David was at home gazing out of his window at a beautiful woman. The juxtaposition of two opposing ideas like “when kings go out to battle” with “David remained at Jerusalem” is a style the writer uses frequently in this book. In this case it highlights David's failing as a king. One of the main purposes of a king was to fight battles; it was the expressly stated reason why the people wanted a king in the first place, to “govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8:19). Yet David sends Joab to do his fighting for him. His affair with Bathsheba sets in train a series of disasters: first an adulterer, he then becomes a murderer, his family is a wreck, his administration of the kingdom is chaotic, there is civil war, his own son leads a coup against him, his friends and family abandon him in droves. And it all began because he wasn't doing what the people wanted a king to do, and what he was appointed and anointed to do in the first place. The writer of Samuel apparently thinks monarchy is bad for Israel, and he demonstrates this by showing David, the “model” king to be a prime example of why it doesn't work.

This juxtaposition of opposing ideas is similar to the positioning of the description of David as “ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” *immediately after* the rejection of David's good-looking brother on the basis that appearance is not important. The writer of Samuel seems to deliberately put seemingly contradictory statements side-by-side in order to draw attention to them. A further example of this, earlier in the story about whether or not Israel should have a monarchy, appears in the story about the elders of Israel coming to Samuel and saying “appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel disliked the idea and prayed about it. The LORD responded by saying to Samuel “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you” (v.7). In fact he says it twice: “Listen to their voice” (again in v.9). Samuel returned to the elders and tried to talk them out of the idea, giving a long speech about all the bad things a king would do (vv. 11-18). But the people insisted on having a king, and Samuel prayed about it again. Again the LORD said “Listen to their voice and set a king over them” (v.22). So, having been told three times by God to give them a king, you would think that's what Samuel would tell the elders. God was in favour and they would get their king. But what does Samuel do? “Samuel then said to the people of Israel, ‘Each of you return home’” (v.22). Samuel may, in fact, have reported fully about his conversation with God, but if so the writer has chosen not to tell us. He wants to leave the impression that Samuel was still convinced that he was right, and by implication, God was wrong, and he's not going to tell the people that they will get their king after all! (This may sound shocking, but the prophet Jonah does something very similar, arguing with God about his policy of being compassionate and merciful!) As the story continues, God has to later tell Samuel he's going to send someone to him to be

¹⁹ Virginia Ingram wrote her PhD thesis on irony and satire in the 9 chapters of 2 Samuel commonly called the “Succession Narrative”. “Virginia Ingram, “A King and a Fool? Verbal irony in 2 Samuel 11:1-19:8a” (Murdoch University, 2016).

anointed as king, and he sends Saul to Samuel the next day. Samuel made no effort himself to find a king or even to ask God about it. He just sulks about not getting his way. What would Samuel have preferred? The writer leaves us in no doubt about that, right at the start of the story: “When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel” (v.1). He didn’t have a problem with hereditary leadership, he just wanted it to be *his own dynasty* that ruled Israel!

In this story we have something of an echo of the story of Gideon. After Gideon saved Israel from their enemies the people said to him “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian” (Judges 8:22). Gideon’s reply was theologically almost identical to Samuel’s reaction later: “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you” (v.23). However, there is a remarkable irony in the Gideon story in the events that follow. First, Gideon asks for the people to pay him a gold earring each (a tax if you like); then he uses this gold to make an *ִעֲפֹד* *ephod*, which was probably some kind of garment designating a high office. Then Gideon has a son and names him Abimelech (v.31) which literally means “My father is king”! So, having rejected the office and title of king, Gideon then levies a tax (like a king), produces a garment to designate his high office (like a king), and names his son “My father is king”. After the death of Gideon Abimelech goes about to establish himself as king, clearly on the supposition that Gideon had founded a dynasty.

By appointing his own sons as successors Samuel was following the precedent set by the judge Gideon. *Theologically* they were on the same page (God is Israel’s king), but *in practice* they ruled as kings and wanted their sons to rule after them. By using similar language in his story to that used in *Judges*, the writer of *Samuel* is making a literary connection, letting the reader know that history was about to repeat itself. The juxtaposition of God’s words to Samuel, “give them a king”, set against Samuel’s words to the elders of Israel in the finale, “go home”, highlight the irony. Samuel was not opposed to hereditary rulership; he was opposed to the idea that it shouldn’t be *his family* that would rule! No wonder that Samuel criticised almost everything that king Saul did and undermined his kingship.

Not all irony is humorous, although it can be. However, the repetitive nature of the ironies in Samuel, highlighted by the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, tends to ridicule the key characters, principally Samuel and David, and portrays their weaknesses in a somewhat comic way.

I will conclude with one final example from Samuel-Kings. There are several elements in the story of David and Jonathan which suggest an intensity beyond any other friendship between two men in the Bible. It begins with what seems to be their first meeting, at least as far as the record in Samuel portrays it. Having just killed Goliath, and with Goliath’s severed head still in his hands, David was summoned to meet King Saul, and Jonathan appears to have been immediately smitten.

“When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (18:1-3).

So what did David say that made Jonathan so enthralled with him? Twice in three verses we are told that Jonathan loved him, but not why. We don’t even get any hint from the record that they had even spoken to each other at this point, and the only

thing David is said to have uttered before the words *When David had finished speaking to Saul ...* was to give his father's name! The repetition of "Jonathan loved him as his own soul" seems intentionally designed to emphasise that just seeing David and hear him speak was enough for Jonathan to fall head-over-heels in love with him. In addition to telling us that Jonathan loved David, the writer uses a variety of terms to describe the attraction: "Jonathan took great delight in David" (19:1), and David "found favour in his [Jonathan's] eyes" (20:3). After Jonathan's death David lamented that "your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1:26).

If we consider the story from a literary perspective and consider the role that it plays in the overall context of Samuel, we should note that the writer reports a number of times that Jonathan loved David (adding in 20:17 that "he loved him as he loved his own life"), but never that David loved Jonathan. Was it a one-sided infatuation? Interestingly, Patricia Tull notes that the Bible doesn't actually describe David and Jonathan's relationship in terms of "friendship."²⁰ Even in David's lament on the death of Jonathan, he says that it was Jonathan who loved him, not that he loved Jonathan – "your love to me was wonderful". The closest he comes to mirroring Jonathan's love was to say *וְנִעַמְתָּ לִי מְאֹד* "You were very nice to me" which hardly seems to be the kind of thing you'd say to your lover! Elsewhere in Samuel we are given details of Jonathan acting rashly.²¹ It is part of a narrative which depicts Saul's rejection as king, and Jonathan's unsuitability to succeed him. The purpose of the story about Jonathan falling in love with David after the briefest of encounters may have been to further highlight his unsuitability as a future king, because he was impetuous and driven by emotions, while also serving the dual purpose of showing why David was so suitable for the job – even the heir to the throne loved him! David's turn will come, however, and he is also shown to be deeply flawed.

In endeavouring to identify satire in biblical texts, the final point I would make is that we should ask of "difficult" or puzzling texts, "Does it make *better sense* to read this as satire?" And, does it help to put it in an historical context? The writer or redactor of these texts in Samuel-Kings was most likely part of a conversation about the value of kings and the usefulness of monarchy as an institution, and the historical setting for such a conversation would be in the late or post-exilic period when the revival and re-institution of monarchy was under serious consideration. The writer of Chronicles has a different view, and while Samuel-Kings portrays the kings as deeply flawed, sometimes in a mocking or satirical way, the Chronicler describes the reigns of David and Solomon in particular, and of the kings of Judah in general, in mostly glowing terms. As part of a conversation, it seems that these books are putting different cases for whether or not to revive the monarchy in a restored nation returning from exile. It was a political discussion with a theological foundation. Jonah was most likely written around the same time, although part of a different conversation. Jonah's issues were theological rather than political: could they rely on God to be faithful to the covenant, and could they rely on the prevailing theological explanations for why bad things happen to good people. Jonah *the prophet* is mocked as rebellious; Jonah *the man of prayer* is mocked as piously mouthing words which are both irrelevant and hypocritical; Jonah *the theologian* is mocked because his dogma is at odds with his experience. Yet in the end Jonah stands up to God – or at least to the way God was portrayed by the opposing voices – and says he is right to be angry in the face of what seems to him to be an

²⁰ Patricia K Tull, "Jonathan's Gift of Friendship," *Interpretation* 58, no. 2 (2004): 130-43.

²¹ For example, he is introduced to the reader when he attacked the Philistine garrison at Michmash prematurely without waiting for his father, in 13:2-3

inexcusable injustice. In my reading of the story, at this point the sympathies of the reader or listener shift to Jonah. Jonah was rebellious, but he was rebelling against apparent injustice. His pious prayers were irrelevant because the liturgy did not provide satisfying answers or comfort in the face of catastrophe. His theology was detached from reality because it was grounded in dogma rather than experience. The target of the mockery was not Jonah but the failure of contemporary religious leaders to answer the pressing questions of the day. While God has the final word in Jonah it's almost a non-ending, leaving the reader with more unanswered questions. And so the dialogue continued in later biblical texts which wrestled further with the same issues, and continues to this day.

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