

## PROPHETIC SATIRE AS A VEHICLE FOR ETHICAL INSTRUCTION

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### I. INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

Satire has been defined as “the exposure, through ridicule or rebuke, of human vice or folly.”<sup>1</sup> The satirist attempts to reveal his contempt, disgust, or ridicule of that which appears to him to be improper or ill conceived. As a literary form satire is generally viewed as having four distinct elements: (1) an object of attack—whether a particular thing, position, person, or the ills of society in general; (2) a satiric vehicle—ranging anywhere from a simple metaphor to a full-blown story; (3) a satiric tone—displaying the author’s attitude toward the object of his attack; and (4) a satiric norm—a standard, whether stated or implied, by which the author’s criticism is being applied.<sup>2</sup> Further, “all satire . . . presupposes that . . . the reader understands the norms of good and evil.”<sup>3</sup>

1. *Roman satire.* As a distinctive literary form satire is generally conceded to have emerged with or been invented by the Romans. Roman satire was characterized by a moral seriousness, whether directed at specific social ills or in philosophical discourse.<sup>4</sup> Many Roman writers distinguish themselves as satirists including poets, such as Lucilius and Perseus or writers of prose, such as Seneca and Petronius. The works of two writers, Horace and Juvenal, gave rise to what has been considered distinctive types of satire: Horatian and Juvenalian. The former is generally seen to be of a milder type. “We rightly associate him with something more sunny than the ‘juice of the black cuttlefish’ and ‘absolute verdigris’ to which he compared back-biting. He preferred the method of the open jest. A joke may settle weighty matters better than a sharp word.”<sup>5</sup> His early poems most often corrected

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<sup>1</sup> L. Ryken, *How To Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 159.

<sup>2</sup> See L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, and T. Longman, III, eds., “Satire,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 762.

<sup>3</sup> D. E. Ritchie, “Jonathan Swift,” in *Invitation to the Classics* (ed. L. Cowan and O Guinness; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 177.

<sup>4</sup> See W. W. Robson, “Satire,” in *Cassell’s Encyclopaedia of Literature* (ed. S. H. Steinberg; London: Cassell & Co., 1953) 1.495.

<sup>5</sup> J. W. Duff, *A Literary History of Rome From the Origins to the Close of the Golden Age* (ed. A. M. Duff; 2d ed.; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960) 374.

social abuse. In one instance, “Horace ridicules the Stoic doctrine *omnem stultum insanum esse*—‘everyone but the sage is mad’—and at the same time uses the text to castigate the follies of mankind, specifically avarice, ambition, self-indulgence, and superstition.”<sup>6</sup> Even in his more philosophical moments his character and wit were not absent. One may note these lines from his Second Satire:

Postumus, Postumus, alack-a-day,  
The years, how swiftly do they glide away!  
No piety keeps wrinkles from the brow,  
Nor makes old age his near approach delay,  
Nor never-mastered Death more time allow;  
If thou should'st sacrifice three hundred steers  
Each morning, friend, 'twere futile hope to storm  
The heart of Pluto, never touched to tears.<sup>7</sup>

Juvenal, on the other hand, employed a more biting tone in his satire. Juvenal did not hide his contempt for Roman society, finding Rome no place for an honest man. Such may be seen in the excerpt from his Third Satyr:

Now, now 'tis time to quit this cursed place,  
And hide from Villains my too honest Face:  
Here let *Arturius* live, and such as he;  
Such Manners will with such a Town agree.  
Knaves who in full Assemblies have the knack  
Of turning Truth to Lies, and White to Black;  
Can hire large Houses, and oppress the Poor  
By Farm'd Excise; can cleanse the Common-shoare;  
And rent the Fishery; can bear the dead;  
And teach their Eyes dissembled Tears to shed,  
All this for Gain; for Gain they sell their very Head.<sup>8</sup>

In yet another satirical poem he displays his disdain for homosexual marriage with observations that appear almost contemporary:

O Father of our city, whence came such wickedness among thy Latin shepherds?  
How did such a lust possess thy grandchildren, O Gradivus? Behold! Here you  
have a man of high birth and wealth being handed over in marriage to a man,  
and yet neither shakest thy helmet, nor smitest the earth with thy spear, nor  
yet protestest to thy Father?<sup>9</sup>

2. *Pre-Roman satire.* Although formal satire is thus held to be of Roman invention, satirical elements are clearly attested in other ancient cultures.

<sup>6</sup> M. Hadas, *A History of Latin Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) 169.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 175.

<sup>8</sup> J. Dryden, trans., “From the Satires,” in *The Portable Roman Reader* (ed. B. Davenport; New York: Viking, 1972) 599–600.

<sup>9</sup> Hadas, *History of Latin Literature* 283.

For example, satire is couched in several of Aristophanes' plays, which often satirize or ridicule the middle and lower classes of society.<sup>10</sup> Noteworthy among these is his satirical portrait in the *Wasps* of the Athenians' love for "sitting in the jury courts and trying cases"<sup>11</sup> and in his *Ecclesiazusae* (or "Portrait of Women") his observation that in some cases the practices of women are more sensible than those of men:

In the first place, they will soak their wool in hot water as they always did, and you won't see them trying to change that. The trouble with the men of Athens is that, however well things may be going, they refuse to believe they are safe unless they're dreaming up some new-fangled idea. Now the women, they sit down when they cook as they always have done; they carry their bundles on their heads as they always have done; they bake their cakes in the way they always have done; they irritate their husbands as they always have done.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, satire was not unknown in the ancient Near East, even in periods long before the classical Greco-Roman era. Thus satirical elements may be perceived as early as in the literature of ancient Sumer. In an essay relating to educational protocol entitled "School Days" an "old grad" details the rigors of the past educational system of his day. By implication, the impression is left that things were much tougher in the "old days":

My headmaster read my tablet, said:  
 "There is something missing," caned me. . . .  
 "Why didn't you speak Sumerian," caned me.  
 My teacher (*ummi*) said:  
 "Your hand is unsatisfactory," caned me.<sup>13</sup>

A further satirical note, however, can be detected when this "old grad" got his father to court the teacher's favor with presents and some "extra salary." Then the father tells his servants, "Pour for him *irda*-oil, bring it to the table for him. Make fragrant oil flow like water on his stomach (and) back; I want to dress him in a garment give him some extra salary, put a ring on his hand."<sup>14</sup> Apparently things then took a dramatic turn for the better for the student. The implication of all this is that while the curriculum and the faculty were severe, these could be overcome by the right price!

Likewise, many of the Sumerian proverbs carry a satirical tone. Consider the following examples:

- (1) Who has not supported a wife or child,  
 has not borne a leash.

<sup>10</sup> Such may be due to Aristophanes' aristocratic upbringing: for details see J. P. Mahaffy, *A History of Classical Greek Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1895) 247.

<sup>11</sup> G. Murray, *The Literature of Ancient Greece* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956) 284.

<sup>12</sup> Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* as cited in R. Flacelière, *A Literary History of Greece* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1964) 241.

<sup>13</sup> S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963) 238, 239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

- (2) My wife is at the outdoor shrine,  
 my mother is down by the river,  
 and here am I starving of hunger.<sup>15</sup>

As well, in the Disputation between Copper and Silver, Copper satirizes the practical value of Silver by saying, "If there were no palace, you would have neither station nor dwelling place; only the grave, the 'place of escape,' would be your station."<sup>16</sup>

Satire can also be noted among the Babylonians. For example, in the classic Babylonian Theodicy (c. 1000 BC) a sufferer complains to his friend about the injustice of both the gods and human society.

I have looked around in society, . . .  
 God does not block the progress of a demon.  
 A father hauls a boat up a channel,  
 While his first-born sprawls in bed.  
 The eldest son makes his way like a lion,  
 The second son is content to drive a donkey.  
 The heir struts the street like a peddler,  
 The younger son makes provision for the destitute.  
 What has it profited me that I knelt before my god?  
 It is I who must (now) bow before my inferior!  
 The riffraff despise me as much as the rich and proud.<sup>17</sup>

Another wisdom piece, the Dialogue of Pessimism, bears clear marks of satire. Thus Lambert summarizes the plot of this dialogue between a master and his slave as follows:

The master, evidently a man of means, announces to his slave that he is about to engage in some activity, and the discreet slave promptly points out the benefits of the proposed course of action. But the master has already tired of the idea and declares that he will certainly not do the thing, whereupon the slave equally promptly mentions some of the unpleasant consequences which might have followed the realization of the plan. When the master has thus disposed of all the ideas which he can summon, he finally asks the slave what is worth doing. Now the slave takes the initiative and declares that death is the only desirable end.<sup>18</sup>

Lambert properly remarks that "this piece . . . should be regarded as satire, and can very properly be compared with Juvenal."<sup>19</sup> The object of this satirical attack is to be noted in the slave's final speech, which intimates that although he is the slave, his master is really indebted to him. Indeed, without him the master could not make it alone:

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 255.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 265.

<sup>17</sup> B. R. Foster, "The Babylonian Theodicy," in *The Context of Scripture* (ed. W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; 3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997, 2000, 2002) 1.494.

<sup>18</sup> W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 139.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

“Slave, oblige me again!” “Here, master! Here!”  
 “Now then, what is good?”  
 “What’s good is to break my neck and your neck  
 and to be thrown in the river.  
 Who is tall enough to ascend to the heavens?  
 Who is broad enough to encompass the earth?”  
 “No way, slave, I’ll kill you and send you in advance.”  
 “But my master wouldn’t even survive me three days!”<sup>20</sup>

Moving to the opposite end of the Fertile Crescent, satire can be found in the literature of the ancient Egyptians. Among the many examples that could be cited is the well-known middle kingdom Satire on the Trades in which a father instructs his son as to the high value of being a scribe as compared with other professions:

Set your heart on books!  
 I watched those seized for labor—  
 There’s nothing better than books!  
 It’s like a boat on water.<sup>21</sup>

In doing so the father describes the various trades in less than flattering language. For example, he describes the plight of the poor gardener or farmer as follows:

The gardener carries a yoke,  
 His shoulders are bent as with age;  
 There’s a swelling on his neck  
 And it festers.  
 In the morning he waters vegetables,  
 The evening he spends with the herbs,  
 While at noon he has toiled in the orchard.  
 He works himself to death  
 More than all other professions.  
 The farmer wails more than the guinea fowl,  
 His voice is louder than a raven’s;  
 His fingers are swollen  
 And stink to excess.<sup>22</sup>

In another piece of instructional literature, “The Admonitions of Ipuwer,” the author laments the ills of society, which has been turned topsy-turvy:

Lo, the face is pale, the bowman ready,  
 Crime is everywhere, there is no man of yesterday. . . .  
 Lo, the laws of the chamber are thrown out,

<sup>20</sup> A. Livingstone, “Dialogue of Pessimism or the Obliging Slave,” in *Context of Scripture* 1.496.

<sup>21</sup> “The Satire of the Trades,” in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 1976, 1980) 1.185.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 1.187.

Men walk on them in the streets,  
 Beggars tear them up in the alleys. . . .  
 See now, the transformations of people,  
 He who did not build a hut is an owner of coffers.  
 See the judges of the land are driven from the land,  
 The nobles are expelled from the royal mansions.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the author of the *Lebensmüde* complains:

To whom shall I speak today?  
 Hearts are greedy,  
 Everyone robs his comrade's goods. . . .  
 Kindness has perished,  
 Insolence assaults everyone.<sup>24</sup>

Satire can be seen in elsewhere in the literature of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds and in diverse settings. Thus in a letter from a Hittite king to Adad-nirari I of Assyria (1367–1275 BC) the Hittite king acknowledges the Assyrian king's successes against the land of Mitanni and is willing to recognize him as a "Great King." But the Hittite king was unwilling to address the Assyrian king as a "brother," a title often found in diplomatic documents between those of equal rank:

You indeed conquered by force of arms. And you conquered and [ . . . ] and have become a Great King. But why do you still continue to speak about brotherhood and about seeing Mount Amanus? . . . On what account should I write to you about brotherhood? Were you and I born from one mother?<sup>25</sup>

The point of the Hittite king's satirical communication is that there simply could be no talk of "brotherhood" between those who historically were rivals or enemies.

Moving closer to the land of the OT, one can discern satire in the epic literature of ancient Canaan. In the Ugaritic Aqhat Epic the goddess Virgin Anat covets a set of bow and arrows given by the god of crafts to Dan'el, Aqhat's father, who in turn had given them to his son. Anat therefore approaches Aqhat with an offer of money. When that fails she offers him immortality. Aqhat, however, apparently is skeptical either of Anat's motives or sincerity, or her ability to grant immortality. He continues to refuse giving her the desired bow and arrows. In doing so, however, he uses less than respect and good tact saying to her in dripping sarcasm,

Don't lie to me, Virgin, for with a hero your lies are wasted.  
 A mortal—what does he get in the end?  
 what does a mortal finally get?  
 plaster poured on his head, lime on top of his skull.  
 As every man dies, I will die; yes, I too will surely die.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 1.151, 155, 156.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 167.

<sup>25</sup> G. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (2d ed.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 147.

And I have something else to tell you: bows are for men!  
Do women ever hunt?<sup>26</sup>

From this brief survey selected from many possibilities it can be noted that satire was known and utilized, if only informally, in a wide range of ancient cultures and a variety of genres in the ancient world—even in the ancient Near East long before the classical Greco-Roman period. It should come as no surprise, then, that as those who interacted with the cultures of those around them the Hebrews would utilize elements of satire, whether stated or implied. And such they did.

## II. SATIRE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. *General survey.* We can discover satire in many settings of the OT and in many of its genres. Such is to be expected, for as Jemielity notes, “By very etymology, satire is a stew, a mixed dish: *satura*, the term itself Latin, denotes a yearly offering to the gods of various fruits, hence, a mixture or medley.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, “It is obvious that the Bible is a thoroughly satiric book.”<sup>28</sup> We shall examine a few samples from the many examples that could be cited. We begin with Moses’ victory song as recorded in Exod 15:1–18.<sup>29</sup> Within that song Moses chides the vanquished pursuing Egyptian army, taunting them with these words:

The enemy boasted,  
“I will pursue, I will overtake them.  
I will divide the spoils;  
I will gorge myself on them.  
I will draw my sword  
and my hand will destroy them.”  
But you blew with your breath,  
and the sea covered them.  
They sank like lead  
in the mighty waters. (Exod 15:9–10)<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> M. D. Coogan, ed. and trans., *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 37. Aqhat’s encounter with Anat is reminiscent of a similar scene between the Akkadian hero Gilgamesh and the goddess Ishtar. Like Aqhat, Gilgamesh rejects the advances of Ishtar; like Aqhat, Gilgamesh insultingly pointed out that Ishtar’s offer was less than attractive. For she had had many lovers, all of which she had dealt with treacherously. In his final salvo he chides her by saying, “Which lover didst thou love forever? . . . If thou shouldst love me, thou wouldst [treat me] like them” (E. A. Speiser, trans., “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [ed. J. B. Pritchard; 2d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955] 84). For the relation of the Gilgamesh Epic to OT studies, see A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963).

<sup>27</sup> T. Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 58.  
<sup>28</sup> “Satire,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* 762.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of Moses’ song as a victory song see R. D. Patterson, “The Song of Redemption,” *WTJ* 57 (1995) 153–61; “Victory at Sea: Prose and Poetry in Exodus 14–15,” *BibSac* 161 (2004) 3–13; cf. H. Strauss, “Das Meerlied des Mose—ein ‘Siegeslied’ Israels?” *ZAW* 97 (1985) 103–9.

<sup>30</sup> Unless otherwise noted all references are taken from the New International Version.

Here we can perceive a close relationship between taunting and satire. This is to be expected because taunting in the ancient Near East developed a “literary genre known as the taunt song, usually employing conventional motifs,” and several of the features of satire are clearly present in the taunt.<sup>31</sup>

Implied satire can be observed in the story of the prophet Balaam’s encounter with his donkey (Num 22:21–35). For what the “blind” seer could not perceive was clearly visible to his donkey—a female donkey at that! As Cole remarks, “This element may also serve to heighten the irony and satire of the story to follow—that a female pack animal is more attuned to the ways and means of Yahweh than one of the noblest of the world’s divination experts.”<sup>32</sup> What Balaam could not grasp is explained by the angel of the Lord who also points out that Balaam owed his life to the donkey: “If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her” (Num 22:33). Thus a lowly donkey was more perceptive than this hireling prophet who, unknown to him, had even saved his life!

A mixture of taunt and satire can also be seen in the epic account of David and Goliath.<sup>33</sup> As the giant Philistine warrior taunted David and cursed him “by his gods” (1 Sam 17:43), and threatened to give David’s slain body to scavengers, both fowl and beasts, David replies with a similar taunt, “This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Sam 17:46).<sup>34</sup> The account contains lively satire, not only in the respective taunts of the combatants, especially with David’s play on Goliath’s threat, but also in the fact that the gods of the mighty giant were powerless before a young shepherd ill-equipped for battle who had Yahweh as his helper. Thus the satirical element functions to castigate giant strength that operates apart from dependence on and allegiance to the Lord. In the hands of God’s servant sling and stone can prevail over superior size and traditional weaponry.

<sup>31</sup> L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, T. Longman, III, eds., “Taunt,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 841. Taunting often appears in prophetic judgment oracles, sometimes taking the form of a woe oracle. See further R. D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Chicago: Moody, 1991) 183–91.

<sup>32</sup> R. D. Cole, *Numbers* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 387–88. The apparent discrepancy between God’s giving permission to Balaam to go and meet with Balak and God’s anger with the prophet for going is a time-honored crux. Perhaps God knew that Balaam would misuse the Lord’s permission to meet with Balak but say only what God would tell him in order to enhance his own standing and realize economic gain. See further W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 88–91. For the story itself, see Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (2d ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986) 69–74.

<sup>33</sup> For the David and Goliath story as epic literature, see L. Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 135–38.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the taunting and satirical irony in this passage see R. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; 12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 3.700–702.

In a classic text embodying psychological warfare the Aramean king Ben-Hadad insults King Ahab of Israel saying, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if enough dust remains in Samaria to give each of my men a handful” (1 Kgs 20:10), to which Ahab retorts, “One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off” (1 Kgs 20:11). Such taunts were common enough in Near Eastern warfare. Clearly each king attacked the other’s ability to withstand his opponent with a bit of biting satire. In the reading of the Greek text of Aquila Ben-Hadad is portrayed as boasting that Samaria will be so thoroughly devastated that his men would not find enough of it to carry away its dust in pinches. Ahab’s reply suggests that Ben-Hadad ought not to boast about victory at the time of putting on his armor for battle. He might not live to take it off!

In yet another narrative context the prophet Elijah meets the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in a contest to determine just who is truly God—Yahweh or Baal. The ensuing contest will demonstrate that only Yahweh is truly God and he alone is to be served. When the prophets of Baal fail to elicit a response from their god so as to ignite the wood under the sacrificial offering, Elijah taunts them with these words: “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is in deep thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened” (1 Kgs 18:27). Jemielity cites this passage as an example of the fact that OT prophets were satirists: “They taunt, gibe, scoff, mock; indeed modern literary criticism would affirm that prophets do often prove satirists.”<sup>35</sup> Elijah, of course, is in the service of the God of the universe, a fact that is demonstrated when after dousing the sacrificial offering and the wood and the surrounding area with water three times, the Lord’s fire consumed “the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil and also licked up the water” (1 Kgs 18:38). In this text, as in the previous examples, the satirical element validates the fact that only Yahweh is God before whom the pagan gods are powerless. The ethical implications follow: to oppose Yahweh is folly; to serve him is the *sine qua non* for experiencing God’s sovereign intervention and is available only to those who put their trust in him.

Satirical elements also appear in OT poetry, particularly in the wisdom literature. The book of Job is replete with satire. Thus Job satirizes his opponents by remarking sarcastically, “Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!” (Job 12:2). The psalmist employs satire in answering the heathen’s taunt as to the whereabouts of Israel’s God. The psalmist first points to the fact that Yahweh’s residence is in heaven and then observes that the lifeless idols of the heathen are completely impotent as well as all who trust in them:

But their idols are silver and gold,  
made by the hands of men.

<sup>35</sup> Jemielity, *Satire* 84. He goes on to suggest that what Elijah means by being “busy,” is a euphemism “of Baal’s attending to his own bodily needs and thus being unavailable for the needs of his priests. In other words, Baal may be in the bathroom.”

They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
 eyes, but they cannot see;  
 they have ears but cannot hear,  
 noses, but they cannot smell;  
 they have hands, but cannot feel,  
 feet, but they cannot walk;  
 nor can they utter a sound with their throats.  
 Those who make them will be like them,  
 and so will all who put trust in them. (Ps 115:4–7; cf. 135:15–18)

Quite the contrary, those who fear the Lord and put their trust in him will experience his blessing. The implication follows: spend your life in full dependence on him who alone is God (Ps 115:9–13).

Likewise, many of the OT proverbs contain satire. The lazy man is criticized with a heavy dose of satire in which “the prudent activity of the ant contrasts strikingly with the inopportune sleeping of the foolish human being.”<sup>36</sup>

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider his ways and be wise!  
 It has no commander, no overseer or ruler,  
 yet it stores its provisions in summer  
 and gathers its food at harvest.  
 How long will you lie there, you sluggard?  
 When will you get up from your sleep?  
 A little sleep, a little slumber,  
 a little folding of the hands to rest—  
 and poverty will come to you like a bandit  
 and scarcity like an armed man. (Prov 6:6–11)

As Fox remarks, “The sage . . . adduces accepted notions about the ant to exemplify a form of good behavior and to shame the indolent listener by the contrast.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the sluggard has many excuses such as fearing an imaginary lion in the street (Prov 26:13). Therefore, the author of Proverbs observes,

As a door turns on its hinges,  
 so a sluggard turns on his bed.  
 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;  
 he is too lazy to bring it back into his mouth. (Prov 26:14–15)

Instances of people who inappropriately fill social positions also come in for their share of satire.

Under three things the earth trembles;  
 under four it cannot bear up:

<sup>36</sup> B. K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1–15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 338.

<sup>37</sup> M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 218.

a servant who becomes king,  
 a fool who is full of food,  
 an unloved woman who is married,  
 and a maid servant who displaces her mistress. (Prov 30:21–23)

As McKane remarks, this “saying is a species of satire on the theme that there are some situations in which certain people are unbearable.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, “For a survey of society and social types, it is hard to match the book of Proverbs.”<sup>39</sup> It may be added that many of these are presented as satire.

Not to be forgotten is the book of Ecclesiastes. Here the author produces a long list of social abuses that he criticizes, often in biting satire. For example, he denounces man’s insatiable thirst for getting ahead and acquiring things:

And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy  
 of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.  
 The fool folds his hands  
 and ruins himself.  
 Better one handful with tranquility  
 than two handfuls with toil  
 and chasing after the wind. (Eccl 4:4–6)

Longman’s observation on the author’s remarks is that “as people look at their neighbors, they work hard in order to keep ahead of them. His conclusion is that the cycle of jealousy leading to hard work and success is meaningless.”<sup>40</sup> Longman correctly goes on to recognize that the words concerning the fool (v. 5) are cast in a “terse form [and] sarcastic image, and the parallels to the book of Proverbs (Prov 6:9–11; 10:4; 12:24; 19:15; 20:13; 24:30–34) signal that Qohelet here quotes a proverb. The intention of the proverb is to ridicule the lazy fool.”<sup>41</sup> The seeming contrast between verses four and five appears to provide an ethical norm. While the “gospel of getting ahead” is a foolish and meaningless enterprise, not to work at all is equally stupid. The solution is to work but be satisfied with one’s lot rather than trying to “keep up with the Joneses.”

2. *Satire in the Old Testament prophets.* The prophetic literature, however, is the most prominent repository of satire in the OT, “where we encounter continuous attacks on the evils of society and individuals.”<sup>42</sup> Most commonly such satire is recorded in the first person, “Apart from very occasional parable or symbolic incident, Hebrew prophecy proceeds for the

<sup>38</sup> W. McKane, *Proverbs* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 659.

<sup>39</sup> L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, T. Longman III, “Proverbs, Book of,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* 680.

<sup>40</sup> T. Longman, III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 136.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 137. Even the Song of Solomon may contain a touch of satire/sarcasm (e.g. see 1:8).

<sup>42</sup> “Satire,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* 762; see also L. Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 330.

most part as direct, first-person statement. When the prophets are satiric, therefore, the satire is direct and explicit."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, satire freely exists in the prophetic oracles of judgment and can be found in nearly every book of prophecy. As did the psalmist (Ps 115:2–8), Isaiah's condemnation of the people's folly of idolatry (Isa 44:9–20) is at times done in biting satire. For example,

He cuts down cedars,  
or perhaps took a cypress or oak.  
... some of it he takes and warms himself,  
he kindles a fire and bakes bread.  
But he also fashions a god and worships it;  
he makes an idol and bows down to it (Isa 44:14, 15).<sup>44</sup>

Among the many other examples from Isaiah that could be cited is what Schökel terms Isaiah's "magnificent satire" of the king of Babylon (Isa 14:3–20), in which the self-styled "king of the universe" is brought down to the ground.<sup>45</sup> So great is his fall that people will stare in amazement at his demise and say, "Is this the man that shook the earth and made the kingdoms tremble, the man who made the world a desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?" (vv. 16–17).

Jeremiah reports the Lord's condemnation of the people's departure from the traditional paths of righteousness as follows: "To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear" (Jer 6:10). As did Isaiah (Isa 1:10–17), Jeremiah denounces the false religious and ethical practices of God's people. They go through the routine of temple worship but their devotion to the Lord is vain and without any spiritual application or sensitivity to the needs of others (Jer 7:4–8).

Ezekiel likewise condemns the empty religiosity of his day, particularly among the elite of society (e.g. Ezek 22:6–12). So debased was Israelite society that God doubted that he could find a man on whose behalf he could spare his people from divine judgment: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none" (Ezek 22:30). A satirical element may also be seen in Nebuchadnezzar's failure to heed Daniel's warning concerning his pride over his great successes (Dan 4:19–37) and in Daniel's ability to interpret the king's dreams when the king's "learned men" were unable to do so (Dan 2:4–47).

Among the pre-exilic minor prophets one may note satirical elements in Hosea's depiction of Israel's failure to act as appreciative children of the Heavenly Father (Hos 11:1–7), in Joel's description of the people's failure to see that the bareness and dryness of their land reflected the spiritual

<sup>43</sup> Jemielity, *Satire* 63.

<sup>44</sup> See also Jer 10:5, 14:22; Hos 4:12; Hab 2:18–19. For Assyria, see Isa 10:12–15.

<sup>45</sup> L. A. Schökel, "Isaiah," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. R. Alter and F. Kermode; Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1987) 173. Note also the splendid satire of Babylon in Isa 47:12–15.

condition of their hearts (Joel 1:8–12, 16–20) and in Amos’s call to “right behavior in reminders that God’s justice is the standard by which his nation should reform itself.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, because of Amos’s frequent use of satire, he has been called the “plain spoken prophet of informal satire.”<sup>47</sup> One may note Amos’s biting satirical portrait of the rich women of Samaria whose only concern is to feed their own lusts, while oppressing the poor and needy, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’” (Amos 4:1). Amos’s often biting satire of the society current in his day may be seen in the following passage:

You lie on beds inlaid with ivory  
and lounge on your couches.  
You dine on choice lambs  
and fatted calves.  
You strum away on your harps like David  
and improvise on musical instruments.  
You drink wine by the bowlful  
and use the finest lotions,  
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. (Amos 6:4–6)<sup>48</sup>

In warning Edom that their past behavior towards God’s people will merit their certain judgment, Obadiah employs satire to inform the Edomites that their pride in their seemingly impregnable position in the midst of the steep cliffs of Sela should not assure them of their invulnerability:

“The pride of your heart has deceived you,  
you who live in the clefts of the rocks  
and make your home on the heights,  
you who say to yourself,  
‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’  
Though you soar like the eagle  
and make your nest among the stars,  
from there I will bring you down,” declares the LORD. (Obad 3–4)

The book of Jonah is filled with satire. Ryken describes Jonah as “the greatest satiric masterpiece in the Bible.”<sup>49</sup> Ryken points out that the account in Jonah is narrated in a well-told story which embodies a clear object of attack (nationalistic zeal), a satiric vehicle (a narrative with a distinct plot), a Horatian type of satiric tone, and a clear satiric norm (the revealed character of God). One can find irony and satire even in the author’s choice of imagery and terms describing Jonah’s attempted flight from and later fulfillment of God’s calling upon him. Thus Jonah is told to “go up” (1:2) to Nineveh and preach against it but “rises up” to flee. His “rising up,” however,

<sup>46</sup> “Satire,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* 762.

<sup>47</sup> “Amos, Book of,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* 22.

<sup>48</sup> For an evaluation of Amos’s satire, see Ryken, *Words of Delight* 334–37.

<sup>49</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight* 337–40.

leads him into a series of “downs.” God’s runaway prophet goes down to Joppa (1:3), goes down below deck of a ship bound for Tarshish and falls asleep unaware of the storm (1:5), is later thrown overboard, and, sinking down into the waters, winds up down in the belly of the sea creature God has provided (1:17–21). Finding himself alive and coming to his senses within the sea creature, Jonah portrays his plight as follows: “To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever” (Jonah 2:6). Spewed out from the fish onto land he receives a renewed command to “rise up, go to Nineveh” and preach God’s original message. In fulfilling his commission he is overwhelmingly successful, which angers him greatly.

He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home. That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” (4:2)

As Good points out, “This satiric irony of The Book of Jonah stems from the author’s awareness that the covenant God is the God of all the earth, but the covenant people want to keep him in their own possession.”<sup>50</sup>

No less than Amos and Jonah, Micah contains a great deal of satire. For example, he likens the exploitation of the masses to cannibalism:

Listen, you leaders of Jacob,  
 you rulers of the house of Israel.  
 Should you not know justice,  
 you who hate good and love evil;  
 who tear the skin from my people  
 and the flesh from their bones;  
 who eat my people’s flesh,  
 strip off their skin  
 and break their bones in pieces;  
 who chop them up like meat for the pan,  
 like flesh for the pot? (Mic 3:1–3)

Nahum also employs satire. In calling Nineveh a “city of blood” (3:1) Nahum warns the Ninevites that their city, with all its political wickedness, will fare no better than Egyptian Thebes (Nah 3:8). Moreover, its famed, supposedly invincible army was in reality nothing more than a bunch of women (3:13), while their guards and officials were like locusts “that settle on the walls on a cold day but when the sun appears they fly away, and no one knows where” (3:17).

The well-known taunt songs in the second chapter of the prophecy of Habakkuk provide a rich source of satire. In a series of taunts cast in the form of woe oracles Habakkuk prophesies the judgment of the Chaldeans, essentially satirizing their unethical conduct. As they have wrongfully treated others, so it will be done to them (Hab 2:6–20). For example, Habakkuk chides the Chaldean as being like a man who gave a drink to his neighbor

<sup>50</sup> Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981) 242.

so as to get him drunk and then expose his nakedness. Yet when the Lord's judgment came, the experience would be reversed: "Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed! The cup of the LORD's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory" (Hab 2:15-16). Thus the Chaldeans, who have "befriended" other peoples only to take advantage of them, will find that their practices will eventuate in their own judgment. In each of Habakkuk's taunt songs are clear elements of satire including invective and satiric norm.<sup>51</sup>

Zephaniah warns the citizens of Jerusalem concerning their hypocritical worship practices and materialistic lifestyle. While they feign worship of God in the sacrificial rituals, they also give allegiance to pagan gods and admire and emulate the goods and lifestyle of the foreign nations. Zephaniah warns them that God also has a sacrifice prepared but those who are invited will find that it is they who are to be the sacrifice in the day of the Lord. Those who craved foreign clothing would see the uniforms of the invaders. Those who believe they can go on with their selfish lifestyle and say "the LORD will do nothing" (Zeph 1:12), will find they have lost it all: "They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine" (v. 13).

Satire was also alive among the post-exilic Minor Prophets. Haggai satirizes those who are preoccupied with seeing to the needs of their own houses rather than the Lord's house (Hag 1:4). Zechariah satirizes the selfish worship practices of his day saying, "When you fasted and mourn in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?" (Zech 7:5-6). Nor were their supposedly high spiritual standards reflected in their conduct in society, for they had oppressed the widow, orphan, poor, and aliens among them (vv. 8-10).<sup>52</sup> Within Malachi's disputation style, which often borders on diatribe, one can note frequent touches of satire. Thus he begins his report of God's censure of the priests with words asking where their feigned respect for the Lord was to be seen: "'A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?' Says the LORD Almighty" (Mal 1:6). He goes on to point out their clear lack of respect for the Lord in their offering of impure and unfit sacrificial elements. Even the priests would have to admit that the Lord's table was defiled. As Baldwin remarks, "Malachi strips away all self-deception by putting into blunt language the motives he discerns."<sup>53</sup>

### III. PROPHETIC SATIRE AND ETHICAL NORMS

1. *Criticism and tone.* All of this, of course, is only a small sample of the abundant use of satire within the prophetic books. But from these examples

<sup>51</sup> See Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* 183-209.

<sup>52</sup> For the motif of the widow, orphan, and the poor, see R. D. Patterson, "The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature," *BSac* 130 (1973) 223-34.

<sup>53</sup> J. C. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972) 230.

we can note both the existence of several elements that are customarily found in satire as well as the uses to which satire was put by the prophets in providing ethical instruction to their hearers. As to the former, in every case a distinct object of attack, the primary element in satire, is evident. As Jemielity points out, "The nature and characteristics common in both prophecy and satire explain their frequent intermingling and shared identity. . . . and criticism is always the content of satire."<sup>54</sup> Such may come in the form of a criticism of God's people or of other nations. The criticism may be leveled at individuals or whole societies comprising cities or even nations. The people and/or their practices may be attacked and when this is done, the satiric tone is usually, though not always, rather harsh—Juvenalian, if you please. Robert Alter points out,

If the speaker sarcastically invokes the viewpoint of his human objects of reproof, conjuring up the illusory pleasures or power to which they are addicted, he produces a satirical depiction of how the evil are self-deceived. Tonally, the satires tend to jeer where the accusations angrily expose and impugn; substantively, they tend to be evocations of the moral psychology of overweening wickedness. If on the other hand the speaker focuses on the cataclysmic consequences of the misdeeds he is stigmatizing, then he produces a vision of the terrible swift force of God in history, wreaking havoc among the nations.<sup>55</sup>

Among the many prophecies dealing with other nations and peoples, the king of Babylon (Isa 14:3–23) and the prince of Tyre (Ezekiel 26–28) are examples of those who particularly are criticized for their audacity and pride. In the former case, the Babylonian king is castigated for his oppressive treatment and defiance of God and his standards. For these he shall be judged:

How the oppressor has come to an end!  
 How his fury has ended! . . .  
 How you have fallen from heaven,  
 O morning star, son of the dawn!  
 You have been cast down to the earth,  
 you who once laid low the nations! (Isa 14:3, 12)

When the Babylonian's judgment has come, all will mock his fate:

"Is this the man who shook the earth  
 and made kingdoms tremble,  
 the man who made the world a desert,  
 who overthrew its cities  
 and would not let his captives go home?" (vv. 16–17)

Likewise the prince of Tyre, with all of his wealth and refinement acquired through commercial gain (Ezek 27:1–25; 28:4–5) as his ships sailed the seas, is attacked for assuming that his own cunning has made him a virtual god of the sea lanes. Yet the ruler of Tyre should understand that he is no god despite his own over estimation of himself:

<sup>54</sup> Jemielity, *Satire* 85.

<sup>55</sup> R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985) 146–47.

In the pride of your heart  
 you say, "I am a god  
 in the heart of the seas."  
 But you are a man and not a god,  
 though you think you are as wise as a god.  
 Are you wiser than Daniel?  
 Is no secret hidden from you? (Ezek 28:2-3)

In mock lament utilizing various images drawn from several sources (vv. 11-19) the prince is reminded that like Adam who though he was placed in an Edenic paradise was cast out due to his sin, he too will be judged and lose his lofty status.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, this self-styled Melkartian cherub could not count on his riches either. Unlike Yahweh's cherubim who guarded the Garden of Eden with a flaming sword, this "princely cherub" served another god and for this will be burned to ashes. He would learn who truly is God and come to realize that neither his wisdom nor his wealth could spare him (v. 17).<sup>57</sup>

2. *Satiric norm and ethical standards.* Therefore, it can be seen that the OT prophet's use of satire was not mere literary artistry. His attacks were leveled in accordance with recognized ethical standards held widely throughout the ancient Near East. Thus accepted moral behavior specified humane treatment of the poor and disenfranchised members of society such as the widow, orphan, and the poor.<sup>58</sup> For example, Hammurapi declared that he had enacted his laws "to make justice appear in the land, to destroy the evil and wicked and that the strong might not oppress the weak."<sup>59</sup> In the Aqhat Epic of ancient Canaan, King Dan'el was described as one who "judges the cause of the widow(s); he adjudicates the case of the fatherless."<sup>60</sup> To be noted also is the boast of the Phoenician King Kulamuwa:

Before the former kings, the *Muskabim* were living like dogs.  
 But I was to some a father;  
 and to some I was a mother;  
 and to some I was a brother.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> L. E. Cooper, Sr. (*Ezekiel* [NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994] 268-69) points out that "Of the twenty elements associated with the king of Tyre in 18:11-19 most also are found in Isaiah's indictment of another tyrannical ruler, the king of Babylon (14:12-17)."

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of rituals associated with the god Melkart, see R. H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6:883-84.

<sup>58</sup> For the motif of the widow, orphan, and the poor, see Patterson, "The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor," 223-34; F. C. Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *JNES* 21 (1962) 129-39; E. Hammershaimb, "On the Ethics of the Old Testament Prophets," *VTSup* 7 (1960) 75-101.

<sup>59</sup> G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 7 [CH; Ia: 32-39]; for the original edition see E. Bergmann, *Codex Hammurabi; Textus Primigenius* (3d ed.; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1953).

<sup>60</sup> M. D. Coogan, ed. and trans., *Stories From Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 35; for the text, see C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1965) 248.

<sup>61</sup> K. L. Younger, Jr., "The Kulamuwa Inscription," in *Context of Scripture* 2.148.

In ancient Egypt King Merikare of the First Intermediate Period is instructed by his father Khety III that a good king should

Do justice, then you endure on earth;  
 Calm the weeper, don't oppress the widow,  
 Don't expel a man from his father's property,  
 Don't reduce the nobles in their possessions.  
 Beware of punishing wrongfully . . .  
 Thus will the land be well-ordered.<sup>62</sup>

Yet it was such folk who suffered so greatly in times of invasion by being carried off into captivity or by being oppressed by foreign occupiers. Such can be documented abundantly in the annals of the kings of the ancient Near East.

These types of ethical standards were even more strongly expected of God's people: "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow" (Deut 27:19). Just and charitable treatment would thus be a reflection of God's own concerns (cf. Pss 68:5; 82:3-4). "Throughout the Old Testament, then, the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the poor is particularly enjoined upon Israel as befitting a redeemed people who are entrusted with the character and standards of their Redeemer."<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, it could be expected that in the prophet's pronouncements employing satire he would base his criticism in accordance with a recognized ethical norm that was being violated. And such certainly was the case. Thus Amos chastises Israel's affluent class of society for their complacent attitude as well as their indulgent self-seeking and spiritual insensitivity (cf. Amos 2:6-7; 3:9-15; 5:7-12; 8:10). His messages in chapter six are representative:

Woe to you who are complacent in Zion,  
 And to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria . . .  
 You lie on beds inlaid with ivory  
 and lounge on your couches.  
 You dine on choice lambs  
 and fattened calves.  
 You strum away on your harps like David  
 and improvise on musical instruments.  
 You drink wine by the bowlful  
 and use the finest lotions,  
 but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph . . .  
 Do horses run on the rocky crags?  
 Does one plow there with oxen?  
 But you have turned justice into poison  
 and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness. (Amos 6:1, 4-7, 12)

The prophets used satire, then, to criticize current social practices, particularly the exploitation of the lower classes of society. They challenged

<sup>62</sup> M. Lichtheim, "Merikare," in *Context of Scripture* 1.62.

<sup>63</sup> Patterson, "The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor" 232.

the elite of the land to follow the Lord and his revealed standards of ethical conduct. In so doing they warned their hearers that God's judgment was sure to follow should they not change their ways. It may be added that on occasion the Lord's prophets also felt it necessary to condemn those who opposed their God-inspired message and sometimes employed satire to do so.

Jemielity points out that "from the earliest times of the classical prophets in the eighth century . . . to the catastrophic times of the early sixth century . . . Hebrew prophecy castigates not only a panorama of viciousness that includes human sacrifice, religious syncretism, gross social injustice, and equally gross sexual excess wearing the garb of religious worship, but also other prophets."<sup>64</sup> For example, note Jeremiah's condemnation of the false prophets of his day:

They have lied about the LORD;  
 they said, "He will do nothing!  
 No harm will come to us;  
 we will never see sword or famine.  
 The prophets are but wind  
 and the word is not in them;  
 so let what they say be done to them." (Jer 5:12-13)

Ezekiel likewise must confront the false prophets (Ezek 13:1-23). In so doing he satirizes their prophecies as being "out of their own imagination," while they themselves are "foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing" (vv. 1-2). Therefore, they are "like jackals among ruins" (v. 4). By calling them foolish (Heb. *nābāl*), Ezekiel charges these prophets with being morally and spiritually insensitive, hence devoid of God-inspired wisdom. In saying that they are following their own spirit (Heb. *rū ām*), there is a hint that they are little more than a bag of wind. By the allegation of being like jackals Ezekiel subtly warns these prophets that they care only about their own needs and desires, oblivious to the harm and ruin they are certain to cause God's people. Ezekiel's satire is less than flattering!

As noted above, the cause of the immoral and unethical practices so rampant among all classes of Israelite society lies deeper still. It stems from an abandonment of the Lord to pursue a false and syncretistic religiosity. So it is that Jeremiah must condemn Judah's immorality, calling its men "lustful stallions each neighing for another man's wife" (Jer 5:8). Therefore, his dire message to them is one of God's certain judgment in like kind:

I will pull up your skirts over your face  
 that your shame may be seen—  
 your adulteries and lustful neighings,  
 your shameless prostitution!  
 I have seen your detestable acts  
 on the hills and in the fields.  
 Woe to you O Jerusalem!  
 How long will you be unclean? (Jer 13:26-27)

<sup>64</sup> Jemielity, *Satire* 120.

Jeremiah points to the actual underlying cause of their sinful behavior. God's people have turned to the immoral practices of paganism with the result that "on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute" (2:20). In so doing they have forgotten their spiritual marriage to Yahweh. Jeremiah records the Lord's own anguish of heart:

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
 how as a bride you loved me  
 and followed me through the desert,  
 through a land not sown. (Jer 2:2)

In their spiritual adultery God's people have joined themselves to another husband, a false god called Baal (2:23) as well as to other pagan deities (cf. Ezek 16:8–19, 32–34; Hos 2:16–17). How foolish to desert their rightful husband (Heb. *ba'al*) to chase after another Baal. Jeremiah accordingly chides them:

How can you say, "I am not defiled;  
 I have not run after the Baals?"  
 See how you behaved in the valley;  
 consider what you have done.  
 You are a swift she-camel  
 running here and there,  
 a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,  
 sniffing the wind in her craving—  
 in her heat who can restrain her?  
 Any males that pursue her need not tire themselves;  
 at mating time they will find her. (2:23–24)

What a travesty! God's people could not realize the deep-seated nature of their sin that caused the immorality and unethical lifestyle—practices that have conditioned their own future demise:

Yet in spite of all this  
 You say, "I am innocent;  
 he is not angry with me."  
 But I will pass judgment on you  
 because you say, "I have not sinned." (Jer 2:37)

3. *Satire and coming judgment.* The prophet may use satire not only in criticizing the present unethical situation but in announcing God's coming judgment. As Jemielity observes, "Satire proceeds imaginatively and morally by extending into the future the likely consequences of present behavior or absurdity."<sup>65</sup>

The message of God's prophets often details the causes for judgment. Isaiah laments the empty, even false, religiosity of his people who feign faith to the Lord while failing to keep his standards. He records God's catalog of

<sup>65</sup> Jemielity, *Satire* 78.

charges as to their absence of genuine religion (Isa 1:10–17), calling them “rulers of Sodom” and “people of Gomorrah” (v. 10). Their observance of sacrificial rituals apart from a genuine devotion to the Lord, which should be manifested in a concern for justice and the needs of the weaker elements of society, is meaningless. For they have neglected the widow, the orphan, and the poor: “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa 1:16–17).<sup>66</sup> Isaiah chides his contemporaries for turning their backs on God and his ethical standards; in so doing they have less sense than an ox or donkey (1:3). Sawyer concludes, “It is this indissoluble link between ritual and ethical standards that the prophets tried to force their contemporaries to accept. Sacrifice without justice is worthless, and justice for the prophets means protection of the underprivileged members of society.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, divine justice also meant the execution of judgment—even upon God’s own people (Isa 1:23–25).

To the same effect are the words of other prophets. Hosea likens Israel’s bent for false religion in the face of God’s clearly revealed standards (Hos 4:1–19) as reflecting the waywardness of a “stubborn heifer” (v. 16). He admonishes them not to continue their flirtation with the false worship at Gilgal and Beth-Aven, the latter name being a sarcastic parody of the town Bethel. Thus Bethel (“house of God”) has become Beth-Aven (“house of wickedness”). In an interesting twist of satire, Amos condemns the elders of Israelite society by sarcastically “encouraging” this same syncretistic religiosity:

“Come to Bethel and transgress;  
 Gilgal and multiply transgression;  
 bring your sacrifices every morning,  
 your tithes every three days;  
 offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened,  
 and proclaim freewill-offerings, publish them;  
 for so you love to do, O people of Israel,”  
 declares the Lord God. (Amos 4:4–5 ESV)

As Lehrman properly observes, “The sarcasm is clear.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, “Amos tells them to go on with zeal in their idolatrous sacrifices, and to multiply their sin. But they will not keep back the divine judgment by so doing.”<sup>69</sup>

As previously noted, Joel points out that the dryness and bareness of the land due to the series of locusts plagues reflected well the spiritual bareness of their false religious practice (Joel 1:1–12). Such realization should be a stimulus to repentance and true faith (vv. 13–14; 2:12–17). If they should fail

<sup>66</sup> Hammershaimb (“Ethics” 80) remarks, “From the context one must draw the conclusion, that the prophet considers these three commandments as belonging to the law of Israel’s God.”

<sup>67</sup> J. F. A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 44.

<sup>68</sup> S. M. Lehrman, “Amos,” in *The Twelve Prophets* (The Soncino Books of the Bible; 12th ed.; ed. A. Cohen; London: Soncino, 1985) 99.

<sup>69</sup> C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. ed. 1948) 1.270.

to repent, certain judgment lay ahead (2:1–11). Judah's society has simply forgotten the clear mandate of the Torah to put God first in their affections and let that be reflected in their conduct (Deut 32:1–6).

As we have seen, satire may be found in prophetic texts that warn of judgment to come for violating God's holy person and standards. Thus Amos warned those whose materialistic lives, that included the exploitation of the poor and the abandonment for the false worship practices, would merit the Lord's judgment. Their present plenty would be turned into famine (Amos 8:4–14). He satirizes the situation as follows:

Here this, you who trample the needy  
 And do away with the poor of the land, saying,  
 "When will the New Moon be over  
 that we may sell grain,  
 and the Sabbath be ended  
 that we may market wheat?"  
 skimping the measure,  
 boosting the price  
 and cheating with dishonest scales,  
 buying the poor with silver  
 and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
 selling even the sweepings with the wheat.  
 The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob, "I will  
 never forget anything they have done." (Hos 8:4–7)

Gibson appropriately observes, "A people who acted in this kind of way, yet flocked to the sanctuary to show their piety, were fiddling while Rome burned; and judgement could not be far away."<sup>70</sup> Similar satirical pieces may often be found in the various prophetic oracles of judgment against Israel (e.g. Isa 28:7–22; Jer 22:13–23; Ezek 13:1–9; Hos 6:4–6; Obadiah; Micah 1:3–8; Nah 3:8–19; Hab 2:6–20; Zeph 1:17–18; etc.).

It may be added that the various collections of judgment oracles against the nations routinely contain satiric elements (e.g. Isa 16:6–12; Jer 46:7–10; Ezek 32:2–10; Nah 2:11–12; Zeph 2:4). The nations so criticized are also denounced in accordance with a satiric norm based on accepted international protocol (e.g. Amos 1:3–2:3; Nah 3:1–4; Hab 2:6–17; Zeph 2:13–15) or for blatantly defying the true God of the universe and/or his people (e.g. Isa 37:22–23; Hab 2:18–20; cf. Deut 32:27; 2 Kgs 19:22).

#### IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Satire is abundantly attested in the OT, including the prophetic books. The prophets used it freely to (1) criticize the immoral and unethical social practices of their contemporaries; (2) condemn the religious observances of their day as either hypocritically syncretistic or blatantly pagan; and

<sup>70</sup> J. C. L. Gibson, *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998) 61.

(3) warn offenders that because all of this is a violation of God's person and standards, they face certain, perhaps imminent, destruction. It may be added that these three purposes of satire may all occur in a single extended context. Jeremiah's sermon at the Temple Gate will serve as a representative example. Recording God's own message, Jeremiah satirizes those who brashly say that nothing can harm them despite their wicked behavior, because the Temple was in their midst. He warns them that those who say such worthless words perpetuate a deceptively wrong idea. For the peoples' social practices such as their exploitation and oppression of the alien, the fatherless, and the widow as well as the rampant idolatry and murder of innocent people will merit the Lord's certain judgment (Jer 7:3–8). The Lord himself asks, "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'—safe to do all these detestable things?" (vv. 9–10).

Judah's unethical ways thus demonstrate an ethical vacuum. God and his standards were simply absent from their lifestyle. The Jerusalemites' allegiance to the Lord was a mockery at best. Therefore, to go on in their flagrant immorality and idolatry while assuming that the presence of the Temple would keep them from external harm or the Lord's judgment, was an empty fantasy. Judah had best take note of God's dealing with the northern kingdom (vv. 12–15).

Satire, then, is indeed prevalent in the writings of the prophets. By recognizing satire for what it is the interpreter will gain insight so as to profit his understanding and enjoy God's word more fully.

But satire, ever moral, ever new,  
Delights the reader and instructs him, too.  
She, if good sense refined her sterling page,  
Oft shakes some rooted folly of the age.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, any hermeneutic that fails to recognize its presence and the purposes for which it was utilized will fail to grasp the full intent of the prophet's message. Nor should we miss or fail to apply to ourselves the prophet's satirical intent. McQuilkin appropriately chides contemporary Christian society by asking, "When God so strongly opposes all injustice, including the injustice resulting from class and racial discrimination, why do Christians almost universally participate in their own cultural patterns of discrimination rather than joining with other believers to provide a radically biblical counter-culture of justice, mercy, and unity?"<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the message of God's prophets of old "relentlessly strips away the comfortable bric-à-brac of human and physical temples, the ever-satisfying gewgaws that adorn edifices of complacency and self-assurance."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, "Satire," in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (16th ed.; ed. J. Bartlett and J. Kaplan; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992) 280.

<sup>72</sup> Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (2d ed.; Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995).

<sup>73</sup> Jemielly, *Satire* 197.