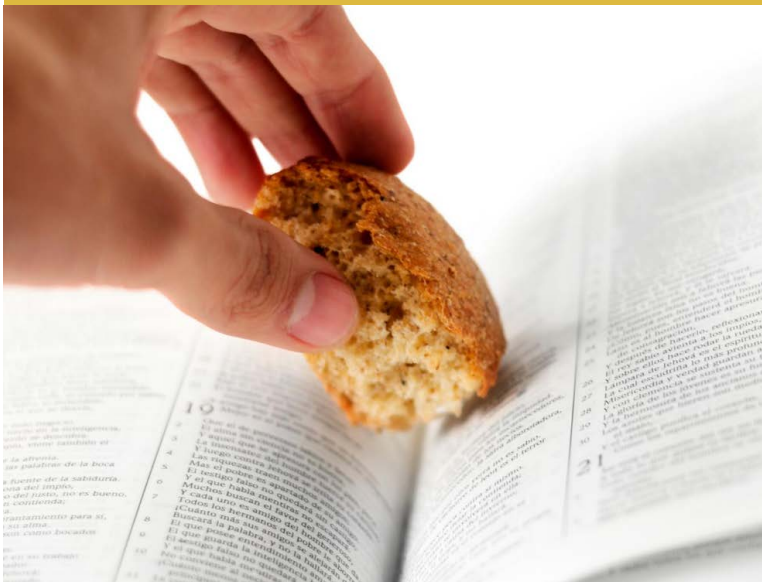


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IDIOM AND IRONY READING BETWEEN THE LINES IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE



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IDIOM AND IRONY

READING BETWEEN THE LINES IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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1 INTRODUCTION

An earlier Olive Press Research Paper *Did God Really Say?* by Jacki Turnbull (OPRP 25) was followed by Alex Jacob's more recent papers *How Should We Read The Bible?* (OPRP 38), and *Knowing Jesus In His Jewish Context* (OPRP 40). This OPRP follows on from the previous ones by investigating how an appreciation of Jewish culture and literary style can offer further insights into how the first readers (or hearers) understood the scriptures.

This is a wide-ranging subject which can only be touched on briefly in a short paper. It starts by looking at certain Jewish idioms in the New Testament, followed by examples of numerical figures of speech, then moves on to the whole concept of wordplay in general, before finishing with an examination of humour and irony.

For example, did you know that having a 'good eye' means being generous, that to '*pluck out your eye*' was a commonly used picturesque exaggeration, or that there is an intentional double meaning in '*Daily Bread*'? Did you know that many narrative passages in the Hebrew scriptures have a range of semi-poetic features, such as repetition, onomatopoeia¹ and alliteration; or frequently use intentional ambiguity, humour and irony? Or maybe that a subtle variation in the gender of a word can intentionally affect the meaning of the text?

Nothing in this paper should detract from our belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Yet God chose not only to communicate these inspired writings over many centuries through all sorts of intriguing characters, flawed men and women like ourselves, he also chose a particular culture for this purpose, that of the Jewish people. Understanding how Hebrew literary conventions, idioms, and figures of speech influenced and shaped their stories and writings, is all part of seeing the Word of God through the lens of the cultural setting which God chose for it.

2 IDIOMS AND COLLOQUIALISMS

An idiom or colloquialism is a phrase or expression in common use, which has its own special meaning, which is not quite what someone outside the culture might expect from a straightforward use of the words. For example when we say “just a minute” or “hang on a second”, we don't literally mean an exact minute or a precise second, what we mean is that we are not quite ready. We are so used to these expressions it probably seems extremely pedantic to point out that they are not absolutely literal. But now imagine some well meaning translator in two thousand years' time who is not familiar with our culture, trying very seriously to explain the exact significance of the reference to a minute or a second, and assuming something very precise was intended.

This is a problem faced by Bible translators all the time. Not only modern translators face these difficulties. An early Jewish translator of the Septuagint,² (who is known to us only as Ben Sira's grandson), noted in the Prologue of his work *“What was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language”*, and warned that his translation *“differs not a little as originally expressed”*.³ If this applied to a translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek made around 130BC, then how much more must it apply to modern translators today.

Even when translators understand the idiom being used, what should they do? They can translate the words very literally, leaving the reader to make sense of the meaning. This method is called transliteration. Or they can try to convey the rough intended meaning of the phrase, which veers towards a paraphrase. Both methods have dangers. In the first case, the reader may look at the literal words and completely misunderstand their intended meaning. In the second case, we depend on the skill and knowledge of the translator to get it right.

The more we veer away from the original text the more we can miss a lot of other things going on, such as verbal cross-referencing, either within the passage or within scripture as a whole. Most translators try to steer a middle path, but they may not always be aware of a particular idiom. Not only do we need a better understanding of the many Hebraisms behind the Greek text of the Gospels, maybe even to the extent that *“only when we begin to put the Greek of the Gospels back into Hebrew will it be possible to fully understand the words of Jesus”*,⁴ but we need to appreciate how Hebrew idiom works throughout scripture as a whole.

2.1 HAVING A GOOD EYE

A well known example of an idiomatic expression occurs when Jesus talks about having a 'good eye' or a 'bad eye'. One of Jesus' sayings was *"If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness."* (Matt 6:22-23 NIV) All sorts of spiritual meanings have been imputed to this saying, but quite simply **someone with a 'good eye' was a generous person**, someone with a 'bad eye' was a mean person. Since the rest of the passage (6:19-24) is all about the use of money it makes perfect sense.

In colloquial Hebrew one's 'eye' is often used idiomatically to describe someone's attitude towards others. Having a 'good eye' or having a 'bad eye' are idioms which have been part of the Hebrew language since Biblical times, and are still in use today. Having a 'good eye' (*ayin tovah*) means to be **looking out** for others, and to be generous in meeting their needs. Having a 'bad eye' (*ayin ra'ah*) means being greedy and self-centred, **blind** to those around you.⁵

Both expressions are used in this way in Proverbs. In Proverbs 28:22, when we read *"the miser is in a hurry to get rich"*, the 'miser' in Hebrew is literally a 'bad eye'. Proverbs 23:6 has *"do not eat the bread of the stingy"* where the Hebrew translated as 'stingy' is literally a 'bad eye'. In Proverbs 22:9 we find *"those who are generous are blessed"*, once again being 'generous' is literally having a 'good eye'.⁶ Apparently, these expressions are still used by Hebrew speakers in Israel today, and are derived from the way in which Hebrew expands on the concept of 'seeing', by using it to describe someone's attitude to other people.⁷

2.2 PLUCK OUT YOUR EYE

Perhaps the most obvious saying of Jesus which really should not be taken literally comes in his teaching on sexual morality. When he said that *"If your right eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away ... and if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away"*, clearly Jesus did not expect us to actually carry out such physical extremism. (Matt 5:29-30).⁸

It is not often realised that Jesus did not invent these expressions, rather he was using a common idiom of the time. This highly exaggerated hyperbole was in normal use among both Jewish and non-Jewish teachers when teaching about sexual morality.

In both Rabbinic and Greek literature “*exaggerated demands to cut off limbs from the body as a sign of seriousness about morality were commonplace*”.⁹ Jesus was simply using a contemporary metaphor to illustrate his teaching. Since he was part of a culture which employed dramatic exaggeration as a normal teaching method, Jesus himself often used **picturesque overstatement** in His illustrations.¹⁰

2.3 BREAD FROM HEAVEN

We find another traditional idiom in the spiritual connotation given to the word '*bread*' in scripture. From the beginning, Israel was told that the provision of manna was to remind them that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:3). Accordingly “*there was a tradition in Israel that God’s intelligible Word, by which one lives, was food, like manna*”, so that any reference to '*bread*' or '*manna*' would remind hearers of the “*manna-like life giving word of Yahweh*”.¹¹

What is our '*Daily Bread*'? We pray this phrase every time we say the Lord's Prayer, “*give us today our daily bread*” (Matt 6:11), yet academically there is a translation difficulty. No-one is really sure what the word translated '*daily*' actually means, for the simple reason that it occurs nowhere else in Greek literature. Although the most likely meaning seems to be '*bread for today*' or '*bread for tomorrow*', scholars are puzzled at the repetition. A construction meaning '*give us today our bread for today*' seems unnecessarily clumsy. Since repetition is usually for emphasis, it is not really clear why a double emphasis on *today* should be so important.

The Greek word is *epiousion*, and certainly the phrase 'our bread *ton epiousion*' would highlight day-to-day needs. For most people living on a subsistence level, or for disciples living by faith, that is very relevant. Since Jesus continued the same discourse with teaching about our attitude to material needs, finishing with an admonition to focus on today rather than worry about tomorrow, the phrase '*daily bread*' is certainly relevant to such daily needs (Matt 6:25-34). However, that does not explain why this very unusual word *epiousion* was chosen (some even suggest especially invented), when there were many other Greek words which meant 'daily'.¹²

Many scholars agree that the phrase 'our bread *ton epiousion*' would invoke a memory of the manna in the wilderness.¹³ Certainly the Early Church Fathers seemed to think so. They understood '*daily bread*' to mean '*bread of salvation*', '*bread of life*', or '*heavenly manna*'. St Augustine referred to it as '*the invisible bread of the Word of God*',¹⁴ while St Jerome considered *epiousion* to refer to '*kingdom*' bread, meaning we should pray to live in Kingdom reality.¹⁵ So it seems **there are two levels of intended meaning**; while we depend on God for daily sustenance, at the same time *epiousion* also refers to the '*bread of the Kingdom*'.

All this gives us a very helpful insight to the Lord's Prayer. We might paraphrase '*give us today our Daily Bread*' to mean '**give us today our spiritual walk with you**'. (After all, if our walk with God is right, our material needs will be surely included.) And for any who struggle with a daily spiritual routine, it is a great encouragement to find we are allowed, even instructed, to pray about it!

This means we can consider the Lord's Prayer as a neatly balanced Hebrew poem, following the structure:

*Give us our daily walk with you;
Deliver us from the evil of the past,
internal and external;
Deliver us from the evil of the future,
internal and external.*

What is it that still harms us from the past? Surely our failures, mistakes and omissions. We carry their scars and they still come back to haunt us. We need forgiveness. Likewise the scars inflicted on us by others can only be healed as we learn to forgive them. We also need protection from present and future evil. Many have wasted time debating what it means for the Lord not to '*lead us into*' temptation. It is simply Hebrew parallelism. Hebrew poetry employs parallelism, using different words to say the same thing, and where we see parallelism we should focus on commonalities rather than differences. '*Lead us not into*' is poetic parallelism for '*deliver us from*'; it means the same thing, no more, no less.

Therefore, the Lord's prayer becomes a poetic expansion on a simple theme, '*Give us our daily walk with you and deliver us from evil*'. Poetic because that is normal rabbinic teaching method, to consign teaching to easily remembered poetic structures, with typical Hebrew repetition. Indeed, many of Jesus' sayings are so full of such Hebrew parallelism, that if they are turned back into Aramaic they exhibit a poetic rhythm making them very easy to memorise.¹⁶

Jesus' poetic treatment is also liturgical, because he took a well known Jewish liturgy of his day, the **Hebrew Qaddish**, and gave it an update. By adapting a standard Jewish liturgical prayer, for '*the Kingdom to come throughout the earth and also in Israel*', he upgraded it to become a prayer for the Kingdom to come throughout the earth, but to start in us. For the Kingdom to come, it must begin with us. By understanding the idiomatic spiritual application of *bread*, the key to this poetic Hebrew liturgy is unlocked.¹⁷

We can derive another interesting insight from this idiomatic meaning of *bread*. It is very interesting to consider the Old Syriac translation of the Gospels. This Second Century translation takes Jesus' words, which had been translated from Aramaic into Greek, and puts them back into something very close to his original language. The expression used for *epiousion* in the Old Syriac version is *lahmo ameno* meaning *amen bread*, which is an idiom implying *never-ending or never-ceasing bread*.¹⁸ There is only one kind of bread that is eternal, there is only one kind of bread that does not run out, which Jesus calls the *Bread of Life*. Appropriately, when he makes this claim about himself, it is in the course of a discussion about manna in the desert (John 6:31-51).¹⁹

Finally, the name *Bethlehem* literally means the *House of Bread*, but if we apply it spiritually then we see a beautiful prophetic insight, foreshadowing that the *House of Bread* would one day provide the *Bread of Life*.

3 NUMERICAL IDIOMS

It is well known that many numbers in Hebrew carry symbolic meanings. Here we look at some interesting numerical expressions which have idiomatic meanings.

3.1 'THREE DAYS' IN JONAH

According to Uriel Simon the phrase three days is “*a common idiom to denote a period that is long but not too long*”. Simon offers this insight regarding Jonah's experience in the great fish. He adds that the addition of and three nights means the same thing in terms of time, but also “*highlights the slow passage of time in Jonah's consciousness*” due to the hardship of the prevailing circumstances.²⁰

When Jonah reached Nineveh, the city is described as being a very great city which took *three days* to cross (Jonah 3:3). Scholars have spent a lot of time trying to make sense of this, because if taken literally it would be much too big for Nineveh or any other ancient city. They need not have bothered if only they had realised it was not a precise statement of time, but an idiomatic expression which just meant it was a big city which took quite a while to travel through. Other scriptures which Simon notes as using these expressions are Nehemiah 2:11 (three days), and 1 Samuel 30:12 (three days and three nights).²¹

In the same way, the expressions *forty days* or *forty years* are common colloquialisms which are used throughout the Bible to mean a considerable period (days or years respectively) of unknown length, and should not be taken to imply an exact period of time. It is interesting that according to the Hebrew text Jonah declares that Nineveh would be destroyed if it did not repent within *forty days* (Jonah 3:4). However in the Greek text of the Septuagint the expression is changed to three days.²² Clearly the Jewish translators of the Septuagint felt that *forty days* and *three days* were interchangeable idiomatic expressions.

When the Hebrew text was first written *forty days* was the usual colloquialism, but by the time the Septuagint was being translated *three days* was more commonly used. (The meanings of words often change over time, sometimes quite considerably, but idioms and colloquialisms date much more quickly.) In either case, the meaning is exactly the same, namely that if the Ninevites did not get a move on and repent, God would deal with them. This fascinating example of interchangeability of *three days* with *forty days* makes it clear that in neither case is a specific period of time intended.

3.2 'THREE DAYS' IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament the phrase *three days* is used a number of times. When we see the same phrase recurring, when it is always three days rather than two, four or five days, that is usually a good indication that we are dealing with an idiomatic expression. Luke uses it a number of times in Acts. In two cases, it seems to cover an initial settling in period after someone arrives at a new destination. Firstly, when the new Governor, Porcius Festus, arrived in Judea, *after three days* he went up to Jerusalem, implying once he had settled in (Acts 25:1). Similarly, after Paul arrived in Rome, *three days later* he called the Jewish leaders together, again apparently meaning once he had time to settle in (Acts 28:17).

During Paul's voyage to Rome the expression is used twice more. On Malta Paul and his companions were entertained hospitably *for three days* by the chief official Publius (Acts 28:7), and after Malta their ship put in at Syracuse and stayed there *three days* (Acts 28:12). Earlier on, when Paul reached Damascus, *for three days* he continued to be blind and did not eat or drink (Acts 9:9). In these cases the *three days* could be quite literal, but it is more likely to be an idiomatic use of a common figure of speech, especially as Luke uses the same expression three times in the final chapter of Acts.

In another incident, Luke tells us how Joseph and Mary returned to Jerusalem to look for Jesus once they realised he was missing. Luke says that *after three days* they found him in the temple courts (Luke 2:46). I used to wonder where Jesus stayed for three days, and why it took them so long. However, an idiom meaning that it was *'long but not too long'*, need only imply that it took them a lot of extensive searching. Maybe they found him by nightfall.

Both Mark and Matthew use the same expression *for three days* in the story of feeding four thousand (Matt 15:32; Mark 8:2). Once again, a timescale which seemed long in terms of being without food all day, but which still enabled Jesus to dismiss the crowds before nightfall, would best suit the context.

Most notably of all, Jesus uses this idiom when he makes a prophetic comparison between Jonah's experience in the fish and his own time in the grave. Just as Jonah was *three days and three nights* in the fish, so Jesus would be *three days and three nights* in the earth (Matt 12:39-42).

Much ink has been spent trying to work out how a crucifixion on Friday afternoon and a resurrection on Sunday morning fits in with a seventy-two hour period, all of which is quite unnecessary once we realise that *three days and three nights* is simply an idiomatic expression. The comparison with Jonah is not about the exact period of time spent in either the fish or the grave, but about God's deliverance from an apparently hopeless situation. In the parallel passage in Luke, Jesus compares himself with Jonah without any mention of a time period, showing that the precise timescale was not the salient point (Luke 11:29-32).²³

3.3 SEVEN THOUSAND

Another typological number is *a thousand* which usually implies simply a vast number, and need not be taken as arithmetically exact. Other numbers have symbolic or spiritual meanings, the best known being the number *seven*, which can often be used to imply perfection in the sense of completeness or fulness, so can also indicate purity or holiness.

When Elijah is told that the Lord will reserve *seven thousand* in Israel for himself (1 Kings 19:18), this should not be taken numerically. A thousand simply indicates there will be a considerable number, and seven indicates both holiness and fulness. So in this context *seven thousand* means the full complement of the righteous who God will reserve for Himself. It implies that however severe God's judgment on Israel, there will always be a holy remnant. This is exactly how Paul sees this verse, understanding it to mean "*a remnant chosen by grace*" (Romans 11:5).²⁴

3.3 SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN

Another interesting example of the idiomatic use of seven occurs in the interchange between Jesus and Peter in Matthew's Gospel. Peter asks Jesus how many times he needs to forgive someone, and suggests up to seven times (Matt 18:22). We often deride Peter for thinking he could put a numerical limit on forgiveness, but in fact Peter is adopting the symbolic meaning of seven. He is asking, should we keep on and on forgiving regardless? Martin Goldsmith explains "*Seven is the traditional number of completion and fullness, so Peter's suggestion of forgiving seven times seems generous. This is doubly true because the rabbis recommended three times as adequate*".²⁵

There was a rabbinic teaching that it was unnecessary to go on forgiving ad infinitum, since if someone did not change their behaviour then there was a reasonable limit to what could be expected. *“If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven”* (Yoma 86b).²⁶ Assuming this view was current in Peter's time, then he expects Jesus' standards to be higher than those of the rabbis. He therefore asks Jesus to confirm that continuous and complete forgiveness is the intended model. In reply Jesus affirms Peter's understanding. Jesus follows the same idiomatic terminology as Genesis 4:24 (which speaks of Cain being avenged seven times but Lamech being avenged seventy-seven times), but applies it to forgiveness rather than revenge.²⁷

Theologically, Jesus is pointedly reversing evil intent with good, exchanging a curse for a blessing. Colloquially, he is saying to Peter not just *'completely'*, but *'completely times completely'*. Which is why it does not matter that it is possible to interpret the Greek phrase to mean either *'seventy-seven times'* or *'seventy times seven'*. Idiomatically it comes to the same thing, linguistic wordplay on the fact that seven itself represents perfection, so cannot be bettered, perfection times perfection still equals perfection. (Just as a mathematician will tell you that infinity times infinity still equals infinity.)

Jesus uses the same idiomatic number *seven* when teaching on the same subject in Luke's Gospel. Here it is those in the believing community who sin and then repent who we are to forgive. The disciples still find the teaching to forgive *'seven times in a day'*, meaning an unlimited number of times, to be a daunting prospect. (Luke 17:3-5)

4 SCRIPTURE AS A HEARD TEXT

We need to remember that many of the stories in the Hebrew Bible were told and re-told from generation to generation. The original narratives came out of long traditions of oral story-telling, so they employ numerous story-telling techniques to keep the audience attentive. Even when eventually written down they would still be read aloud, so the same aural techniques would apply as the story is read to an audience.²⁸ Techniques which allow a change in tone, a raising of the eyebrows, all sorts of change in delivery, would give the story a different flavour, a different nuance, each time it is read.

Most ordinary people did not study scripture by reading it, (scrolls were too unwieldy and too scarce), but by hearing it read aloud, so scripture was carried in the mind as a **heard text**. Tellingly, the Bible's most common name in rabbinic Hebrew is '*miqra*', meaning '*that which is read aloud*'.²⁹

4.1 ALLUSIVE ECHOES

A variety of different ways of connecting words, sounds and phrases is prevalent throughout scripture. Constant use of similar sounding words and phrases were deliberate aids to memorization. Indeed, "*the Bible's use of oral puns and soundplay is a habit facilitated by the very nature of spoken Hebrew*".³⁰

Very often, words and sounds link together otherwise unrelated scriptures. Significantly, "*The Hebrew of the Bible is a language with relative limited vocabulary, so there is an enormous amount of hidden interaction between words that serve a variety of different meanings. These interconnections are lost in translation and a whole dimension of meaning with them.*"³¹

Consider the following perceptive insight: "*Wordplay in Hebrew is not play, it is a reflection of the profound interconnectedness of all reality. As a literary technique it can create a web of allusive echoes that tie together disparate texts.*"³² Many of Jesus' own sayings exhibit such allusive echoes, verbal links to Hebrew scriptures, which illuminate otherwise enigmatic statements, and which often make elliptical Messianic claims.

4.2 ONOMATOPOEIA, ALLITERATION AND ASSONANCE

Nor is it just individual words and sounds which contribute to the semi-poetic nature of Hebrew narrative. Indeed, there is a whole range of "*syntax and structure which comes into play in the conveying of ideas, of emphasis, of nuance ... the sounds, the rhythms, the 'music' ... make an enormous difference to 'taste', 'feeling', inner coherence and integrity of the text itself.*"³³

As an example of "*the sounds, the rhythms, and the music*" of a text, compare the RSV version of Psalm 122:6:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May they prosper who love you!"

with the Hebrew original:

*"sha'alu sh'lom yerushalim, yishalyu ohavoyikh".*³⁴

The alliteration of the 'p's (pray, peace, prosper) attempts to mimic the poetic sounds of the original text, since in Hebrew there is continuous word play linking the name of Jerusalem (*yerushalim*), with the words for 'peace' (*shalom*), 'pray for' (*sha'alu*) and to be 'at ease' (*yishlayu*).

We can see how beautifully the original softness of the sounds, as well as the quiet rhythm, help to convey the sense of peace that the poetry seeks to imply. This effect is called *onomatopoeia*, meaning that the very sounds of the words themselves contribute towards the meaning to be conveyed. Both *alliteration* (words beginning with the same letter) and *assonance* (words which use similar sounds within the word) are also used. Onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance are often used in Hebrew poetry, but also occur regularly in Hebrew narrative.

4.3 POETIC STRUCTURE IN HEBREW NARRATIVE: ELIJAH

A good example of Hebrew narrative which appears in English Bibles as straightforward prose, but which in Hebrew is written in semi-poetic style, is the familiar story of Elijah's flight from Jezebel and subsequent encounter with YHWH at Horeb (1 Kings 19). The narrative employs a wealth of literary techniques, all used to enhance the drama and the theological meaning of the story, but which become lost in translation. Uriel Simon notes how the sentence structures rely on "*parallel clauses, as in poetry, it even has a quasi-poetic rhythm.*"³⁵ Would we evaluate this story differently, if it were it set out as poetry rather than prose in our Bibles?

In Hebrew there is a terse, staccato grammatical construction, giving the text an urgent tension and an imperative of movement. At the outset, when Elijah hears the threats from Jezebel, there is a dramatic series of one word sentences, where the terseness of the grammar is supplemented by obvious alliteration.

So we have: *wayyar* meaning effectively: He saw.

wayyaqom: He set off

wayyelek: He ran for his life.³⁶

Again, when Elijah has received the food provided by the angelic messenger, the staccato grammar consists almost entirely of terse one word sentences:

He looked. He ate. He drank. He returned. He lay down.

Here the grammatic structure conveys an urgency of movement, while building up a dramatic intensity throughout the passage, quite lost in our English prose.³⁷

4.4 POETRY AND PARADOX: THE SOUND OF SILENCE

The climax of the Elijah narrative is the famous “*still, small voice*” which he heard on the mountain. In Hebrew the phrase is **qol demama daqqa**.

We can see how the quasi-poetic structure is designed for dramatic oral delivery, with the harsh consonants of *qol demama daqqa* contrasting stridently with the softer poetry of *ruach, ra'ash, 'esh*, the preceding wind, earthquake and fire.

Furthermore, the phrase is constructed of a strikingly chiasmic series of consonants, (q-d-m /m-d-q). By '*chiasmic*' we mean a phrase or piece of writing which is carefully designed around a crux, being balanced on both sides as though leading up to a mountain top then

leading away from it.

A chiasmic structure is common in Hebrew poetry, while in Hebrew narrative it is often used to emphasise a climax. Whereas in English we like to have our conclusion at the end, in Hebrew literature the climax is often in the middle, and a common way of showing where it comes is by a literary chiasm. So the chiasmic structure of “*qol demama daqqa*” would tell the hearers that this is the most important bit, it emphasises that we are at the crux of the narrative action.³⁸

Although the AV renders '*qol demama daqqa*' as '*a still, small voice*', other translations offer different options. The NIV suggests '*a gentle whisper*', the Jewish Study Bible prefers '*a soft murmuring sound*', while the NRSV moves closest to the poetic paradox of the Hebrew with '*a sound of sheer silence*'.

The Hebrew phrase is supremely enigmatic:

qol can mean a sound or a voice;

demama can mean either silence or a moan;

daqqa suggests being finely ground like flour.³⁹

So we have three words which normally just do not fit together. Following the staccato delivery which has characterised this whole passage, a fitting literal translation would be:

'A Sound. A Silence. Shattering'.

Alternatively a poetic attempt to capture the enigmatic mystery of the original could be *'a silent shimmering sound'*. The phrase defies translation. It's impossible to do justice to the intentional hiddenness and deeply poetic dimensions of the Hebrew; we are given a sensuous aural paradox, insisting that at the heart of divine revelation there is ultimate mystery. *"The phrase is rich in sound and paradoxical in sense, the numinous power of the image lies precisely in our inability to grasp it"*.⁴⁰

4.5 LAYERS OF MEANING

'Ambiguous' simply means having two or more meanings.

Intentional ambiguity may allow two layers of meaning which can live side by side, or alternatively may offer differing meanings which cannot co-exist, so requiring the reader to make a choice. In our culture we use deliberate ambiguity mainly in puns meant as jokes, (so we speak of a *'double entendre'* meaning 'double intention'), but Hebrew culture uses ambiguity in many sophisticated ways.

When we looked at the Lord's Prayer we saw that both the literal and spiritual meanings of 'daily bread' were intended. Purposeful built-in ambiguity was often characteristic of Jesus' teaching and parables. Rather than assume there can only be one 'intended' meaning, we should realise that intentional ambiguity is often employed by Hebrew writers. Such games with words cause obvious problems for translators, who view carefully nuanced meanings as textual problems. There are times when intentional *"ambiguity can be used to very pointed effect"* so that *"a later twist in the text requires that the reader go back and reconstrue differently what has already been read"*.⁴¹

There is a good example at the beginning of the Elijah narrative. The word *wayyar* as already noted means *he saw*. However, in unpointed Hebrew (unpointed meaning older Hebrew scripts which just used consonants but no vowels), it would be *wyr*, which could equally mean *he was afraid*. Most of our English translations prefer *he was afraid* rather than *he saw*, because the translators think it makes more sense. Some translations then have a footnote saying '*or he saw*'. Which is correct? The answer is both are correct. It is a good example of deliberate ambiguity. The story teller, whether telling the story from memory before the text was written down, or reading from the unpointed text, can change the balance of the story with a slight change of inflexion of their voice, or they might deliberately pronounce it in such a way as to suggest either meaning.

The idea is that *"a later twist in the text requires that the reader go back and reconstrue differently what has already been read"*.⁴² We are meant to start off believing that Elijah is at fault and will be reprimanded, only to find out that Elijah is fully justified and it is Israel who is being judged.

Those who start off judging Elijah are meant to have to re-think, and find it is they themselves who are being judged. There is a continual pattern of ambiguity present throughout the story, culminating as we have seen with the enigmatic masterpiece *qol demama daqqa*. Deliberate repetition, deliberate ambiguity, and a sub-text of irony are key literary techniques which deliver the Elijah narrative.

Scripture often challenges us to reach our own conclusions, rather than spoon-feeding us with answers, so that *"The Bible is always in dialogue with us"*.⁴³ If we want scripture to be monotone and didactic, carrying only one meaning and telling us what we must think, then we have misunderstood the literary style and teaching method of Hebrew narrative, which is often sophisticated and complex, open-ended and challenging. Furthermore, an awareness of the ironic nature of Hebrew narrative is necessary to appreciate its subtlety.

4.6 HUMOUR AND IRONY

Artistic ambiguity can often be associated with ironic humour. Indeed, *“there is a lot of humour in the Bible, but until recently nobody seemed to notice it or consider it appropriate to draw attention to it ... there is enormous wit, folk-humour and above all irony throughout.”*⁴⁴

Humour and irony are closely linked. Different cultures are notoriously diverse in their cultural norms of humour even today, leave alone winding back to what a Jewish audience might have found humorous or ironic two or three thousand years ago. There is an underlying ironic humour in many Biblical narratives, which is missed by our modern culture and our serious theological concerns. It is impossible to nuance in translation, yet it would have been appreciated by the original audiences and readers.

I once went to a seminar given by a distinguished professor who was an expert in his field, which was the book of Amos. At the end of his talk, which was mainly about how the book was actually written by various different people, I asked him a simple question, *‘What if the text is subversive?’*, meaning what if it is full of deliberate irony. He looked at me very sadly, and admitted that in that case everything he had said fell down. Sadly, I think, because in his heart he knew it was true. His life's work was based on an invalid assumption, and once Jewish irony was taken into account, then the integrity of the book of Amos being written by the author who is identified in its opening words is fully valid.

Scholars are coming to recognise that the whole of the source critical apparatus proposed from Wellhausen onwards simply disintegrates once textual subversion is taken into account. Put simply, nineteenth century German scholarship was not equipped to understand the Hebrew mindset, and once Jewish humour, irony and ambiguity are appreciated, then all those source critical theories become invalid. Driving down to appreciate the cultural roots of the Hebrew scriptures **reinstates their validity as the Word of God.**⁴⁵

5 A QUESTION OF GENDER

We noted earlier that scripture was not read privately, (in fact the ability to read silently to oneself did not even exist until many centuries after Jesus' time), but by hearing it read aloud. Scripture was carried in the mind as a *heard* text. Before the Old Testament scriptures were written down, many of the older stories were told and retold for many generations. Words became familiar friends, polished and re-polished by each telling, so the audiences would become familiar with each nuance or change in the wording. Any slight alteration would immediately be recognised, causing the audience to think '*what does that change mean?*' Here are three examples where a subtle change in gender, perhaps requiring no more than tweaking the sound of a word, would be significant to the original hearers.

5.1 GENDER AND THEOLOGY: ELIJAH

Going back to the Elijah story, Elijah wearily rests under a broom tree. The Hebrew phrase is '*one solitary broom tree*' which is mentioned twice (1 Kings 19:4 & 5). He sat down under the tree, prayed, then lay down under the tree and fell asleep. The repetition is striking, part of the poetic pattern of repetition which is such a feature of this passage. The repetition of the adjective '*solitary*' clearly emphasises Elijah's own feelings of isolation, but rather strangely it is expressed firstly in the female gender then secondly in the male gender.⁴⁶ Why? As we have seen every word in this passage is very carefully thought out, highly significant, and would certainly be noticed by the original hearers.

The alteration signifies a subtle but important change in the storyline, an indication that the sphere of influence has shifted. Up to this point Elijah is running away from Jezebel. The plot seems to be about a confrontation between Jezebel and Elijah. She has threatened him with death, and appears the dominant influence. But by the end of the story she is forgotten, vanquished by irrelevance. The plot starts off being a contest between Jezebel and Elijah, but soon becomes a dialogue between Elijah and YHWH. The grammatical shift in gender is an oh-so-subtle recognition of the point at which Jezebel no longer matters, she is no longer part of the story. Too subtle for modern tastes, totally lost in our translations, but not lost on the original audiences familiar with the sophisticated wordplay of oral story-telling.

5.2 GENDER AND HUMOUR: RUTH

If irony in the Elijah story depends on subversive ambiguity, then irony in the book of Ruth is gentle and playful, full of whimsical humour. In Hebrew Naomi's sons (*Mahlon* and *Chilion*) have names that mean 'Sickly' and 'Perishing'.⁴⁷ Obviously these were not their real names, which have either been long forgotten or were never important to the story-teller anyway. Listeners are meant to realise that the text will be playful, full of subtle jokes. It also tells us that men are not important, this is a women's story about women.

At the end of the story when Boaz meets his next-of-kin to negotiate the sale of Naomi's inherited land, we are never told the real name of the relative. He only merits an enigmatic colloquialism meaning something like 'old so-and-so'.⁴⁸ Again it tells us he is of no real significance, this is a women's story. It is likely the story was told by women to women for many years before eventually being written down, "a collective creation of women's culture, a story shaped by the co-operation between women narrators and their actively engaged female audiences".⁴⁹

There is another example of a subtle change in gender vocabulary which influences the plot in the book of Ruth. When Boaz meets Ruth he tells her to stay close to his *young women* and that he has told the young men not to molest her (Ruth 2:8-9). But when Ruth reports back to Naomi she adjusts her version of their conversation, to describe Boaz as having told her to keep close to his *young men* (2:21). The English translations don't know what to do with this change, so they use some gender neutral word such as stay close to his *workers*. However, note that Naomi picks up very quickly on the implication of Ruth's report, responding with some acerbity that it would be very good for her to stay close to his *maidens*, which indeed Ruth did (2:22-23).⁵⁰

Apart from obviously amusing the audience, this exchange triggers Naomi into action. If she wants Ruth to establish a liaison with this wealthy kinsman who Providence seems to have provided, then she had better do something about it before Ruth ends up with one of the anonymous young men. (Naomi does not know from Ruth's report that Boaz has ordered them not to touch her.)

According to Michele Guinness there is an age old cultural joke about Jewish Mamas being inveterate match-makers, a joke which lies at the heart of the plot in this story.⁵¹ (Strictly speaking Naomi is Ruth's mother-in-law, but from 2:3 she has consistently regarded her as '*my daughter*'.) So the tweak in the text provides a joke within a joke.

It seems Ruth is not above a little scheming of her own, with just one disingenuous remark sparking Naomi's concern and adroitly manoeuvring Naomi into her plan of action. The original audiences would have enjoyed the humour of mother and daughter-in-law goings-on. They would have appreciated the irony of the schemer herself being gently manoeuvred, and relished the way a twist within the plot can depend on just one word. Alice Ostriker sees it as a '*woman-centred*' text told by women to women, where "*it is easy to imagine communal giggling around the fire ... and easy to imagine the sighs of satisfaction at the happy ending*" as the story is told and retold over generations.⁵²

5.3 GENDER AND IRONY: SHEBA

There is a popular saying current in Britain at the moment, '*It's a tough job but somebody has to do it!*' It is of course meant humourously, but it is a prime example of an ironic comment which subverts the literal meaning of the words. What is irony? One scholar explains it like this: "*Irony consists in using words to convey the opposite of their normal meaning. Irony, which depends so much on tone of voice or gestures, is notoriously difficult to convey in a written text, and therefore poses particular problems for a translator.*"⁵³ The problem is, how do we spot such comments in the Bible? How do we know when a text should not be taken too literally because there is a degree of irony involved, or even such heavy irony that the words mean precisely the opposite of what they seem to say?⁵⁴

For example, once we appreciate the sub-plot in the story of Ruth we are entitled to reconsider the circumstances of her meeting with Boaz. Is it really conceivable that having been in Bethlehem for some months, (a fairly small village at that time), she had not found out who Boaz was? With all the various family re-unions and meetings with close relatives you would expect in a small Jewish community, is it conceivable that by now she did not know that Boaz was a close relative, well off (and presumably a widower with no children)? Given that family fields would be grouped together, it would not be difficult to find out which was Boaz' land.

So when the text enigmatically says *'it so happened'* (2:3) we are entitled to see understated irony, entitled to imagine the story-teller dramatically rolling her eyes and putting on a tone of voice dripping with ironic emphasis; meaning *'it so happened'* because Ruth in her usual quiet but determined way had worked out which field to be in. At one level the story is about the God of Israel providentially honouring Ruth the Moabite's determined commitment to Him, but there is not a little *chutzpah* which she herself brings to proceedings. Again the plot operates at different levels, where once more *"a later twist in the text requires that the reader go back and reconstrue differently what has already been read"*. The ironic sub-text now asks us a question, does Providence reward our initiative and co-operation?

The story of Solomon and Sheba (1 Kings 10:1-13) provides another fascinating illustration of an ironic sub-text lying below the surface. We have a choice of taking the story at face value, or seeing it as deeply ironic, even sarcastic in its portrayal. It is sometimes said that to understand a story properly you need to know the end. Certainly that can be said of many Biblical narratives, which come from oral traditions where the audiences would hear the same stories over and over again, and would know very well how they ended. So just as we should view the Elijah stories through the lens of his eventual ascension to heaven in 2 Kings 2, as being Divine endorsement for the prophet's various activities, so we need to evaluate the accounts of Solomon's wealth in the light of his eventual demise. In 1 Kings 11:9-11 we read that the Lord became very angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from Him and because of Solomon's continually disobedient attitude, and pronounced a devastating judgment. This causes us to reconsider the accounts of Solomon's wealth and fame. Are they all they appear, or are we entitled to look for ironic 'subversion', even sarcastic mockery?

Brueggemann understands the Queen of Sheba's speech (10:6-9) as offering a cutting irony. When she says *'How happy are your courtiers'*, he regards her phraseology as *'shockingly exclusionary'*. It excludes the rest of the population, many burdened by conscripted labour on the overly grandiose building projects, or paying high taxes to help finance them. They are probably not very happy at all. Brueggemann imagines that when the Queen utters the words *'justice and righteousness'* there would be *'an embarrassed silence in the room'*. There is subversive irony, pointedly contrasting Solomon's unrestrained opulence with Torah requirements of justice.⁵⁵

Now for the gender twist. There is an alternative reading with an even deeper cutting edge. In some manuscripts the word for '*courtiers*' is feminine, which some translations interpret as '*How happy are your wives!*' Really?! Seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, all cooped up together with nothing much to do, so many that the King can scarcely remember their names. Not exactly a recipe for happiness. Surely the Queen is being sarcastic now. It's a peek forward to the end of the story, where we are told that Solomon's love for many foreign women turned his heart from the Lord and '*led him astray*' (11:1-3).

Given the ironic context, are the numbers seven hundred and three hundred numerically accurate, or just gross over-exaggeration? As with Elijah's seven thousand, the numbers are typological.⁵⁶ Seven normally means '*full, complete, perfect*', but here it becomes subversive, it effectively means the opposite. There is heavy irony with underlying pathos. It is the '*full, complete, perfect*' number to lead the King astray. In the end Solomon is portrayed as a wise fool. The King who asked for wisdom to govern his people, instead frittered it away answering riddles to show off and enhance his own reputation, forgetting the Torah requirements of justice and righteousness in the process.

As for Sheba, when we read that the King gave her '*all she desired*' (10:13), we are entitled to see an intentional sexual *double entendre*. Ethiopian emperors were known as the Lion of Judah right down to Haile Selassie in the last century. Ethiopian tradition holds very firmly that Sheba gave birth to Solomon's son, which is how the title began, and which is why a thousand years later Philip encountered an Ethiopian royal official returning from a visit to the temple in Jerusalem, puzzling over the Hebrew scriptures. In God's economy nothing is wasted. Solomon may have frittered away his gift of wisdom, but Sheba got what she came for, and the gift of God-honouring wisdom was passed down her line for centuries, still active when the royal official returned with news of Messiah and a believing church was founded.

6 SUMMARY

Paul exclaims “*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*” (Romans 11:33 NIV). Although he was not speaking about the Bible, his comment is very apt. We have examined just a few examples of the rich and varied nature of Hebrew literary style. An appreciation of its complexity, with its many colloquialisms and figures of speech, can give us a greater insight into the intentions of the story-tellers and writers behind the texts.

So, when we know that having a *'good eye'* means being a generous person, it changes the whole meaning of that text, which then nestles neatly in the context of the passage as a whole instead of standing out like a sore thumb. When we realise that like his contemporaries Jesus often used greatly exaggerated hyperbole, it helps us appreciate his teaching style. We should not take literally figures of speech which were not meant that way. Many Hebrew numerical expressions are such figures of speech which should not be taken literally.

There may be intentional layers of meaning which are both valid, as with *'daily bread'*. When we look for a 'correct meaning' it may be that both possible meanings are intended, rather than being 'either/or'. At other times deliberate ambiguity is more enigmatic, requiring us to revise our initial impressions, or challenging us to think through carefully the different possible meanings on offer. The Bible is often *'in dialogue'* with us.

Many of the stories were recounted orally long before being written down, so they abound with story-telling techniques. Even once written down, the scriptures were still *heard* not *read*. Narrative passages can be semi-poetic, using rhythm, repetition and a variety of wordplay like alliteration and onomatopoeia, which sadly become lost in translation. Very often there will be *'a web of allusive echoes'* which cross-refer to other parts of scripture.

The Hebrew scriptures are full of *'wit, folk-humour and above all irony'*. With oral story-telling just a slight variation in a word can allow a significant change in emphasis. Even odd alterations in the gender of a word can imply a shift in theological emphasis (as with Elijah), or introduce a humorous plot within a plot (as with Ruth). Intentional irony may offer a 'subversive' meaning totally opposed to the literal meaning of the words (as with Sheba).

It may help our reading of scripture to realise that if we don't understand a passage, it could be because of subtle humour or dead-pan irony hiding behind the surface meaning.

Throughout it all we remember that the Bible is inspired by God. Nothing in all creation can compare with the power of the Word of God. Yet he wrote the scriptures as he builds his Kingdom, through the frailties and oddities of ordinary men and women, through the warp and woof of human (in this case Jewish) culture. Our insight can be enriched, and apparent textual difficulties resolved, as we peek behind the cultural and literary settings through which God chose to communicate His Word.

RECOMMENDED READING

Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus, or Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus are good places to go for those new to the subject.

Frank Booth MA, July 2020

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Abbreviations:

Pillar NTC – Pillar New Testament Commentary

NICNT – The New International Commentary on the New Testament

NIGTC – The New International Greek Testament Commentary

8 END NOTES

1 onomatopoeia, means that the very sounds of the words themselves contribute towards the meaning to be conveyed.

2 The Septuagint is the overall name given to various translations of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek.

3 D W Gooding Texts and Versions in New Bible Dictionary (1996) 1171; he gives an interesting account of the development of the Septuagint from around 3rd Century BC onwards.

4 David Bivin & Roy Blizzard Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus 65

5 Lois Tverberg Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus 69-72

6 Tverberg Walking in the Dust 70; see also R T France The Gospel of Matthew 262

7 Tverberg Walking in the Dust 70;

8 Translation by R T France The Gospel of Matthew 192; (see also Matt 18:8-9; Mark 9:42-47)

9 R T France The Gospel of Matthew 205

10 Tverberg Walking in the Dust 113

11 Robert Coote Yahweh recalls Elijah 119

- 12 James Edwards *The Gospel According to Luke* 334 n165
- 13 See France *The Gospel of Matthew* 248; Joel Green *The Gospel of Luke* 443; James Dunn *Jesus Remembered* 410
- 14 Leon Morris *The Gospel According to Matthew* 146
- 15 Edwards *The Gospel According to Luke* 334
- 16 F F Bruce *The New Testament Documents* 48
- 17 For further discussion, including a translation of the Qaddish see France *The Gospel of Matthew* 243, or Green *The Gospel of Luke* 439. For comments on a version of the Qaddish in current use see Michele Guinness *A Little Kosher Seasoning* 66. For an interesting discussion on whether Hebrew rather than Aramaic was the original language Jesus used for the Lord's Prayer, see Edwards *The Gospel According to Luke* 331.
- 18 Kenneth Bailey *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* 121
- 19 There is no room in this paper to examine the Feeding of the Five Thousand, where the link between bread and manna should certainly be seen as intentional; making connections both to Jesus' teaching as spiritual manna, and also to Jesus himself as the Bread of Life, as clearly identified in John 6:31-51. Once again, the use of deliberate linguistic triggers (to Exodus 16, Numbers 11, 2 Kings 4:42-48) is lost in many modern translations. See my later comments on 'allusive echoes'.
- 20 Uriel Simon *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* 19
- 21 Simon *Jonah* 19
- 22 Simon *Jonah* page xlii
- 23 Other references such as Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29; and John 2:19 are to Jesus rebuilding the temple in three days, an oblique reference to his resurrection.
- 24 See my previous paper *Elijah and Covenant* (OPRP May 2008) for a more detailed discussion of this point.
- 25 Martin Goldsmith *Matthew & Mission* 142
- 26 Morris *The Gospel According to Matthew* 471
- 27 France *The Gospel of Matthew* 705; also Ann Spangler & Lois Tverberg *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* 38-39

- 28 Jonathan Magonet *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* 13
- 29 David Stern *Midrash and Jewish Interpretation in the Jewish Study Bible* 1870;
- 30 Stern *Midrash and Jewish Interpretation* 1870
- 31 Magonet *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* 20
- 32 Jerome Walsh *1 Kings* page xvi
- 33 Magonet *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* 20
- 34 Magonet *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* 20
- 35 Uriel Simon *Prophetic Narratives* 205
- 36 Cogan *1 Kings* 450; Walsh *1 Kings* 266
- 37 Walsh *1 Kings* 269
- 38 Walsh *1 Kings* 276
- 39 Johann Lust 'A Gentle Breeze' 111
- 40 Johann Lust 'A Gentle Breeze' 111
- 41 Walsh *1 Kings* page xvi
- 42 Walsh *1 Kings* page xvi
- 43 Magonet *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* 10
- 44 Magonet *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* 6
- 45 The seminal work by Robert Alter *The Art of Biblical Narrative* changed previous scholarly perceptions. Alter was not a Biblical scholar, but a Jewish professor of literature who took on the world of critical Biblical scholarship by challenging them to see the Bible as Jewish literature, overturning existing scholarly assumptions in the process. This caused great controversy but has been hugely influential. See my section on *Reading Hebrew Narrative in the Bibliography*.
- 46 Walsh *1 Kings* 268
- 47 Adrien Bledstein *Female Companionships* 131; Cynthia Ozick *Ruth* 212; both in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* Ed Athalya Brenner (see *Bibliography*).
- 48 Bledstein *Female Companionships* 126

49 Fokkelien Van Dyke-Hemmes Ruth: A Product of Women's Culture in A Feminist Companion to Ruth 139.

50 Ilona Rashkow Ruth: The Discourse of Power in A Feminist Companion to Ruth 36

51 Michele Guinness A Little Kosher Seasoning 221

52 Alice Ostriker The Book of Ruth & the Love of the Land 346. For further double entendres in the Hebrew text leading to communal giggling, see the articles by Bledstein and Rashkow in A Feminist Companion to Ruth.

53 R T France The Gospel of Mark 200

54 I had a Jewish cousin whose sense of irony was so dry that his wife never really caught on, and would often reproach him, not realising his gentle ironic humour meant the exact opposite of what he actually said. It is this dry irony which permeates many Biblical narratives, but which is very hard to pick up from the printed page, more especially for those who do not appreciate irony, or understand it as humour.

55 Walter Breuggemann 1 & 2 Kings 134-139. Commenting on the phrase 'justice and righteousness', Breuggemann understands that 'The word pair, when understood in prophetic perspective, constitutes a major critique of the kind of acquisitive aggrandizement embraced by Solomon.'

56 See Job chapters 1 & 42 for similar typological combinations of seven and three.

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John 6:35

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