

TWIST OF FAITH: IRONY IN JOB

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Speaking at Julius Caesar's funeral, Mark Antony praised Brutus—Caesar's main assassin—for being an "honorable man." Asked about a popular restaurant, Yogi Berra replied, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." Irony surrounds and entertains us. Biblical authors also loved to squeeze a twist into their writings. In the book of Job, we encounter three kinds of irony: verbal, situational, and dramatic.

Colliding with the Truth

Verbal irony occurs when the actual meaning of a statement is the opposite of the words' surface meaning. A student mutters, "I really aced this quiz" after earning an "F." The speaker's voice tone and facial expressions reveal the irony.

In literature, context uncovers it. Job utilizes verbal irony to praise his "insightful" friends. He acknowledges their monopoly on wisdom:

Truly indeed you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you (Job 12:2).

But he immediately exposes his true perspective: He asserts his own understanding (12:3). Then he highlights the irony by challenging his friends to learn from beasts, birds, fish, and even the earth (12:7-8). They know what his friends missed: Yahweh has caused all that happened (12:9).

Later, Job offers empty thanks to his consolers. Their confrontations have moved Job to "gratefulness":

How you have helped one who has no power!
How you have assisted the arm that has
no strength!

How you have advised one who has no wisdom!
And what sound wisdom you have made known
in abundance! (Job 26:2-3).

Job also exposes his friends' weakness by describing the vast power of God over creation and life. And these are just the "outer fringes of his ways"! No counselor can claim to grasp God's mind and methods (26:14).

Into the volleys among Job and his friends, Yahweh fires his own shot of irony. After asking Job if he stands in the place of judgment (Job 40:8-9), God challenges him to display his garments of sovereignty and humble the arrogant (40:10-13). If Job could accomplish this divine task, God would praise *him* for his saving power (40:14). If Job were able to speak with such thunderous authority, he could silence the critics and save himself.

Reality Check

Situational irony surfaces when speakers unintentionally make statements in direct opposition to reality. For example, Bildad declares that Job's children died because they transgressed:

If your children sinned against him,
then he sent them into the power of their
transgression (Job 8:4).

Here, the preposition *im* (אם), translated "if," also can be understood to mean "since," setting up Bildad's comment as a condemnation of Job's family. Even Job wondered about his children and offered sacrifices just in case (1:5). Yet the children did not die because of their sin or anyone else's. Instead, they died in a test of Job's righteousness.

Job himself speaks paradoxically about his circumstances. He complains about the hedge that God placed around him. He laments that this hedge brought him deep grief (Job 3:20-23). Later, he accuses God of hemming him in like a wild beast (7:12). Job does not realize that the hedge he protests is the very means God uses to preserve him (1:10). The hedge is not punishment, but protection.

Out of the Loop

The writer of Job employs dramatic irony by letting the reader in on something important, while keeping most of the characters in the dark. Job and his friends never learn of the events recounted in Job 1-2. They do not know that God suggested Job as a test-subject for Satan. They are unaware that the story emphasizes God's sovereignty, not man's righteousness.

Job's friends do not know that the answers to life's enigmas are not found in this life—and even Job discovers this truth only through deep suffering. Although the writer of Job lets us in on the full story, many of us continue to live like Job's friends, as though we're capable of finding life's answers ourselves.

How ironic. **B**

Scripture quotations
are from the
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Bible (LEB).



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