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God as a disappointed lover?

Sarcastic irony as a rhetorical device in Isaiah 6:9–10

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The book of Isaiah offers poetically powerful images of God, not least in the story of Isaiah's calling, Isaiah 6, which has spawned a lively reception history. The motif of hardening of hearts (6:9–10) resonated far beyond the New Testament (e.g. Mark 4:10–12; Acts 28:26f), especially in Calvinist theology.

This rhetorical-analytical essay tentatively asks whether an alternative interpretation to the common interpretation¹ of Isaiah 6:9–10 is within the realm of possibility. It questions the image of a wilfully hardening God in favour of the image of a zealous, disappointed lover who, angry at God's cherished but disobedient people, uses sarcastic irony. The ironic-sarcastic formulations are underlined; they mainly occur in the form of imperatives or jussives. In addition to parallelisms, chiasms in lines 5–6 and 8–9 enrich the rhetoric of the text:

Tell this to the people: “You shall listen, listen!

However,² you shall not understand (וְאַל-תִּבְיִן)!

You shall look, look!

However, you shall not comprehend (וְאַל-תִּדְעוּ)!”

Fatten (הִשְׁמֵן, Imp. Hi.) the heart of this people,

and make its ears heavy (הִכְבֵּד, Imp. Hi.),

and paste up its eyes (הִשֵּׁעַ, Imp. Hi.),

so that it just does not (פֶּן-) see with its eyes

and listen with its ears

and its heart does not comprehend and repent and is healed!”

The hypothesis is that God – angry and defiant – makes use of irony, which intends the opposite of what is formulated.

In the absence of a Hebrew theory of rhetoric from the time of the development of the Book of Isaiah, Anaximenes (4th century BC) and his *Ars Rhetorica* (21 [1434a]) may be quoted for a definition: Irony is “to name things by means of contrary expressions” (τὸ δὲ τοῖς ἐναντίοις ὀνόμασι προσαγορεύειν τὰ πράγματα). Irony means saying something while pretending not to say it.³ Someone uses irony, for example, when expressing the point of view of the (trial) opponent (“these noble citizens [...] we useless mortals”) with the understanding that he, the speaker, is convinced of the opposite.

¹ In the more recent literature, cf., e.g., Wolfgang Köhler (2019). According to him, the hardening, in Isaiah, is already part of God's execution of judgement on the people.

² The ו clearly has an adversative sense, as for example in Gen 2:20; 17:21; Hos 4:4 (contrast hearing/not understanding).

³ Εἰρωνεία δὲ ἐστὶ λέγειν τι μὴ λέγειν προσποιούμενον.

To cite another relatively early example of this concept of irony in Greek literature, in Plato, *Gorgias* 489e (cf. Aristoteles, *Rhetor.* 1419b), Socrates stylizes himself as an ignorant student and ensnares the arrogant sophist Callicles with the words: “Treat me more gently, you admirable one, when you set out to teach me, so that I don’t run away from your school.” Socrates says the opposite of what he means, not considering the sophistic snob to be “admirable”. Nor does he aspire to learn anything from him.

As a broader form of irony, Cicero mentions the *dissimulatio*, “in which one speaks differently than one thinks, not in the [...] sense that one says the *opposite* [...], but in feigned seriousness [...], *thinking differently than one speaks*” (Orat. 2.269; *cum aliter sentias ac loquare*). The *dissimulatio* can extend to an entire sequence instead of just one expression, and what is spoken does not have to be the pure opposite of what is thought, only “different”.⁴

Irony (in the sense defined by Anaximenes) and sarcasm existed in Hebrew literature, even though only Greeks and Romans initially wrote down language-theoretical thoughts on irony. Already Amos’s pithy speeches made use of sarcastic irony: *Am* 4:4: “come to Bet-El and *commit sacrilege*, to Gilgal and *commit even more sacrilege*!”

Amos obviously (“commit sacrilege”) intends the opposite, as 5:5 also proves: “Do *not* visit Bethel, do *not* go to Gilgal”, because there adversity looms. Like Isaiah, Amos formulates ironic imperatives in 4:4.⁵

The same is true for *Jdg* 10:14: “[*Just*] go (לכו) and cry (ויעקו) unto the gods whom you have chosen. *They shall deliver you* (ישיעו) in the time of tribulation!” As in *Isa* 6:9f, sarcastic irony is hurled in the form of imperatives and jussives: God does *not* want the people to turn to the gods! God’s defiant anger at the fact of idolatry is expressed (cf. *Jdg* 10:13) as, in *Isa* 6:9f, God’s defiant anger at the fact of hardened hearts among the people; there, too, God intends the opposite (e.g., *Isa* 1:16–17, 19–20; 1:5; 7:9; 9:12; 28:12; 30:15; 31:6; cf. 30:19b–20). The wish in *Jdg* 10:14 is equally ironic and sarcastic: “*They shall deliver you!*” Of course, they should not (and cannot).

1 Kings 18:27: Elijah mocks the priests of Baal. “*Shout loudly!* (קראו) *He is a god!* He could be busy, could be relieving himself or travelling. Maybe he sleeps and then wakes up.” The only irony is the imperative at the beginning (“shout loudly”; Elijah does not intend this) and the sentence “He is a god”. Baal is not a god at all in Elijah’s mind; the following anthropomorphisms suggest the opposite of divinity. They are sarcastically comical but no longer ironic. They rather convey what Elijah intends: to mock the non-divinity of Baal.

Jdg 9:8–20 uses a parable of trees to criticise Abimelech’s election as king (Abimelech as a prickly thorn bush). Then, in v.19, an ironic and sarcastic conditional sentence follows: “So if (ואם) you have acted *faithfully and honourably*

⁴ On the development of the concept of irony in Greek-Latin literature, see P. Lampe 2021: 193–207.

⁵ The “like David” in *Am* 6:5 also is ironic.

towards Jerubbaal and his house today, then *take pleasure* (שמח) *in Abimelech!* And he too shall take pleasure (וישמח) *in you.*” The opposite is the case. They neither acted faithfully or honourably, nor should anyone rejoice. Here, too, the imperatives and the jussives are sarcastic and ironic.

2 Sam 6:20 offers pure ironic sarcasm: “When David returned to bless his house, Michal, the daughter of Saul, went out to meet him and said, ‘How *honourably* the king of Israel behaved today when he exposed himself before the eyes of the maidservants of his subjects, as only any vulgar fellow would.’” In fact, Michal despises (6:16) the king who made a fool of himself.

There are also plenty of non-ironic sarcasms, not least the sarcasm that glows through the satirical portrait of arrogant women of Jerusalem (Isa 3:16–24; 4:4).⁶ Isa 22:23–25 satirises nepotism. There is no question that the various writers of the evolving book of Isaiah were capable of linguistic finesse that powerfully charged the language.⁷

Interim result: (a) Sarcastic irony had been used since the early prophets of Scripture. (b) The book of Isaiah is capable of sarcasm and linguistic art. (c) Irony and

⁶ Examples of non-ironic sarcasm: Am 4:1; 6:4–6; Prov 26:16, 18f; 2 Kings 14:9; 18:23f; 1 Kings 20:10 (a sarcasm not based on irony, but on excessive exaggeration); Job 38 (God almost mockingly shows Job how small he is compared to the divine majesty). In Josh 17:14–15, Joshua is annoyed with Joseph’s descendants, who complain about the all too meagre allocation of land by lot: “Go up into the forest and clear land for yourselves there [...] if the hill country of Ephraim is too small for you” (again an imperative; see above) – a reaction characterised by sarcastic anger. Joshua, however, does not use irony. He relents and actually means what he advises, as vv. 17–18 show. Ez 18:2 and Jer 31:29 quote a bitterly sarcastic and accusatory Israelite proverb with which younger people denounce the mistakes of the older generation: “The fathers eat sour grapes, yet the sons’ teeth become dull.”

⁷ Examples: (1) The well-known change of genres in the *vineyard song* (5:1–7). The rhetorical highlight is that the Jerusalem audience, asked to judge the vineyard, suddenly find themselves judging themselves (analogous to 2 Sam 12:1–12). However, God then immediately removes their function as judges in order to pass judgement himself (5:5–6), just as God also removes the “I” from the prophet (5:1–2) and speaks in the first person himself in 5:3–6. The abrupt changes reflect the emotional dynamics: God’s displeasure and the ambivalence of God’s emotions towards the people. (2) Powerful *metaphors and comparisons* decorate the prophetic discourse, e.g., Isa 29:10; 1:22f, 25; 5:18; 5:1–7; also 3:14 (cf. Song of Songs 8:12; Isa 27:2–5; Jer 12:10; Ps 80:9–14); Isa 1:21; 1:5b–6; 7:4; 7:18 (cf. 5:26); 8:20, 22; 21:12; 8:7f, 14; 7:2; 18:4; 9:3, 10, 13f, 17f; 10:5f, 12–17, 22, 26f, 33f; 11:1, 4f, 10, 15; 12:3; 13:14; 14:5, 11f, 21, 23, 25, 29f; 16:2, 8f (metonymy), 11; 17:4 (metonymy), 5f, 10–13; 18:5f; 19:15; 21:1, 3, 10; 22:17f, 23–25; 23:4, 14, 16–18; 24:6, 13, 20, 23 (personifications such as 23:4, 14–18); 25:4f, 7, 10f; 26:6, 17f; 27:8, 12; 28:1–5, 20, 24–28; 29:5, 7f, 11f, 16; 30:13f, 17, 27f, 33; 31:4f, 9b; 32:2, 17, 19; 33:4, 11f, 20, 23; 34:4f, 11, 17; 35:1, 6; 36:6; 37:3, 21, 27, 29, 31; 38:12, 14. (3) *Word plays* 7:9; 10:30f; 19:18; 22:23f et al. (4) *Symbolic actions and signs* reinforce the proclamation: 8:1; 7:4 (cf. the motif of a remnant in 10:21f; 8:17a; 1:8f; 4:2–3; 30:17); 20:3f (cf. 2 Sam 10:4f). (5) Effective rhetoric includes long admonishing *silence*. The non-verbal presence of the prophet embodies the message (8:16–18). Because the people do not listen, the prophet seals his mouth. Instead, he writes down his message and seals the document as a sign that, apart from his followers, no one will listen anyway (8:16).

sarcasm are mostly used in emotionally charged commands (imperatives, jussives), expressing frustration and defiance – as in Isa 6:9f. The above initial working hypothesis thus is a substantiated possibility.

The hypothetical becomes more probable if, for example, Isa 1:16–17, 19–20; 1:5; 7:9; 9:12; 28:12; 30:15; 31:6⁸ are taken into account where God's will is clearly outlined: God wants the opposite of hardening, God wants repentance to God's self. This divine will is contrasted by the people's disobedience, their unwillingness to listen, which awakens God's wrath (5:25; 9:11, 16, 20; 10:4; 12:1) and motivates God's plan of a judgement. The people turn away from God (e.g., 1:2, 4–5, 21) and lack understanding (1:3). In 1:3, we encounter the same word stem as in 6:9; here, at the beginning of the book, the lack of understanding is clearly stated as a *fact* (cf. further 5:8, 11–15, 18–24; 3:16–23; 4:4 et al.). Accordingly, our working hypothesis holds that 6:9 ironically and sarcastically mirrors the people's obdurate refusal to listen as a *fact*. It is not announced as an object of divine will.

As counterevidence, Isa 29:9f must be mentioned: “*Paste your eyes together* (השתעשעו; hitp., reflexive verb, the same word stem [שעע] as in 6:10, where it is hiph.) and *be pasted up* (ושעו)! Inebriated, they lose their senses (שכרו), but not with wine; they stagger (נעו) [...]. *For the Lord has poured out* (כִּי־נָסַךְ) a spirit of deep sleep on you; and *he closes* your eyes (i.e., the prophets) (ויעצם). Therefore, all revelations are to you like words of a sealed book.” The underlined imperatives in verse 9 could be understood ironically and sarcastically, as in the parallels above. Verse 10, however, makes God the author of Israel's self-hardening. How can this be, when God's will was previously said to be directed towards turning the people to God? (see above).⁹ The reader is challenged by the contradiction between an image of God in which God wants God's people to turn to God, and an image that presents a God who deliberately “pastes up” God's people.¹⁰ Whether this active hardening by God was intended as a judgement for the disobedient people or not is irrelevant: The contradiction between these two images of God documented in the Book of Isaiah remains.

⁸ Cf. also 30:19b–20 or 22:8–14, where Yahweh's expectation of repentance is presupposed: Instead of fortifying walls and mustering armour in the face of the enemy threat, which is backed by God, and instead of holding parties (“for tomorrow we are dead”, 13), the Jerusalemites should mourn (12), but they miss their chance, which brings about their death (14).

⁹ We need not be occupied by the contradiction within 29:9f itself; for ancient understanding, it did not exist: Divine influence (here: “pasting up peoples' eyes”) and human action (“pasting up one's own eyes”) cannot be set off against each other, so that a contradiction would arise. At least in the classical Greek mindset, free will was taken for granted (P. Lampe 2015: 125 with further evidence). Even when a god or a demon influences a person's thinking, the person remains the author of the decision and solely responsible for it. No matter how hard Athena tries to appease Achilles, he himself decides to allow himself to be influenced by her (Homer, *Il.* 1.216–222). Clytemnestra tries to talk her way out of responsibility for her bloody murder of her husband by referring to a demon, but the chorus – and thus the poet (Aeschylus, *Agam.* 1505f) – does not let her get away with it.

¹⁰ God hardens non-Israelites' hearts: Gen 11:9; Ex 4:21; cf. 7:13; 9:35. But God's people?

Current Old Testament research has not reached a consensus on the genesis of the book. The prophet of the second half of the 8th century was sometimes credited with fewer than three dozen verses,¹¹ with increasingly more in recent research – the pendulum is swinging back.¹² But even if we were to take the most conservative position, attributing both 6:9f and 29:9f to the prophet, there would be decades between the two texts: 6:9f is envisioned at the beginning of Isaiah's ministry and 29:9f at its end, when Judah was occupied by Assyria and Jerusalem was besieged (701 BC). However, the same authorship is highly questionable. Despite the uncertainty in the research landscape, Jan Kreuch's analysis of the so-called Assyrian cycle (Isa 28–31)¹³ still seems plausible. Drawing, e.g., on contemporaneous Assyrian propaganda texts, it holds that a large part of the cycle originated from the prophet's environment around 700 BC (but not from the prophet himself). Whether verse 29:10 already belonged to the cycle of this time or entered it later¹⁴ is irrelevant: Regardless of how this may be decided, it is most probable that 6:9f and 29:10 are not from the same author. If this is the case, it follows methodically that 6:9f must first be interpreted on its own, as this essay did, while 29:10 is already part of the reception history of 6:9f – a reception history in which, as often is the fate of irony, the recipients no longer understood the sarcastic irony but read the verses as declaration of divine will in plain text.

Interestingly, the Septuagint renders the sarcasm and not a version according to which God charged the prophet with hardening the people's hearts. In LXX Isa 6:9, Isaiah is commissioned to prophesy to the people that they will be obdurate in the future: εἰπὼν τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ Ἀκοῇ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε καὶ βλέποντες βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε: "[...] you will hear (fut. ind.!) and certainly not understand [...]"; οὐ μὴ with subjunctive emphatically negates a future event. Sarcasm still resonates here, albeit softened without the ironic element: "Tell the people: 'You will hear, but you certainly will not understand.'" This is rhetoric that challenges the listeners' pride; it provokes them to make an even greater effort to understand and to shake off the shaming "no way you will understand". God intends the opposite of obduracy; God's will aims at the people's understanding.

LXX Isa 6:10 justifies the sarcastic-pessimistic assessment of the future made in 6:9: "For" (γάρ) in the past (aorists) the heart of the people also became fatty, their hearing was impaired and they closed their eyes, lest they see, hear, understand "and turn around and I heal them": ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ

¹¹ See in particular Becker 1997; 1999: 1–37, 117–152; 2004: 30–60; cf. further Kaiser 1987: 636–658; 2000: 200–217.

¹² Cf., e.g., Barthel 2006: 653–658; Berges 1998; 2000: 167–198; 2006: 190–197; 2010; Wagner 2006; Schmid 2011. On a probable redactional layer from the end of the 7th century, see Barth 1977.

¹³ Kreuch 2011.

¹⁴ *After* the fall of both kingdoms, it would have been plausible to regard the judgement by God announced by Isaiah as unstoppable and correspondingly to assume that God commissioned the prophet to harden the people's heart (6:9f) as well as that God's self hardened it (29:10).

τούτου, καὶ τοῖς ὡσὶν αὐτῶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν, μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὡσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς. The final μήποτε clause here emphasises the intention of the people – μήποτε is dependent on the refusal of the people in 10a –, not an intention of God. LXX Isa 6:9–10 in brief: Tell the people, “You will hear my message, but in your stubbornness you will certainly not understand it!” For it was the same in the past: the people closed themselves off so as not to understand and turn around.

In conclusion, an ironic-sarcastic reading of the Hebrew text of Isa 6:9f remains possible as an alternative – despite 29:10 as an element of the later reception history of 6:9f. Moreover, (a) the reception history of Isa 6 in the Septuagint and (b) the clear Isaiahic declarations of God’s will that aims at the repentance of the people (see above Isa 1:16–17, 19–20; 1:5; 7:9; 9:12; 28:12; 30:15; 31:6 [שׁוּבוּ] et al.; cf. 30:19b–20) and not at its obduration even increase the probability that the proposed reading better reflects the textual gradient than the traditional interpretation.

Gerd Theißen once wrote, “Die Bildlosigkeit Gottes wurde zum Bild dafür, dass Gott anders ist als alle Vorstellungen von ihm”.¹⁵ This also applies to the anthropomorphic image of God in Isaiah 6, in which emotions abound: a disappointed, loving God, frustrated and zealous at the same time, fighting for the people, angry and ready to purify by judgement. This God reaches out to the man Isaiah to get closer to the ears of the people and touch their innermost being. The words to the prophet sound passionate, using sarcasm. In a paraphrase:

*Tell these people: “Listen – but, please, do not understand!
Look – but, please, do not comprehend!”
Fatten the heart of this people,
numb its ears,
and paste up its eyes,
so that it does not (dare to) see with its eyes,
listen with its ears,
and its heart comprehend and turn around (to me) and be healed!*

The words burst out bitterly, defiantly, sarcastically: “Look here! But you’re not doing it anyway with your foggy senses!” Ironic sarcasm is the penultimate means of luring the wooed out of their reserve. “Ears dumb, hearts clogged, eyes pasted up.” Who wants to take this? God provokes – in the hope that Israel will wash its eyes and open its heart. In the end, the lover even resorts to the last means to change the mind of the wooed: He threatens! He threatens to lay waste cities and fields (6:11). What a suitor, this Yahweh!

Which price does the book of Isaiah pay for its powerful words? For a long time, the sarcastically provocative rhetoric of the text was misjudged. Running counter to the wooing slant of the text, pious readers understood that God had

¹⁵ Theißen 2012: 131.

indeed intended to harden Israel and thus block its path to repentance. Insisting on a literal understanding of the Bible excludes recognising rhetorical figures from the outset. Accordingly, the text could be associated with doctrines of predestination – or with anti-Jewish resentment. God's self allegedly had plugged Israel's ears.

In Isaiah's poetry and rhetoric, God becomes a vivacious lover who lets feelings burst forth with eloquence. Spurned by the courted Israel, God suffers and even lets himself be carried away by anger to threaten Israel. Can God be envisioned so emotional, so human? So vulnerable? May God speak sarcastically? Is the Hebrew Bible with its colourful images of God best filed away in the church archives, never to be opened again as a canon, as Notger Slenczka suggested in 2015, sparking a strange theological dispute in Berlin in which even hatchets from the 2nd century were wielded? Is the seemingly human Old Testament God ready for the archives? Not at all.

The New Testament insists on the human side of God by claiming that God came particularly close to humanity *in* an individual Galilean person, in whom God's essence was recognisable. In late antiquity, philosophical categories were used to integrate this human side of God into a doctrine of two natures and the concept of a triune God. However, the human side persisted within these Christological and theological conceptualizations. By looking at Jesus of Nazareth, the Church may surmise what God is like. Not only sovereign. Not just omnipotent. Not just ruling over the cosmos with a majesty that no temple can contain (Isaiah 6), yet also turning to people in a loving and personal way – just as the Nazarene turned to people who had nothing to offer in return. It was a Jesus who wore himself out for the people “at the hedges and fences”, but who also overturned tables of moneychangers in the temple with a frown. Offensive. Uncomfortable. A Jesus who gave himself to the people. *This* is the human side of the Sovereign.

Paul gives this insight an additional twist in the surprising sentences of 1 Corinthians 8:2–3: “If anyone imagines that he knows something (about God), he has not yet realised how (God) is to be known. Rather, whoever *loves* God is recognised by him” – recognised and accepted with his or her flaws and scars. The Hebrew אהב with its broad spectrum of meaning, which includes intimate love,¹⁶ resonates in the background of ἐγνώσκει. For Paul, God can be recognised in a personal relationship in which God takes the first step by looking at people with ἀγάπη, by acknowledging them. In such a relationship with God, the person in turn learns to recognise and love God. According to Paul, *this* means recognising God – beyond all cognitively comprehensible images of God, which include a possible otherness of God from the outset.

¹⁶ The same is true for γινώσκω: e.g., LXX Gen 4:1; Matt 1:25; Plutarch, *Galba* 9; Menander 558.5; Heraclides Lembus (2nd cent. BC), *Excerpta Politiarum* 64.

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