

## Biblical Jokes

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A serious reader might, one day, discover that not everything he reads in “the Good Book” is holy. There are boring lists of laws and names; there are uninspiring pages of history; there are passages, which even the Jews objected to having read in public. But humour is “out”. Thus, Jorge de Burgos, in *The Name of the Rose*, makes the general statement that truth and good are not being laughed at, and that, because laughter begets doubt, it is to be shunned by all true Christians.<sup>1</sup> Can one really believe that the Bible would contradict this opinion? The evidence at hand has prompted a modern theologian to say that, “the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things of all literature”.<sup>2</sup> Surely, the Bible is no joking matter, and that in more than one sense.

As a matter of fact, there is a lot of wit and humour in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> This has been recognised for ages, e.g., in the play on words, which are commonplace in the first pages of Genesis. Adam (אָדָם = *hā’ādām*) is “the one made from the soil” (חֹדָם = *hā’adāmāh*) (cf. Gen 2:7), hence he is an “earthling”, or even a “redskin” (cf. אָדָם = *’adom* = red). Eve (חַוְוָה = *chavvāh*) gets her name because she is “the mother of all living” (קַח־לַחַיָּה = *khāl-chāy*) (Gen 3:20).<sup>4</sup> Cain’s name refers to Eve’s first experience of becoming a mother (Gen 4:1) (קַנְיָהּ = *qānīī* = I have gotten), while her second-born might have his name Abel because he did not

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, London UK: Book Club Associates, 1984, p. 132, and passim, where he gives all the reasons, and authorities, why Jesus could, but never did, laugh.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, London UK: Max Reinhardt, 1954, Dialogue 26 (April 5, 1942), pp. 186-196, quotation p. 195. Similar sentiments are expressed on pp. 28, 107, and 351 (courtesy John Quiring, Center for Process Studies, Claremont CA). The furthest A. N. Whitehead goes in allowing humouristic elements in the Bible are Elijah’s taunting the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), Haman hanged on his own gallows (Est 7), or, also, the riot of the silversmiths at Ephesus (Acts 19).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Webster, *Laughter in the Bible*, St Louis MO: Bethany Press, 1960, p. 9, has figured out that, adding up the many varieties of laughter, there are over 250 biblical references to it. They are most heavily concentrated in the wisdom literature (Job, Ps, Prov, Qoh), occur frequently in the prophets (Is, Jer), and are also of great significance to the gospel writers. References to more scholarly discussions on wit, humour, and irony in the Bible are given in the first part of the Bibliography, below. In the following notes, we rely especially on W. F. Stinespring’s articles in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol 2, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> There is a further play on words in Gen 2:23b, which is not completely lost in the English translation. Here, Adam says: “She shall be called woman” (אִשָּׁה = *’ishsha*) “because she was taken from man” (אִשָּׁה = *me’ish*).

live very long (cf. הָבֵל = *hebel* = breath?). Furthermore, as the story unfolds, parents and children are expelled from Eden, the place of delight (cf. אָדָם = '*ādan* = to delight). This whole section of the book of Genesis, says W. F. Stinespring, has "a lightness of touch that has long time been recognised. Who has smiled at the indecent haste, with which the guilty pair clothe themselves, and try to hide among the trees? And how sadly, yet ludicrously human, is it, when the man blames the woman, and she, in turn, blames the serpent? The whole atmosphere contrasts sharply with the austere account of creation that precedes."<sup>5</sup>

The humorous elements, just noted, still do it, in some modern yarns. But there are many more amusing sections in the scriptures. Think only of Isaiah's famous satire on the makers and worshippers of idols (Is 44:9-20; furthermore, Ps 115:4-8; Hos 13:2; Wis 13:11-14, 17), or of such incidents, where the statue of Dagon is pushed off his pedestal, and then lies face-down on the floor, with his two hands severed (1 Sam 5:3-4), or where the gods Bel and Nebo are loaded on beasts of burden, and carried off as booty (Is 46:1; also Judges 18:24; Dan 11:8; Jer 46:15).

As to religious office-bearers, there is the anecdote of the Samaritan priest, who was sent to Bethel to teach Israelites "how to worship Jahweh" (2 Kings 17:28), and that of the prophet Balaam, hired to curse Israel, and who, against his own will, repeatedly blesses them (Num 22:5-24, 25), or, finally, the incident of the 70 priests of Bel, who used to feast on the offerings given to their god, and then were exposed by the footsteps they left from a nightly visit to their temple (Dan 14:16-22).<sup>6</sup>

Theologians, too, in the Bible, are the victims of irony and ridicule. One masterpiece of satire, is the book of Job, which continuously criticises the conventional religious ideas of its day, especially the dogma of perfect, and exact, retribution, or justness of reward, for men's deeds on earth. Even the so-called "friends" of Job add to this effect by the very stuffiness, and conventionality, of

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. W. F. Stinespring, "Art, Humour", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol 2, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 660B.

<sup>6</sup> Compare also, in the Additions to Daniel in the LXX, the story of the chaste Susanna. There is, in vv. 54-58, a rhyme (σχίνον = *schion* and πρίνον = *prinon*), and a definite wordplay. The elder, who affirms that he saw Susanna sinning under a small mastick tree, (ὑπὸ σχίνον = *hupo schinon*) will be split in two (v. 55: σχίσει = *schizei*), whereas his companion, who indicated a mighty oak tree (ὑπὸ πρίνον = *hupo prinon*) will be cut into pieces (v. 59: πρίσαι = *prisai*). Only the NEB has attempted to render the pun into English: "under a clove tree . . . God's angel will cleave you in two", "under a yew tree . . . He is waiting to hew you down".

their attacks. This is particularly so, because the reader knows in advance what the final outcome will be.<sup>7</sup>

Interesting, too, is the book of Jonah, which has an irony all of its own. Here a broad-minded Jew ridicules his own people, represented by the rebellious prophet, for their lack of missionary zeal, their prejudice against foreigners, and their failure to understand a God of love (cf., e.g., Jonah 4:10-11). Jonah's theology contrasts with the nationalistic outlook, found in the book of Esther, and is not unlike the broad-mindedness of Ruth, which stands up against the exclusiveness, professed in the work of the Chronist. Surely, we pious readers may join in with the One who laughs in heaven (cf. Ps 2:4; Prov 1:26), be it at the expense of pagan gods and their retinue, or even at the expense of Israel's own theologians and exegetes.

The Bible also has several funny stories, in which patriarchs, judges, and kings lose their composure, or are caught in the snares they set for others. For instance, Jacob, the first-born, because he "supplanted" his brother (Gen 27:36: יַעֲקֹב = *ya'aqōv*), one day meets his match in Laban, who first marries off Leah to him (Gen 29:23), . . . by reason of birthright! (v. 26).

Then there is Samson, a sort of uncontrollable Till Eulenspiegel, or Peer Gynt. Always bawling, and excelling his rivals in muscular strength, yet, at the same time, no match for feminine wiles. Under his rough exterior, there is a witty, if untutored, mind, quick at repartee, an instinctive devotion to his own people, and a dogged determination in avenging wrongs, which culminates in a self-inflicted heroic death.<sup>8</sup>

There is also King David, who, with abandon, dances and whirls before the Ark, to the utter disgust of Michal (cf. 2 Sam 6:14-16). No. We rather expect people to stride solemnly after an Ark, and not to hop and to skip from it, wearing only a linen ephod! We have, apparently, forgotten that the Lord wants us to rejoice, and to shout for joy, in His presence (cf. Deut 12:18; Ps 33:1).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. F. Stinespring, "Art, Irony, and Satire", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol 2, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 727A.

<sup>8</sup> Something of the flavour of the entire Samson narrative can be sensed in J. Moffat's rendering of the Hebrew jingle in Judges 14:18: "if you hadn't used my heifer for your plough, you wouldn't have guessed my riddle now". Another instance, is the following free rendering of Judges 15:16: "With a bone of an ass, I've piled them in a mass! With a bone of an ass, I've slain a thousand men". One may also note Samson's straight-faced lies to Delilah in Judges 16:7, 11, 13 (cf. Stinespring, "Art, Irony, and Satire", 726B).

Things are not very much different in the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Some authors have made a lot out of the fact that “Jesus wept” (John 11:35; also Luke 19:41; Heb 5:7), whereas it is nowhere mentioned that He ever did laugh. Still, we must credit Jesus with creating a funny situation, when calling the chief tax collector of Jericho out of his hiding place in a tree (Luke 19:1-10). He also tricked Simon the Pharisee, in pronouncing His own judgment (Luke 43), and the High Priest, in confessing, unwittingly, His divine Sonship (Matt 26:64). After the resurrection, He played hide-and-seek with Mary Magdalene (John 20:13-16). And there is also something of a tongue-in-cheek attitude, when Jesus, in one parable, praises the unjust steward (Luke 16:8), and, in another one, has a Pharisee, i.e., a separatist, “standing by himself” (Luke 18:11 D), and the publican “standing far from him” (v. 13).<sup>10</sup>

Even if we credit these, and other more-subtle points, to the gospel writers, they still indicate that Jesus’ biographers did not feel it inappropriate to thus depict our Lord. Nor are the New Testament theologians, John and Paul, reluctant to use humour and irony. Some of John’s examples include 7:42; 8:7; 9:27, 41; and 11:50. While Paul’s Corinthian correspondence shows also several interesting instances (cf. 1 Cor 4 and 9; 2 Cor 3:1; 10:12; 11:4, 7; 12:11, 13, 16). Surely, the New Testament, too, is full of humour!

Now, we must not forget that, between the not-always-cautious inspired writers (or, also, those who feel at home with the original languages), on the one side, and the Bible readers of today, on the other side, there have been whole generations of devout Bible translators. Their linguistic choices did not always

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<sup>9</sup> Several plays on words appear in the first gospel, the most famous one being probably Matt 16:18: “You are Peter (Πέτρος = *petros*; Aramaic: ܩܦܗܐ = *kēphā*), and on this rock (πέτρα = *petra*; Aramaic: ܩܦܗܐ = *kēphā*) I will build My church.” A satirical pun occurs, e.g., in 6:16: The Pharisees disfigure (ἀθανίζουσιν = *aphanizousin*) their faces, that they may figure (θανῶσιν = *phanōsin*) in public as fasting. Not unsimilar, are 21:41 (NEB; Knox) and 24:30: The peoples of the earth shall wail (κόψονται = *kopsontai*), and they shall see (ὄψονται = *opsontai*) the Son of man”. In addition, it is well known that, in 22:23-33, Jesus outwits His opponents, and, in the next chapter, He develops a rather extended satire on the Pharisees, and their proverbial hypocrisy (note esp. 23:24, 27).

<sup>10</sup> In the gospel story of Matt 9:1-8, Jesus is about to heal the paralytic, when His opponents intervene and blame Him for claiming to have a power reserved to God alone. For the benefit of the teachers of the Law, Jesus seems to change the proposed act of mercy, in an apologetic argument. This is a most unusual argument *a minore parte*. It might also be (as H. Clavier, [Reference details unknown], 1959, p. 14, puts it) that some bystanders had objected that it does not cost any effort just to *talk*, but that a visible proof was needed. In that case, too, Jesus would have taken up the challenge.

allow them to create equivalent plays on words: “Traduttore, traditore”, as the Italians say. But, in addition to this, translators have often imposed their own norms of decency and propriety on the holy scriptures, and have robbed them of much of their humanity and earthliness. Hence, it is necessary, today, to go even beyond the notes of a study bible to discover the numerous puns and plays on words, which are present in the original Hebrew, or Greek.

Some plays on words, we have mentioned already, for instance, regarding Jacob the “supplanter” (cf. Gen 27:36). Elsewhere, the patriarch’s name alludes to the child gripping Esau’s heel (Gen 25:26: also יַעֲקֹב = *ya‘aqōv*). As to Esau, himself, his name (עֵשָׂו = *‘esāv*) is explicitly connected with the fact that his whole body was “like a hairy garment” (Gen 25:25: כְּאֶדְרֵת שֵׁשׁ־עָרְבָה = *kh<sup>e</sup>’adderet sē‘ār*), which rather alludes at the land of Seir (עֵיִר = *sē‘īyr*), the territory later inhabited by Esau’s descendants, the Edomites. Elsewhere, the patriarch’s name is twice related to “the red land” (אֶדֹמ = *’Edōm*), because, at birth, his skin was “reddish” (also Gen 25:25), and later, because he sold his birth privilege for “that red broth” (v. 30: חֲמֵץ־לֶחֶם = *hā’ādōm*), further explained as “a soup of lentils” (v. 34).

Isaac’s story, too, is full of puns, which are all hidden, in translation. At his birth, Abraham “laughs” in surprise (Gen 17:17 P), and so does Sarah (18:12 J). Whereas the women folk “rejoice” with her, or maybe “mock” about her late motherhood (21:6). In addition, there is the same hint in Ishmael’s “playing” or “making sport” with Isaac (21:9), and, finally, in Isaac’s “fondling” of his wife Rebecca (26:8).

A few words might be added on the use of certain euphemisms, although it is not easy to appreciate the exact connotations they had for the original audiences. A well-known instance, is Rachel’s treatment of Laban’s household gods, which she had stolen, and hidden inside her camel’s saddle, and then pretends that “the custom of women” was upon her (cf. Gen 31:35 KJV). This rather unusual way makes one smile, since we are not used to such kind of playfulness in the history of our venerable patriarchs and matriarchs! Yet, one should realise that, in the Semitic culture, there was probably nothing funny about this particular idiom, and that any such impression is only created by the different conventions, which prevail among today’s speakers of English. If there is any humour involved at all, it should be in the fact that Laban’s tiny household gods

are so worthless that even a woman in Rachel's condition does not hesitate to sit on them.<sup>11</sup>

Then, there is, also, the anecdote of Elijah, making fun of the pagan priests. Although quite in line with the satires of other prophets, his wit is lost in most translations, except in the recent TEV (1 Kings 18:27: using "relieving himself", against "busy", "retired", "engaged", "moving", "pursuing", in the other versions). Saul, a great king, doesn't fare better, when, traditionally, he goes into a cave "to cover his feet" (1 Sam 24:3 KJV), and only recent translations have dared to drop this euphemism, and refer to a royal relief action (cf. NEB, TEV, NIV).

There is no need to insist further. Translation techniques have changed, meanwhile, so that even some Bible Societies no longer find it *infra dig* to produce biblical cartoons and comic strips. People have come to realise, more easily, that the tricks of the stage were as familiar to the writers of the past, as they are to public speakers of today. Both often use a light-hearted joke to keep the hearers' attention. There is, then, no longer a quarrel with humour in the divinely-inspired, canonical scriptures.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. De Waard, "Do you use 'clean language'?", in *The Bible Translator* 22 (1971), pp. 107-115; quoted p. 110.