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ESTRATTO

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THE IRONY OF SALVATION
A Fundamental Pattern of Early Christian Soteriology

Irony and salvation? Combining both by means of a genitive – is this a blasphemous joke? Since the concept of irony has been used in various ways in intellectual history, it is advisable to first reach into the treasure chest of classical Greek concepts. At the end of the 5th century BC, Aristophanes uses the term irony in his comedies (*Nu*. 449; *V*. 174; *Av*. 1211) to describe the shirker who deliberately belittles himself to avoid duties. Socrates also was accused of such immoral dissimulation, then called «irony». Playing dumb, he "chatted up" people in the market and questioned their certainties, gradually eroding them. This method of truth seeking was disparagingly criticized as «ironic» by people not familiar with Socrates' philosophical procedure (e.g., in Plato, *Smp*. 216e [by Alcibiades], cfr. 218d; *R*. 337a [by Thrasymachus]; *Grg*. 489e [by Callicles]). However, in the *Gorgias* passage, a later meaning of «irony» already emerges: Socrates here stylizes himself as a clueless student and ensnares the arrogant sophistic snob Callicles by saying: «Treat me more gently, you admirable man, when you set out to instruct me, so that I do not run away from your school». Socrates says the opposite of what he means, for by no means does he consider the man to be «admirable». Here irony is already recognizable as a *rhetorical device*, which the Greek contemporaries, however, still criticize as dishonorable *behavior*, as immoral dissimulation[1]. For most Greeks – including Theophrastus[2], Demosthenes[3], and Ariston[4] – irony is a negative label that they attach to devious self-debasing dissimulation.

If we leave aside Anaximenes' *Ars Rhetorica*, for example[5], it was not until the Latin rhetors of the imperial period that irony bloomed into a

[1] For a helpful differentiation between rhetorical device and behavior, see, e.g., M. Hartung, *Ironie in der Alltagssprache. Eine gesprächsanalytische Untersuchung*, Verlag für Gesprächsforschung, Radolfzell 2002, p. 16. Also *online* http://www.verlag-gespraechsforschung.de/2002/pdf/ironie.pdf (seen Feb. 9th, 2021).

[2] Theophrastus, *Char*. Prooem. 4-5; 1.1.1-2; 1.7.2.

[3] Demosthenes, *Epit*. 18.7; *Phil*. 1.7.5; 1.37.5; *Exordia* 14.3.

[4] Ariston, *Fragm*. 14.6.16. Aristotle, on the other hand, wants to exonerate the dissimulating Socrates from the blemish of immorality by allowing understatement (εἰρωνεία) to be considered honorable (in contrast to exaggeration), because it is not aimed at reputation and profit: *NE* 4.13 (1127b). Cicero then acknowledges the fine wit of *urbana dissimulatio* in Socrates' irony; in the highest terms he praises the high elegance in Socrates' irony that combines seriousness with wit (*Orat*. 2.270; cfr. 2.269).

[5] In Greek literature, irony as a rhetorical technique is already discussed by Anaximenes of Lampsakos (4th century BC) in *Ars Rhetorica* (21 [1434a]): Irony expresses the opposite and, for example,

positively understood rhetorical device, eliciting pleasure instead of annoyance. The dissimulation is no longer covert and deceptive but clearly recognizable to the audience. In Cicero (*Orat*. 2.262), Crassus gives the floor to the ugly opposing attorney Lamia, who rudely interrupted him in the following manner: «Let us then hear the *handsome* boy (*pulchellum puerum*)!» Lamia responded: «I could not form my own shape – yet, I formed my own mind!» Crassus again: «Let us then hear the *eloquent* man (*disertum*)», and everyone laughed. Cicero calls this form of irony in which the meaning of a single expression is – transparently for everyone – turned upside down, *inversio* (*Orat*. 2.262 *invertuntur verba*). The *inversio* surprises the listeners and therefore exhilarates them. As another variant of irony, Cicero mentions the *dissimulatio*, «in which one speaks differently from what one thinks not in the [...] sense of saying the *opposite*, as Crassus did to Lamia, but in mock seriousness [...] [just] thinking *differently* than one speaks» (*Orat*. 2.269 *cum aliter sentias ac loquare*). Cicero's contexts show that the *dissimilatio*, just like the *inversio*, is deliberately transparent. Taken together, *dissimulatio* can encompass an entire sequence of words or phrases rather than just one expression, and what is said does not need to be the pure opposite of what is thought; it only needs to be "different".

In a comparable way, in the context of the tropes, Quintilian (*Inst*. 8.6.54) elaborates:

> «Irony (εἰρωνεία: Quintilian uses the Greek term) is a kind of allegory in which the opposite is expressed (*contraria ostenduntur*). [...] For if something [...] deviates from the spoken words (*verbis dissentit*), it is clear that the speech is trying to say something different (*diversam esse orationi voluntatem*)».

The trope's unspoken plaintext that the author has in mind is transparent to the listeners.

In addition, Quintilian presents irony as a figure of thought:

> «Regarding genre, εἰρωνεία as figure (*schema*) is almost indistinguishable from εἰρωνεία as *tropos*. Both [...] involve understanding the opposite of what is pronounced (*contrarium ei, quod dicitur, intellegendum est*)» (*Inst*. 9.2.44).

The two differ only regarding appearance: while, in the case of the *tropos*, only an individual word contains irony (*Inst*. 9.2.45f), «in the case of [irony as] figure it is a matter of feigning the overall intention (*totius voluntatis fictio*) [...] so that [...] the sense is different (*diversus*) from the entire talk and tone (*sermoni et voci*)» (*Inst*. 9.2.46). In the case of Socrates, even

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renders the point of view of the (litigant) opponent («these noble citizens [...] we good-for-nothing mortals») with the understanding that the speaker is convinced of the opposite. Aristotle, *Rhetor*. 1419b, describes irony as a sophisticated strategy of the free man, with which he amuses himself, whereas the buffoon amuses others.

his whole life had contained irony, Quintilian holds, as Socrates «played the ignorant and the admirer of other allegedly wise persons» (*Inst*. 9,2,46).

Thus, irony is used not only as a trope, but also as a figure of thought that encompasses more than just an individual word. Entire passages are to be understood *contrarily* to what the words say – or at least *differently* from it. Thus, irony in the ancient tradition not only represents a statement *sub contrario*; the definition at times can also be wider. Furthermore, ironic dissimulation is transparent to the listener, and it induces positive feelings, cheerfulness (cfr., e.g., *Inst*. 6.3.89). Consequently, this concept of irony contains four elements:

a) The *opposite* of the wording – or at least something *other* than the wording – is to be considered true.
b) The ironic disguise is transparent to the text recipient.
c) Not only single words but also longer passages, even a whole vita, can be understood ironically, i.e., differently from what appears on the surface.
d) Ironic dissimulation, if it is not devious but transparent, induces positive emotions, usually cheerfulness, joy.

With this concept of irony, still unaffected by post-antiquity concepts, we can approach the *Gospel of Mark*[6]. Regarding modern irony concepts, however, one *aperçu* might suffice: the Belgian literary theorist Paul de Man began his lecture *The Concept of Irony*, written in 1977, with the revelation that this title was meant ironically[7]. That says it all – or does it?

1. *The Irony in the Mocking of Jesus (*Mark *15:16-20)*

Starting with a simple example, the scene of mockery in the praetorium (Mark 15:16-20), we encounter a fascinating double irony. Despite its tragedy, the narrative has the potential to kindle inner joy in the listeners. They are left in a dual emotional state of sadness and serenity at the end. How so?

It is important to distinguish the different perspectives of those involved. a) On the level of the narrated world, the soldier figures use irony in their vituperation: «Hail King of the Jews». They put a purple cloak around Jesus' shoulders, fall to their knees, and pay homage to him (cfr. also 15:32). b) However, from the perspective of the early Christian recipients of the text, it

[6] Irony in Mark's Gospel was already recognized by, for example, Thomas Hobbes (in reference especially to Mark 15:18; in W. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1974, p. 28); J. Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992; H. Hupe, *Paradoxe Abschiede. Ironie des Entzugs im Markusevanglium*, in U.E. Eisen - H.E. Mader (eds.), *Talking God in Society. Multidisciplinary (Re)constructions of Ancient (Con)texts. Festschrift for Peter Lampe*. 1. *Theories and Applications*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2020, pp. 575-591.

[7] P. de Man, *The Concept of Irony*, in Id., *Aesthetic Ideology*, edited with an introduction by A. Warminski, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1996, pp. 163-184, here p. 163.

is clear: These solders told the truth! They were only too blind and stupid to see this. Their supposed irony was not ironic! Thus, a second irony tops the first one: The truly disgraced are the mockers, which – despite all empathy for the imprisoned protagonist – triggers satisfaction in the text recipients, if not a cheerful spark. We could interpret: Having to look at the tragic protagonist in the narrative and thus feel compassion is made more bearable by the fact that the text's double irony adds a twist to the narrative. A touch of humor makes the sight of the gallows easier to bear.

What comes across as irony on the level of the soldier figures in the narrated world – «King of the Jews» – is ironically turned upside down on the level of the text's recipients – «King of the Jews» as confession. We will discover this difference between text level and recipient level in other examples as well. It is constitutive for our thesis that the following text phenomena also are to be categorized as irony.

2. *The Irony in Jesus' Cry of Despair on the Cross (*Mark *15:34)*

Venturing into a more difficult example, we hear Jesus' cry of despair on the cross, «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?» (Mark 15:34). Does this have anything to do with irony? Is it blasphemous to conflate the verse with irony? Several observations are expedient. Jesus in this text does not deny the existence of God. The desperate language is based on a prayer in Ps 22:1. It addresses God directly, decrying that God is no longer perceptible. The absence of religious experience is lamented to God. God is accused of remoteness[8]. This is the perspective of the narrated figure of the crucified Jesus – on the textual level. The early Christian text recipients, however, know: God was close in this horror, not having abandoned the protagonist; otherwise, God would not have raised him[9]. The irony is that the crucified man's cry about being abandoned was false; rather the opposite was true for the recipients. The protagonist was mistaken at that moment. Jesus, the hero of the gospel narrative, erred? Yes, indeed, urging us to a step-by-step analysis:

1. «God has abandoned me» is an ironic statement insofar as the text recipients (unlike the literary figure of the protagonist) believe the opposite to be true. What the recipient must think based on the text's context – as opposed

[8] See also Ps 22:2: «You do not answer». Ps 22:15 directly accuses: «You lay me in the dust of death». Nevertheless, the psalmist addresses his outcry to God as a prayer – even if he does not feel God. Not giving up hope, he asks God for closeness and help (Ps 22:11.19), which are eventually granted to him (Ps 22:21b-31). This positive turn, however, does not cancel the preceding phase of feeling abandoned. The psalmist traversed this dark valley in its entirety.

[9] See also the positive turn in the *Psalm* (previous note), which may have been known to *Mark*'s recipients.

to what is shouted out in Mark 15:34 – is comforting and triggers satisfaction, if not a joyful spark: God is near, as God's imminent raising of the one who feels abandoned shows. *God is near, even when human experience no longer perceives this*. An *absconditus deus* is not necessarily a *deus absens*.

2. In addition, the recipient learns that this Jesus immersed so deeply into the human condition that he was not only executed as a criminal, not only trembled with fear in that dark garden, but also felt abandonment by God in death – and even erred. This is how low he sank. So cruelly did his human journey end. The *Gospel of Mark* does not gloss over anything in Jesus' passion, anything about the death on the cross, which is stark and ugly to the recipients' eyes – also as a death of religious experience. On the level of what is narrated, there is no Johannine triumphant glow above the cross, no speculating that Jesus being lifted up on the cross was already elevated into the glory of God at that moment, as John, the Evangelist, proclaims, enamored of his play on words with the verb ὑψόω/«elevate». No, the cross was the deepest humiliation (as in Phil 2:7-8) and the elevation separate from it.

Only on the level of the reader's reception does a positive aspect emerge at this low point: What the crucified perceived and desperately shouted out did not correspond to God's reality. God also was close to Jesus there, at this low point, as *absconditus* allowing this nadir to spread its darkness. God, although near, lets his protagonist Jesus experience the abyss fully. Differently from the *Gospel of John*.

3. This leads to the third observation, which strikes sensitive theological nerves. On the level of the recipient, the conclusion is inescapable: The literary figure of God at this low point acts as an εἴρων in the classical Greek sense, as someone who temporarily disguises himself by pretending to be far away and not revealing the opposite – his actual closeness – to the protagonist. Irony is evident here not as a rhetorical device but as the behavior of a literary figure[10], a behavior rated *negatively* by the Greeks. What we are confronted with is the pain of a central theological nerve, the question of theodicy, and a way out can only be found if we remember (see 2.) that *Mark*'s passion story explores the incarnation's darkest consequences.

3. *The Irony in the Image of the Disciples in Mark's Gospel*

In the classical Greek sense, also the literary figure of Peter acted as an εἴρων, disguising himself as unknown to the defendant Jesus, denying him. Judas behaved as an εἴρων when he called Jesus «Master» and pressed a kiss on his face, not to offer honor, let alone love, but to surrender him

[10] Cfr. above, in the context of note 1.

(Mark14:44f). With these two human specimens of splendor in the passion story, we have arrived at the Markan image of the disciples. There they are, the heroes of Christian life, the models!

The *Gospel of Mark*, as 13:37 instructs the recipients, is to be read as an *inclusive story*, that is, the disciples may be understood as a symbolic representation of the community of the Christian readers, who are invited to identify with the literary figures of the disciples. In the pre-Easter journey of Jesus and his disciples, the church is supposed to discover its own journey with the risen Christ, be comforted by Jesus' miracles and be strengthened by his words. Mark's text expresses the inclusive-story structure at a prominent place, at the end of the synoptic apocalypse: «What I say to *you*, I say to *all*». Analogously, the sentence applies to everything that Jesus speaks and does in the *Gospel of Mark*.

How does this work in detail? In the beginning, the text entices the readers to identify with the disciples. At first, this identification is gratifying. Jesus chooses them; they listen to his call and follow him (Mark 1:16ff; 2:13f; 3:13ff). They are given authority to preach, even to cast out demons (3:14f). They are elevated to being family to Jesus (3:34). The pleasure of reading continues until chapter 4. But then it becomes uncomfortable for the identifying readers, as the disciples do not grasp the meaning of the parables and need a private tutoring session; they are obtuse. However, the reader can still see the glass half full, for Jesus considers the apostles worthy of this special instruction. Darker clouds gather in the disciples' image at the end of the fourth chapter, when a storm breaks loose above the lake while the master sleeps in the stern; in this scenario, the disciples are scolded for the first time: «Why are you so fearful? Do you still have no faith?» (Mark 4:40). What do the readers do at this point? Do they begin to slip out of the disciple identification? Or do they let the text question them: «In my own bad-weather situations, do I trust in Jesus just as little?».

In the following chapters, blow by blow the readers witness what is known as the non-understanding of the disciples in Mark. Up to the narrative's watershed at Peter's confession in Mark 8:27ff, the disciples' non-understanding of Jesus' power to work miracles irritates the readers – as already in the story of the calming of the storm. The disciples, with all their zeal to follow Jesus, do not yet realize that here the Messiah, endowed with God's power, is standing before them, able to command demons, storms, and diseases. They are blind and therefore capable of deplorable reactions that irritate, perhaps question, and sometimes amuse the reader. For the readers who identify themselves with the disciples, with a self-critical look into the mirror, can *still* answer: «Thank God, I have understood that this is the powerful Son of God-Messiah in whom trust may be placed. Since my own baptism this is my faith; otherwise, I would not read this book by Mark».

Observing what happens in the narrative up to chapter 8, the reader witnesses the performance of enormous miracles after the calming of the storm: the casting out of a terrible demon named Legion, the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, the two feeding miracles, the second calming of the storm with Jesus walking on the waters, and the vivid description of the healing of a deaf-mute man in chapter 7. In no section of the book of Mark do so many miracle stories accumulate as in this one. At the same time, the individual stories become longer and more detailed.

This *crescendo* is contrasted with a *decrescendo* in the image of the disciples. They increasingly irritate the reader. In response to Jesus' command to feed the 5000, they consider running to a baker and buying bread for a huge amount of money, the equivalent of over 1000 euros – an expression of lack of trust. The disciples do not understand that Jesus' command to feed the people is meant differently: They are to serve the people when Jesus miraculously multiplies the bread, as the further context shows (Mark 6:41.43). However, the idea of serving others is far from the disciples, as chapters 9 and 10 also illustrate in a grotesque way; there they do not want to serve, but to be the greatest.

After the miraculous experience of the first feeding, the disciples' behavior at the second one seems all the more astonishing. Even now, when they should know better, the pathetic disciples ask: How can one here, in the desert, feed all these people (8:4)? The disciples' incompetence is even illustrated geographically: In 6:45, Jesus commands them to go to Bethsaida. But they do not make it there (6:53). Only under Jesus' aegis do they reach Bethsaida – much later, six pages further on (8:22). Finally, in the second story of the calming of a storm, they show their lack of understanding by being frightened and thinking that a ghost is coming toward them (6:49). At the end of this text (6:52), the evangelist comments on the disciples' behavior: «They had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened». Verse 7:18 rebukes: «Do you also not understand?». And in 8:14-21 Mark devotes a summarizing extra passage to the disciples' incomprehension at the feedings.

In 8:29, in Peter's confession, this part of the disciples' lack of understanding is concluded. Finally – after a symbolic healing of a blind – the scales fall from their eyes: Yes, this is the powerful Messiah, expected by Israel. But at this apex there is no rest, no catching one's breath. Instantly, the next level of the disciples' non-understanding is reached: Already in 8:31, Jesus announces that he, *as* the powerful Messiah, contrary to all expectations will enter into suffering and thus plunge all religiously preconceived notions of Messiahship into crisis – just as in Paul the λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ, the «word of the cross», causes the religious notions of the world to founder (1Cor 1:18ff). Promptly, the Markan disciples also fail on this new level of

their task of understanding: Peter impetuously fends off the idea of suffering and gets the next verbal smack: «Get behind me, you Satan, out of my sight!» (8:33). As a further shock, Jesus not only prophesies his *own* suffering, but at the same time calls to a suffering discipleship: «Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow *behind* me» (8:34). The Greek offers the word play of «get behind me!» (8:33)/«follow behind me» (8:34). Both times the Greek reads ὀπίσω μου. Follow me on the «way» (ὁδός) – which is the Markan metaphor for Jesus' way into the passion at Jerusalem. This is the second bitter pill, the μίμησις ἐσταυρωμένου (mimesis of the crucified Christ, made concrete, as Mark will show later, in readiness for self-denial, renouncement of status, and suffering for the sake of others), that the disciples henceforth are to swallow in their process of understanding and that they will not choke down until the resurrection.

Here, at the latest, the reader, looking into the mirror of the disciples, can no longer answer lightly: Yes, I have already realized all this for myself. Here, at the latest, the reader is challenged just like the disciples in the story. The gospel has become uncomfortable for the listening community[11].

How does Mark's narrative of the disciples' faltering continue? Jesus strikes the death knell twice more in chapters 9 and 10, announcing his Passion for the second and third time. Each time, the disciples react in a grotesquely inappropriate manner: In 9:33ff, they ponder who among them is the greatest; in 10:35-37, they ask for the best places in heaven. The master goes to the gallows; the disciples dream of five-star suites. The contrast cannot be drawn more sharply. Jesus again responds to this "no" of the disciples to suffering with calls to be ready to suffer, but this time more concretely: «Suffering», mimetic discipleship of the crucified Christ, according to Mark 9:35-37, means being ready to become the lowest in rank like a child, that is, to renounce status; according to Mark 10:38-45, it means serving – which the disciples had already failed to grasp in the feeding story (see above). To serve and to be ready not to be the first for once, but the last, are for Mark concretizations of cross-oriented discipleship in a *passio activa*, which is identical with active *agape*, an *agape* that gives (up) parts of one's self to and for the benefit of others and only in this way becomes authentic. Mark 10:45 ends: «The Son of Man also did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many»[12].

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[11] Two things should be noted. a) In Mark's concept of «understanding» his insistence on a cross existence of the disciples means that «understanding» is not reduced to cognitive functions but encompasses the entire Christian existence. This Messiah is only «understood» by those who, like Bartimaeus, existentially engage in the «path» (ὁδός) of following Jesus to the cross, not by those who stand by the wayside, watching and waving palm branches. Discipleship grasps the whole person. b) For Mark, the church is a church ready to suffer, with suffering and the cross not only including a passive but, above all, also an active side (see below, *passio activa*).

[12] Mark is in line with Paul, who also propagates a serving church and a Christian cross existence

The disciples' failure continues to increase. They sleep through part of the Passion. Symbolically, in Gethsemane, they close their eyes to the impending suffering, sinking into suppression, while in contrast, at the beginning of the passion, a blind man named Bartimaeus opens his eyes and follows along the «path» (ὁδός) of the Passion (Mark 10:52). The disciples, on the other hand, keep struggling against all this, in Mark 14:47 even with a sword. From their group come betrayal, denial, abandonment; they run off. The Passion chapter 15 has to unfold its narrative completely without them. One disciple failure after another, contrasted by positive marginal figures: Not only Bartimaeus but also the woman who anoints Jesus, anticipating the anointing of a dead, gets involved in his suffering—in contrast to the disciples. The same is done by the other women who persevere near Jesus until the end instead of fleeing. Simon of Cyrene literally carries Jesus' cross, unburdening the doomed man.

What remains? The readers and listeners of Mark's text are beset by the question of how to deal with their identification with the disciples at the end, with the self-critical look in the disciples' mirror. The disciples' doltishness is exhilarating for long stretches; the readers always know everything better than the disciples do and can happily elevate themselves above these literary figures. But at the same time, in the disciple identification, which was so comfortable at the beginning and then became increasingly awkward, ecclesiastical self-criticism comes into play. With its image of the disciples, Mark's *Gospel* holds up a critical mirror to the reading community, inviting them to examine whether or not they are failing as much as the disciples. For Mark's *Gospel*, the church is a self-critical church, unafraid to question, to caricature, and to expose itself and the apostolic authorities representing it in their inabilities. Literally exposed – stark naked – a follower of Jesus runs away in 14:52. Nothing is glossed over. No excuses, not even for the readers attempting to identify with the disciples.

Where is the ironic potential of the Markan image of the disciples? These disciples are not *only* dolts and failures. The text recipients know this from the rest of the early Christian tradition (reflected, e.g., in 1Cor 15:5-7; Gal 2:9), but also from Mark's text itself. Called by Jesus at the beginning, empowered, elevated to Jesus' *familia*, they once again become the object of intense divine acting at the end of the *Gospel* (16:7; cfr. 14:28; 9:9): God responds to the failure of the disciples with a new act of grace, the resurrection. The disciples thus become paradigms of the *sola gratia*: Just as the Markan Jesus, in the course of the narrative, strove to sharpen the dull disciples' understanding and sustained his undeserving followers all the

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that can manifest itself in renunciation of rights for the benefit of others (1Cor 6:7 and 9:6.12.15.18), in renunciation of freedom for the benefit of weaker ones (1Cor 8:9-13 and 10:28-33), or in renunciation of status in order to build up others (Phil 2:3-8).

way up to his Passion, so God abides by these figures of failure after Jesus' death, not dropping them, but rather setting them up as future proclaimers of the gospel[13] – an act of grace, *sola gratia*, undeserved. In the church's brokenness, illustrated by the Markan image of the disciples, God's gracious acting becomes manifest.

Where is the irony? The human heroes of the tradition, the role models and apostolic princes – are failures, material for caricatures. Or, reversing the ironic thought, exposed in a breakdown of *human* qualities, through the *sola gratia*, the void becomes something important, a model: the empowered apostle. *God* enables the irony of strength in human weakness: What is narrated by the text, the disciples' faintness, in the mind of the recipients becomes a vessel of divine power – a reading that has the potential of triggering merriment in Christian recipients who consider themselves undeservedly sustained by χάρις (grace). Identifying with the literary figures of the disciples, the readers may consider their own failures and weakness subsumed in God's grace and perceive themselves strengthened by God.

On the textual level, the disciples are weak and foolish, but on the level of reception, which is guided by clues such as the penultimate verse of Mark's Gospel (see note 13) as well as the rest of the early Christian tradition, the disciples are strong, apostolic greats – *sola gratia* greats, but greats. The paradox of the strong in the weak is "irony" according to the irony criteria we initially extracted from ancient literature. Narrated weakness is turned into its opposite, and this opposite is considered true on the level of text reception.

4. *The Irony in the Life of the Crucified One*

Irony characterizes not only the life of the disciples but even more that of the Crucified One himself. Brazen and bold in the ancient religious world, believers in Christ claimed that their God had wrought salvation for humanity at a place of powerlessness, shame, and disgust, in the death of a criminal on a cross. So far, *in rebus religiosis* the world had assumed that a deity saves by displaying divine power and glory. But powerlessness and shame of a God's Son as a means of salvation? A folly, as Paul admits (μωρία); a scandal, a provocation (σκάνδαλον: 1Cor 1:23).

Nonetheless, this foolishness, called gospel, started a triumphal procession through the ancient world. What the world reviled as μωρία, as

[13] The readers, who owe their very Christian existence to this proclamation, may conclude this from Mark 16:7; 14:28; 9:9b. In addition, there are the prolepses in the narrative: a) Mark 3:14-15 introduces the motif of sending the disciples; b) the later mission to the Gentiles by the apostles is anchored in the life of the pre-Easter Jesus – in the presence of these disciples (Mark 7:24-8:10; 13:10; 14:9; 5:18-20; 15:39).

nonsense, in the minds of the Christ believers reverted into "wisdom", divine δύναμις, σωτηρία and ἀπολύτρωσις (1Cor 1:21, 24f, 30). In other words, salvation was pronounced *sub contrario*, and in this form it was proclaimed to the world as a cheering gospel, as «glad tidings». This was the irony of early Christian salvation, the ironic core of the ancient faith in Christ. That pillory and gallows in the narrative of the "good news" were to be thought of as their opposites – death as life – became the uplifting raison d'être for believing readers of the narrative.

The irony of pronouncing salvation *sub contrario* was born out of a historical dilemma. With the execution of its leader on the cross, the Jesus movement had failed. This could have been the end of everything. But Jesus' followers, above all Peter, in their grief experienced visions in which they saw the dead Jesus as a living one (1Cor 15:3ff). A gigantic reinterpretation thus began – supported by the Jewish Bible, large parts of which were read as prophecies of the Jesus event. Whoever said «death» of Jesus now meant «life». Whoever narrated the death on the cross with its powerlessness and shame now meant salvation of humankind and victory by God. Whoever told of the sadness of Good Friday ultimately let joy prevail in the listeners.

What began as a contingent historical event, as the failure of a prophetic movement from the Galilean hinterland, became a theological principle in the post- Easter faith in Christ: God and God's workings do not present themselves to humans directly, not face to face – then humans would be crushed and die by the superiority and δόξα of God (Exod 33:20). Rather, only God's «back» is shown, as Exod 33:23 puts it; τὰ ὀπίσω μου in the LXX. There we encounter again the ὀπίσω μου with which Mark played in a pun earlier (see above). In 8:33-34, the disciples were to position themselves in a way that they directed their gaze to Jesus' back and thus followed him. This back would carry the cross a few chapters later. The front side of δόξα and δύναμις in the resurrection would be seen by the disciples only later. At first, δόξα and δύναμις appear *sub contrario*, in shame and powerlessness.

That the almighty God shows God's self in a powerless human, crucified and criminalized, in a child born in the feeding trough of a cattle stable – that was a message for donkeys who did not mind the dissonance of the paradox. Strength was accessible in weakness? God's salvific acting in the disaster of a cross, in the stench of a stable? What nonsense (1Cor 1:23). God hidden in the weak? And then visible, tangible, comprehensible there? This was the disturbing imposition of the gospel that was supposed to be a message of joy.

The year 2018 marked the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation in the Liberal Arts Lecture Hall of the University of Heidelberg[14], April 26th, 1518. He defended 28 theses, unfolding his *theologia*

[14] WA 1:353-374.

crucis before frowning theology professors, but enthusiastic students. Luther hurled sentences like these into the faces of the skeptical theologians: Only «he [deserves to be called a true theologian] who understands that the segment of God's being [...] that is facing the world is made visible in *suffering* and the *cross*»[15]. He pointed out: God can «*only* be found in tribulations and in the cross» (*Deum non inveniri nisi in passionibus et cruce*)[16]. God is the «God hidden in suffering» (*Deus absconditus in passionibus*)[17].

Hidden in the inconspicuous. In a marginal group at the fringes of the Roman Empire, in the backyard at a place of execution. God hidden and at the same time visible *sub contrario*, that is, in the opposite of what is usually associated with God, in the opposite of glory, power, and wisdom. Instead, the folly of a paradoxical message, which changed the world.

What are the effects of this – ironic – combining of opposites, unifying contradictory perspectives in the figure of irony? What does it do to a culture when it learns to discover God *in* the weak, the inconspicuous, in a child and in a cruelly executed man? Ethically, it meant seeing the human face of God – specifically the face of God's Son (Matt 25:34-40) – in the face of the helpless and sick. It meant to meet Christ at the bedside of the injured, to assign dignity to the dementia patient, to the homeless, the refugee. Whoever loves people, be their faces ugly or not, looks God in the face. The *sub-contrario* way of thinking valorized weak human beings, conceding dignity to them. Who internalized this could no longer ridicule the weak as "losers".

The *sub-contrario* thinking also brought about a second effect. Not only were the weak looked at differently. Conversely, the view of God changed. Conventional images of God were overturned (e.g., 1Cor 1:18ff). The Almighty not only sat enthroned in heavens beyond, surrounded by power and glory, unapproachable, a supreme being. No, God also was considered close (e.g., Matt 10:29-31). The distant Sovereign was perceived as near in one who was called Immanuel («God-with-us») and said, «I am with you always, to the very end of the age» (Matt 28:20). The incarnate hangs on a cross – at the side of other humans. God – an Immanuel in a battered world.

A third and final point arises from the *sub-contrario* thinking. In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther combined his *theologia crucis* with his doctrine of justification. In other words, God does not accept persons for outstanding piety or clean slates; God's acceptance only grows out of love, although these humans have nothing to show, standing before God empty-handed and carrying ballast on their backs. Luther in the Heidelberg lecture hall held[18]: «Human love arises from what it finds to be lovable»

[15] WA 1:362 (in thesis 20).
[16] WA 1:362 (in thesis 21).
[17] WA 1:362 (in thesis 21).
[18] WA 1:365 (in thesis 28).

(*Amor hominis fit a suo diligibile)*; «God's love», however, «does not find but creates what it loves» (*Amor Dei non invenit, sed creat suum diligibile*). It «loves what is [...] bad, foolish, weak, in order to *make* it [...] good, wise, and robust» (*diligit* [...] *malos, stultos, infirmos, ut fiat* [...] *bonos, sapientes, robustos*). It «exudes itself» (*effluit*), turning itself to «where it distributes good to the bad and needy» (*ubi bonum conferat malo et egeno*). Accordingly, Luther boldly formulated, «Sinners are beautiful because they are loved; not because they are beautiful are they loved» (*Ideo enim peccatores sunt pulchri, quia diliguntur, non ideo diliguntur, quia sunt pulchri*). For the reformer, this realization meant a liberation from religious pressure. God gives to empty hands, to anxious hearts; God comes near undeservedly. The *do-ut-des* principle breaks down at this point.

5. *The Irony in the Life of Paul*

After the irony in Mark's image of the disciples and in the early Christian image of Christ, finally the irony in Paul's image as it appears in his letters is the focus. As in Mark's Gospel Jesus chose a faltering team of disciples and sat down at the table with the marginalized, with the proverbial «sinners and tax collectors» (Mark 2:15), so the risen *Kyrios* chose the unworthy Paul (οὐκ ἱκανός, as Paul saw himself: 1Cor 15:9): a persecutor of Christians, an «abnormally born», last of the apostles (1Cor 15:8-9). A basic pattern of Christian soteriology becomes obvious: God chooses the marginalized, the weak, in order to unfold God's own strength (1Cor 1:26-29; 2Cor 12:9). Where human self-exaltation takes hold, less room is left for God's δύναμις[19].

In Paul, this basic pattern is encountered at every turn of his *theologia crucis*, in 1Cor 1:26ff as well as in his doctrine of justification as the flip side of his *theologia crucis*. What people could present to God with καύχησις, in self-praise, is knocked out of their hands (cfr. the *sola gratia*, above). According to Paul, God saves those who do not deserve salvation, God choses those who are not worth choosing.

We saw Quintilian's assessment that an entire life could contain irony, as when Socrates outwardly appeared as an «ignorant man» and as an «admirer of other supposedly wise persons» (*Inst*. 9.2.46), while in fact he was philosophically searching for ἀλήθεια. Life as irony was equally true for the Markan disciple figures: They were failures outwardly – yet selected to be

[19] Seen from an etic perspective, this basic pattern means: By means of theology, the non-privileged, socially marginal early Christians managed to interpret their own position of weakness as positive – as a place where they thought the Almighty was particularly close and active, more active than among the socially privileged.

the first heralds of the gospel. Life as irony was true for the vita of Jesus as well, a suffering man, executed as a criminal – yet considered God's Son and savior of humankind. It also applied to Paul's life. Outwardly, a former persecutor of Christians, an «abnormally born» (1Cor 15:8) – yet apostle to the Gentiles. Outwardly, he and his co-workers were, as he himself describes in 1Cor 4:9-13, «garbage of the world», «like those condemned to die in the arena», as «fools» «a spectacle» for non-believers, «dishonored», «slandered», «hungry», «in rags», and «homeless» – yet, *as* such fragile human vessels, endowed with divine δύναμις (2Cor 4:7), being given new strength every day (4:16) so that they were not despairing (4:8) but empowered to bless those who afflicted them (1Cor 4:12). The Pauline catalogues of *peristaseis* in, for example, 1Cor 4 and 2Cor 4, express the irony of the apostolic destiny drastically. 2Cor 4:10 culminates in the statement: «We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body». Thus, the apostles participate in the ironic existence of the human Son of God, Jesus. Outwardly marked by death – but actually standing in the fullness of life and therefore (so Phil 1:18c.25c; 4:1.4) glowing with joy and cheerfulness – despite all apostolic stress (Phil 1:17.23).

By playing with a double irony, the catalogues of *peristaseis* in 1Cor 4 and 2Cor 4 express the ironic apostolic existence in a rhetorically adept way. On the one hand, Paul mocks the Corinthians who, as enthusiastic charismatics who are moved by the spirit, consider themselves complete in their Christianity. He sneers, ironically mimicking their position: «Already you have been satiated, already you have become rich and begun to reign» (1Cor 4:8a). He then bursts this bubble: O, if only you had attained to dominion (ἐβασιλεύσατε), then we too, who led you to Christ in the first place, could reign with you (1Cor 4:8b). Verse 4:8b flags 4:8a as ironic. In plain language, by no means are you perfect and risen to co-rulership with Christ. For even I, your apostle, am not; as an evangelist I am «the garbage of the world».

However, precisely *as* this garbage I am a vessel of divine power (2Cor 4:7), which is a second ironic reversal. It implies: You Corinthians, too, could be vessels of God's power if you behaved more humbly, if you admitted to your emptiness before God, that is, if you did not puff yourselves up in factions (1Cor 1-4), but let go of your attempts at self-aggrandizement (cfr. 4:8a) and acknowledged that, on the one hand, we are despised by the world and, on the other (2Cor 4:7b), by our own strength have nothing to be proud of before God.

In the fool's speech of 2Cor 11:[5-12].17 to 12:13, Paul also uses irony. There he lists his human merits, which distinguish him from the opponents who invaded Corinth and whom he ironically dubs «super apostles». But then he parenthesizes this self-glorifying speech and asserts: This is how a

fool talks. For apostolic strength is not rooted in one's own qualities. Only the fool thinks that way – and you Corinthians think that way when following the «super apostles». Apostolic strength is rooted in God's δύναμις alone. This means that what is enumerated within the parentheses is intended as ironic speech: It does not represent a positive list, but a nothingness, even a nocens (cfr. Phil 3:7-8); it is – *sit venia verbo* – detrimental excremental dirt, an obscenity Paul allows himself in this context (σκύβαλα: Phil 3:8). Again, being empty before God is propagated as the authentic attitude that allows God's δύναμις to take hold.

6. *Conclusions*

In conclusion, it is part of the basic structure of the early Christian faith, exceptionally documented in its oldest preserved writings (Paul's letters and Mark's Gospel)[20], that it is not satisfied with what is empirically ostensible (Jesus' crucifixion, the apostles' weaknesses). Such negative experiences are not left as they are, but ironically stand for the opposite (or at least something other)[21] being true.

This basic motive also drives the Christian eschatologies. They offer mental alternatives to the *de facto* world. The basic motive of not being satisfied with the empirically ostensible, but wanting the opposite or something other to be true, can be interpreted as a meaning-giving coping strategy for dealing with the hardships and absurdities of existence, as a distancing from distressing empirical perceptions. It is a distancing that is ready to conceptualize alternatives to the empirically harsh world and therefore harbors socially and politically explosive potential.

The ironic principal pattern of the Christian faith creates serenity in an absurd world, it strikes up a cheerful keynote and offers an art of living that the self-styled «fool» Paul in his ragged tunic (cfr. 1Cor 4:10f) embodied in his cruciform Christ mimesis. For him, this kenotic and mimetic identification with the crucified Christ gave room for divine δύναμις and a perspective of hope.

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[20] For Mark's closeness to Pauline theology, see recently H.E. Mader, *Markus und Paulus. Die beiden ältesten erhaltenen literarischen Werke und theologischen Entwürfe des Urchristentums im Vergleich*, Schöningh-Brill, Paderborn-Leiden 2020, convincingly discussing other topics that both authors have in common.

[21] Cfr. Cicero on irony as *dissimilatio* (*Orat*. 2.269), above.