A NEW LOOK AT PARADOX AND IRONY IN 2 CORINTHIANS 10-13

J A LOUBSER

ABSTRACT

After a brief discussion on the nature of Pauline irony, the ironic discourse in 2 Corinthians 10-13 is investigated. It is argued that 2 Corinthians 10-13 is an ironic discourse with at least three intersecting levels of irony, namely dissimulative, existential, and paradoxical irony. An awareness of the irony in 2 Corinthians 10-13 has an important bearing on the interpretation of the text. It becomes clear that Paul refers to his authority in an ironic sense. By means of irony he also heightens the pathos of this passage, which enables one to understand it as a peroratio. If this is the case, there is no need to regard 2 Corinthians 10-13 as a separate letter in the Corinthian correspondence.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is remarkable that in modern literary studies on irony (e.g., Muecke 1969, 1970; Amante 1981; Snyman; 1983; and Johl 1988) no reference is made to Paul's use of irony, although his work contains some textbook examples.

In addition, none of the recent major works on 2 Cor (Martin 1986 and Becker 1989) deals with Paul's irony from the perspective of modern literary theory. However, the monographs of H D Betz (1972) and Karl Plank (1987), as well as the articles by Reumann (1955), Zmijewski (1978) and Spencer (1981) indicate that the phenomenon of irony is gradually attracting more attention from Biblical scholarship.¹

2 WHAT IS IRONY?

The problem with any study on irony is that, in view of modern research, the matter proves to be so complex that no standard definition is possible (Muecke 1969:3). Instead of presenting definitions, as was done previously, scholars are now rather presenting theories (Johl 1988:39).

In classical rhetorics irony was regarded as 'saying exactly the opposite of

¹ In the Johannine studies C R Culpepper (1983) was the first to systematically research irony as a literary technique, but the Pauline texts are still waiting to be analysed as a whole from the perspective of irony.

0254-8356/92 $4.00 © NTSSA
what you intend to say’ (vide Nida 1983:185). As Scriptural reference for this usage, passages as 2 Cor 12:13 are usually cited (‘... I was never a burden to you. Forgive me this wrong!’; cf also Blass 1976:425). This definition, however, also applies to other figures of style such as parody, satire, sarcasm, comedy and humour.

More recent theories interpret irony within the framework of a variety of linguistic and philosophical theories — e.g., speech act theory, semiotics (cf Johl 1988:22 for references to Barthes et al), pragmatics (cf De Wolff 1985:227), and narratology. In his analysis Plank draws on the hermeneutical theories of Ricoeur, the ‘New Rhetoric’ of Perelman, the phenomenology of reading and reader-response criticism, and structural linguistics (1987:8). A form of irony is even employed as therapeutic technique in the so-called paradoxical psychotherapy.

For the purpose of this article, I shall use an adaptation of Rainer Warning’s (1985) scheme which describes irony as a communicative event (cf also Johl 1988:98).

VICTIM (receiver 1)

IRONIC MESSAGE

SENDER (EIRON) ------------------------------- AUDIENCE (receiver 2)

In the case of irony the sender (or eiron) transmits the same message to both audience and victim, but they receive the message differently.

In 2 Cor 10-13 the ironic communication is complicated because the

---

2 In The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976) irony is described as: ‘Expression of one’s meaning by language of opposite or different tendency, especially simulated adoption of another’s point of view or laudatory tone for purpose of ridicule.’

3 H Snyman (1983:156), following Amante, ventures the following definition: ‘Irony is present when, in a given language situation, a locutionary speech act breaks with an illocutionary (purposeful act) or the perlocutionary; and when the speech act has the purpose of separating illusion and reality, and this (i.e., this separation) is accomplished by the partial or complete suspension of the expected language-social presuppositions of truthfulness, relevance and rationality’ (translation by J A Loubser).

4 Culpepper, by using a narrative model, was able to recognize irony in the Gospel of John as a technique to draw the reader into the perspective of the narrator.

5 Cf Weeks (1985), and the theories of the Paolo Alto School as implemented in the Palazzoli Clinic. Cf also Wilde (1981).
Corinthian congregation is both victim and audience. In this case the sender (Paul) provides a number of signals by which the audience can gain insight into his irony and receive the message.6

2.1 Punctual, episodic and thematic irony
The extent of ironical statements can differ drastically. Good (1981) therefore distinguishes punctual, episodic and thematic irony. This differentiation concerns the extent of the text area in which the irony functions, not different categories of irony. All three these types are found in 2 Cor 10-13.

2.2 Situational and literary irony
In the case of conscious, verbal irony, the eiron can disclose his irony to the receivers, or he can leave to them to discover it for themselves. In the case of situational irony,7 the eiron himself may be unaware of it, or may even be the victim of the irony. In such a case the irony exists in its discovery by the receiver-audience. While most of Paul's irony in 2 Cor 10-13 is conscious, there is also an unconscious ironic strategy, as shown by my analysis.

2.3 Irony and other figures of speech
In the model of irony I use, the intention of the sender plays a decisive role. The same may apply to humour and sarcasm, but the authorial intention differs according to the figure employed. In the case of humour, the sender intends to entertain the receiver, while sarcasm intends to hurt. In contrast to these, the intention of the eiron is to engage the audience creatively and intellectually by reversing their preconceptions or convictions in a playful manner. For this reason irony is often found in polemic texts such as 2 Cor 10-13.

Because irony corresponds with the intention of the sender, it follows that ironical statements will not be confined to shorter expressions, but that whole episodes and discourses can be ironic. In the latter case, the irony may dominate other figures of style such as humour, sarcasm, satire, parody and litotes.8 Therefore we find ironical sarcasm, ironical humour, etc in 2 Cor 10-13.

2.4 The signalling of irony
Paul either signals his irony by direct statements or by various shades of exagger-

---

6 For the purpose of this article, the implied author is named the 'author', 'sender' or 'Paul', while the readers, are simply called the 'audience' or 'the Corinthians'.
7 Cf Johl (1988:40) and Van Gorp (1986:201).
8 In Johl's description of some of these figures in their relationship to irony, it becomes clear how fluid the distinctions can become (1988:45-72). Cf also Spencer (1981) who brilliantly demonstrates how virtually all stylistic aspects in 2 Cor 11:16-12:13 contribute to the communication of Paul's ironic message.
ation, hyperbole, understatement, reversal or parody. Sometimes the sender-eiron may warn his audience that he is going to divert from plain language usage (cf 2 Cor 11:21b). These diversions can, for example, be thematically related; the author can feign ignorance on a subject of general knowledge, or he can suspend a set of values that the text as a whole maintains. Conflicting facts or propositions may be communicated. Irony can also be present where an opinion other than the generally accepted one is expressed, or where logic is distorted, or even where illogical or absurd conclusions are consciously drawn from rational premises. Deviations of literary style can also be an indication, for example when an author follows a specific style and suddenly shocks the expectation of the receiver by switching to a new one (cf the parody on Paul's res gestae in 2 Cor 11:22-29, with the switch occurring in v29). Often irony is only perceived after an author has relieved the tension by supplying the correct version.

In principle we must accept that — according to our model — most of the known rhetorical forms can be used to express irony. This involves: shifts in expectancies regarding the word order, syntax or propositions, shifts with regard to the communication function, or shifts between meaning and referent.

2.5 Ironic codes

In search of a workable hypothesis that might serve to describe the ironic codes/perspectives in Paul (without becoming too technical), I have found Karl A Plank's distinction between dissimulative and paradoxical irony useful.

9 While satire, parody, hyperbole and litotes are essentially socially directed, irony has an aesthetic impact as well (Snyman 1983:156). About litotes Snyman says: 'Apart from the fact that litotes does not exhibit such a conscious "play" character, and apparently does not clearly accentuate the "balance" factor, it is fully recognisable as a kind of irony' (1983:156f, translated by J A Loubser). Lausberg says (1973): 'Die Ironie ist in der Litotes nicht total, sondern nur graduell.' In discussing the nature of irony, Snyman points out that it has a social and an aesthetic aspect. Under the social aspect he understands that irony always intends to have an impact on its social environment (on the reader). It is also aesthetic because it draws on the aesthetic ability of the author/artist to perceive ironical contrasts or to conceptualise them. This activity springs from a more general sense of irony and leads to an ironical play with words, metaphors and other phenomena. In contrast to the metaphor, irony cannot be subdivided structurally into categories and should rather be examined ad hoc with regard to both these aspects. Cf also Plank (1987:48), Van Gorp (1986:201) and Reumann (1955:141-142).

10 These criteria are borrowed from Booth (1975).

11 For a complete list of such rhetorical forms we refer to the listing under the heading 'Forms involving a shift in expectancies' by A H Snyman and J v W Cronje (cf Nida 1983:183ff,190). This more or less correlates with what Booth (1975) and Muecke (1973) have in mind in their proposed criteria for the recognition of irony.

12 This description corresponds with the distinction between irony as a literary or verbal code and irony as a life code or existential code.
2.5.1 Dissimulative irony

The type of irony described thus far primarily falls under the category of dissimulative irony. Since ancient times the focus of irony has been upon the notion of dissimulation, first defined by Quintillian. This concept of irony originated in Old Greek comedy where the eiron was the underdog, weak, but clever and eventually triumphant. Socrates, for example, is portrayed in the role of the eiron in Plato’s Dialogues: initially naive and half-witted, but later the conquering and triumphant intellect (Snyman 1983:153). Compared to Socrates, Paul does not feign ignorance; he feigns to boast as the Corinthians expect him to do. Both Paul and Socrates used their dissimulation to unmask the pretence of the boastful (alazôn) (cf Plank 1987:39).

Dissimulative irony mostly depends upon exaggeration, over-statement or understatement to establish its code.

2.5.2 Paradoxical irony

By paradoxical irony the sender leads his audience to view certain contraries as necessary, thus creating the sense of an open-ended reality. Kierkegaard describes this form of irony, by which life in general is seen sub specie ironiae, as (in Hegel’s words) ‘die unendliche absolute Negativität’ (1961:250). Plank explains: ‘Where the irony of dissimulation suggests that the expressed meaning appears to be other than it is, the irony of paradox notes that the expressed meaning is what it appears to be, but what appears to be is not all that it is. Thus, in this perspective, Socrates’s ignorance is not a clever disguise, but the real awareness of not knowing which expresses at once the only genuine knowledge’ (1987:40).

Whereas the classical paradox of Socrates, ‘All that I know is that I do not know,’ refers to philosophical knowledge, Paul’s paradox in 2 Cor 12:9-10 refers to power relations: ‘All power/authority I have, is my powerlessness.’ Whereas dissimulative irony presupposes a stable view of reality, paradoxical irony riddles the observer’s perceptions of reality. Thus it ‘risks confusion to make perception clear’ (cf Plank 1987:41). For this reason we find that paradoxes usually suggest a conflict of convictions.

The term ‘paradoxical irony’ gives rise to the question whether all paradoxes in Paul should be taken as such. In 2 Cor 10-13 (as will become clear) there can be no doubt that we are dealing with paradoxical irony.14

---

13 In his *Institutio Oratorico* it is an expression of: ‘diversum ei quod dicit intellectum petit’ (an expression seeking to be understood differently from what it says).
14 Cf Plank (1987:10) who found that the ‘the paradoxical irony of 1 Corinthians 1-4
3 THE RHETORICAL SITUATION IN 2 CORINTHIANS 10-13

The speech act (in a non-technical sense) behind 2 Cor 10-13 is to prepare the congregation for Paul's third visit to Corinth. His assistant, Titus, has already returned with favorable news from Corinth (12:18), but the apostle uses the letter to reaffirm all his arguments in a strongly emotional appeal. The outstanding matter is the question of Paul's authority, which forms the dominant theme of the discourse. In the first main part of the discourse (10:1-11:21a) Paul apologetically refutes three accusations levelled against him (as reflected in 10:1,10; 10:12,13,18; and 11:6 et seq). In the second part (11:21b-12:13) he equals the boast of the opponents, while in the third part (12:14-13:10) he directly appeals to the congregation to prepare themselves for his visit.

4 RECONSTRUCTION OF THE IRONIC DISCOURSE

In normal discourse an ironist usually largely depends on facial expression and body language to signal irony (Johl 1988:11). Within the aural-manuscript culture of New Testament times authors could not use modern textual aids such as quotes, exclamation marks, italics and the like. They therefore had to rely on context, style and content to convey meaning.

An analysis of the rhetoric of Paul's irony in 2 Cor 10-13 is complicated by the fact that we lack direct access to the horizon of expectation created by the social system, values, literary conventions and religious frames of reference underlying the text. The identification of irony is further complicated by the fact that the eiron might flout expectations created by his own personal style or circumstances. Muecke states: '...the true ironist will be the man who can be ironic in ways not permitted by the rules, values, and norms of his speech community.' And: '...the less likely the occurrence of irony the more impact it can have' (1973:35-42).

It is therefore to be expected that exegetes will differ widely with regard to the identification of irony in the text due to a degree of unreliable 'mirror-reading' that cannot be avoided. Within the scope of this article it will not be possible to argue the exegetical presuppositions on which the reconstruction of the ironic codes are based, though occasional references are made.

characterises the way Paul sees the world and his deepest convictions of the gospel.'

15 This part can be seen as an apology in the sense that 'it responds to a perceived criticism which the speaker cannot ignore without consequence' (Plank 1987:13, following Betz and Perelman).

16 Cf Becker (1989:247) for this division, though I differ from him regarding the ending of the first and second part.
4.1 The ironic discourse.
4.1.1 First part: refutation of accusations (10:1-11:21a)
When Paul opens chapter 10 with the emphatic words 'I, Paul, myself...,' the unusual word order reveals his intention to commend himself. The strong emphasis on his own person stands in contrast to the 'meekness and gentleness of Christ' (10:1) to which he appeals. Paul’s show of strength becomes more evident when he threatens 'to be...bold...towards some people who think that we live by the standards of this world' (10:2). He threatens them with powerful weapons to demolish strongholds, arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God (10:4-5). These weapons will be used in cooperation with the obedient members of the congregation (cf 10:6).

The show of strength continues when Paul declares that he belongs to Christ just as much as his opponents do (10:7). In 10:8 he boasts 'somewhat freely' about the authority the Lord has given him for building up the Corinthians and underscores this by a litotes ('I will not be ashamed of it'). When he exaggerates, 'I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten (ἐκφοβεῖν) you with my letters (10:9)', the dissimulative irony is apparent — Paul’s intention is to impress his audience by his letter. In 10:11 he even boasts that when he comes to Corinth he will act with the same boldness as expressed in his letters.

The ironic element is enhanced by an exaggeration of his opponents’ hubris (ὑψωμα 10:5) and his own unworthiness (ἐξουθενέωνοσ 10:10).

After ironically stating in 10:12, 'We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves, he proceeds to do precisely that, although according to different norms. He ridicules his opponents by suggesting that they have 'overextended themselves' (ὑπερεκτείνομεν ἐαυτοὺς 10:14) and that their boasting is 'beyond measure' (ἐστὶν τὰ ἄμετρα 10:15).

It is true that Paul qualifies his boastful language by maintaining that he does not wish to exercise the authority he received from the Lord (10:8) and that he is commended by the Lord himself (10:18). This, however, does not diminish the fact that he is boasting. It only signals that his boasting is to be understood ironically. In modern literature irony is usually signalled with much more subtlety, but in the aural-manuscript culture of Paul’s time, such explicit signals were appropriate.

In the following section of the discourse (11:1-21a) Paul continues to boast while simultaneously relativising his boast. His exaggerations and understatements increase, while he employs words in sarcastic and ironical fashion.

In 11:1 he euphemistically states, 'I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness... '. He then applies the well-known allegory of Eve’s fall into sin in an unexpected (ironical) way to emphasise the seduction of the Corinthians by

---

17 Here, as in the majority of Bible quotations, the NIV is used.
his opponents. He calls his opponents’ cunning παινωργία, probably as a pun on the term they applied to him (cf 12:16; Betz 1972:105f). He sarcastically concludes that the Corinthians ‘easily endure’ (καλῶς ἄνευ χειρότερο) the false teachings of his opponents.

By abasing himself and ridiculing his opponents, he adds to the ironic tone of the passage: though he is ‘not a trained speaker’ (λογείας ἄνευ λόγῳ) there is still no comparison between him and the ‘super-apostles’ (11:5-6) (cf Garland 1989:376).

He continues exaggerating by means of a rhetorical question and an answer: ‘Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you’ (11:7-8).

He labels his opponents ‘false apostles’ masquerading as apostles of Christ, and it is ‘no wonder,’ because Satan himself masquerades as an Angel of Light (11:13-14). By thus emphasising the discrepancy between reality and the appearance of his opponents, Paul further enhances the ironic tone of his argument.

Apparently he is now prepared to waive his principles in order to boast: ‘Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool’ (11:16-17). He adds a punctual ironical statement: ‘You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!’ (11:19). The Corinthians are further ridiculed as fools who ‘put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face’ (11:20). To this obvious exaggeration he adds with bitter irony: ‘To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!’ (11:21a) (cf Spencer 1981:355). Now Paul is ready to boast of his weakness.

4.1.2 Second part: boasting like the opponents (11:21b-12:13)

The next section of the discourse is known as Paul’s foolish boast (Narrenrede). He pretends to equal his opponents in boasting. However, he presents it as an ironic boast by relieving the irony from time to time and showing that his boasting is not equal to theirs, for he is boasting in his weaknesses.

In the introduction to the Narrenrede (11:21b-29) Paul ‘dares to boast’ by comparing himself to his opponents. The insertion, ‘I am speaking like a fool,’ represents a shift in the expectancy of the word order, emphasising his foolishness. He is just as good a Jew and Christian as they. He surprises his audience, however, by expanding this comparison to include mention of his suffering and weaknesses, of which he provides a seemingly endless list. This may have been intended as a parody of the boasts of his opponents (Garland 1989:378) or a form of self-ridicule (Marshall 1987:360).

After this introduction three narratives follow, each carrying Paul’s ironic
boasting a step further, developing into a powerful climax in the third. These episodes are

(a) the exit from Damascus (11:30-33);
(b) visions and revelations (12:1-5);
(c) the thorn in the flesh (12:6-10).

(a) The social background to the first episode is probably the Roman institution of the ‘wall crown’ (corona muralis) first mentioned by Judge (Garland 1989:379). Instead of deserving this high military honour awarded for valour to the first soldier scaling the city walls of the enemy, Paul suffers the humility of having been the first one to be lowered from the walls when fleeing Damascus. This incident is reported as a boast, but it soon becomes clear that it is a parody of the ‘wall crown,’ illustrating Paul’s ironical boasting.

(b) The second episode is a parody of the ‘visions and revelations’ the Corinthians expect from a true apostle (cf Betz 1972). Paul boasts of having been ‘caught up to the third heaven,’ i.e., to paradise itself. He, however, flouts the expectation of his audience to learn some message from the Lord at this stage, by declaring that he ‘heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell’ (12:4). ‘I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses’ (12:5). Thus once again, his boasting is revealed as ironical.

(c) In the third episode we find a parody of the Corinthians’ expectation that an apostle should be able to witness to the hearing of his prayers.\(^\text{18}\) He says, ‘...there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me’ (12:7-8). The Lord did not remove this ‘thorn’ as one might have expected, but only gave him the message: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9).

In view of Paul’s theme it is possible that the ‘thorn in the flesh’ is a pun referring ironically to his opponents (who were like a modern ‘pain in the neck’ to him). This seems to be the most acceptable interpretation, since the qualification of the thorn as ‘a messenger of Satan,’ reminds of his description of the opponents in 11:14. Moreover, the expression ‘thorn in the flesh’ is semantic equivalent to LXX-metaphors for enmity such as ‘skolopes en tois ofthalmois humoon’ (Nm 33:55) and ‘bolidas en tois ofthalmois humoon’ (Jos 23:13).

Paul concludes this passage with a paradoxical statement: ‘That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses... For when I am weak, then I am strong’ (12:10). At this point, where Paul’s irony reaches a climax (cf Spencer

\(^{18}\) Cf Betz (1972) who views this as a healing miracle in the style of an aretology.
he indicates that his ironical boasting is based on the paradox that 'power is made perfect in weakness.' The Corinthians’ system of convictions is thus challenged by a paradoxical reversal: his weakness is at the same time his power. Thus the Corinthians’ perception of weakness and power is shocked.19

Paul concludes his ironical boasting (Narrenrede) by conceding that he has made a fool of himself (12:11). Nevertheless, his ironic ‘show of strength’ continues: although he is nothing, he is not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles’ (bitter irony). He has given proof of this by displaying ‘the signs of an apostle’ — signs, wonders and miracles. In the light of the preceding discourse these can be nothing but ironic references to (a) his corona muralis, (b) his vision and (c) his prayer as discussed above.20 These ‘signs and wonders’ qualify him as a true apostle, because they reveal the basic paradox of Christian existence, namely that power is made perfect in weakness. Paul concludes this argument with a piece of sarcastic irony: ‘How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!’ (12:13).

4.1.3 Third part: a direct appeal (12:14-13:10)

In the last part of the discourse (12:14-21) Paul is no longer boasting and the Corinthians can no longer harbour the illusion that he intends his boast to be ironical. However, Paul’s underlying ironical trend continues unabated. He continues his ‘show of strength’ by portraying himself as a self-sacrificing, loving father of an ungrateful congregation: ‘If I love you more, will you love me less?’ (12:15). He exaggerates their perception of him by putting words in their mouths: ‘Yet, crafty fellow (panourgos) that I am, I caught you by trickery!’ (12:16). He also exaggerates his fear concerning them, suggesting that he may find every kind of vice in the congregation at his arrival (12:20-21).

By describing his third visit as legally binding in terms of Deuteronomy 19:15 (‘Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’) Paul resumes his threats. He warns: ‘On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier...’ (13:2). As Garland describes it: ‘Shrewdly Paul has turned the tables on the Corinthians. The question is not whether Christ speaks in Paul but whether Christ lives in them’ (1989:382). The basis for his strong talk is Christ, who ‘was crucified in weakness, yet...lives by God’s power’ (13:4). Thus Paul bases his authority on the paradox of the cross and the resurrection of Christ. This accounts for his own paradoxical existence — ‘Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you’ (13:4). This, however, does not clarify the nature of his authority.

In 13:5-10, which concludes the discourse, there is a change of tone. Paul

---

19 See Patte (1983:9-27) for the distiction between convictions and beliefs.
20 This point is altogether missed by Garland (1989:381).
now no longer threatens, he rather hopes (13:6) and prays (13:7,9) that the Corinthians will receive him in the correct spirit. When he again refers to his authority (‘... that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of...the authority which the Lord gave me for building you up,’ cf 10:7-11), it should not be understood as a new threat. Although it may seem to refer to a positivistic kind of authority, to which he can take recourse should his boasting fail, this is not the case. Here the ironical vein in which he uses the concept ‘authority’ should have been clear to his audience. Despite his previous formidable show of strength and boasting in his authority (10:8 — ἐὰν...καὐχῆσομαι περὶ τῆς ἐξουσίας ἡμῶν) it is now evident that this boasting too was intended ironically. Paul never intended to exercise any authority qualitatively different from that of the crucified Lord.

5 LEVELS OF IRONY

Even though there are different reader’s receptions of the author’s intention in the text, the accumulated evidence sufficiently illustrates that 2 Cor 10-13 employs a ‘thorough and fundamental’ irony.²¹

Paul’s irony can be typified as verbal. He uses it to persuade and to introduce delicate subjects. He seeks to sharpen the contrasts, revealing internal conflict and exposing social discrepancies (cf H Snyman 1983:154). It is furthermore obvious that his irony does not fit into the mould of dramatic, tragic, romantic or even philosophical irony. In view of the above analysis, I shall now try to summarise and typify the intersecting levels of irony in the discourse.

At least three levels of irony have been detected in 2 Cor 10-13:

(a) The most obvious ironic code in the discourse is Paul’s ironic boast in his weaknesses (his Narrenrede). This code, recognised by most commentators, is explicitly signalled and lifted at intervals until it is finally discontinued at the end of the Narrenrede. This code can be classified as dissimulative irony.

(b) The Narrenrede, however, occurs within a much broader ironic code which is often overlooked. This broader code can be described as an ironic boast in his authority which continues throughout the discourse and is only (moderately) lifted at the end. Though Paul’s boasting and threatening change into a plea, it leaves the audience with some uncertainty. Therefore this code does not completely fit the description of dissimulative irony, and exhibits some traits of existential irony.

(c) Both previous codes are based on, or are relative to, the paradoxical irony that ‘power is made perfect in weakness.’ This paradoxical irony is made possible by Christ who was crucified in weakness, yet lives by God’s power. Thus Paul’s weakness proves to be power in disguise, with the implication that the oppo-

nents' show of strength reveals their real inadequacy. Plank describes the effect of this form of irony when saying: 'Paul's irony pervades the discourse: on the textual surface it works to fulfil Paul's apologetic and homiletic demands, while in the deep structures of the text, it promotes the convictional change that enables those demands to be met' (1987:33).

6 A NEW LOOK AT APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

The above analysis has some important consequences for interpreting the text. Paul's conception of his own authority is a case in point. It has been suggested that Paul's authority stemmed from the decision of the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), or even from a direct revelation from the Lord. According to this conception, he had the legal right to ban dissidents from the church (of course in cooperation with the obedient members, cf 10:6). It is significant that in 10:12-18, when referring to his mandate to evangelise, he does not appeal to the decision of the Council, but to his ability to boast 'in the Lord,' which is subsequently qualified as a boasting in weaknesses (which, of course, does not make sense according to the normal human perception of power).

The question remains whether Paul's appeal to his weaknesses as basis of authority represents (a) only a temporary suspension of the other bases, or (b) whether it is a calculated replacement for the other bases. This cannot be answered from the data in 2 Cor 10-13 alone, though it is evident that in a situation such as that in Corinth, where the congregation denied Paul's authority, his only possible recourse was to a paradoxical statement of his authority. By associating his charismatic gifts with his weakness, Paul upsets the Corinthians' criteria for authority and forces a reinterpretation of power.

To the Corinthians, at least, Paul can only speak of his authority in an ironic sense. Whoever fails to grasp this, may misinterpret ecclesiastical authority as something which is at hand in a positivistic sense, a view which in the past has legitimised the burning of heretics at the stake.

7 THE FUNCTION OF 2 COR 10-13 WITHIN THE CORINTHIAN CORRESPONDENCE

The question whether 2 Cor 10-13 was originally a separate letter cannot be decided on intratextual evidence alone. It was only recently identified by Becker (1989:229ff) as 'Letter-D' of the Corinthian correspondence. The forceful emotive tone of the discourse has often been used to prove that it was written at a stage before the positive news (reported in 2 Cor 1:1-2,13 and 7:5-16,18) reached

22 This seems to be the view of Furnish (1984:477) and Garland (1989:383).

23 Perhaps this is a necessary perspective in a situation where church bodies sometimes operate with a positivistic perception of authority, cf Mosheim (1774) and Wendland (1948).
Paul. There is, however, a reasonable alternative to such an argument.

When examining the rhetorical function of 2 Cor 10-13, it appears that the text exhibits some characteristics of a peroratio, though not in the strict rhetorical sense of the word.

According to Lausberg, the function of the peroratio (inventio) is to conclude an argument by recapitulating those points which have already been proven (1973:25f). The peroratio is further characterised by pathos (in comparison to ethos) as a 'heftigere Affektionstufe,' which in the process of persuasion has the function of moving the audience to 'pity and fear' or to 'hope and fear' (1973:35).

Insofar as 2 Cor 10-13 exhibits these features, it may be understood as an extended peroratio. To a considerable extent Paul does not concentrate on new arguments in the discourse. The accusations made against him are dealt with in previous parts of 2 Corinthians (his weak appearance, chs 4-5:10; his inadequate recommendation, 3:1ff; his handling of financial affairs chs 8-9). The same applies to his reasons for boasting (I:12) and his appeal to the Corinthians to prepare themselves (7:2ff). Paul rather recapitulates these themes in a forceful and emotive manner to persuade and move the congregation. His prime instrument for achieving this is his irony, which as a figure of speech does not contribute so much to the cognitive expansion of information, but is rather a technique in which known truths are expressed in a different manner (vide Booth 1975:10).

This cannot furnish conclusive evidence that 2 Cor 10-13 was not composed as a separate letter, but at least it provides a viable hypothesis for explaining its eventual reception as concluding part of the Corinthian correspondence.

8 CONCLUSION

From the above it is evident that a comprehensive study of irony in Paul deserves serious consideration.

We have seen that for Paul irony is, on the one hand, 'the soft but indomitable voice which ultimately separates illusion and reality from each other.' On the other hand it is also Goethe's 'Geist der stets verneint', sowing — in Heinrich Heine's words — the poison of doubt.

One of the remaining issues is whether we can typify Paul's whole theology as an ironic enterprise, as it was taken to be in the dialectic 'theology of the cross' (as Plank, 1987:30-31,94, also seems to believe). Whatever the case, I

---

24 Bates's (1965) proposal that 2 Cor 10-13 is a recapitulation is rejected as 'not adequate' by Martin (1986:298) without any argumentation.
25 In view of this, it is difficult to regard 2 Cor 10-13 as 'an apology in letter-form' as Betz (1972) does.
26 Cf Snyman (1983:153) for references.
27 Cf also Funk (1960) and Boomershine who relates Paul's dialectic to apocalyptic
think that Paul — in the light of the Corinthian situation — would have agreed with the (South) African poet N P Van Wyk Louw when he said:

‘No-one finds it comfortable within the universe; we can only learn to live ironically; and: within irony, still preserve love.’

WORKS CONSULTED


coordinates.


Mosheim, J L van 1774. *Verklaring van den tweede brief van de heiligen apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Corinth*. Utrecht: Gisberus Tiem. van Paddenburg.


---

Prof J A Loubser, University of Zululand, Private Bag X1001, KWA DLANGEZWA, 3886 Republic of South Africa.