



# Humor in the Bible

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**H**ow do we define “humor”? What is humorous or funny depends as much on the listener or viewer as the situation or humorist, so an exact definition is impossible. Defining humor is much like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart trying to define “obscenity” in a 1964 case before the court (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*). He wrote, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced...but I know it when I see it.” An adequate definition of humor is impossible, but we “know it when we see it.”

The ancient Greeks speculated considerably on the nature of comedy. They considered “irony” to be the highest form of comedy—the dramatic twist or effect caused by events or people who act differently than one would suppose. The actual word “humor” entered the English language only in the 1600s. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word “humor” arose from the consideration of the various “humors” that might affect a person’s temperament. Since then, the meaning of “humor” has broadened to encompass the whole range of what we deem “funny”—slapstick, comedy, jokes, farce, incompetence, foolishness, irony, and more.

Is there humor in the Bible? Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead didn’t see any: “The total absence of humour in the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literatures.”<sup>1</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers thought the opposite. She imagined, for example, how the tax collector Matthew might have heard Jesus’ parables:

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 1.

*The Scriptures are rich with humor—people acting in foolish ways, the irony of people acting differently than one would expect, the sudden twists in a story to illustrate a meaning. The Bible is about human life—all of it—how could it not contain humor?*

He has gleefully thrown away all his worldly goods—but, all the same, his professional instincts are shocked by financial stupidity and appealed to by financial astuteness. He thinks the Parable of the Unjust Steward is a frightfully funny story.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Cahill wrote about “the wry and smiling Jesus” and his “laughing victory” as he disputes with the religious authorities.<sup>3</sup>

I first realized that the Bible could be funny when I heard Professor David Rhoads from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago recite the Gospel of Mark. When you hear the story told aloud, it becomes so clear how the disciples—those destined to become our great heroes of the faith—fail to catch on to who Jesus is. They have witnessed stupendous miracles, yet they are scared to death in the boat as Jesus sleeps during a storm (Mark 4:35–41). Jesus tells the disciples that to be great is to be a servant (Mark 9:33–35) and that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like little children (Mark 10:13–16), yet soon after that James and John have apparently missed the whole point and ask to sit at Jesus’ right and left hand in glory (Mark 10:35–40). Nor do the townspeople of Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth, who have known him the longest and who have no doubt heard of the unbelievable miracles he has performed, grasp who he is: “Can’t be! We watched this man grow among us” (Mark 6:1–6). One can’t help but smile at the rich irony in scenes like these.

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In looking for humor in the Bible, we are not referring to buffoonery, such as the pie-in-the-face kind of “Three Stooges” humor. We are also not thinking of the humor as from a stand-up comedian or the wise-cracking of Alan Alda as Hawkeye on M\*A\*S\*H. The Bible does, however, tell of humor at the expense of others. No doubt Israelite children whooped with laughter hearing the story of Samson tying torches to the tails of three hundred foxes, who ran and set afire the Philistine fields of grain and olive groves; but the Philistine farmers didn’t find it so funny (Judg 15:4, 5). The pompous platitudes of Job’s “comforters” are laughable, but they were spoken in the midst of Job’s sufferings. The Jewish Purim festival is a light-hearted observance of the rescue of the Jews in Babylon by Queen Esther and Uncle Mordecai, celebrated with masquerades and “Haman cookies,” even though the story ends grimly with the hanging of Haman.

<sup>2</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943) 100.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* (New York: Anchor, 2001) 280.

Psalm 126:2 describes the laughter of joy, but in Psalm 2:4, 37:14, and 59:8 we read of the “laughter of derision.” When Jesus announced that the ruler’s little girl was not dead but sleeping, the people laughed at him (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53). At his trial and crucifixion Jesus was mocked, derided, and scoffed at—a grim sort of humor (Matt 27:29–31; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35).

For our purposes here, however, let us define humor as those situations, comments, or stories that would cause us to smile, chuckle, or even laugh. It helps to put ourselves in the place of those first listeners or participants of these stories. We are so accustomed to hearing them that we barely realize the impact they would have had upon those who were there.

### THE UNEXPECTED TWIST

All throughout the Scriptures God acts in unexpected ways. We expect one thing, but God turns our expectations upside down and surprises us. We can’t help but smile at this flagrant irony.

The best known instance where the word “laugh” occurs in the Bible is with Abraham and Sarah. God promised them a son, but Sarah’s biological clock had run well past midnight, and they had given up hope. Yet, when God assures them that indeed Sarah would have her son, they each laughed for surprise and joy. Indeed, Abraham laughed so hard that he fell on his face with laughter (Gen 17:17; 18:12–15).

The most beloved of Jesus’ parables is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). We do not think of it as a funny story, but imagine the reaction of those standing around Jesus listening to it for the first time. First, the younger son asks for his inheritance. Can’t you imagine the listeners nudging each other, thinking, “What cheek! This teenage kid asking for all that money!” But then the situation is compounded—to the surprise and raised eyebrows of those first listeners—when the father gives it to him. “What sensible father would ever do that?” As they hear how the son wastes the whole sum and ends up in the pigsty, the listeners smile and nod to each other, “No surprise there! We knew it would end that way.” The son comes home and appropriately asks only to be a servant. Listeners probably assume the father will take the boy back, but of course make him work to make up for all those losses. But no, the father takes him back with no consequences at all. Then comes the one sensible person in the whole story, the faithful, hardworking elder brother, and *he’s* rebuked! Imagine the reaction of those first listeners. We are amused at the young son’s exorbitant request, surprised at the father’s giving in, gratified when the elder brother brings a sensible note into the story, then brought to realize that all along Jesus was describing God’s extravagant mercy dealing with us. The humor and huge irony of people acting so illogically and incongruously has set us up for the unexpected, surprising, and astonishing good news of God’s grace and acceptance.

One of the most genuinely humorous stories in the Bible is buried in 2 Kings 6,

once again with a totally unexpected twist. The Syrian army comes to capture the prophet Elisha. When God answers Elisha's prayer to strike the army blind, the prophet leads them to Samaria, where the Israelite king can easily kill them. But Elisha says no. So what shall we do with this enemy? "Feed them," Elisha says, "they're hungry!" So the king, no doubt puzzled by all this, gives his enemies not a sack lunch with some potato chips and a pickle, but "a great feast," and sends them on their way. The story ends with the comment that the Syrian army "no longer came raiding into the land of Israel" (2 Kings 6:23). What a twist! Violence usually escalates into more violence, but here's an instance where a totally unexpected response of nonviolence and even hospitality defuses what could have been a bloody outcome. I wonder if Martin Luther King Jr. ever preached on that text.

#### PEOPLE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO ACT THAT WAY

Role reversal is a standard element of humor and comedy. In the TV series *Frasier*, the brothers Frasier and Niles Crane are highly trained Harvard psychiatrists yet bumble their way ineptly through various domestic situations. On a larger scale, sensible persons would not dare argue with the sovereign creator God of the universe, yet Abraham does. When he hears of God's plan to destroy the cities, Abraham plays "Gotcha!" with God, goading God, as it were, to act according to God's own standards: "I can't imagine you would do such a thing, killing the righteous people along with the wicked. Come now, a righteous God can't do that!" (Gen 18:25, paraphrased). Then, in a scene that resembles the dickering over prices at a Middle Eastern street bazaar, Abraham negotiates the rescue of righteous people from the soon-to-be-destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, all the while acting deferential, presumably to avoid angering God: "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more..." Yet in the end Abraham has to admit there may not be anybody righteous in those two cities, except for Lot and his family (Gen 18:32). How can anyone help but smile at that exchange?

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The story of Jonah is not only humorous, but the humor is compounded as the story unfolds. Jonah tries to run from God—a futile gesture—and ends up in the fish. In the fish's belly, he prays a lengthy prayer for deliverance. Arriving finally in Nineveh, he preaches (somewhat grudgingly, we suppose) the shortest sermon in the Bible: eight words in English, only five in Hebrew, no gospel, only threat—and this results in the Bible's most successful sermon! Was Jonah happy about this? Quite the opposite. He pouts in anger, consoled only by the shade of the bush God provides. Then God sends a worm to destroy the bush, and Jonah

pouts even more. We can imagine God looking down as a parent and wanting to laugh at a child pouting in foolish, exaggerated self-pity. The story ends as Jonah learns about God's vast willingness to forgive—or at least the reader does.

### GOTCHA!

“Hoisting someone on his own petard” is a standard element of humor. For example, when the Israelites complain of hardship on their exodus journey, God angrily threatens to “strike them with pestilence and disinherit them” (Num 14:12). Moses intercedes, first reminding God that God's reputation will be sullied as other nations conclude that God can't rescue the people as planned. Then Moses reminds God of the promise to be “slow of anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression” (v. 18). If you're so loving and forgiving, Moses argues, then now's the time to be what you say you are. Gotcha, God! Impertinent, yes, and humorous too (Num 14:13–19; see also Exod 32:30–34; 33:12–15).

We are appalled at how callously Jesus treats the Canaanite woman who pleads for healing for her daughter in Matt 15:21–28. Yet she doesn't back down, but turns the table on Jesus by pressing on and reminding him that even dogs get crumbs from the table. Jesus is astounded at her faith, “and her daughter was healed instantly.” Who doesn't smile or cheer at the mother's persistence?

Imagine the onlookers listening to Jesus contend with the Pharisees and lawyers as they try to incriminate him with tricky questions. How humorous it must have been when Jesus stymied them by asking them if John's authority came from heaven or not. They were baffled, because either answer would have caused trouble for them (Matt 21:23–27). Finally, they thought they had Jesus trapped by asking, “Is it lawful to pay taxes or not?” One answer will anger Jewish patriots, the other will incriminate him with the secular authorities. When Jesus showed them a coin with the emperor's image and said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's,” they were again baffled and left Jesus alone (Matt 22:15–22). Gotcha! Again and again in those confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the audience must have found it highly amusing as Jesus outwitted them.

### IMAGINE IT ON FILM

For the traveling troupes who performed mystery and morality plays from town to town in the Middle Ages, biblical scenes were stock repertoire. Think of the Bible stories that become humorous when we visualize them. Think of them on film.

Pontius Pilate was the most powerful man in the Gospel stories, the representative of the mighty Roman Empire. Yet, picture the scene described in John 18 when Jesus is brought before him—beaten, bleeding, and half-naked. Does Jesus cower in fear before the mighty Pilate? No. When Jesus is brought before him, Pilate tries to send him back to the Jewish authorities. They won't take him. He ques-

tions Jesus, who calmly answers, until Pilate throws up his hands and asks, “What is truth?” knowing that he is being cleverly manipulated (v. 38). He goes out and announces to the temple authorities that he finds no case against Jesus, and offers to release him. But Pilate is thwarted by the authorities, who ask for Barabbas instead. Even Pilate’s wife pleads for him to release this innocent man (Matt 27:19), but Pilate is hemmed in by circumstances. He goes back and talks to Jesus, and again tries to release him, but continues to be outmaneuvered. Matthew adds that “Pilate saw that he could do nothing” (Matt 27:24). Picture the scene: Jesus remains calm; the mighty Pilate appears frazzled, outwitted, and helpless. Irony is a form of humor, and what more ironical scene is there in the Bible?

Another story in the Bible which is humorous to read, but would be downright funny to watch on screen is the account of Manoah and his wife in Judg 13. A “man of God” appears to her and informs her that she will bear a son and then gives her instructions about the boy: Don’t cut his hair; he will be a Nazirite and will deliver his people from the Philistines. She runs to tell her husband, who is apparently miffed that the “man of God” appeared to his wife, since he is the head of the household. So he prays that God will send the man again, this time to him, with instructions about the new child. God answers his prayer, but sends the man of God again to the wife instead of to Manoah. This time, his wife is out in the field, so she tells the man of God to wait so she can fetch her husband (would a filmmaker portray an angel leaning on a fencepost as he waited patiently out in the field?). Manoah arrives and asks the man of God if he’s the one who spoke to his wife, as if he’s offended that a strange man would so inappropriately talk to a woman alone. The man of God says, “I am he,” so Manoah asks to hear the message, even though his wife has already told him the whole story. Then they invite the man of God to lunch; he doesn’t eat, but mysteriously ascends to heaven in the cooking smoke. We readers knew all along the visitor was an angel, but the story says that only at the end did Manoah and his wife realize it was indeed an angel of God.

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All throughout the Scriptures we find passages that are humorous.

- Can we fail to smile at how Adam and Eve point the blame elsewhere after their transgression: “She gave me the fruit”; “The serpent tricked me” (Gen 3:12–13)?
- How foolish is it to try to build “a city and a tower with its top in the heavens” (Gen 11:4)?
- Consider the scheming that that goes on between Jacob and Laban. I remember how in Bible camp we repeated the “Mizpah benediction” to each other—“The LORD watch between you and me when we are absent, one from another”—not realizing that what these two connivers are really saying is, “God had better keep an eye on you when I’m not around” (Gen 31:49).

- Descriptions that might sound normal in Hebrew, a language accustomed to similes and metaphors, sound comical to us in English, such as comparing the attributes of a beautiful woman to doves, goats, pomegranates, towers, fawns, and towers in the Song of Solomon (4:1–5).
- We wouldn't dare read the story of Balaam and his talking donkey in church, knowing people would laugh (Num 22:22–35).
- Think of all the gentle humor in the Book of Proverbs—the fool who thinks he can buy wisdom with money (17:16); a man too lazy to lift food to his mouth (19:24); the foolishness of not hiding from danger (22:3); the futility of speaking wisdom to a fool (23:9); and many more.
- The spectacle of the chief tax collector climbing a tree to see Jesus must have struck onlookers as funny (Luke 19:4).
- There is a touch of comedy in people who do something clearly foolish and have to pay the consequences—an architect who launches a building project without counting the cost (Luke 14:28–32), a man who builds on a flimsy foundation of sand (Matt 7:24–27), the young women who failed to bring sufficient oil for the wedding feast (Matt 25:1–12), or the rich man who built bigger and bigger grain bins but neglected his own soul (Luke 12:16–21).
- At the wedding in Cana, even after Jesus rebukes Mary when she tells him about the wine shortage, saying, “What does this have to do with me?” we can detect the twinkle in a mother's eye when she turns to the servants and says knowingly, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:1–11). Mothers do know best!

So, is there humor in the Bible? The more appropriate question would be how could there *not* be humor in the Bible? Humor is created by surprising endings, unexpected events, people doing foolish things, incongruities between what people appear to be and really are, crafty motives, misidentifications, misunderstandings—all the stuff of human life, and all of it is in the Bible. The Bible is by its very nature inevitably humorous, because the message of the Bible is that humans do evil and foolish things, but God creates unexpected endings. God acts in unexpected ways, and people's lives change in surprising directions. Anything out of the ordinary can be humorous, and the purpose of the Bible is to jar people out of the ordinary and change life in new directions. The Bible is, after all, about human life, and the whole spectrum of human life is there—including humor! ☩

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