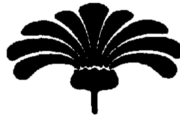
# On HUMOUR and the COMIC in the HEBREW BIBLE

Edited by
Yehuda T. Radday
& Athalya Brenner



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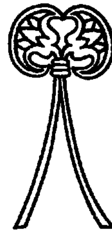

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*General Editor*: David M. Gunn
(Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia)
*Assistant General Editor*: Danna Nolan Fewell
(Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Texas)
*Consultant Editors*: Elizabeth Struthers Malbon
(Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg, Virginia)
James G. Williams
(Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York)

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## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| *BA* | *Biblical Archaeologist* |
| BDB | F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907) |
| BH | Biblical Hebrew |
| BLS | Bible and Literature Series |
| BWANT | Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament |
| HAT | Handbuch zum Alten Testament |
| *JBL* | *Journal of Biblical Literature* |
| *JSOT* | *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* |
| *JSS* | *Journal of Semitic Studies* |
| MH | Mishnaic Hebrew |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| *ZAW* | *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* |

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## CONTRIBUTORS

*Athalya Brenner* is a graduate of the University of Haifa, The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the University of Manchester, England and teaches Biblical Studies at Oranim College of Education, Israel. She has written *Colour Terms in the Old Testament* (1982); *The Israelite Woman* (1985); *Ruth and Naomi* (in Hebrew, 1988); and *The Song of Songs* in the series *Old Testament Guides* (1989). Address: Oranim College of Education/University of Haifa, College Division, Tiv'on 36910, Israel.

*Robert P. Carroll* studied Hebrew at Trinity College, Dublin, and has a Ph.D. in Semitic Studies from the University of Edinburgh. He is Reader in Biblical Studies at the University of Glasgow, and the author of *When Prophecy Failed* (1979); *From Chaos to Covenant* (1981); *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL, 1986); and *Jeremiah* (Old Testament Guides, 1989). Address: Department of Biblical Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK.

*Philip R. Davies*. A graduate of the Universities of Oxford and St Andrews, Dr Davies is currently Reader in Old Testament at the University of Sheffield. In addition to several books and articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls, he has also written *Daniel* in the series *Old Testament Guides* (1985); and most recently, with J.W. Rogerson, *The Old Testament World*. Address: Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.

*J. Cheryl Exum* is Associate Professor of Theology (Hebrew Bible) at Boston College. She holds a Ph.D. degree from Columbia University in New York. She has published widely on literary approaches to the Bible, served on the editorial boards of *Semeia* and *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, and

edited three volumes on biblical poetics, most recently *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus* (in the *Semeia Studies* series). Address: Department of Theology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167-3806, USA.

*Moshe Garsiel* is Associate Professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. His research work focuses on Biblical geography and the Bible as literature. Address: Department of Biblical Studies, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.

*Francis Landy* is Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Alberta. He wrote *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (1983). He describes himself as 'quiet and untramelled by family or friends'. Address: Department of Religious Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada T6G 2B4.

*Etan Levine* is Professor of Biblical Studies at The University of Haifa, Israel, and the author of sixteen books on classical Judaica. He is currently Visiting Scholar at Columbia University, and is completing a comprehensive study on the Aramaic Versions of the Bible. Address: Department of Biblical Studies, University of Haifa, Mt Carmel, Haifa 31999, Israel.

*John R. Miles* has a Ph.D. from Harvard University (1971). After teaching for several years he moved into book publishing as editor at Doubleday, New York, and executive editor at the University of California Press. He is currently book editor at the Los Angeles Times, but remains intermittently active in Bible scholarship. Address: The Los Angeles Times, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles, CA 90053, USA.

*Yehuda T. Radday* is Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at the Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa. He studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, and The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and taught Torah with classical commentaries. His fields of research are the narrative techniques of, and computer-aided statistical enquiries into, the Hebrew Bible. Address: General Studies, The Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa 32000, Israel.

*William Whedbee* received his B.A. from Westmont College, his B.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary, and his Ph.D. from Yale University. He is currently Professor of Religion and Head of the Department of Religion at Pomona College, Claremont, California. He published studies on Isaiah and Wisdom literature, among other topics; and is presently at work on a study of selected Minor Prophets and on the Bible and the Comic Vision. Address: Department of Religion, Pomona College, Claremont, CA 91711, USA.

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# BETWEEN INTENTIONALITY AND RECEPTION: ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND APPLICATION (A PREVIEW)

A. Brenner and Y.T. Radday

The essays presented in this volume, previously published and new ones, are grounded in three tacit presuppositions:

1. Instances of humour, jokes and comic expression are to be found in the Hebrew Bible or read into its texts.
2. By way of a generalization, the nature of biblical humour is unique albeit elusive.
3. The acknowledgment of humorous and comic elements—when and where these are judged to be valid—can serve as a valuable strategy for biblical exegesis.

Having commenced from these common denominators, however, the contributors depart on their separate ways. Consequently, the essays here collected are far from uniform or consistent with some so-called theory of biblical humour. The authors do not even agree on the fundamental issues of what humour in general and biblical humour in particular are, and about the latter's affinity with laughing and laughter. Some take a broader view, others a more limited one. There is no consensus concerning the rhetorical modes or literary genres that are widely or partly recognized as manifestations and vehicles of humour elsewhere in literary practice, and their applicability to the interpretation of biblical literature. The difficulties of evaluating biblical humour are exacerbated by the awareness that, next to the inhibiting reverence for biblical texts, there lurks the methodological dilemma of veering

between textual intentionality and reader's reception/ response. And this question, an essential one for contemporary literary criticism, is especially significant in the case of any discourse on humour.

What is known as Common Sense indicates that the communication of humour is notoriously problematic. Formulating a theory of reading humour is therefore an even more formidable task than formulating other segments of a general reading theory. Reading texts which are not self-defined by some intrinsic means as 'humorous' or 'comic' (which the biblical texts are not) is much more controversial than evaluating a self-declared 'humorous' oral or written presentation. One therefore has to settle for admitted subjectivity and a polyvalence of opinions. Correspondence (concerning some of the reasons for disregarding humour in the bible, for instance) is followed by variance (about text intentionality *vs* reader's reception, or irony and its relational status *vis-à-vis* humour). This state of affairs mirrors the incongruities inherent in humour, its perception, and the analysis of its nature and functionality.

On the other hand, certain issues keep cropping up in most of the contributions. The ensuing repetition is caused by the writers' (= readers') preoccupation with those fundamental issues. Since the volume is a sample of modes concerning the assessment of humour in biblical literature and the ways in which this assessment facilitates the interpretation of biblical texts, a certain amount of overlap cannot be avoided. It is hoped that the thematic concerns and the broad consent on basic issues bind the individual contributions together, and lend them a degree of cohesion. We shall try to introduce the diversity of approach and procedures applied by a short overview of individual essays.

In 'On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction', Radday raises the problem of the methodological issues of defining humour in general and its biblical brand in particular, a theme that resurfaces in almost every essay. He discusses the reasons and motives for the almost universal neglect of this facet of biblical literature throughout ages of hermeneutics and theology, and attempts to articulate criteria for evaluating the legitimacy of readers' responses to the bibli-

cal authors' intentionally didactic humour.

The essays grouped in Part I deal with general (vertical) topics. 'On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament' (Brenner) opens the debate. By defining the semantic field and assigning a hierarchy to its constituent lexemes, it is shown that biblical occurrences of humour are mostly of what Freud calls 'tendentious humour'. This category of humour ridicules and hurts by exposure and causes joy to its producer at the expense of the other (see also Landy's essay). The linguistic data exclude neither educational purposes nor entertainment value as predominant motives for the literary utilization of humour. They do indicate, though, that the chief motive for biblical instances of humour appears to be aggression. This is exemplified by the availability of the semantic terms themselves and by the partly overlapping types of literary humour they denote—satire, farce, parody, and so on (but see Radday, 'Introduction', and Carroll).

The significance attached to names in biblical literature is a widely recognized phenomenon, well attested by the preoccupation with biblical name aetiologies, the examination of the applicability of names to their bearers, and various puns and word plays derived from proper names. In 'Humour in Names' Radday demonstrates how personal names are satirized and parodied through interpretation, distortion, allocation to various lists, and fictitious re-working; and how names are allocated to places that do not exist, or symbolical values attached to existent as well as fictive places. He contends that, in order for the humour to be understood, the relevant names should be interpreted from within the Hebrew, even if and when foreign etymologies for them are established. The receptor/reader of antiquity and of later periods, one has to remember, was not always familiar with the linguistic provenance of the names. Again, narrative intentionality is, to a large extent, assumed as a basis for the discussion.

In 'Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis' Landy's starting point is, once more, the syndrome of reverence as hindrance when acknowledging humour in the Bible. He proceeds to ground biblical humour in a theoretical framework derived from psychoanalysis (Freud, Ehrenzweig), and literary criti-

cism of jokes and laughter. After commenting on the sophisticated and specialized character of humour in the Bible (see Radday), he briefly analyses the humour in three passages from the Pentateuch. He infers that the humour discovered in these passages exposes things that would otherwise have been repressed; and that, by and large, it is compressed and subversive, the result of bafflement and occupation with serious rather than lighthearted concerns.

The essays grouped in Part II deal with specific texts, textuality and context. They refer to passages, chapters, cycles, and books, and are arranged according to the order of the Hebrew Bible. The literary categories investigated for humour and its classification and analysis are narrative, poetry, prophetic literature, and wisdom literature.

*Semeia* 32 (1984) bears the title *Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible*. The name of the collection implies that the participants hold that the classical terms 'tragedy', 'tragic', 'comedy', and 'comic', when suitably qualified and defined, are applicable to biblical literature. The debate is far from decided, as shown by the methodological objections advanced by several respondents in that volume. However, nowadays it is argued increasingly that the definition of comedy as a literary genre should be broadened, and that comic presentation was much more widespread in the ancient Near East than hitherto believed. Comedy is undoubtedly a species of humour, even though what is comic to the producer is not necessarily perceived as funny or humorous by the consumer/receptor: indeed, it might be perceived as tragedy, pathos, or bathos. The methodological debate on the applicability of the terms 'comedy' and 'tragedy' to biblical literature affords fresh insights into the problematics of humour. Redefinition of these terms and their application to biblical texts may illuminate specific passages, and contribute to the question of intentionality *vs* reception. In short the debate itself, although consensus has still not been reached, is a stimulus for further inquiry into the relational status of the comic and humour in the Bible, as elsewhere in literary discourse. Therefore, two articles in the present collection deal with the concepts of comedy and the comic (and tragic).

In 'Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and

Tragic Visions' (reproduced from *Semeia* 32), Exum and Whedbee examine how the concepts of the 'comic' and 'tragic' affect the interpretation of three narrative texts—from the books of Genesis, Judges, and Samuel respectively. In 'The Comedy of Job' Whedbee proposes to view the book of Job (the poem together with its frames, the Prologue and Epilogue) as a comedy. After a discussion of the generic categorization and its relational properties to laughter and humour, Whedbee demonstrates various types of incongruity, humour, and the comic which are among the components of the complex tapestry of Job.

In 'Wit, Words, and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25' Garsiel examines the operation and functionality of two literary devices—puns and word plays—within a single narrative: the story of Abigail, Nabal, and David (cf. Radday, 'Names'). He shows how instances of *double entendre*, play on words and, especially, play on names pervade the text and invoke the reader's laughter or scorn. Humour, based on wit and witticisms, is enlisted in the service of the narrative's bias. Consequently, our sympathy is for David and Abigail and against Nabal.

Three readers seek, and find, humour among the prophets and prophetic books. Carroll asks a general question, 'Is Humour also among the Prophets?' Like Radday and Landy, he starts from the premise that 'Humour as we know it today is not a feature of the Bible'. Then he branches off: according to him, satire, parody, mockery, even irony, are distinct from humour (as defined in the narrower sense). He finds the task of defining biblical humour difficult and therefore treats his material exclusively from a reader's response angle. His survey relates to pre-classical as well as classical prophets. His conclusions are that humour is a matter of personal definition and judgment; and it remains for each reader of the Bible to assess his/her own conclusions, in line with their own individual convictions.

The essay by Davies, 'Joking in Jeremiah 18', is—once more—a self-styled reader's response. Whereas Carroll surveys, Davies concentrates on a particular passage. According to him, the humour in Jeremiah 18 consists of exposure and self-exposure, unexpected transformations, ironic reversal, and a series of somewhat incoherent but nearly cohesive turns

and surprises. He points out that the joking and laughter gleaned from this text, as well as from the book of Jeremiah as a whole, are theologically problematic. He discusses this in conjunction with the processes of textual history and transmission.

Miles, 'Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody', analyses the presentation, in the book of Jonah, of five stereotypical prophetic themes: the call to prophecy, the prophet's reluctance to accept the call, the psalm of thanksgiving after a rescue, the prophet's rejection by a king, and the rejected prophet's dialogue with God. He traces elements of comedy, parody, satire, burlesque, and gentle fun in the book, but emphasizes that the parodic element (the exposure of human behaviour as it is mirrored by art) is its most characteristic feature. He concludes by saying that although 'ancient humour was typically a laughing at rather than a laughing with' (cf. Brenner, 'Semantic Field') the book of Jonah ends on a gentle, not a contemptuous, jocular note.

The last three essays deal with texts and themes from the Writings. The concept of parody is applied by Brenner to a passage in the Song of Songs in '"Come back, Come back the Shulammite" (Song of Songs 7.1-10: A Parody of the *waṣf* Genre)'. In comparison with other *waṣfs* (descriptive poems in praise of a loved one) in the Song, the passage from chapter 7 displays both affinity with and a departure from the artistic norm of that literary convention. The humour of the biblical presentation is examined in Freudian terms. Analogies are drawn to instances of similar parodies in English poetry, and the links with gender-specific authorship and/or reading are discussed.

Levine writes about 'Qohelet's Fool: A Composite Portrait'. He argues that the Fool (a male Fool, according to Qohelet) and human foolishness are criticized by means of exposure. The comic effect depends on the audience's or reader's awareness and acknowledgment of the absurdity and folly attributed to the Fool as their very own. The portrayal of the Fool, says Levine, has a tragic as well as comic dimension. We are all foolish to an extent, and 'The observer may smile or shed a tear... or do both'.

The book of Esther has always served as a source of merri-

ment and laughter in Jewish tradition. This was not necessarily shared by Christian exegetes (Luther). Radday's 'Esther with Humour' is a running commentary aimed at classifying and articulating the humorous elements in the book—satire, caustic comment, comic situations, unexpected transformations, and so on—whose chief targets are the non-Jews of the Scroll, although the Jewish figures are not let off easily either. It is suggested that the NEB text be used as a base text for the proposed reading. The commentary relates extensively to ancient Jewish sources which, according to Radday ('Introduction'), displayed much more readiness to admit the humour of the biblical text than later generations of readers and exegetes.

We have thus come full circle. What causes laughter to one person is anathema to another. Biblical humour dissected is biblical humour deconstructed. And that is indeed comical, even funny.

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2

# ON MISSING THE HUMOUR IN THE BIBLE AN INTRODUCTION

Yehuda T. Radday

'The Literature of the Hebrew gives an idea of a people who went about their business and their pleasure as gravely as a society of beavers', opines George Eliot. A.N. Whitehead believed that 'the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature'. The German philosopher Theodor Lessing, a Jew killed by the Nazis in 1933, observed that Moses and Jesus never laughed. In fact, why should they have laughed, and if they did laugh, why should it be recorded?

Since these three were no great authorities in matters biblical, we had better turn to an expert. According to one, W. Phelps by name, 'the Bible contains all sorts of literature except humour'.[1] However, since by this statement he erroneously claims that there is drama in the Hebrew Bible, it would be unwise to trust his judgment that the book is humourless. It is the aim of this anthology to dispel the widespread misconception that the Bible is lacking in humour.

Let me, before I go further, counter this allegation by a case in point. The first of the ten plagues called down by Moses changed the water of the Nile into blood, so that the Egyptians would have nothing to drink (Exod. 7.17ff.). What did Pharaoh's professional magicians do? Instead of turning the blood back into water, they proudly displayed their art by

1 W. Phelps, *The Bible* (New York, 1892), p. 16. My efforts to discover Phelps' identity were not successful, but there are signs that he was a Mormon. Recent discussions with colleagues proved that even today his view is shared with many.

doing 'the same thing by their spells' (v. 22). And when Moses brought swarms of frogs who even jumped into Pharaoh's bed chamber (Exod. 8.33ff.), the magicians brought some more frogs upon the land (v. 7). I think this is delightful humour at the expense of the inane court sorcerers which has been overlooked by most commentators.[1]

However, it is not the intention of this introduction to try and refute the accusation of biblical humourlessness, by calling up examples to the contrary, but only to raise a few questions, to consider them and to offer possible, though hardly final answers. Had humour been discerned in the Bible by scholars and studied to the same extent as the rest of its features, Eliot and Whitehead would not have failed to notice it. And if biblical humour has not been studied by scholars, why such neglect? Is it, perhaps, considered blasphemous to impute humour to the Holy Writ? If reason is symbiotic with humour, cannot religion also be? And supposing, for the sake of argument, that there *is* humour in this ancient Hebrew library, is it so distinct from other, and more familiar kinds of humour that it went unnoticed?

The reader is undoubtedly aware that I have avoided what is probably the most troublesome question: What exactly is humour? While I agree that this point must be clarified before going on, I admit that I feel inadequate when coming to grips with a problem which has been vexing philosophers for decades. Let me elaborate as to where this feeling of inadequacy originates.

The number of terms that go under the heading of humour is close to a dozen: Wit, joke, satire, irony, sarcasm, burlesque, caricature, comedy, travesty, parody and the comic immediately come to mind. So much has been written upon the nature of these words and upon the distinctions between pairs or trios among them that it would be presumptuous as well as, for the present purpose, unnecessary for a biblical scholar—

[1] It was noticed, however, by B. Jacob, *Das zweite Buch der Tora*. Because of Rabbi Jacob's emigration from Germany, this extensive and highly original commentary has remained available only in microfilm at the Jewish National University Library, Jerusalem. I understand that it is to be published in English by Ktav Publishing House, New York.

an outsider, after all—to attempt further disquisition. For instance, what does the following (abridged) tabular statement by a semanticist do to eliminate the constant confusion?[1]

| | *Motive* | *Province* | *Method* | *Audience* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Humour: | Discovery | Human Nature | Observation | The Sympathetic |
| Wit: | Throwing Light | Words and Ideas | Surprise | The Intelligent |

The demarcation by parallel classification may be correct or not; its profit is close to nil. Such a mechanical division disregards the fact that the two terms here analysed are, like the rest, much too fluid and overlapping to be squeezed into a narrow diagnostic frame.

A parable will illustrate what I have in mind. There are many mansions in the house of Humour, differing from each other in size, purpose, number of inhabitants and so on. Furthermore, the walls separating them are of the Japanese sliding type, so that their boundaries are never permanent. To make matters worse, many visible and some hidden interconnecting corridors lead from one apartment to the other, so that owners in this condominium can move freely between mansions and pay longish visits to their neighbours. In these circumstances, the city administration will surely despair of setting municipal rates for the occupants, or of calculating occupancy by percentages since both are proportional to the areas. Similar despair was sensed by a French psychologist when he investigated humour: he entitled the first chapter of his book: 'On the Impossibility of Defining Humour'.[2]

It seems then that the concept of humour defies definition, very much like intelligence: although psychologists are unable to agree among themselves on what intelligence is, they still do not hesitate to measure it. At all events, whether defined or not, humour can be enjoyed. It is therefore both pragmatically advisable for the present purpose, and correct from the point of view of psychology and literary criticism, to concur with

1 B. Kovář, *O Písnuctví* (Prague, 1977).
2 R. Escarpit, *L'humour* (Paris, 1963).

Stephen Leacock.[1] To him—*pace* Phelps—humour is no literary genre at all, but essentially a most subjective, and therefore intrinsically undefinable manifestation of a certain temperamental and highly personal *Weltanschauung*. As such, it is comparable to the flavour of a dish, that sweet, spicy, sour or hot additive which, though rarely visible, nevertheless makes all the difference. Personal experience confirms that nothing separates people (and peoples) from each other as much as what they consider humorous. This is why each of the following essays conceives of humour in its own special way.

Thus, humour may serve to evoke pity as well as protest, comprehension as well as contempt—and relish as well as religiosity. Like charity, it should begin at home: it presupposes a full measure of a proper distance from one's self. 'Higher humour', said Hermann Hesse in his *Nürnberger Reise*, 'starts with not taking one's own person too seriously'. An overdose of respect for any subject is bound to kill even the most benevolent kind of humour. This may well provide the answer to several of the questions raised, as we shall see. Let us now take them up in turn.

No, the humour of the Bible has not undergone the same thorough scrutiny as most of its other aspects. A list of general investigations into its humour which I was able to glean in libraries and catalogues will be found at the end of this volume, while essays on specific shorter passages are cited in the notes and bibliographies attached to individual contributions. The crop of comprehensive publications is remarkably poor, even if one makes allowance for my having overlooked as many as I have unearthed. Occasional references to humorous passages are, of course, dispersed through the commentaries, particularly modern ones. Furthermore, there are the numerous biblical encyclopaedias and dictionaries where one could look up the entry. But with one single and not too satisfactory exception,[2] they all skip *Humour*. In the Hebrew

[1] S. Leacock, *Humor, its Theory and Technique* (Toronto, 1935); *idem*, *Humor and Humanity* (Toronto, 1938), *passim*.

[2] *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G.A. Buttrick *et al.* (New York—Nashville, 1962). The entry's author is W.F. Stinespring, who regrettably devotes no more than 30 lines out of 200 to the Old Testament and disregards all sorts of humour that are not just word play.

ones,[1] *Hoham*, a king of Hebron, is followed not by *Humour*, as one would have hoped, but (in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet) by *Homam*, son of Lotam, and the many German reference books proceed unvaryingly from *Hulda* straight to *Hund*.

To go back from dictionaries to commentators who found humorous passages in the Bible, perhaps, instead of 'humorous passages', I should have said 'passages that seemed humorous to the commentator'. Our concern is, needless to say, primarily with what ancient writers themselves meant to be humorous rather than with what a latter-day reader, scholar or not, conceives of as such. For it is a distressing fact that pseudo-humorous misinterpretations are not as rare as one would hope. I cannot refrain from quoting a few *curiosa*.

When Sara is returned to Abram unharmed by Pharaoh, Abram leaves Egypt 'with his wife and all that he had' (Gen. 12.20), i.e., in Gunkel's opinion,[2] with both the wares and payment for them. This to Gunkel is 'a delicious joke at which the (ancient) Israelite reader laughed from ear to ear'. A more meticulous examination of the chapter than Gunkel's shows that the story's intent is far from humorous.[3] It appears that

[1] E.g. *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, ed. E.L. Sukenik *et al.* (Jerusalem, 1953), *s.v.* Hoham (Hebr.), vol. II, p. 796.

[2] H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen, 1901), *ad loc.* Apart from a number of Jewish critics—a few only because of Gunkel's immense prestige—strong exception to his humorizing the stories of the Patriarchs was taken by H.L. Strack, *Die Genesis* (München, 1905): 'Sind wir denn in einem Possentheater, wenn wir das erste Buch der heiligen Schrift lesen?' (pp. 115-16).

[3] What Gen 12.10-12 wants to say is not our concern, yet one thing is certain: Pharaoh did not 'pay' for Sara. This view rests on the following grounds: (1) Pharaoh never asked for the 'goods' and consequently need not pay; (2) the verb in v. 16a nowhere means 'making presents', but 'being graciously inclined'; (3) the preposition in v. 16a, when inflected or constructed with a noun, unvaryingly (about 25 times in the Bible) signifies 'with regard to' or 'for the sake of' and never 'in exchange for' or 'as a payment for' (with one single exception in Amos 2.6 [= 8.6]); (4) had he paid for Sara and been frustrated in his evil designs, what hindered Pharaoh from taking the presents back, if presents they were?; (5) even the most lecherous among kings in history would not have paid cattle, sheep, asses, slaves and camels for the most beautiful among women, the less so when she was already in his possession; (6) Abraham was rich before he 'went down' to Egypt,

Gunkel used the text to pay a back-handed compliment to his contemporary German-Jewish fellow citizens. To be fair, perhaps he is not to blame: he hailed from a different civilization, lived millennia after the biblical author, had never used, nor listened to, spoken Hebrew (frequently of great help in finding the key to an ambiguous phrase, as will be seen below) and may have once been cheated by a Jewish tailor in Giessen. Moreover, humour, it is well known, suffers when transferred from one culture to another or translated from one language to another. Paradoxically, it was Gunkel who coined the term *Sitz im Leben*, without which, as he believed, a biblical story must remain unintelligible. Let us then not neglect to consider the 'setting in life' of the commentator himself as well—and Gunkel's was Germany of the early twentieth century. *Sapienti sat.*

Lesser luminaries followed in his footsteps. One (better left anonymous) is amused at women being frequently enumerated together with cattle (e.g. Gen. 14.16). Another views Cain and King Saul's daughter Michal as caricatures.[1] Seetman finds it comical that a god serves as a tailor for Adam and Eve.[2] Fisher thinks that the parable of the poor man's lamb (2 Sam. 12.1-4) and the hierophany in the Burning Bush (Exod. 3.14) are funny.[3] Even Stinespring, despite his otherwise good ear, cites Abraham's moving intercession for the few just men of Sodom (Gen. 18.23-33) as a humorous incident.[4]

and when he did so because of the famine, it was hardly because he and his wife, an elderly childless couple, had nothing to eat, but rather because his numerous herds were starving. This is not everything one could use to refute Gunkel, but enough to show how mistaken he is.

1 M. Samuel, *Certain People of the Book* (New York, 1955), p. 3.

2 C. Seetman, *Women in Antiquity* (London, 1956), p. 32.

3 E.J. Fisher, 'The Divine Comedy: Humour in the Bible', *Religious Education* 72 (1977), p. 573.

4 See p. 23, n. 2. Shortly before this went to print, I discovered in the *Harvard University Gazette* (83/7) that in a lecture on 'Poetry and Belief', Professor H. Bloom declared as an example of the 'Bible's almost Kafkaesque radical irony' the scene (Gen. 18.1ff.) of God 'sitting on the ground... devouring roast calf, curd, milk and rolls, and then being offended by the aged Sarah's sensible derision when he prophesies the birth of Isaac'. There is no mention in the text of God sitting on the ground, but there is mention of three men sitting under a tree; of Abraham preparing but not roasting a calf, of people eating,

No offence is meant to these writers when I mention, in the same breath, a last type of mistaken biblical humour, namely the one which is read into the text out of sheer, open and undisguised hostility. Mostly, it is too stupid to give offence, so the title page of one single publication of its kind will suffice as an example—see the illustration on page 28.[1] Incidentally, if this cheap caricature also falls into one of the subcategories of humour, it only proves that the term lacks clear limits.

At this juncture, after exposing a title page drawing as a falsification, and after doubting Gunkel's understanding of biblical humour, I may rightly be questioned on what I base my claim to know better. How can I assert that some readers have completely missed the humour in Scripture, while others have read it into texts where it does not exist? The problem as formulated by the terminology of literary criticism is: How can one maintain that a given reader's response is contrary to the writer's intent when interrogating the latter is not feasible?

I have spent much time on reading and pondering the question and in an excursus I shall now try to propose an answer.

At our disposal for eliciting the genuine intent of a given writer compared with a given reader's response we have only three means: (a) the degree to which the reader has thorough command of the writer's language in reading, writing and speaking; (b) the immediate and, later, wider context of the passage in question; (c) the overall tenor and purpose of the entire book interpreted.

To illustrate my point, I shall adduce an example which is deliberately not taken from those cited by masters like Voltaire (the authority quoted by the caricaturist) or Gunkel, but by the above-mentioned Seetman, who took it over from

but not of devouring, of Sarah's doubtful, yet jubilant astonishment, but not of her deriding the announcement of such a happy event—why should she do so? Neither does God—or, for that matter, any god—prophesy. Yet why should a lecturer make a point of altering a quotation if the change is supposed to bring out that 'radical irony' which happens to be needed by him in order to amuse an audience of unsuspecting undergraduates?

1 My gratitude is due to Mr. Aad van der Toorn, engineer, inventor, bibliophile and friend, of The Hague, for having searched for such an example, found one and supplied it to me.

ÉDITION COMPLÈTE DE 1903-1904
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the Midrash. We read in Midrash ha-Gadol (*ad loc.*) that a Roman lady of high standing and, evidently, with a sense of humour, once said to Rabban Gamliel: 'Your God is a tailor! Doesn't your Book say that he "did make coats of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them"?' She referred of course to Gen. 3.21 and quoted the verse correctly. But did she correctly understand it? In other words, did the questioner's mockingly provocative remark hit upon 'the writer's intent'? Let us apply the three aforementioned criteria in order to test the case.

With regard to language, the translation of the Hebrew *wayya'aś* is accurate, but this is all. In Exodus 25–27 alone the verb occurs with Moses as subject (or with Moses as the person addressed) about thirty times in connection with the erection of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness. What Moses 'did make' there was the Ark of the Covenant, with the Cherubim, the wooden table, the lampstand, the hangings, planks, bars, veils, the golden and the bronze altars, to mention only part of the equipment and neglecting all the accessories such as rings, hooks, chains, etc. Incidentally, and significantly, he also 'did make' the priestly ephod, mantle, tunics, turbans and sashes. If *wayya'aś* is taken literally, then Moses must have been a masterbuilder, a joiner, a goldsmith and a tailor to boot. The truth is, of course, that the crucial word means that 'he had things made, ordered, allowed or agreed them to be made'. Hence, Rabban Gamliel's questioner did not have more than an elementary knowledge of Hebrew—if at all, since she probably quoted the Septuagint. Moreover, she had not read more than the first few pages of Scripture.

We now turn to the immediate context. The Story of Eden is a narratively cast account of humanity's existential situation. The assumption that within this woeful tale its author suddenly and without reason switched from the tragic into the comic is too absurd for words.

The wider context demands of the reader a more than cursory reading, for instance, tracing where and in what connections the noun *kuttōnet* (= coat) recurs in the Bible. The concordance shows that, apart from our verse, it is mentioned twenty-eight times, eight times as a token of paternal love in the Joseph Cycle, ten times in Exodus and Leviticus as priestly

vestments and twice in 1 Samuel 13 as a sort of gown worn by princesses. Thus in twenty out of twenty-eight occurrences the function of these coats is to elevate the wearer above others—brothers, Levites and common folk. Wearing them for the first time is tantamount to a formal and ceremonial investiture, as is indeed indicated in Exod. 28.40, where the coats are called insignia of 'dignity and grandeur' (NEB). This is why in the Paradise Story the word *wayyalbišēm* must not be translated 'he clothed them', but 'he robed them'. The same verb occurs in the description of the installation of priests (Exod. 29.5, 8; 40.14), and in Lev. 8.13 in the very same verbal form as in our passage. The relevance of all this to the Paradise Story is that Adam's and Eve's 'coats' were not designed for protection against the cold or for covering their genitals—this, the two themselves had already done in Gen. 3.7—but imparted to the pair as a sign of humanity's distinction above animals since man and woman alone had by now come to know 'between Good and Evil'. In short, there can be absolutely no humour in this section of the *Urgeschichte*.

Lastly, the idea that the ancient writer wished to ascribe to God proficiency in tailoring would, notwithstanding later inevitable anthropomorphisms, be totally out of character and incongruous for the God of whom the writer preaches and teaches in the following 150 chapters of Torah as a supreme and transcendent Being. No writer in his or her right senses would ever say on the third page of an opus something that contradicts sharply what he or she has to say from there on.

It follows that Gunkel's response is at odds with the writer's intent. The same applies to not a few writers who ventured into the domain of biblical humour. In order to discover where it lies hidden and avoid detecting it where it does not, what is needed is, among other qualifications, a full measure of empathy, which is conspicuously absent in Gunkel's commentary on Bible stories. The Hebrew Bible is a Jewish book, for better or worse, and Gunkel admired the ancient Jews as much as he disliked the living ones. No one who reads his commentary on Genesis can fail to recognize this. Strack, himself non-Jewish, objected to it in a few scornful sentences[1] and Jacob

[1] See p. 25 n. 2.

pointed it out extensively.[1] The latter's testimony is the more reliable, as he had known Gunkel personally and even liked him.[2]

There is reason for an apology for the length of the foregoing discussion, for dwelling on one single verse as an instance of misconceived humour in the Torah and for taking issue with one of the foremost biblical scholars of this century. My excuse is that if Gunkel was mistaken (as it seems to me), it is all the more necessary for Gunkel's disciples and others, as well as their readers, to exercise caution in expounding biblical humour in order to avoid falling into the same trap. Besides, since I have already confessed my inability to tell the reader what humour is, I thought I might at least demonstrate that I know what humour is not.

The 'others' whom I have just mentioned as expounding biblical humour are actually very few in number. The subject has received short shrift from scholarship which has scanned

[1] See p. 22 n. 1.

[2] At the beginning of this Introduction I quoted A.N. Whitehead without indicating the source. It was no oversight; I wished first to show that biblical humour happens to be overlooked even by people of outstanding calibre and later to adduce an example of the insufficiency of, or wrong kind of learning, or of their bias. These notwithstanding, they readily volunteer to enunciate their views on an issue rather foreign to them from their professorial chairs and in their publications. Thus, in *Dialogues* by Lucien Price (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), in an almost verbatim report of Whitehead's table talks, the famous mathematician voices his opinion on the lack of humour in the Bible no fewer than six times without substantiating his claim with one single word (pp. 30, 109, 141, 199, 355, 355) (!). Instead, he ascribes this deficiency to the notorious humourlessness of the Jews (p. 59), their natural melancholy and gloom (p. 109), and aversion to laughing (p. 116). The minutes of these conversations, to be sure, were read and endorsed by the scientist himself. Now, whether he correctly assessed the national character of the Jews is immaterial—one cannot but wonder where he, the son of a minister of the church, got his impressions of the Bible from. Here, Mrs Whitehead enlightens us: unluckily, her husband read the Good Book too late in life, hence his severity, unlike herself whose good fortune it was to read it 'at the right age' as a child. To this Whitehead added that he considered the Jews 'the ablest of races' (!), yet their unusual abilities 'make them just so much more disagreeable'. Now we know and do not wonder any longer.

the Bible so diligently for everything else. For the last 1500 years the majority of biblical scholars, in the seriousness of their research, have not detected the slightest touch of humour in the Bible—a statement which does not reflect too favourably on these researchers. Goethe held that nothing reveals a person's character as much as what makes that person laugh. What, one wonders, does it say about someone's character when he or she is not even able to perceive what is amusing? Thus, in 1984, a conference on Jewish humour took place in Israel at which papers were read on such esoteric topics as 'The Humour of Australian Jewry', but it never occurred to the organizers—in the Land of the Bible!—that biblical humour also merits attention, and this is the joke of the century.

If this is the state of affairs, is it libellous to assert that certain parts of the Bible—an occasional verse, a chapter, maybe an entire book—must, to be understood and fully enjoyed, be read with less solemnity? Indeed, I wish to suggest that, if there were no humour in Scripture it would have to be inserted to make Scripture perfect, as it claims to be (Ps. 19.8), and I put forward the following reason.

The foremost and perhaps the only aim of the Bible is the moral improvement of the world, essentially an educational undertaking; whether one agrees with all, some, or none of its premises and ends, is irrelevant in this context. To achieve success in this difficult experiment, all verbal weapons are permitted—indeed imperative—and neglect of even one such weapon would be tantamount to irresponsibility. In this armoury of weapons there is, in the words of Henry Ward Beecher, no sharper sword than humour. Still greater an authority is Mark Twain who wrote: 'Power and money can weaken a little, century by century, a colossal humbug, and persuasion the quest for vanities, but only humour can blow to rags and nothing can stand against it'. Idolatry is humbug to Scripture and expediency in politics vanity. Hence, humour is indispensable.

In effect, then, the Bible is a teacher—and a good one, as history has demonstrated; a good teacher must have a sense of humour. From this slightly oversimplified syllogism it follows that there must be humour in the Bible. This humour, the

genuine humour which the Bible uses with much refinement, is so enticing a topic that it would be a great pity to let it lie fallow until philosophers and psychologists get around to the definition of the term.

But why has so little attention been given to it? Even the elusive nature of the concept of humour cannot account for this fact. Rather, lack of attention to biblical humour would appear to be, to use the ever handy noncommittal term, 'a multicausal phenomenon'.

First, let us remember that humour with its subcategories, including the recognition thereof, is culture-specific, language-specific and to some degree surely also time-specific. No wonder then that much of it in a three thousand-year-old literature written by Semites in Hebrew escaped notice.

Another reason for what looks like neglect of biblical humour in view of the paucity of publications on this topic has to do with the multivalent scriptural language. When a writer says one thing, but wishes to convey a different or perhaps even the opposite meaning, that writer must rely on the reader's sensitivity to see through the camouflage—and this too, falls within the ambit of humour. Modern writers who doubt the reader's faculty of discrimination, would use inverted commas or italics in order to be on the safe side, but no such typographic means were at the disposal of their biblical colleagues. The latter had to resort to other, frequently highly skilful devices, some of which will be demonstrated in the essays of this volume. It goes without saying that this kind of writing runs the risk of being misunderstood. This is exactly what happened to several biblical storytellers. Thus, the effect of ancient parody, satire, irony and comedy might be lost on a modern reader. Still, humour which is concealed and difficult to notice at first blush is all the more powerful, memorable and enjoyable once it is uncovered.

Furthermore, humour cannot be sensed by people who have no sense of humour themselves. The fathers of literary research in the Bible were German professors of the nineteenth century, and the state of the art to date is still deeply indebted to and influenced by them. But theologians in general are not noted for their wit; their other than scholarly titles having been given them chiefly *honoris*, not *humoris causa*.

Thus, not all of them are mentally or psychologically conditioned to comprehend that a text of sublime religiosity may also contain something not consonant with Catonic *gravitas*. And here, with the mention of the word *religiosity*, we have reached the core of the problem.

The faithful study of the legal and orthopractical aspects of the Bible, and especially of the Pentateuch, has for twenty centuries been the almost exclusive domain of the Jews. The Jews, however, never bothered very much about 'The Bible as Literature', and left the investigation of this field to the non-Jewish scholars of the last two centuries. Hence, while modern biblical scholarship is weighted heavily on the side of the book's literary problems, it is only a few decades since Jewish scholars have started to take an active and ever growing part in its literary analysis—and the majority of them are still students of their non-Jewish masters.

This short overview of the history of Bible research was necessary. It aims to substantiate my assertion that although an abundance of achievements in very many fields of biblical scholarship is due to non-Jews, it is, to the same degree, the non-Jews who must be held responsible for the scarcity of studies in another area, namely that of humour. In other words, when we wonder why publications on biblical humour are so few, we would do well to seek the reason in Christian theological thinking. This observation is not, of course, a value judgment of Christianity, much less so of Christendom. To avoid a misunderstanding, this point, I think, needs some elaboration.

After the commandments of the Torah—for Jews the principal part of the Bible—were essentially abrogated by the apostle Paul, it remained for Christian theology—*faute de mieux*—to emphasize, and relate with deep reverence to, the narrative part of the 'Old Testament'. In contrast, Jews to whom the stories are in principle mainly mere illustrations, feel few inhibitions about them and even agree that some may well have been written in a lighter vein. As long as the legal sections of the Torah receive the undiminished serious attention that is due to them, there is no problem for Jews in seeing the jocund side of the stories. In addition, there is, at the very birth of Christianity, the grim image of the Passion of its

Saviour, the realistic or symbolic representation of which the believer sees almost everywhere. The crucifix is bound to eradicate, in a true Christian heart, any tendency toward detachment and a little levity, both of which lie, after all, at the bottom of a disposition receptive to humour.

Finally, binary Manichaeism, with its clear-cut division of the forces active in human existence into good and evil, though declared heretical by the Fathers of the Church, may possibly have played a role, too, in the rejection of biblical humour.

These trends reached their strongest expression in Calvinism, the stern precepts of which preclude *joie de vivre* and, therefore, make it unthinkable that, when even an ordinary man should not smile, Scripture could. To make things worse for certain theologians, we read that even God laughs—three times, in fact (Pss. 2.4; 37.13; 59.9)—rejoices (Ps. 104.31) and derides (Ps. 2.4), a kind of behaviour unfitting for a deity, who, however, is readily forgiven other anthropopathetic reactions such as regret (cf. Gen. 6.6).

Nothing of what was said in the last paragraph must be construed to suggest that Christians lack humour. The relations between Christians and Jews are so precarious and overshadowed by past events that this *caveat* cannot be repeated often enough. All I want to point out is that Christian theology, by its very nature, is likely to make Christian theologians and exegetes blind to the humour of the Bible.

In this respect Jews, whether or not their proverbial sense of humour is a myth, are more fortunate. The beautiful stories of the Torah, where most frequently a hint of humour may be expected, play a secondary part in Judaism in comparison to the laws, as we have seen, and, therefore, allow for that measure of nonchalance which is, as has also been pointed out, a precondition for humour in writer and reader alike. In fact, Jews feel very much at ease *vis-à-vis* the Torah. When it is said of Moses that he was 'an *intimus* in all my household' (Num. 12.7), why should not his people and followers also feel at home there? And where one feels at home, one relates to one's host without too many restraints, enjoys his or her affability and dares take certain liberties.

This state of balance within Judaism between a certain

degree of distance in the one hand, and a sufficient measure of familiarity on the other, seems to allow humour to flourish and to receive recognition even in Judaic religious literature. The result is that neither the endeavour to track down humour in the Bible, nor the assertion that one has indeed detected humour there is regarded as sacrilege in Jewish thought. The biblical image of humankind is optimistic because the book proclaims humankind's intrinsic perfectibility. In the beginning, there was not original sin, but there was virtue: Adam and Eve knew God and only disobeyed God as all of us do from time to time. Furthermore, at the birth of Judaism stood figures of flesh and blood, each with greatness and weaknesses, and, while Theodor Lessing may be right in saying that Moses never laughed, the Jewish God, as we have seen, does laugh—which, for all purposes, counts for more. In short, as far as a Jewish systematic theology exists at all, humour stands a better chance of existing within it and of being acknowledged as such than it does in Christianity.

Let me illustrate the untrammeled way in which Judaism and Jewry deal with serious or, on occasion, even legal texts, let alone narrative, by two examples. The first is taken from the Talmud, the second dates only from the last century.

The Talmud (*b. B. Mez.* 59b) relates that, when the Sages about 100 CE once discussed a controversial point of law, all were of one opinion except Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, who disagreed. At that moment, a heavenly voice was heard endorsing Rabbi Eliezer's minority vote. But Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah refused to be impressed and countered the endorsement with a quotation from the Torah: '[It is written in Deut. 30.12 that the Torah is not a utopia and that] it [*sc.* the law] is not in heaven [having been given to Israel *in toto* on Mount Sinai, hence heaven must not meddle in the discussion and] we [need] not consider heavenly interference'. The story continues:

> Rabbi Nathan met the prophet Elijah [who had died a few hundred years earlier] and asked him, 'What did the Holy One, be He praised, do at that time [i.e. when he heard Rabbi Joshua's irreverent reply which completely distorted the plain meaning of a Torah verse]?' Said he: 'He laughed and said, "They overruled me, these sons of mine!"'

Because of allegedly impious passages like this, twenty-four cartloads of Talmud manuscripts were burned in Paris in 1242 upon the instigation of the Dominican Henry of Cologne—and were it not so sad, one might add, because of the monk's humourlessness.

The second example concerns one of the most famous preachers in Vienna, Aaron Adolf Jellinek (1821-1893). Once he was asked why the five daughters of Zelophehad were enumerated in a certain order in Num. 27.1, but in a different order in Num. 36.11. He replied, 'It is well known and evident to Him, who created the world by His decree, that ladies hate to have their age divulged, for which reason He left the sequence of the births of the five girls undetermined in His Torah by jumbling their names'.

Thus, it would seem that the Jewish God enjoys a good joke and delights in his people's wit; that for Judaism, wit and religion are not incompatible; and that there is not a bit of *lèse majesté* in searching the Scriptures for it. Actually, a considerable number of passages become clear only when read in this light.

Yet things are not so easy. It is a lamentable fact that from the fifth century CE on, the Rabbis' enterprising and entertaining approach to the Bible decreased and God stopped feeling amused by smart solutions of legal problems invented by the faithful. In any case, he did not show his amusement any longer or, perhaps, no smart solutions were suggested to him anymore. A humour-devastating period of deification of Scripture, a veritable bibliolatry, set in. Within Jewry, too, the book became literarily and literally smothered with reverence. The date is significant. It more or less coincides with the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the Roman empire and with numerous Church Councils where fine points of theology were decided—among other things in order to separate, once and for all, Christian and Jewish belief. From then on Judaism had to take a defensive stand and its defenders, careful not to be outshone in piety by their Christian antagonists, became self-conscious. Thus the idea of possible humour in the Bible became almost as much of anathema in Judaism as in Christianity.

From that time on, the sweet aroma of biblical humour evaporated from the earth except for very few vestiges and, with it, the propensity of people to smell it. Undeniably, it is not easily detected; which brings us back to the question posed in the beginning, namely, and to paraphrase the Jewish child's question on Passover Night: What distinguishes this brand of humour from all other brands of humour—the more familiar ones?

It is highly literary, refined, only hinted at, sometimes based on a single letter, and, therefore, requires active cooperation on the part of the readers, many of whom may have become unable or unwilling to gain access to it when this access demands serious efforts. Moreover, this type of humour is disturbing because it does not exhilarate but is aimed, instead, at educating, at exposing and—at times—perhaps even frightening.

It knows irony, parody, satire and many other genres of literary humour, as will be seen in this collection. However, while it is often difficult enough to tell the genres of humour apart because they tend to evolve one into the other, it is twice as difficult to do so in the Bible. It knows fools, misers, braggarts, offenders, and grotesque figures, but it also knows charmers, beautiful women (on the prowl) and naïve youths. The biblical authors portray those without wagging a disapproving finger or winking suggestively. They never laugh—hence their enormous demands on the reader and their success only with those who take the trouble to read them carefully.

Finally, biblical humour is never scatological or frivolous, but intelligent, subtle, and implicit rather than explicit. Genuine comparative literature watches in wonder, for there is nothing comparable to it in antiquity: no more than a hair's breadth separates it from the earnest. This collection is intended as a contribution towards rescuing biblical humour from neglect and reviving its appreciation.

PART I. In General

# 3

# ON THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF HUMOUR, LAUGHTER AND THE COMIC IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Athalya Brenner

## I

Humour, everybody agrees, is not a clear-cut objective concept. A succinct definition of it, such as 'the capacity to cause or feel amusement', seems correct, albeit too general to be useful. Dictionary entries of the derived adjective 'humorous' define it as 'having or showing a sense of humour', 'funny' or 'facetious, comic'. A 'sense of humour', in its turn, serves to denote 'the faculty of perceiving humour and enjoying what is ludicrous and amusing'. In spite of the elusiveness of definition and the ensuing circularity, it appears that, by general agreement, humour is more than the bare ability to make or perceive jokes. True, it more often than not works through smiling and laughter; and laughter may indeed be produced by and may express joy, merriment and amusement on the one hand but, on the other hand, also mockery, derision and scorn. In Freud's terms, this duality arises from the fact that jokes and the comic can be either relatively innocent or else tendentious; and either mode manifests different symbolic and ontogenetic values of the psyche.[1] When we transfer this duality to the semantic arena, we would expect the psycholog-

[1] S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (The Pelican Freud Library, 6; Harmondsworth, 1976, 1981).

ical duality to be reflected in linguistic actuality. In other words, the semantic field of humour, laughter and the comic should partly overlap with the field of merriment and gaiety and, at the other extreme, partly extend to the field of contempt, insult and ridicule. Carried into the literary territory, this dual part-equivalence implies that 'humour' encompasses a wide array of literary modes: from light-hearted comedy to rhetorical means of exposure such as irony, sarcasm, parody, farce, and burlesque. Laughter is the mediating agent through which humorous literary pieces can express and produce varied and contrasted emotional registers. Again, a bi-polar range is indicated since, as we are all aware, jocularity is but one of the many aspects of the humorous and the comic.[1]

It is widely claimed that the Old Testament does not abound in humorous passages because its tone as well as didactic aims are lofty and serious. Joy and pleasure are recommended as values to live by;[2] yet even these moods or human conditions are rarely, if ever, equated with light-heartedness. It seems that a major trend in biblical and later Jewish thought regards joy as a potentially interfering and distracting agent.[3] As far as the reader is concerned, it does not make much difference

[1] Far be it from me to attempt the immodest task of a definition of humour *per se*. The preceding remarks are merely intended as guidelines for the present paper. Cf. also the Introduction to the present volume.

[2] So, for instance, Deut. 16.15, 'only be joyous'; or Qoheleth's conclusion that the only thing left for a person is to experience joy and enjoyment (Qoh. 8.15; 9.7; 10.19; 11.9).

[3] A revealing passage can be found in the *b. Shab.* 30b, with an almost verbatim repetition in the Babylonian Talmud, *Pesaḥim* 117a. In a discussion of Qoheleth's contradictory views on the value of joy for human life (7.3 and 2.2 *vs* 8.15), it is stated: 'The Shekinah dwells not where there is sadness, or laziness, or laughter, or frivolity, or conversation, or idle talk, but where there is the joyous performance of a (religious) duty'. The equation of 'laughter' with negatively loaded emotional terms such as 'laziness', 'sadness', 'frivolity' and so on speaks for itself. The same subject of religiosity *vs* joy and laughter was of course recently treated in Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose* (English translation 1983). For an opposite view of Jewish tradition, based on different sources, cf. Radday in the Introduction to this volume.

whether the solemn mood is induced by genuinely authorial or else later editorial policy. The result usually speaks for itself.

Still, there are numerous instances of both overt and potential comic situations in OT narrative as well as in poetic and prophetic passages. The slaying of Eglon by Ehud (Judg. 3) is an appropriate example[1] of low comedy.[2] The birth stories of Isaac exhibit more than one aetiological explanation for the 'laughter' element linked to his name.[3] Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19.30-38) come in for a nice share of nationalistic Israelite laughter[4] and, likewise, national or local enemies are often ridiculed.[5] Instances of irony, be it gentle[6] or caustic,[7] funny[8] or otherwise,[9] are plenty. When we attempt a classi-

1 R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 37-41, deals with the story beautifully. He calls it 'a satirical vision, at once shrewd and jubilant' (p. 39), and goes on to explain his approach.

2 Alter (pp. 39-41) discusses the sexual and anal associations connoted by the story. The anal slant is also mentioned by Y. Kaufmann in his *Book of Judges* (Jerusalem, 1968 [in Hebrew], p. 109) (cf. Alter p. 39 n. 8).

3 See below, section III.

4 So Gunkel in his commentary (*Genesis* [Göttingen, 1964, 6th edn]). A critique of Gunkel's tendency to find instances of humour in the narratives of the Torah is advanced by Radday in the Introduction.

5 So Sisera in the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5), where his manner of slaying by Jael is endowed with 'sinister' imagery of sexuality and even birth. There are references in the Psalms to laughter and rejoicing in an enemy's downfall: see Section VI. For other instances of mockery of foreigners and their funny ways see below.

6 So, probably, in the Prologue to the book of Job. Cf. David J.A. Clines, 'False Naivety in the Prologue to Job', *Hebrew Annual Review* 9 (1987).

7 See the remarks on Isa. 28 in Section VI below.

8 So the irony expressed by Sarah's verbal reaction to Isaac's birth, Gen. 21.6-7; and see below.

9 So in quite a few passages in Job's speeches. So, for example, when Job says to his friends: 'No doubt you are perfect men and absolute wisdom is yours!' (Job 12.2). Then he goes on to say: 'But I have sense as well as you... ' (v. 3, both verses as translated by the NEB). It is clear, then, that the initial retort is intended as a caustic reprimand to Zophar and the other friends for their pretence of a knowledge superior to Job's.

Another relevant example for irony that is sad rather than funny is the story of Rachel. Rachel demands of Jacob, 'Give me sons, or I shall

fication of the humour which these passages exemplify, we find that most of them veer towards the 'scorn, ridicule' pole, that is, the tendentious and even cruel and bitter rather than the merry facet of humour. Thus Eglon the Moabite is depicted as a grotesque figure (Judg. 3).[1] Is not the prophet Elisha to blame for his excessively haughty attitude towards the children who mock him, as well as on other occasions, like his parodizing attempts to imitate Elijah (2 Kgs 2) or cure a dead child by remote control (2 Kgs 4.29-32)? Esau's behaviour is farcical (Gen. 25).[2] King David and Michal indulge in a sarcastic verbal exchange (2 Sam. 6.20-22), the ironic result of which is her childlessness (v. 23).[3] Another sarcastic remark is the retort of the king of Israel to the hungry woman during the siege on Samaria (2 Kgs 6.27).[4] King Nebuchadnezzar absurdly demands of his courtiers to divine both the dream he has had and its interpretation (Dan. 2)—a transparent offshoot of Pharaoh's dream narrative (Gen. 41), but also a tight-lipped mocking comment on the foreign

die' (Gen. 30.1). Jacob (v. 2) advises her to refer her complaint to God. When she later gives birth to Joseph she invokes God, greedily looking forward to the birth of yet another son (vv. 22-24). Ironically, the birth of this avidly looked-for second son, Benjamin, kills her (Gen. 35.16-20). No one can claim that the reversal of Rachel's situation—or that of Joseph in Egypt, for that matter—are humorous. Yet both instances, and many others besides, are instances of didactic biblical irony.

1 Cf. above, p. 41, notes 1 and 2.

2 Cf. the commentaries for this chapter. Von Rad in his commentary (*Genesis* [OTL; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972]), pp. 266-68, supplies a balanced discussion of opinions for and against the existence and extent of humour in this passage.

3 Both the dialogue between King David and Michal, and Michal's childlessness, are absent from the otherwise much expanded report of the same event in Chronicles (1 Chron. 13–15). The only detail left is Michal's contempt for the dancing David (15.29).

4 The Israelite king says to the hungry woman who appeals to him for help and food: 'If the Lord will not bring you help, where can I find any for you? From threshing floor or from winepress?' The answer is certainly sarcastic, but is it humorous? I suggest that, against the recognizable background of siege and starvation, it is intended as a piece of black humour. How bleak the situation is the king learns when he listens to the woman's story (2 Kgs 6.28-29). Then, instead of attempting to make light of the situation, he tears his clothes and threatens Elisha (vv. 30ff.).

despot. King Belshazzar is so frightened by the writing on the wall that his emotions affect him physically: he becomes pale, he trembles. The NEB has him 'limp in every limb' while 'his knees knocked together' (Dan. 5.6). The original Aramaic, however, literally reads: 'the knots of his loins were released, and his knees knocked one against the other'. Is this not a euphemistic description of the king's becoming incontinent out of fear? A comical occurrence, especially when juxtaposed with Belshazzar's previous pride, but cruel and low comedy nevertheless. In short, light-hearted comedy cannot be considered a popular OT medium.[1]

As noted above, the bias in favour of tendentious humour is probably conditioned by the didactic nature or framework of most of the extant biblical literature. Without actually entering into the question of the desirability of humour within a self-professed didactic framework,[2] let us just note that the semantic data perforce reflect the literary and conceptual factors that underline them. Inasmuch as we can regard the existing texts as indicative expressions characteristic of the society that produced them, they exhibit a corresponding linguistic bias along the bi-polar axis of 'humour' away from the 'funny' pole towards the 'ludicrous' and 'comic' counterpart. This is evident from the consideration of various linguistic features: the distribution of individual terms, their semantic range, their position within the hierarchy of the field, their situational and verbal contexts, and their quantitative weight.[3]

1 Again, without entering into the reasons for the relative lack of light comedy in the OT, let us just note its rarity. A case in point is the 'happy ending' so characteristic of such comedy. By and large, a 'happy ending' in biblical literature is either not funny (as in the Joseph cycle) or else funny-derisive (as is the end to the wife-sister stories, Gen. 12.10-20; 20; and 26) (*contra* Radday, *Introduction*).

2 For the use of humour as a didactic tool see Radday in the Introduction.

3 Since there are various means for determining the sense and status of a term within the semantic system over and apart from quantity (number of actual textual occurrences), this diminishes the weight of the haphazard or accidental state of the preservation of BH. Still, because of the large number of *hapax legomena* and scantily documented terms, the criterion of quantity is accorded a relatively small measure of significance.

The construction of the semantic field will show that its structure and constituency, as upheld by the available biblical texts, is far from well-rounded. Its bias is glaring, its lexical—and, consequently, its inferred extralinguistic—range lop-sided. The much wider picture afforded by subsequent Hebrew texts, that is, texts of Mishnaic Hebrew (MH), is further testimony to the incompleteness and partiality of the field in Biblical Hebrew (BH).[1]

## II

A few methodological remarks are in order at this point, before the structure of the field is broached.

For the purpose of this study, I adopt S. Ullmann's loose albeit useful definition of the 'semantic field' as:

> a closely knit and articulated lexical sphere where the significance of each unit is determined by its neighbours, with their semantic areas reciprocally limiting one another and dividing up and covering the whole sphere between them.[2]

Thus, the semantic field is viewed as a hierarchy, a unit whose structuring is predetermined by certain criteria. Its principles of organization will be dealt with in descending order. At the head of the semantic pyramid we find primary, or 'blanket', terms. These lexemes are relatively easy to spot: they enter a large number of paradigmatic relations and syntagmatic combinations; are widely distributed[3] and widely applicable; and thus supply a scaffolding for the more limited terms that function as their subordinates within the same field hierarchy.

The lower layers are those of secondary and, then, tertiary terms. Ascribed membership of the latter categories means

[1] See below, section VII.

[2] S. Ullmann, *Principles of Semantics* (Oxford, 1959, 2nd edn), p. 157. Cf. also pp. 152-70 therein; S. Ohman, 'Theories of the "Linguistic Field"', *Word* 9 (1963), pp. 123-34.

[3] Although the distribution may be determined by the contents and subject matter of the text, as a phenomenon it is probably less accidental than other features. At any rate, it belongs to the performance level of our linguistic documentation. As such, it is quite significant.

that the lexemes involved are more restricted in scope and applicability than their predecessors, to the point that, sometimes, they even are etymological derivatives of the primary class terms.

A fourth class is that of indirect terms. These are lexemes or syntagms which may be associated with the higher layers of the field through etymological, phonetic, or semantic links. Here the conceptual and referential affinities might, admittedly, be idiosyncratic or weaker than in the case of the other three categories. Still, for the sake of presenting an inclusive structure, there is a certain advantage in positioning these lexical items of performance within the competence field.

Factors of etymological provenance, as well as diachronic and synchronic factors, are perforce taken into account. Nonetheless, because of the paucity of the available BH material and the linguistic, chronological and geographical difficulties it entails, my approach will be chiefly panchronistic. I will attempt to define a general referential meaning for each term and its position within the semantic structure through the reciprocal relationship of sense/lexeme/set of conditions. For the most part, temporal and spatial factors[1] will have to be neglected for lack of sufficient evidence.

My proposed structure for the field of 'humour, laughter, and the comic' in BH is as follows. It must be understood that the semantic English equivalents assigned to the Hebrew roots at this stage are approximate only. More detailed descriptions of sense and semantic values will be discussed later on, be they of nominal or of verbal Hebrew formations.

*Primary terms:*[2] the roots *ṣḥq* and *śḥq*, both 'laugh, play', together with their verb and noun derivatives.

[1] Ullmann, *Principles*, pp. 254-65.

[2] The criteria for determining the primary status for a semantic term are adapted from A. Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), pp. 39-48. In short, a term is considered primary when: (a) It is monolexemic. (b) Its signification is not included in any other term. (c) Its application is wide. (d) It is psychologically salient and easily identified. (e) It is not a transparent loan word from another language or another linguistic sphere. (f) It is morphologically of a simple construction.

*Secondary terms*: *tll*, *qls*, *lyṣ*, all 'mock, deride', and their derivatives.

*Tertiary terms*: *l'g*, mock, scorn'; and *l'b*, 'play, jest'.

*Indirect references*: *hirḥîb (ki)šᵉ'ôl nepeš*, 'widened the throat like Sheol, the Underworld' (Isa. 5.14; Hab. 2.5); together with other instances of *rāḥab*/*hirḥîb*, 'open wide' + *peh*, 'mouth' or *lēb*, 'heart'; *ṣaw lāṣāw qaw lāqāw* (nonsense syllables? see below—Isa. 28.10, 13).

I shall now turn to a short discussion of the members of each of the groups classified and their respective places within the sector and field hierarchy.

III

Statistically, the roots *ṣḥq* and *śḥq* ('laugh') divide the primary position between them as follows.

- *ṣḥq* has a total of 15 occurrences, 13 of which are verb forms (in the Qal and Pi. stems) and 2 of them nominal—*ṣᵉḥôq*, 'laughter'. Another nominal derivative is the name *yiṣḥāq*, Isaac, which appears in the OT 108 times.[1]
- *śḥq* has 52 occurrences: 35 as verb forms (Qal, Pi., Hif.), and 17 as nominals (16 times of *ṣᵉḥôq*, 'laughter, game'; and once of *miśḥaq*, 'play, game'). A variant on Isaac's name, *yiśḥāq*, appears 4 times.

The two roots are usually regarded as etymological and semantic variants. A quick survey reveals, however, that they are not fully interchangeable, and that their reciprocal situation merits some deliberation.

Etymologically and diachronically, available evidence points to the primariness of *ṣḥq*. It has cognates in Arabic, Syriac[2]

[1] The recurrence of the name has no statistical or quantitative validity for determining the status of the root beyond its counting as another derivative. It is quite helpful, though, for adducing referential meanings through the explanations supplied for the name (see below).

[2] BDB, p. 850.

and Ugaritic,[1] all with the basic sense 'laugh'. *śḥq*, on the other hand, has a cognate in Ge'ez only.[2] Distributionally, too, the data implies a superior status of *ṣḥq* over against *śḥq* and, therefore, restricted interchangeability. *ṣḥq* features in relatively early texts, that is, in texts of classical BH dated up to the exilic period: mainly in Genesis but also in Exodus (once), Judges (in ch. 16, in the Pi.), and Ezekiel (once). *śḥq* also appears in relatively early texts, such as in Samuel (Pi.) and Judges 16 (v. 25, as a true synchronic variant of *ṣḥq* in the same verse).[3] Nevertheless, most of its occurrences belong to the exilic to late layers of BH: so those in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Zechariah, Chronicles, Job, and Qoheleth. Otherwise, it occurs within genres that are difficult to date (Proverbs, Psalms); hence these occurrences are chronologically inconclusive. Most occurrences appear within the wisdom literature (Qoheleth, Job, Proverbs).[4] Therefore, while the reason for the shift of the original sibilant /ṣ/ to /ś/ can be speculated upon only,[5] the general picture is sufficiently clear. There is a chronological movement from *ṣḥq* to *śḥq*. It can be surmised further that, to begin with, there might have existed a sense differentiation between *ṣḥq* Pi. (at least five times with sexual connotations)[6] and *śḥq* Pi. ('play, disport, have fun'),[7] which would explain the partial chronological correspondence in the

1 C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Analecta Orientalia, 38; Rome, 1965), pp. 429, 473 (in the Glossary).

2 BDB, p. 965.

3 This indeed might present an actual case of linguistic or dialectical variance. On the other hand, the variance in this verse may be the result of a scribal error or tendency to vary. At any rate, this single occurrence of *śḥq* and *ṣḥq* within an immediate word context is too little to draw conclusions from.

4 Although the proper noun *yiśḥāq* appears twice in Amos (7.9, 16) as well as in Jer. (33.26) and Ps. (105.9).

5 A few of the possibilities are: assimilation, dissimilation, mutual influence, dialectical variance, and sense division. The last two can be ruled out in this case. As for the other theoretical options, no one of them can be used satisfactorily for explaining such a presumed shift.

6 Gen. 21.9; 26.8; 39.14, 17. Also in Exod. 32.6, where it serves as a euphemism for lewd activity, and hence should be excluded from the count.

7 As in the relatively early occurrences of 1 Sam. 18.7 and 2 Sam. 2.14; 6.5, 21, not always with a humorous denotation.

instance of this one particular usage. Nevertheless and later on, *ṣḥq* was elided from the language in favour of its (etymologically secondary) counterpart *śḥq*. The almost universal absence of the former from MH[1] constitutes additional evidence for the hypothetical process described. Therefore, by way of a generalization, *ṣḥq* can be defined as the primary term for classical (pre-exilic) BH; and the variant *śḥq* as its parallel in later—exilic and post-exilic—BH and in MH.

When we consider the frequency and, what is more important still, the number and diversity of derivatives, *śḥq* undoubtedly emerges as the predominant base in the field. Its superior frequency has been noted above, and so has its wider generative power. It generates three verb formations and three nominals (the proper name *yiśḥāq* included). *ṣḥq* has two verb formations and two nominals (again, the count includes the proper name, better attested in this instance). Hence, it would seem that while *ṣḥq* is the diachronic primary term, *śḥq* is the panchronistic primary term. All the evidence presented so far leads to the same conclusion.

There are additional factors that can be utilized for considering the relative position of a given term within its segment and its field in general, and within its referential range in particular. These are phenomena of word context—the immediate formal and semantic affinities the lexemes under discussion exhibit. In the present case, I have chosen three criteria.

1. The occurrence of single or recurrent parallels, be they synonymous or contrasting.
2. The existence of stable verb phrases. Such phrases, be they simple (verb phrase + preposition) or more complex (a recurrent chain of verb phrase + preposition + noun phrase) often acquire an idiomatic force. A profusion of them indicates a widening of the range of the basic term and, at the same time, testifies to its vitality within its sector and field, and beyond.
3. Other syntagms, be they extended verb phrases (verb phrase + noun phrase) or nominal phrases (noun

[1] Cf. the data in Jastrow's *Dictionary*, p. 1274. It only appears seldom as a variant to the regular *śḥq* = *ṣḥq*.

phrase + noun phrase), especially when they recur, may also be indicative of the range of signification and force of a given term.

The following table presents the data gleaned by utilizing these three phenomena for determining the relative positions of *ṣḥq* and *śḥq*. Variations in morphological matters are specified only when they serve as agents for differentiation. The relevant biblical passages are noted within ordinary brackets. The tentative referential position of a term along the joy → laughter and fun → derision axis, as it is signified by linguistic relations, is given in square brackets. Whenever the denotative or connotative signification is opaque, a short discussion is supplied in the Notes.

| | *ṣḥq* | *śḥq* |
| --- | --- | --- |
| PARALLEL PAIRS | | |
| synonyms | //*l'g* (Ezek. 23.32) [deride] | *ś$^{e}$ḥôq* [laughter] //*m$^{e}$ḥittâh* (Jer. 48.39)[1] |
| | | //*l'g* (2 Chron. 30.10; Prov. 1.29; Pss. 2.4; 59.9; Jer. 20.7) [deride] |
| | | *ś$^{e}$ḥôq*//*rinnâh* (Ps. 126.2) [joy] |
| | | *ś$^{e}$ḥôq*//*t$^{e}$rû'âh* (Job 8.21)[2] |
| | | *ś$^{e}$ḥôq*//*n$^{e}$gînâh* (Lam. 3.14)[3] |
| | | *śḥq*//*śmḥ* (Prov. 14.13; Qoh. 2.2; 10.19) [joy] |
| | | *śḥq*//*rqd* (dance, 1 Chron. 15.29) [joy] |
| | | *miśḥāq*//*qls* (Hab. 1.10) [derision] |

1 *m$^{e}$ḥittâh*, from the root *ḥtt*, means 'terror' and by inference 'destruction'. In this verse it probably refers to the 'object of terror', which is also the object of contempt (BDB, pp. 369-70).
2 *t$^{e}$rû'âh* is translated by NEB as 'shouts of joy'.
3 Literally 'playing music', but here in the sense 'song of contempt, lamentation'.

| | *ṣḥq* | *śḥq* |
|---|---|---|
| contrasts | | //*bkh* (Qoh. 3.4) [cry]<br>//*rgz* (Prov. 29.9)<br>//'anger', 'sorrow' (Prov. 14.13; Qoh. 7.13)[1] |
| PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES | | |
| | Qal + *le* (Gen. 21.6, twice) [laugh at, deride] | + *le* (Ps. 37.13; 59.9; Job 5.22; 12.4; 39, 7.18, 22; 41.21; Prov. 31.25; Lam. 3.14; Hab. 1.10) [deride, laugh at; all *śḥq* Qal, *ś*$^{e}$*ḥôq* and *miśḥaq*] |
| | | Qal + *ʿal* (Job 30.1; Lam. 1.7; Ps. 52.8) [laugh at]<br>Qal + *ʾel* (Job 29.24) [laugh at] |
| | Pi. + *b*$^{e}$ (Gen. 39.14.17; 19.14) [make fun of] | Pi. + *b*$^{e}$ (Ps. 104.26; Prov. 8.31; Job 40.29) [play with] |
| | | Pi. + *l*$^{e}$ (Judg. 16.25) [play, jest] |
| | Pi. + *lipnēy* (Judg. 16.25)[2] [play, jest in front of] | Pi. + *lipnēy* (2 Sam. 2.14; 6.5, 21; Prov. 8.30; 2 Chron. 13.8) [play, jest in front of] |
| | | Hif. + *ʿal* (2 Chron. 30.10) [laugh at, sneer] |
| VERB PHRASES | | |
| | *ʿāṣâh ś*$^{e}$*ḥôq l*$^{e}$ (Gen. 21.6) [made into laughing stock] | |
| | | *rāʾâh biśḥôq* (Judg. 16.27) [sneer at] |
| | | *hāyâh liśḥôq* (Jer. 20.7; 48.26, 27, 39) [was made an object of contempt] |

1 The word context of the occurrence in Qoh. 7.6 is unclear, hence it was not added to the list.

2 In Judg. 16.25 we have, in the same verse, *śḥq l*$^{e}$, 'laugh at' and *ṣḥq lipnēy*, 'play in front of': two root sequences with two different prepositions and senses.

| | *ṣḥq* | *śḥq* |
|---|---|---|
| NOUN PHRASES | | *sôd m$^e$śaḥ$^a$qîm* (Jer. 15.17)<br>*qôl m$^e$śaḥ$^a$qîm* (Jer. 30.19)<br>*m$^e$ḥôl m$^e$śaḥ$^a$qîm* (Jer. 31.4)<br>[occurrences of joy][1] |

The relative profusion of *śḥq* terms, the scope of their syntagmatic relations and, consequently, their wider applicability point to their (panchronic) predominance within the primary sector of the field and its overall structure.

Since laughter is the medium through which humour is very often realized, the linguistic signifier or signifiers of the extra-linguistic concept of 'laugh', 'laughter' are positioned at the centre of the horizontal semantic axis. It therefore comes as no surprise that the primary terms within the field are intrinsically neutral rather than specialized. They are potentially indicative of both the 'positive' and 'negative' poles of 'laughter' and its emotive loads. Clearly, a primary term can either signify 'laughter' that is born out of joy, happiness, the recognition and acknowledgment of fun or the comic; or else refer to laughter that is the result of and reason for contempt, bitterness, derision, cruel fun, and injurious irony. Bearing that in mind, we turn back to the above table of data. A quick look ascertains that both primary roots demonstrate such potential lexical neutrality. On the performance level, however, the number of instances of the 'joy' pole are quite few,[2] while most of the actual occurrences belong to the 'contempt, ridicule' pole. Even derived senses that, strictly speaking, should perhaps be listed as synchronical outsiders—such as *ṣḥq* and *śḥq* in the Pi. stem with the sense 'play, jest', and even euphemistically 'play sexual games'—exhibit pejorative or sinister connotations.

A case in point are the various occurrences of the root *ṣḥq*

[1] Curiously enough, all three constructions appear in the book of Jeremiah.

[2] A wider distribution is not necessarily the result of higher frequency within the OT texts. Although frequency might be beneficial for diagnosing a wider range of usage, by itself it indicates nothing but potential popularity and/or—as noted above—accidental preservation.

within the aetiological legends dealing with the name Isaac, *yiṣḥāq*. In Gen. 21.6 Sarah gives two explanations for her son's name. The first might be construed 'God made me laugh' (for joy). Although this is not the only lexical sense the term may convey, the situational context—the speaker is a happy mother celebrating the birth of her long-awaited son—makes such an understanding of the first name-interpretation plausible.[1] The second interpretation she is made to utter, though, is clearer and demonstrates the other pole of laughter—'all those who hear will laugh at me'. Thus the second interpretation serves as a link with Abraham's self-mocking laughter in the P version of the annunciation of Isaac's birth (Gen. 17.17),[2] and with Sarah's sceptical laughter in Gen. 18.10-15. Other passages connect Isaac with *ṣḥq* Pi. ('have sexual fun' [?], Gen. 21.9-10, 26.8; see above).[3] To summarize: Although the neutral or 'positive' senses do feature in the legends, most of the occurrences exemplify the dubious, derisive or sinister facet of laughter.

## IV

The secondary terms in the field are based on three root lexemes: *tll*, *qls*, and *lyṣ*. We shall presently see that all three lean towards the 'mock, deride' pole.

As a verb form, *tll* appears mainly in the Hif. conjugation. A derived form of *htl* in the Pi. is recorded once (1 Kgs 18.27).[4] The verb forms are attested 9 times, in diverse passages from diverse chronological backgrounds: from Genesis (31.7) through Exodus (8.25) to Judges (16.10, 13, 15),[5] Jeremiah (9.4), Second Isaiah (44.20), and Job (13.9). Each of the two nominals *hᵃtulîm* ('mockery', Job 17.2) and *mahᵃtallôt* ('deceptions' [?] for the parallel stich has *ḥᵃlāqôt*, 'smooth talk'—Isa. 30.10) occurs once. The term is perhaps related to

[1] Y. Zakovitch, *Dual Name Interpretations* (M.A. thesis, Jerusalem, 1971) [in Hebrew], pp. 14-15.
[2] *Op. cit.* and below, p. 00.
[3] See below, p. 00.
[4] BDB, p. 251.
[5] As we remember, Judges 16 (the story of Samson's fall and end) has other terms of the field too (*ṣḥq* and *śḥq* in the Pi.).

an Arabic cognate with the similar meaning of 'mock, deceive, play with'.[1] It is apparent that although its frequency is somewhat poor, the distribution is wide enough to warrant the term a secondary status. Referentially it remains within the 'negative' side of the emotive pole.

*qls* appears 4 times, once in the Pi. (Ezek. 16.31) and 3 times in the Hit. (Hab. 1.10;[2] Ezek. 22.5; 2 Kgs 2.23). Two derived nouns are in evidence too: *qeles* (Pss. 44.14; 79.4; Jer. 20.8) and its feminine form *qallāsâh* (Ezek. 22.4), both 'derision'. The Hit. occurrences as well as the parallels to the nouns demonstrate that the sense referred to is 'deride, make fun of, make an example of'.[3] The MH and later Aramaic *qls*, 'praise', in the same verb formations, is a distinct etymological homonym (from Greek); Jastrow, however, links the two separate sequences semantically through a presumed basic reference of 'shout, call out' attributed to both.[4] It seems that BH *qls*, 'mock', was virtually dropped out of MH because of its more prominent homonym. In other words, the speakers of MH experienced no connection between the two.

The root sequence *lyṣ* is quite prolific. It occurs in the Qal, Pi., Hif. and Hit. verb formations; and generates the nouns *lēṣ*, *lāṣôn*, *mēlîṣ*, and *mᵉlîṣâh*. Its basic lexical sense seems to be 'speak obliquely, indirectly'[5]—hence *mēlîṣ*, 'interpreter, intermediary, ambassador' (Gen. 42.23; Job 33.23; Isa. 43.27). Like *lēṣ*, mainly in Proverbs,[6] *mēlîṣ* has nothing to do with humour. Therefore, it seems that the basic signification and vitality of the term lies outside the realm of the humour field. Nonetheless, some situation and word contexts indicate a 'scorn, mock' signification either on the denotative or the connotative level. So is the case with its occurrences in Ps. 119.5, Job 16.20 (Hif.); perhaps in Isa. 28.14 ('men of *lāṣôn*') and 22 (Hit.); and Prov.

1 BDB, pp. 1068, 1122.
2 Cf. *miśḥāq*, 'jest' and *yiśḥāq* in the same verse.
3 BDB, p. 887. Cf. also the parallelism of *htl* and *qls*, both 'mock', in Ben Sira 11.4.
4 Jastrow, p. 1379.
5 BDB, p. 539, cites cognates in Arabic and Phoenician.
6 *lēṣ* appears in the book of Proverbs 14 times, and also once each in the Psalms and Isaiah. It usually refers to someone who is 'fickle-minded', 'rash', 'reckless'.

1.22. Whether BH *m*ᵉ*lîṣâh* (in later Hebrew 'rhetorics', 'rhetorical device') denotes 'riddle, proverb' or—what is more within the sphere under discussion—satirical song, taunt'[1] (Hab. 2.6; Prov. 1.6), is difficult to determine. In short, its obvious vitality notwithstanding, the root looks like a borrowing into our field from a sector of the field of 'rhetorics'. It is perhaps preferable to position it under the 'tertiary' heading. It is nevertheless ascribed here to the secondary layer for two reasons: the scarcity of other candidates; and the relative variety of its derivatives within the referential framework under discussion.

V

The tertiary, that is, lowest monolexemic level of the field is comprised of two terms: the root sequences *l'g* and *l'b*. Both look like non-indigenous members, which is one of the reasons for the relatively low field status assigned to them in spite of their wide distribution, impressive frequency, and large range.

*l'g* occurs 18 times as a verb and 9 times as a noun. It generates three verb formations—Qal, Nif. and Hif.—and one nominal (*la'ag*). The basic lexical sense of the Qal is defined as 'mock, deride'; attention is drawn to *lglg*, a four-consonantal offshoot in MH; and cognate etymologies are supplied from Arabic, Syriac and the Aramaic of the Targums. The cognates, however, have the sense of 'stutter, speak unclearly'[2] rather than 'mock'. This same cognate sense is actually preserved in BH in a few examples, all gleaned from the book of the first Isaiah: a Nif. occurrence (33.19), a nominal usage (28.11—'mockery of tongue//another language'); and the metathetical [*l*ᵉ*šôn*] *'ilgîm* 'stammering' (32.4).[3] Thus, the provenance of the term and some of its occurrences point to its borrowing into the field of humour and laughter.

Another problem is that not every instance of mockery comes across as funny, although the speaker's original inten-

[1] BDB, p. 539.

[2] BDB, p. 541. Cf. also *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (trans. S.P. Tregelles) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1947, 1979), p. 630. For *lglg* see Jastrow, p. 693.

[3] See also *Bamidbar Rabbah*, s. 16, for a fluidity of *l'g* and *'lg*.

tion might have been to convey a message through derisive laughter. The exposure of something or somebody as absurd, ludicrous or the like might be experienced as comical. Yet, on the other hand, it might entail so much bitterness or anger that it is perceived by the addressee as non-humorous. Since author's intention is often not easy to detect, the criterion I have chosen for either the inclusion or the exclusion of actual *l'g* occurrences within the field is that of the word context in each case. Henceforth when *l'g* features on its own or as the parallel equivalent of *bwz* and *bzh*, 'despise, regard with contempt', be it in the Qal or Hif. stems, it is excluded from the count. Thus occurrences in many passages (like 2 Kgs 19.21 = Isa. 37.22; Ezek. 36.4; Hos. 7.6; Pss. 22.8; 35.16; 80.7; 123.4; Prov. 20.17; Job 9.23; 21.3; 34.7; Neh. 2.19; 3.33; and a Nif. in Isa. 33.19) belong, strictly speaking, outside the scope of our inquiry. What remains are occurrences that stand in structures parallel to or in close syntagmatic proximity with either well-established members of the field, or with terms for 'joy'. This procedure does not imply that *l'g* is equated in the text with its parallels or synonyms. It merely uses the word context for a better understanding of the connotations of actual performance. Hence, when we examine the remaining *l'q* occurrences, we find that in Pss. 2.4; 59.9; Prov. 1.26; Jer. 20.7; 2 Chron. 30.10 they are all parallels of *śḥq*, 'laugh', derived terms. In Ps. 44.14 and 79.4 *l'g* and *qls* appear as a hendiadyc pair. *l'g* is paired off with *śᵉḥôq*, 'laughter', in Ezek. 23.32. Prov. 17.5 and Job 22.9 have the root as the parallel of *śmḥ*, 'enjoy, feel joy'. In short, out of a total of 27 *l'g* occurrences, only 10 properly belong to the field. Like their secondary counterparts, they refer to the 'negative' end of the emotive axis of humour. Even the 'joy' referred to in the last two passages quoted looks far from facetious: it is malicious pleasure felt at someone else's calamity.

There is one occurrence of *l'b* in BH. It is late (a Hif. formation in 2 Chron. 36.16). This lateness, and the existence of cognates in MH,[1] the Aramaic Targums and Syriac,[2] indicate that it is possibly a borrowing from the Aramaic. The cognates

[1] Jastrow, p. 713, for the Hebrew and Aramaic.
[2] BDB, p. 541.

have the senses 'mock, delight'. The Arabic sense of 'play, disport, jest'[1] might be the original one. Still, the biblical *hapax*, late as it is, does not afford much room for further inquiry.

## VI

I would like to round the picture off by presenting three oblique references designed to denote or prompt abusive laughter. All are compounds (rather than monolexemic terms), and idiomatic or idiosyncratic in character. Hence, their assigned place is at the very edge or margin of the field hierarchy.

The first—and idiosyncratic—expression is based upon a repetitious usage of monotonous sounds in Isa. 28.[2] The prophet repeats the series *ṣaw lāsāw qaw lāqāw* twice in v. 10 and twice more in v. 13. The repetition is apparently designed to convey the sense of the stammering language (v. 11) of the drunkards (vv. 7-8) or fools whose linguistic capacity does not exceed that of babies. The result is an example of *laᵃagēy śāpâh*, 'stammering tongue',[3] which the prophet equates with his audience's lack of comprehension. The resulting picture is grotesque and the laughter elicited bitterly ironic.

The second instance involves a metaphor which, so it seems, has evolved into an idiom. The compound *hirḥîb nepeš [ki]šᵉ'ôl* is generally understood and translated 'opened the mouth as wide as She'ol, the Underworld' (in order to swallow). Indeed, the two passages in which the metaphor appears (Isa. 5.14; Hab. 2.5) at first seem to favour this interpretation. However, the basic compound *hirḥîb nepeš* has a semantic cognate in

[1] *Ibid.*

[2] Here *lāṣôn* (v. 14) and *lyṣ* Hit. (v. 22) indicate the general situational context of derisive laughter at the expense of the drunken custodians of Ephraim and Judah.

[3] See *l'g* in the previous section. Tur-Sinai, in his Commentary on Isa. 28, interprets *ṣaw* and *qaw* as not only alliteratively, but also substantially, connected with *qī'*, 'vomit' and *ṣō'âh*, 'faeces' of v. 8 there. Cf. Tur-Sinai, *Peshuto shel miqra'* (in Hebrew), Vol. III/1 (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 79. Although he assigns a different associative and connotative value to the expression under discussion, he too upholds that the prophet compares the leaders of the people to brainless children (pp. 79-80).

the Ugaritic *yprq lṣb*, 'opened the mouth wide'.[1] In the relevant Ugaritic texts[2] the parallel to the idiom is *wyshq*, 'and laughed'. *rāḥab pî*, 'I opened my mouth wide', in 1 Sam. 2.1 (the same root sequence but in the Qal) seems like another equivalent of the Ugaritic usage, since it too indicates laughter (expressing scorn). Similarly, other OT occurrences of *hirḥîb* (Hif., 'widened') together with *peh*, 'mouth' (Isa. 57.4; Pss. 35.21; 81.11) or *lēb*, 'heart' (as 'sight of the emotions', Ps. 119.32; cf. the Ugaritic above), all seem to refer to the widening of the mouth in the mocking gesture of victorious laughter. Therefore, we should consider the possibility that the BH loan coinage, not to say calque, *hirḥîb nepeš [ki]šᵉ'ôl* is one of a series, and that originally it too had the sense 'to laugh' (derisively). The secondary association with *šᵉ'ôl*, 'underworld, death' fits in with the basic metaphor: the personification of death as a laughing monster/demon is not surprising. One might surmise that later, through the contiguity of senses (for death gobbles its victims up; that is why they disappear in the ground, its belly), the idiom became opaque and its original meaning was lost.[3]

## VII

We have come to the end of the survey. The inevitable conclusion is that the field of humour, laughter and the comic in BH is sadly depleted and lopsided. Terms relating to lighthearted, facetious, innocent, pleasant laughter and fun exist only on the primary level and, even here, they are neutral rather than specific: they may signify fun, comedy and jokes as well as abuse, ridicule, and licentiousness. On the lower levels of the field's hierarchy, the extant data testify only to categories of 'heavy' laughter—that of satire, sarcasm, irony and the exposure of the contemptible, the absurd and the grotesque.

By way of a short comparison, let us have a look at the same

1 Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Glossary, p. 429.

2 Gordon 49 (= CTA 6): III, 16 and 2 Aqht (= CTA 17): II, 16.

3 There are indications for references to 'merry-making, play, jest' in both passages. Isa. 5.14 has a portrayal of public festivity and laughter soured by catastrophe. Hab. 2.5 is followed by 2.6, which deals with riddles and perhaps satire (*mᵉlîṣâh*, see under *lyṣ*).

field in the next stratum of the Hebrew language, that is, in MH. Even a superficial survey shows that many previous gaps are here filled. Some BH terms, like the primary *śḥq*, 'laugh' and its derivatives,[1] or the lower *l'g* and *l'b*, 'mock'[2] remain vital and their range is perhaps enlarged. Other terms are added, quite often by borrowing from the Aramaic or through it. Thus *bdḥ* and its derivatives signify 'be happy, enjoy, have fun, be humorous';[3] and have acquired prominence both in MH and in Modern Hebrew. Together with *ḥyk*, 'laugh, jest', *bdḥ* joins the old BH *śḥq* on the primary level. Another newcomer, *gḥk*, does not lag far behind.[4] BH *lyṣ* is also very much in evidence, gaining stature and referential ground. BH *l'g* and *l'b* are joined by the etymologically secondary *lglg* of the same sense, 'mock'. On the other hand, BH *ṣḥq* is virtually dropped, and the same applies to *qls* (through competition with its homonym *qls*, 'praise').[5] On the whole, the imbalanced structure of the BH field seems to have been redressed in MH. Both in MH and in contemporary and later Aramaic terms for laughter, smiling, having fun and making fun abound, as much as terms for denoting abuse and ridicule. MH, as is the case in many other semantic fields, fills the gaps and supplies a much wider framework for expressing humour and the bi-polar concepts related to it.

1 The spelling undergoes a shift from *śḥq* to *sḥq* (Jastrow, p. 1550), which is quite usual for /ś/ in MH texts.

2 Jastrow, pp. 139-40.

3 Jastrow, pp. 139-40.

4 Jastrow, p. 233.

5 Jastrow, pp. 701, 709, 716.

4

# HUMOUR IN NAMES

Yehuda T. Radday

> The mocker is never taken seriously when he is most serious.
>
> (J. Joyce, *Ulysses*)

For those who know no other kind of humour than the joke, looking for humour in the Hebrew Bible would be a hopeless undertaking. Not so for those who hold that serious humour is no paradox and that what is meant to be instructive might just as well be—to use a phrase of Gibbon—amusing. Leaving aside the thorny problem of exactly what in fact humour is, and contenting ourselves with the notion that humour exists, one may still think that the most unlikely place to look for it in the book would be in proper and place names.* Again, in reality it is not so. An author may for instance use a proper name in order to characterize a person, mostly negatively; in order to show that its bearer is imaginary; to poke fun at him or to link him (to his disadvantage) by association, location or slight homophony to another. Regardless of whether the bearer is a person or a place, the author has a number of means at his

* The problem of transliterating Hebrew into English is here even thornier than usual because this essay deals exclusively with names, and its thesis is based upon how these may have sounded to the ancient listener. Unfortunately, the New English Bible (NEB), which I shall follow in this respect, itself follows the example of most Bible translations and renders not a few names in their Graecicized Septuagint forms so that their original sounds and significances are obscured. For instance, it writes Methusalem instead of Metushelah. I must therefore ask readers to make allowance for a certain measure of inconsistency.

disposal.

Distorting a real name is one device. The Roman satirist called the emperor Claudius Tiberius Nero behind his back 'Caldius Biberius Mero' which means 'hot and drunk with undiluted heavy wine' and popular Hebrew humorists derived the name of America from *'ammâ rēqā'*, i.e. a frivolous nation.[1] Inventing a name to disclose the character of the bearer at the very beginning is another: Ruritania is clearly a pleasure-loving, but shaky Balkan kingdom, and it is not hard to guess what Shakespeare's opinion was of a young lady by the name of Doll Tearsheet.[2] Thirdly, the writer may use a name which shows that its bearer does not exist, viz. Swift's country of Brobdignag and Jules Verne's Captain Nemo.[3] Lastly, an unnecessarily inflated list of names, in themselves perhaps quite innocent, ridicules by sheer accumulated mass. Two good examples are James Joyce's list of sixteen dignitaries who attended a viceregal party, starting with Monsieur Pierrepaul Petitépatant and ending with Hurhausdirektorpräsident Hans Chuechli;[4] and S.J. Agnon's enumeration, one after the other, of forty Jewish neighbourhoods in Jerusalem, a city which at that time numbered hardly 50,000 Jewish souls.[5] True, not every one of these instances is funny but there is no gainsaying that their authors' intent was humorous.

I can see no reason why the biblical storytellers should not have used the same devices. These are legitimate and there

1 Of the hundreds of examples one more is noteworthy because it is so witty. When David Coref, court physician to Frederic William III, King of Prussia, was baptized so as to qualify for membership of the Academy of Science as its 'coréférant', the then Lord Chamberlain remarked that he who is now *le juif coréférant* is nobody else but *Coref le juif errant*.

2 In Henry IV, Part II. Other examples from his comedies are Judges Shallow and Silence, Private Pistol, Policeman Dull, Mistress Quickly and Mistress Overdone.

3 For countries, compare Nephelokokkygia (= Cuckoonebulopolis) by Aristophanes and Erewhon, Samuel Butler's anagram for Nowhere; and for persons, Odysseus calling himself *outeis* (= 'no-man') to fool blind Polyphemos (*Odyssey Book*, 9).

4 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Bodley Head edn, 1960), p. 397.

5 S.J. Agnon, *Temol Shilshom* (Tel-Aviv, 1952), p. 273.

was no lack of targets for their wit.[1] Let us then consider the two categories, personal names and place names, separately, and in that order. I shall dwell on those cases only where reading *cum grano humoris* may carry some exegetical weight and perhaps throw a new light on an otherwise well-known text.

The inventory of more than 1500 biblical personal names and of about 650 place names has of course been diligently studied in its entirety.[2] However the main concern of scholars with respect to personal names was to explain them by means of various branches of philology such as etymology; and with respect to place names, to identify their locations with the aid of geography, topography and archaeology and by comparison with modern toponyms. While intending no disrespect for those savants whose devoted and rigorous reşearch has earned them our esteem, I propose to direct our enquiry to other paths. Therefore, their conclusions will be quoted only occasionally.

It must be remembered that the Bible was not composed for latter-day sages, but rather was written for, read by, and most probably read aloud to, a public which was almost the contemporary of the writer(s). And when reading a strange name or listening to it being recited, this public surely never consulted

[1] This is not the place for adducing even one of the innumerable biblical personages whom the Sages of the Talmud found so blameworthy that they twisted their names until they sounded comical. For a sample of one single name being intentionally comically misinterpreted in a couple of ways see *Esther Rabba*, 1.

[2] Personal names, more than place names, have intrigued biblical scholars who used the inventory with various ends in mind as shown in the titles of their publications. Cf. M. Nestle, *Die israelitischen Eigennamen nach ihrer religionsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung* (Haarlem, 1875); and M. Grünwald, *Die Eigennamen des alten Testaments und ihre Bedeutung für die Kenntnis des Volksglaubens* (Breslau, 1985). The diachronic aspect is the subject matter of G.B. Gray, *Studies in Hebrew Proper Names* (London, 1896), the general-historical one that of M. Noth, 'Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung', BWANT 3, 10 (1929, 1966); and of J.J. Stamm, *Beiträge zur hebräischen und altorientalischen Namenskunde* (Göttingen, 1980). A full and computerized list of all names is available from *Bible et Informatique*, L'Abbaye de Maredsous, 5198 Denée, Belgium.

dictionaries or concordances for enlightenment, just as today no one in his right mind would look in an atlas for a country by the name of Utopia, nor search for Thomas Mann's charming young crook Felix Krull in the records of Interpol; although, with some luck, one might discover that Utopia is a small town in Ohio, and unearth a certain Herr Krull in a German provincial telephone directory.

What follows from here for our study of names is that the more we busy ourselves with *Wissenschaft*, the more surely we miss a possible humorous slant of the narrators. To make this point by analogy: Londoners call Parliament's bell-tower 'Big Ben' and in German folklore the 'deutsche Michel' denotes a naïve and simple-hearted country lad. Nothing would be more misleading than the efforts of future philogists to connect them with the Biblical personages Benjamin and Michael, respectively.

## *Personal Names*

### *Character Names*

Our starting point is 1 Sam. 25.25. Abigail, a beautiful young woman, asks the young and still uncrowned David to spare the life of her husand Nabal, who has offended David. As an apology she says, 'For as his name is, so is he: Nābāl (= 'fool, churl') is his name and *nebālāh* (= 'folly') is with him'. Nabal = 'fool' is attested in Ps. 14.1, so that Abigail obviously felt no compunction in disparaging her spouse. But how could parents ever have named their child 'Fool'? Stamm[1] tries to solve the riddle by equating Hebr. *nābāl* with Arab. *nabîl* = 'noble'—no pun is intended here—but his effort is not too convincing. First, wherever *nābāl* occurs in Scripture, it is in a disrespectful sense; and, second, does Stamm really imagine a shepherd near Hebron in 1000 BCE would know Arabic when the first Arabs appear on the biblical scene around 700 (cf. Isa. 13.20, or, according to 2 Chron. 17.11, only a century and a half earlier)? Why may we not assume that Nabal is a palindrome[2] of Laban (Gen. 29–31), another rich shepherd and

[1] See Stamm (note 7), *s.v.*
[2] An old literary device. Cf., though not a true palindrome, Gottfried

exactly as much of a miser as Nabal? In addition, Laban may in either case be a by-name: *lābān* = 'white' is the colour of the finest wool (cf. Isa. 1.18) and plays an important role in the dealings between Laban and Jacob in Gen. 30.31ff. Hence, Nabal is a paragrammatical soubriquet by which his retinue and even his wife refer to the old niggard and drunkard. Since the narrator did the same, it has been established to our satisfaction that Scripture uses distorted personal names in order to mock their bearers.

Let us consider briefly a few more names as support for this contention before tackling more intricate cases. Bileam, who was summoned by the enemy to curse Israel (Num. 22–24), means (or could mean) 'abuser of a people'; Kozbi, a Midianite beauty who seduced one of the Israelite chieftains (Num. 22.15), evokes to the Hebrew ear the notion of deception;[1] a Moabite potentate by the name of Eglon = 'Big Calf' is stabbed with a dagger (Judg. 3.22), but the weapon cannot be recovered as the fat closes over blade and hilt. Another oppressor's name is Cushan-Rishathaim (Judg. 3.8), which a Hebrew listener could have interpreted only as 'Superblack Double-villain'. When one reads that a rapist is the son of a certain Hamor, i.e. donkey, one cannot help thinking of the fact that asses were proverbial for lust and the size of their genitals[2] and that the saying goes 'like father, like son'. Abraham's nephew (Gen. 12.5) who, at first and laudably, joins his uncle in the latter's wanderings but, finally and less laudably, settles among the worst evildoers, i.e. in Sodom, is quite an ambivalent figure and therefore rightly called Lot, namely 'veiled'.[3]

Then there is Samson's Philistine *femme fatale* Delilah (Judg. 16) who betrays him to her countrymen while he is asleep in her lap. In a modern Beduin dialect, Delilah signifies not inappropriately either 'saddle' or a well-fed palfrey,[4] but the Talmud[5] seems better to understand what the author had

von Strassburg's hero Tristan, alias Tantris (13th century).

1 Sensed by Bemidbar Rabba, *ad loc.*

2 Ezek. 23.20.

3 Isa. 25.7.

4 For this suggestion I am indebted to my colleague Dr Judith Rosenhaus.

5 *B. Sota* 9b.

in mind: 'Rabbi says, "Were not her name Delilah, she could be nicknamed thus, because she diminished (Hebr. *dildᵉlāh*) his strength, his mind and his victories"'. The names of four pompous local kings (Gen. 14), who embarked on a world war in miniature and were defeated before the war even started, are Bera, Birsha, Shinab and Shemeber. No normal people bear such names, least of all kings, because in Hebrew they mean (approximately) 'King Bad', 'King Evil', 'King Rebel' and 'King Highfalutin'. Hence, their original names must have been different and these must be their biblical pseudonyms.

In fact, we find even one explicit example of renaming a person in order to put him to shame and to make him a laughing stock. Jeremiah (20.3) said to one of the chief officers in the Temple, 'The Lord does not call your name (in future) Pashhur (= 'Tranquility around') but Magor-missabib ('Terror on every side')'. If this is the way a biblical prophet dared to treat a real priest, why might not a biblical writer likewise treat a person playing a part in his narrative?

Some of the examples are so striking that not only does the Midrash, delighting as it does in word play, mention them—viz. Delilah—but even modern biblical scholars who, although they view the possibility of humorous tendencies in Scripture with little favour, could not help but notice them. Yet contemporary commentaries neglect a certain Picol and tell us no more than that his name suggests that he might be a mercenary of Egyptian origin. Not playing any role in the diplomatic proceedings related in Genesis 21 and 26, he is given short shrift by modern exegetes. A closer look at him yields further results. In the negotiations of Abimelech with Abraham and later with Isaac, Abimelech is mentioned ten times. Only after five chapters (Gen. 26) do we learn that he is the king of Gerar (vv. 1, 12), a tiny kingdom on the coastal plain, the army of which can hardly have exceeded the size of a fire brigade. This formidable force is commanded by the above Picol, mentioned three times in two chapters, each time—and in striking contradistinction to Abimelech who is not called king—as 'General of the Royal Army'. Gracing the occasion with his presence, he sits in at the conference and insists on being mentioned as a participant, but at the reception he does not

utter one single word—and his name is Picol which, whatever it may have meant in Egyptian, in Hebrew means 'Mouthful'.[1] The incongruity between his 'talkative' name and his taciturn comportment was noticed by the Rabbis,[2] but they failed to pay attention to the totally unnecessary threefold repetition of his rank, which only adds ridicule to the already ridiculous figure he cuts. While of the commercial and connubial discussions between the king and his interlocutors he understands very little—as an Egyptian his knowledge of Hebrew and Philistine was surely not too impressive—he understands even less of the humorous side of the goings on (which deserves to be dealt with separately). What Shaw put in a sentence, namely 'In the army, honour does not go together with humour', the biblical writer achieves by the otherwise purposeless repetition of one personal name *pleno titulo*.

Three more and somewhat variant cases should be considered. Queen Jezebel is a murderess, who also sought Elijah's life (1 Kgs 16–19). Her name sounds offensively mocking to the modern Hebrew speaker who is reminded of *zebel* = 'dung'. Yet this noun does not belong to the biblical Hebrew vocabulary and occurs for the first time as late as in the Mishnah (*Shab.* 8.5). Hence, no humour can here be imputed to the writer and the case only seemingly lies within our terms of reference.

The instance of the Canaanite deity Baal-Zebub (also known under his alias Belzebub) is of another kind. As the name stands, its meaning is 'Lord of Flies' (2 Kgs 1.2ff.). Semitists are probably correct in maintaining that his real title was Baal-Zebul, i.e. 'Baal of the Lofty House', and that the Israelites jokingly 'improved' upon it. Actually, once in the Bible (Eccl. 10.1), someone complained of being plagued by flies (*zᵉbûbîm*), so that we may include Baal-Zebub in our collection. But why flies? The number of meat sacrifices permitted

[1] The image reminds one of the Hebrew idiom 'he filled his mouth with water', meaning 'he did not utter one single word'. It would have here been most welcome if it could be found in Scripture, but to one's regret it cannot, being a twentieth-century neologism borrowed from the Russian *slowno w rot wode nabral*.

[2] *Bereshit Rabba* 54.

to the Israelites was, at least on paper, quite restricted and the only place where they were to be offered was Jerusalem. In contrast, the number of Canaanite altars all over the country was practically limitless and the number of bloody sacrifices depended only on what a person could afford. The slaughtered meat naturally attracted lots of flies, a spectacle which could easily have induced the Israelites to view the Baal as a deity particularly fond of these insects who, being his messengers, fed on the meat in his stead. Baal-Zebub is a witty name, and, in Aristotle's word, 'Wit is educated insult'.

Finally, there is Joseph's son, Manasseh (Heb. *mᵉnaššeh*, Gen. 41.51). His father gave him this name 'for God has made me forget all my hardship and my father's house' since *mᵉnaššeh* is understood by the Torah as a derivative of the root *nšh* = 'forget'. If so, then whenever Joseph remembered his father, all he had to do was call his son and ask him to please help him to forget the old man; or, alternatively, whenever he saw his son he was reminded of his own father in spite of himself. This explanation of the name, a sort of *lucus a non lucendo*, was designed, it appears, by the narrator to let the reader understand that Joseph, the exemplary son, contrary to what he said, was never able nor wanted to forget his father's house.

One of the reasons why the humorous implication in a person's name occurring in the Bible is so frequently overlooked by scholars is that the narrators themselves poker-facedly never let us sense that they were not speaking in earnest, which is, after all, one of the components of good humour. It follows that wherever they do the opposite and explain what may seem a joke or an ironical appellation, their intention was serious and anything but derogatory. This conclusion refutes, for instance, the assertion made by many exegetes that what the Torah tells of Esau in Gen. 25.25-30 smacks of irony: they called him Edom = 'the Red One' because of the red pottage he so greedily craved, and Seir (from *śēʿār* = 'hair') because he was born so disgustingly hairy. Both names stuck to him, so we are told by more than one modern commentator, and were used by the offspring of his counterpart and brother Jacob when they wished to express their hate and contempt for Esau's descendants. If this assertion is rebutted on formal

grounds, as I maintain it is, not a few incidents related in the Torah can be viewed in a new light: for instance, the Torah does not rejoice in sly Jacob deceiving credulous Esau, and whatever else is often read into the tenuous relationship between the twins is in need of revision.[1]

Most examples cited so far, it is true, show how the storyteller changed an original name, later forgotten, into a new and not exactly complimentary one. I can recall only one exception. The father-in-law of Moses is Jethro, whom the Torah holds in high esteem.[2] The word means approximately 'pre-eminence'. In itself, this would not be ample evidence if, as already remarked by the Sages, he were not identical with Reuel (Exod. 2.18), to be translated 'God's Companion', and also identical with, or related to, Hobab (Num. 10.29) which in turn means 'Good Friend'. In addition, in Exod. 4.18 he is called Jether, i.e. 'Superior', and some sort of association exists between him and Heber = 'Comrade' (Judg. 4.17). With so much sympathy shown by means of laudatory names to one single person and to his close relatives we have reason to believe that they were heaped, out of gratitude, upon the members of the family who formerly had other names.

We have seen that the Bible often 'corrupts' a person's name so as to turn him or her into a universal object of ridicule. By the same token the trick may be used with regard to a foreign people whom one deems to deserve no better. I am going to adduce four examples where a similar technique is employed, and two others, each of another kind. I shall start with the group of four.

We have already met the four kinglets of Genesis 14. They waged war against the five Great Eastern Kings who had previously vanquished the Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Emim and the Horites (vv. 5-6). Of the Rephaim we hear shortly

[1] One of the chief culprits in this respect is a scholar of world renown, namely H. Gunkel. For instance, in his *Genesis* (Göttingen, 1917) he seems to forget that Jacob and Esau are twins and projects upon them the relationship between Jews and Gentiles of the German Empire of his time. He even knows that when the ancient Jews listened to how Esau was tricked by his brother they grinned, and that 'they certainly rejoiced at these splendid jokes'.

[2] Cf. Exodus 18.

afterwards (15.20) and of all four in Deuteronomy 2, assuming that the Zamzummim there are identical with our Zuzim.[1] They are all said to be the original and even pre-Canaanite inhabitants of the land, but in Genesis 14 their appearance is totally unwarranted, unless their mention is supposed to add to the already highly humorous flavour of the story. Their names are of course entries in any biblical *Reallexikon* which, however, may be of little help if their function here is to add a shade of unreality to the events related.

Whom did the five Super-Kings—all bearing high-sounding names—subdue? The Rephaim, according to Isa. 14.9 (and seven times elsewhere) are desert spooks. The Emim according to Job 29.25 and also in accordance with their very name (*'êmāh* = 'fright') are half-legendary horror creatures. Whether the Horites were actually a tribe—viz. Gen. 36.20, 32 and three other times—may well have been irrelevant to the narrator of and listener to Genesis 14; either could easily and gladly have understood them to be troglodytes because *ḥôr* = 'cave' is supported by 1 Sam. 14.11 as a place of habitation and refuge of all sorts of contemptible people. The name 'Zuzim' may be interpreted as 'vermin'[2] and 'Zamzummim' either onomatopoedically as 'buzzers' (Modern Hebrew knows the verb); as 'tricksters' or as 'lechers' (cf. the biblical root *zmm* = 'to trick, to debauch'). Let it be admitted that each of these four name-interpretations is somewhat daring when seen alone, but together and in the generally humorous atmosphere of the chapter which debunks so-called victors in war, they do carry

[1] All these names are of course discussed extensively in biblical dictionaries. The matter of the Rephaim has lately been investigated anew by S. Talmon, 'Biblical Repa'im and Ugaritic Rpu/i(m)', *Hebrew Annual Review—Gordis Jubilee Volume* (1983), pp. 256-49. He concedes there the 'mythical overtones' of the word in Hebrew poetical phraseology, but denies them in historiography. It may be opportune at this point to state again that the manner in which I am treating names in this essay in no way contradicts, or competes with, the findings of Talmon and others in their research. They deal with each name for itself and disconnected from others. In such wise, however, much of the accumulated impact and impression when taken and read together and achieved by means of alliteration and equivocation as well of course as all contextually created hilarity are lost.

[2] Pss. 50.11; 80.14.

conviction: the entire campaign is now one big Donquixoterie, where 'ghosts', 'cowards', 'tricksters' and 'womanizers' stand for that Spaniard's windmills.

In the very same chapter, Genesis 14, the Amalekites, the fifth ethnonym in the series, are mentioned for the first time (v. 7). In ancient history, Amalek is the nomadic arch-enemy of the Israelite settlers and in later Jewish consciousness the antithesis of the idea and ideal of Israel. While this is not our present concern, we cannot but wonder about the name Amalek. Its etymology, so we are told by the dictionaries, is dubious. As it does not sound either Hebrew or Semitic, it will most probably remain dubious, unless it is assumed to be again the Hebrew distortion of a former and long forgotten name. The first component *'am* signifies 'people', and the second could be a derivative of the root *mlq* = 'nip'. In view of what the Torah relates of Amalek later, especially in Exod. 17.8-18 and again in Deut. 25.17-19, namely how Amalek fell without provocation or cause upon the exhausted Israelites in the wilderness to cut off their rearguard, the new name is undoubtedly fitting. That the gemination of the letter *mem* which our interpretation would necessitate is absent would not have worried the writer and need not worry the reader: hate-filled humour takes precedence over grammar.

The sixth people are the Midianites. It was undeniably the Midianites who pulled Joseph out of the pit (Gen. 37.28), but a few verses earlier (v. 25) his brothers had seen a caravan of Ishmaelites approaching and wanted to sell the lad to them. Was he then sold by the brothers to the Ishmaelites or the Midianites or did the Midianites sell him to the Ishmaelites? How this riddle is solved by various exegetes is not the current issue, but the trouble increases when we reach v. 36, which indicates that neither group of camel drivers, but the Medanites sold him to Potiphar! Now the Midianites and Medanites differ in Hebrew by just one single consonant, i.e. the *yôd* (*y* or *i*) after the *dālet* (*d*). Scholars tried to resolve this discrepancy in several ways. Some, such as Onkelos in his translation into Aramaic and, in his footsteps, Speiser[1] and many others elimi-

[1] E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, 1964), *ad loc*. For the other opinions quoted, commentaries must be consulted.

nate the difficulty by simply inserting the missing letter in v. 36 as a correction of a *lapsus calami* and, lo, the Medanites have disappeared! But this is a counsel of despair. Others suppose that two contradictory pre-biblical traditions, one knowing of a caravan with a *yôd* and another having heard of one without a *yôd*, were combined by a late editor who, for his own obscure reasons, let a vestige of each stand—too easy a way out, I think.

A third solution rests on Gen. 25.2 which mentions two brothers, Medan and Midian, whose offspring in the course of time allegedly intermingled, either in reality by intermarriage or in tradition by confusion of their names. This is a subterfuge because not only are the Medanites (Hebr. *mᵉdānîm*) nowhere else confused with the Midianites (Hebr. *midyānîm*), but the Medanites are as a matter of fact not even mentioned elsewhere.

Now whosoever may have pocketed the twenty silver shekels, the price of that choice slave, the primary cause for the sale was no doubt that dissension reigned among the brothers, and dissensions translated into good Hebrew is *mdnym* (read: *mᵉdānîm*),[1] a consonant cluster generally, and, I believe, erroneously understood to refer to a hypothetical tribe of merchants called Medanites. Verse 36 reads in consequence 'The dissensions sold him...' and that dissensions cannot sell, but only cause a sale, is no counter-argument: in biblical as well as in Modern Hebrew 'he did' includes 'he let or caused something to be done', which is borne out throughout the Bible. For example, when Moses had the tabernacle built, forty times in Exodus 36–40 alone we read 'and he (scil. Moses) made' as if he alone had done all the work and not Bezalel and his helpmates at his behest.

*Personal Names* en masse

Long genealogical lists of Israelites are a frequent phenomenon in the Torah, e.g. Gen. 46.8-27; Exod. 6.14-26; Num. 1.1-2.34; 26.3-65, and even more so in Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles, where they account for considerable text blocks. There is of course nothing humorous about them: the later

[1] Prov. 6.19; 10.12.

reader was simply interested in ancestral 'roots'. The matter is totally different when name lists are found of non-Israelites, where they do not serve the slightest purpose and where we ask ourselves what may have made the authors include tiresome records of inconsequential names in dramatic narrative. Yet they may, at times, contain more than meets the eye. Two outstanding examples will illustrate the point.

The technique of intertwining a high-tension story and a register of strange and rather comically sounding personal names reaches its apogee in the book of Esther. There we read of no fewer than thirty nonentities who crowd the Persian Royal Court, only four of whom play at most a very minor role, and only one ever utters a word. They are:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1.10 | (1) Mehuman, (2) Biztha, (3) Harbona, (4) Bigtha, (5) Abagtha, (6) Zethar, (7) Carkas |
| 1.14 | (8) Carshena, (9) Shethar, (10) Admatha, (11) Tarshish, (12) Meres, (13) Marsena, (14) Memucan |
| 2.3 | (15) Hege |
| 2.8 | (16) Hegai |
| 2.14 | (17) Shaashgaz |
| 2.21 | (18) Bigthan, (19) Teresh |
| 4.4 | (20) Hathach |
| 9.7-9 | (21) Parshandatha, (22) Dalphon, (23) Aspatha, (24) Poratha, (25) Adalia, (26) Aridatha, (27) Parmashtha, (28) Arisai, (29) Aridai, (30) Vaizatha |

Whatever these names may mean in Persian, Median or the language of any of the 127 royal provinces (1.1), in Hebrew they just sound ludicrous. For instance, no. 1 recalls *mᵉhûmāh* = 'panic',[1] no. 2 *bizzāh* = 'plunder',[2] no. 3 *ḥarbôn* = 'drought',[3] no. 4 *delef* = 'leaker',[4]—the rest evoke no direct Hebrew associations, but are equally droll. Lacking any operative task—except for the last ten whose role is to be hanged—they give the impression of a dumb chorus in an opera bouffe. The Jewish Masoretes gave vent to their utter contempt for Haman's sons (the last ten on the list) by prescribing that when these names are written in a scroll, seven letters should be smaller

[1] Deut. 7.23; and another ten times.
[2] Esth. 9.10.
[3] Ps. 32.4.
[4] Prov. 19.13.

and one larger than the rest, as if to underscore that they were very minor and not entirely normal courtiers. Similarly, it is a Jewish custom, to this very day, that when the Scroll of Esther is recited in synagogue, the names of the ten Hamanides must be read in a single breath. The upshot of my argument is that by flooding the story with a host of chamberlains with grotesque names the author describes a Byzantine-like court with an overstaffed administration *au baroque*, chiefly occupied with how to annihilate all the Jews effectively and efficiently.

Whereas the Scroll of Esther, despite its almost tragic end, is probably the most humorous in the biblical canon, the most awesome pericope therein is Gen. 22.1-19, in Hebrew the *'Aqēdāh* (= Binding) and in English generally and incorrectly called the Sacrifice of Isaac. It begins with the extremely rare, solemn and not obviously motivated opening, 'And it came to pass after these things'. Yet, to our great surprise, the very same phrase opens just as needlessly the next very short paragraph (vv. 20-24) concerning the birth in distant Aram to Abraham's nephew Bethuel of Rebecca, Isaac's future wife. At first, both openings appear redundant, although even the severest critics, not to mention Jewish exegetes, are of one mind that the Torah is most sparing in words. Consequently, the view that the writer did not know how otherwise to connect one story with another and that the first few words of both parts of Gen. 22 are a *façon de parler* must be repudiated, even more in a chapter which is universally acknowledged as the masterpiece of the biblical art of storytelling.[1] Hence, the repetition in so close a context of two identical and seemingly superfluous introductory phrases must be deliberate, and the only reason I can think of for the writer to have done so, is that he wanted the reader to juxtapose the two adjacent texts.[2] Let

[1] Best substantiated by E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Bern, 1946), pp. 7-30.
[2] Just as a recurrent *leitmotif* joins two musical pieces together, thus, in some exquisite literary masterpieces a phrase is repeated to link one part with another. An excellent example is how Gen. 37 and 38, the respective contents of which are so far apart that many consider Gen. 38 a foreign intruder, are tied together by the employment of at least three infrequent expressions. Such finesse is of course lost in translation.

us then try and follow up his hidden intention.

The *'Aqēdāh* is, according to Jewish commentaries, the tenth, the last and the hardest of the tests Abraham had to undergo: he is commanded by an inscrutable God to offer as a burnt offering on a nameless mountain, beyond space and time, his beloved son who was born to him in his old age, who is his one and only link with the future, and on whose survival depends the fulfilment of all the Divine promises. Abraham passes the test and Isaac is saved. The story continues, but has nothing better to tell us than that Abraham's brother Nahor has meanwhile begotten eight sons by his wife Milcah—not to mention a couple of unnamed daughters—and that one of the sons, Bethuel, in turn begot a daughter, Rebecca. Furthermore, Nahor, so v. 24 informs us as if in an afterthought, not content with such numerous offspring, fathered three more sons and one daughter by his concubine Reumah. The total of his descendants enumerated here by name in just four verses is eleven males and two females.

In this way, the short paragraph literally swarms with people, none of whom—except Rebecca and perhaps her father—is of the slightest importance, and none of whom makes another appearance elsewhere. For good measure, their names are most bizarre. Again, what they sounded like to the members of the clan themselves and whether or not they are the original names is not the point. In any case, the Hebrew speaker, upon hearing them, must surely have found them laughable. Nahor—see Jer. 8.16—is one who pants like a beast. Buz is 'contempt', Jidlaph 'dropper', Tebah 'slaughter', Tahash 'badger' (in Luther's translation 'giraffe'!) and Gaham (perhaps) means 'Red-Eye'. Pildash defies translation except that it differs by only a single consonant from the Hebrew word for 'concubine'. As for the women, Rebecca's and her mother Milcah's names are acceptable, to be sure, but the name of Reumah, Nahor's lover, is cognate to *re'em*, a 'wild and untamed animal',[1] and Maacah's is derived from the root *m'k* = 'lewdly touching [better: kneading] a woman's

[1] Thus in W. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. P. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs (Oxford, 1951), *s.v.*

breasts'.[1] In this context, one may be allowed to translate Nahor' as a snorting stallion in rut[2]—*on comprend.*

We revert now to the *'Aqēdāh*. The contrast is striking: Nahor in the midst of his wives and brood as opposed to Abraham in his terrible solitude, without his wife, alone with his doomed and only son, but blessed with the so far unfulfilled Divine promise to become the 'father of a multitude of nations', yea of kings (Gen. 17.5-6); monstrous names as opposed to 'Most High Father' (= Abraham) and 'There Will Be Joy' (= Isaac); animal-like sexuality as opposed to human love and faithfulness. In short, to borrow a Hebrew idiom, *ḥayyēy-šā'āh* as opposed to *ḥayyēy-'ôlām*, i.e. 'here and now' as opposed to, following Martin Buber's newly coined expression, 'worldtime'.

The transition from the sublime *'Aqēdāh* down to the pedigree of a concubine's daughter is what Thomas Mann called 'an abrupt precipice into banality'. In contrast to those who equate humour exclusively with jokes, let Madame de Staël speak: 'L'humour, c'est la perception de la ressemblance entre les contraires et de la différence entre les semblables'.

*Fictitious Names*

We have seen that the biblical narrator loves to name his *dramatis personae* so that the readers themselves may infer what they think of them. By this strategy of writing one thing and meaning another, in itself a device which belongs to the domain of humour, the writer silently expresses his faith in the reader's good sense and perception of humour. He could not have foreseen how numerous are the cases where this trust would be unfounded; and how often an eternal and most serious spiritual truth, which he conceals behind a veil of apparent light-heartedness, would be comprehended literally as a factual one. A few examples will illustrate my point.

Why did Cain kill his brother Abel? It would lead us too far afield to quote here in detail the answers offered to this question. They range from the psychological (innate human fratricidal inclinations), via the religious (Cain's offerings were

1 *Op. cit., s.v.*
2 Cf. also Job 39.5.

less precious than Abel's and, therefore, less pleasing to God), to the economic (clash of interest between the farmer and the cowboy as if we were watching the musical 'Oklahoma'). A close inspection of the names in Gen. 1–6 provides, I believe, a better solution.

Adam is 'Adam' because he was created from *'ᵃdāmāh* = (dust from the) ground; Eve is 'Eve' (Heb. *ḥawwāh*) because (Gen. 3.20) she was the mother of all living (life = Heb. *ḥayyîm*, Cain—Gen. 4.1 notwithstanding—is called 'Cain' because the word signifies a sort of weapon, especially one used by a brute (e.g. by a giant in 2 Sam. 21.16); and Noah is 'Noah' for he was the first to find favour (Heb. *ḥen*—the consonants of Noah transposed—and Heb. *naḥat* = 'contentment') in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6.8) and brought relief (*nḥm*) to men (Gen. 5.29). In short, four of the five principal protagonists of the Primordial Story bear names the meanings of which became appropriate only in their later lives and could, consequently, not have been given to them by their parents. At the same time it is noteworthy that the explanation of the name of the fifth is lacking. Why indeed is Abel called 'Abel'? The answer lies in what the word means (Heb. *hebel* = 'nothingness', 'transience', cf. Eccl. 1.1) and in what happened to him later on. He was murdered, and being murdered without any reason and vanishing from the scene is his only part in the plot. If Cain was to be a murderer, he had after all to have a victim. All this can only mean one thing which is given away by the plainly fictitious names: the tale is not a photographic report of factual events, but deals with Man's existential problems. It is indeed true, but in another and higher sense, like all great fiction. While Abel also means 'a whiff of breath', so the Garden of Eden story contains several other whiffs of humour, but these have nothing to do with names.

The hero, or better anti-hero, of one of the strangest books in the Bible is a prophet by the name of Jonah ben Amittai. He fears God (1.9), but disobeys him. He wants to reform the evil ways of the Ninevites (3.4), but regrets (4.1) their doing penance (3.5-10), and his prestige as a prophet is dearer to him than the survival of myriads of human beings (4.11). Unlike all other prophets he is aggressive and lacking in honesty—no wonder that nowhere does the book explicitly call

him a prophet. Obviously the author wished to describe a 'false prophet', a concept quite as obviously not meaning a prophet who lies or whose forecasts fail to materialize, but one who is disloyal to his mission. That the entire story is made up is further accentuated by several absurd traits, e.g. Jonah being swallowed and spit out by a gigantic fish (2.1, 11), taught a lesson by a minute worm (4.7)—note the comical contrast in size—and by Nineveh's cattle fasting (!) in order to repent for their sins (3.8).

Now, for his didactic, fictitious and vastly humorous fable the writer needed a name for his main character. He found a most appropriate one in a certain prophet Jonah ben Amittai who is mentioned in 2 Kgs 14.25, of whom absolutely nothing is known and who lived about one century before the Israelites could have heard of Nineveh. But why did he prefer this man over all others in Scripture who are no less of a *tabula rasa*? Because this name stands in crass contradistinction to his would-be prophet! The noun *yônāh* means 'dove', and the dove symbolizes all that Jonah is not, namely innocence and kindness, and has done so consistently since its appearance in the Flood story.[1] Moreover, Jonah's patronym is Amittai, from *ᵓᵉmet* (= 'truth, honesty'), a quality whose absence in Jonah's character is singularly manifest. If this is not humour, what is?

Now to a third and more elaborate example. In Gen. 5.25-27 we meet, among a host of others, Metushelah, better known by his Greek name Methusalem, the senior of all biblical figures who reached the impressive age of 969 years, a matter which does not concern us at present. In any case, he lived longer than his forefathers on the one hand, and on the other, he also outlived every single one of his descendants. When we do a little calculation, it transpires that according to biblical chronology he died in the year of the Flood. In other words, he is the only one whom we know by name to have drowned in the Flood.

The names of his ancestors and scions—see below—sound relatively modest in comparison with his, in every sense a *nom de guerre*: the component *mᵉtû* is an archaic expression

1 Cf. Isa. 38.14; Hos. 7.11; Song 2.14; 5.2; 6.9.

for 'man' or 'hero'[1] and *šelaḥ* is a sort of javelin (Neh. 4.11). Together they intimate bloodlust and bellicosity—and this man of all others the Torah lets perish miserably in the Flood, holding fast, so to speak, to his weapon which far from saving him hastens his death. For better or for worse, this is humour—crude, to be sure—at the expense of a self-styled professional victor, which tallies excellently with the view Genesis takes of war and generalship, viz. the operetta Field-marshal Picol in chs. 21 and 26, the four kinglets and the five emperors in ch. 14, and Nimrod in ch. 10. The latter is the first king mentioned in the Bible; he enjoys the royal sport of killing animals if there are no people around to be killed, and calls himself with arrogant *pluralis maiestatis* 'Let's riot'. Yet the full significance of Metushelah's fate emerges from his genealogy. The following table shows it and that of his cousins, i.e. the branch of the Cainides and of the Sethides:

| | (1) Adam | |
|---|---|---|
| (1) Cain | | (2) Seth |
| (2) Enoch | | (3) Enosh |
| | | (4) Kenan |
| (3) Irad | | (5) Mehalalel |
| | | (6) Jered |
| (4) Mehujael | | (7) Enoch |
| (5) Methushael | | (8) Metushelah |
| (6) Lemech | | (9) Lemech |
| | | (10) Noah |
| (7) (a) Jabal (b) Jubal (c) Tubal-Cain | | (a) Shem (b) Ham (c) Japhet |

Apart from the fact that the biblically meaningful numbers 7 and 10 alone proclaim that the lists are intentionally constructed, the very similar names of the two lineages indicate that the author wished us to compare them with each other. Yet, if they are historical, how can one imagine that over half a millennium since Adam's death—he died in the year 930 and the Flood occurred in 1656—parents in one family gave their sons in almost parallel (and partly chiastic) order the same names as another family; and if the names are fabricated, how can one believe that the author could not think of a little variation? Since both alternatives must be rejected

[1] See Gesenius, *op. cit.*, *s.v. met* 2.

one is again compelled to try to find out what he had in mind.

If, as we have seen, Cain means 'javelin', Kenan, then, is its diminutive; Mehujael means (perhaps) 'strengthened by a god' and Mahalalel means 'praising a god'. If Irad is related to Job's (39.5) *'ārôd* = 'wild ass', then Jered (= 'lesser') mitigates the aggressive connotation; Metushelah, the 'Spearman', is substituted for Methushael = 'Mangod', hybris personified. Enoch alone is honorific on both sides, meaning 'dedicated, consecrated', and has become, maybe because of being so much in variance with all the rest, a venerated figure in Jewish and, in pursuance of Gen. 5.12, 24, also in Christian legends. That Noah must not have a counterpart is easily understood, and Enosh was necessary to complete the decade. His name is probably derived from the root *'nš* = 'weak' and practically heads the right-hand column where all names seem to be a weakened version of those on the left-hand one—weakened, it is true, but not exactly laudatory. The Cainides die out completely in the seventh generation, the Sethides live on for three more, only to die in the Flood because they are corrupted (Gen. 6.1-12), together with the last survivor, Metushelah.

We have skipped the two Lemechs. This name is inexplicable in Hebrew. However, it may be a palindrome of *melek* = 'king' and then mean 'king in reverse' or non-king. The Cainide Lemech is known to have invented two amusements in which kings indulge with particular gusto, namely polygamy and bloodshed, both of which he boasts of shamelessly (4.19, 23). For the palindromic twist of a name we have already met Laban vs. Nabal; another similar word play occurs in the very same list, namely Noah (*nḥ*) *vs.* 'favour' (*ḥn*), as mentioned before.

Without saying it in so many words, and using nothing but the means of mock-heroic namegiving, Scripture tells the reader that the clan of a murderer soon became extinct and that the less criminal one of Seth was later wiped off the face of the earth, too. *Sic transit*, and even a Metushelah *non mansit.*[1]

[1] In consonance with the subject of this essay I allowed myself to open the footnotes to personal names with a sharp-witted and true, though

## *Place Names*

Bible scholarship, it seems to me, does not sufficiently take into account that toponyms found in the Torah frequently serve other than informative purposes—on the contrary, they may at times aim at disinformation. If this possibility is overlooked, searching for their locations by comparison with other ancient literature or by studying modern maps must be futile. Such geographical disinformation may have as its object criticism and derision of the inhabitants of the place, demoting the place itself from its exalted position and diminishing its glory in the minds of the readers. These objects are hard to separate clearly from each other and will therefore be treated together. What they have in common is that the instrument with which they are pursued is the play upon place names.

### *Babel*

Gen. 11.9 explains the name Babel, one of the wonders of the ancient world, by 'there the Lord confounded [better: mixed] (Heb. *bālal* from the root *bll*) the language of all the earth'. Not a few commentators view this as faulty popular etymology, for the true name of the city in a Mesopotamian language was Bab'ilu = 'the Gate of the Gods'. There are several flaws in this assumption. If commentators credit the Torah with being familiar with pre-biblical Mesopotamian epic literature, they cannot in the same breath maintain that it was not familiar with the correct meaning of a contemporary name. Furthermore, we shall see that when it suits them they grant the ancient writer expert knowledge of obscure and faraway localities, but when it does not, they deny him elementary erudition. Apart from this, why should a book concerned with the relationship between God and Man find it necessary to account for the diversity of human languages—nowhere does it extol and twice only does it speak of Hebrew—or why a skyscraper in Babylon has remained unfinished—nor does it

not directly pertinent anecdote. In contraposition to it, let me end this section with another. The German poet Herder once lightheartedly started a letter to his close friend Goethe with the words, 'Thou, Goethe, who descendest from God, from the Goths or from *Kot* (= excrement)'. Goethe never spoke to Herder again.

refer anywhere to the much closer pyramids. Finally, the proper place for taking note of the Tower was in 10.10, where Babel is already so named; therefore, explaining the name in ch. 11 is unnecessary—and at the end of our passage all buildings and languages are forgotten anyhow. All these doubts are immediately dispelled as soon as the humorous slant of the story is recognized.

Why did those men crowd into one city? Not because they were obsessed with storming the heavens, but with fear, as it is written 'lest we be scattered'. They wanted to escape their frightful solitude—the earth was empty—by all gathering together into one huge shelter, yet the larger the shelter, the greater the 'misunderstandings'. As their desire for local togetherness contradicts God's command 'Fill the earth' (Gen. 1.28), he thwarts their plans, not however Poseidon-like with an earthquake to destroy their tower, but by the most natural means: multitudes lack coherence, conglomerations of people first of all breed substantial quarrels and later wars over mere words. The topic of the chapter therefore is not architectural, historical, linguistic or mythical, but existential, and expresses the Torah's view of living in a metropolis. There, in a Manhattan of antiquity, life is so unlivable that people are willy-nilly forced to 'scatter' in order to survive. Just as at first bitumen mixes with mortar (v. 3), so finally the mixers themselves become mixed up (v. 7) and in the end the city goes down in history, a byword for generations, as Babel = 'Mixville'.

*Tarshish*

Here we return once more to the book of Jonah and the humour therein. Its place names add to this humour. There is nothing wrong with Jaffa, the port of Jonah's embarkation, but Nineveh is a blatant anachronism—see above—destined to expose the unreality of the tale. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, like Babylon 'an exceedingly great city' (3.3) in the East, but while he proudly declares his God to be he 'who made heaven, sea and the dry land' (2.9), he flies from there to the end of the earth in the far West, to Tarshish, probably in Sardinia or in the Iberian peninsula. Hence, in addition to other reprehensible traits in this curious kind of prophet, he is also inconsistent; and the manner in which he makes the Lord known to the

mariners as the God of the Universe is no more than an empty phrase. His flight to Tarshish unmasks him as a liar—this time an example of unconscious humour.

*Ararat*

Mount Ararat is where Noah's ark came to rest (Gen. 8.4). Why Ararat? Because, according to most modern exegetes, the Ararat mountain ridge, somewhere in the Caucasus, was the highest point on earth known to the ancient writer. Consequently, and for once taking the biblical story at face value, Soviet archaeologists periodically equip expeditions to search there for the remains of Noah's huge floating box. So far, ark-archaeology's efforts have regrettably remained unsuccessful, leaving the citizens of Russia in suspense. But how could it be otherwise?

The Flood saga is undeniably somehow related to the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic and Noah to its hero Utnapishtim. However, despite many parallels, the latter's boat lands not on Mt Ararat, but on the lower and more southerly Mt Nizzir, although the author of that epic must have been more aware than his alleged Hebrew imitator of Mt Ararat being higher. Why does the Hebrew deviate in this detail from its model?[1]

When an object floats on water, and when the waters slowly recede and the tops of hills on dry land appear, then this object by no means comes to rest on the highest and first visible mountain top, but, on the contrary, is swept down by the subsiding waters until it becomes stuck on the lowest point of a valley. A simple experiment in a bath tub will corroborate this claim, but, even without such proof, the one who composed the story must have known that much physics. It follows that he lets the ark land on Mt Ararat, the most improbable place of

[1] Probably the first to pay attention to this detail was B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora* (Berlin, 1934), *ad loc.* For a comparison between the biblical account and the Mesopotamian epic, J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1955), is of course indispensable—with a *caveat* in mind: what is distinctive about the Hebrew Bible is rather obliterated by such a comparison, because the similarities are more easily recognizable—biblical humour all the more so, a quality singularly absent in most ancient literature.

all, in order to make his readers conclude that the deluge simply did not happen as told—and perhaps also in order to spare idle archaeologists useless expense.

It further follows that a hard to imagine meteorological phenomenon is not the focal point of the story, but rather a highly relevant ideology. Its principal problem is again an existential and moral one. 'Can one single righteous man save a world of good-for-nothings?' The biblical answer, true or false, is an unambiguous 'yes', but it is immediately and facilely eclipsed by the humorously mystifying choice of Mt Ararat as the ark's anchorage.

*Paradise*

So idyllic is the description of Paradise in Genesis 2–3 that it must evoke the reader's curiosity to know where it is on earth, so that he might make a pilgrimage there and spend his life in such pleasant circumstances. But where is it? To this fateful question we get a surprisingly precise reply: where one river divides into four others (Gen. 2.10-14), all of them indicated by their names. They are the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The first hitch, though, is that the Euphrates and the Tigris have no common origin, but quite to the contrary converge into one confluence before they reach the sea. The Gihon, to make things worse, is an insignificant rivulet near Jerusalem,[1] whereas the Pishon is totally unknown and does not reappear anywhere else in biblical or extra-biblical literature. Some believe it to be the Nile, others the Ganges—why not the Mississippi?

Yet this is not all. The Gihon is said to circumflow the Land of Cush, of which there are unfortunately two: one in Ethiopia,[2] another somewhere near Media.[3] The Pishon, too, circumflows a land, the Land of Havila, which may designate a region either in Arabia[4] or one adjacent to Egypt.[5] The fact that in Havila there is 'good gold' does not fit either place. And does the Book value gold so highly that it deems it necessary to

1 See 1 Kgs 1.33.
2 Cf. Isa. 11.11; Ezek. 30.4; Nah. 3.9.
3 Cf. Esth. 1.1.
4 Cf. Gen. 15.18; 1 Sam. 15.17.
5 Cf. Gen. 10.7; 1 Chron. 1.23.

advise the reader on its second page where he may find it? It is most confusing.

Many solutions have been offered to this enigma: that after the Flood the earth's surface changed, that the description is Egyptian-mythical, that the writer's geography is primitive and chaotic.[1] Whatever the merits of each suggestion, none is consonant with the general character, the artistic level and the overall aims of the Torah. We also wonder how the Jewish exiles, when sitting 'by the waters of Babylon',[2] i.e. on the very banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris, came to terms with a passage which flagrantly contradicts what they saw with their own eyes. Maybe humour comes to our rescue in this quandary.

Paradise represents, in concrete terms, what the Torah understands by the concept of happiness (Hebr. *'ēden*).[3] There is water, vegetarian food, shade, company, social and ecological harmony, monogamic matrimony, a task to perform (Gen. 2.15) and one apparently senseless, and therefore all the more educational, taboo. Gold lies outside this garden of beatitude. But can the garden be reached? Of course it can and the pericope provides accurate guidance: 'Just follow the course of two mighty and well-known rivers [that never meet in reality] upstream until they meet with a brook, equally well known since it bubbles under your own window, and with a fourth and imaginary river, and that at a point where also two lines cross, one connecting the two different Lands of Cush, the other connecting the two different Lands of Havila—*Bon voyage*!' This is neither primitive nor chaotic, but told tongue in cheek. The real route to paradise on earth is, so the book opines, to follow its commandments, six hundred and thirteen in all and detailed further on. Whether the reader accepts the injunctions is his own business, in any case. Where the Four Rivers lead to is no elusive Elysion, no Utopia, but a do-it-yourself Eutopia. The five verses are intentionally atopic—or shall we say metatopic?—, not inadvertently anatopic—and spoken

1 'Chaotic' is Speiser's verdict (cf. p. 69, note 1).
2 Ps. 137.1.
3 Cf. Gen. 18.12.

in a humorous vein.[1]

*The Battle of the Dead Sea*

The account of the only war in Genesis (ch. 14) is so strange that—despite their widely contradictory interpretations—scholars are of one mind in calling it the most unintelligible one throughout the book. One of them needs 4600 words to discuss the 340 words of the chapter,[2] another writes, 'If this is possible, nothing is impossible',[3] a third is convinced of its historicity, but only in part.[4] We have already had occasion to observe one aspect of the chapter's humour—see *Personal Names*—but there is another aspect, that of its place names. The paradox of this geographically difficult tale is that it does not have a counterpart in its richness of geographical information. Its twenty-four verses, apart from fifteen personal and six ethnic names, abound in no fewer than twenty-six toponyms. They encompass in fact the entire ancient Near East, from the Mediterranean coast in the west to the Tigris in the east and from Anatolia in the north to the Gulf of Eilat in the south. Some defy identification, others carry a second and explanatory name that only enhances the complexity; and one, Dan (v. 29), looks like a glaring anachronism, for Dan was to receive its name centuries later.

The story deals with the invasion of the Land of Canaan by five ostensibly powerful Mesopotamian kings who 'made war' (v. 2)—a peculiar and slightly funny expression in Hebrew—against local rulers over four townlets near the Dead Sea, a *Grande Alliance* against a *Petite Entente*. They march with their armies, criss-crossing the Fertile Crescent, first south through thinly populated Transjordan on to Eilat, and from

[1] For a discussion of the Tale of the Four Rivers see my article 'The Four Rivers of Paradise', in *Hebrew Studies* 23 (1982), pp. 796-803 (in English) or its more extensive Hebrew version in *La-Ateret Zevi—Tribute to Z.E. Kurzweil*, ed. Y.T. Radday *et al.* (Haifa, 1979), pp. 25-31. The subject is treated in a still more detailed way, in German, in *Ein Stück Tora*, ed. Y.T. Radday and M. Schultz (Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1989), vol. 1.

[2] Gunkel, *Genesis*, *ad loc.*

[3] T. Nöldeke.

[4] D.N. Freedman, 'The Real Story of the Ebla Tablets: Ebla and the Cities of the Plain', *BA* 41 (1978), pp. 143-64.

there north through the empty Negev to Kadesh, which they could have reached by a faster and less exhausting route had they only planned the campaign as they should have. On their way they pass Dan which may not have existed yet; the city of Ham (= 'drove'), a name, though not documented elsewhere, suggesting a megapolis; Ashterot-Karnaim, which fell to the conquerors although named after, and hopefully protected by, the double-horned goddess Astarte; an otherwise unknown Shawe-Kiriathaim ('Plain of Doubletown'?); Hareram-Seir ('Mount Shaggygoat'?) and El-Paran ('Redram'?), both recalling totem animals—and all of them of comical and absurd grandiloquence.[1]

After 'beating the enemy', the king of Sodom meets Abram in Emek Shawe ('Evendale'), having renamed it 'Kingsdale', ostensibly in memory of his victory which the king pretends to have won there. However, not only had he not beaten the enemy, not only had no battle taken place at all, and therefore no victory been won by either side, but the king of Sodom with his ally, the king of Gomorrha, had spent the time of danger hidden in the asphalt pits of Emek Siddim.

This last place name offers a good example of how prominent scholars are prone to ignore humour even where it is glaring. The vocalization of Siddim, it is true, is singular, but in view of the fact that the two kings have just crawled out of asphalt pits it is reasonable to read 'Sidim'. Since biblical criticism does not grant the Masoretic vowel signs too much weight, it is possible to translate it as 'lime' and to visualize the two heroes standing in front of Abram dripping black tar and white lime. Why, since Siddim makes no sense, many commentaries amend it to *šēdîm* = 'demons' is incomprehensible. Thus they miss the *Situationskomik* completely and turn what is by virtue of its plot and its personal, ethnic and place

1 I want to reiterate at this point that I am fully aware of my guilt. When trying to render these place names into English and to make them sound to the English ear approximately as they might have sounded to the Hebrew, I neglected much—not all—Semitic philology, particularly etymology. My excuse is that readers and listeners from Moses down to before the French encyclopaedists were no professors of Semitic languages, and that scholarly philology is poison to literary humour.

names a hilarious anti-war parody into a huge and, in the main, meaningless museum exhibit.

*Nod*

The following impressive instance of biblical humour at its most serious sheds much light on the author's ingenious artistry, on how he reveals his hope not to be understood literally and how much he relies on the reader's patience and sensitivity to work out his almost cunningly concealed *Weltanschauung*. For as a by-product of the analysis of a piece of very simple text, we learn a great deal of the Torah's image of humankind.

The story of Abel's death at the hand of his brother Cain terminates with the matter-of-fact statement 'and [Cain] dwelt [better: settled down] in the Land of Nod' (Gen. 4.16). As in previously treated passages, we feel like asking the same questions again: where is this land, and why must we know where Cain retired to for the rest of his life?

The answer to the first question as found in not a few biblical encyclopedias, is that Nod should be identified with the Land of Nadu, a country 'in an eastern region' and known from cuneiform literature. But what business had Cain to sojourn there? Moreover, why was Abel killed at all? Is Cain's reaction to God's sentence, 'You shall be a vagrant and a wanderer' (Heb. *nāʿ wānād*, v. 12), a repenting confession ('My crime is indeed too great to be forgiven') or an insolent retort ('Is my transgression really so great to be beyond all forgiveness?'). The Hebrew is ambiguous and Midrashim and modern translators vacillate over how the sentence (paraphased by me to elicit the difference) should be understood. Also, if Cain was declared an outlaw, why was he not killed by someone? And if he was not, but was forgiven, why was he given a mark 'lest any who came upon him should kill him', since he would have been safer unmarked if he were to escape detection? Furthermore, how can one murder be avenged sevenfold (v. 15)? And how does he who is condemned to eternal vagrancy settle down in one place, and there build the first city on earth (v. 17)?

The entire episode is of such fundamental importance that for once its problems must be examined at some length. Some

of them have already been touched upon. That the Torah—*pace* the Midrash in *Bereshit Rabbah* 16—wished to ascribe the fratricide to a clash of material interest is unthinkable: it is not a History of Economy. That one sacrifice was more acceptable than the other is likewise incredible, because neither of the brothers had been commanded by God to offer any sacrifice at all. That the story is meant to explain why there were nomads called Kenites[1] after Cain, their *heros eponymos*, is impossible, among other reasons because the very same Kenites were famous for their rock fortresses,[2] whose presence denotes the opposite of a nomadic lifestyle. That the mark is a sign of recognition among desert dwellers is altogether inconceivable.

And if we surmise with some scholars the vagrant Cain to be the mythical ancestor of all roaming tinkers and the inventor of their skill, we have only come back full-circle to the field of economy, which is of little interest to any biblical book, let alone the first few chapters of the Torah.

Frustrated by such unsatisfactory evasions of the issue we now turn to the less than famous last words of the story mentioned above, namely 'and he settled in the Land of Nod', which, I wish to suggest, were written by the thoughtful author with humour and hopefully will be recognized by the attentive reader as such. No particular attentiveness, though, is needed for recognizing that 'wandering' = *nād* and the name of the country Nod are a *jeu de mots*—though for recognizing the *jeu d'esprit* a little more patience and insight are needed.

The Hebrew verb for 'dwell' undeniably carries the connotation of permanence and contented rest. Explicitly emphasized by Cain's building a city, it is therefore semantically irreconcilable with the equally explicit Divine verdict of restlessness unless one of the two, either Cain's 'urbanization' late in life or his unsettled existence, can be interpreted as figurative speech. Since, however, building a city from laying its foundations to giving it a name (v. 17) remains doubtlessly and unequivocally realistic, we perforce follow Rashi's opinion that

1 They are mentioned with much gratitude in Judg. 4, esp. v. 17.
2 Cf. Num. 24.11.

Cain's restlessness refers to a state of mind and not to his continuous movement from one place to another. It is for this reason that we are told that he built a town himself, perhaps a useless effort to counteract his own restlessness: town or no town, wherever he was, the ground trembled under his feet.

The roots which provide the words of the sentence 'vagrant and wanderer', namely *nwʿ* and *nwd* respectively, are also used for a notion that does not entail a change of habitation: the first, e.g., for an earthquake (Isa. 24.20); the second for a shaking reed (1 Kgs 14.15), a sadly nodding head (Nah. 3.7) or a quiver of the lips (Job 16.5). His brother's spilt blood turned the entire earth for Cain into one single Land of Nod, a Land of Tremor—a Nadistan.

Thus all problems of the episode are solved at once. It cares nothing, as some have suggested, about economic competition between the murderer, a farmer, and his cowboy victim, but very much about crime and punishment. Cain is not a historical, but a typological figure, the criminal *par excellence*—wherefore his crime must be maximized to unprovoked fratricide. Disproportion between crime and punishment is a given fact in our lives: the greater the former, the more inadequate the latter. True, repentance serves as a mitigating circumstance, but it does not cancel guilt and only postpones retribution, maybe until the seventh generation (see the genealogy of the Cainides above). This alone is the correct meaning of the Hebrew word (*šibʿātayim*, Gen. 4.24), mistranslated as 'sevenfold'—God's wheels grind slowly, as the proverb has it. The number seven is chosen because in biblical numerology it points to divine intervention. In the end, the rule that 'crime does not pay' is confirmed in a truly Jewish manner: Cain's progeny becomes extinct, and his own life is spared only so that he (and the reader) may learn that, even with temporary impunity, a criminal forfeits his future. If indeed it was granted to Cain to live to see the birth of his last descendant as biblical chronology seems to hint, then it is significant that that child was named—a last act of remorse—Tubal-Cain, a name which unites the names of the killer and the victim. To leave the possibility of this sort of punishment and of this sort of atonement open may well be the reason why, in contrast to what is written of the clan of Seth, the ages

of Cain and of the Cainides are not indicated.

Finally, if even a Cain was haunted by his conscience—as Isaiah (48.23) said, 'No peace for the wicked'—it follows that every man has a conscience. That man is basically good and evildoing a momentary moral perversion is the teaching of the optimistic and humanely benevolent Torah. This entire edifice of concepts concerning the nature of human beings rests on two words—'settled' and 'Nod'—and on Scripture's finely honed, yet odd sense of humour. Shakespeare tells us that what's in a name is fortuitous and that 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet', but in the Bible it had to be a Cain who built the city and he had to build it in the Land of Nod and nowhere else. Whether the penological, psychological and theological teachings of this chapter are true is again another matter.

*Israel's Campsites in the Wilderness*

Numbers 33 enumerates the sites where the Israelites encamped between leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land. Since it is the most comprehensive list, we shall disregard the incomplete ones (e.g. Exodus 14–18, Deut. 1.1-2 and others) as well as occasional disagreements between them. So far, biblical research has not reached unanimity regarding the itinerary. The obstacles are the uncertain location of Mount Sinai and the difficulty of identifying more than half the number of the stations.

As almost a dozen proposals were offered by biblical geographers for the honour of the locus of the divine revelation, discussing even only some of them oversteps the limits of this essay. Suffice it to point out that to increase the muddle, the mountain is known by two alternating names, Sinai and Horeb, and that once (Judg. 5.5) Mount Tabor in the heart of the Land of Israel is also called Sinai. With the Torah's known aversion to the veneration of and pilgrimages to 'holy' sites such as the tomb of Moses, the most reasonable solution of the Sinai riddle seems to be that the mountain's 'ordinary' name was Horeb, while Horeb—or any other mountain, e.g. Tabor—becomes Sinai if and only when God manifests himself on it by revelation or intervention in Israel's history. It therefore cannot be chance but rather purpose that, among the forty

stations in the catalogue, Mount Sinai, the most memorable one, is skipped. This in itself is of course not humorous, but the list is, if the concept of humour as understood here is accepted.

The list is altogether strangely suspect. The forty stations, apart from recurring astonishingly often in Scripture, seem to tally too well with the number of years—forty in all—as if the Israelites spent one year at each station. In reality, according to Num. 9.21-22, they sometimes camped only a single night in one place, while according to Deut. 1.46 and 2.14 at Kadesh alone they stayed for more than thirty-eight years. And there is one more feature in which the chapter (Num. 33) evokes our wonderment: the detailed enumeration itself, i.e. the mass of names. On the one hand, the Sinai peninsula was never and still is not so densely inhabited that there was room there for so many loci; and on the other hand, the foregoing discussions have already shown that factual information runs counter to the overall *raison d'écrire* of the Torah and that, wherever we meet such an *embarras de richesses* we must be even more on guard.

The number forty is generally associated with the notion of progressive purification and maturation by means of isolation, a notion which is still reflected in the word 'quarantine'. In consequence, we find forty days as the duration of rain in the Flood saga, as the length of Moses' stay on Mount Sinai and of Elijah's seclusion (1 Kgs 19.8), in the respite granted by Jonah to the Ninevites for repentance and more. Hence, the length of Israel's solitary sojourn in the wilderness is a rounded-off structured one, with a view to impress upon the reader that it was a period of their slowly adapting themselves to their new partner-in-covenant. This is exactly how Jeremiah (2.1ff.) conceived it to be: a kind of honeymoon of the community of Israel (= *k$^e$neset yiśrā'ēl*, a feminine noun in Hebrew!) and God. Misunderstandings between newly-weds are frequent, visits by outsiders are unwelcome, and it is impolite for the curious to follow in the footsteps of young couples after their union has been consecrated. But how can such subsequent molestations be prevented? True, certain localities, especially where important events have taken place, cannot be kept secret, but the order of the remaining addresses can at least be jumbled in order to mislead the inquisitive. Other places, too

well remembered for particularly intimate encounters or exceptionally painful rows between the couple, are given code-names. The result can be seen in Figure 1 (p. 92).

The forty sites are listed in their order in Numbers 33, but arranged in two columns: on the left side are those where so momentous an incident happened (referred to in the list by chapter and verse) that they could not be left out; on the right side are those that recur nowhere outside this chapter. I wish to argue that these latter names are figments of the author's inventiveness (and humour) insofar as they allude to the doings and misdoings of that first post-Sinaitic generation. In the right-hand column occasional corroborations, tentative references and even more tentative translations are added. Three of the fourteen names are marked with an asterisk: these few are laudatory, in contrast to the rest that point to habitual stiffneckedness. In this way the list proves to be an integral part of the Exodus story and not the concoction of a late Priestly writer, alleged to be 'lacking in imagination'. If the list suffers from some defect, then it is not the absence, but the abundance of imagination.

These remarks do not exhaust the singularity of the list; it is not only artificially, but also most artistically constructed. The forty names are divided into three parts of 13, 14, and 13 names respectively, of equal length but unequal composition. In parts I and III we find eleven 'genuine' and two fictitious names each, whereas part II comprises fictitious names only. Such symmetric-chiastic order is a much followed convention especially in the Torah and, when we look at the entire Bible, found mostly in its oldest parts,[1] and thus in our case a testimony to the high antiquity of this pseudo-logbook. Investigations into biblical chiasmus have shown that this literary convention is characterized by positioning the *idée matière* of the chiastically arranged text-block in its centre. If so, then we are justified in reading in the table of names that, much to our surprise, its author considered part II with its non-historical

[1] Readers who wish to know more about this detail, in particular the importance of chiasmus not only as a literary ornament, but as a key to exegetical problems, may consult my essay 'Chiasmus in Biblical Narrative', *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, ed. J.J. Welch (Hildesheim, 1981), pp. 50-117.

| *Sites Attested in the Narrative* | | | *Fictitious Names* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Succoth | Exod. 13.12 | | | | |
| 2. Etham | Exod. 13.20 | | | | |
| 3. Pi haHiroth | Exod. 14.2 | | | | |
| 4. Marah | Exod. 15.23 | | | | |
| 5. Elim | Exod. 15.27 | | | | |
| 6. Red Sea | Exod. 14–15 | | | | |
| 7. Sin | Exod. 16.1 | 11 + 2 | | | |
| 8. | | | Dophkah | = | Spur On[1] (Don't Return!) |
| 9. | | | Alush | = | I Shall Mould[2] (them to my will) |
| 10. Rephidim | Exod. 17 | | | | |
| 11. Sinai Wilderness | Exod. 19 | | | | |
| 12. Kibroth-haTa'awah | Num. 11.34 | | | | |
| 13. Hazeroth | Num. 11.35 | | | | |
| 14. | | | Rithmah | = | Restrain[3] |
| 15. | | | Rimmon-Perez | = | Lovely, but Rebellious[4] |
| 16. | | | *Libnah | = | Whiteness, Innocence |
| 17. | | | Rissah | = | Smashing[5] (the stubborn) |
| 18. | | | Kehelatha | = | Rabble |
| 19. | | 14 | *Har Shepher | = | Mount Fair |
| 20. | | | Haradah | = | Trembling (with fear) |
| 21. | | | Makheloth | = | Riots[6] |
| 22. | | | Tahath | = | Deep Brown |
| 23. | | | Terah | = | Wanderer[7] |
| 24. | | | *Mithcah | = | Sweetheart |
| 25. | | | Hashmonah | = | Well Fed[8] (but ungrateful) |
| 26. | | | Moseroth | = | Chastisement[9] |
| 27. | | | Bene-Jaakan | = | ?[10] |
| 28. Gidgad | Deut. 10.7 | | | | |
| 29. Jothvathah | Deut. 10.7 | | | | |
| 30. | | | Ebronah | = | Anger[11] |
| 31. Ezion-Geber | Deut. 2.8 | | | | |
| 32. Kadesh | Deut. 1.46 | | | | |
| 33. Mount Hor | Num. 32.8 | | | | |
| 34. | | 11 + 2 | Zalmonah | = | Darkness[12] |
| 35. Punon | Gen. 36.41 | | | | |
| 36. Oboth ? | Num. 21.10 | | (Oboth ? | = | Ghosts)[13] |
| 37. Iye-Abarim | Num. 21.11 | | | | |
| 38. Dibon-Gad | Num. 21.20 | | | | |
| 39. Almon-Diblataim (?) | | | | | |
| 40. Abarim Mtns | Deut. 32.48 | | | | |

* = laudatory connotation ? = dubious

*Figure 1: The Campsites*

*Notes to Figure 1*

1. Cf. Gen. 33.13.
2. Cf. Jer. 7.18.
3. Cf. Mic. 1.13.
4. A composite place name still more curious than the rest of part II. Its two components seem to present opposites: the first means 'pomegranate', a complimentary designation in view of Song 4.3, the second 'outburst' (cf. 2 Sam. 6.8), undoubtedly censorious. Taken together they may describe Israel's ambivalent behaviour on the way to Canaan. But *rimmôn* is also the name of an Aramaean deity—*cf.* Gesenius, *op. cit.*, *s.v.* II. While the explanation of the name Rimmon-Perez which I have just suggested is admittedly questionable, connecting the place with one of the gods of a faraway nation seems to me even more so.
5. Cf. Amos 6.11.
6. Cf. Num. 16.3.
7. Starting from no. 23 the going is less smooth. Terah was Abraham's father (Gen. 11.25) who, like his son, left home for unknown reasons, and wandered westward halfway to the Land of Canaan. His name is probably derived from the root *yrḥ* = *'rḥ* = 'to wander', derivatives of which are the Hebrew words for 'moon', 'path' and 'guest'.
8. This name is an obstacle, but perhaps not wholly unsurmountable. The root *ḥšm* is documented here and four more times: in the personal names Husham (Gen. 36.34) and Hashum (Ezra 2.19), in the trislegomenon *ḥašmāl* (Ezek. 1.4, 27; 8.2) and the hapax *ḥašmānîm* (Ps. 68.32). Gesenius (*op. cit.*, *s.v.*) connects it cautiously with Arab. *ḥšm* or *šḥm* = 'fat, greasy', and E. Ben-Yehuda, *Thesaurus totius Hebraitatis* (Jerusalem, 1948), quotes from the writings of Rav Saadia Gaon (Egypt, 10th cent.) the word *neḥšām* = 'mighty', although the context would recommend 'plump, fatty'. We are immediately reminded of Heb. *ḥômeš* = 'belly, paunch' (2 Sam. 2.23) and of the root *mšḥ* = 'to lubricate, anoint'. Permutations of the same three radicals, all converging in the same meaning, are a frequent phenomenon in Hebrew. If so, and mindful of the Manna which the Israelites fed upon for decades and which is explicitly said to have been oily (Num. 11.8), no. 25 fits well into the table of stations. For the ending *-ônāh*, see below note 11.
9. Cf. Deut. 8.5.
10. This is again a hard nut. Its second component may stem from the root *'qh* = 'fence in' (cf. Deut. 22.8) and make one think of the heavy and restrictive 'yoke of commandments', so much resented by that generation. Alternatively we may connect it with the more frequent *'wq* or *ṣwq* (cf. Ps. 66.11) = 'to press, to be oppressed, groan' (cf. also Amos 2.13), in which case it may recall the unceasing grumblings of the Israelites. Neither accounts for the first component, the like of which we find only once more in a toponym, namely Bene-Berak (Josh. 19.45). Since Bene-Jaakan is the last station in the roster's most significant part II and thus perhaps a summary, maybe one is per-

mitted to take it as a caustically derisive new name for the Bene-Jaakob, from which it differs in Hebrew in only one, i.e. its last consonant. The suggestion will seem less audacious when we consider how daringly Hosea (12.4, 5) played with the patriarch's name.

11. Hebrew toponyms with the feminine ending *-āh* are very rare. Among the 650 in the Bible I found no more than twenty, of which eight occur in our chapter alone. Moreover, among these eight, three only end with *-ônāh* and appear in our list (nos. 25, 30 and 34). Still more intriguing is that their masculine forms exist also as place names and are mentioned not far from each other: Heshmon in Josh. 15.27, Ebron in Josh. 19.28, and Zalmon in Judg. 9.48. Hence Hashmonah, Ebronah and Zalmonah give the impression of being artificial imitations. I believe that no. 39 may be added to them because a locality by the name of Almon is known to us from Josh. 21.18, but I am unable to explain why no. 39, instead of being called Almonah, received the cumbersome Diblataim as an addendum.

12. See the previous note.

13. The word occurs in various eerie senses, e.g. as 'ghosts' in Isa. 29.4 and as 'subterranean spirits' in 1 Sam. 28.8. It thus relates nicely to its neighbours 'Darkness' (no. 34) and 'Clouds' (no. 39) in the right hand columns to make a foursome. What I fail to comprehend is why Oboth is listed in the opposite column. It is true, it belongs there because of being a 'real' campsite according to Num. 21.10 whereas, in accordance with what Oboth means and, in addition, for reasons of symmetry with part I, its proper place is among the fictitious names. Frightening ghostlike howling of desert winds is referred to in Deut. 32.10.

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names as its crucial component. When we apply the same yardstick to part II alone we find, again chiastically positioned in its middle, three most unusual toponyms: Haradah (no. 20) = 'Trembling', Makheloth (no. 21) = 'Riots' and Tahath (no. 22) = 'Deep Down', all three unmistakable hints to that generation's external and internal life experiences[1]—*quod erat demonstrandum.*[2]

I readily concede that the method of interpretation applied here to the register of campsite names is highly midrashic, an approach not viewed with too much favour in biblical scholarship. What however I am not prepared to concede is that the Midrash, though not 'scientific', must therefore be uncondi-

[1] Cf. Ps. 95.10.

[2] The issue of the campsites is treated extensively in Vol. II of the series mentioned in n. 1 on p. 84.

tionally relegated from exegesis. Since to be 'scientific' is not exactly one of the objectives of the Torah, there is room for making a case against the so-called scientific approach to it and in favour of the homiletic Midrash.

I can foresee two objections which may be raised against the manner in which I have treated this chapter in particular and biblical personal and place names in general. One is that the method is midrashic and therefore late, i.e. post-biblical, and can therefore not be ascribed to biblical authors. It is, incidentally, employed by Targum Jonathan to Numbers 33 with largely similar results. But there is already Midrash in the Bible itself—not only in Chronicles, where its existence is admitted by scholars, but also much earlier. For instance, midrash-like, the toponym Gilead in Gen. 31.25 is 'corrected' further down to Gal-Ed, and in line with the Midrash in 1 Sam. 1.27-28, Samuel's name should have been Saul. Even a far-fetched Midrash is not out of bounds when one is out to fathom what the book has to say. In the present case, humour camouflaged in a dystopical and, to all appearances, monotonous list is a feat of eminent literary sophistication and, for this reason, merits the extensive attention paid to it here.

Another objection will take issue with the various word plays I felt were necessary in order to make my point. Some readers may be unwilling to accept the numerous and often tenuous indispensable puns and other manifestations of wordplayfulness, which I had recourse to in order to elicit the humorous viewpoint of a passage. Instead of a long-winded defence of this means I wish to cite two examples, both ancient, both authentic, both hardly ever questioned by the most critical modern commentators, and—it could not be more welcome—one playing daringly upon an ethnic name, the other on a place name. Jeremiah (51.1) foretells the downfall of a people by the name of Lēb Kâmāy which has never been heard of, but which, because of the context, must somehow be associated with Babel. Most modern English translations leave the words simply transliterated, but already the Septuagint translates them as 'Chaldeans'. Whence the Chaldeans? Because when each letter in the Hebrew alphabet is numbered from 1 to 22 and then letter no. 1 is replaced by letter no. 22, letter no. 2 by letter no. 21 and so on, the two

cryptic words give the Hebrew *Kaśdîm* = Chaldeans, another name for Babylonians. If this looks very far-fetched, another instance follows in v. 41 of the same chapter: the toponym Sheshak, once more a unique and very peculiar name, gives 'Babel' if its letters are decoded in the same cryptographic fashion. It is worth repeating here that no better solution has been found for these two nonce words in the Hebrew onomasticon.

In a last attempt to vindicate the solution put forward here of Israel's enigmatic itinerary, I would like to sustain it by two cases in point, one taken from a classical and another from a less than classical source.

The latter stems from a paperback, better unnamed, which I happened to read just when I was occupied with my tantalizing list of campsites. Railing at how New Hampshire's lovely autumn scenery was disfigured by the eyesore of expensive and uncomfortable roadside cabins, the writer lets his eloping couple sleep over at motels named Hyperice, the Wrestles Home and Incognight—as if he had read the book of Numbers and known its biting toponymy, which he probably had not.

The classical source is rabbinical. When the Rabbis of old, as jurists, discussed legal matters in the Torah their exegesis was highly, at times perhaps exaggeratedly, literal. Not so when they dealt with narration. Here they knew very well that not every place name was a place name, and when they felt one to be a stumbling block on the way to reasonable comprehension they had no compunction about transforming its sense from the straight but unintelligible to the convoluted but meaningful and humorous, be it ever so strained. This is borne out by innumerable examples, none, however, as appropriate and supportive in this context as the following from the halachic-midrashic collection *Sifre* (par. 21), quoted also in *Debarim Rabba* and in Rashi's commentary on the words 'between Paran and Tophel and Laban':[1] 'Said R. Johanan [another version: R. Shimeon bar Jochai], "We have searched in the entire Bible and not been able to find localities named Tophel and Laban [which can only signify that they did not exist as such], but [Moses] scolded [the Israelites] for complaining (=

[1] Deut. 1.1.

*tāpᵉlû*) about the Manna[1] which was of white (= *lābān*) colour[2] (cf. Exod. 16.31)"'. I have the feeling that both R. Johanan and R. Shimeon would have agreed with this essay.

### *Envoy*

An essay proposing and defending ideas with which every reader agrees is not worth writing, let alone reading. This is why I expect mine to meet a certain measure of disagreement. However, should I surprisingly have succeeded in convincing every reader, let me supply myself one point where my thesis is open to attack. The entire thesis rests solely upon what I personally understand by humour. With this, it stands or falls. All things considered, I hope it will stand.

[1] Cf. Num. 11.10.
[2] Cf. Exod. 16.31.

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5

# HUMOUR AS A TOOL FOR BIBLICAL EXEGESIS*

Francis Landy

Some books suffer from their reputation, and the Bible most of all. The irreligious don't read it, because 'religion' doesn't concern them, and the worshipper meditates in it, it is true, but only along certain well-directed paths. The reverence accorded the Bible is a hindrance, ironically, a form of idolatry; and we forget that real people wrote the Bible out of their common experience. Hence a Bible that was known through quotations in the Talmud, or half-listened to in synagogue; hence the allegorization of the Song of Songs, the pious conformity imposed on Ecclesiastes and Job. Or there is the mechanical recitation of psalms in times of trouble; as if they are a sort of mantra, a magical charm against disaster. 'Don't pray to God, say *tehillim* (psalms)!'. And yet—at least until recently—the Bible escaped being suffocated entirely by unthinking piety, it was still one of the best-known and most-loved of books. And why? Because it is fun and human.

The solemn ritual of reading the Bible excluded humour as a valid way of worshipping God, and has created an impression of a stiff and serious document that never relaxes into a smile, so that many sensitive readers have closed their minds to its comic possibilities. For instance, George Steiner[1] speaks of 'the absence of purely verbal wit in the Old Testament'.[2] On

* Originally published under the title 'Humour', in *Jewish Quarterly* 28.1 (1980), pp. 13-19, and reproduced here by permission of the publishers.

1 *After Babel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 22.

2 I suppose the qualification 'purely verbal' does exculpate Prof. Steiner to some degree. On the other hand, I am at a loss to imagine

the other hand, Samuel Sandmel has devoted well over half the chapter on Biblical narrative in his *The Enjoyment of Scripture*[1] to comic episodes, ranging from scenes like the murder of Eglon by Ehud to whole books, such as Jonah and Esther. His presentation is shrewd, alive with sympathetic commonsense. His main point is the highly evolved variety of biblical humour, from the coarse slapstick of the exploits of Samson to the subtleties of dialogue between Laban and Jacob.

Humour is, of course, a matter of definition. Nor does humour, any more than poetry, survive explication. Thus any attempt at analysing biblical humour must found itself on more general theoretical considerations; and instead of laughter, hope to provoke thought—'what is the text saying?'—so that even those who fail to respond with a chuckle (and this is largely a question of one's expectations), will be induced to think again about how they read it, alerted to the dynamic surprises of Scripture.

I have neither the space nor the knowledge to produce a thorough survey of the literature on humour, and will confine myself to a few examples with which I am acquainted. The first, naturally, is that of Freud, whose *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* has had an influence quite disproportionate to its significance in his own eyes, and is the source of several key perceptions:

1. The subversive nature of humour, that allows repressed wishes and thoughts to be surreptitiously released, and is conditionally licensed, like the mediaeval Fool. He enumerates four categories of joke: obscene, aggressive, cynical, and sceptical. For this reason, *hutspah* is almost always fun, or attempts to be so; for this reason, too, oppressed peoples like the Jews develop a very sharp, highly ambivalent comic repertoire, in which the national anguish finds bearable expression.

what 'purely verbal' wit can be, or indeed 'purely verbal' anything. Language must always have reference to the world outside itself. It is astonishing that Prof. Steiner, who normally chooses his words so carefully, should have been so lax in this instance.

[1] Oxford: OUP, 1972, pp. 20-46.

2. The relationship of jokes to dreams and slips of the tongue. Indeed, these are often found to be 'funny' and to reveal unconscious processes.
3. The pleasure of jokes derives largely from an economy of effort, whether of speech or emotion. Hence the effectiveness of puns, or the succinctness of epigrams. Another technique used by jokes/comedy that relates them to dreams is displacement—the substitution of metonyms for the joke's real preoccupation. This takes several forms (allusion, analogy, opposition, etc.).

Anton Ehrenzweig[1] is attracted by what he calls the inarticulate 'baffling' character of the joke; that the first response to a good joke is a guffaw of laughter, for which we only afterwards construct a coherent explanation. In his view, the clarity, neatness, 'point' of the joke, in other words, its artistic *Gestalt*, is a secondary formulation, that covers up our first Dionysiac glee. In the joke, wishes and perceptions that we dare not consciously admit come to the surface, only to be repressed again. The success of the joke depends on the intensity of interaction between the conscious (articulate) and unconscious (inarticulate) elements. Ehrenzweig develops and illustrates his theme with all his customary brilliance, discussing, for instance, the embarrassment of the person who tells a joke badly, and the experience of hearing a joke repeated.

The last theorist I wish to cite is the encyclopaedic Israeli critic, Reuven Tsur. In his Ph.D. thesis[2] he drew on the works of linguists, critics and psychoanalysts of every description to suggest a comprehensive theory of poetry. One of his chapters is on the relationship of wit and metaphor, and his conclusion is interesting:

> Linguistically speaking, the difference between the exploitation of linguistic resources in a joke and a poem is a matter of degree. Psychologically speaking, too, the difference may be considered as that of degree. In a joke, there is, first, an

[1] *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing*, 2nd edn (1965), pp. 125-48.
[2] Sussex, 1971.

> expectation. Its refutation brings about a sudden shift with a sudden discharge of psychic energy—which manifests itself in an outburst of laughter. In a poem there is a longer and more complex series of expectations, refutations and retarded satisfactions. There is, therefore, a series of *controlled* explosions, as it were, which, if frequent enough, makes the machine of the reader's reaction run smoothly. Or, to change the metaphor, a poem is similar to a motion picture—made up of a series of small, discontinuous images. If they succeed quickly enough one after the other, the result is a process of fluent and articulate appearances. When they follow more slowly upon another, the white gaps become more apparent, although still consciously imperceptible; the effect is similar to the rather comic gestures seen on films from the early twentieth century.

For Reuven Tsur a joke, like a metaphor, is the product of the difference between overt expression (i.e. what the speaker actually says) and covert impression (i.e. what is implicit in what the speaker says) that is especially intense in literature. Hence jokes must be analysed in the same way, and with the same degree of seriousness, as poetry.

Humour in the Bible is sophisticated, but it is also specialized. By and large, there is no humour in biblical poetry. I can think of one excellent joke in the Song of Songs and one Psalm that is perhaps intentionally grotesque (Ps. 109). But the prophetic books have hardly a trace of lightness about them, except in their narrative sections. For humour is an abiding characteristic only of the great narrative cycle and its offshoots, like Ruth and Esther.

One of the reasons why we do not associate humour with the Bible is that the Bible is meant to be a 'serious' document, and insofar as humour has content, it is subversive. Indeed, nonsense is the most subversive and threatening of statements, as psychoanalysts from Freud to Lacan have never ceased to inform us. Since the Bible speaks *ex cathedra*, and for two thousand years was unquestionable, who would suppose that it would question itself? Throughout the ages the pious have distorted and modified its message, because they could not face the implications of what it is saying. It contains Job and Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs and those desperate cries from darkness, the Psalms. The immutable legal codes

were revolutionary onslaughts against paganism and social injustice. The Bible impresses us above all with a sense of dialectic, of ruthless thinking and examination, despite all later editing. And one of the instruments it uses is humour.

Yet it is seldom that we actually laugh when we read the Bible. Rather, there is a comic undercurrent in the narrative, a subliminal critical awareness. An analogy might be made with a Shakespearean Fool, who does not make us laugh, but makes us think. One determinant is narrative necessity; a joke is an instantaneous eruption, but in the Bible the energy is fed back into the continuing saga, the tension is not released, but continues to shape the story. A second determinant, related to this, is the anarchic dissipation of laughter, that resolves issues by exploding them; whereas the interest of Biblical narrative depends on a sane and careful balance of tensions, a climax that is constantly deferred. The conscious control of the narrator is unruffled by the enormity of the events he recounts. We can hear Sarah's laughter, but we cannot share it. Such manic empathy is vitiated by the detached presentation, where everything appears objectively, quietly.[1]

Another factor is the scale on which the Bible operates, vast in terms of written space, narrated time, sheer abundance of characters and numbers, and incommensurable in significance. Humour is context-bound: for example, the same joke is effective in different ways in comedy and tragedy. In the Bible, each incident participates in an intricate pattern, and is evaluated dynamically; moreover, we can never forget its ultimate claims. If the joke stands for the abolition of seriousness, then a joke in the Bible is a paradoxical event, that denies its whole purpose.

Yet not only are there jokes in the Bible, but in a sense whole books are jokes. For example, Genesis is a sequence of deceptions and ruses, a long parable of the fallibility of human intentions. Illustration is difficult because the deceptions are

[1] Much has been made of the differences between Homer and the Bible, but it seems to me that this same percipience, the secure and humble Ego in control of discordant and violent material, is an important stance in common, that opposes them, say, to the ecstatic virulence of Ugaritic epics.

usually multiple, and hang together. Thus the *Akedah* is a double-deception: Abraham is deceived into thinking that he will murder his son and that the Promise was a cheat; on the other hand, his lie 'The Lord will provide a lamb, my son' comes true. Jacob tricks both Esau and Isaac, and is tricked by Laban; the contest of deceptions is only concluded when his sons in turn fake Joseph's death. And the Joseph-cycle picks up the theme: Joseph's dreams are fulfilled because of his brothers' efforts to frustrate them. In my view, this network of riddles and hoaxes mediates demands that cannot be resolved rationally; for instance, mandatory endogamy (marriage within the family) with the prohibition of incest. Thus Sarah is both Abraham's half-sister (Gen. 20.12) and his wife. Sterility pursues them; they are driven by famine into strange lands, where Abraham risks death for his wife's sake. Only through a set of deceptions (paradoxically truths) is the danger averted and sterility becomes fruitfulness.

Yet if Genesis is pervaded by these deceptions, to an extent that is almost impossible to convey, obviously they are not all funny. This brings me to a further point: the transformational link between the comic, the tragic, and the uncanny. If the content of humour is frequently terrible, centred around man's obsessive preoccupations, sexual failure and fear of death—gallows-humour, smut and the like—little distinguishes it from that of tragedy. The same material provokes polarized, or confused, reactions. Freud observed that humour is a form of disguised subversion, but as the cloak becomes thinner, or our senses more discriminating, so it becomes difficult to separate the reality from the disguise. Jacob's sons ask their father to identify Joseph's blood-stained coat, and there is hardly a more horrible moment in Scripture; but its form is that of a practical joke.[1] Our reactions to biblical stories are constantly shifting, consequent, I believe, on several variables:

1. *Our sympathy*. We are far more likely to laugh at someone we dislike (e.g. Laban) or despise (e.g. Lot) than at a character to whom we are committed. Ambivalent figures, such as Jacob, are the most inter-

[1] (i) The brothers know it is Joseph's coat. (ii) They know it is not Joseph's blood. (iii) Their pretended solicitation.

esting.

2. *Subject-matter and context.* Sex and death are always potentially laughable. For example, the angels' overnight stop in Sodom is the more abrasively picaresque for the lasciviousness of the citizens' intentions[1] and the knowledge of the impending catastrophe.
3. *The outcome.* A joke is essentially a harmless release of dangerous emotion; it is cathartic. If all ends well, one might experience comic relief. If the inhabitants of Sodom had had their way, amusement would turn into bewilderment. For this reason a very similar episode in Judges 19 leaves a completely contrary impression.

Sometimes the most terrible moments are the funniest. We find this, for example, in Lear; and in the Bible one or two examples will be examined in due course. 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality' is one of the more memorable quotations of the twentieth century, so it turns to humour and laughter, as a defence; the greater the onslaught on our sensibilities, the more exciting is the effort to contain it.

The joke then is a turncoat; from an eruption of the libido it becomes an assertion of the Ego in the face of adversity. Hence the heroism of humour.

Ehrenzweig devotes an interesting chapter to the sensations of Beauty and Ugliness. These, he says, are related and opposed strategies for controlling inarticulate unconscious material (e.g. the sex drives). One easily turns into the other. Analogously, humour is the better for being *risqué*, mediates between sanity and madness.

The Uncanny carries with it its own comic potential. 'Isn't that funny?', we say. The Bible is full of supernatural events, indeed it is one, on a vast scale. Yet although the Uncanny is quasi-comic, especially if it surprises and provides a happy solution to a dangerous situation, never, as far as I recollect, can it actually be confused with it. This is because comedy/humour is a purely human phenomenon, arising out of

[1] Suppose they had said 'Bring them out that we may rob them', or 'murder them', would the effect be as titillating?

human weakness and courage.[1]

Nevertheless, the surreal *deus ex machina* conveys his own challenge, his own subversion of expectations. A different reality intrudes on ours, and we feel 'funny', dislocated, as we might do when a joke strikes us. Freud has an acute insight: the simplest form of the comic is nonsense, and it works by returning us to an earlier developmental stage, e.g. that of the child. Through miracles (the Uncanny) we recapture the child's wonder, but instead of reducing sense to nonsense, they imply a sense, a divine pattern, in the apparent nonsense of the world. Thus they transform humour into its opposite.

Let us briefly look at one example. The old servant travels to Haran to seek out a wife for Isaac. He sets conditions on God—the destined girl should give his camels a drink as well as himself. To his astonishment the test works: 'And the man was staring at her speechless, to know whether the Lord had made his way prosper or not' (Gen. 24.21). The surge of wonder throws him offguard, silences him completely, in a manner, one imagines, quite disconcerting to Rebecca. Yet this is the one verse in the whole lengthy anecdote that is entirely free of overtones of humour or irony.

Now I will turn to particular texts, and attempt to illustrate how the humour emanates from a sense of bafflement caused by a clash of implicit and explicit messages; how it compresses meanings, and often exposes subversive implication that dare not be consciously expressed; and is frequently associated with the most weighty matters, the most terrible crises.

1. *'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen. 4.9)*

Samuel Sandmel describes Cain's retort as 'plain sarcasm', but I suspect it is deeper and less fathomable than that. The first point is that according to the ethics of the Torah, and indeed of any human society, he *is* his brother's keeper. 'You shall not see your brother's ox or his lamb wandering...' (Deut. 22.1) is echoed in numerous verses. 'Two are better than one' (Eccl. 4.9). In the primordial family Cain protests against social responsibility, and we might all listen with a

[1] God is only funny when he is acting as if he were human (cf. Example 2).

sympathetic ear. Thus at its very beginning the Torah incorporates a question subversive of its basic assumption concerning the relationship between human beings, and the question is unanswered. Cain's is not merely a piece of ***hutspah*** in the highest degree, since it is directed to the supreme authority, but one powered by the most undeniable and nihilistic of sentiments.

If it were simply a truculent statement, 'I am not my brother's keeper', or indeed a genuine question, the subversiveness would not be so apparent. But the form of the rhetorical question makes it doubly pert.

1. Rhetorical questions are always insidious: I know but I pretend that I don't know so as to make you admit, by your own reasoning, the absurdity of your position.
2. As the first Jew, Cain answers a rhetorical question with a rhetorical question.

Let us look at the immediate sequence of events:

1. Cain murders Abel.
2. GOD: Where is Abel your brother?
3. CAIN: I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?
4. GOD: What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the earth...

For we know that Cain does know where his brother is, and has 'kept him/guarded him' very well. Behind the apparent disclaimer of responsibility there is the theme of fraternal jealousy and hatred that is one of the pivots of action in Genesis; and beyond this the mystery of God's arbitrary preference for Abel in Gen. 4.4.

But we also know that God knows where Abel is. In the next verse, baffled by Cain's ingenious response, he says so—'The voice of your brother's blood'. One rhetorical question asks questions of another. Two reasons may be suggested for the tautology:

1. God, cruelly or moralistically, wants to give Cain a wild moment of hope, that perhaps not everything is visible to God's eyes, so as to make the confrontation with Cain's guilt more crushing, to sow more deeply

the lesson of divine omniscience.

2. More important, in my view, is the repressed answer to the question 'Where?', i.e. 'Nowhere', and the sudden sense of the loneliness and absence of a soul in the world, that impresses us with the horror of Cain's deed. Similarly, Cain's thrust, 'Am I my brother's keeper?', asks the same question of God. Has he kept Abel? Has he kept Cain? Can his unfairness in the matter of sacrifice be justified?

The question 'Where?' arises at certain crucial points in the Genesis narrative. God asks Adam in the garden, 'Where are you?' (Gen. 39). Reuben cries, when Joseph is kidnapped, 'And as for me, where am I going?' (Gen. 37.30). At other equally decisive moments, the question 'Where?' is begged but not asked, as when God commands Abraham 'to go to a land that I will show you', or to sacrifice Isaac on 'one of the mountains that I will tell you'. The question that need not be asked, because we trust in God, is matched by that no one can answer.

2. *Abraham's debate with God on the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18.20-33)*

I was embarrassed for choice among the super-abundance of humorous episodes; and it is difficult to account for the selection of one that is perhaps not funny at all. Certainly, it is not hard to find others with more sustained comic interest. The events in Sodom, the wiles of Jacob and Laban, and the twists of Jacob's diplomacy on his reunion with his brother, all come to mind; not to speak of the more blatantly farcical episodes in Judges, such as the Gideon cycle. But these stories are all complicated, and very human. What attracts me to the episode I am about to discuss is the presence, in an awe-inspiring context, of comic possibilities; and the astonishing conclusion.

In the passage God tells or at least hints to Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom. Abraham protests, and a strange haggling ensues, at the end of which God promises to spare the city if ten righteous men be found there. He then goes on his way.

'Far be it from you, that the Judge of all the earth should not work justice'. With these words Abraham arraigns God, and few words are braver. 'Far be it from you' in Hebrew has implications of 'You desecrate yourself'. Why? To destroy the righteous with the wicked. It is a charge that rings through the ages.

Abraham's words are yet more impressive for being on behalf of a people who are wicked, and whom he despises, as is clear from Gen. 14.22-23, when he refuses the gifts of the king of Sodom, 'And you shall not say, I enriched Abraham'. Thus God's description of him (Gen. 18.18), as the one in whom 'all the nations of the world will be blessed', is immediately demonstrated.

The remark is epigrammatic, forceful, and of course *hutspadik* in the highest. It has all the elements of humour, but the wit is too savage to be discharged in a joke. This is true of the entire passage, as we shall see; the comic possibilities are held in suspense.

Several elements contribute to the appearance of a joke:

1. The absurdity that the Judge of all the earth should not be just himself. Then what right has he to condemn Sodom? The underlying blasphemy is that God is hypocritical and desecrates himself, that there is no meaning or justice on earth.
2. The surprise that Abraham, the friend of God, the protagonist for good, unlike Cain in the previous example, should suddenly reveal such hostility to him. The implication, as in Job, is that the man who honestly protests against God's injustice, as daily experienced, is closer to him than the pious believer.
3. Paradoxically, it is God who proposes acting according to strict justice: 'I have heard the cry of Sodom... I will go down and examine the evidence... I will decide what to do' (vv. 20-21). It is Abraham who believes in sparing the evil to preserve the good.

Far from being angered by Abraham's language, God accedes to his request, that the city should be spared if fifty righteous men be found there. Abraham proceeds to exploit the logic of his argument. 'Supposing there are five short of the fifty?'...

'If there are forty?'... Or thirty? Or twenty? Or ten? It has the beauty and remorselessness of Socratic questioning. To each demand God assents. Our sense of surprise that God is humbled in this way, is amenable to the Socratic process, is combined with admiration for Abraham's awful daring. His circumlocutions, contrasting with his earlier outspokenness, emphasize the risk to which he is exposed

> Behold I have been permitted to speak to my Lord... let it not anger my Lord that I speak once more'... (v. 32).

As step follows step, the suspense increases. How far will Abraham go? How far will God let him? Two contradictory suppositions develop: for the moment one cannot tell if God's lack of resistance is genuine (Abraham is stronger/cleverer than he) or deliberate (he loses on purpose). The latter possibility evokes the familiar image of God as the omniscient, omnipotent Father who permits and encourages his children to fight him, to feel their strength; they in turn test him out, to see how far they can go. The game acts out in play the child's aggressive wishes. Our growing excitement is half hope that Abraham will win, half license to the sacrilegious wish that God be no longer powerful and wise. Secretly we side with the men of Babel and Adam. On the one hand, the sequence is a game through which these subversive impulses are liberated; on the other, Abraham's questions remain unanswerable.

The reason why it is just a game is that God knows (perhaps Abraham too) that there are not ten righteous men in Sodom. His passive amenability alters nothing in fact. But it raises further quesions.

The logical conclusion of Abraham's argument is that for even one righteous man the city should be spared. But he fails to ask the question. Why? (Socrates wouldn't). The conclusion of the tale/parable is enigmatic. 'And the Lord went when he finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.' This then is the final 'joke': our expectations are simply abandoned, momentarily baffled. The subversive implications of the story are turned against itself; stories don't have to have endings.

### 3. *'Food from earth—food from heaven' (Num. 11.4-33)*

My last example is motivated by the extremity of its language and its polarized qualities of horror and comedy. However, it is too long and complex to be considered with any degree of thoroughness. This section, then, will consist of the text in its entirety and a few observations. I will use the lively King James Version, with one or two modifications.

> (4) And the mixed multitude that was among them fell a-lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, 'Who shall give us flesh to eat? (5) We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlics. (6) But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes.'
>
> (7) And the manna was as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium. (8) And the people went about and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it: and the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil. (9) And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it.
>
> (10) Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent: and the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly; and Moses also was displeased.
>
> (11) And Moses said unto the Lord, 'Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?
>
> (12) Have I conceived all this people? Have I given birth to it, that thou shouldest say unto me "Carry them in thy bosom"; as a nurse beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers? (13) Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they weep unto me, saying, "Give us flesh that we may eat". (14) I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. (15) And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness.'
>
> (16) And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. (17) And I will come down and talk with thee there; and I will take off the spirit which is upon thee,

and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.
(18) And say unto the people, "Sanctify yourselves against tomorrow, and ye shall eat flesh: for ye have wept in the ears of the Lord, saying 'Who shall give us flesh to eat? for it was well with us in Egypt': therefore the Lord will give you flesh, and ye shall eat. (19) Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; (20) but even a whole month, until it come out of your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you: because that ye have despised the Lord which is among you, saying, 'Why came we forth out of Egypt?'"'
(21) And Moses said, 'The people among whom I am are six hundred thousand footmen; and thou hast said, "I will give them flesh, that they may eat a whole month". (22) If the flocks and the herds be slain for them, will that suffice them? or if all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, will that suffice them?'
(23) And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Is the Lord's hand waxed short? thou shalt see now whether my word is to be prized by you or not'.
(24) And Moses went out, and told the people the words of the Lord, and gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tabernacle. (25) And the Lord came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took off the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not do so again. (26) But there remained two men in the camp, the name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad: and the spirit rested upon them; and they were in the lists, but went not out unto the tabernacle: and they prophesied in the camp.
(27) And there ran a young man, and told Moses, and said, 'Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp'. (28) And Joshua, the son of Nun, the servant of Moses from his youth, answered and said, 'My lord Moses, restrain them!' (29) And Moses said unto him, 'Art thou jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!'
(30) And Moses gat him into the camp, he and the elders of Israel. (31) And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought them quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth. (32) And

> the people stood up all that day, and all that night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails: he that gathered least gathered ten homers: and they spread them all abroad for themselves round about the camp. (33) And while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was kindled against the people, and he smote the people with a very great plague.

The story is formally closed, and as subversive of complacent religious ideas as any story can be. Poetic justice is frequently wit in action, as it replaces the cumbersome metonymy of conventional justice (e.g. X crime worth Y years imprisonment) with punishment as metaphor, something that can be instantaneously recognized as just. It may be deliberate, testifying to the ingenuity of the human imagination; accidental, a fortunate trick of nature (e.g. the robber robbed); or causal, as in this case, when gluttony leads to over-eating. The pleasure obtained from poetic justice is genuinely poetic, in that there is an intuitively recognized correspondence between crime and punishment.

The poetic justice in this incident itself depends on the crucial ambivalence of food, that we discover in infancy: it can be good or bad, satisfying or sickening. This in turn is connected with other ambivalences:

1. (a) Food from earth, food from Egypt (fish, cucumbers etc.) = good; (b) food from heaven (manna, quails) = bad.

The Israelites claim that food from earth (Egypt) is good, while supernatural food is substanceless and boring; the editor quietly inverts this, with his apparently incongruous note on the nature of manna, that appeals to us, sounds very palatable, while terrestrial food arouses curiosity, our taste for novelty. Our reaction to the Israelites' complaints may be compounded out of sympathetic humour as well as exasperation, as we recognize human failings. Even miracles become boring, often enough repeated. In the wilderness, miracles are commonplace, and the commonplace miraculous. We smile, too, at their absurdly short memories, the suppression that is an essential part of humour. 'We remember the fish = We've forgotten the slavery' (note the beautifully ironic 'that we ate for nothing!'). Forgetfulness is itself a signifier: one forgets what it is convenient to forget; and through this we come to realize

that slavery was not altogether unpleasant. Slavery meant security, knowing your place, irresponsibility and dependence on the seasonal cycle. 'Let us return to Egypt' is a rejection of God and his miracles, for the stability of nature.

The Israelites' words confine their spiritual life to the physical cycle. Hence the ambiguity of *nephesh* in v. 6: 'Our soul is dry, there is nothing'. Through this ambiguity, and the surrogate greed represented by verbal excess, one begins to sense their utter demoralization in the desert, and the paradox that God is found where there is nothing.

2. Moses' reaction is equally contrary to expectations: his nerve fails him completely. On the other hand, his words to God are fearless. His complaint 'Why did you choose me?' echoes his initial reluctance to accept his mission. His wish resembles that of his people: to live for the day; to be a simple individual, his father-in-law's shepherd.

Moses seems to make an extraordinary error: the people are more powerful and fearful than God. The Israelites too have little apprehension, and quickly learn their mistake. Parallel to this is Moses' inexplicable outburst of scepticism in vv. 21-23.

3. God responds not with anger, but with a promise of divine gifts. An excess of spiritual food (illumination) compensates for the absence of physical food, as well as distributing the burden of leadership for Moses. His improbable kindness turns out to conceal rage; divine gifts are dangerous. The same word *ruach* 'wind/spirit' brings both prophetic ecstasy and quails.

4. The point of Moses' querulous 'Did I conceive this people? ... Should I carry them as a nurse bears a sucking child?' is that their true mother and nurse is God. God in the narrative is shown to be an appalling, vindictive parent, who suckles his people with bad food.

The effect of humour is mediated through the extraordinarily vigorous language of the protagonists. Through this we come to recognize a certain symmetry between the rage of God and the murmurings of Israel. 'The fish, and the cucumbers, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic' is pathetically funny, and infantile. These are the fantasies of explorers on an ice-cap, that tells us of the effects of privation and the

austere landscape. Pathetic, too, is the modesty of their ambition, culminating in onions and garlic. Our laughter at the all-too-human or childish catalogue implicitly begs questions of the whole enterprise: what are such people doing in the wilderness?

If this is one mystery, then God's speech is another. 'Not for one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month... ' God as undignified braggart, as market-stall hustler, is only matched perhaps by Anat in the Ugaritic epics. His boastfulness contrasts with the humility of the ex-slaves, whose symmetrically-opposed rhetorical redundancy is a diminuendo, concluding in onions and garlic. Supposing God had sent them onions and garlic for thirty days? Over and above this is the sublime humility of Moses. Perhaps the saddest remark in the whole episode is 'Are you jealous for my sake?'

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PART II. In Particular

# 6

# ISAAC, SAMSON, AND SAUL: REFLECTIONS ON THE COMIC AND TRAGIC VISIONS*

J. Cheryl Exum
and
J. William Whedbee

Holy Books never laugh, to whatever nations they belong.
Baudelaire

## I

Within the more standard approaches of biblical criticism, the categories of comedy and tragedy have played a peripheral role. At first glance such a state of affairs should not be surprising; after all, the terms are Greek in origin, usually Aristotelian in their literary-critical application, and hence seemingly remote from the central and characteristic genres of biblical literature. Yet in the long history of the Bible's place in Western tradition, comedy and tragedy have had a powerful involvement with the Bible—an involvement often subtle, sometimes strained, at times fascinating. Interpretation has swung from one extreme to the other; comedy, in particular, has had a chequered past. From early on some interpreters opposed any significant link between comedy and the Bible, whereas Dante immortalized the Christian biblical vision in

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the grand Medieval poem he named the *Commedia*. More recently Northrop Frye has made the Dantéesque view a central aspect of his own approach to the Bible:

> From the point of view of Christianity... tragedy is an episode in that larger scheme of redemption and resurrection to which Dante gave the name of *commedia*. This conception of *commedia* enters drama with the miracle-play cycles, where such tragedies as the Fall and the Crucifixion are episodes of a dramatic scheme in which the divine comedy has the last word. The sense of tragedy as a prelude to comedy is hardly separable from anything explicitly Christian (1964: 455).

What is striking is that biblical scholarship has paid so little attention to the implications of Frye's claims. Thus the potential of comedy and tragedy as illuminating perspectives for explicating biblical texts has never been carefully and systematically explored, at least to our knowledge. To be sure, biblical scholarship has not totally ignored the usefulness of comic and tragic models; here we would point to H. Gunkel's trenchant remarks on comic episodes in Genesis (see below) and single out for special praise E.M. Good's *Irony in the Old Testament*, a volume that offers pioneering, provocative interpretations of comic and tragic irony in the Hebrew Bible. Apart from Good's book, we find articles on Job and Saul as tragic figures (see below) or on tragic dimensions of the crucifixion. But comedy in particular as an interpretative category appears infrequently in the standard biblical commentaries and journals, though, as we have noted, outside biblical scholarship comedy holds a higher, more honoured place. Even when tragedy or comedy enters the picture in biblical criticism, its particular form is usually unclear and ill-defined. In recent years biblical scholars have begun to look more seriously at the possibilities, but the exceptions are rare that seek to lay a solid groundwork in literary criticism before building an interpretative edifice.

In this article we wish to make some amends for the desultory application of comedy and tragedy to the Hebrew Bible, with the necessary proviso that we keenly recognize the limited, tentative scope of our treatment. We hope our reflections will suggest what could and should be done, but we offer them

in all diffidence before the enormity of the task.

As an epigraph for our presentation we have cited Baudelaire's assertion 'Holy Books never laugh...'—an assertion we have chosen ironically as a backdrop against which to offer a contradictory thesis. The holy book we call the Bible revels in a profound laughter, a divine and human laughter that is endemic to the whole narrative of creation, fall and salvation, and finally a laughter that results in a wondrous, all-encompassing comic vision. Moreover, we wish to argue that the passion and depth of this comic vision derive precisely from its recognition of the place and power of tragedy, of that vision of the dark, jagged side of human existence which knows of unredeemed death and unmitigated disaster, and which holds in unresolvable tension the facts of human culpability and hostile transcendence (Ricoeur: 220, see below). But the tragedy is episodic in the overarching structure of the Bible and ephemeral in its ultimate effects, though nonetheless excruciating in its reality. The comic vision can embrace the tragic side of existence without eliminating or negating it. Tragedy cannot be felt in its full force apart from comedy, nor can comedy be understood and fully appreciated apart from tragedy. So it is in general—and so it is, we suggest, in the concrete forms of biblical literature.

If Frye is correct that the book of Job is 'the epitome of the narrative of the Bible' (1982: 193), and if he and others are correct that Job is best construed as a comedy, then the book of Job with its subtle subordination of the tragic vision to the more dominant view of comedy tellingly illustrates our thesis (see Whedbee). We do not wish, however, to argue again the thesis of the comedy of Job; we want rather to move to the narratives about Israel's patriarchs, judges, and kings to explore the centrality of comedy and the paradoxical, powerful interplay between the tragic and comic visions in the Hebrew Bible—visions that are ultimately reincorporated and refocussed in the Christian Bible.

Before turning to Genesis, Judges, and 1 and 2 Samuel, we need to consider briefly the nature of the comic and tragic visions. We do not wish to offer a definition as such or a reductive formula where voluminous critical discussion is available; rather we want to draw out certain recurrent dimensions of

comedy and tragedy—dimensions which reflect established lines of literary criticism and which appear in major comic and tragic works. Here we are acutely sensitive to the risk of imposing later and perhaps alien schemas on the Bible. Obviously the persuasiveness of an interpretation of biblical literature in terms of comic and tragic visions depends on the degree to which one can argue for a form of comedy or tragedy that is intrinsic to the biblical texts within their native Hebraic and Near Eastern setting. We would hasten to add, however, that a larger comparative context embracing the relationship between the Bible and its ongoing role in Western culture is also a germane factor: going back and forth between the Bible and its literary and dramatic 'afterlife' may open up the possibility for new insights into both the original biblical texts and later works which have been influenced by the Bible.

We wish to focus on the comic and tragic visions from three major perspectives: (1) plot; (2) thematic and stylistic patterns; (3) characterization of heroes. First, the plot lines of comedy and tragedy follow similar trajectories, but then conventionally break apart at the decisive endpoint. Thus both comedy and tragedy usually begin with a view of a harmonious, integrated society, a situation that is challenged or tested in some way as the action unfolds; but comedy typically swings upward at the end and shows the hero happily reintegrated within her or his rightful society, whereas tragedy typically ends with a fallen hero and a vision of disintegration, alienation, and death. To use Frye's apt image, comedy follows a U-shaped plot line, whereas tragedy has an inverted U-shaped movement. Tragedy may grant its protagonist a moment of glory, but then descends into darkness and stays there, whatever the glimmerings of a new day. Comedy, on the other hand, ultimately ascends from any momentary darkness and concludes with celebration, joy, and new life. In a word, tragedy ends in catastrophe, whereas comedy ends in carnival. Using this pattern of parallel but ultimately diverging plot lines, D. Robertson has offered a stimulating comparative treatment of Exodus 1–15 as a comedy, over against Euripides' tragedy, *The Bacchae*.

Second, comedy and tragedy have characteristic thematic and stylistic habits which set them apart, yet here too one

should not think of polar opposites. Comedy typically delights in various forms of verbal artifice such as word plays, parody, exaggerated repetitiousness, burlesque, hyperbole and understatement. Comedy exploits incongruity, stressing specifically the ludicrous and ridiculous. Though comedy cannot be reduced to a simplistic equation with the humorous and laughable, comedy nevertheless seeks habitually to elicit laughter—even though the laughter sometimes might be pained and embarrassed, not joyous and celebrative. Thus the laughter may be at someone's expense when comedy takes the form of satire in order to deflate the pretentious. Comedy indeed celebrates the rhythm of life with its times of play and joyous renewal, but frequently comedy must first resort to ridicule and bring down the boastful who block the free movement of life. Comedy takes up arms against the forces that stifle life and laughter; and though its barbed arrows can sting fiercely, they usually do not kill. If satire fails to move on to the genuinely restorative and celebrative, then it becomes a real question whether it still remains in the domain of comedy (cf. Frye, 1966: 233-39).

When we turn to tragedy, we find that its thematic movement, so intimately interwoven with its plot-line, characteristically oscillates between the fatedness of the hero's fall and the fierceness of the hero's assertion of transcendence. The issue of the hero's so-called flaw is subordinate to the inexorable movement toward catastrophe and the increasing isolation of the hero in a cosmos that appears inhospitable and capricious. At the heart of tragedy is always 'a vision of extremity'—to borrow M. Krieger's telling phrase. Any tempering of this extremity obscures the tragic vision (see G. Steiner: xiiff.). Such a sombre thematic configuration typically demands an elevated, even exalted style: 'The rhetoric of tragedy requires the noblest diction that the greatest poets can produce' (Frye, 1966: 210). To be sure, the presence of common rhetorical strategies such as irony, parody, and repetition in central tragic works reveals the stylistic crossovers between comedy and tragedy. Thus any distinction between so-called 'low' and 'high' styles must be precisely delineated in the context of particular texts and their discrete literary traditions.

Third, the characterization of comic and tragic heroes differs, though again it is often a matter of degree and relative emphasis. As Frye reminds us, 'comedy tends to deal with characters in a social group, whereas tragedy is more concentrated on a single individual' (1966: 207). The tragic hero's glory and burden is that he or she is isolated, an individual who stands somehow apart from or above humanity, yet is still one of us. Social stratification often plays a pivotal role in this process of differentiation and isolation; hence in antiquity and in fact until recently the tragic hero was customarily a king, prince, or warrior, and rarely a person of low rank. (A. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* illustrates how twentieth century attempts at tragedy are far removed from the dominant tradition.)

On the other hand, the characteristic figures of comedy—rogues, tricksters, buffoons, fools, clowns—incarnate the human, all too human, sometimes in fact assuming subhuman or animal form. When seemingly great or noble personages appear, they are usually satirized and subjected to ridicule, thus undercutting their pretentiousness and reducing them to the common lot of humanity. Even when comedy isolates a figure for some sort of special attention, the ultimate goal is still reintegration into the social group to which he or she properly belongs.

## II

We have indulged enough in generalities and must now attempt to give life to these dry bones of critical commonplaces about comedy and tragedy. Analysis of concrete texts must come into play in order to test the illuminating power of such categories. We begin with Genesis, which in many respects may be more appropriately called 'the epitome of the narrative of the Bible' than the book of Job. Against the backdrop of the exile from Eden and the wandering of the children of Adam and Eve—a backdrop which Milton justly treated as tragic in *Paradise Lost*—we have the narratives about Israel's fathers and mothers. If the comic vision animates the whole Bible, then surely we should expect to find its seeds in the patriarchal and matriarchal traditions. Although all three

major patriarchs provide appealing subjects for analysis from the perspective of comedy, we have space here to consider only Isaac, often overlooked because he appears so bland and uninteresting, a figure overshadowed by his father Abraham, on the one side, and his son Jacob, on the other. Yet perhaps his shadowy presence in the biblical tradition makes him all the more inviting as a test case for our exploration.

Isaac at first glance appears the least likely candidate for the role of comic figure, whereas Abraham and Jacob have occasionally been portrayed in a comic light. Jacob, for instance, can be viewed as a rogue or trickster who by dint of his guile and wit makes his way successfully in the world (cf. Good and Williams). Isaac, however, has usually been represented as a tragic figure, especially in the light of the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of young Isaac. Elie Wiesel, for example, illustrates the more common approach in 'Isaac: A Survivor's Story', where he calls Isaac 'the most tragic of our ancestors' (p. 97). We wish, however, to argue an alternative position: whatever the fate of Isaac in the many 'afterlives' of his tale, he is better represented in the biblical narratives as one of the *most comical* of Israel's ancestors. The evocation of various forms of laughter in the name 'Isaac' precisely finds its most congenial home in a narrative best defined as comedy, a narrative which embodies all the ingredients that have conventionally made up the comic vision.

To capture the full panorama of Isaac's story we must go back before his birth and look at those engrossing accounts of the promise of his birth. YHWH reiterates the promise of numerous progeny to the aging father-to-be in Genesis 17, narrowing the promise to focus on the single son in the closing speech to Abraham, who responds with sceptical laughter. YHWH then repeats the promise in Genesis 18, where it meets with Sarah's amused but incredulous laughter.

However we evaluate the traditio-historical and theological interpretations of the aged couple's laughter in response to promises about a new baby, their laughter at bottom is most easily taken as an all too human reaction to an incongruous situation filled with amusing, even absurd ingredients. Despite all the sombre trappings of a theophanic revelation, Abraham's laughter and his sceptical questions are not surpris-

ing—at least from his intense human awareness as to how things customarily work in the world: 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' (Gen. 17.17); nor is his petition on behalf of his 'other' son unreasonable: 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' (Gen. 17.18). YHWH simply brushes aside Abraham's concerns, reiterates Sarah's maternal role, and then adds a significant new element—the name of the promised child: 'No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac' (יצחק, 'he laughs') (Gen. 17.19). YHWH does not allow the sound of laughter to die in Abraham's throat, but rather seizes upon the verb יצחק and declares that it will be the name of the coming heir. In so doing YHWH permanently embeds laughter into the line of Israel's ancestors: Isaac will bear in his very being the image of laughter.

After this first outburst of incredulous laughter and the ensuing dialogue between the sceptical Abraham and the insistent YHWH, we will hear again and again the echoes of laughter around this promised child. Thus the following narrative about Sarah's equally incredulous laughter with her even more earthy reaction stands as a perfect complement to the preceding story about Abraham: it is a case of like husband, like wife. The narrative is one of the master strokes of Genesis, which must be read in its entirety to appreciate fully its artistry (see Gen. 18.9-15). The seemingly preposterous promise of a new baby, the eavesdropping Sarah who is discovered, the divine visitor who feels insulted, the tête-à-tête between YHWH and Sarah who attempts to cover up her laughter by lying to her guest(s)—all these elements add up to something equivalent to Hebrew farce. That the dialogue breaks off without any clear resolution heightens the suspense and leaves the reader hanging in the balance—not to mention the aging couple.

Before Abraham and Sarah have their long awaited son, the major story line is complicated twice more. First, the rather dreary story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the partial rescue of Lot and his family interrupts the main flow of the narrative, yet it still serves to reinforce the structural and thematic configuration of the surrounding stories. It

functions in particular as a kind of parodied replay of such themes as unexpected divine visitors, equivocal human response marked more by incredulity than faith, and births of national ancestors. Moreover, as E.M. Good has noted, the story is not without its comical moments: for example, 'Lot's ludicrous delay is comically ironic' (p. 94). More germane to the birth story of Isaac is the aetiological tale of Moabite and Ammonite origins: the kinship between Israel and its closest neighbours is recognized—they are cousins; yet the quality of the kinship is undercut because Moab and Ammon are the products of an incestuous union. Such use of an invented story about the questionable origins of one's hated relatives is a stock-in-trade strategy of ethnic humour. In fact, according to Frye, 'the possibilities of incestuous combinations form one of the minor themes of comedy' (1966: 181).

The second complication comes in the guise of a repeated story—Abraham's decision once again that his wife's 'loyalty' (חסד) to him would be best demonstrated by a denial of her wifely status, a strategem designed ostensibly as a self-protective measure when Abraham feels threatened on foreign soil (Gen. 20; cf. Gen. 12). Ironically, of course, Abraham's timorous action threatens the future of the clan since he loses his wife to another man's harem. Here the episode re-enacts an earlier cycle of human failing and propitious divine intervention (see Gen. 12); even more significantly, it retards and even jeopardizes the long-awaited fulfilment of the promised birth of Isaac. Moreover, it embodies the U-shaped plot line so endemic to comic tales: the innocuous beginning that locates Abraham and describes his status as resident alien, the precipitous decision to have his wife lie about her status, the introduction of Sarah into the royal harem, the timely divine intervention which averts permanent harm to Abimelech's household, the return of Sarah to her husband along with lavish gifts, the rather incongruous prophetic intercession in which the 'guilty' Abraham prays on behalf of the 'innocent' Abimelech in order to heal the divinely inflicted barrenness of the royal household—all these elements, whatever their inner complexity, move ineluctably along the comic trajectory, averting potential disaster and ultimately reintegrating all protagonists in their rightful society.

At last the oft-delayed birth of the promised child takes place. Isaac comes as a gift out of season, and his birth is a happy surprise to the aged couple, resolving the long-standing problem of Sarah's barrenness. Hence YHWH fulfills the promise—even if not necessarily according to human timetables. The festive occasion now evokes a laughter from Sarah different from what we heard before: '"God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age"' (Gen. 21.6-7). Once again is heard a play on the name Isaac, sounding the notes of laughter in response to such an amazing turnabout in the fortunes of the erstwhile barren couple. As we recall, the divine announcement of the promised birth had initially been greeted by sceptical laughter in the face of absurdity; but now promise finally joins hands with fulfilment to create joyous laughter. Sarah's laughter is full-throated, vibrant, and infectious because it is born in one of life's most beautiful moments—the birth of a child. In contrast to Abraham's earlier laughter that was marked by disbelief, or Sarah's initial laughter that was choked back in denial, Sarah's new laughter is wonderfully contagious: she extends it beyond the charmed circle of YHWH, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, announcing that 'everyone who hears will laugh with me'. But ultimately it is Isaac who becomes the chief bearer of this richly ambiguous tradition of laughter—for his very name ('he laughs') tells the tale. In the end Isaac emerges from this complex of comical stories as a being who is a sexual joke of sorts—but a joke as profound as it is whimsical, as serious as it is playful, for it contains all the mysterious rhythms of laughter and life both human and divine.

We would normally expect such a story to end here and finish with a fairytale flourish, 'and they lived happily ever after'. But this is not the way of the Genesis narrators, who are telling a series of connected family stories which are open-ended by the necessity of the case. Thus the story continues, and the narrator strikes a note of discord: Sarah remains hostile about the disturbing presence of Hagar and Ishmael in Abraham's clan (Gen. 21.8ff.). During the festive event of Isaac's weaning, Sarah spies Ishmael while he is 'playing'

(מְצַחֵק, Gen. 21.9). Though we have here yet another word play on Isaac's name, the exact meaning is opaque. Is Ishmael playing with Isaac (מְצַחֵק עם יצחק—so the Greek)? Or is Ishmael simply playing (so the Hebrew which lacks the name of Isaac)? Or is Ishmael playing Isaac—that is, pretending to be Isaac and thus usurping his role as legitimate heir (so the interpretation of G. Coats, p. 97)? We simply do not know the precise intent—only the presence of the root צחק echoes Isaac's name, suggesting some type of pun. In any event, Sarah is angry over Ishmael's activity and demands the permanent expulsion of a rival wife and a potential rival to her own son: 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac' (Gen. 21.10). Though Abraham is displeased—after all Ishmael is his first-born son—he complies with Sarah's demand, but not until he receives further clarification from YHWH about the exact status of his two sons: 'through Isaac shall your descendants be named; yet I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring' (Gen. 21.12-13).

Again, as in Genesis 16, we have a bittersweet conclusion: Hagar and her son are banished to the desert where the forlorn mother laments the imminent death of her son; but YHWH hears (שמע) Ishmael's voice (note the twofold play on Ishmael's name in Gen. 21.17) and rescues boy and mother, reiterating one last time the promise of a great future for this other son of Abraham. This little narrative offers in miniature a U-shaped plot line. Beginning with an integrated society (the larger family unit of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and the two sons), the story has a downturn in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael; but in contrast to a tragic ending, the story has a wonderful upturn when YHWH intervenes saving both mother and son and reaffirming the promise of a new society—'a great nation' to which Ishmael and his descendants will rightfully belong.

If Hagar's story has moments of pathos and near-tragedy, the portrayal of Abraham's greatest trial represents the sharpest descent of Isaac's whole story into what is potentially a terrifying tragedy. The imperious divine voice startles us: 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering

upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you' (Gen. 22.2). If YHWH's action has been puzzling before, now it becomes utterly incomprehensible, perhaps even contradictory. Abraham is to take the son of promise, whose name evokes and echoes 'laughter', and sacrifice him to the God who originally gave him. Talk about the Joban God who gives and takes away! Here the story indeed comes dangerously close to tragedy, and E.M. Good uses the language of 'tragic irony' to characterize the inexplicable command to kill Isaac (p. 195).

Yet we must once again be alert to the U-shaped plot. Even this sudden jolt in the story need not catch us completely off guard. As Frye reminds us, 'An extraordinary number of comic stories, both in drama and fiction, seem to approach a potentially tragic crisis near the end, a feature that I may call the "point of ritual death"' (1966: 179). Frye's observation provides a legitimate and illuminating context for interpreting this famous story which has undoubtedly elicited more volumes of commentary than any other text in the Isaac sagas. We, the readers, know at the outset that the commanded sacrifice is a test for Abraham; like Job, Abraham must pass a trial by ordeal. We also know that despite Abraham's occasional moments of weakness, we can generally count on him to trust YHWH (cf. especially Gen. 12.1-4; 15.1-6). Thus we are somewhat prepared for Abraham's instantaneous response in faith: as Kierkegaard's 'prince of faith' he is ready to sacrifice Isaac to God. We know further that such heroes of faith, after enduring their trials, receive their due reward. Finally, in such a world, we know about dramatic interventions by a divine figure—the fabled *deus ex machina*. Therefore we are predisposed for YHWH's last-minute intervention to save Isaac by staying Abraham's hand and substituting a ram. Like the preceding story about the divinely sanctioned expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, the story of Abraham's most demanding trial ends happily: Isaac is spared, Abraham receives a reaffirmation of the promise of abundant blessing, and father and son return to their rightful society.

Too often interpreters have unduly isolated Genesis 22 from its literary context, thus failing to see how well it fits into the dominant structure intrinsic to the surrounding narratives.

Isaac's whole story, like the tales of Abraham and Jacob, not only fits into an overarching U-shaped plot line, but each individual episode similarly has a U-shape. We find, in short, 'a series of little U's' (A. Bingham) all intertwined with the comprehensive U-shaped pattern. Thus Genesis 22 is not exceptional in its basic structure.

The emotional intensity of this tale of a father's willingness to offer up his son to a demanding deity gives Genesis 22 special force. In the present movement of Genesis, it serves as the *climax* of Abraham's story, while at the same time functioning as the centre of Isaac's story. Commentators have traditionally stressed its climactic role for Abraham in his relationship to YHWH, but we must not lose sight of how well it epitomizes Isaac's whole career both in its U-shaped structure and in its characterization of Isaac as a type.

We have already noted how Genesis 22 is *almost* a tragedy, a dimension evident in the Medieval mystery play *Abraham and Isaac*. What is crucial, however, in the biblical form is the absence of any heart-rending cries of either father or son—in sharpest contrast to David's lament over Absalom. Moreover, as we have emphasized, Genesis 22 breaks off from the tragic arc at a strategic moment—as opposed to the genuinely tragic tale of Jephthah's daughter where no fiat from heaven stays the executioner's hand. For Isaac there is a joyous upswing which puts his story back into a comic light, a comedy in the shadow of threatened death, but nonetheless a comedy with its celebration of life.

Here also in Genesis 22 we find a piquant representation of Isaac as a type: he is passive victim and survivor. A rapid review of his story from the vantage point of his role in Genesis 22 illustrates his passive, submissive nature: he is born to over-aged parents (Gen. 21); he is protected from the assumed threat of his older half-brother, whose potential as a rival is taken care of by his mother Sarah (Gen. 21); he is preeminently the victim in his near-sacrifice at the hands of his father, emerging as a survivor only because of divine intervention (Gen. 22); he is a compliant son in the idyllic, romantic tale of Abraham's match-making on his behalf (Gen. 24); he is the one to yield ground in order to avoid conflict with the Philistines in a series of well disputes (Gen. 26); he is duped by

his shrewd, strong-willed wife and his wily younger son and tricked into giving his deathbed blessing to the 'wrong' son (Gen. 27); he somehow survives for apparently twenty more years after the 'death-bed' debacle and after his death is buried by his two sons (Gen. 35.28-29).

The only time Isaac acts 'independently' he imitates his father's pattern of perpetrating a lie about his wife's marital status in order to protect himself while in foreign territory—a case of like father, like son (Gen. 26). R.C. Culley has perceptively contrasted this episode with the two earlier parallels in the Abraham cycle (Gen. 12; 20), singling out for special comment Isaac's dull-witted, awkward handling of the situation. First, argues Culley, Isaac misperceives the danger of the situation, since no one apparently wants Rebekah—in contrast to Sarah. Second, misperception is coupled with an unnecessary act of deception to create an awkward, abnormal situation: Isaac continues to live with his wife who is purportedly his sister. Not surprisingly, Isaac cannot control his sexual urges and gets caught in a bit of sexual play with Rebekah. It is comically ironic that he is fondling or 'playing around' (מצחק) with his alleged sister. Once again we hear wordplay on Isaac's name—echoing that intimate connection of eroticism, play, and earthy humour which are staple ingredients of the comic mix from time immemorial. Abimelech's discovery leads to a sharp rebuke of Isaac from a justifiably angry king because of the danger of guilt and divine punishment (Gen. 26.10-11). Here again, however, the U-shaped pattern asserts itself. Despite his reprehensible conduct Isaac gets off scot-free, and YHWH blesses him beyond measure; so that once more Isaac receives divine protection and material prosperity simply because he is Abraham's heir (Gen. 26.2-5, 12-13). 'All ends well', as Culley laconically puts it. In fact, 'the shape of the story suggests... the hero as a bumbler who in spite of his inept handling of the situation comes out on top' (Culley: 39). Thus on the one occasion when Isaac acts on his own he hardly appears as a strong, resourceful individual and only emerges successfully because of who he is—the passive recipient of divine favour—not because of his ability to act wisely and independently.

In sum, apart from the *partial* exception of the episode in

Genesis 26 involving his wife, Isaac is a victim through and through, characteristically acquiescent to personages stronger and more clever than he. Paradoxically, the brightest, happiest moment in Isaac's whole life perhaps occurred when he was most passive—the occasion of his birth. A child of his parents' old age, he bore a name that evoked laughter; yet, as we have seen, laughter can have many faces, often mirroring incredulity as well as joy, embarrassment as well as amusement, cruelty as well as relief. As passive victim Isaac is more often laughed at or over rather than one who laughs himself or laughs with others (though he does enjoy sexual play with his wife!, Gen. 26.8). Although sometimes a victim is a candidate for tragedy (Jephthah's daughter is the chilling biblical example), such is not the case with Isaac; he is survivor as well as victim, emerging from difficult and even dangerous circumstances as one who is successful and blessed. His story always has a comic upturn, aborting the possibility of tragedy. He is typically an innocent, passive man and is set up again and again—a classic half-pathetic, half-humorous dupe whose story is filled with ludicrous moments. His role is widely attested in comedy through the ages—his type of comic figure is well depicted in Charlie Chaplin's pose as a rumpled tramp who is often laughed at, but who survives all his hard times.

To illustrate most vividly Isaac's role as dupe and victim who is manipulated but who nonetheless comes forth as a survivor, we turn lastly to Genesis 27. If Genesis 22 is the centre of Isaac's story, then surely the climax comes in Genesis 27, the account of the famous deathbed scene when he is deprived of what should have been his last noble gesture, the passing on of his inheritance in the form of the paternal blessing to his firstborn son who is also his favourite. Though the story contains elements of pathos, it is dominantly cast in a comic mode, as Gunkel saw long ago and as Thomas Mann captured so pointedly in his title of this section, *Der große Jokus*, in *Joseph und seine Brüder*. This episode has the potential for a tragic development—note only the similar opening scene in *King Lear*, where the old father passes on his inheritance to his daughters; but the Genesis story takes a significantly different turn and ends happily.

Let us look more closely at the story in light of its comic

dimensions. The opening lines of the deathbed scene, when we read how Isaac thinks first of his stomach, strike a humorous note: 'prepare for me delectable food such as I love and bring it to me that I may eat; that I may bless you before I die' (Gen. 27.4). (The earthiness of the Genesis narratives comes out often in the eating scenes: Isaac's favourite son, Esau, already has manifested a similar propensity of thinking of food first, the future second—another case of like father like son.) The clever rogue Jacob pulls off the hoax, though he expresses doubts and misgivings when his enterprising, resourceful mother first conceives the plan and urges him simply to follow her instructions. The story is marked by turns with both ludicrousness and pathos. Picture the scene: an old man, blind and senile, lying on his deathbed, hungrily awaits his beloved elder son's arrival with choice cuisine; but meanwhile the younger son, the favourite of his mother, enters and identifies himself as Esau. The dissembling Jacob has been preposterously outfitted with animal skins on his arms, aping the appearance of his hairy brother, lest his blind father feel his smooth, hairless skin and discover the ruse. To complete the disguise Jacob wears his brother's garb in order to emit the right body odour. Jacob then proceeds with a bold-faced lie when his blind, befuddled father becomes suspicious. The dialogue between deceiving son and confused father is immediately followed by the moving account of Esau's later arrival and his anguished plea for a blessing (Gen. 27.18-40). Pathos is indeed present, but more pervasive is comic incongruity and irony; Isaac blesses the 'wrong' son who is paradoxically the 'right' son according to the prenatal oracle (Gen. 25.23). What a bizarre way of working out the divine will! Though somehow involved, God is curiously absent. Moral categories are not invoked; apparently they are just not appropriate (cf. Gunkel, 1964: 307). Isaac is deceived, Esau is cheated out of his blessing; yet nobody gets seriously hurt, at least not in any ultimate sense.

Gunkel seems to have been the first modern scholar to discern the comic, humorous aspects of Genesis 27: 'The substance of the story is and remains that a deception finally has a happy ending: Jacob the rogue really wins for himself the blessing; Esau draws the shorter one, without being morally

guilty, and the hearers are the happy heirs of the deceiver' (p. 307). Like the near tragedy of Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac, this story of deception has the happy outcome characteristic of comedy—though this ending must await the adventures of Jacob the rogue during his sojourn in a strange land, where he will show his marvellous ability as a trickster who ultimately manages to come out on top. Isaac's 'wrong' blessing for his two sons therefore will finally be 'right' for both of them: Jacob as deceiver will become Israel, a 'prince of God' who prevails against both God and men, reflecting perhaps the image of his grandfather Abraham; whereas Esau as the deceived seems to display at crucial times the image of his father Isaac, a victim who is usually outwitted and manipulated by personages more resourceful than he, but who nonetheless emerges as a magnanimous, generous survivor (cf. his deportment in the reunion with Jacob in Gen. 33). Apropos of the plot line of comedy, the two brothers become reconciled in the end, even though they become founder figures of two separate societies (Gen. 33).

The final encounter between Isaac and his twin sons, so decisive in determining the dynamic of the subsequent story of Israel, meshes with the recurrent pattern of comical moments in Isaac's story which begins with the dramatic announcements of his birth. His name, 'he laughs', indeed begets his character and destiny, but in a different sense from what such a happy appellation might initially suggest. Apart from the one occasion of his birth, he is not usually the source of joyous laughter, nor is he a clever wit himself. Again and again he is laughed over, often manipulated, victimized, even duped—but his life at bottom is not tragic, for he survives and survives and survives. In fact, Isaac lives longer than either his father, Abraham, or his son, Jacob. According to biblical chronology, he lives twenty years after the deathbed scene. In the conventional style that describes a complete and successful life, the narrator tells us that 'Isaac breathed his last; and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days' (Gen. 35.29). The burial scene epitomizes the typical ending of comedy, stressing that the different protagonists are reintegrated into the society to which they properly belong: the dead father 'gathered to his people', and his two reconciled

sons united at his burial.

In conclusion, the Isaac story contains all three ingredients of the comic vision as we have defined it. First, its plot line both in the parts and the whole follows the U-shaped pattern intrinsic to comedy. Though indeed it has its moments of near-tragedy and pathos, each time we find the decisive upturn to a happy ending. Second, style and theme display typical comic traits: word plays are plentiful, especially the pivotal pun on Isaac's name; ludicrous and farcical moments abound; and comic irony and incongruity are pervasive. Finally, the characterization of Isaac as passive victim is best construed as comic. A hallmark of his role is his ordinariness; things typically happen to him, he is never the powerful protagonist actively shaping events. But in his very ordinariness, in his tendency to drift along on currents that sometimes threaten to submerge him, in his ability to survive and somehow to muddle through—in all these ways he is a comic hero familiar to us all, one who evokes from us a secret smile of recognition, a half-comic, half-pathetic figure who incarnates and mirrors the human, all too human, and is therefore all the more laughable and lovable.

## III

Our interpretation of the Isaac story as a fundamental embodiment of the comic vision which characterizes biblical narrative, as well as our general remarks on the relationship between comedy and tragedy in the Bible, makes clear our agreement with the observation that the Judaeo-Christian vision is not a tragic one (see Frye, Steiner). We have argued that the account of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, with all its implicit pathos and horror, must be read, finally, in its proper comic context. Even the Book of Job, which to many interpreters appears to have dressed its protagonist in tragic garb, we have defined as comic (see Whedbee). There remains one obvious choice for a biblical representation of the tragic vision, the story of King Saul. This story offers the clearest example of what might properly be called biblical tragedy—though we might use Steiner's phrase, 'tempered tragedy' (xiii). For just as Denmark will be a better place under Fortin-

bras and Scotland under Malcolm, we know that Israel finds security and prosperity under Saul's successor, the king after God's own heart. Nevertheless, all the essential tragic ingredients meet us in the story of Saul, chief among them, and indispensable to the tragic vision, the Aeschylean paradox of human guilt and the wicked god (see Ricoeur: 211-31).

'Saul is the one great tragic hero of the Bible', says N. Frye (1982: 181), an observation most biblical exegetes would take as a commonplace. Few of us would quarrel with G. von Rad's classic statement that 'Israel never again gave birth to a poetic production which in certain of its features has such close affinity with the spirit of Greek tragedy' (p. 325). E.M. Good offers a compelling reading of this narrative in terms of its tragic dimension, and more recently, both W.L. Humphreys (1978, 1980, 1982) and D.M. Gunn (1980, 1981) have argued at length for its tragic character. In order to advance our thesis about the comic and tragic visions in the Bible, we propose to set the tragic story of Saul over against what we would classify as the comic story of Samson, a narrative which resembles Saul's at enough points to deserve Wellhausen's designation of Samson as a *Vorspiel* to Saul. Both are hailed as deliverers of Israel from the Philistines, both fail at the task, and both die seemingly ignominious deaths at the hands of their oppressors in the process. How then is one a comic figure and the other tragic? The difference between the comic vision and the tragic vision becomes clear when we compare different handling of similar elements.

We have already alluded to the difficulty of differentiating sharply between comedy and tragedy, except in their extreme forms. Thus we shall find some crossovers in these stories, just as we found moments of pathos and near-tragedy in the story of Isaac. Nevertheless, the difference between the two visions is evident in spite of a certain admixture of comic and tragic elements. As S. Langer remarks, 'The matrix of the work is always either tragic or comic; but within its frame the two often interplay' (1981a: 72). This interplay, we have suggested, is essential to the vitality of these visions, for without the tempering of a comic perspective, tragedy moves into the realm of melodrama, while comedy without a recognition of tragic potential becomes farce (cf. Frye, 1965: 50).

Stock elements of comedy abound in the story of Samson in Judges 13–16: wit and humour, bawdy riddles and amorous escapades, a rapid pace, an episodic structure, and a hero of incredible vitality. The Philistines are the blocking characters who inhibit movement toward a harmonious society; they are caricatured, as is Samson himself, and clear distinctions are made between hero and villains. Unmistakably tragic elements appear as well—the hero's betrayal, blinding, and death providing the most obvious examples. When Milton sought to make a tragedy of the Samson story he produced a powerful drama, but even here the inherent comic plot line which he took over from the biblical tradition defeats the realization of the tragic vision. Neither in *Samson Agonistes* nor in the biblical account does the death of the hero carry the final or the central message. It is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the biblical story, as we shall argue below, that Milton's Manoah offers us the crucial insight, 'No time for lamentation now,/Nor much more cause; Samson hath quit himself. Like Samson...', and the chorus assures us, 'All is best, though we oft doubt...'

Biblical scholars have been content to note either comic or tragic features of the Samson saga or both, without exploring adequately the nature of their relationship. Rarely do they give more than a superficial definition to the terms comedy and tragedy. J.L. Crenshaw is typical in concluding that the Samson saga is a tragicomedy because 'neither tragedy nor comedy becomes sufficiently pronounced to drown out faint echos [*sic*] of its opposite' (129), yet he fails to move beyond generalities to make his case. While such assessments are cognizant of the interplay between comic and tragic elements, they fail to locate properly the matrix of the saga.[1] That matrix, in our opinion, is best described as comic, a designation which does not necessarily mean that we like the way the story ends. What Frye says about comic drama is applicable here.

> Does anything that exhibits the structure of a comedy have to be taken as a comedy, regardless of its content or of our atti-

[1] Similarly, the recent literary study of Vickery, who discusses tragic aspects of the story but fails to recognize that its form is comic.

> tude to that content? The answer is clearly yes. A comedy is not a play which ends happily: it is a play in which a certain structure is present and works through to its own logical [festive] end, whether we or the cast or the author feel happy about it or not (1965: 46).

In spite of Samson's suffering and death, the story, with its emphasis on restoration and resolution, exemplifies the comic vision, and only when viewed in its proper comic context can its tragic moments be rightly appreciated.

Similarly, the Saul story has its moments of comic incongruity, such as the unsuspecting lad who seeks lost asses and finds a kingdom (chs. 9–10), and the future king who hides among the baggage when he is chosen by lot (11.20-24). These incidents bring comic relief to the foreboding atmosphere of ch. 8, which predisposes us to expect the worst from the institution of a monarchy. But the real alternative to the tragic perspective in 1 Samuel 8–2 Samuel 1 is provided by the story of David, which gives the narrative another, sanguine, mood alongside the sombre mood of Saul's tragic tale. Shortly after David is introduced comes what must count as one of the great comic scenes in the Bible, the slaying of the Philistine champion, 'a man of war from his youth', by a ruddy, handsome shepherd boy with a sling. David's story follows the plot line of romance and his spectacular rise in these chapters epitomizes the romantic hero's successful quest (see Frye, 1966: 186-206). Like many of Shakespeare's plays, the narrative of 1 Samuel 8–2 Samuel 1 is contrapuntal. Two plots, David's rise and Saul's demise, are developed at the same time, each preserving its own integrity, while interwoven and connected by intricate verbal, thematic, and structural patterns (cf. Frye, 1965: 27). For the purposes of this analysis we shall consider only the tragic tale of Saul.

Let us begin with the plot line in the stories of Samson and Saul, Judges 13–16 and 1 Samuel 8–2 Samuel 1. Each of our heroes meets his death fighting YHWH's battles against the Philistines. But preceding the death account in each story comes the point where the hero experiences his moment of greatest desolation. These two parts of each story, the low point in the fortunes of the hero and the account of his death, provide the points of greatest similarity between the tales and

thus serve well to demonstrate the way in which the comic and tragic visions clearly diverge, one moving toward reconciliation and affirmation, the other toward isolation and lamentation.

The Samson saga has the characteristic comic U-shaped plot. Its low point is reached when Samson is shaved and YHWH leaves him, a departure all the more devastating because Samson, at first, does not realize it. On three earlier occasions, when Delilah had tried to subdue him, Samson tricked her and remained invincible. But her fourth attempt brings about his undoing, just as she knew it would (16.18). In what we might consider a moment of hubris, Samson sets out 'as at other times' to better the Philistines, only to discover the bitter reality that 'YHWH had left him'. Betrayed by Delilah, bereft of his hair, his strength, and the presence of his god (and these three things are inseparably connected in the narrative), Samson is blinded and imprisoned. He is brought out for 'sport' at a sacrifice to Dagon, where vast numbers of Philistines gather to celebrate victory over their enemy. In this, his moment of deepest humiliation, Samson calls on YHWH with a petition for vindication and death (16.28-30).[1] His prayer, with its conventional invocation and plea to be remembered, expresses his sense of abandonment by YHWH (see Greenberg: 12), as he makes urgent supplication for divine favour just this once: 'O Lord YHWH, remember me please and strengthen me please only this time, O God'. Samson's prayer reestablishes his relationship to YHWH and thus gives the plot its upward surge. This restoration of broken relationship is decisive for the comic vision in Judges 13–16. YHWH's departure from Samson, which occurred when he was shaved, is not final; rather a responsive deity is swayed by prayer. Samson's request for strength 'only this time' is granted as is his desire to die with the Philistines. Strictly speaking, his death is not a suicide, for death is in YHWH's hand, not Samson's. The distinction is an important one: YHWH's power—not Samson's own or some mysterious force which resides in his hair—enables Samson to bring about the

[1] Taking v. 30 as part of Samson's prayer; for fuller discussion, see Exum 1983: 34 and notes.

destruction of the Philistines and his own death. Samson's death is the logical conclusion of the narrative; it brings release from a world of darkness (an aspect heightened by Milton) and vindication for the ignominy he has suffered at the hands of the Philistines (the object emphasized in the biblical account).[1] At his death, Samson fulfils the destiny YHWH had appointed for him, to 'be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines' (13.5). Moreover, his final triumph over the Philistines surpasses his earlier exploits, winning him even greater glory: 'The dead that he killed at his death were more than those he had killed in his life' (16.30). Finally, his burial by his brothers in the tomb of Manoah his father serves as the final symbol of his integration into the society which he represents, but in which he has functioned so obstinately and independently.

In contrast to the U-shaped plot of Judges 13–16, the story of Saul in 1 Samuel 9–31 displays the inverted U-plot structure typical of tragedy. The story develops against the negative backdrop of YHWH's misgivings about kingship in ch. 8, and its movement to catastrophe is impelled by the rejection stories of chs. 13 and 15. Saul encounters various setbacks, from anxiety over his loss of prestige in the eyes of the people (18.7) to his inability to apprehend David; and his fortune, not to mention his sanity, deteriorates until the narrative reaches its lowest point with the vision of Samuel conjured up by the medium at En Dor. For sheer starkness and terror, and in its gripping evocation of isolation and hopelessness, this scene stands out amid biblical narrative. Notice, for example, the number of references to Saul's anguished state of mind: he is afraid (v. 5), his heart trembled greatly (v. 5), he is in great distress (v. 15), filled with fear (v. 20), there is no strength in him (v. 20), he is terrified (v. 21). After this journey into the abyss of divine abandonment, Saul's death can only be seen as anticlimactic.

The scene is set at night. Night not only covers the movements of the king, hiding him from Philistine observation, but

1 Following G. Mendenhall (pp. 76-77) in taking נקם as vindication, not vengeance. Vindication is YHWH's prerogative, with Samson acting as the legitimate agent.

symbolizes as well the realm of darkness and uncertainty he is about to enter. Night is traditionally the time of spirits and necromancer's rites, and it provides an archetypal symbol for the ultimate darkness, death. It is no accident that just as Saul left his first meeting with Samuel in ch. 9 at the break of day, i.e. the dawn of his career, he both arrives and departs from his last encounter with Samuel while it is still night.

The isolation Saul experiences manifests itself even before this final rejection by Samuel. Try as he may—and there have been no indications that Saul was not a faithful Yahwist—Saul cannot get YHWH to answer him ('And when Saul inquired of YHWH, YHWH did not answer him either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets', 28.6; indeed, YHWH never addresses Saul directly in the narrative, but speaks to him only through Samuel, or, as in ch. 14, through the sacred lot). Why does Saul seek out the prophet Samuel, who has already rejected him? When Gunn (1980: 108) answers that Saul can stand no more ambiguity, he identifies the root of the dilemma of the tragic hero. Not content to let his tragic destiny unfold, the tragic hero stalks it. Like Oedipus, who relentlessly pushes for the full truth to be disclosed while the answers steadily close in upon him, Saul *must know*.

A feeling of uncertainty and apprehension permeates the chapter; what occurs is not only secretive but forbidden as well. Ironically it was Saul himself, apparently in the service of YHWH, who put the mediums and wizards out of the land (v. 4). Now YHWH's silence and the failure of ordinary means of inquiry drive Saul to consultation with the dead. Though reluctant, the medium whose life stands threatened by Saul's edict against necromancy becomes the sole source of the knowledge he seeks. Neither Saul nor Samuel is identified at first; Saul goes in disguise and instructs the woman, 'Bring up for me whomever I say to you' (v. 8). Both Saul's and Samuel's presence at the seance is revealed at the same time: when she sees Samuel, the woman recognizes *Saul*. Saul, for his part, recognizes Samuel on the basis of the woman's description, 'an old man... wrapped in a robe'. It has taken twelve verses to establish the mood and set the scene, during which time suspense has been mounting as we await the fateful confrontation.

With characteristic brusqueness, Samuel asks Saul's reason for disturbing him. Saul's reply that 'the Philistines are waging war against me' recalls the situation of ch. 13, when Saul first erred by offering the sacrifice in Samuel's absence; and when he implores, 'I have called you to *reveal to me what I should do*', we remember that he did not wait for Samuel to tell him what to do then ('Seven days you shall wait until I come to you and I will *reveal to you what you shall do*', 10.8). Samuel's reply, 'Why do you ask me?' (ולמה תשאלני), puns ironically on Saul's name, and his answer reiterates in painful detail what Saul knows already: because Saul disobeyed in not carrying out the ban against the Amalekites (ch. 15), YHWH has rejected him and given the kingdom to David. Moreover, Israel will be defeated and Saul and his sons will die in the forthcoming battle. Overcome by weakness and fear Saul collapses (v. 20), prefiguring as it were his fall on the field of battle.

Though the meal that follows provides one of several points of contact between Saul's last meeting with Samuel and his first (in this case the meal which takes place in ch. 9),[1] it seems at first glance somewhat incongruous in this terrible rejection scene. A remark by George Steiner with reference to Racine's *Bérénice* not only provides, in our opinion, the clue to the meal's function, but also sheds helpful light on the nature of the tragic vision in 1 Samuel 28—a vision as terrifying and uncompromising as any in the tragic corpus, yet ever so slightly tempered.

> Can Bérénice remain standing under the hammering of sorrow on Racine's naked stage or will she have to call for a chair, thus bringing on to that stage the whole contingency and compromise of the mundane order of the world? I admit

[1] Saul, from the outset, is not prepared to encounter Samuel (his servant in ch. 9 provides both the idea and the money). At the beginning and end of his career, Saul makes a journey of inquiry, דרש (9.9; 28.7), which leads him to Samuel. He is urged on by a servant or servants who know where to seek the answers: 'Behold, there is a man of God in this city' (9.6); 'Behold, there is a woman master of spirits at En Dor' (28.7). His servant's description of Samuel, 'All that he says comes true' (9.6), is darkly ironic in its anticipation of all the troubles Samuel will prophesy for Saul.

> that, today, this question and the executive conventions from which it springs, seem to me to crystallize the truth of absolute tragedy with an integrity, with an economy of means, with a transcendence of theatrical 'business' and verbal orchestration beyond that which we find on Shakespeare's loud and prodigal scene. It needs no cosmic storms or peregrine woods to reach the heart of desolation. The absence of a chair will do (pp. xiii-xiv).

Henri Bergson, in a classic essay on 'Laughter', makes a similar point.

> No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. On this account, the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself. He does not even sit down any more than can be helped (p. 94).

In a scene built around dialogue, Saul's words are dramatic in their brevity, 'I will not eat'. The meal which Saul allows to be prepared and which he eats with his servants meliorates the despair and pathos of the scene. Saul would have it otherwise, but he gives in, as he has before, to human urging. Pure tragedy would have left him without any resource. Samson prays for and receives strength (כח, 16.30) from YHWH; but as for Saul, we are told he has no strength in him (v. 20). Relief comes as he receives nourishment from the medium whose kindness offers a dramatic contrast to Samuel's severity (cf. Preston: 36). This delicate tempering of the tragic vein enables Saul to eat, rise, and go his way—though he goes now with the sure knowledge of the fate that awaits him: 'Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me' (28.19).

In the account of Saul's death in 1 Samuel 31, the narrative yields fully to the tragic vision. Wounded and fearing abuse by the Philistines, Saul tells his armour-bearer to thrust him through. But the young man is afraid. As in the ill-fated decision to make the offering himself in ch. 13, it appears that Saul has no option but to take matters into his own hand. Unlike Samson, whose prayer brings reconciliation to YHWH, Saul *cannot* call on God to let him die, because already in ch. 28 God has effectively and decisively ended communication. Thus, whereas Samson's death was in the hands of YHWH, Saul's comes by his own hand. In contrast to Samson's death which

belongs to a larger, comic resolution, Saul's death stands in tragic isolation. Whether grounded in a 'failure of nerve' (so Good: 78) or symbolic of a 'final moment of grandeur [when] he seizes control of events' (so Humphreys, 1980: 79-80), Saul's suicide functions as his last desperate attempt to wrench from his destiny its final meaning. As an act of his own will, it can be compared to Oedipus' self-blinding even though in both cases the circumstances are from God.

> Apollo, friends, Apollo
> Has laid this agony upon me;
> Not by his hand; I did it.

Tragic events pile up in 1 Samuel 31. First, Israel is routed and many are slain (v. 1); then Saul's sons meet their deaths (v. 2); next comes Saul's suicide and that of his armour-bearer (vv. 3-6), after which the Israelites abandon their cities to the Philistines (v. 7). The next day brings further dishonour: the Philistines mutilate and desecrate Saul's body (vv. 8-10). They send messengers throughout their territory to carry the good news, and, as a token of their victory, they exhibit Saul's armour in the temple of Ashtaroth and his body on the wall of Beth-shan. The scene recalls the Philistines' celebration of Samson's defeat and their merrymaking in Dagon's temple over his disgrace ('our god has given [Samson] our enemy into our hand', Judg. 16.23, 24). But no *deus ex machina* steps in to aid Saul and bring about a comic resolution, as in the Samson story. The cruellest part of Saul's fate lies in his death in isolation from YHWH. Typical of the tragic vision, there is no reconciliation, no restoration, no future for the house of Saul.

Catastrophe does not strike the tragic protagonist alone. Like the curses that work themselves out in the house of Atreus and the house of Oedipus, Saul's misfortune extends beyond himself to his whole family. Three sons, Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, are also killed in the battle on Mount Gilboa and their bodies exhibited with their father's at Beth-shan. Accounts which lie outside the boundaries of the Saul story in 1 Samuel 8–2 Samuel 1 describe the tragic circumstances which befall the remaining members of the house of Saul. Ishbosheth is slain in his bed (2 Sam. 4). In 2 Samuel 21, other sons of Saul meet tragic deaths as the result of blood

guilt on Saul's house for apparent crimes against the Gibeonites. Only Mephibosheth is spared; but Mephibosheth has his own troubles as a cripple to whom David shows questionable loyalty (2 Sam. 9) and whose loyalty to David is questioned (2 Sam. 16.1-4; 19.24-30). Finally there is Saul's daughter Michal, who is taken from David, whom she loves, and given to Palti, only later to be taken from Palti and returned to David (1 Sam. 18.20; 25.44; 2 Sam. 3.15-16—the fact that Palti followed after her weeping suggests the severing of a strong bond). Michal and David quarrel over his behaviour before the ark of YHWH (2 Sam. 6.12-23) and the outcome for Michal has an air of tragic finality about it. She dies childless, bringing to an end another branch of the house of Saul.

In our introductory remarks, we alluded to characteristic thematic and stylistic habits of comedy and tragedy. Here we would like to consider the different handling of that most common feature of biblical narrative, repetition.[1] Frye, in the *Anatomy*, observes that repetition overdone or not going anywhere is comic (p. 168). Samson, as we are all aware, keeps doing the same thing, and in this he is quite laughable. True, he encounters obstacles and suffers temporary setbacks, but we see over and over again that Samson bounces back, and we come to expect it. Samson exemplifies Ben Jonson's theory of the 'humour' and Bergson's concept of mechanical behaviour as a central element of comedy. He is obsessed by a fatal weakness for women, and this leads him into repeated scrapes

[1] Space does not allow consideration of a common repetitive technique in biblical narrative, the paralleling of scenes. Another, different version of Saul's death appears in 2 Sam. 1. Though investigation of the relationship of this account to 1 Sam. 31 would take us too far afield, suffice it to say that it helps to mitigate the starkness of the death of Saul, especially by accenting the continuity under David, the good, true king. At the same time, it offers us David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, which surely heightens the tragic grandeur of Saul, while emphasizing, through its focus on Jonathan, the tragic fate of Saul's house. In the Samson narrative, our sense of the comic movement is fostered by Judg. 15.18-20, which presents a potential death account corresponding to 16.28-30. Here Samson's death is averted and his boastfulness undercut by YHWH's rescue in a delightful comic resolution (see Exum, 1981: 21-25).

with the Philistines (14.1-15.8; 16.1-3; 16.4-22). Twice he falls for the same ruse and reveals his secret to a woman, and the repetitive factor in these episodes accentuates his incorrigibility. The Philistines threaten one woman and bribe the other to 'entice' (14.15; 16.5) Samson, first (ch. 14) in order to learn the answer to his riddle and then (ch. 16) to discover the secret of his strength (in both cases the key word is נגד). Both women manipulate him by appealing to his affection, 'You only hate me, you do not love me' (14.16); 'How can you say "I love you" when your heart is not with me?' (16.15). After enduring the Timnite's urging for seven days (14.16) and Delilah's every day (16.16), Samson gives in. In both cases 'he told her' (14.17; 16.17) 'because she harassed him' (14.17; 16.16). The betrayal of his secret leads both times, once indirectly and once directly, to the handing over of Samson to the Philistines. In 15.13 they *bind* him with two new ropes and *bring him up* from the rock of Etam. In 16.21 they *bring him down* to Gaza and *bind* him with bronze fetters. The climax of both accounts occurs when Samson calls on YHWH (ויקרא [שמשון] אל יהוה, 15.18; 16.28), in both cases bringing about a dramatic turn of events. The extensive repetition in the story both amuses and instructs, for each account leads to the same point: the strong man cannot save himself; Samson depends on YHWH for life and death.[1]

The repetitive phenomenon in Judges 13–16 differs noticeably from the twofold account of Saul's disobedience and rejection and other doublets in the narrative, such as Saul's casting his spear at David, and Saul's pursuit of David which both times results in David's sparing Saul's life—all of which have a cumulative effect. When, for example, Samuel rejects Saul for disobedience the first time (ch. 13), a number of details remain hazy. It is not altogether evident wherein Saul's disobedience lies: he did wait the seven days required by Samuel and only then made the offering because 'the people were scattering'. Nor is the accusation, 'You have not kept the commandment of God', quite clear, since the narrative records no instructions from YHWH but only from Samuel (10.8). Even the outcome lacks an apparent resolution, for it leaves us in the dark about Saul's response. Having delivered

[1] For detailed discussion of the parallels, see Exum, 1981: 3-9.

his diatribe, Samuel simply goes off to Gibeah, leaving Saul to prepare for battle, and the narrative makes no further reference to Saul's error in offering the sacrifice. But by the second rejection scene, there is no mistaking that YHWH has had second thoughts about the fledgling monarch. Ch. 15 reinforces and spells out what ch. 13 presented tentatively, and it confirms what we may have suspected about Saul there. YHWH clearly gives the command to annihilate the Amalekites and Saul equally clearly does not carry it out, whatever the reason. Here we see more deeply into Saul's personality and the motivation behind his decisions, particularly his desire to win the favour of the people. Saul may well be acting in good faith; that is, he may truly believe that a sacrifice of the spoils to YHWH in Gilgal is compatible with the demands of holy war.[1] But whereas his defence in ch. 13 seemed reasonable, it is somewhat feeble in ch. 15, as he shifts his pronouns as well as the blame: '*They* have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice to YHWH *your* God; and the rest *we* have utterly destroyed' (15.15). No doubt attends the outcome; the conclusion strikes a tragic note: 'And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death but Samuel grieved over Saul. And YHWH repented that he had made Saul king over Israel' (15.35).[2]

Samson repeats his folly and Saul repeats his errors. The repetition has different force and is evaluated differently in the comic and tragic worlds. Samson is not judged negatively by YHWH. Though certainly not the most perceptive of heroes, YHWH never castigates him for it, and commentators who condemn Samson for betraying his Nazirite vow engage in a moral evaluation which the narrative itself does not make (see Exum, 1983). In contrast, Saul is judged negatively by both YHWH and Samuel; and each repeated weakness, each instance of vacillation, each violent and unstable action adds to

[1] See Gunn's analysis of ch. 15 (1980: 41-56), where he argues that Saul understands זבח as compatible with חרם, whereas Samuel and YHWH do not.

[2] Saul does apparently see Samuel again, ch. 19. The statement in 15.35 that Saul did not see Samuel again signals forcefully the break with the old order represented by Samuel and prepares for the introduction of the new order symbolized by David in ch. 16.

the case against him.

A comparison of the treatment of the two heroes shows how little Samson is held accountable by YHWH (biblical exegetes are not so forgiving). Judges 13–16 does not make an issue of obedience. At best, it is implied in 13.5 and 16.17, but demands for obedience, warnings against disobedience, and homilies about the results of disobedience are strikingly absent in the story. Neither YHWH, nor the narrator, nor any of the characters censures Samson for any of his actions, though his parents demur at his choice of a spouse (14.3). This lack of specific moral judgment finds its home in comedy. The comic hero is neither good nor bad, as Langer points out, 'but is genuinely amoral,—now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny, because his energy is really unimpaired and each failure prepares the situation for a new fantastic move' (1981a: 78). Tragedy, on the other hand, plunges its protagonist into moral conflict. Obedience plays a central role in the tragedy of Saul. Samuel stresses its importance for both king and people: 'If you fear YHWH and serve him and obey his voice and do not rebel against the commandment of YHWH, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow YHWH your God, it will be well; but if you do not obey the voice of YHWH, but rebel against the commandment of YHWH, then the hand of YHWH will be against you and your king' (12.14-15 following LXX). This admonition sets the stage for Saul's failure and consequent rejection when he obeys the people (15.24) rather than YHWH (15.1, 19, 20, 22). And Samuel does not miss a last opportunity to remind Saul that his disobedience has cost him the kingdom (28.18).[1]

On various occasions people around him call attention to Saul's weaknesses and shortcomings. Samuel calls him a fool

[1] Obedience (שמע בקול) is repeatedly connected with the notions of kingship (divine versus human) and rejection (of YHWH or of Saul). In ch. 8 Samuel is told to listen to (שמע בקול) the people and make them a king like the nations even though their request means the rejection (מאס) of YHWH as king (cf. also 12.1). Ch. 12 announces divine forbearance if the people and their king obey YHWH (vv. 14-15; note the pun on Saul's name, vv. 13, 17, 19). Saul, however, obeys the people rather than YHWH and is therefore rejected (מאס) as king (ch. 15). The themes come together a final time in 28.16-19.

(13.13) and rebukes him for his feelings of inferiority (15.17), his own son admits that he has 'troubled the land' (14.29), and David twice forces him to admit his failings ('You are more righteous than I', 24.17; 'I have played the fool and erred exceedingly', 26.21). Such negative estimations expose Saul's vulnerability while assuming his accountability.

Although space does not permit a full investigation of the subject, one of our observations about different styles and techniques at work in comedy and tragedy can be well illustrated by the death scenes in Judges 16 and 1 Samuel 31. We hasten to add, however, that it is difficult to generalize about these matters, since the same literary devices can serve both comic and tragic modes. Fine distinctions between what is particular to the stories and what is typical of comedy and tragedy remain to be tested and probably can never be fully drawn. Nevertheless, we believe these two accounts demonstrate our point about the playfulness and artifice of the comic expression and the high seriousness of the tragic style.

The techniques of irony and reversal as used in Judg. 16.23-31 are not appropriate to the seriousness of tragedy. The entire scene depends for its surprise and delight on the technique of ironic reversal, and its unfolding is splendidly manipulated by the skilful employment of paronomasia. The Philistines assemble to praise their god for victory over their Israelite enemy, but in the end YHWH (through Samson), not Dagon, is the victor. The Philistines rejoice at the captivity of one who has greatly multiplied (הרבה, v. 24) their slain, and ironically, these very merrymakers at his death become the slain who outnumber (רבים, v. 30) those he killed in his life. When Samson is brought out for the amusement of the Philistines, he leans on the two pillars which support the house (v. 26); later he will lean on these supporting pillars again, but this time for destruction (v. 29). At first, the sightless Samson depends on a mere lad for support (הנער המחזיק בידו), but his petition to YHWH to strengthen him (וחזקני) results in a dramatic change of circumstances. The crowning pun, and the one which carries the scene, revolves around Samson's prayer itself: the people call (קרא) Samson to make sport, but while they watch, Samson calls (ויקרא) on YHWH! This superb ironic twist reverses the downward movement of the

narrative and turns Dagon's festival into YHWH's victory.

The situation is different in 1 Samuel 31. The tragic vision at this point, we suggest, could not tolerate a delight in word play such as we find in Judges 16.[1] The account is terse and straightforward, with an almost uncharacteristic lack of repetition. Of the few repeated terms, the recurrent phrase, 'Saul and his (three) sons', reminds us of the end of the Saulide dynasty prophesied by Samuel, and the reappearance of such words as 'fall' (נפל), 'dead' (מות), 'slain' (חלל), and 'fled' (נוס) casts a sombre shadow over the whole.

Restoration in Judges 16 comes from God. In spite of the brute fact of Samson's death among the enemy, the story ends, as comedies typically do, on a note of triumph: through Samson, YHWH achieves a glorious victory over Israel's oppressors. There is no restoration in 1 Samuel 31, but there is relief. Just as in ch. 28 relief had come in the form of human kindness on the part of the woman of En Dor, so now it comes from the men of Jabesh-Gilead. Again, it is a kindness of the *night*. In one of the many instances of inclusion in the Saul narrative, the men of Jabesh act on Saul's behalf as he had on theirs, at the beginning of his kingly career (ch. 11). Then he delivered them from the threatened shame of multilation; now they retrieve his mutilated body, sparing it further humiliation. Saul's burial does not have the integrating symbolism of Samson's. The fact of divine rejection overshadows this act of acceptance into human society, though it does not negate it. Moreover, the treatment of Saul's body raises uneasy questions (cf. Humphreys, 1980: 83-85). Mutilation and desecration of the body occur; in a practice uncommon in Israel, the body is burned; and only then are the bones buried in Jabesh, a location remote from Saul's home in Benjamin.[2] The tragedy of King Saul ends with fasting (1 Sam. 31.13) and lamentation

[1] This is not to say that tragedy cannot employ paronomasia—surely it can—but the handling of puns in tragedy would differ, we think, from the zestful twists in meaning exploited by Judg. 16. The occurrence of paronomasia in other comic and tragic narratives in the Bible requires investigation. But the fact remains that word play is absent from the stark account of 1 Sam. 31.

[2] Restoration of the bones does occur in 2 Sam. 21, an illustration of the logical evolution towards comedy in the Bible.

(2 Sam. 1.17; cf. also the tragic vignette of Jephthah's daughter). David's lament, 'How are the mighty fallen', like the chorus' 'Behold, this was Oedipus, greatest of men', serves as a commentary not just on the fate of Saul, but on the tragedy of the human condition in general.

Comedy can embrace pain and death in the larger context of restoration. For Samson, this is possible because he is an instrument of the divine plan in which we implicitly trust. In contrast, tragedy shows the uncompromising terror of suffering and death which Saul must face alone. Here we find a crucial difference between the tales: divine intention and motivation are ambiguous in Saul's case but not in Samson's. Though we are introduced to Samson with high expectations which remain unrealized (ch. 13),[1] we are nevertheless repeatedly reminded that YHWH controls Samson's folly and ludicrous escapades, 'for [YHWH] was seeking an occasion against the Philistines' (14.4). This fact allows perhaps for perplexity on the part of the reader, but not ambiguity. We, like Samson's parents, may find it odd that Samson desires a Philistine wife, but the text assures us that 'it was from YHWH' (14.4). Not simply sexual desire but also the spirit of YHWH drives Samson to his confrontations with the Philistines (14.19; 15.14). Significantly, YHWH does not promise that Samson will ultimately deliver Israel from the Philistines, only that he will be the first to do so (13.5). The opposite holds true for Saul of whom YHWH says, 'It is he who will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines' (9.16). Do we have here a hint of divine unreliability? In the comedy, Samson fulfils YHWH's plan for him; part of Saul's tragedy derives from the fact that YHWH's prophecy of 9.16-17 does not come to pass.[2]

[1] Greenstein notes a number of anomalies in the story besides this one, all of which he sees as part of the riddle the text poses for us: 'With Samson, the expected is the unexpected' (p. 246). This unpredictability or toying with our expectations is another feature of the comic. Tragedy tends to develop along clearer defined lines and is less likely to surprise (cf. Sypher: 207).

[2] YHWH predicts two things for Saul in 1 Sam. 9.16-17: 'He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines', and 'He it is who shall rule over my people'. Both are unrealized, for Saul does both only for a

In the Saul narrative the portrayal of the deity is uncomfortably ambiguous (see chs. 8 and 9). Any way you look at it, YHWH has an ambivalent attitude towards kingship.[1] Gunn (1980) has argued, with good evidence, that the deity's angry feelings of rejection as king by the people (ch. 8) give rise to a predisposition to reject Saul. Rejection (מאס) appears at strategic points in the narrative. 'Because you have rejected the word of YHWH, he has rejected you from being king' (15.23), echoes YHWH's bitter complaint of 8.7, 'They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them'. YHWH selects Saul but at the same time views him as an unwelcome usurper of divine leadership. Thus the first king must pay dearly for the people's sin ('evil' according to 12.17 and 19) of requesting a human monarch. To use Gunn's phrase, Saul becomes kingship's scapegoat. Whether one accepts Gunn's thesis or sides with commentators who defend YHWH as justified in rejecting Saul, such widely differing interpretations bear witness to a complex picture of deity in the narrative.

But it is not just YHWH whose portrayal is ambiguous. Saul himself appears as a particularly complicated personality. He emerges as a strong leader (ch. 11), yet wavers in precarious situations (chs. 13 and 15). Appearing not to want the kingship at the beginning of his career, at the end he struggles to hold on to it at all costs. Though capable of magnanimity (11.13) and inspiring loyalty among his followers, he sometimes displays sinister, inflexible qualities one hardly anticipates—e.g. his willingness to carry out his rash oath and have his own son killed in ch. 14, his evil designs against David, and his slaughter of the priests of Nob. If Gunn is correct in arguing that Saul acted in good faith in chs. 13 and 15, then even Saul's best intentions bring about the worst of consequences. Is his problem that he is, as Good puts it, 'a man not fitted for a job that should not have been opened' (p. 58)?

The tragic vision until relatively modern times has typically cast as its hero a royal figure such as we find in Saul. The

time. Fulfilment occurs with David.

[1] Like Gunn, we are not concerned with the problem of sources here but only with the final product.

privileged position of kings, which enables them to break laws ordinary people must respect, renders them well-suited to tragic treatment. In Israelite as in Greek thought, the king in his role as mediator and representative stands in a special position between the sacred and the profane (C. Segal: 44-46) and, as the Deuteronomistic Historian so fondly points out, the people's welfare depends upon the king's proper performance of the royal functions symbolized by obedience. We observe Saul at the height and depth of his worldly fortunes. When we meet him, he stands 'head and shoulders above the people'; yet all too soon we discover that he is little in his own eyes, and we follow his demise to his final rejection when his imposing stature lies 'full length upon the ground, filled with fear'. Saul is thrust into a position of leadership he did not seek only to have it torn away from him and promised to another who is better than he. Though he remains head and shoulders above the people who, like us, are less significant in the shaping of history, he is not so far above us that we fail to recognize in his *hamartia* our own potential to make similarly destructive, though certainly less far-reaching, errors of judgment.

And what of Samson? We are told he 'judged Israel', but commentators have long observed that he does not behave like a judge. Samson, rather, is the typical rogue, a Hebrew Rob Roy, a Til Eulenspiegel in biblical dress. His wit and prowess provide the occasion to ridicule the Philistines and have a good laugh at their expense. He constantly gets the better of them, and the narrative shows a hearty, lusty approval of it all. Comedy may serve as a release for anti-social instincts and in this context wit in its various expressions often functions, as it does in Restoration Comedy, as a form of aggression (see E. Segal). Indeed, the frequently cruel laughter at the Philistines gives vent to Israelite hostility—so much so that J.A. Wharton has aptly described these anecdotes about Samson as 'resistance stories' (see especially pp. 53-54). The narrative allows no place for remorse over the Philistine casualties of Samson's pranks and angry outbursts. The comic spirit which animates these escapades does not permit us to pause over any of them long enough to ponder the potential tragic dimension before plunging us into another laughable adventure. Like the story of Isaac, we have a plot composed of a series of little U's.

Only in ch. 16, with Samson's betrayal, blinding, and death does a tragic perspective threaten seriously to intrude. But here also the comic vision prevails. Immediately after the betrayal and blinding, we catch a glint of hope and a hint of victory which is to come: Samson's hair begins to grow (v. 22). The clue to its direction planted, the comic movement proceeds, as we have observed, reversing the fortunes of our hero and his captors, and finally bringing about a victory for YHWH and Israel.

A typical comic hero, Samson displays a remarkable absence of character development, a factor Milton was forced to alter considerably if his hero was to attain tragic proportions. We all know that the biblical Samson does not learn from past mistakes. This simple, if not simplistic, characterization is not a function of the short span of the story—only four chapters as opposed to the much longer narrative about Saul. One gets the impression that even if there were further Samson stories, they would be more of the same. Characteristics of the picaresque are evident not only in the episodic structure of the narrative but also in the hero who moves from one adventure to the next with little or no character development. In the end, of course, Samson is released from his 'humour'. Whether or not he learned anything about himself or his mission in the process the narrative does not say. We may take our clue from other comic heroes that the freedom from an obsessive trait does not necessarily bring with it a deeper self-understanding (see Frye, 1965: 79).

Whereas Samson's insouciant, comic character does not develop (as was also the case with Isaac), Saul's tragic one becomes a veritable battleground for opposing emotions and traits. Unquestionably Saul is a troubled man. His rigidity with regard to Jonathan (ch. 14), his suspicions of David and attempts on his life (chs. 18, 19, 22, 23, 24 and 26), his massacre of the priests of Nob (ch. 22), his random paranoia regarding the loyalty of family and servants (chs. 19, 20, 22) are all signs that something is amiss. The tragic hero is haunted by demonic forces from both within and without. We witness as Saul, driven by petty fears and jealousies, becomes a disintegrated personality, but most disturbing is the realization that the evil spirit which torments him and makes

his plight even more desperate is the agent of none other than YHWH. In this acknowledgment of the root of Saul's distress, we discover why Saul alone of biblical heroes attains a truly tragic stature, and we reach the core of the tragic vision: the problem of evil.

In no other biblical story is the problem of evil so pressing and so uncompromising as in the story of Saul. Saul's downfall is of his own making, and in more than one instance he has incurred the divine wrath. But whereas Saul is guilty, he is not really evil. The tragic vision gives rise to the uneasy awareness that the hero's punishment exceeds any guilt. The question is not why is Saul rejected. That we know, regardless of whether or not we consider the rejection justified by Saul's actions. The question is why is there no forgiveness.

Saul encounters God's dark side in a way that Samson never experiences it, for Samson endures only a temporary abandonment. Saul knows the demonic side of God not only through divine absence, but also, paradoxically, through YHWH's persecuting presence, in the form of an evil spirit. In Greek tragedy, the hero faces an indifferent, arbitrary world alone. Saul, in contrast, knows the agony of rejection by the God whose aid he repeatedly seeks—the biblical God whom we expect to be trustworthy—and more, he feels directly the terror of divine enmity. In a turn of phrase as telling as it is disquieting, Samuel exposes the problem: 'YHWH has become your enemy' (28.16).[1]

Critics from Aristotle on have found various ways of formulating the problem of hostile transcendence, for it constitutes the essence of tragedy. Paul Ricoeur offers a particularly discerning discussion in *The Symbolism of Evil*, where he writes,

> The tragic properly so called does not appear until the theme of predestination to evil—to call it by its name—comes up against the theme of *heroic* greatness; fate must first feel the resistance of freedom, rebound (so to speak) from the hardness of the hero, and finally crush him, before the pre-emi-

[1] Reading ערך as 'your enemy'; cf. Symmachus, Aquila, Theodotion, Vulg., Targ. Some commentators follow LXX (cf. Syr.) in reading רעך, in which case Samuel's statement is not so radical and merely reiterates what he has said before (15.28).

> nently tragic emotion—φόβος—can be born (p. 218; cf. Frye, 1982: 181).

It is hardly necessary to point out that when we speak of predestination to evil in the biblical story of Saul, we are not speaking of predestination in any simple sense, but rather as something undefinable and irreducible, and therefore all the more terrifying. Saul is caught between his own turbulent personality and the antagonism of God towards human kingship. He displays heroic greatness in his refusal to acquiesce to the fate prophesied by Samuel, taking extraordinary steps to hold on to his kingdom. A lesser man, a man without hubris, might merely accept his destiny. Saul, however, wrestles against it. Again, to borrow an insight from Ricoeur which fits the story of Saul admirably,

> Without the dialectics of fate and freedom there would be no tragedy. Tragedy requires, on the one hand, transcendence and, more precisely, hostile transcendence... and, on the other hand, the upsurge of a freedom that *delays* the fulfilment of fate, causes it to hesitate and to appear contingent at the height of the crisis, in order finally to make it break out in a 'denouement', where its fatal character is ultimately revealed (pp. 220-21).

YHWH rejects Saul on two occasions early on in the narrative, and while tormenting Saul with an evil spirit, proceeds to further the fortunes of his rival. Since a large part of the narrative develops the plot of David's rise, we see YHWH act simultaneously to subvert Saul and strengthen David. Saul manages to delay his downfall but not to avoid it. He rules some years after his rejection; there are signs that he still commands loyalty even though he himself doubts it (23.8, 19; 24.2; 26.1); he manages apparently to keep the Philistines at bay; and he even shows on occasion a conciliatory attitude toward David (19.6-7; 24.17-23; 26.21-25). Moreover, to the end, he seeks YHWH's counsel (ch. 28). But, as we have seen, he meets ultimately with divine silence and a crushing reiteration of rejection from the ghost of Samuel.

## IV

Tragedy confronts us with what R. Sewall has called 'the terror of the irrational'. The tragic hero is the victim of forces she or he cannot control and cannot comprehend. Faced with an inhospitable world, the tragic hero encounters on all sides unresolved questions, doubts, and ambiguities (see Sewall, Steiner). In contrast to tragedy, the comic vision can tolerate the presence of evil, resolving the fact of evil into a larger, harmonious whole. Though comedy is no stranger to ambiguity and doubt, and on occasion catches glimpses of tragic despair, it mitigates their terror. Even death, as we have tried to show for the story of Samson, is not a serious threat, for out of death can come restitution and renewal.

The exceptional quality of Saul as a tragic hero heightens by way of contrast the more dominant comic movement of biblical narrative. The biblical world view of a harmonious universe with a benign deity results in a natural evolution toward comic resolution. As G. Steiner observes, tragedy is alien to a universe which operates according to principles of reason and unthinkable in relation to a deity who acts in accordance with the demands of justice (pp. 4-5). We suppose the ways of the biblical God to be rational and just and thus we expect biblical stories to turn out for the best. Here the stories of Isaac and Samson fit our expectations, and, as we have argued, are inherently comic, however much subsequent interpreters have attempted to transform them into tragedies. In the all-embracing comic vision of the Bible, it is the presence of tragedies, like that of Saul, and perhaps a Jephthah or a Jeremiah, not their absence which is striking. But their presence in the wider biblical story, like the presence of tragic moments in the individual comic stories, contributes to the fullness and richness of biblical narrative.

These three stories of a patriarch, a judge, and a king epitomize, in our judgment, the characteristic patterns of comedy and tragedy in the Bible. One cannot remain on the level of narrative genres to deal fully with comedy and tragedy. As we have implied in the title, 'Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions', and as we have sought to show in this study, comedy and tragedy express essentially different views of reality. It

remains the task of biblical scholarship to delineate more precisely the interplay between the genres of comedy and tragedy and the differing visions of existence reflected in the concrete forms of biblical literature.

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7

# WIT, WORDS, AND A WOMAN: 1 SAMUEL 25

Moshe Garsiel

The episode narrated in 1 Samuel 25 is regarded as an integral part of a cycle of stories dealing with the relationship between King Saul and David. Its literary technique is designed to highlight the contrast between the two on the thematic problem: How should one deal with one's enemy?[1] The comparative structure substantiates a clear conclusion of who is the good and who is the villain, and serves as an answer to the question: why David has been chosen by the Lord to replace Saul on his throne.[2]

Our episode starts with an introduction to the antagonist: 'There was a man in Maon whose possessions were in Carmel. The man was very wealthy: he owned three thousand sheep and a thousand goats' (25.2). By not naming the person till v. 3 the narrator applies a dynamic device[3] which leaves the reader in suspense, curious to know who this rich person is. At the same time, it gives the text an ironic touch: the reader is advised that the man's enormous wealth

1 See R.P. Gordon, 'David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24–26', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980), pp. 42ff.; M. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan, 1985), pp. 119-33.

2 For a similar approach see P.K. McCarter, *1 Samuel* (Anchor Bible, 1980), pp. 400-401, and for a more detailed discussion M. Garsiel's entry '1 Samuel', *The World of the Bible*, ed. S. Abramski and M. Garsiel (Ramat-Gan, 1985), pp. 196-97 (Hebrew). A different view is expressed in A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (BLS, 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

3 Cf. A.L. Strauss, *Studies in Literature* (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 46-47 (Hebrew).

outweighs his very personality, and that his whole being rests and depends on his possessions.[1] The irony lies in that eventually, upon his death, all he has, including his wife, will be turned over into the hands of David, the very person to whom he has refused to give a small share of what he regales his guests with. Only in v. 3 does the narrator move to disclose the names of the man himself and of his wife, to be followed by their characterization. While Nabal's name precedes Abigail's in the text, the order is reversed when their respective traits are assessed. Now, the woman comes first: 'She was intelligent and beautiful, but the man was hard and mean and he was a Calebite'. The change of order could not have gone unnoticed in the tribal and patriarchal society of that time, since the message of such a presentation is explicit. The description of the woman precedes that of her husband because she is going to get the upper hand. Being *twbt śkl wypt t'r* will, we already guess, serve her later on. This introduction immediately brings into focus the first contrast between wealth and avarice, on the one hand, and good sense and beauty on the other. It surely is not accidental that the two personages are characterized by two antonyms *twbt* = 'good' and *r'* = 'bad'.[2]

The second contrast is implied by localities. David is staying in the wilderness (*mdbr*),[3] but Nabal lives at Maon, a place the name of which tells of permanent residence,[4] while his flocks are at Carmel which means 'plantation' or 'garden' and which also serves elsewhere as an opposite to 'wilderness'. David and Nabal thus represent two different ways of living, i.e. the outsider *vs* settled rural society. It is bound to strike the reader as ironical that the outcast marries into an established clan and gains a foothold in agrarian society.[5]

[1] For this observation, see J.L. Levenson, '1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History', in K.R.R. Gros Louis and J.S. Ackerman (eds.), *Literary Interpretation of Biblical Narratives*, II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), p. 244.
[2] Cf. D.M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul* (JSOTS, 14; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), pp. 96ff.; J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, II (Assen, 1986), p. 482.
[3] Verses 1, 4, 14, 21.
[4] Cf. Isa. 32.15; Jer. 4.26, and BDB, p. 502; also Fokkelman, *op. cit.*, p. 483.
[5] That it is the writer's wish to emphasize this is borne out by the

The main purpose of the storyteller, however, is to show that Abigail, endowed with cleverness and beauty, knows how to manipulate both her rich and miserly husband and the dashing but outlawed David, the young national hero. That a woman outmanoeuvres men lends the story a humorously entertaining touch.

The confrontation begins when David uses the occasion of Nabal's shearing festival to get provisions for his men. Before sending his messengers there he instructs them to be respectful and polite. The word *šlwm*, 'peace', is repeated in their request four times (vv. 5-6), emphasizing the delegation's goodwill and peaceful intentions. Nabal misinterprets their words as ambiguous. To him, the word *shalom* might, as a midrashic play on names, refer to Salmon, one of David's forefathers and founder of his hometown, Bethlehem.[1] What David meant as a greeting sounds a warning bell in Nabal's ears, as if David's intention were to bring him and his entire household under the power of David's clan. Be that as it may, Nabal regards the message as a request for protection payoff and refuses to accede to it.[2] His refusal is in insulting terms, to boot. After explicitly mentioning David's father Yishai, he implicitly refers to his other ancestors. The word *'bdym* (slaves) is a stinging allusion to David's grandfather Obed,[3] the word *hmtprṣym* (breaking away) hints at his famous ancestor Perez,[4] and the word *lḥmy* (my food) at his hometown Bethlehem. Nabal's response is thus doubly insulting: he turns

otherwise superfluous postscript (v. 43), to wit that David also married one Ahinoam the Jezreelite whose place of birth is Jezreel, derived from the root *zr'* (sow). The two women, Abigail and Ahinoam, therefore constitute a pair quite like *krm* (fruit garden) and *zr'* (seed), both the pride of the ancient Hebrew farmer.

[1] Cf. Ruth 4.20-21; 1 Chron. 2.22, 51, 54; and M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (r.p. Hildesheim, 1966), p. 232.

[2] Levenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-22 reminds the reader of Isa. 32.6 where the same wickedness as Nabal's, namely to withhold food from the hungry and drink from the thirsty, is said to characterize the typical *nbl*.

[3] Ruth 4.17, 21-22; 1 Chron. 2.12.

[4] Ruth 4.12, 18-22, and especially Gen. 38.27-30.

down David's request and mocks his family.[1]

Such sarcastically humorous word play on names is taken up by other figures in the plot, even by the narrator himself. Thus, Abigail says to David, 'Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched fellow (*'yš blyʿl*), for he is just what his name says: his name means "boor" (*nbl*, Nabal) and he behaves in a boorish way (*nblh ʿmw*)'.[2] Even one of Nabal's servants does not hesitate to call his master *bn-blyʿl* (a nasty fellow). The consonants of this epithet repeat Nabal's name twice, while another subtle and less devious pun on it is perhaps contained in the servant's report to his mistress about Nabal's reaction to David's messengers. Describing Nabal's verbal attack, the servant employs the verb *wyʿṭ* (he flew out at), and thus compares the assault to that of an *ʿyṭ*, a bird of prey[3] that eats corpses, in Hebrew *nblwt*, another derivate of the root *nbl*.[4]

Now David reciprocates by the same token. Nabal is, as we have been told before, a member of the Calebite clan (v. 2). Its name is probably cognate with *klb* (dog).[5] David ridicules Nabal's origin when he threatens him and his entire household with total extermination, swearing 'not to leave even one who pisses against the wall', which can only mean 'dog'. With crude humour, he compares all relatives of Nabal to dogs—after all, their very name proclaims it![6]

Now to the narrator, who also derides Nabal by playing on his name. Among the provisions taken along by Abigail to

[1] For a detailed anlysis of the word play on names in this episode see M. Garsiel, *The First Book*, pp. 126-33; *idem*, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Bar-Ilan University Press [forthcoming]), §6.3.3 [2].

[2] Regarding the etymology of Nabal's name consult W.M.W. Roth, '*NBL*', *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960), pp. 394-409; J. Barr, 'The Symbolism of Names in the Old Testament', *British Journal of Religious Literature* 52 (1969), pp. 11-29; *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, V, pp. 746-47; J.J. Stamm, *Beiträge zur hebräischen und altorientalischen Namenkunde* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 205-13.

[3] See the entry on this bird in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Hebrew), VI, pp. 185-86.

[4] The supposed connection between *nbl* (outcast) and *nblh* (corpse) is discussed by Roth, *op. cit*.

[5] On *klb*, see *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, IV, pp. 106-10.

[6] Cf. Levenson, *op. cit*., p. 318, and M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, *s.v*.

appease David there are two *nbly yyn* (jars of wine)—see v. 18. That she offers David, among other things, these two presents is bound to evoke laughter and is a piece of dramatic irony. First, one cannot miss the point that *nbl* (= *nēbel*, jar) is similar in pronunciation to Nabal, as if Abigail subconsciously offers her very husband to David. As to the dramatic irony, it comes to light when, later on in the story (v. 37), we are told of the circumstances of Nabal's demise: 'The next morning, when Nabal had slept off the wine (*bṣ't hyyn mnbl*—literally, when the wine went out of Nabal), his wife told him everything that had happened, and his heart died within him and he became like a stone'. In this manner, Abigail's taking away from Nabal two *nbly yyn* and offering them to David anticipates and foreshadows her husband's ultimate fate.[1]

The irony in Abigail's betrayal of her husband becomes still greater when one considers that, among the provisions she brings David apart from wine, is a large quantity of *lḥm*—two hundred loaves of bread—and five dressed sheep (v. 18). However, one item is missing: water.

It is surprising that the author, whose consummate art of storytelling should by now have become established beyond doubt, did not stress that David received from Abigail's hand all that her husband denied him in the first place (v. 11). Since Nabal mentions bread and meat here, David may actually now partake of both within his own camp without being invited to Nabal's party. But in the same verse Nabal also refuses to provide David with water, which raises a few questions. Can one imagine that David and his men were in such dire need of drinking water as to expect it to be sent from Nabal's feast? Supposing they were, why did Abigail not bring some water? And could she have brought water for 600 men? Finally, when she brought the two jars of wine, was it not for the camp's own festivity and not in order to quench the thirst of David's numerous followers? In short, only the wine presented by her in v. 18 does not tally with what Nabal refused to part with in v. 11.

It is hardly likely that the writer's sense of humour and artfulness failed him here, that he forgot the water and that

[1] Noted by Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

he simply substituted wine for it. To solve this riddle we have recourse to the Septuagint which, in v. 11, reads 'my wine' (*yyny*) instead of 'my water' (*mymy*). Which of the two very similar consonant clusters is to be preferred? It seems, in view of the above-mentioned doubts, that it should be that of the ancient translation. Our trust in the author not to overlook the smallest detail and not to miss any occasion for irony is thereby restored.

Moreover, it seems that 'the wine went out of Nabal' (v. 37) is a case of *double entendre*: it 'left' him once when his wife took it away without his knowledge, and again when he woke up from his drunkenness. Only at this moment does Abigail tell him what happened, upon which his heart (*lbw*) dies, he becomes 'like a stone (*l'bn*)' and ten days later conveniently dies. These two Hebrew words, particularly the second, make the name 'Nabal' reverberate once again.[1] With admirable skill and fine humour the author employs permutations of this name's consonants to depict the man's character, enumerating the gifts received by David and alluding to his sorry end. He who did not invite David in, is stricken when the wine goes out of him. He who did not share anything with David, loses his wife to him.[2] He who complained of the widespread disloyalty of servants, is unaware of what is going on within his own household.[3]

Whereas Nabal is drawn with contempt and his downfall with barely concealed satisfaction, the narrator portrays Abigail with sympathetic humour and overt admiration. She turns out to be the winner. By looks and brains she manipulates her current as well as her future husband and is the master of the game. She who laughs last, laughs longest.

Abigail also strikes us as a master of timing. She knows when to make haste and what to postpone. Four times, i.e. whenever the plot reaches a crucial juncture, the verb *mhr* (hurry) is employed: when she rushes provisions to David in order to soothe his wrath (v. 18); when she sees him, dis-

1 Cf. Garsiel, *The First Book*, p. 127; Fokkelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 521.

2 This lesson is probably echoed in Jer. 17.11: 'So is one who amasses wealth by unjust means; in the middle of his life it will leave him and in the end he will be proved a fool (*nbl*)'.

3 Cf. Levenson, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

mounts from her ass and falls upon her face in front of him (v. 23); when David praises her prompt initiative and decides to spare Nabal (v. 34); and, for the fourth time, when she receives David's marriage proposal and hastens to accept it (v. 42). She knows how to protect herself and her family against the danger caused by her husband's stubbornness, as well as how and when to accept a good proposition when it comes her way.

Similarly, she knows when not to hurry. She conceals from her husband her intention to appease David (v. 19). Furthermore, when she returns home from her encounter with David and finds Nabal in a severe state of drunkenness, she does not tell him anything, but waits until the morning for him to sober up. Only then does she reveal to him what has happened (vv. 36-38).

Abigail is also a master of rhetoric. In a very long, seemingly spontaneous and in fact probably well-prepared speech, she persuades David to go back on the vow he took to exterminate Nabal and his household.[1] As to the wit which she displays in her speech and to her gift for word play—cf. v. 25—she finds her like in David, whose vow is also spiced with wit and word play. When he states twice (vv. 22 and 34) that by the morning light (*'d 'wr hbqr*) nothing will be left of all Nabal's family and lifestock, not even one who pisses against the wall (*mštyn bqyr*), the phonetic similarity between the words *hbqr* and *bqyr* adds a humorously playful note. The same expression, *'wr hbqr* recurs when she tells Nabal of her activities during his state of inebriety. Then, in the morning (*bbqr*), his heart 'dies within him' (*bqrbw*), another witticism based upon transposing the same three consonants (v. 37). While David is determined to kill Nabal and everybody else, she by her

[1] On the structure of her speech and its literary devices, see Garsiel, *1 Samuel*, pp. 200-201; N. Klaus, 'Abigail's Speech: A Literary Analysis', *Bet Miqra* 111 (1987), pp. 320-31 (Hebrew); and Fokkelmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 493ff. Different aspects of the story are treated by Y.T. Radday's contribution to this volume. The importance of v. 25 on how to understand personal names in the Bible in general is pointed out in his essay 'Humour in Names', and what may be deduced from Abigail's behaviour in assessing the status of women in his unpublished essay 'Sex, Women and Biblical Narrative Humour'.

courage saves everybody else except Nabal, whose timely death she inadvertently causes.[1]

The end of the story highlights for the last time Abigail's knowledge of male nature. Hearing of David's marriage proposal, she accepts it with alacrity, prostrates herself on her face on the ground in a gesture of obedience and respect, and declares her willingness even to wash the feet of his servants. However, when she follows his messengers to join him, she does not forget to take with her five of her maidservants. No reader will miss the humour created by the contrast between the widow's humble words and her wish to remain a lady of high standing.[2]

[1] The word play is interpreted differently by Fokkelman, *op. cit.*, p. 522.

[2] Note the fourfold use of *rgl* (foot) in this chapter (vv. 24, 27, 41, and 42), in different meanings. They reflect Abigail's feigned flattering humility and, at the same time, her insistence on retaining her former status.

8

# IS HUMOUR ALSO AMONG THE PROPHETS?

R.P. Carroll

> φιλοπαίσμονες γὰρ καὶ οἱ θεοί
>
> Plato[1]

> 'Is there laughter in Heaven?' The humourlessness of the Bible is amazing. Laughter is a divine attribute. And the absence of laughter from the Hebraic religions is a serious matter to us of the Northern European races, for laughter plays a large part in our lives, and we are forced to do our laughing almost entirely outside of our religion.
>
> A.N. Whitehead[2]

The concept of a humorous biblical prophet is an oxymoron. Whitehead's generalization about the Bible is nowhere more true than when applied to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. A less humorous collection of people it would be impossible to find outside a list of mediaeval bishops. Humour as we know it today is not a feature of the Bible. What the biblical books do contain is a wide range of satire and irony, bawdy and ribaldry, taunt and mockery, burlesque and lampoon, parody and denigration; but these are all quite distinct from humour. Irony is certainly not humour.[3] Nor for that matter is the coarse language of abuse so typical of many of the harangues

[1] *Cratylus* 406c. The phrase may be translated as 'for the gods also have a sense of humour'; cf. H.N. Fowler, *Plato with an English Translation*, VI, The Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1926), pp. 80-81.

[2] *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* as recorded by Lucien Price (London: Max Reinhardt, 1954), pp. 351-52.

[3] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (ET Collins, 1966), p. 341.

in the prophetic books.[1] Laughter when it does appear in the text is often of the sadistic kind (e.g. Ps. 2.4-5) or reflects scepticism (e.g. Gen. 18.12, 15) or mockery (e.g. Ezek. 23.32).

Of course the Bible can be read *now* for humour or humorous reasons. Shifts in culture and changes in the readers' horizons, as well as readers' responses to the text, have made it possible to read the Hebrew Bible as a collection of humorous stories. The Bible may not be witty in itself but it is and can be a cause or occasion of wit in others. Modern retellings of various biblical stories can stress absurd elements in the text or develop aspects of a story so as to create a highly humorous account of the tale. A Joseph Heller in *God Knows* can tell the story of David and Solomon as a series of music-hall turns and so build into the biblical stories all the variegated wealth of modern Jewish humour.[2] A stand-up comic such as Woody Allen can exploit biblical stories using a pastiche of biblical and Qumran material or by making up mock-biblical sayings (e.g. 'the lion and the calf shall lie down together but the calf won't get much sleep'; 'whoso loveth wisdom is righteous but he that keepeth company with fowl is weird').[3] These examples belong to reader-response accounts of the text fused with the horizons of modern sensibility and humour. Whether they mine a deep layer of humorous material implicit in the text or impose their own canons of humour on an essentially non-humorous book is a moot point for seminars on irony in the Hebrew Bible.

The use of irony in the Hebrew Bible is so deep-seated and prevalent that little of its narrative can be read without becoming aware of the ironizing distance between the narration and the narrated characters.[4] This role of irony in the

[1] J. Chotzner's essay 'Humour of the Bible' in *Hebrew Humour and Other Essays* (London: Luzac, 1905), pp. 1-12 tends to treat all the ironic figures of speech in the Bible as examples of Hebrew humour.

[2] J. Heller, *God Knows* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984, and Black Swan, 1985).

[3] E.g. W. Allen, 'The Scrolls', in *Without Feathers* (London: Elm Tree, 1976, and Sphere, 1978), pp. 21-25. Examples cited from his section 'Laws and Proverbs', p. 25. His scrolls deal with the Lord's bet with Satan about Job, the Aqedah, and a Jewish midrash of his own.

[4] On irony in the Bible see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana Stud-

presentation of figures in narratives allows the modern reader to laugh at the folly and absurdity of characters trapped in their own inanities. Here lies the basis for a humorous reading of the Bible, but the humour is in the narrator's presentational irony rather than in the characters or actions themselves. By careful or skilful juxtaposing of details or judgments, the biblical writer can make us laugh at essentially humourless characters. In the case of the prophets—a particularly humourless group of serious people—the story of Jonah illustrates the technique perfectly. This schlemiel is always presented as a serious person who spends all his time arguing the toss with the deity about everything and yet who also, by default, constantly converts the heathen (be they sailors or Ninevites) to a more righteous way of life. Jonah has no sense of humour but for the reader (or hearer) the story is hilarious. Such an ironic lampooning or burlesquing of a prophet-like figure[1] typifies the gap between the humourlessness of the character in the text and the humorousness of the presentation. And it is in exploiting that gap that this essay on humour among the prophets is possible in the first place.

Stories of and about prophets occur frequently in the Hebrew Bible but there are no funny prophets in the book. So in order to make some intelligible sense of the question constituting the title of this essay, it becomes necessary to look at a number of prophet stories from the viewpoint of the narrator's presentation. This makes for an oblique study of the prophets and places the study firmly in the reader-response school of biblical readings. It cannot rescue the savage ironists among the prophets from their bouts of *saeva indignatio* or transform the prophetic moralists into comedians; but it can highlight the saving humour with which many of the stories are told. The selection which follows is but a sampling of the

ies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), *passim*; E. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (r.p. Sheffield: Almond, 1981). More briefly see R.P. Carroll, 'Irony', in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R.J. Coggins & J.L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), pp. 325-26.

[1] The warrant for treating Jonah as a prophet is to be found in 2 Kings 14.26, in the book's canonic placement, and in the long history of its treatment by readers and commentators *as* a prophetic text.

possibilities for a reading of the prophets from the viewpoint of humour. It cannot be exhaustive because such an approach would have to be cumbersome as well as comprehensive. I have picked out a few stories about figures defined as prophets and have indicated some of the humorous features in the presentations of their stories. Those features will have to serve as my attempt to answer the question posed by this essay's title somewhat in the affirmative.

*Abraham the prophet*

In Gen. 20.7 Abraham is called a prophet and therefore this study has its warrant for considering the peripatetic patriarch in the contexts of prophets and humour. The story in Genesis 20 is just one instalment in the running story of Abraham's tendency to pass his wife off as his sister whenever he chanced to travel among the heathen (like the sailors and Ninevites of Jonah's acquaintance, Abimelech of Gerar was a remarkably pious man!). As a result of this tendency, Abimelech the king comes close to death (in the Egyptian version of the tale in Genesis 12, Pharaoh and his house suffered from plagues—what else could happen in Egypt!) and is instructed in v. 7 to restore Abraham's wife to her (dream-revealed) husband. This action accompanied by Abraham's prayers (*because* he is a prophet!) will guarantee Abimelech's survival. Now whether this turn in events is irony or humour may be a moot point. The irony of Abimelech having to seek for his life to the man who has wronged him by his deception is obvious and not without its humorous aspect. The story in its entirety brings to an end the barrenness of Sarah (cf. Gen. 20.17–21.2) because in healing Abimelech the barrenness of his wives is also cured, and immediately after this tale of fecundity frustrated comes the story of Sarah's pregnancy (via Abraham presumably). Perhaps in praying for Abimelech and thereby restoring his virility Abraham had also discovered his own potency! Or at least Yahweh had seen fit to allow Abimelech's wives (wife and female slaves, i.e. his harem) to become pregnant and had then visited Sarah—with the inevitable result.

*Balaam and his she-ass*

Passing over the story of the prophet Moses and his uncir-

cumcised lips (Exod. 6.12) with its potential for humorous depiction of a *tongue-tied stammerer* persuading the mighty Pharaoh to release the Israelites from their work-camps and *producing* the silver-tongued poems attributed to him in the Torah, the next most obvious humoresque of prophecy is Balaam the foreign and world-famous seer (Num. 22–24). Yet again we have a very serious figure of impeccable orthodoxy whose story betrays no humorous elements, except for the addition to it of the tale of the talking she-ass (Num. 22.21-35). The humour of this delightful vignette was not lost on the producers of the Midrash Rabbah to Numbers. The great seer is reduced by this story to the level of a blithering idiot arguing and fighting with his she-ass over something which, although quite evident to the animal, he cannot see. The seer who cannot see! It is a most humorous presentation which mocks the world-famous seer renowned for his ability to see so far into the future and yet here incapable of seeing to the end of the road![1] The function of the additional tale in the story of Balaam's great oracles of success for Israel may be more lampoon and mockery than humour, but it is the closest any story of a prophet (outside that of Jonah) in the Bible comes to humour.

*Samuel the seer*

I hesitate to trawl the stories of Samuel (1 Sam. 1–28) for their humorous elements because these are few and far between. It is more a case of irony than humour. Samuel the seer replaces Eli the priest and his corrupt sons, only to introduce into Israel the rule of his own two corrupt sons (cf. 2.22-25; 8.1-3). Samuel's protestations of innocence in the matter of bribe-taking (12.3-5) are deconstructed by the fact of his sons' bribe-taking (8.3). But these are the juxtaposings of the narrator and hardly constitute real humour. They do expose the problem of distinguishing irony and humour in biblical narratives and, at best, provide for feelings of *Schadenfreude* in the

[1] The inherent humour of the incident is well detected in the *Midrash Rabbah* to Numbers (20.14-15); on the she-ass element as burlesque see A. Rofé, *The Book of Balaam (Numbers 22.2–24.25)* (Jerusalem: Simor, 1979), pp. 49-52 (in Hebrew).

reader's response to the stories of how Samuel replaced Eli and was then himself replaced by Saul (who in turn was replaced by David, etc.). Irony must pass for humour here!

*Elijah*
The severe moralist from Gilead who rants and raves his way through the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2) hardly provides much evidence for humour among the prophets. On the contrary, his humourlessness is only equalled by that of his humourless companion Elisha. And yet the stories of Elijah are not told without a certain degree of hilarity—though the hilarity is very much in the narration rather than in the character of Elijah. In 1 Kings 18 there is a neat juxtaposition of Obadiah, the saviour of one hundred prophets, and Elijah, the killer of 850 prophets (vv. 4, 19, 40). In that famous story of the *Kulturkampf* on Mount Carmel Elijah is presented as the champion of Yahweh on the mountain *killing* alien prophets. In the very next story he is again presented as a prophet on the mountain-top, but this time it is Horeb, the mount of Elohim, and he arrives there after a journey to the wilderness where he had expressed *the wish to die* (19.4). This is irony rather than humour; but the modern reader is entitled to enjoy the story as having its humorous points. Further irony/humour appears when Elijah takes himself to a cave on mount Horeb (to Yahweh's surprise? cf. v. 9) and there complains to Yahweh about popular plots to kill him (he who had so recently wished to die!). In the ensuing discussion between Yahweh and Elijah there is a very fine satirical (or humorous?) take-off of the pyrotechnical legend of the divine revelation (to Moses) on Horeb/Sinai (19.11-13). As Yahweh sweeps past a powerful wind tears the mountains and breaks the rocks, then an earthquake followed by a fire ravages the mountain. In none of these earth-shattering phenomena is Yahweh to be found. But in 'a still small voice' which came after the fire Yahweh speaks to Elijah. The text of 1 Kings 19 is too densely textured for simple or single meanings to be extracted from it. Humour, irony, satire and polemic may all be detected in it, as well as a fine intertextual treatment of Moses on Horeb/Sinai (cf. Exod. 19.16-19; Deut. 4.11-12), which clearly debunks some of the mythic elements of that

legend. At the end of his encounter with Yahweh Elijah has been instructed to appoint his prophetic successor (19.16) and so has been effectively removed from his post as prophet (to) in the reign of Ahab (the stories which follow ignore him completely, except for a response to Ahab's involvement in the story of Naboth's vineyard in 21.17-29).[1] So all those shenanigans on Mount Carmel were for nothing! All that noise and frenzied activity on behalf of Yahweh had been pointless and his slaughtering of prophets had just been the shape of things to come (19.17). Yahweh himself would leave seven thousand faithful Israelites who had not conformed to baalistic customs and, so far as one can judge from the stories, it would appear to be the case that Obadiah had been a more constructive influence in shaping the future than Elijah, for all his frenetic theatricality, had been. As a sharp, ironic critique of prophets the presentation of Elijah in the narratives of Kings is both instructive and humorous. In the closing scenes of Elijah's life (2 Kgs 1–2.12) fire motifs dominate the story, and the modern reader begins to understand why the story of Yahweh's non-appearance in fire was added to the construction of 1 Kings 19. Fires everywhere (on Carmel, on Horeb, on the soldiers of 2 Kings 1, and finally Elijah in 'a chariot of fire and horses of fire'), 'but Yahweh was not in the fire' (1 Kgs 19.12). Say no more! Is it all ironic or can we detect a strong dose of humour in the narrated presentation of Elijah?

*Elisha*

After Elijah can the reader of the Hebrew Bible tolerate any further irony or humour? In one story about Elisha, Elijah's successor, the prophet is represented as a figure of fun for some of the small boys of Bethel (2 Kgs 2.23-24). As small boys (youths) are wont to do, they had shouted at the less than hir-

[1] The story of Naboth's vineyard is strange and somewhat strangely developed in its present location in 1 Kings 21. In the 2 Kgs 9.21-26 version of Naboth's property Elijah is conspicuously absent, so we must assume that he has been added to the development of a midrash on the subject in 1 Kings 21. On this feature of the stories see A. Rofé, 'The Vineyard of Naboth: The Origin and Message of the Story', *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988), pp. 89-104.

sute prophet 'go up baldy! go up baldy!' Sensitive about his fine head of skin, the prophet Elisha cursed the boys in the name of Yahweh and Yahweh obliged his servant by setting she-bears on the ill-mannered youths! Two bears came out of the woods and tore apart forty-two of the boys. Having proved himself to be an appropriate successor to Elijah, Elisha continued his journey on to Carmel. The story itself may be grotesque and cruel and is presented without any narrational comment; but it has occasioned much wit and observation among readers of the tale. Apart from jokes about how Elisha's appeal for a number of bears was kept down to two by Yahweh, Mark Twain displays a fine understanding of narrator's narration in his finely turned story of Elijah (*sic*!) and the bears as told by a small boy:

> 'There was once a prophet named Elijah', said the lad. 'One day he was going up a mountain. Some boys threw stones at him.' He said, 'If you keep throwing stones at me I'll set the bears on you and they'll eat you up'. And they did, and he did, and the bears did.[1]

A touch of gallows humour perhaps but an interesting retelling of the biblical story—midrash with elements of wordplay. The story of the prophet and the bears seems to have appealed to Twain, because he used it elsewhere to make a different point:

> There is this trouble about special providences—namely, there is so often a doubt as to which party was intended to be the beneficiary. In the case of the children, the bears, and the prophet, the bears got more real satisfaction out of the episode than the prophet did, because they got the children.[2]

The capacity of the story for midrashic and humorous development is quite obvious, though the biblical account must be recognized as having no humour attached to it and the narrator chooses not to comment on it.

A quiet humour may be said to obtain throughout all the

[1] Cited in *Greatly Exaggerated: The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain*, ed. A. Ayres (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1988), p. 187.

[2] Cited in Ayres, *ibid*., p. 187 (from Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*). On the rabbinic interpretation of 2 Kgs 2.23-24 see *b. Sota* 46b-47.

Elijah and Elisha stories, though whether of the mocking kind or more innocent than that may be debated. Elijah's mocking of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18.26-29) is too well known to require exegesis. It displays savage irony as well as a mocking parody of religious beliefs: 'cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened'. These echoes of lament psalms (e.g. Pss. 44.23-26; 89.46-51) may be found humorous depending on the reader's viewpoint. The depiction of Elisha blinding the Syrian army through his prayers and then leading it into the city of its enemies is not without its humorous aspect (2 Kgs 6.15-23). These stories typify that humorous element which may be said to run through the collected tales of the prophets and the sons of the prophets in 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13. But the humour is in the narrator's deft touches and canny presentation of prophets and situations, rather than in the characters of the prophets. The tales are humorous, the prophets are not. Humour in that sense is not to be found among the prophets, though it is to be found in the telling of stories *about* them.

*The prophets*

Moving away from the stories of prophets as told by the deuteronomistic historians to that collection of biblical literature known as 'the prophets' (*Nebi'im*), the so-called 'classical', 'canonical' or 'writing' prophets in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the book of the Twelve, we move from narrative and story to lengthy anthologies of poetic utterance and edited prose. With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Jeremiah and Jonah), there is little by way of direct presentation of prophets as persons. To find humour here requires skilled detective work and a linguistic nose of acute sensibilities. Caustic wit and sardonic expression are to be found throughout the prophetic collections but these linguistic qualities do not necessarily bespeak humorous sources. It may not be humour but savage anger which informs the language of irony and parody, mockery and derision so typical of an Amos or Micah. Dean Swift's *saeva indignatio* is an emotion closer to the tone and tenor of the prophets than humour, and modern readers of the prophets may be rather sanguine in their tendency to

think of the prophets as witty and humorous speakers. Of course to those who are not the targets of the savage irony and trenchant debunking of the prophets the language may appear to have its humorous moments, but in a very real sense prophetic language lacks humour.

*Amos*

There really are very few laughs in the book of Amos. A certain turn of phrase may make the reader's lips twitch, but humour is hard to come by in the collection of oracles and sayings associated with Amos of Tekoa. One notes the curious phrase 'a man and his father go in to the same maiden' (2.7); but its sense seems more caustic and ironic than humorous. Humour may not be far from the observation in 2.16, 'he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day', nor from the description in 3.12 'as the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed'. The phrase 'cleanness of teeth' (4.6) meaning 'famine', is more gallows humour than outrightly witty, but it may appeal to the thoughtful reader prepared to reflect on it as an oblique way of describing starvation—how clean your teeth are looking today! In the famous phrases contained in the statement 'as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him' (5.19), there may be glimpses of humour, black and dark. Ironic reversal of situations is so much a feature of the book of Amos (and of so many other prophetic books) that perhaps we should accept irony and satire as the closest the prophets ever came to true humour. Their words are too grim and dark to afford much prospect for laughter. However graphic their images may be regarded (e.g. 'I will command and shake the house of Israel among the nations as one shakes with a sieve', 9.9), their import is too serious and sinister to have humour as the defining element. What is said here about Amos can be applied to most of the other collections of poems, oracles and sayings attributed to various prophets. Sharp of eye and caustic of tongue, they lashed their communities with whips of scorn, and the gentle ribbing humour

of the sage is far from their mouths.

*Hosea*

Rich with psychoanalytical insight,[1] the depiction of Hosea's marriage(s) in Hosea 1–3 affords very little wit or humour. Only in so far as cuckoldry and promiscuity give rise to ribald mocking and humour in any community can Hosea's plight be said to be humorous. Too much pain and too much symbolism are built into the chapters for humour to emerge from them in any sense. In the poems there are many fine phrases and a few may be read as being tinged with the possibility of humour. The clusters of images in 7.4-7 spin fine webs of wordplay dominated connections between heated ovens for baking and the heat of sexual passion mixed with the heat of alcoholic hangovers and the heat of anger. But irony and criticism seem more dominant in the images than humour. Ephraim as a half-baked cake (7.8) may appeal to the modern reader as a humorous allusion but the humour may merely lie in a modern sense of the incongruity of the phrase. Running through the book of Hosea are images of food and cooking set over against the analysis of social hunger and dissatisfaction. This is the irony of the gap between pretensions and reality, and the incongruity may be seen by some readers as not lacking in humour. The biting sarcasm of 'Ephraim herds the wind' (12.1) or 'they kiss calves' (13.2) can be construed as humorous observations on the folly of social and political practices. Religious sacrifices and ceremonies conducted in the presence of skilfully made idols may easily be satirized by the simple description 'they kiss calves', and this simple but devastating critique is not without its humorous aspect. But trawling the minor prophets with nets designed to trap humour is a wearisome activity, especially when the

[1] In his 1910 paper 'A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men' (published under the general title *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*) Sigmund Freud discusses men who choose to love promiscuous women. Freud did not use Hosea in his study so there is no Freudian concept of the Hosea complex! If my friend and colleague Arthur Shenkin would publish his learned paper 'Hosea the Passionate Prophet', biblical studies and psychoanalytical theory would be able to discourse in the public domain on a fascinating subject.

poetry of the collections sparkles with other far more obvious features. Brilliant, almost Shakespearian wordcraft gives the book of Hosea a linguistic quality which is not well served by seeking humour in it. No doubt there are a few smiles to be had from the book but its real power and appeal lie elsewhere.

*Jonah*

The one true funnyman among the Hebrew prophets is Jonah. Not funny in himself but as a figure of fun narrated by others. The textual Jonah offers no evidence of wit or humour in anything said by him but, depicted as a schlemiel by the writer, his story has occasioned great hilarity among readers and other tellers of his story.[1] He is not identified as a prophet in the text but the inclusion of his story in the collection of prophetic texts and the reference to him as Jonah ben Amittai, *the prophet*, in 2 Kgs 14.26 warrant that description. A study of Jonah by itself would yield more humour than a treatment of all the other prophets put together, but that enterprise is forbidden to this writer.[2] Suffice it to say here that the humour lies in the telling of Jonah's story by means of juxtaposed tales of how, willy-nilly, this reluctant prophet converted the heathen sailors and Ninevites from their wicked and idolatrous ways without even attempting to do so! As a prophet his immediate response is always to refuse and then to do the opposite of what is commanded. Yet each time he succeeds in turning the heathen to Yahweh (e.g. 1.16). In the belly of the fish he prays a psalm of impeccable orthodoxy; but outside the fish he is a cantankerous, obstinate and extremely unpleasant person. After the brief sojourn in (more accurately: brief jour-

1 E.g. J.A. Miles, 'Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 65 (1974-75), pp. 168-81; J. Mather, 'The Comic Art of the Book of Jonah', *Soundings* 65 (1982), pp. 280-91. There is a very fine one act play on Jonah by Wolf Mankowitz, *It Should Happen To A Dog* (1956), which harvests much of the fun in the story. A published version is to be found in *Religious Drama* 3, selected and introduced by M. Halverson, Meridian Books, New York (I am most grateful to Charles A. Kennedy of Virginia State University for gifting me a copy of this smart play).

2 Cf. my unpublished paper read to the SBL International Meeting in Heidelberg, 1987: 'Lampooning the Prophets: Two Burlesques on Prophecy'—a paper on Balaam and Jonah.

ney through) Nineveh his anger knows no bounds when the deity fails to zap the heathen. Our final picture of Jonah, like the lampoon of Balaam quarrelling with his she-ass, is of the outraged prophet arguing the toss with the Lord Yahweh over the fate of a *qîqāyôn* plant and ignoring the possibility of the destruction of 120,000 human souls ('and also much cattle'). The story is a delicious irony. It lampoons a certain type of prophet by showing Yahweh to be gentler and more understanding than his awkward servant. The humour is rich, though the story might be categorized as a satire on prophets. But the humour is derived from looking *at* a prophet and laughing *at* him rather than laughing *with* him. It is outside the prophet and lies in the narrator's skill in painting such a ludicrous picture of an absurd person. For all its funny qualities the story is essentially about a humourless person (like all the prophets) told in such a way that generations of readers have fallen out of their seats laughing at the *schlemiel*. Only in mocking prophets does it seem to be possible to introduce humour among the prophets!

*Isaiah*

The three large collections of prophetic material in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel do not yield any greater evidence of humour among the prophets than has been found in the smaller anthologies. Again the humour is to be found in modern readings of the text or in certain editorial procedures which have allowed certain juxtapositions of material to be made. Caustic wit and sardonic expression may be found in all the prophets, especially the three major figures, but such linguistic techniques are not overly humorous. The overwhelming tendency of prophets towards what may be called 'rant and rhetoric' does not bespeak a fundamental sense of humour. Insight and sharp-eyed critique of social and cultural norms expressed in ironic and satirizing forms seldom use the gentler forms of expression associated with wit and humour. Holding up the community to obloquy and denunciation does not encourage the more modest approach of gentle ribbing and witty remark.

The satire of wealthy owners hurling their idols of gold and silver to the moles and bats (2.19-21) is not without its humor-

ous aspects. Nor is the scene where a reluctant man refuses to be made the leader of 'this heap of ruins' just because he possesses a cloak (3.6-7), entirely lacking in wit. The mighty warriors of strong drink (5.11, 22) in daily and nocturnal pursuit of alcohol is a description of a familiar type of social behaviour which is more an example of mockery than humour. But the hyperbole 'warriors of drink' conjures up an amusing set of scenes of mighty men falling over inflamed with drink—a combination of military and civic braggadocio and incompetence. The purpose of the satire is not just to poke fun at foolish drunks, but to indict an oppressive stratum of leadership in the community (5.12, 23; cf. Amos 4.1; 6.4-6). Some humour can be detected behind the images and expressions used in 28.24-28. Images of the bed too short and the covering too narrow of 28.20 may appeal to the reader as humorous. There is a strong sense of the ridiculous in many of the sayings in Isaiah but it reflects more the negative aspect of humour than its positive side. Satire and kaleidoscopic irony remain the dominant thrusts of the book rather than good-natured humour or the gentler shores of comedy.

Some hilarity may be derived from Isaiah if a reader-response juxtaposition of 3.16-23 and 20.2-6 is entertained. In the critique of the daughters of Zion, arrayed in all their latest fashion finery, are included items of apparel which suggest topless dresses and see-through blouses.[1] Now such a phalanx of female worthies striding (clanking or tinkling would reflect v. 16 better!) down the streets of Jerusalem, dressed to kill and displaying much naked flesh, must have been a sight to behold. If at the same time and along the same streets these women encountered an Isaiah, equally half-naked (buttock-naked according to 20.4) and denouncing their choice styles of fashion, then a most funny scene may be imagined. On one side of the street the half-naked Isaiah ranting at the women for their obsession with sartorial styles, and on the other side these formidable half-naked women glowering at their critic (the

[1] Cf. O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12* (OTL; London: SCM, 1972), pp. 49-50; K. Galling, *Biblisches Reallexikon* (HAT, I.1; Tübingen; J.C.B. Mohr, 1937) (references in Kaiser). The evidence is less obvious in the second editions of both these writers! cf. Kaiser (1983); Galling (1977).

text is silent on the matter of the women's response to 3.16-23).

The hilarity of this scene is arrived at by imagining a literal sense to both texts and by reading them together as if they could be conjoined. The editors have not obliged us by linking the two texts together in this fashion, and only my intertextual reading of them permits this amusing scene to emerge from a book rather low on humour. The *topos* 'address to women' (cf. 32.9-12; Amos 4.1; Jer. 9.17-19, 20-22) is a minor feature of the prophetic books and hostile addresses to women (cf. elements in Jer. 44.15-25) only a small part of that *topos*, so too much should not be made of 3.16-23. To deconstruct it by means of 20.2-6 is a modern glossing of the text; but an amusing one.

Xenophobia and vilification of foreign nations inform the genre known as 'oracles against the nations' (e.g. Isa. 13–23; Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 25–32) and provide some black humour in the prophetic books. In the collection of oracles against Babylon (Isa. 13–14) the satire on the king of Babylon (14.4-21: described as a *māšāl*, 'discourse'; 'taunt' in RSV) is not without its humorous aspects. The mighty emperor is reduced to the status of a shade in Sheol, where he is greeted by the shades of the kings of the nations with the words (uttered perhaps with just a hint of *Schadenfreude*?), 'You too have become as weak as we! You have become like us!' (v. 10). Using an ancient astral myth about the daystar, son of dawn, the emperor's aspirations are contrasted with his great fall to Sheol. Here is the man who had made the world like a desert with his great conquests now reduced to the same status as his victims (vv. 16-17). Irony and satire dominate the poem, and the familiar theme of the reversal of fortunes mocks the fallen emperor. It is yet another example of what might be called gallows humour, but this time the conditions of expression are reversed and the boot is on the other foot. Not gallows humour about one's own condition or fate, but a poking of fun at an old enemy meeting his come-uppance. It is typical of the kind of poem to be found in the oracles against the nations which, while it may not be a product of humour itself, must have put the hearers/readers into a good humour. Similar elements can be found in the 'polemic against idols' *topos* in Isa. 44.9-20 (cf.

Jer. 10.1-16; Pss. 115.3-8; 135.15-18). The satire against the idols takes the form of a description of the manufacturing processes whereby a tree in the forest was transformed by many crafts into a beautiful figure. From the cedar which grows in the forest comes the wood from which the idol is made, and which also provides the fuel for the fire which gives warmth and on which dinner is cooked. It is good knockabout fun in which the idol is reduced to the status of its materiality. As an argument it is both wooden and poor, but as abuse of an alien cult it has good propaganda value. The images it conjures up of fuel production, food production and idol production make for good satire and underline the point of the polemic: 'he feeds on ashes' (v. 20: not quite a punning phrase, but a nicely summarized evaluation of the connections between eating and burning wood). Irony and satire dominate the polemic; but it is not without its humorous moments.

*Jeremiah*

There is even less humour to be found in the book of Jeremiah than in Isaiah. Neither prophet can be said to have been a humorous person, though both books contain a considerable amount of ironic and satirical material. The harangue is not a humorous mode of denigration and the spirit of harangue is very much abroad in both books. The modern reader may note the refusal of Jeremiah to speak in 1.6 on the grounds that he is too inexperienced to speak (the conventional interpretation of this inexperience makes it due to his youthfulness); and then note the range of lyrical poetry expressed by Jeremiah in the rest of the book associated with him. This is rather like the heavy or uncircumcised lips of Moses which did not prevent him from uttering some magnificant poetry. Perhaps this bashfulness or (mock-) modesty in the great poets of the Hebrew Bible can be read humorously: i.e. every time Yahweh approaches a person with a commissioning to be a prophet he refuses. This refusal never lasts very long and they turn out to be first-class poets when they do speak. To some extent this is an amusing state of affairs; but the formal nature of the refusal is so conventional as to suggest that we have here a *topos* of reluctance which indicates the true prophet. We may note the irony or humour

of this ploy but, for the biblical writers, it is a more serious matter which bears on the authenticity of the speaker's status as prophet.

Unconscious humour might be detected by a modern reader in Jeremiah's advocacy of marriage in his letter to the exiles in 29.4-7 (especially in the light of his own refusal to marry according to the conventional reading of 16.1-4), and the subsequent behaviour of the deported community. The repeated command 'take wives... take wives' (v. 6) is obeyed, to some extent, in the behaviour of Ahab and Zedekiah who are said to 'have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives' (vv. 22-23). A delicious irony no doubt, but hardly the point being made by the letter writer in vv. 4-7. The letter clearly means that people should marry, whereas the two prophets have been using their undoubtedly attractive positions of power as prophets to acquire other people's wives! In the final form of this chapter these two independent pieces of text provide this (now) quite humorous gloss on life in Babylonia. It is, however, very unlikely that the original writers intended to be amusing at this point in the book—given the result of the prophets' adultery (i.e. Nebuchadnezzar's favourite pastime of roasting foreigners in the fire, cf. Dan. 3). This is, at best, just another example of gallows humour (from a reader-response perspective). Some humour may be extracted from the stories of Jeremiah and Zedekiah (34–39): especially in 37–38, where the prophet who has spoken so often in the past about escaping from the city (e.g. 21.8-10) is himself caught when trying to leave the city. His claim (37.14) that he is not deserting to the Chaldeans (the advocacy of 21.9; 38.2) sounds extremely hollow and is so treated by the guards who arrest him. It is an amusing example of someone hoisted with his own petard. Also amusing is Jeremiah's need to lie to save his own skin and the reputation of king Zedekiah (38.24-27): it is amusing because so much of the poetry and prose of Jeremiah is taken up with accusations against the community and various groups of telling lies (*šeqer*), and now to find the prophet himself forced to save his own skin by lying is to see a man caught in his own lure. No doubt this response to Jeremiah's dilemma in 38.24-27 contains elements of *Schadenfreude*, but this is in keeping with the nastiness of

humour among the prophets. What humour there is in Jeremiah is black and cruel rather than gay and lighthearted.

*Ezekiel*

Humour in relation to Ezekiel is most probably a contradiction in terms. Even Chotzner, who finds so much humour in the Hebrew Bible because he treats irony, sarcasm and satire as humour, has to admit that Ezekiel's sense of humour is quite unpalatable. In a neatly expressed paragraph he writes:

> Of Ezekiel's humour no specimens can be given here. It is, like Swift's, rather coarse, and not altogether palatable. The curious may be referred to the sixteenth and twenty-third chapters of the Book of Ezekiel.[1]

Ezekiel's intensely literary style bears out the claim that he had swallowed a scroll (2.8–3.3). There is a density to his prose pieces that makes any humour they may contain rather heavy-handed. One notes the phrase 'and though you sit on scorpions' (2.6) and smiles; but is it humorous? The lifting up of the prophet by the hair of the head and his transportation by that means to Jerusalem (8.3) may amuse the modern reader, but it is more a conventional reference to inspiration than a literal journey dangling by the hair. Scorn and satire are hurled against the people, parody and harangue molest them in the utterances of Ezekiel. But there is little humour in these biting denigrations. The lengthy harangues of chs. 16, 20 and 23 are obsessed with sexual images but little in them is humorous. One may note the irony of whores who pay their clients rather than the time-honoured fashion of clients paying the whores (16.30-34), but is the point very humorous? Bitterness and hostility are too close to the surface in these harangues for humour to have any dominant role to play. Again, the category which comes to mind when reading Ezekiel is that of Swiftian *saeva indignatio*—coruscations of anger rather than of wit. The satire on monarchy in v. 17, which ridicules the king as the young twig carried off by the great eagle (i.e. the emperor), is transformed by its ending (vv. 22-24) into an utterance of hope for the future. It is much

[1] Chotzner, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

more a play on conventional images than a humorous piece (cf. 20.47; tree imagery is so conventional and dominant in Isaiah and Ezekiel that little in general can be said about it), though there may be some facetiousness involved in describing the king as a mere twig (that depends upon the youthfulness of the king and his self-image of importance in the royal ideology of the Jerusalem court).

Some humour may be derived from the gap between the speaker's sense of self-importance in Ezekiel and the tendency of the people to put him down in various ways. The argument between him and Yahweh in 4.12-15, over whether human or cow dung is to be used in the preparation of food, suggests a character rather vulnerable to the human ribbing which appears at certain points in the book. Thus in 21.49 (Heb. 21.5) he complains that the people are dismissing him as 'a maker of parables'.[1] There may be a mocking tone behind 33.30-32, where the people come to listen to the speaker and speak well of him without meaning anything of what they say. They appear to dismiss him as a singer (Heb. 'song') of obscene or lascivious songs—and no wonder if they heard him sing anything like what appears in chs. 16, 20 and 23! They hear and appreciate what he has to say, but they will not take a blind bit of notice of what is said in order to practise it. The image of the people gathering to hear yet another performance of the balladeer and praising him to the skies, but ignoring the practical import of what is sung, is not without its humorous touches and helps to unravel the speaker's self-esteem.

*Is humour also among the prophets?*

To return then to the fundamental question which constitutes the title of my chapter. It is, of course, based on the more famous question asked twice of Saul (the king) in 1 Samuel: 'Therefore it became a proverb (*māšāl*), "Is Saul also among the prophets?"' (10.12; cf. 19.24). The answer to the question

[1] The phrase *m<sup>e</sup>maššēl m<sup>e</sup>šālîm* 'user of proverbs', a form of *mšl* used especially in Ezekiel, is taken by some commentators to refer to 'riddles' rather than proverbs (cf. the standard commentaries such as Eichrodt and Zimmerli).

(assuming it not to be rhetorical) in Samuel is 'No!' and the point of the query would appear to have indicated the need to separate appearance from reality. Not everybody who behaves *as* a prophet *is* a prophet. Hence the proverb (*māšāl*) functions as a saying with reference to unusual behaviour which is out of character. In that sense it is a very good question to pose of prophets. Humour among prophets is so rare a thing that when we imagine that we have discovered a humorous or witty prophet then we have probably been mistaken. Humour is no more to be found among the prophets than King Saul was a prophet; but there are occasions when such a mistake might easily be made.

Of course it is all a matter of definitions. If humour is made an elastic term (not unconnected with the archaic sense of 'humours', i.e. the bodily fluids which were thought to determine emotional and physical dispositions) then it may be stretched to include black and gallows humour, satire and parody, raging anger and kaleidoscopic irony, harangue and taunt, invective and cursing, and the whole panoply of derogatory attitudes displayed in the prophetic books. In this sense the prophets fluctuate between comedy and tragedy in the classical dichotomy of those two structures of presentation.[1] If, on the other hand, we confine humour to some genuine sense of wit and funniness the prophets must be adjudged to be humourless. It is all a matter of definition and judgment, and each individual reader of the Bible will nuance their assessment of the matter in terms relative to their reading of the text in conjunction with their own convictions about what humour is.

We bring to the biblical text our own values and judgments and combine these with our trawling of texts, in order to arrive at something approximating to an intelligent interpretation of the text. It cannot be otherwise. Ideally we attempt a 'fusion of horizons'.[2] That is, we allow for both the horizon of the text and our own horizon to come together to constitute

[1] On this aspect of prophecy see N.K. Gottwald, 'Tragedy and Comedy in the Latter Prophets', *Semeia* 32 (1984), pp. 83-96.

[2] The concept and phrase belong to H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (ET London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), pp. 273-74.

the interpretation. Hence, in best reader-response terms we recognize where we are located in our own world and allow those values to shape how we read texts. Living in the late twentieth century we approach the Bible much informed by the long history of its interpretation, and from a culture where wit and comedy are important aspects of how we live now. Thus we inevitably read the Bible from a humorous viewpoint and our comedic horizon, fused with the humourless horizon of the prophets, permits us to find them not unfunny. It is a matter for subtle rather than cumbersome exegesis and for sophisticated recognition of what we are doing when finding humour among the prophetic texts. It remains an open question whether the narrators of prophetic tales and editors of the books took anything but an ironic view of their subject-matter. In that ironizing distanciation of narrator from subject we detect moments capable of humour, and that may be our only justification for reading the prophets from the viewpoint of humour. Other writers (e.g. Chotzner) might view the matter differently and argue for a greater or lesser degree of humour among the prophets than I have suggested in the above pages. It is a relative matter ('the son-in-law also rises', as modern readings of Qoheleth have it) and different trawls will produce different yields. To the reader with a real sense of humour the biblical prophets may well constitute a text of unending laughter and hilarity. To a different reader, perhaps one more given to serious theological or political reflection, the prophets may not be a laughing matter. Laughter—so beloved by the Greek gods—threatens to deconstruct theology and politics and so is dangerous for those of serious mien. And yet... there remains Jonah and Balaam and all the other prophets... and one is tempted to smile, if not to laugh. Humour indeed!

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9

# JOKING IN JEREMIAH 18

Philip R. Davies

I shall argue both that Jeremiah 18 *is* a joke, i.e. that it is a funny story, and also that the story itself is *about* a joke. But first, some remarks about my presuppositions.

I am not of course arguing that Jeremiah 18 is or was *intended* as a joke, since this thesis is unprovable (and unfalsifiable). Texts do not *have* humour any more than they *have* meaning. For all that the critic may try to establish that a text is funny or even that its author was trying to be funny, the *sine qua non* of such arguments is that the reader finds humour—Freud: 'Wit is made, while the comical is found'.[1]

Indeed, the very *lack* of intention may well be the cause of much of the humour. Many texts of the Bible have come about as the result of a long process of incrementation, with the final product being the result of no single creative mind, and such collaboration can often effect a comical result. There is a well-known (if puerile) party game in which halves of sentences are mixed up and assigned to two teams of players, who then match to random halves. The result is rarely hilarious, but often comic enough. It is especially comic when the mismatched halves appear to approach some kind of sense. A biblical story made up of many fractions which have been combined in a process which never had cohesion as its goal will often provide a very similar effect. Complete lack of sense is rarely funny, but near-cohesion frequently is. Another common definition of humour identifies it with the grotesque—

1 *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* (New York and London, 1916), p. 289.

something that parodies or mimics reality or sense but fails in one or two conspicuous ways. Hegel's definition of comedy as a 'breakdown of art'[1] provides another way of analysing the sort of humour which narratives such as Jeremiah 18 can convey.

But wherein exactly lies humour in this biblical chapter? Two of the most common occasions of humour are the puncturing of dignity and pretension: the failure of an extravagant posture to achieve its intended response, and the spectacle of a would-be perpetrator of a deed becoming its victim. Both circumstances belong to the story told in Jeremiah 18. There are numerous other ways in which this story may yield humour: it perpetrates a 'sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing';[2] it also presents the unfortunate plight of a 'fall guy', a feature of humour so frequent that it has led to theories of humour which define it as an expression of relief that one is not the victim and fear of being identified with the victim. Irony, too, which has often been taken as the essence of humour,[3] is found here in the account of a prophet prophesying a divine plot and becoming the victim of a human one. Or in the deity who eloquently threatens action but in the event does nothing.

Thus, numerous features which are widely regarded as actually or potentially humorous exist in Jeremiah 18. Whether they induce humour in the reader depends, of course, on whether she or he is disposed to laugh, and in the case of the book of Jeremiah such disposition may not be presumed. This initial obstacle, however, is compensated for by the fact that once a text *has* been seen as funny, it is difficult if not impossible to restore it (if that is the word) to non-humour. However, it is not possible, in the last analysis, to argue, or to persuade, a reader that a story is humorous. Jokes can be killed by explanation as much as by over-repetition. What technique, then, is appropriate for the present essay? How to explain that a story is a joke? It is a truism that the success of a joke depends not on what is told, but the way it is told. This

1 Quoted in E.F. Carritt, *The Theory of Beauty* (London, 1949), p. 333.

2 Quoted in Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (London, 1937), p. 26.

3 E.g. by H. Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris, 1947) (see especially pp. 129f.).

cliché, which implies that meaning depends on the telling, not the told, also explains the rationale of the ancient (and modern) genre of 'rewritten (or retold) Bible'.[1] Accordingly, I shall exegete Jeremiah 18 in the manner of a modern Targum, without haggadic expansion, but with what I may call 'stream-of-reader-consciousness'.

*Before the story starts*

The reader of the book of Jeremiah who has faithfully worked through the first seventeen chapters has met three characters: YHWH, the prophet, and the audience. But the audience subsists only as an implication, for although its attitudes and words are referred to, it is nowhere given a voice of its own. Its members are dumb objects of criticism and exhortation in the monologues of the other two characters. Moreover, these monologues, or conversations (as few commentators fail to tell us), have emphasized the uniquely close personal relationship between this prophet and his deity, already demonstrated at the beginning of the book (1.4-10). YHWH is, uniquely with Jeremiah, his appointer and comforter—his only interlocutor in these first seventeen chapters.

Furthermore, the reader has read little but conversation. Action has been very scarce: Jeremiah has been told to stand in the temple gate (7.2) and the Benjamin (?) gate (17.19), but only in order to deliver a speech from a particular vantage point. The elaborate business with the loincloth in ch. 13 (which has a humour of its own, but that is another matter) counts as the only real action so far.

By chapter 18, then, the reader has quite clear expectations, doggedly imposed by the previous chapters. This being so, the reader is in for something unexpected, and in the unexpected lies the risk of humour.

*The story opens*

The story begins with a call to action, it is true, but this action is intended only to provide the opportunity for more divine

1 For the term, and a description of the genre, see D. Harrington in *Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia and Atlanta, 1986).

words. Indeed, this chapter opens like the previous five, and does not immediately rouse the reader to expect anything more than another sequence of divine speeches. At the potter's Jeremiah sees the potter making vessels, one (or maybe several) of which is spoiled and then reworked into another pot. Unlike Jeremiah's almond rod (1.11-12) or Amos' basket of fruit (Amos 8.1-2), this is not an opaque image applied only through what hits Western ears as painful word play, but a rather good image.

An image probably too good not to be left alone, an image sinister in its lack of specificity, a highly veiled threat, warning, reminder, or whatever. Comment on this eloquent image is hardly needed. But the deity of the book of Jeremiah is nothing if not loquacious, and will perforce give his commentary. The commentary has some amusing aspects, because it goes on for too long and in the process so confuses the meaning that the impact of the original image is deadened. First: '"O house of Israel, can I not do to you as this potter has done?", says YHWH'. This very obvious spelling out reeks of pedantry, adding nothing of substance but subtracting something of effect. 'Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel' adds pedantry to pedantry, although it still avoids ruining the metaphoric power of the potter's doings by refraining from specifying any intended course of action. Perhaps a case can be made for 'ramming the point home'? Especially if after seventeen chapters one remains unclear as to the general idea of the book. But if so, the impact of the image is now entirely blunted by a further explanation (vv. 7-10) which develops, without any concession to verbal economy, an explanation of the meaning of the potter's action which, moreover, turns out to contradict the previous one! The remoulding of the clay is now not a symbol of complete divine power over Israel, but of the ability of YHWH to *change his mind* concerning *any nation*. If this were a speech in real life, ponders the reader, the audience would by now be scratching their heads, wondering where the speaker is going, and what it is he really wants to be understood.

But in case they think they are still following the gist of this explication, YHWH concludes with yet another paragraph, an explanation of the potter's action unrelated to the one(s?) he

has just finished giving. And he wants to change the audience. He has words now for 'the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem', to tell them that he is 'devising evil' against them. The speech ends with a direct call to return from their evil ways, and amend their deeds.

On any analysis, the speech is hardly a model of rhetoric, let alone sense. The final word, to change course or else, is clear enough, but this point (if it is the point) seems to have been reached by an excessively circuitous route. The initial parable of the potter has been betrayed in two ways. The power of the image has been sapped by the subsequent (and conflicting) prosaic interpretations, and the rhetorical scale has descended from parable to outright threat. The speech doesn't work rhetorically (any more than it will work effectually). For all his practice, YHWH is no orator.

*The story twists*

But perhaps audiences do not attend carefully to the structure or the rhetoric of divine speeches. Perhaps the blunt fact that the deity speaks is enough. YHWH has at least managed to convey two things: first, he is the potter and the audience (whether Israel, any nation, or the Judahites) are pots; second, they had better watch out, since YHWH is plotting a scheme against them. What, then, will be the response? As I suggested earlier, the reader probably does not expect *any* reaction. The audience in the book of Jeremiah has never reacted before. Yet now it does. The reaction is in two parts: at first (v. 12), they say '*nôʾāš!* we will follow our own plans' (using the same word as YHWH, *ḥšb*). Whether this is reported directly or in the words of Jeremiah is not clear. But even if it is the latter, the attitude of the people is not a general disposition but a specific response to the preceding speech. It refutes both of the closing remarks of that speech in refusing to change course and insisting on following their own 'plots' (*maḥšābāh*) in both vv. 11 and 12. The reaction is one of defiance; they are not cowed by YHWH's pots or his words. Let us also note the rhetorical effect of the short, blunt and direct statement, which contrasts with the long-winded expressions of the divine speeches which both precede and follow. In the book of Jeremiah—up to this point entirely—the manner of speaking

and content are the only means of characterization. How, then, are the people characterized through their speech? Determined, knowing precisely what they want to, and will, do. Blunt, to the point. How is the deity characterized through *his* words? Prolix and ineffective. It is not difficult to find some humour in the divine verbal assault stopped in its tracks by this simple rebuttal.

Some commentators have understood the meaning of the people's statement differently, often depending on their understanding of the first word, *nô'āš*.[1] In Jer. 2.25 this word is used in an identical situation, prefacing a refusal to change ways. In 1 Sam. 27.1 it means 'give up [hope]', and in Isa. 57.10 those wearied by a long journey do not say *nô'āš*, but find new strength. As an interjection it apparently indicates lack of hope or of avail. But on whose part? A pious commentator will see in this a recognition by the people that they cannot, much as they would like, change their way: that, as it were weighed down by original sin, their will to do good is mortally stricken. Their plight is hopeless. But that is hardly the most coherent reading here, whether or not it is in Jer. 2.25. The people are not defending or apologising. They are defying, and in the light of their next step, which is to plot against the prophet, their *nô'āš* most plausibly paraphrases as 'give up, you are wasting your time'. All we cannot be sure of is whether this remark is addressed to YHWH or Jeremiah. It hardly matters, for in this story both YHWH and the people address each other only through the prophet anyway.

If this is the correct way to read *nô'āš*, then what follows makes very good sense. YHWH (or Jeremiah) does not give up, but continues to speak, in a tone of outrage and with a further threat. The speech employs rhetoric, of a familiar kind, the kind in which other nations or the natural world are called to witness, in which the speaker strains his ingenuity to find a new metaphor for his theme (the essence, for example, of so-called 'pre-Islamic poetry'). All the nations, and Lebanese snow, respectively, are invoked in this case. Everyone is horrified at what Israel is doing, but like the east wind Israel will be

[1] See W. McKane, *Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 426f. for some examples.

scattered (vv. 13-17). From these words it appears that YHWH is no longer offering the people any chance to change their ways: he accepts their decision as final (for this chapter at least: he will resume the attempt later), and states the consequences.

But while YHWH utters his last word here, it is not the last word of the story. The people decide (v. 18) to plot against Jeremiah. In the reuse of the root *ḥšb* the threads of their earlier statement (v. 12) are picked up. Their 'plots'—or one, at least—are going to be put into practice. So what is the plot and what is the reason for it?

The plot appears to involve only a verbal battle. Jeremiah's speeches, declare the people, contribute nothing. Their words are from the priests, wisemen, and prophets. Jeremiah is accordingly to be smitten *ballāšôn*. 'With the tongue' is how this is usually translated. But how is *that* done? By verbal abuse? Possibly; but if so, that threat is not carried out here. An alternative is 'in the tongue'—'let us hurt him in his tongue'—metaphorically of course. In other words, as the text continues, 'Let us not heed any of his words'. The way to counter Jeremiah's (YHWH's) refusal to 'give up' (v. 12) is to ignore him (them). A very simple strategy, again characterizing the people as a group which can act as well as speak in a direct and no-nonsense manner. And just as the simple strategy of saying 'no' to YHWH nullified the rhetoric, so this equally simple strategy nullifies Jeremiah's whole activity—perhaps his whole career. If the people have said 'no', yet Jeremiah (YHWH) will not stop speaking, then they will simply stop listening. The listener will turn off the volume; the pot will not be amenable to the potter. Insofar as the issue is all about words, YHWH is clearly not able to reshape his pot. But of course the issue is supposed to be about action. YHWH's action remains a threat. In the meantime, the people are taking action, and in the process giving the potter parable an interpretation of their own. This is not a fanciful way of speaking, either: YHWH used the language of 'scheming' or 'plotting' to interpret the potter's way with the pot; and in using the same word with regard to Jeremiah, the people are clearly acting out the parable with Jeremiah as their pot.

To end the story at this point would be possible, but the shape

of the story would be truncated. Seen as a joke, there is one element left. The butt of the joke, namely the prophet, has to add his signature, has to accept that he has been made a fool of. If Jeremiah does not accept what has happened, the humorous effect will not be complete. And Jeremiah obliges handsomely with a delightfully ironic contribution (vv. 19-23). Finding he cannot any longer address the people, who will no longer play his game, finding himself the object of *their* plot when it was *he* who had supposedly announced YHWH's plot against *them*, he turns to YHWH, yet again. Echoing the words of the people ('not... heed'), he asks YHWH to 'heed' him (v. 19)—a verbal play which draws attention to the reversal of the situation which has come about. Again using extravagant language, containing well-known stereotypes from the lament poem, he claims that his enemies have 'dug a pit for my life' (v. 20). Now, it is possible to read this claim literally and assume that the people have made it easier not to hear him by dropping him in a pit.[1] But we have only the prophet's word for this. Perhaps he is exaggerating slightly. He is not accustomed to speaking prosaically.

Carroll has already commented as follows on this lament:

> The speaker's response to such persecution is to appeal to Yahweh to punish his enemies in the most appalling ways. Let the men among them die in battle or from the plague, let their women become childless and widowed, and let their children starve to death or be slain by invaders.... The calling down of vengeance on others and the pleading for mercy for oneself would then make Jeremiah a premature 'Holy Willie' (the Calvinist hero of Robert Burns' poem 'Holy Willie's Prayer': 'Lord, in the day of vengeance try him... But, Lord, remember me and mine...')[2]

On the first occasion when Jeremiah is directly confronted by

[1] As I argued in 'Potter, Prophet and People: Jeremiah 18 as Parable', *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 (1987), pp. 23-33, noting the wordplay between *šûḥâ* in v. 20 and *nišḥat* in v. 4. A number of scholars, from Rashi via Rudolph to Holladay, have argued that Jeremiah's descriptions of his torments are to be taken literally. For a discussion of this debate see McKane, p. 436f.

[2] R.P. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (OTL; London & Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 381, 383.

those he has been criticizing, he turns to YHWH in bitter hatred. He is no longer uttering doom as a spokesperson for the deity, but from his own heart he urges terrible vengeance. For what? For an affront to his own personal dignity, not for refusal to listen to the divine message. The guise of the prophet is now set aside, and the person, not the mouthpiece, speaks.

The final scenario is, then, a pretty neat inversion of the opening, and indeed of the pattern established until now throughout the book. That pattern saw the deity speaking, and the prophet passing on, words of threat to a mute audience. Now we find the people having uttered their one statement, and the prophet uttering words of doom towards a mute deity. There has also been a transfer of effective action. The deity who proclaimed himself to be the omnipotent potter is now the object of a prophetic plea to behave like one! For until the threatened action is forthcoming, it is indeed the people who have exercised the power and the poor prophet who is the pot.

*Summary*

If the story as now told has appeared humorous (however black the humour), we can now identify three aspects which have delivered the humour: *role*, *relationship* and *rhetoric*. The roles of the deity and the audience (the people) have been reversed, the prophet remaining in the middle, but now on the receiving end. The relationships are also changed. The people finally find their voice and express an attitude to the prophet, and to YHWH. The relationship between the prophet and YHWH also changes, as the prophet for the first time finds himself personally in need of some help and some vindication. Jeremiah himself now wants an end to words and some action—not least to satisfy his own feeling of impotence and wish for vengeance. Is it not irony that Jeremiah wants dire punishment not for their offensive actions against YHWH but because they have decided to ignore *him*? Is this not the last straw for a man of words! And in the use of words we have also seen a rather humorous contrast: the overblown language of the deity is rebuffed by a brief—and effective—single statement, which entirely overturns the situation set up by YHWH and Jeremiah. But over and above all these stands the image of the potter and the pot. The episode is an acting

out of that parable, in which the divine casting of parts is disputed and effectively changed. YHWH wants to play the potter, but in *this* story it is the people who play the potter, and Jeremiah who becomes the pot.

In what sense, though, can one claim that this story *tells* a joke? What is the joke? Who plays it? Here there is some choice. The people certainly play a joke on Jeremiah. They simply refuse to listen and thus throw him into a frenzy of furious lament at his impotence. They play a joke on the deity too. His little parable about the potter has been hijacked. And why is there no divine reassurance to Jeremiah? Has YHWH played a joke on his own prophet?

Perhaps the real joke is the one played upon the characters in the book, by the numerous authors who have contributed to the making of a story whose impact they did not either foresee or dictate. Many of the things explained as humorous in this chapter could be, and conventionally are, accounted for by the history of the text. The inconsistencies and ironies which appear in the MT of Jeremiah are unintended and, thus, point towards editorial activity. This perspective need not be challenged. But there is also a right to read the text as a narrative and as a whole. The assumption of such reading of biblical texts (and it has been made explicit by B.S. Childs) is that the final form, determined by a 'community of faith', has the utmost theological significance.[1] But what if the final form is the result of a series of discrete but independently motivated moves which have produced a somewhat incoherent and inelegant text? This is the conclusion of W. McKane about the formation of the book of Jeremiah, and has been very thoroughly argued. What might the determination of the 'final form', or the literary critic's decision to read the narrative as it actually is, deliver? What guarantee is there, for instance, that the result will be theologically positive, congenial to the 'community of faith'? What if the critic finds the story to be a joke? It is well documented that in the history of biblical interpretation humour has been rarely and grudgingly conceded to the text, where it has not been totally rejected from the outset.

[1] B.S. Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

In Jeremiah 18, if the reading given here is followed, is there not a magnificant irony in the conclusion—that a multitude of piously-motivated contributions to the text, most having as their intention the greater glorification or justification of YHWH or his prophet, have in fact succeeded in producing a humorous story in which the people turn the tables on YHWH and Jeremiah?

The problem of a humorous reading of texts exists, perhaps, only for those whose goal is something religiously or theologically valuable; and it would arise with very few other ancient literatures. If the reader is not a religious believer, she or he may still find that the texts, read as literary wholes, deliver theological statements. Or perhaps not. And if humour is found, there is no refuge for the modern literary critic in the claim that it is not intentional, for the intentional theory of meaning no longer operates as such in literary criticism.

If, however, the religious reader wants to salvage an appropriate meaning, she or he can always retort that YHWH gets the last laugh, as he does in ch. 52 when his threats come good. For ch. 18 can, after all, be seen as a mere episode in a longer story. But what, then, to make of the words, the interminable words before ch. 52? Is not the book of Jeremiah mostly about words? Is not this what Jeremiah and Hananiah battle about, despite their (again very humorous) antics with yokes? And even if the verdict of ch. 52 is definitive, and if the last laugh is the important one, it is not the *only* one. In the case of ch. 18, it is people who win the battle, even if they are destined to lose the war. In truth, however, it is as always the reader who is the real winner, and—so long as the reader has the last word on what stories mean—the reader will always be able to play the potter.

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10

# LAUGHING AT THE BIBLE: JONAH AS PARODY*

John R. Miles

Satire is the exposure by comedy of behaviour which is standardized and, to that extent, foolish. Parody is that breed of satire in which the standardized behaviour to be exposed is literary. The Chicago satirical revue *Second City* presents a skit based on the typical American P.T.A. debate on the advisability of sex education and a second skit based on Tschaikowsky's ballet *Swan Lake*. The first skit, though satirical, is not a parody, since the P.T.A. debate, though familiar to most Americans, is familiar from American life not from American letters. The second skit, dealing with *Swan Lake*, is a parody, since the conventions of the dying swan in the *ballet russe* are known not from Russian life but from Russian art. Parody then is literary humour which takes a familiar text or, more often, a familiar style as its vehicle.

In the last analysis, of course, parody does have a target in real life. The Second City parody of *Swan Lake* is only approximately a joke on the ballet. Ultimately, it is a joke on people who take the ballet too seriously. However, it is no trivial matter that the skit does not mock ballet viewers directly but only indirectly through the object of their enthusiasm. Analysts of humour maintain that every joke is a joke on him who laughs. But men do not laugh at themselves easily. They must be taken in traps: simpler traps for the simple, subtler traps for the subtle. The greater indirection of parody then bespeaks a serious audience confronted on its home ground.

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It is difficult to gauge the satirical sense of another culture because commonsense—the standard against which the exaggerations of satire must be measured—has its roots in those humble habits which perish most completely when a culture passes. The comic relief provided by the soldiers in Shakespeare's histories relieves the modern playgoer but little since he has little notion of what the Elizabethan soldier was like when he was not trying to be funny. The common literary sense of another culture is, however, another matter. If enough of the literature is available for the critic to determine what the literature considered normal, then he can hope to recognize a comic exaggeration when he sees one. I have never met an English butler; but because the type is so familiar to me from British mystery novels and war movies, I know the rule to which P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves is the hilarious exception.

In 1970, as part of the H.G. May *Festschrift*, Millar Burrows carefully reviewed earlier critical suggestions as to the literary category of the book of Jonah from Karl Budde's in 1892 that Jonah was part of a lost midrash on Kings down to Elias Bickermann's in 1965 that the work was a parable illustrating the power of God over even his own irrevocable decisions.[1] Burrows himself read Jonah as a satire, and in this his work was only a marginal advance on a similar analysis by E.M. Good in 1965.[2] However, in specifying the *Sitz im Leben* of the Jonah satire, Burrows made an original suggestion. Whereas Good had been content to situate the work generally 'as a protest... in the somewhat self-righteous reforming zeal'[3] of the fifth century BC, Burrows inserted it in a more specific polemic context; namely, into a conflict between those Jews who remained in Palestine after the fall of Jerusalem and the exiles returning from Babylon.

I should like to carry Good's and Burrows' work a step fur-

1 Millar Burrows, 'The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah', *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament, Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William J. Reed (New York: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 80-107.

2 E.M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), pp. 39-55.

3 *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

ther both as to *Gattung* and as to *Sitz im Leben*. My first suggestion is that the proximate target of the humour of the Book of Jonah is not Jewish life but Hebrew letters; in other words, that in the sense just explained, the work is not a satire but a parody. My second and consequent suggestion, to be presented eventually in a second article, is that its ultimate target is not the returning Babylonian exiles as a group but only those among them who were serious in a new and, to some, unwelcome way about the religious writings of Israel.

It is crucial to the functioning of parody that the literary style or styles to be laughed at be so standardized as to be immediately recognizable. The book of Jonah meets this requirement admirably, for the narrative of the prophetic career is surely the clearest stereotype in Scripture. The characters in the narrative—the prophet himself, the summoning deity, the wicked king in his wicked city—are stock characters. The scenes—the prophet's initial reluctance, his prediction of destruction, his grief at failure—are stock scenes. Even the language is formulaic. Of course, the presence of these features in Jonah does not prove that the book is a parody, but it does constitute the condition *sine qua non*: if characters, scenes, and language were less stereotyped, parody would be impossible.

We will trace elements of parody in the book through five distinct prophetic scenes. The first of these is the call to prophecy, a familiar scene in which the most familiar note is the prophet's humble reluctance to accept the Lord's call. 'Moses said to Yahweh, "But my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither before nor since you spoke to me. I am a slow and clumsy speaker!"' (Exod. 4.10). Gideon 'said to him, "But my Lord, I am the least important of my family"' (Judg. 6.15). Isaiah said, "Oh no! I am lost! A man of unclean lips living with people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"' (Isa. 6.5). Jeremiah said, '"Ah, Lord Yahweh! You can tell I do not know how to speak: I am only a boy"' (Jer. 1.6). If these passages are familiar, indeed so familiar as hardly to require repeating, then my thesis stands: parody cannot begin from any subject matter but that which requires no introduction.

At the start of the book, the call to prophecy comes to Jonah

the son of Amittai in the words 'Up! Go to the great city of Nineveh, and tell it that its wickedness has become known to me'. The selection of Jonah as the prophet's name and Nineveh as the wicked city where he will preach may mean no more than the selection of Tex and Dodge City would mean in a parody of the western movie. That is to say, they may have no special significance except as cues to the literary *genre.* Nineveh may not have been (*pace* Good) 'the ancient world's most impressive evil'.[1] For a fifth-century Jew, that distinction would more spontaneously have been granted to Babylon. However, for literary purposes, Nineveh was more available than Babylon, the site of such recent suffering. In 1973, one would not choose Wounded Knee for a parody of the western nor Cambodia for a parody of 'God Is My Co-pilot'. Nor, finally, need we follow a long line of critics, beginning quaintly with St Columban, who have made much of the name Jonah, 'the dove', as a symbol of innocence.[2] Symbolism of this sort is likely only if the work is an allegory, and no allegorical interpretation has ever been able to account for more than pieces of the work.

Jonah expresses his reluctance to go east to Nineveh by sailing west to Tarshish. It makes little difference in this context that Tarshish is not Tartessos on the west coast of Spain. It may not even be as far away as Sardinia. The point is that if one sets sail from Joppa, as Jonah does, he is sailing west, and Nineveh lies in the east. Jonah is surely one of the most reluctant heroes in literature, but the parodic quality of his flight from Yahweh depends even more on his phlegmatic silence. The prophetic scenario calls for reluctance, to be sure, on the part of the prophet, but it also calls on him to express this reluctance in anguished eloquence. Jonah's silence has the parodic impact of silence after the question, 'Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?' For all that the text tells us, Jonah may think himself perfectly worthy of his prophetic call. He is simply perfectly determined not to accept

1 *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

2 R.H. Bowers, *The Legend of Jonah, Fifty Odd Interpretations of Jonah from the New Testament through the English Renaissance* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 41-42.

it. One must keep in mind that Jonah *pays* for his passage to Tarshish. By presenting a prophet who actually buys out of his vocation, the author drains the last trace of numinosity from this most numinous genre in the Bible. Moses could hardly have been more mundane than Jonah had he thrown water on the burning bush or pawned the miraculous staff to escape confrontation with Pharaoh.

Faced with the reluctance of his chosen spokesman, the Lord follows the script and produces a demonstrative storm at sea. Jonah's reaction to the sign worked for his benefit is to fall asleep. Once again, it is a silence that speaks, for typically the prophet, when confronted with such a sign, expresses his awe before the power and holiness of the Lord. When fire consumes Gideon's offering, he cries, 'Alas Lord God! Now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face'. When the throw of the sailors' dice makes further resistance futile, Jonah's resignation—his 'Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down for you'—has the same Chaplinesque *sangfroid* as his purchase of passage in Joppa. The quality of numinous abandon—Isaiah's 'Here I am Lord. Send me'—is utterly missing. Jonah's literal abandonment is to Isaiah's spiritual abandonment as Jonah's literal sleep is to Ezekiel's spiritual trance.

By providing a crew of gentile sailors, the author sets the scene for an important bit of parodic byplay; namely, for the behaviour of the sailors during the storm. When the storm breaks, the sailors begin praying *ʾîš ʾel-ʾĕlōhāyw*: 'each one to his own god'. The Jerusalem Bible footnote here illustrates what I believe to be the mistake of reading this line seriously. The JB editor writes: 'The sailors are from different countries: each has his own god but believes in the power of the other gods as well'.[1] One is reminded of the minister who used to announce solemnly near the end of each service: 'And now, during these remaining moments, let us each pray silently to his private God'. Even conceding that crews can be

[1] *The Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Alexander Jones (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1966), *ad loc*. One must keep in mind that the distributive is not grammatically necessary: *lĕʾlōhêhem* would have been perfectly possible.

international in character, chances are slight that there would be quite as many gods as sailors on board. Rather, as the wind rises and the crew sinks into polytheistic confusion, we should discern the mockery of a biblical mockery; namely, the mockery of the mockery of idolatry in Second Isaiah (cf. 44.15-17). The admiral's request that Jonah wake and add his prayer to the cacophany of different prayers to different gods only reinforces the *buffo* quality of the scene.

The third biblical genre to be parodied in Jonah is the psalm of thanksgiving for rescue from the pit. Such, of course, is Jonah's famous prayer from the belly of the fish. I agree with the source criticism which maintains that this prayer was composed separately and inserted into the Jonah narrative by an editor. Its freedom from Aramaisms suggests this as does the fact that it is a psalm of thanksgiving for rescue and thus is inappropriate before the rescue. However, the question must still be asked: why was it inserted at all?

The solution of this puzzle in redaction criticism may lie with the satirical motive of the author. Water- and sea-imagery, including especially the representation of Sea or She'ol as the chaos-dragon, is as prominent in the psalter as the call to prophecy is prominent in the prophetic books. Indeed Psalm 130, 'From the depths, I cry to you, O Lord', is one of the finest in the collection. However, the power of sea-imagery is only effective if it is in fact imagery and not direct description. If it is not to be merely bombastic, it cannot refer to real oceans and real water. In Jonah 2, it does.

In our culture, cancer is a common metaphor for hidden danger. A presidential address on Communism or on crime in the streets might well speak of 'a dread cancer gnawing at the vitals of America'. But for a presidential address on cancer itself, 'dread cancer gnawing at the vitals' would not be available *as an image*. Some other image would be used—probably warfare or football. In logic, comparison must remain in the same genus. In poetry, it must not.

The author of the book of Jonah deliberately disregards this poetic canon for comic effect. Jonah's situation is not comparable to the situation of a man swallowed by a great monster. This *is* Jonah's situation. His troubles are not like waves washing over his head. His troubles *are* waves washing over

his head. This, I submit, is the comic effect of the placement of the psalm in ch. 2 in the book of Jonah. The psalms are satirized through a comically exaggerated use of their imagery just as Jonah's reluctance satirized the classical reluctance of the prophets, and just as the sailors' polytheistic *ne plus ultra* made gentile religion not just foolish but also funny.

To digress for a moment on the language of Jonah's prayer, we may note that water and pit imagery is found in four of its seven verses. The most concentrated water and pit imagery of the psalter (Ps. 69 and 84) is not nearly as concentrated as that.

In 2.3, we read *beṭen šĕʾôl*, 'the belly of sheol'.

In 2.4, *mĕṣûlāh*, 'the deep' (used in Job 41.23 of the crocodile); *lĕbab yammîm*, 'the heart of the seas'; *nāhār*, 'the River'; and *mišbārîm wĕgallîm*, 'breakers and waves'.

In 2.6, *mayim*, 'waters'; *tĕhôm*, 'the abyss'; and *sûf ḥābûš lerōʾšî*, 'seaweed wrapped around my head'.

In 2.7, *qiṣbê hārîm*, 'the foundations of the mountains'; and *bĕriḥê hāʾāreṣ*, 'the bars of Earth'.

We may say then, to hazard a pun, that this short psalm releases a veritable flood of water imagery. The references in v. 7 to the base of the mountains and the bars of Earth are no less watery than the others, for the foundation of the cosmic mountain is the cosmic river which also bars or limits the earth. The detail of v. 7, 'seaweed wrapped round my head', extravagant in any setting, has in its present setting the special extravagance of slapstick.[1]

Yahweh's laconic response to this surfeit of language—'Yahweh spoke to the fish, which then vomited Jonah up on the shore'—should be understood against the general tendency of ancient humour to laugh at rather than laugh with. This is a generalization, but, I think, a safe one. Almost all the laughter reported in the Bible is laughter of scorn, and consequently—as in classical Greek humour—there is relatively wide tolerance for jokes about excretion, belching, vomiting, and other indelicacies. Aristophanes' *The Frogs* opens with a

[1] Cf. J. Wellhausen, *Die kleinen Propheten* (Berlin: Reiner, 1898), p. 221, laconically: 'Die Ausmalung des Bildes... ist etwas weit getrieben'.

little exchange including references to both excretion and vomiting; and in the book of Judges, Ehud's attack on Eglon takes place as the latter is relieving himself.[1] With this quality of ancient humour in mind, we may wish to see Jonah's salvation by regurgitation as a conscious attempt to make him the more ridiculous.

In ch. 3, we enter upon the parody of a fourth biblical set-piece; namely, the rejection of the prophet by the king. Background scenes here are such standard ones as Moses before Pharaoh, Micaiah before Ahab, Isaiah before Manasseh, and Jeremiah before Zedekiah. In all these incidents, the Word of the prophet is lengthy and impassioned, he himself is completely ignored or angrily rejected, and the fated punishment comes to pass. Chapter 3 of the book of Jonah is a reversal: the prophet is neither eloquent nor impassioned but jejune to the point of banality. He speaks only one sentence, addressing it to no one in particular, not mentioning the crimes of the king or of the city, not describing the imminent punishment, and in fact not issuing an imperative of any sort.[2]

Strange to tell, this tiny stimulus brings a truly convulsive response from the king. He rises from his throne immediately on receiving a second-hand report of Jonah's preaching, strips off his robes, dons sackcloth, sits in the dust, and from his position in the dust, imposes an indefinite fast from all food and

1 Cf. Samuel Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 20ff. In his comments on Jonah, however, Sandmel makes no reference to Good or Burrows.

2 Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 31-32, points out that Jonah does not announce an alternative situation—*fata conditionalia*, in the Sibylline terminology—but 'immutable and unavoidable *fata denunciativa*'. In Augustine's words, 'annuntiavit Jonas non misericordiam sed vitam futuram'. Inasmuch as the *fata denunciativa* were not to come to pass, Jonah was doomed to be a false prophet; and this aspect of his quandary won much attention from pre-Reformation exegesis. A part of the message of the book, however, which is accessible to ancient and modern readers alike, is that it is man and not God who wishes irreversible condemnation. For Yahweh, there are no *fata denunciativa* in the Sibylline sense. He has power over even his own word: 'I will not execute the fierceness of my anger... for I am God and not man; the Holy One in the midst of you, and I do not come to carry off prey like a roaring lion' (Hos. 11.9).

drink on all the men and animals in the realm. Men and animals alike are to repent of their sins and dress in sackcloth.

No prophet in the history of Israel ever suggested that a penitent king fast from water or impose such a fast on his animals or, strangest of all, arrange for his animals to repent of their sins and dress in sackcloth.[1] These measures are intended to be fully as bizarre as they seem. The closing verse in ch. 4, as we shall see, argues this very strongly; and consequently I must take sharp issue with the bowdlerized New English Bible translation of 3.8: 'They are to dress in sackcloth' for 'Men and beasts are to dress in sackcloth'.[2]

Evidently, Yahweh enjoyed this spectacle. At any rate, he cancelled the scheduled destruction of Nineveh, making Jonah the most successful, if not the only successful, prophet in history. All prophets aimed at averting disaster by warning of it. Only Jonah's warning was fully heeded. Only Nineveh's destruction was averted, and it is this, Jonah's prophetic triumph, which sets the stage for the last scene which we shall consider.

This scene, occupying most of ch. 4, is a burlesque of the stock scene in which the rejected prophet pours out his sorrow to Yahweh and is comforted. The misgivings of Moses and his prayer for death (Num. 11.10-15) and Jeremiah's curse on the day of his birth (Jer. 20.7-8) are general background here, but the most direct parallel is provided by 1 Kings 19, where Elijah sits under a furze bush and despairs (1 Kgs 19.4):

| | |
|---|---|
| *qaḥ napšî* | Take my life: |
| *kî lō'-ṭôb 'ănōkî mē'ăbōtāy* | I am no better than my ancestors. |

[1] James D. Smart, *Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), vol. 6, p. 890, asserts that, according to Herodotus, the Persians give animals a part in mourning. This can only be a reference to Book I, 140, where Herodotus speaks of the Zoroastrian custom of exposing the dead to crows and dogs. Apart from the fact that mourning is not repentance, we would wish for a reference in Herodotus to livestock rather than just to animals in general. The urine of the bull was used in Zoroastrian purification rites, but this sort of repentance hardly figures in the present passage; cf. Angelo de Gubernatis, *Zoological Mythology* (New York: Macmillan, 1872), pp. 97f.

[2] *New English Bible* (Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, 1970), *ad loc.*

Jonah despairs under a castor-oil plant rather than under a furze bush, but his words are similar to Elijah's:

| | |
|---|---|
| *qāḥ-nā' 'et-napšî mimmennî* | Take away my life: |
| *kî ṭôb môtî mēḥayyāy* | I would be better off dead. |

In these words, the author of the book of Jonah apes the whole parade of prophets, psalmists, and saints, not excluding Job, who have prayed to have their lives taken from them. Their complaints came after failure and suffering, his after victory. However, the force of the parody rides not on this contrast but on Jonah's reason for his complaint. He says (4.2): 'O Lord, didn't I tell you this would happen when I was still home? This is why I headed for Tarshish: I knew that you were a tender-hearted and kind God, not that easily angered, very devoted, and prone to give in.' The line has a definite note of frustrated *Schadenfreude*. It is far from the noblest protest ever voiced in Israel. And yet when noble Jeremiah and noble Job trouble deaf heaven with their own bootless cries, they no less than Jonah are objecting, finally, to the fact that God is so intransigently godlike.[1]

[1] The opinion that the author of the book of Jonah urges internationalism by presenting Jonah as a jealous nationalist has appeared at various points in the history of interpretation, according to Bickerman, *op. cit.*, but has never altogether won the day. For Augustine, Jonah prefigured 'the carnal people of Israel, who were sad at the redemption and deliverance of the nations', but Jerome objected since Jonah was also a figure of Christ, and Christ had wept over Jerusalem. Luther revived Augustine's opinion, but the modern tendency to find a statement for internationalism in Jonah stems less from Luther and the Reformation than from the Enlightenment with its desire to find a natural religion, common to all men, and its hostility to positive/national religion as divisive of the human family.

In a similar vein, Harry Orlinsky writes, 'For one reason or another, nearly all who belong to these different groups [rabbinic interpreters, Christian apologists, liberals, idealists] would like very much to find internationalism, not nationalism, in the Bible. Certainly this is the temper of much of the world since World War II. And so if the biblical outlook is nationalistic-universal rather than internationalistic, biblical Israel is regarded as having been far behind our own times and our progressive outlook' ('Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel', *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of H.G. May*, ed. H.T. Frank and W.L. Reed [New York: Abingdon, 1970], p. 235). Orlinsky

Earlier and in passing I compared Jonah to Charlie Chaplin. A more apposite comparison might be to Sholom

assembles some of the 'literally, hundreds, not just tens and scores, of passages in the Hebrew Bible... that assert positively or at least reflect the relationship of God and Israel as being purely nationalistic' (*op. cit.*, p. 225) and questions the sincerity of contemporary internationalism. E. Bickerman's and Orlinsky's comments are a useful prophylactic against the sort of 'eisegesis' that Orlinsky, in particular, so often inveighs against. One might wish that Jacques Ellul, to name only one recent commentator over-concerned with the relevance of religion, would take such cautions to heart. But it is surely one thing to find internationalism in the Hebrew Bible *tout simple* and another to find it—or an argument about it—in a portion of the Bible written just after Juda had disappeared and then reappeared as world Jewry. That the wide currency of such an interpretation dates to the Enlightenment and wins new popularity after the Second World War does not make it wrong. May it not happen that the social context of the interpreter, as it approximates the context of that which he interprets, may help him rather than hinder him in accurate interpretation?

I fear that certain ethnic and religious tensions have been only too apparent in the interpretation of Jonah. Christians, jealous of the privilege of Israel which their own scriptures (cf. Rom. 9–11) oblige them to acknowledge, eulogize those few Jewish writings which minimize the privilege and, in so doing, disparage the enormous remainder which celebrates it. Jews, resentful of a charge which is embarrassing at least in contemporary context, respond by relativizing the context. Fascinating in its way, this *pas de deux* is also painful to witness, doubly so because the real issue is never broached. G.H. Cohn's *Das Buch Jona im Lichte der biblischen Erzählkunst* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 12; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960) was widely reviewed in Christian journals, none of which mentioned Cohn's rejection of the nearly universal Christian interpretation as wholly without foundation in either style or content (see Cohn, p. 99, note 4).

My interpretation of the book of Jonah does indeed view it as a plea for greater internationalism. An attack, however comic, on the national literature is an attack on national pride. However, if the author mocks Jews for their pride, he also mocks the gentiles for their stupidity.

The *gaucherie* of the sailors and the Ninevites in their attempt to do God's will is forgiven—as is Jonah's pride—but not concealed. It is hard to imagine that the Assyrian converts in Palestine had *not* provided examples of well-meaning excess, for so have converts done in every age (cf. the attempt at Elephantine to provide a spouse for 'Yahu'). Dismayed, the northern Israelite and Judaean subjects may also have been touched. No one comes through this brief narrative quite unscathed, and yet the book is without a villain: one more argument that it is comedy.

Aleichem's Tevye. Tevye concedes that God's ways are not his, but unlike Job's, his concession is ironic, sardonic, offhand, and querulous. In the story *Schprintze*, Tevye prays: 'O, thou Father of the Universe, our dear God in Heaven. We have lived through a Kishinev and a Constitution, through pogroms and disasters of every kind. I am only surprised, if you will forgive me for saying this, that you haven't changed by a hair. May the Evil Eye spare you.'[1] Neither Tevye nor Jonah is a villain, but they are not heroes either, and the insinuation is that the orchestrated sorrows of Job and Jeremiah are no different from theirs.

The prophet Elijah, to return to the narrative, was comforted by God with food and drink and finally with a new revelation at Mt Horeb. Jonah is comforted only by the castor-oil plant which the Lord raises up over his hut; and when the Lord sends a worm to kill the plant ('The Lord God giveth, the Lord God taketh way'), Jonah sinks again into despair, his words, *ṭôb môtî mēḥayyāy*, striking a note of bathos that is surely intended. In view of the increasing importance of Elijah in the post-exilic period, it is likely that Elijah is a prophet the parodist has particularly in mind.

We said earlier that ancient humour was typically a laughing at rather than a laughing with. The closing two verses of the book of Jonah are an exception to that rule. When God says to Jonah, 'You grieve over a plant you did not work for or care for. It sprouted in a night and died in a night. And should I not grieve over the great city of Nineveh, where there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, plus the many animals?', he of course rebukes Jonah with a rhetorical *qal waḥōmer*. And yet in all of Jewish literature, is there another *qal* so *qal* as this castor oil tree? Jonah is not, after all, a moral reprobate. As all comedy, the book of Jonah has no real villain. By the end of the fourth chapter, Jonah has done his job, Nineveh is saved, and a happy ending is held up only by the prophet's childish pout. God's reaction to this is not anger but coaxing. We may almost say that Yahweh 'kids' Jonah: that is,

[1] Sholom Aleichem, *The Tevye Stories*, translated by Julius and Frances Butwin (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), p. 76.

he treats him like a 'kid', like the child that he has chosen to be—but gently, not contemptuously. The last line in particular, with its closing words *ûbĕhēmāh rabbāh*, 'plus the many animals', must surely prompt a smile; for if Jonah is foolish in his resentment, the Ninevites, dressing their animals in sackcloth and forcing them to fast, have been foolish in their repentance. God concedes this much to Jonah. But the hundred and twenty thousand who do not know their right hand from their left are not so many actual children. Rather they are one hundred and twenty thousand Assyrian adults who, like the king of Nineveh, had not quite reached the age of religious reason. And with this comment, the book of Jonah and our consideration of its parodic elements are completed.

11

# THE COMEDY OF JOB*

William Whedbee

The book of Job, like all literary masterpieces, has the power to evoke radically diverse interpretations; its ambiguity continues both to challenge and frustrate interpreters in their ongoing quest for solutions to its enigmas. So it is presumptuous to say that any one key unlocks all of its doors, and diffidence is surely demanded.

No part of the interpretation of Job is more clouded with uncertainty than the identification of genre. The parallels offered do not quite fit, and most scholars end up by concluding that Job belongs to no literary category: it simply is! To be sure, there is no dearth of suggestions: Job has variously been called a 'wisdom disputation', an 'answered lament', a '*rîb*' or 'trial', a 'theodicy', an 'epic', etc.[1] It is not necessary for my purpose to repeat the various arguments pro or con for these alternatives, or to enumerate other possibilities which have been proffered. Suffice it to say that many of these proposals are outgrowths of an exercise of one type of literary criticism—legitimate in itself—which reconstructs different stages in the book's development and applies a generic label to each stage—especially that of the alleged autograph of the original Job. I am in full agreement with Good's wise comments on the pitfalls that await the literary critic who seeks to find the autograph and then tries to interpret it as the authentic Job (1973).

* Originally published under the title 'The Comedy of Job', *Semeia* 7 (1977), and reproduced here by permission of the publishers.

1 See the standard Old Testament introductions. Unless otherwise noted I will use Pope's translation.

That the book of Job experienced several stages of growth is no doubt true, but that fact does not exempt the interpreter from the responsibility of coming to grips with the book's final form. One of the strengths of Polzin's recent structural analysis of Job is that he takes seriously the necessity and importance of interpreting Job's present form. It will likewise be my starting-point to take the book as it now stands and attempt to interpret the totality of its parts.

With these preliminary remarks in mind, I now return to the problem of the overarching genre of the book of Job. As mentioned, one of the long-standing positions is that Job is a tragedy. At least as far back as Theodore of Mopsuestia, scholars have observed affinities of Job with Greek drama.[1] The 'tragic' view of Job received its most extreme statement in H. Kallen's book in which he argues for an explicit dependence of the Joban poet on Greek tragedians—Euripides in particular—and then proceeds to rearrange and rewrite Job *à la* Euripidean tragedy. The deficiencies of Kallen's approach have been amply demonstrated, but the view of Job as tragedy persists. Its most recent champion is S. Terrien, a most distinguished critic of Job. His thesis is that Job is a 'festal tragedy' in which the poet articulates two interwoven and controlling mythical patterns: first, the theme of royal expiation that centres in the vicarious suffering of the king; second, the rhythm of the seasons with the accent on the renewal of the earth through the life-giving rains of autumn (Terrien: 507). Early in the exile (c. 575 BCE), an Israelite poet experimented with cultic forms and forged out his masterpiece 'as a paracultic drama for the celebration of the New Year Festival' (p. 509). The Joban poet used diverse genres—e.g. lament, hymn, judicial discussion, wisdom dispute, prophetic vision, onomasticon, theophany—to create a new genre, 'the festal tragedy'.

Terrien's interpretation is stimulating and suggestive. He goes far towards explaining the presence of certain 'tragic' elements long noted in Job, but he does so with full awareness of the traditional genres and motifs embedded in Job. One of my chief differences with Terrien, however, hinges on his

[1] I owe this reference to Davidson (1962).

limitation to the *poem* of Job; his is still another example of that species of literary criticism which limits the 'genuine' poetic production to a given stage and then interprets that stage in terms of genre, setting, and intention. As indicated above, I think this is a legitimate mode of criticism, but I think it is also imperative to take full measure of the whole book of Job. In contrast therefore to Terrien, it is my thesis that once the poem is set in its full and final literary context, replete with Prologue and Epilogue as well as the Elihu speeches, the most apt and compelling generic designation of the book of Job is *comedy*.[1] In my judgment, the broad, overarching category of comedy is able to illuminate best the wealth of disparate genres, formulas, and motifs which are now interwoven in the total structure of the book.

At first blush many will recoil from the suggestion that Job is comedy and will dismiss my thesis as downright crazy or a bad joke in the worst tradition of gallows humour. How can a book so filled with agony and despair, so dominated with the images of suffering and death, be considered a comedy? This type of reaction is rooted in the identification of comedy with laughter and light humour. I would only counter that literary criticism has long recognized that it is a mistake to make an easy and absolute equation between comedy and laughter.[2]

[1] When I first broached this thesis in a lecture five years ago, I was keenly aware that it represents a rather lonely position in biblical scholarship. However, while I was reading in the area of comic theory, I was delighted to come across an enticing observation by the playwright Christopher Fry that 'Job is the great reservoir of comedy'. (See his essay, 'Comedy', in Corrigan.) Needless to say, I was pleased to know that I was not completely alone in my opinion, but Fry's remark is in a general discussion of the relationship between tragedy and comedy, and he is not concerned to argue the case for Job. Just recently I discovered that another Frye—this time the well-known literary critic, Northrup Frye—also describes the book of Job as technically a comedy (1965). The two Fry(e)s have been an encouragement and a stimulus for me to continue my research into the comic dimensions of Job, and their insights have helped to deepen both my perception into comedy in general and the comedy of Job in particular. After I had completed this essay I discovered a collection of short, popular essays by J.C. McLelland in which he sets Job and other biblical narratives in the context of comedy.

[2] For convenience, see the collection of essays edited by Corrigan

Comedy can be profoundly serious; in fact, it has often served as one of the most compelling strategies for dealing with chaos and suffering, the most obvious example being so-called 'dark comedy' (Styan, Guthke). Moreover, critics have perceived at least since the time of Socrates a subtle and powerful interplay between comedy and tragedy. So my interpretation of Job as comedy does not depend on elements we might consider to be funny. Also, how does one accurately define what might be considered funny? Thanks to Freud and others we are all aware of the difficulty of defining laughter in our own context—let alone a context distant from us in time and tradition. Thus we do not exactly know what might have elicited laughter from the ancient Israelites or any of their contempo-

(especially the comprehensive essay by W. Sypher, 'The Meanings of Comedy', pp. 19ff.). D. Saliers' comments are indicative of an emerging consensus in comic theory about the subtlety and the wide, complex range of comedy: 'When we ask what constitutes the "comic" or the "comic vision"..., we come to a vast tract of inquiry. What at first seems to be clearly demarcated pathways become, in closer approach, tangled, ill-defined thickets. On the surface, we are inclined to regard what is comical as more homogeneous than it actually is, perhaps because we think of the comical primarily in terms of laughter... What strikes us as comic and funny depends, of course, upon the evaluative perceptions we make of the matter at hand.' 'When it is said', he continues, 'that the comic is not as homogeneous as it may first seem, I am not referring simply to the range of laughter—from the tenuous inner smile of recognition and sympathy through the brilliant quick-witted burst of intellectual laughter, to the uproarious guffaw. The psychology of laughter is another tangled inquiry; related, but not directly relevant. No, we are being reminded that one person's comedy is another person's pathos. Which is to say again, the comical is *relational*. It springs from the way we value and from the way we can distance ourselves from what is grave or valued or sacred. Thus, what constitutes the comical is as variegated as communities of perception are; or at least as variable as the publicly sharable capacities for seriousness or detachment are.' In a recent essay on the irony of Job, J.G. Williams makes the following admission which illustrates the difficulty of determining what is 'funny': 'At times, may I admit, I think the whole thing [i.e., the book of Job] is terribly funny. But irony is never really funny, is it? For what kind of universe must Job now live in? A meaningless universe mismanaged by a chaotic, capricious, jealous Tyrant.' Although I question why irony cannot be funny, I think this quotation aptly shows the problem highlighted in Saliers' reflections on comedy and laughter.

raries in the Near East. From the evidence of some Near Eastern and biblical texts, we might be surprised as to the degree some of this literature was able to evoke laughter from its original audiences.[1] But at any rate I wish to avoid an oversimplified equation between comedy and laughter and want to focus rather on that vision of comedy which has two central ingredients: first, its perception of incongruity that moves in the realm of the ironic, the ludicrous, and the ridiculous; and second, a basic plot line that leads ultimately to the happiness of the hero and his restoration to a serene and harmonious society.[2]

## I

Now I want to look at the overarching structure of Job and argue more precisely my case for the comedy of Job. It is important initially to observe that the poet has framed his poetic speeches with a prose narrative, now broken up into a prologue (Job 1–2) and epilogue (Job 42.7ff.). It is a long-held

[1] We are too often wont to think of Aristophanes' *Comedies* as the unique and determinative exemplar of ancient comedy. In my judgment, however, the whole subject of comedy in the Near East and Israel has been seriously neglected until fairly recently. Only in the last two decades have a few books and essays appeared to begin to fill the gap, but the subject still awaits complete exploration. To be sure, we cannot overlook some of the pioneering efforts already published. The first I would single out for attention is E. Speiser's brilliant thesis that the so-called 'Dialogue of Pessimism' from Mesopotamia is not 'pessimistic' at all, but is rather a humorous, farcical satire; in short, it is one species of comedy. In addition to Speiser, other seminal works are: Foster (1974), Van de Walle (1969), Good (1965), Smith (unpublished), Via (1975), and Rosenthal (1956). From evidence presented in such studies, scholars are beginning to make an increasingly impressive case for a much richer comic tradition in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean world than has hitherto been recognized. I am presently working on a monograph on comic elements in Job, which will take much more fully into account than is possible in the present article the links between Job and the diverse comic traditions in antiquity.

[2] The constitutive features of comedy are of course most debated; see again some of the diverse views represented in the collection of essays in Corrigan (esp. the essays by C. Fry, W. Sypher, G. Santayana, N.A. Scott, Jr., S. Langer, N. Frye as well as the introduction by Corrigan).

view that the poet borrows a didactic folktale or legend—i.e., a prose narrative that describes the fall and ultimate restoration of a folk hero in the days of yore. A number of literary conventions and typical motifs show that the narrative is best construed as a folktale (see Robertson, Williams, Polzin). It has the customary 'once upon a time' fairy-tale beginning: 'There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job' (1.1). The setting in a non-Israelite locale, the vaguely defined land of Uz, heightens this dimension. The stylized numbers—seven sons and three daughters, seven thousand sheep and three thousand oxen—contribute further to the folktale flavour, as does the adroit use of repetition (a twofold test, a four-fold series of disasters each of which is laconically reported by an anonymous messenger, a twofold audience between Yahweh and the Satan). Moreover, the characters are stylized, being defined by formulas and motifs typical of folktales. So Job is the best of men, 'the greatest of all the people of the east' (1.3b). He always does the right thing at the right time—whether in prosperity or adversity (cf. 1.5, 20-22; 2.10). His response to his traumatic trials is exactly what we would expect from such a figure and is comparable to that of Abraham in the story about the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). Lastly, and important for a comic movement, the plot is not only similar to that of other folktales but it is also typical of comedy. In such stories, the hero is usually subjected to a test from which he comes out on top only by the utmost effort and the demonstration of his prowess. So it is with Job, who endures his sufferings with unflinching faith, and in the end is restored to a harmonious relationship with God and man. He has all his possessions doubled, he receives a new set of children, and his daughters are renowned far and wide for their beauty. He himself lives 140 years after his trial and dies a fulfilled and satisfied man. Such a story follows the plot line of many comedies. As Northrup Frye observes, 'Comedy has a U-shaped plot, with the action sinking into deep and often potentially tragic complications, and then suddenly turning upward into a happy ending' (1963: 25).

It is important to stress that the poet has retained the basic plot of the folktale, even though he has altered the old tale by cutting it in two parts and making it into a prologue and epi-

logue. The genre and intention are thereby transformed. By breaking the tale into two pieces and inserting the long poetic speeches as the literary centrepiece, he has fractured the integrity of the original narrative and forced it to serve dual functions: it supplies the framework in which the poetic dialogues unfold, and at the same time it provides the fundamental story line. The intention of the 'frame story' lies on multiple levels:

1. It describes 'what is to be considered the normal and "right" condition of the world and the characters' (Shapiro: 54).
2. It gives the reader decisive information which is kept from the protagonists of the story but which defines and conditions their actions and words.
3. It provides the 'U-shaped plot' for the whole book.

Of crucial significance is that the prologue contains presuppositions and questions that trigger the movement of the book. First, by taking a figure famed for his righteousness, the poet intensifies and authenticates the agony of the innocent sufferer. Moreover, by stating explicitly that Job's suffering is in no way due to sin, the poet puts his readers in a privileged position: we know what neither Job nor his counsellors know—that Job is afflicted because of a chain of events that occurred in a mysterious divine council. This fact throws the whole ensuing dialogue into extreme tension and creates one of the fundamental incongruities of the entire book. The knowledge gained in the prologue shows the major debate to be misplaced and wide of the mark; this perspective is sharpened by what T.R. Henn calls the 'infinity of repetition' in which Job's antagonists keep on giving wrong answers with a thudding monotony. Incongruity—which at least is potentially comic—stands at the heart of the main course of the dialogues.

Second, the prologue foreshadows the theme of God's ambiguous personality, a theme richly developed in the poem (cf. chs. 7, 9, 12). Even if we accept E. Good's explanation that the Satan's self-curse and not a wager *per se* motivates God's action against Job, ambiguity still colours the representation of God (1973: 475ff.). Good is probably correct in pointing out the

way this curse by necessity elicits the divine response, but we still have Yahweh's potentially self-incriminating acknowledgment: 'you have incited me against him/To destroy him without cause' (2.3b). This theme of divinely caused suffering that capriciously strikes innocent and guilty alike will reappear: ''Tis all the same...', Job later asserts, 'guiltless as well as wicked he destroys' (9.22). So an aura of ambiguity hovers over the old tale, which will penetrate the later dialogues.

Third, an age-old mythical motif—the determination of human fate in the divine council—is used in the prologue, only to come under attack in the poem. It seems that the poem unveils this vision of mythical action in order to challenge its ultimate adequacy. Such a God may still have the power to determine a person's destiny, but already the question is implicit whether this kind of God is still righteous and trustworthy.

The epilogue is equally crucial for understanding the total literary work and cannot so easily be set aside as many literary critics have suggested. By retaining the restoration scene in the epilogue, the poet suddenly shifts the direction of the whole poem and returns to the prologue's vision of the idyllic society into which the main protagonists are now reintegrated. There is an upturn in the fortunes of the hero which resembles formally at least the comic upturn found in the happy ending.

## II

The poetic speeches open with Job's soliloquy (ch. 3) which begins on a dark, discordant note totally dissonant from Job's pious words in the prologue. The hero has fallen! His dramatic curse of his birthday represents a sudden, sharp downturn into despair. As Good has noted, the self-curse of the Satan that evokes the action of the prologue and expects a curse from Job has been partially effective, though it is not as clearly directed as the Satan had claimed (1973: 475ff.). Job's curse is ambiguous: does it only concern Job's own existence?—'Damn the day *I* was born' (3.3a); or is it also implicitly a curse against the Creator? D. Robertson answers the latter question affirmatively (pp. 449f.), but I share Good's reluctance to be so sure as

to the ultimate thrust of the curse (p. 476). It does seem clear, however, that Job hurls a curse and a challenge against the whole creation. This intention is epitomized in Job's appeal to mythological tradition: 'May those who curse Yam curse it, those skilled in rousing Leviathan' (3.8). Job calls the old creation myth to mind in order to reverse its effects; he desires to throw all of creation back into primordial chaos. So whether or not Job indirectly curses God, the incongruity between the Job of the prologue who blesses and the Job of the poem who curses is sharply drawn. The Satan was at least partially right in his assessment of the situation.

Job's soliloquy reveals still another attack on normative Hebraic tradition. Job goes counter to the Hebraic preference of life over death and reverts to what seems to be more compatible with the Egyptian expectation of the afterlife where restful ease greets the one who is fortunate enough to find his way to the grave (3.13, 22). In fact, it is not inappropriate to call this reversal of tradition a parody of the usual Hebraic emphasis on life over against death—an emphasis found especially in the Complaint Psalms (cf. Ps. 88). Later on in his discourses Job will return to the normative Hebraic view of death as a grey, gloomy form of existence (cf. 7.9f.; 10.21, 22; 14.1ff.), but for now at least death seems better than life.

In sum, Job 3 represents on the one hand a jarring contrast to how Job was initially portrayed in the prologue, but on the other hand it sets a fundamental tone for the succeeding speeches. That Job's outburst counters elements in normative Hebraic tradition and thus stands in an incongruous relationship to that tradition is evidence of its radicality and newness.

## III

After the bitter curse in ch. 3, the three friends now begin to offer their contribution. The friends are initially presented in a favourable light; they are sensitive and compassionate to Job: 'When they saw him from afar, they could not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept; each tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one said a word to him, for they saw that his anguish was very great' (2.12-13). The

friends engage in customary mourning rites, and one should understand their silence primarily from this point of view. But when one remembers Job's later sarcastic wish, 'Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!' (13.5), it is not remiss to suggest that this initial period of silence in retrospect is represented incongruously as their finest hour.

Although the friends' speeches can be read on several different levels, it seems that the poet has created a magnificent caricature of the wise counsellor. Eliphaz's opening speech has typical elements which are carried through the ensuing speeches of the friends. Decades ago K. Fullerton pointed to the presence of 'double entendre' in this speech. And Eliphaz indeed evokes an ambivalent response, as D. Robertson has recently argued (pp. 451ff.). On the positive side, Eliphaz appears to be motivated by a genuine concern for Job. He begins very solicitously: 'If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?' (4.2a). Moreover, he seems convinced that Job is what he claims to be—an innocent sufferer. Nowhere in his first speech does he resort to direct accusation or name-calling. He explains Job's present misfortunes by an appeal to a dramatic visionary revelation about the inherent and thus inevitable sinfulness of mankind (4.13ff.). Job is only implicated because he is a member of the human race, not because of any particular sin he has committed. Finally, even though Eliphaz was not privy to the proceedings of the divine council, he seems on one level to have Job's situation analysed fairly well. Job's suffering is a disciplinary test; so Job has only to hang on to his integrity and be confident in his piety and his God. If Job therefore commits his cause to God, 'who does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number', then he may expect full restoration, replete with his possessions, numerous descendants, and the expectation of dying 'in ripe old age' (cf. 5.24-26). In fact, Eliphaz accurately albeit ironically predicts the final denouement of the whole book, as will also his two companions (cf. 8.5-7; 11.13ff.).

But Eliphaz's speech can be viewed from another angle, which gives a negative slant to his words. Eliphaz and his two cohorts rely heavily on their accumulation of proverbial wisdom gained from traditional lore as well as their own personal observation; thus they strike the pose of exemplary sages.

Eliphaz even goes beyond the usual ambiance of the sage when he describes an awesome night vision in order to authenticate his wise counsel, though there is a curious incongruity between the elaborate portrayal of the vision and the rather commonplace information contained therein (cf. 4.14ff.). So on another level Eliphaz comes across as a rather pompous, pretentious counsellor, who must in the end resort to general maxims which simply fail to apply in this specific situation (cf. 4.8-11; 5.2-4), even though these maxims be clothed in the language of a mysterious visionary experience.

Though Bildad and Zophar by no means may be considered carbon copies of Eliphaz and sometimes formulate their arguments differently (e.g., Bildad especially emphasizes the authority of the fathers whereas Zophar appeals to the impenetrable mysteries of the divine nature), they both begin with the same basic premise as Eliphaz: there is a necessary and universal correlation between suffering and sinning. It is no surprise therefore that their essential advice is the same: repent and trust God (cf. 8.5-7; 10.13ff.).

In the second and third cycles of speeches the friends resort more and more to stereotyping as they indulge in long, lurid portrayals of the grim destiny of the wicked (cf. chs. 15, 18, 20, 22, 27.13ff.). In so behaving the friends become increasingly ludicrous as they engage in an 'infinity of repetition'. 'Exaggeration', remarks Bergson, 'is always comic when prolonged and especially when prolonged' (quoted in Cox: 141). To put it another way: 'In ridiculing [they] become ridiculous'[1]—which is a fundamental but paradoxical ingredient of comedy. From the outset both Job and the reader—albeit on different levels of knowledge—are keenly aware of the utter incongruity between the friends' speeches and Job's situation. The friends become cruelly and grotesquely comic as they strive with increasing dogmatism to apply their faulty solutions to the wrong problem—and the wrong person.

Job's sarcastic and satirical rejection of the friends and their irrelevant advice is sharp and bitter, but not unmerited:

[1] Cox (p. 155). The whole question is noteworthy: 'At the bottom literary comedy rests upon a paradox which no human being can either solve or avoid: in ridiculing we become ridiculous'.

> No doubt you are the gentry; and with you wisdom will die.
> But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you.
> Who does not know such things? (12.2-3)
> ... Ask the beasts, they will teach you;
> The birds of the air, they will tell you (12.7).
> Galling comforters are you all. Have windy words a limit?
> What moves you to prattle on? I, too, could talk like you.
> If you were in my place, I could harangue with words,
> Could shake my head at you. I could strengthen you with my
> mouth,
> My quivering lips would soothe you (16.2b-5).
> How you have helped the powerless,
> Aided the arm that had no strength!
> How you have counseled the unwise,
> Offered advice in profusion!
> With whose help have you uttered words,
> Whose breath came forth from you? (26.2-4).

According to Roger Cox in a recent essay on comedy, Schopenhauer

> classified pedantry as a form of folly and says that 'the pedant, with his general maxims, almost always misses the mark in life, shows himself to be foolish, awkward, and useless!' (p. 137).

In Schopenhauer's sense, Job's 'comforters' may be termed pedants, who though claiming to be wise in fact emerge as fools. Job's cutting retort to his friends dramatizes this perception: 'Your maxims are ashen aphorisms/Defences of clay are your defences' (13.12). In his article Cox goes on to argue that moralizing leads toward incongruity for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that it usually takes the form of universal statements. 'Obviously universal statements gather so many things under a single heading that there is almost bound to be incongruity among the things brought together under that heading' (p. 148). Cox ends his discussion with an observation that strikingly bears on the Joban poet's parody of the wise comforter: 'The pedant with his general maxims is simply a caricature of the basic comic character, who strives constantly... to justify and preserve his invented self against the onslaughts of the realities he encounters' (p. 148).

In conclusion, the poet has created a brilliant caricature of the friends in their role as wise counsellors, who indeed say

some 'right things about God' (but who become ridiculous in their approach to Job because of the irrelevance of their counsel). The would-be wise men become fools, the mockers become a mockery. The friends resemble the classical comic figure of the *alazon*—the imposter, the offender, and finally the enemy of God (cf. 42.7).[1] As imposters the friends are finally reduced to silence and confusion. Elihu's words, though self-serving, are nevertheless illuminating of what happens to the friends in the course of the debate and are anticipatory of Yahweh's condemnation of the friends: 'I paid close attention to you, but none of you confuted Job. None of you answered his words (32.12)'; 'Dismayed, they answer him no more: Words have forsaken them' (32.15). According to Sypher this is typical of what happens to the *alazon*:

> in the course of the comic debate the supposed wisdom of the *alazon* is reduced to absurdity, and the *alazon* himself becomes a clown (p. 42).

Thus in the end, the friends become comic characters, and their pretentious pose vis-à-vis Job and God is exposed and ridiculed.

## IV

When one examines the speeches of Job it is all but impossible to find any systematic and orderly progression—despite the best efforts of scholars. Rather the poet has built a rambling discursiveness into the dialogues which seems to heighten the sense of chaos that is so terribly threatening. I want to highlight two facets of this discursiveness. First, one notices that the poet has built into Job's responses to his friends the stylistic feature of delayed reaction: Job often seems to ignore the immediately preceding speech in order to deal with an earlier argument of one of the comforters (cf. 9.2 which is the answer to Eliphaz in 4.17). Thus a certain incongruity is present in the very structuring of the speeches. The various speakers are sometimes portrayed as talking past one another. Secondly, Job's speeches sometimes shift addressees in midstream, often

[1] Cf. Aristophanes' famous parody of Socrates in *The Clouds*.

without forewarning; suddenly Job is no longer speaking to the friends but is addressing God (cf. 7.ff.; 13.20ff.; 17.3f.). What this observation reveals is that Job is keenly aware that he is fighting a battle on two fronts against two different adversaries: his erstwhile human friends have become his enemies (cf. 6.14ff.; 19.19), and God, likewise his one-time friend (29.4), has become his foe. Throughout the entire course of the dialogues Job confronts first one adversary and then another without always explicitly informing the reader. Job's speeches, therefore, are operating on different levels, a fact which gives them an incongruous cast.

To Job, however, it is his second adversary—God—who presents the most awesome threat. Job moves from his own plight to a radical and comprehensive indictment of God and a frontal challenge to God's justice in the universe. As D. Robertson has argued, what began as a test of Job has now turned into a test of God (p.451); thus the moral vision of the universe comes to stand under a severe and searching scrutiny. Since Job is convinced that his suffering is not attributable to any particular sin, he senses that his misfortune is symptomatic of a grave and general disorder of the universe. His language of attack against God is probably the most searing in the Hebrew Bible. God often emerges as a grotesque, demonic deity. The following is a typical catalogue of divine terrors:

> His anger rips and rages against me; he knashes at me with his teeth;
> My enemy whets his eye against me.
> God puts me in custody of the vicious; tosses me into the hand of the wicked.
> I was at ease and he crushed me; grabbed me by the neck and mangled me.
> He sets me up as his target; his archers ring me round.
> He stabs my vitals without pity; pours out my guts on the ground.
> He rends me rift upon rift; rushes at me like a warrior (16.9, 11-14).

To Job the contest is grotesquely unequal; yet God persists in treating Job not as a piece of frail flesh, but as some primordial monster of the deep (cf. 7.12). If one is looking for the dark comedy of the grotesque, Job is indeed a fertile field.

It is possible to view Job's speeches as a collage of brilliant parodies, where at almost every crucial juncture Job takes up diverse parts of his traditional heritage only to twist them and make them ludicrous: Job's parody of Psalm 8 is the most frequently quoted example (7.17-18). But he bitingly parodies the complaint genre time and again (cf. Job 3, 7, 14). His speeches reach a crescendo of bitter irony when he catalogues examples of the pervasive chaos in creation under the generic pattern of the hymn of praise:

> Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be just before God?
> If one wished to contend with him one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
> He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength—who has hardened himself against him and succeeded?—
> he who removes mountains and they know it not, when he overturns them in his anger;
> who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble;
> who commands the sun, and it does not rise; who seals up the stars;
> who alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the sea;
> who made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
> who does great things beyond understanding, and marvellous things without number (9.2-10 in the RSV translation).

It should not be missed that this speech answers Eliphaz and not the immediately preceding Bildad; it also parodies elements in Eliphaz's speech (cf. 4.17 and 9.2; 5.9 and 9.10). What results is an ironic parody of a doxological hymn, which is used only in order to twist its intention and convey an opposite meaning: it no longer serves to praise Yahweh as just and merciful in his role as Creator, but rather portrays him as a God of terror who revels in destruction. When Job concludes his hymnic catalogue of divine attributes with an almost verbatim quotation of Eliphaz's earlier lines ('who does great things without understanding and marvellous things without number'—5.9 and 9.10), he brings to a fitting climax his sardonic song to the God of chaos.

Throughout his arguments Job continually reverts to the

certainty of his innocence and integrity as the cornerstone of his case (cf. 9.3ff.). If there be any equal justice in the universe, Job is convinced that he must be vindicated. So early on in the dialogue Job calls for a cosmic trial, where he will be the defendant and Yahweh the plaintiff. If he can at all get a fair trial, God must acquit him. But no sooner has he broached this idea than he realizes that he is sure to lose. God will rig the trial and overpower Job with his superior strength and wisdom and especially his rhetorical prowess (cf. 9.14-23). So the dominant and guiding metaphor of a trial has a 'self-destruct' mechanism:[1] to the Joban poet it simply is not sufficient to deal with the case of Job vs. God.

It is because of Job's fears which are born of his sense of inequality that he conceives of having a mysterious third party who will ensure a just and fair trial. The first time we hear of such a figure, Job promptly negates the notion: no such arbitrator really exists (9.32, 33). But the second time Job is more confident and he has also modified the character of the mediatorial figure; the umpire or arbitrator has become one who will vouch for Job on high and guarantee a fair trial (16.19). This theme reaches its climax in the famous 'Redeemer' passage (19.23ff.). Although no one pretends to understand this text completely (it is next to impossible to translate it!), what clearly stands out is that Job is absolutely confident that his Redeemer/Vindicator/Avenger lives. Job is therefore assured of some sort of ultimate vindication, but what exactly is entailed in this vindication is unclear. D. Robertson has proposed the most extreme interpretation: Job conjures up here the image of one who will vindicate him by murdering God (Robertson: 460). It is rather a grotesque thought, but it is a possible interpretation given the semantic range of the word *gō'ēl*. What is interesting for my purpose is that in Job's dramatic confrontation with Yahweh there is ironically no mediator in view except that we do meet again the term 'umpire' (*môkîᵃḥ*) now applied to Job (40.2), which

1 Shapiro (p. 56): 'the legal debate is not presented straight..., but 'self-destructs' along the way, both in the language used and in the over-all architecture of what is said and when'.

heightens the irony of the absence of any bona fide mediator.[1] At any rate, the absence of the mediator negates Job's utter sense of confidence in 19.25f. What to many interpreters is the high point in Job's odyssey of faith is finally submerged in the sea of incongruities that surge through the book.

Job concludes his appeal for a trial in ch. 31, where he utters an oath of clearance in the form of a series of self-curses. In my judgment, Robertson is convincing in his interpretation of this oath as an effective means of forcing God's hand (p. 461). It now becomes necessary for God to make a personal appearance. Job's final challenge to God is Job at his Promethean best:

> O that someone would listen to me! Behold my signature, let Shaddai answer me. Let my opponent write a document. I would wear it on my shoulder, I would bind it on like a crown. I would tell him the number of my steps; I would approach him like a prince (31.35-37).

## V

When one turns from Job's heroic challenge to God for a personal encounter, he is primed for a dramatic visitation of God; he is therefore taken aback by the appearance of the young interloper—Elihu. It is this sharp sense of disconnection with what precedes and follows, coupled with stylistic and linguistic differences, which has led the vast majority of scholars to relegate Elihu's speeches to the heap of secondary and inferior materials. Such overblown, bombastic language, so the argument runs, could never be the work of the poet of the authentic Job! Perhaps this is correct, but then again perhaps it misses something. As H.H. Rowley points out, 'Whoever wrote the Elihu speeches probably deliberately put banal lines into his mouth, since his purpose was rather to expose this type of character than to exalt it'.[2] I think Rowley is on the

[1] I owe to Good the observation concerning the ironic application of the term 'umpire' to Job in 40.2. He kindly called this text to my attention after I had delivered an earlier form of this paper at the 1974 Annual Meeting of the SBL. He has discussed the text in his *Irony of the Old Testament*.

[2] Rowley (p. 268). Note, however, Pope's counter opinion in his discussion of Elihu's opening speech: 'This sample of Elihu's rhetoric may

right track with this remark, but he does not go far enough with it. In my opinion, a reading of these speeches in the whole context of Job shows that Elihu is a comic character whom the writer seeks to expose by the timing of Elihu's appearance and the type of language he uses.[1] From everything that precedes Elihu's entrance, the reader surely expects Yahweh to appear; but instead of the mighty God young Elihu steps boldly onto the scene.

Elihu appears as 'the Johnny-come-lately, who pops up from nowhere in ch. 32, disappears after ch. 37, and is never heard of again' (Good: 208). The effect is an ironic reversal of expectation and a jarring example of incongruity. We expect God—and we get Elihu!

Elihu emerges as the proverbial and prototypical 'angry young man' who attempts to speak for God and to straighten out his elders. His long, verbose introduction sets the tone for his whole contribution:

> I am young in years, and you are venerable men;
> So I recoiled and was afraid to declare my knowledge to you.
> I thought, 'Days should speak,
> Many years ought to teach wisdom'.
> But it is a spirit in man, the breath of Shaddai gives insight.
> Seniors may not be sage, nor elders understand aright.
> So I say, 'Listen to me, I too will state my view'.
> I waited for you to speak, I gave ear to your arguments while

strike the modern reader as ridiculously pompous and verbose. There is, however, no ground for supposing that this effect was intended by the author' (p. 213). Contrast the opinion of Skehan on the major intention of Elihu's opening speech in ch. 32: 'The poem is... a formal rhetorical exercise, with a caricature of its ostensible protagonist inherent in its hesitations and its outbursts; if it has more words and more structure than the contents would seem to deserve, this is quite deliberate' (p. 382). Such sharply contradictory views from equally reputable scholars illustrate how far we are from a consensus in interpreting the book of Job. I would argue, however, that the burden of proof is on Pope to show the evidence for his assertion.

[1] The opinion of the possible comic dimension in the depiction of Elihu is by no means original with me; I would simply note that such a view has found sufficient currency to find its way into the explanatory comments of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*: 'The ludicrous boastfulness of Elihu's introductory remarks may have been introduced as a comical element, to relieve tragic tension' (p. 644).

> you tested words.
> I paid close attention to you, but none of you confuted Job.
> None of you answered his words.
>
> I will now say my piece; I will declare what I know.
> For I am brimming with words, wind bloats my belly.
> My belly is like unvented wine, like new wine-skins ready to burst.
> I must speak and get relief, open my lips and reply (32.6b-12, 17-20).

After such 'windy' words one would imagine that Elihu is finally ready to begin his subject. But he continues on a similar note in vv. 1-7 of ch. 33 which are an exordium directed more particularly to Job. 'It has pleased the author', remarks Dhorme, 'to depict the new speaker as interminably prosy' (p. 415). Is not this one sort of first-class parody—to put banal, verbose lines in the mouth of a pretentious interloper? According to Davidson and Toy, many ancient scholars branded Elihu as a buffoon, 'a boastful youth whose shallow intermeddling is only to be explained by the fewness of his years, the incarnation of folly, or the Satan himself gone a-mumming' (p. 99). From a comic perspective Elihu, like the three friends, seems to play the role of the *alazon* or buffoon, and it seems that the author's intent is to expose him as such. Just as we find a caricature of the friends in their role as 'old' sages, so we have a caricature of the 'angry young man' who now aspires to be the one who would defend the ways of God. Though there may be 'no fool like an old fool', Elihu, as a young fool, comes close. He not only reiterates and expands essentially the same views as the three friends (even the disciplinary view of suffering was first mentioned by Eliphaz [5.17], though Elihu modifies it by combining it with a mediatorial figure); but he also anticipates some of the themes of the Yahweh speeches (cf. esp. ch. 37). In the first instance he basically repeats the tired arguments of the friends, which were based on the premise that Job's suffering must be tied to his sinfulness; and in the second, he shows how different it is when a brash young man speaks in God's behalf from when God himself speaks out of the awesome whirlwind. So Elihu emerges in the total context of the book as a comic figure whom the author exposes and ridicules. Like the friends,

Elihu appears to be wise; and he indeed says many 'right' things, but he ultimately misses the mark since he fundamentally misconstrues what is involved in Job's particular situation.

## VI

Most interpreters rightly consider the Yahweh speeches to be the climax of the book of Job. That the speeches are laced with irony is a widely held view; but what kind of irony is the debated issue. The speeches seem to side-step the questions posed by Job—or at least they offer no clear-cut answers. At any rate ambiguity seems intrinsic to the speeches. How one finally resolves the problem of the Yahweh speeches and Job's responses is one important key to a comprehensive interpretation of the book of Job.

The most common view is to take the Yahweh speeches at more or less face value and interpret Job's repentance as genuine. Job had become pretentious and had stepped beyond his limits (cf. 40.1-8); so the divine interrogation was eminently appropriate. In his confrontation with God Job became aware of the hugeness of creation and the presence of a divine mystery that transcended human understanding. The overpowering theophany unveiled to Job not only the majestic Creator God, but the wonders of creation:

> I know you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted... I talked of things I did not know, wonders beyond my ken... I heard of you by hearsay, but now my own eyes have seen you. So I recant and repent in dust and ashes (42.2, 3a, 5, 6).

With such a vision Job's repentance is the appropriate and authentic response. What then, according to this view, is the intention of the Yahweh speeches and Job's responses? Von Rad's answer is typical:

> The purpose of the divine answer in the book of Job is to glorify God's justice towards his creatures, and the fact that he is turned towards them to do them good and bless them. And in the intention of the poem that is also truly an answer to Job's question. If Job's holding fast to his righteousness

> was a question put to God, God gives the answer by pointing to the glory of his providence that sustains all his creation. Of course this justice of God cannot be comprehended by man; it can only be adored (1962: 417).

In a word, the incongruity at the root of creation is surmounted by the vision of the Creator and his creation; prayer and praise become the only fitting responses.

If von Rad's view is typical, D. Robertson has recently presented a highly atypical interpretation. Utilizing a peculiarly literary tack, Robertson has set the Yahweh speeches in the larger context of the book of Job and argued the position that they yield a fundamentally ironic sense (pp. 462ff.). For instance, in ch. 9 Job predicts what Yahweh would do in a face-to-face encounter: Yahweh would simply overwhelm Job with his awesome powers, and with his superior intellectual abilities he would pose questions that Job could not possibly answer (cf. especially 9.3ff.). Thus the Joban poet has 'set up' God; we want and hope that God will not act as predicted, but when God does finally appear he in fact performs as Job says he will.

> So God's rhetoric,because Job has armed us against it, convinces us that he is a charlatan God, one who has the power and skill of a god but is a fake at the truly divine task of governing with justice and love (p. 464).

Moreover, argues Robertson, Job's repentance is 'tongue-in-cheek', since both he and the friends had already predicted that Job would inevitably knuckle under in a show-down with God ('Though guiltless, *my mouth* would declare me guilty', 9.20a; cf. also 9.13-15) (p. 467). So God becomes 'the friends writ large' and is parodied as a blustery, false comforter.[1] God himself in the end confirms this reading when he approves Job's words in the Epilogue (42.7). Thus the meaning of the book of Job, according to Robertson, is that the poet, like 'a medicine man', has developed a strategy for dealing with 'man's fear of fate, his destiny, the unknown' (p. 468). That

[1] Robertson (p. 467). It is noteworthy that Sypher brings out the ambiguous aspect of the *alazon* or impostor figure in classical comedy: 'the Impostor, the enemy of God, is not only the alter ego of the ironist, he is, in Cornford's phrase, the very God himself' (p. 43).

strategy involves the curing of fear by 'ridicule of the object feared' (p. 468). 'So we know of him what we know of all tyrants, that while they may torture us and finally kill us, they cannot destroy our personal integrity' (p. 469).

In my judgment it is possible to accept some of Robertson's insights into the irony of Job, but I think it is necessary to set them in the larger context of comedy. In this way the two diametrically opposed interpretations presented above may be brought together in a new and illuminating synthesis.

I would only underscore what Robertson says about the adroit use of irony in the book of Job; in fact, it is the type of irony the poet utilizes that leads me to suspect it is best interpreted from a comic perspective. As I have noted, time and again the irony often veers in the direction of the ludicrous and ridiculous. Incongruity and parody pervade the representation of Job's friends including young Elihu, Job's God, and *Job himself.* I think Robertson's interpretation, in fact, would have been strengthened had he not eliminated Elihu from his discussion and had he given more attention to the ironic portrayal of Job. For example, are not the friends correct to a point in their estimate of Job's pride? And is it not the case that Yahweh's magnificent parody of Job's heroic posture has elements of truth?

> Gird your loins like a hero; I will ask you and you tell me!
>
> Have you an arm like God? Can you thunder with a voice like his?
> Deck now yourself with grandeur and majesty; be arrayed in glory and splendour.
> Let loose your furious wrath; glance at every proud one and abase him;
> Tread down the wicked where they stand.
> Bury them in the dust together; bind them in the infernal crypt.
> Then I will acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you! (40.7, 9-14).

'[This] final challenge to Job', says Terrien, 'parodies ironically the prerogatives and functions of the divine monarch in the ancient Middle East' (p. 507).

Moreover, I think that even the irony in Job's predictions of how Yahweh would act takes a different turn from Robert-

son's description. It is true that Job declares that Yahweh would be physically and verbally overpowering to a mere mortal in a face-to-face encounter. But from the perspective of comedy this kind of satirical questioning of the human hero is not at all out of place.[1] Also, in my opinion, there is an incongruity between the content of Job's predictions and the content of the theophanic vision—fulfilment does not quite match prediction. In Job's description of Yahweh's action he parodied the Creator God as one who brought chaos not order, darkness not light, death not life (cf. 9.5ff.; 12.14ff.). But the Yahweh speeches move in a different direction. Terrien is correct, I think, in discerning at the heart of the Yahweh speeches a mythical pattern that appears in the seasonal changes with concentration on the life-giving rains—which do indeed sometimes fall on 'no man's land' (38.2ff.) (p. 508). But should not the rains fall there? Are not the creation and its needs bigger than man with his more narrow vantage point on what constitutes superfluity and waste? The rhetorical questions concerning the emergence of *new life* bespeak the vitality of creation—they do not focus on death and disorder (cf. 39.1ff.).

Finally, I think that it is not a misreading of the Yahweh speeches to hear a playful, festive note in the portrayal of creation. The occasion of creation was when 'the morning stars sang together, and all the gods exulted' (38.7). The pictures of the animals, for the most part, do not conjure up images of primordial chaos so much as they do images of freedom (the wild ass), awesome strength (the buffalo), majestic power (the horse), and grandeur of flight (the hawk and the eagle). Even the much-maligned ostrich is not so much a symbol of threatening chaos as ludicrous stupidity—yes the stupidity is God-given, but there are compensating features: 'When up she spreads her plumes, she laughs at horse and rider' (39.18). She may be bizarre in looks, ridiculous in actions, but she is a superb runner! Similarly even the mighty Leviathan, the most terrifying and truly monstrous creature in this 'carnival of animals' (to use Terrien's apt phrase), is described somewhat sportively—at least from the Creator's

[1] See von Rad's intriguing interpretation of Job 38ff. as a satirical, ironical piece dependent on Egyptian prototypes (1966).

view. The portrayal in Job 41.1ff. is not so disparate from what we find in Ps. 104.26: 'Leviathan you formed to make him play in it', i.e. the sea) or as an alternative translation puts it, 'Leviathan you formed to play with'. 'Yahweh', says Terrien, 'permits himself to speak of these threatening realities with the detachment of the humorist, because he controls them' (p. 504).

On still another level I would argue that the irony and incongruity of the Yahweh speeches are best interpreted as elements in a comic vision. As interpreters have often noted, Yahweh's answer to Job is no answer—at least it is not an unambiguous answer. Incongruity is involved, however one chooses finally to deal with that incongruity. Professor Good seems to be correct in his contention that Yahweh decisively shifts the issue from the question of justice—Job's question—to the question of order (Good, 1973: 480). That order involves justice is clearly a part of the Hebraic heritage, but it is an order that transcends narrow human views of justice and comprehends all creation. The issue is pinpointed in Job 40.8, which I believe has been correctly translated by Good: 'Would you even annul my order (*mišpāṭ*), treat me as wicked so you can be innocent?' (1973: 479). Is it the case, Good asks, that either Job or God must be wicked and the other innocent? The answer in Good's opinion is 'no!' (1973: 480). He argues:

> What God demonstrates is that moral presumptions are not the way the world is handled, that the question of order is another one entirely from the one Job put (1973: 481).

Thus if one examines carefully Job's speeches, the trial metaphor involving guilt and innocence becomes dominant; but the Yahweh speeches move more dominantly in the mythological metaphors of creation.[1]

Job's new perception, I would argue, is rooted in a comic perspective, which comes only when Job has a double view—i.e. a divine and human view—of himself and the world. This double view only becomes Job's through the theophanic vision. He sees God and through God's eyes he now sees the world. He

[1] Cf. Cross (pp. 343ff.). According to him, Job 'repudiated the God of history whose realm is politics, law, and justice' and recalled rather the Creator God of the ancient myths.

sees the mysterious interworkings of the universe; he sees the seeming superfluity which is nevertheless required for the larger needs of life in the cosmos; and he sees that man only constitutes a small part of the cosmos. As Terrien states:

> Job is invited, in effect, to liberate himself from the microcosm of his egocentricity, to borrow the perspective of God without pursuing the mirage of self-deification, and to discover the broad horizons of the macrocosm of life on the grand scale (p. 502).

The mystery and incongruity remain—they are now accepted but not resolved.

After the initial theophanic speech the hero is silenced: 'Lo, I am small, how can I answer you? My hand I lay on my mouth; I have spoken once, I will not reply; twice, but I will say no more' (40.4-5). Now on one level silence is a profoundly authentic response of the one who has become wise and this reaction is not to be denigrated. Yet there is a second divine speech and a second response. The seeming redundance of the two speeches has perplexed interpreters for centuries. A common approach is to brand the second speech as a secondary addition and then blend Job's two responses into one harmonistic account. I side with those who argue that the second speech lies on the primary stage of tradition; but whatever one's position on this question, it is still necessary to interpret the final stage of the text with its duplicate structure. As a rule when scholars have attempted to take the text as it stands and interpret the intention of the two speeches and the two responses, they have done so in theological and/or psychological terms: Job has been silenced, but he still needs to be repentant. Silence therefore is construed on a lower level in the hierarchy of appropriate responses. Terrien's interpretation typifies this approach:

> Job no longer protests of his innocence, nor does he clamour for his rights. He is not yet ready to surrender his pride, nor can he exteriorize a confession in words. The poet stresses the negative aspect of Job's response to the First Speech (40.4-5). He may well be aware of the need for psychological suspense in view of the processes of man's conversion. The encounter must continue (p. 502).

One can find evidence to support this view. Although there is a clear-cut parallelism in form and content between the two speeches and the two responses, the parallelism is designed to be incremental and build to a climax. The introductory challenge—'Gird your loins like a hero; I will ask you, and you tell me'—is repeated from the opening speech (38.3), but the issue under debate is now more clearly stated in 40.8. Moreover, the hero's arrogation to himself of the divine prerogatives, certainly present in the first speech, is sarcastically parodied in 40.9-14. Thus a climax is achieved in the second speech which is matched by the climax in the second response. The hero's silence is completed by his repentance. Hearing the divine speech silences the human hero, and seeing the divine presence—as opposed to the hearing of God—triggers repentance. Though silence is often the mark of the truly wise and faithful man in the Hebraic and Near Eastern tradition (cf. especially Egyptian wisdom), the two-stage movement in the book of Job seems to suggest that silence as a response is not sufficient; so silence must be transcended and climaxed in repentance.

I think, however, that comedy helps to illumine and further explicate this movement of the text. The incongruity between the two speeches and the two responses has comic dimensions. Just at the moment the reader finishes the first speech and Job's response, he senses that a climax has finally been reached—a climax already delayed once before by the entrance of Elihu. But again the poet shifts his ground and throws off his audience, for he has Yahweh break in and repeat virtually the same challenge to Job. Yet one detects differences. As indicated above, one hears a more clear-cut formulation of the issue involved (40.8) as well as a sharper parody of the hero. Moreover, though the theme of the 'carnival of animals' is resumed, the two primordial and mythological monsters are cast up before man's eyes as terrifying symbols of the powers of chaos and evil, whereas they appear as mere playthings before God, because he alone as Creator controls them. So presumably the audience, like the hero, is caught off guard. What was thought to be the climax was not the climax; in fact, it was only a powerful prelude to the second and more decisive encounter between the hero and his God. The stylistic technique of structural parallelism serves to heighten the

sense of incongruity in Yahweh's renewed challenge to Job and Job's second capitulation in the act of repentance. Thus commentators have been right in discerning an incongruity between the two speeches, but they have gone astray in seeking a solution by deletion or rearrangement, according to a logic that fails to catch that what the poet does is simply to exploit the age-old Near Eastern literary convention of parallel structures in order to create a comic effect.

In conclusion, Job's second response of repentance seems to have multiple levels of meaning. In Robertson's ironic interpretation, Job's repentance is 'tongue-in-cheek' (pp. 466ff.); the hero bows his head but with a side-long glance to his audience he winks his eye. It must be admitted that Robertson's view is appealing and has textual support on its side (note again the sequence of ch. 9 and the sequence of Yahweh's speeches and Job's responses). Moreover, it is obviously easy to incorporate a 'tongue-in-cheek' repentance into a comic view; it would be one more element in the 'poet's ironic joke' (to use Robertson's own phrase from another context).

I think, however, that the repentance is an authentic response of the hero, because he has been granted the double view delineated above; it is too simple therefore to view it as 'tongue-in-cheek'. Thus Job's confession is genuine and becomes equivalent to the recognition scene in the comic plot: 'I talked of things I did not know, wonders beyond my ken... I had heard of you by hearsay, but now my own eyes have seen you' (42.3, 5). According to the poet, a crucial part of Job's vision is that he sees as God sees and paradoxically he sees that he as a mortal does not see! That he repents is expected because he now sees aright. His confession is authentic but paradoxical: his new wisdom is that he does not know all, his new perception is that he does not see all; but he now knows enough and sees enough. Of course it is still possible to construe this confesion of new sight as ironic and tongue-in-cheek; but I think that the poet's portrayal of Job's vision of God makes a difference when one remembers that Job has complained, on the one hand, about his inability to see God (cf. 9.11; 23.8-9) and expressed, on the other, the confidence that in the moment of his vindication he would see God (19.26-27). So I would argue that Robertson underplays the significance

of Job's vision of God when he concentrates on the ironic interplay between Job's prior speeches and the Yahweh speeches. To be sure, whether one interprets the repentance scene as tongue-in-cheek or authentic depends finally on whether or not one senses an incongruity between Job's predictions of how God would act in a confrontation and God's actual self-representation in the Yahweh speeches. In my view, as I argued earlier, there is an incongruity between prediction and fulfilment which the poet has Job himself confess. Thus I read the confession as genuine and Job's acknowledgment of his new perception into the ways of God and the world as authentic. Job as comic hero rediscovers his limits as a man and repents before the creator God.

## VII

That the restoration scene (42.7ff.) follows immediately Job's repentance is explicable from the perspective of comedy; in fact, it is decisive to a comic movement according to numerous literary critics. Building on Cornford's classic analysis of Attic Comedy, Sypher argues that the movement from repentance to festivity is a necessary component of comedy, which shows among other things that comedy is a more complex form than tragedy (pp. 33ff.). He states:

> Retaining its double action of penance and revel, comedy remains an 'improvisation' with a loose structure, and a precarious logic that can tolerate every kind of 'improbability' (p. 35).

Thus critics have been correct in noting the 'improvised', 'improbable', and gratuitous quality of the restoration, but they have either missed or dismissed the significance of this part of Job within the totality of the book's structure. Here I part company with Terrien, Robertson, Good, and other interpreters who in different ways tend to discount the importance of the Epilogue. Good is typical:

> The restoration of wealth is not a sign of divine pleasure but is simply something that happens, as far as Job cares (p. 482).

I think this sort of interpretation overly psychologizes the hero

and fails thereby to deal with the generic structure of the whole book. The restoration is not at all superfluous or surprising when one traces out the plot line of comedy, where catastrophe is typically followed by restoration, penance by festivity, and alienation from society by reintegration into society. And one should note that this restoration includes not simply Job and his new family but Job's three friends as well. A crowning irony surely comes when Yahweh rebukes the friends and commends Job (42.7)—and then orders the friends to go to Job, offer sacrifice, and have Job intercede for them in order that they might likewise be restored to divine favour.[1] All the crucial segments of the Joban society are therefore restored to a happy, harmonious relationship.

The 'happy ending' of the book of Job illumines and helps to confirm the comic perspective I have tried to delineate. In fact, the happy ending, in my view, demonstrates the ultimate irony and comedy of Job, where the problems are not fully and satisfactorily resolved, where the contradictions and incongruities remain. Describing the book of Job as technically a comedy, N. Frye remarks:

> The author of Job has solved the moral problem of his play in the usual comic fashion, by cutting its Gordian knot. But we can accept this solution only by thinking of the world of Job's reward as a different world from the nightmare world of misery and boils and uncomprehending comforters (1965: 129).

Although I owe an enormous debt to N. Frye for insights into comedy, I think his interpretation of the comedy of Job misses something. I would argue, first of all, that Frye does not give sufficient heed to the prior elements of comedy within the poem of Job; thus he depends too exclusively on the 'happy ending' to define Job as technically a comedy. Moreover as I read comedy, it seems that a major point is its perception of

[1] Robertson also focuses on the irony of the divine speech in 42.7 but gives it a different twist: '[God's] words in 42.7 mean exactly the opposite of what he wants and once intended them to mean. God is the object of the poet's ironic joke. And after this bit of irreverence on the part of the poet it is impossible for us to take seriously the solution to the problem of suffering offered by the folktale' (p. 468).

the incongruities of existence in which celebration and festivity occur side-by-side with evil and death. Thus the comic vision does not necessarily eliminate evil and death; it is not incorrigibly and naively optimistic; it does not shut its eyes to the dark, jagged edges of life in this world. In fact, many would argue that it is precisely because man has experienced suffering that he has a sharpened awareness of comic incongruity.[1] Comedy therefore may incorporate rather than ignore the haunting riddles of life. Thus even though the happy ending does stand in an incongruous relationship with the preceding poem, that does not mean it refers to a different world; it simply affirms that a harmonious, prosperous society is desirable in the midst of a world of pain and death.

That the book of Job fades out in a scene borrowed from the world of fairy tale and romance not only helps to confirm its comic mode, it also breaks off or at least alters its potentially tragic movement, which as we have noted has long been a concern of commentators. Even here, however, one must emphasize that the line between tragedy and comedy is fluid, and a work as richly complex and ambiguous as Job can legitimately evoke both responses. Job can indeed be painted as a tragic hero, as a Hebrew Prometheus who steadfastly holds to his integrity and defiantly challenges God and the world. But when Job has his theophanic vision, when he beholds God and the world from a double view, when he sees that he does not ultimately see, when he perceives that the incongruities are not totally resolvable, then he 'repents' and is duly 'restored' to the idyllic life of a serene society.[2] The eminent playwright,

[1] 'Man laughed only after the Exile, when he knew sin and suffering; the comical is a mark of man's revolt, boredom, and aspiration' (Sypher: 26). If Sypher and other critics are correct in this insight (as I believe them to be), and if it is true that the book of Job is born in Israel's exile, then one must deal seriously with the comic perspective in evaluating the different types of literature that emerged from Israel's experience of exile. In my judgment, the correlation of exile and comedy is one which needs to be explored more fully in dealing with Israelite literature such as Jonah, Esther, Daniel 1–6, etc.

[2] Cf. R. Polzin's conclusion as to the achievement of the book when one views its dominant structural movement: 'The framework of the story... is a work of genius. By means of its remarkable resources it takes the reader on a journey, the beginning of which may be

Christopher Fry, captures well these multiple dimensions in his perceptive observations on the interplay between tragedy and comedy:

> The bridge by which we cross from tragedy to comedy and back again is precarious and narrow. We find ourselves in one or the other by the turn of a thought... I know that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as tragedy. The characters press on to the theme with all their divisions and perplexities about them; they are already entered for the race to doom, and good and evil are an infernal tangle skinning the fingers that try to unravel them. If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy, and to some extent I have to cross the one before I can light on the other. [But] a bridge has to be crossed, a thought has to be turned. Somehow the characters have to unmortify themselves: to affirm life and assimilate death... Their hearts must be as determined as the phoenix; what burns must also light and renew: not by a vulnerable optimism but by a hard-won maturity of delight, by the intuition of comedy... The Book of Job is the great reservoir of comedy.[1]

The aura of ambiguity indeed remains to hover over the book of Job, but it is comedy—rich, full, celebrative of life despite its contradictions and riddles—that emerges as the final and dominant note in the Joban chorus of dissonant voices.

described as equilibrium without insight and whose conclusion is appropriately equilibrium with insight. The genius of this journey is that insight is conferred not by the avoidance of contradiction and inconsistency but precisely by the courageous integration of contradiction and resolution' (p. 200). I would support this interpretation of the fundamental movement of the book; I would only argue that it finds its best focus and richest meaning in the comic vision.

[1] C. Fry, 'Comedy', in Corrigan (p. 17). After I had completed this article, I received a notice about the West Coast Premier of Neil Simon's new play, 'God's Favorite', a contemporary, comic adaptation of the biblical story of Job. The comedy of Job lives on!

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# 'COME BACK, COME BACK THE SHULAMMITE' (SONG OF SONGS 7.1-10): A PARODY OF THE *WAṢF* GENRE

Athalya Brenner

## I

An enthusiastic description of the physical attributes of a loved person seems to be part and parcel of love poetry. For the sake of convenience, the Arabic term *waṣf*, which designates a descriptive love poem, is here adopted as a generic term,[1] as elsewhere in OT research on the Song of Songs.[2] In spiritual love poetry too the descriptive convention is often retained, although there it functions as an allegorical base for covert allusions.[3] It is customary to extol and glorify those physical attributes that make the loved one—usually the female[4]—desirable for the lover. Similes, metaphors, and hyperboles form the core of the description and are frequently extravagant. If we look closely enough, though, no 'description' is

[1] M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible, Garden City (New York: Doubleday, New York: 1977), p. 56: 'The *waṣf*, or description, understandably, is a staple of Arabic love songs and has analogues in other love poetry'. Samples from translations made by Jastrow and Dalman follow. See also M. Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), pp. 80-87.
[2] So literature cited in Pope. Also in F. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), pp. 55f., with the notes and literature mentioned.
[3] As illustrated by the ancient traditions (Jewish and Christian) of heavily allegorizing the Song. And see Landy, pp. 28-29.
[4] Pope, p. 56: 'While praise of feminine pulchritude predominated in love poetry generally, description and praise of the male lover is less common'. Cf. also p. 67 there, following Horst.

actually obtained: by the end of the poem we still have no idea what the loved person looks like, in the sense that no *complete* image is communicated. It seems that the details given are primarily designed not to supply a photograph, so to speak, but to involve the reader's senses and emotions, inasmuch as they presumably reflect the heightened emotional state of the assumed speaker.

The actual so-called description may be well ordered, thus conforming to a transparent descriptive model. Conversely, it may be haphazard, thus supplying an additional (structural) proof of the irate mood of the speaking lover. The tone, however, is almost always serious, celebratory, idealizing—as befits a fatal (subject) matter like love?

'Almost always' allows for exceptions or, rather, a counter-genre which rises out of the main stream and deconstructs it. In order to be effective, such a counter-treatment would use the chief literary conventions of the parent genre, so that it is recognized as a legitimate offshoot of the latter. Yet, it would introduce a certain shift by departing from one or more of those same conventions. Thus, by bringing in a seemingly minor change (or minor changes), the whole picture—rather than some of its relatively insignificant components—can be transformed into something else. Indeed, it is possible to radically alter the basic meaning (on the poet's side) and response (on the reader's side) of a *waṣf*, or any other poetic work, through such relatively minimal transmutations. The change might indicate, simply, a transition in mood, an additional angle supplied, rather than a radical alteration of viewpoint. On the other hand, it might signify criticism of a literary or social convention, or both.[1] The adherence to a recognizable literary convention, together with recognizable departures from it, may result in a parody of that same convention or genre—if and when (a) it can be established that a writer is deliberately parodizing, that is, imitating a style; and especially (b) if the reader discovers the 'imitation' to be an amusing or humorous comment on the values of the original literary form.

There are three *waṣf*-type poems in the Song of Songs—4.1-

[1] See section V below.

5 (with a part parallel in 6.4-7); 5.10-16; 7.1-10. The first deals with the figure of a female lover—'the beloved', in Landy's terms[1]—as does the third. The middle one deals with the figure of a male lover.[2] The ratio can hardly be accidental, despite our expectation that more male descriptions will be forthcoming, since the chief voice in the Song is a female voice.[3] This practice follows a well known pattern. Traditionally, *waṣf* poems deal with female beauty rather than with its male counterpart. Neither does the placing of the *waṣfs* within the book seem unplanned: they function as kingpins for the concentric-chiastic structural core of the whole work (chs. 4 to 7.1-10).[4] This central section begins and ends with female-figure *waṣfs*, while a male-figure *waṣf* stands at its own centre (5.9-16). The arrangement seems justified in view of the prominence of the female figure and voice throughout the Song. Superficially, then, such a chiastic arrangement fits in with the overall structure. On second thoughts, however, the question arises: why is another extensive female-describing *waṣf* necessary? One plausible answer is that it rounds off the structure of the whole poem (the Song of Songs in its entirety), for it places a female *waṣf* in two symmetrical positions within the text. As indicated, such a reason is structurally sound. Yet, it does not exclude the possibility of

1 Landy, *op. cit.* The consistent use of '(the) lover' for the male voice and '(the) beloved' for its female counterpart implies a critical decision. According to that view, the Song is a unified composition which revolves, in sequence, around two specific figures and their amorous liaison (Landy, pp. 33f.; M. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986], pp. 1-9). I do not wish to make a stand here either on the question of the homogeneous *vs.* collective nature of the Song, or on that of its dating. These problems, central as they are, have but little bearing on my subject.

2 Landy identifies the male 'lover' with 'the king', and the female lover/'beloved' with 'a country girl' (p. 27). Goulder (p. 3) concurs with the identification of the male lover. However, he assigns the (single) female role to an Arabian princess from Nadib, who arrives at King Solomon's palace to become one of his wives. Pope, who postulates a cultic origin for the Song (see especially pp. 210-28), assigns the roles differently.

3 A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 46-50.

4 Landy, pp. 54-58, especially p. 56.

another, which is the one I would like to explore: that, although the third poem deals with the same subject matter (a female lover's desirable physical attributes, and their impact), it also adds fresh insights to the previous catalogue of ch. 4. It would be my task in the following pages to demonstrate that the fresh material introduced by the *waṣf* of ch. 7 is motivated by insights into the comic elements of the dancing woman's figure. The tone of this poem is ribald and the humour sexual, although not to the point of actual obscenity. It is the combination of a fresh point of view and a different tone, much more than the subject matter or the particular utilization of stock of admittedly conventional metaphor, that distinguishes the Dance of the Shulammite as parody from the previous two *waṣfs* (which, as will be shown later, are closer to one another than to their humorous counterpart).

## II

Sexual humour may be blatant, scurrilous, coarse, lecherous, outspoken, irreverent, exuberant, vicious. Therefore, defining it as a guideline for understanding 7.1-10, or any other biblical passage, might arouse emotional and, consequently, also academic resistance on the part of the reader. Can love be funny? Should we not balk at laughing at it? Are we justified in ascribing jocular tendencies to biblical literature, well known for its lofty didactic nature? *Should* the Scriptures laugh at love in such a manner? Further, when it is so expressed, are we dealing with love, or with something else? And what about the sanctity of the text, and the allegorical interpretations attributed to the Song of Songs, including our passage, since early antiquity? Furthermore, and from another angle altogether: if we assume a 'lowly' humorous intent on the part of the assumed author(s), do we not enter the most dangerous ground of 'author's intent', which is to be trodden at one's peril only, or preferably not at all?[1] Even when we limit ourselves to

[1] For the shift from author's intent to reader's response as a pivot for literary criticism, see J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, 1987), pp. 31ff.

dealing with the 'reader's response' rather than the 'author's intent',[1] the attribution of sexual humour to the passage remains problematic. For it can, and should, be argued that a joke is effective and, indeed, recognizable as such only when it is *funny*. We hardly need Freud's authority to know that when a joke or comical remark requires extensive explanations, it does not work.[2] Therefore, if the *waṣf* of Song 7.1-10 has not been recognized as a humorous piece or a parody of its genre until now, does not that mean that it simply is not funny?

Excessive reverence towards ideologies and their supportive texts excludes the recognition of the existence of humour. For, whereas ideology is a rationalized (if not always rational) response, humour functions as a subversive agent of the conscious.[3] Thus, it may attack and even cancel out conscious ideological stands. It follows that in order to see the humour of the *waṣf* under discussion, be it to our personal taste or otherwise, we must suspend our respect for the Scriptures and their didactic intent,[4] at least for a short duration. If we are pre-

[1] Culler, pp. 64-83 ('Stories of Reading').

[2] S. Freud (translated and edited J. Strachey), *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (The Pelican Freud Library, 6; 1976, 1981). See the introduction, pp. 39-46 (on jokes) and elsewhere, for example pp. 137ff. Jokes are usually classified as a sub-species of humour and the comic (p. 138). Therefore I feel justified in using Freud extensively as an authority for the present discussion even though, strictly speaking, far be it from me to view Song 7.1-10 as a joke *per se*.

[3] Freud, chs. V ('The Motives of Jokes—Jokes as a Social Process') and VI ('The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and the Unconscious').

[4] Again, a formulation by Freud seems to apply to our case beautifully. While discussing a joke made by the poet Heine on Catholic and Protestant priests (pp. 128-29), Freud writes of his own reluctance to utilize that particular joke (p. 132): 'I told myself that among my readers there would probably be a few who felt respect not only for religion but for its governors and assistants. Such readers would merely be indignant... and would get into an emotional state which would deprive them of all interest'. If one includes 'religious texts' within 'religion', as one should, a predictable reader reaction, such as Freud anticipates, might bias the response to a biblical text. Indeed, the Sages of the Talmud list laughter among the emotional attitudes that preclude divinity *šᵉkînâh*; so in *b. Shebi'ith* 30b and *Pesahim* 117a).

It is often insisted upon that there is an inherent contrast between the didactic intent attributed to biblical literature in most of its mani-

pared to tolerate such suspension for a while, then the full connotative and denotative dimensions of the Shulammite *waṣf* spring to the surface and fun replaces heavy sentiment. Only for a while, though. Love, we must remember, is predominantly a serious, sacred matter; and its complexity admits suffering and tragedy much more readily than fun and comedy.[1]

## III

Obviously, the key for defining 7.1-10 as a parodized, self-deconstructing,[2] tongue-in-cheek treatment of the *waṣf* genre lies in comparing it to the other two occurrences of the same genre in the Song, 4.1-7 and 5.8-16.[3] Superficially, all three

festations and the employment of humour. Such a claim does not make much sense. Educational motives do not necessarily exclude humour. On the contrary. It is almost a truism to restate that some species of humour—notably parody, satire, and irony—have served, from early antiquity on, to illuminate intellectual, moral and social problems. To assume that biblical thought found humour too unsuitable a vehicle to enlist for 'sacred' purposes seems absurd, since laughter may be a good teacher. Admittedly, though, instances of biblical humour in its various guises are neither numerous nor always transparent, which does not absolve the critic from identifying and analysing them wherever they do appear.

[1] It is perhaps worth noting that, in keeping with this train of popular thought, we tend to be profoundly moved by love tragedies, even though love comedies may give us more pleasure (of another kind altogether). Needless to say, in the Song love and its physical manifestations are treated most seriously, barring our instance (and, perhaps, 8.8ff.).

[2] In the sense that it is constructed as a *double entendre*. Its form and imagery are those of a descriptive adoration poem, while its purpose is different from the latter's. In Freud's terms, we are here dealing with a juxtaposition of technique *vs* purpose.

[3] Properly speaking, the aim of the *waṣfs* within their present word contexts is not description only, but seduction and ultimately consummation. Whether they originally belong to the situational context of a wedding celebration is immaterial for the present business. Hence, it seems better to include both introductions and conclusions to the main body of the descriptions in the poems themselves. Landy's stand is different. For instance, he defines 7.8-10 as an 'extended metaphor' appended to the *waṣf* of 7.1-7, and 4.8-5.1 as the 'extended metaphor' to 4.1-7 (p. 56). Thus he attempts to achieve structural symmetry. It must be said, however, that such symmetry can be

share the same motivation and basic technique. When we look at the details, however, we find that the differences are considerable, especially in the case of 7.1-10 *vis-à-vis* the other two.

All three begin by stating that the female lover and male lover are visually, aesthetically, beautiful. This is explicitly so in 4.1a (twice) and 5.10b: in 7.1b the statement features but is limited.[1] All three end, again, on a similar note. The female lover's aesthetic beauty is reiterated in 4.7, after the tempting sensual value of her overall picture is alluded to (4.6). The male lover of 5.15a-16 is monumentally handsome, all sweetness and light. The comment in 7.8 is analogous: aesthetic pleasure is viewed as the forerunner to sensuous and sexual pleasure. The latter comment, however, is relatively elaborated upon much more explicitly and daringly[2] (7.9-10a),[3] than in the previous two passages. In short, all three poems share a circular structure and lead to the same conclusion, but the third is more articulate and forward in tone and purpose. The forwardness is achieved by a combination of tone and imagery which depart radically from the tone and imagery that conclude the other two *waṣf*s (see below).

In ch. 4 the physical 'description' starts with the head and proceeds downwards, more or less in an orderly fashion.[4] The

achieved by defining 7.8-10 as a conclusion and including it within the *waṣf* proper—especially since in 4.6, again, the allusion to consummation is quite obvious; and the link of 4.8-9 to the preceding and successive verses is far from clarified by calling them an 'extended metaphor'. Further, the beginning of 4.10, 'How beautiful...', indicates, like 4.1 and 7.2, the start of a new unit.

1 Since here the notion of beauty is limited to the woman's feet and/or, by metonymy, footwork (= dance steps).

2 Goulder, pp. 57-58.

3 Verse 10b seems very corrupt. Goulder (pp. 58-59) understands v. 10 as a dialogue between the lover (the king, 10a) and his beloved (the princes, 10b). '"Your mouth is intoxicating", says the king: "it goes", replies the princess with a twinkle, "to my beloved's 'uprights', it glides with my lips over his 'sleepers'"'. Without commenting on Goulder's king/princess theory, his interpretation makes sense. So does his remark: 'It is no surprise that the Hebrew tradition has obscured these delicate euphemisms... or that the Song was treated with caution as leading to lust. But the meaning is really quite plain' (p. 59).

4 Cf. the summary of Horst's position on the *Beschreibungslied waṣf*

inventory ends with an allusion to the female lover's breasts (4.5), but does not proceed to the lower regions of her body. Can this be the result of accident? Should we assume that for some obscure reason only part of this specific poem came down to us? The existence of the circular ending (4.6-7) which, strictly speaking, lies outside the *waṣf* proper,[1] makes such an evaluation a remote possibility. What, then, can be the reason for the incompleteness of the lover's 'picture'? Clearly, the parts of the body described are those that are unclothed, visible—or, in the case of the breasts, partly so—to the eyes of the beholder. This seems like a public concession to modesty (although a metaphorically veiled allusion to the consummation of the speaker's passion is, of course, contained in 4.6). Such a concession, one may speculate, is probably motivated by reverence or, at least, an assumed conventional attitude of reverence, towards the loved person. At any rate, the loved one is perceived by the reader as a sculpture, a bust—not a complete person, hardly a body to be made love to. Since the love object lacks some vital parts, the declared passion of the assumed speaker becomes hardly credible: the constraints of chastity serve as a deconstructive (in the literal sense) and conventional (in the social-sociological sense) agent.

A similar attitude features in the portrayal of the male lover's physique in 5.10-16. Like the previous one, this *waṣf* commences from the head and proceeds downwards. Unlike the former, it supplies a head-to-toe rundown. Yet, there is a vast difference between the terms used for depicting the lover's head and those referring to the rest of his figure.

The first section (vv. 11-13) has the same kind of sensual imagery already encountered in ch. 4. It uses a few of the

in Pope, p. 67, together with the examples from Palestinian and other love poetry cited there (and referred to above, p. 251 n. 1). It seems that bodily description tends to move, almost invariably, from the head downwards. So the examples in Pope, pp. 56 (Palestinian), 70 (hymn to Ninurta), 73 (an Egyptian magic text), 74 (the Chester Beatty love songs), 75 (from Ugarit), 76 (Ninurta). Against all these stands the description of the Indian love goddess Parvati (pp. 87-88) which corresponds, in its order as in other points, to Song 7.1ff.

[1] See p. 256 n. 3.

metaphors that feature there,[1] and roundly appeals to the senses: visual,[2] tactile,[3] olfactory,[4] auditory,[5] and, perhaps, also gustatory[6] sensations are evoked. In contradistinction, the second section (vv. 14-15a) represents the lover's torso and legs as a monumental sculpture made of precious metals and stones.[7] This has the effect of involving two senses only, the visual and tactile, thus impoverishing the picture and divesting it of more comprehensive sensual impact. The overall impression one is left with is that of the cold beauty and maddening unavailability of a statue, rather than with the live warmth of a human being. Instead of celebrating desire, the literary convention of the statue[8] promotes a distancing of the love object; instead of describing the physique of the love object to a sensual/sexual end, the poem brings about a dislocation of emotion—from the sensuous to the purely aesthetic. In other words, no 'real' picture emerges, no 'real' lover is portrayed, no point of reference outside language/literary idiom is presented to the reader to hold on to. It is indeed possible to fanta-

[1] The metaphors seem to belong to a set stock. Their distribution within a specific poem, though, exhibits some variation in application. Thus the comparison of eyes to doves recurs twice (4.1; 5.12). Running water may feature in a metaphor depicting eyes, as does milk (5.12). Elsewhere, it is involved in the description of teeth (4.2). Aromatics (4.6; 5.13), fortifications (4.4; 5.13c) and mountains (Gilead, 4.1; Lebanon, 5.15) constitute recurrent features as well.

[2] So the colour phenomena indicated—sheen and blackness (v. 11), water and milk colour (v. 12); birds—doves, ravens (vv. 11-12); plants—aromatics and lilies (v. 12).

[3] The image of the birds bathing in milk (and water, v. 12).

[4] *bōśem*, *merqāḥîm* (aromatics), and myrrh (v. 13).

[5] The noise of the doves? (v. 12).

[6] As it seems, the whole point of the description is to promote the touching of the physical inventory described, notably the hair tresses (v. 11) and lips (v. 13).

[7] The list contains gold (*zāhāb* and *pāz*) and perhaps some other metal (*'ešet*, but cf. BDB, p. 799 and Ben Yehudah, IV, p. 4761); turquoise and lapiz lazuli (*taršîš* and *sappîrîm*; cf. A. Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), pp. 166-67 and notes); ivory; and marble (*šēš*). All the materials are expensive, but very different from those used for the description of the lover's head.

[8] For the correspondence to statues of gods, the possible connection to Akkadian *Göttertypentext*, and its invasion into love poetry, cf. Pope, pp. 535-36.

size about making love to a statue, as has been done within the realm of literature and outside it. Nevertheless, most people would sooner prefer an actual flesh-and-blood model, even if it is somewhat blemished. Therefore, the effectiveness of the description is somewhat curtailed as soon as the theme of the statue is introduced. Thus modesty is retained and desire contained, at least as far as social convention and public appearance are concerned. The price for such containment is a certain lack of descriptive specificity, which may result in a diminished sensual involvement on the part of the reader.

The poem of the Shulammite in ch. 7 is altogether different. Like the *waṣf* of ch. 5, it alludes to the whole body. Yet, unlike the other two *waṣf*s, it starts with the feet (7.2) and proceeds upwards, to the head and hair (7.5b-6). Could it be argued that, since the Shulammite is presented as a dancer, this is the 'natural' course the description should follow? Perhaps. Still, the departure from the *waṣf* procedure better attested in the Song of Songs (from the head downwards) seems to imply more than an innocent break induced by the difference in situational context. Since the reader is now spared no physical detail—including an explicit reference to the dancer's vulva (v. 3a)[1]—it seems that here modesty is forsaken in favour of the involvement of the senses, the sexual motivation (of the speaker/x), and the expected response in kind (of the listeners and readers).

Modesty and sexual decorum imply at least professed reverence towards the object of desire. Once this conventional reverence is discarded, a lighter mood may set in. Reverence does not necessarily exclude joy. It more often than not, however, does exclude humour. Neither does joy always imply humour, although it might.[2] If we are satisfied, at this point, that the mood of the poem in 7.1-10 is much lighter and more irreverent than that of its previous counterparts, the road is open to showing that it is not only that, but humorous as well. This, together with an affirmation that the type of humour involved is anchored in jocular/sexual—rather than visual/

1 So Pope, Goulder, and others for the verse.

2 Cf. A. Brenner, 'On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter, and the Comic', in this volume.

aesthetic—allusions, requires taking a closer look at the details of the descriptive procedure.

## IV

The poem begins with an invitation to the Shulammite[1] to perform once more[2] 'the dance of the two camps', and a response to that invitation (7.1a and 1b).[3] It is far from clear who and of which gender are the speakers in each case although, as it transpires, the Shulammite complies with the invitation and dances. Neither is there agreement among commentators about the meaning of the rare[4] *maḥᵃnāyim*, literally 'two camps', mentioned in the invitation. Obviously, as a solo dance is called for, one cannot talk about two 'camps', that is, 'rows', of dancers.[5] I can recall no interpretation of the phrase which makes sense of the situation,[6] precisely because

1 Pope supplies an exhaustive survey of the name/appellative and its significance (pp. 596-600). I am not convinced by any of the interpretations advanced. Since the Hebrew form does have the article prefixed, I prefer to transcribe the word as an adjective (after the NEB) rather than a proper name.

2 Unlike Pope and other commentators, I can see no reason for an emendation. Pope statates that 'The double imperative is repeated for emphasis and rhythm, as in Judg. 5.12 and in Ugaritic' (p. 595). I submit that here, as well as in Judg. 5.12, the sense 'do again' might be indicated by the repetition.

3 According to Goulder (pp. 54-55), 1b is the dancer's verbal response; thereby she takes up the challenge. According to the NEB translation a dialogue indeed obtains in the verse, but between a male chorus and the bridegroom (p. 805).

4 When two 'camps' or companies' are indicated in other passages, the plural *maḥᵃnôt* is used. So with the two companies Jacob divides his people and livestock into in Gen. 32.1-12; and the camps (in the plural) of the Philistines against the Israelites in 1 Sam. 17. The toponym *maḥᵃnāyim*, although obviously of the same grammatical (dual) formation, cannot elucidate the word as it appears here. It denotes 'two camps', but without specifying the relationship between them. Further, the passage dealing with the place name in Gen. 32.2-3 is abrupt and corrupt. It must be considered a covert name allusion, but the nature of the allusion precludes its usefulness for the Song passage. And see Pope, pp. 603f.

5 So Goulder, p. 55, and NEB for the verse.

6 Pope, pp. 601-14, for the military divine interpretation and others.

the expression *kimḥōlat hammaḥᵃnāyim* is usually understood as referring to the arrangement of the *dancers* (in the plural). This is not necessarily so. The phrase may also be interpreted as a 'dance performed between two rows (or camps, or companies)' of *spectators* rather than performers. A solo dance performed between 'two camps of spectators' makes as much linguistic sense as a war duel fought by two representatives-middlemen between two army camps.[1] This would make a plausible picture. If there are two rows of spectators, the Shulammite is called upon to dance in the middle. The audience is probably active and noisy, slightly drunk perhaps. An extensive running commentary accompanies the dance, a commentary which becomes more and more daring as the dance becomes faster, the atmosphere warms up, and the drink flows.[2] Again: it is customary to assume that this poem, like 4.1ff., is uttered by a lover in a solemn mood. One should nevertheless consider the option that a looser situation is implied; that the lover's voice is far from solemn, as befits such an occasion of dance and drink;[3] that he is encouraged to be flippant by other, presumably male also, spectators; that a dialogue and/or chorus, rather than a single adoring voice, are indicated in some places.[4] Presumably, the change in tone and

[1] As in 1 Sam. 17. A similar situation, with twelve (rather than one) representatives for each of the warring sides, features in the Joab/Abner skirmish at Gibeon, 2 Sam. 2.12-16. The word 'camp', *maḥᵃneh*, or '(2) camps' is not mentioned in the latter passage, and the event described takes place at Gibeon. Yet, Abner and his men come from *Maḥᵃnayim*, Eshbaal's headquarters (vv. 8-9). Therefore and nevertheless, this story might be considered a covert allusion to the toponym as well.

[2] See below for v. 3b, and the next note.

[3] This, to the extent of my knowledge, has not been recognized. Horst and others have indeed placed the *waṣf* within the possible *Sitz im Leben* of a wedding. Yet, the atmosphere relevant to the occasion, and its possibly flippant consequences, have not been emphasized.

[4] The use of dialogue is one of the basic conventions of the Song. Hence, it is plausible that more than one speaker is at work within the passage. As in 8.8 (not a *waṣf*), the audience defines itself as plural by the verb *neḥᵉzeh* = 'we shall gaze'. In other words, the voice that speaks or recites the poem is either corporate, or single, or assigned to various individuals. A single poetic voice might represent an individual as well as a corporate personality, a communal recital as well as a

approach corresponds to the change in situation. Neither a wooing procedure (4.1ff.), nor a longing evocation of an absent and sought-for lover (5.8) are implied, but a close scrutiny of a present, live woman in public performance.

The poem begins, conventionally enough, with descriptive and metaphorical materials that feature in the other *waṣfs*. It commences, like 4.1, from the notion of the female lover's aesthetic beauty, this time dealing first with her feet (7.2a). The next item, the dancer's thighs, is again depicted in terms similar to those we have already encountered: they are compared to exquisite jewels.[1] Similarly, we remember, the male lover's torso in ch. 5 was covered rather than revealed by its presentation as a statue made of precious stone and metal (5.14-15a). And here, at this point exactly, the masking of the love object's body by items of clothing or comparison to artefacts ends, for the dancer's vulva[2] is boldly introduced (7.3a). It is conceivable that the boldness of the description is inspired by the scanty dress sported or not sported by the dancer.[3] Nonetheless, the verification of this point is less important than diagnosing the audacious tone of the description, which is anchored in its situational and modal frames of reference.

Some modern commentators understand the next stich, *'al-yeḥsar hammāzeg* (v. 3b), as an allusion to the womb's juices, symbolized by (mingled) wine. I would like to suggest that the expression is both denotative and figurative. Wine is called for

solo appearance, while indications concerning shifts in speakers are not always supplied. This approach, admittedly, detracts from the supposed intimate and solemn nature of the passage.

[1] Pope, pp. 615-17, supplies a comprehensive commentary on the difficult *ḥ^a^lā'îm* and *'ommān*.

[2] The vulva, and not the navel, is here designated by *šorrēk* (Goulder, p. 56). The introduction of the vulva is a departure from chs. 4–5, where the description is confined to bodily parts that can actually be seen. Within a list of visual attributes, this item functions as a deconstructive agent. It is referred to as if seen, thus—at one and the same time—upholding and belying the formal framework. In my opinion, this departure cannot be explained in terms of blatant eroticism only. A change of attitude and tone is implied.

[3] Cf. Landy, p. 69. Still, nakedness or near-nakedness does not wholly justify a description of what cannot be seen, inasmuch as clothing does not necessarily restrict the imagination.

to be served to the speaker(s) and spectators by way of self-encouragement[1] and, at the same time, a sly reference is made to the sexuality of the dancing woman. Such a double sense, as Freud points out, is characteristic of a certain type of joke, whose enjoyment is almost exclusive to those present but often proves elusive for those absent from the original scene.[2]

Next in line is the dancer's belly, likened to a mound of wheat bordered by lily flowers (7.3c-d). Again, the description is forward and quite transparent: the stomach and the pubic hair are referred to. It appears that the dancing damsel is far from slim. Learned lines have been written about the Rubens- or Botticelli-style 'statuesque' figure implied, and the changing tastes and fashions in female beauty over the ages.[3] For all we know, the ancients might have indeed preferred fat and healthy-looking to skinny women. But, who knows, perhaps they did not. The decisive factors for interpretation, here as in other instances, is the word context and the accumulation of clues defining the tone of the poem. Interpreting the allusion to the dancer's obvious corpulence as an adoring remark within the present context seems to me to be conditioned by the wish to view 7.1ff. as straightforward praise, much like the other *waṣf*s. If we are willing to consider the present poem as a humorous offshoot of the *waṣf* convention, much like some of Shakespeare's sonnets[4]—a parody which uses conventional materials[5] and form while, simultaneously, departing from the parent norm—another picture emerges. The dancer is, frankly, fat, her belly in dance motion is big and quivering, much like an unstable mound of wheat.[6] She looks comical;

1 Self-encouragement that, likewise, seems to interrupt the poetic flow features in the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5.12), where Deborah is presented as the speaking voice.

2 Freud, p. 137 and elsewhere, attributes the success of such situational jokes to their technique.

3 So, for instance, Goulder, p. 56.

4 Notably sonnets nos. 130, 138, 141; and see below.

5 Such as the eliciting of sensual response, the use of stock metaphors, and the adherence to an ordered framework of description.

6 The unstable character of the referent (mound) has to be taken into account as well as its size and shape, on the metaphorical and the referential level.

her body inspires pithy comments. The only things about her that are depicted as truly beautiful are her feet and artistic-looking thighs. Still, at one and the same time, she is energetic, scantily dressed or not at all, and—most important—immensely desirable. Otherwise, why bother with a blow-by-blow account of her dance?

Next come her breasts, 'the twin fawns of a gazelle' (v. 4). On the face of it, this is the exact parallel of 4.5, as well as a foil for the corresponding image of the male lover as a fawn (2.9, 17; 8.14).[1] Once more, much has been written on the referential meaning of this image, with no consensus reached.[2] However, if one takes the situational context into account, and gives up the notion of producing an identical sense for both occurrences (7.4 and 4.5) of the simile—a fresh and humorous, slightly comical possibility emerges. The dancer is in constant motion. Together with the rest of the body, her breasts move fast, much like frolicking fawns. This is titillating, but might look ludicrous as well. At any rate, it is as good a pretext as any to laugh, aloud if through a seemingly respectable metaphor, at the woman's charms. The laughter, let us remember, does not cancel out the effectiveness of those same charms. If anything, it might indicate a modicum of excited embarrassment on the part of the speaker(s) and audience. Humour may indeed function as, and be motivated by, an unconscious mask or mask for the unconscious. This observation is especially valid for contexts high in sexual tension and fraught with an anxiety of exposing one's feelings prematurely.[3]

The dancer's neck is likened to an ivory tower (v. 5a), rightly understood by Goulder as a variant of 'the tower of

[1] Landy, 'Androgyny: Fawns and Lilies', pp. 73-92 (for fawns and other metaphors employed in the passage). In general, Landy's discussion is highly perceptive, illuminating, and inspiring. I find, however, that he neglects the occasional humour in the Song almost entirely.

[2] For an exhaustive discussion see Landy, *op. cit.*, and the next section, pp. 93ff.

[3] Freud (p. 285): 'The comic of sexuality and obscenity would deserve more detailed consideration... The starting-point would once more... be exposure...' See also pp. 141-46.

David' in 4.4.[1] Although this 'tower' imagery occurs in both *waṣfs*, one is not absolved of finding its function in each one, without presupposing that their function is identical in both cases. In other words, in what way does a simile likening a woman's neck to a tower constitute a term of praise? The neck is exaggerated, it is like a tower. Whereas the image in 4.4 is complete—the female lover's bejewelled neck is like a tower adorned wth warriors' shields—and therefore comprehensible, its counterpart in 7.5a is opaque. A more specific connotative sense,[2] since the denotation is not readily transparent, would probably depend on the context—the substance and tone of previous as well as subsequent imagery.

What about the dancer's eyes and nose (the rest of v. 5)? The pools of Heshbon do not feature elsewhere in the Bible as an epitome of famous beauty spots. Hence, this item is even more obscure than the (admittedly difficult) conventional comparisons of the loved person's eyes to doves (4.1; 5.12), or doves washing in water and milk (5.12). Are the points of reference the size or limpidity of the pools, to which the woman's eyes might be compared to advantage?[3] The text does not transparently lend itself to such interpretations, neither does any other OT occurrence substantiate them. They seem to be drawn from the need to constitute v. 5 as terms of praise. In fact, the public water places outside the gate of Heshbon,[4] like those outside the gates of other cities, were used for drinking, watering of animals, washing bodies and clothes, and clearing debris. Their waters were probably turbid rather than serenely limpid. And why Heshbon? It is a foreign town; and the foreigners' water is by definition much dirtier than ours, to be sure! And so must the dancer's eyes be, much more turbid

1 Goulder, p. 56.
2 Landy, p. 87.
3 So most commentators. But cf. Goulder, who imagines two pools, each on the one side of the city gate, as the eyes are to either side of the nose (p. 56). This makes little sense, since there is nothing unique about such a description.
4 See Pope, pp. 625-26, for the Hebrew *ḥešbôn* and *bat rabbîm*. Unlike Goulder, Landy and others, and in line with the ancient translations, I understand *bat rabbîm* as a poetic synonym of *ḥešbôn*, not a geographically obscure toponym.

than the spectators'/readers', a natural result of her strenuous exertions. By now she is probably perspiring freely, her figure is far from the dignified ones of the female or male love objects that enjoy a lofty statuesque repose (chs. 4, 5). Perhaps she does indeed look ludicrous; her appearance by now perhaps deserves or may provoke derisive comment.

That 'The ancients did not admire enormous noses any more than we do'[1] sounds reasonable. Whether it is so or not, any attempt to explain away the 'Lebanese' dimensions of the dancer's nose remains unconvincing.[2] The fact is that, like Marvell's 'Coy Mistress',[3] Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady',[4] and the dark girl of the Song of Songs herself (1.5-6), some features of the dancer are far from conventionally handsome. True, she dances well and suggestively (v. 2a). Her thighs are like artistic jewels (2b), her vulva guessed to be generous (3a-b)—so far on the credit side. On the other hand, her belly is fat and jumpy like her breasts (3c, 4), her neck is (disproportionately?) long, her eyes by now turbid, her nose outsize (5). In terms of slang, she is 'a mixed bag'; and it is allowed, within the particular life-situation, to poke fun at her, the object of personal and communal desire. The licence for jocularity and laughter is derived from the situation, inasmuch as it relates to the twisting of previous, conventionally used metaphors (Lebanon, tower, fawns).[5]

Verse 6 ostensibly deals with the dancer's head, *rō'š*, then

1 Goulder, p. 56.

2 Landy, p. 86: 'It is not a huge nose'. See also Pope, pp. 626-27 for various opinions.

3 So the English metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) in his poem 'To His Coy Mistress'. The poem is to be found in H.M. Margoliouth (ed.), *Andrew Marvell: Poems and Letters* (Oxford, 1952). For the reader's convenience, its text is reproduced (with modern spelling) in an appendix at the end of this paper. For general information on Marvell see G. Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to the Metaphysical Poets* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968), ch. 9.

4 Sonnet no. 127.

5 Pope sums the matter up beautifully: 'If our lady is superhuman in nature and size, then the dismay about her towering or mountainous nose disappears as the perspective and proportions fall into focus' (p. 627). From admitting exaggeration to recognizing humour there is but one small step.

proceeds to relate to her hair. I think, however, that the *karmel*, 'Mount Carmel' which presumably refers to the whole head does not make sense as such. Goulder's explanation that the head resembles that well-known mountain, and the hair is like its dense forest,[1] seems unsupported by the text itself. In addition, the description of a detail (hair) is much more in order here than that of the more general 'head'. Therefore, and with the view to a possible parallelism, I accept the often suggested minimal emendation of *karmel* to *karmîl*,[2] which is the biblical alternative to and later equivalent of *šānî*, 'crimson'.[3] Thus we gain a parallel pair of 'crimson' and 'purple' ('your head is like crimson, your hair like royal purple soaked in the troughs'; for the translation and sense of the entire verse see below), both referring to the dancer's hair.

At this point most commentators talk about the reddish *ḥenna* (red dye) properties of the dancer's glinting hair, but the colour reference appears to be mistaken.[4] The reference is probably to threads or woven cloth, soaked in troughs[5] during the dyeing process.[6] Purple and—to a lesser extent—crimson were exclusively worn by royalty and nobles; this explains the expression *'argāmān melek*, 'royal purple'.[7] After restoring the text and imagery, and in keeping with the designations of previous metaphors, the referent becomes clearer. The dancer's tresses,[8] to begin with perhaps well groomed and

1 Goulder, p. 57.
2 So BH, Ibn Janah, and Ibn Ezra in his commentary.
3 So in 2 Chron. 2.6, 13; 3.4. And see Brenner, *Colour Terms*, pp. 143-45.
4 Pope says, 'Crimson hair seems no more strange than the purplish tresses of the following line'. (p. 629). Indeed it does not seem more strange, but also not less so. We ought to consider giving up the notion that both *karmîl* and *'argāmān* denote colour here. In other words, Henna (= *kōper*)-dyed hair is out of the question.
5 = *rᵉhāṭîm*. So also in Gen. 30.38, 41 and Exod. 2.16. See Pope, p. 630.
6 So Y. Felix, *The Song of Songs: Nature, Plot and Allegory*, (Jerusalem; 1974 [in Hebrew]), pp. 22 and 109.
7 Which assumes a slight change in the biblical punctuation—so Felix, *op. cit.* For other interpretations of v. 6, usually understanding the last three words as an additional stich, see the commentaries.
8 Or locks, for *dallat*. Cf. Isa. 38.12, the root *dll* (= 'hang, below'; BDB, p. 195), and perhaps the name of Samson's woman Delilah, whose link

arranged, are now—after dancing for a while—wet with perspiration, much like packs of thread in the dyeing vessels. There is no reason to assume that the picture she now presents is aesthetically captivating.[1] Rather than a recognition of pure aesthetics, other responses might be evoked within the spectators' psyche by the dance: laughter; desire; embarrassment caused by that same desire for a dancer who is provocative and appetizing, but far from conventionally good-looking. At least, this is implied by the non-conventional 'praise': a good-natured and humorous description which anchors desire not in aesthetics, but in energy and sex appeal.

Thus we get to the finale of the *waṣf* or, we should now say, the *waṣf* parody proper. Verse 7 sums the picture up: the Shulammite is fair and sweet inasmuch as sexual pleasure is concerned (which is the point of the whole poem).[2] And lest we err, the appendix to the description states the speaker's intention even more explicitly. He has laughed at the dancer without undue reverence not because he does not respect her—we know nothing of that, one way or the other. He laughs at her because she is comical—even ridiculous—as well as sexy. One response does not cancel the other out—on the contrary! Ultimately, it is the sexy-sensual side that prevails. The pastoral similes and metaphors of vv. 8-10[3] make it clear that the speaker's intention and, perhaps, the Shulammite's too,[4] is to bring passion to its consummation. The aim of the poem, then, is serious. Yet the means is jocular, and completely devoid of the idolization and reverence typical of, for instance, 4.1-7 (where the sexual goal is overtly identical) and 5.10-16 (where it is not stated overtly as such). Serenity, it transpires, befits the artistic evocation of works of art (the statues of chs. 4 and 5); humour is eminently more suitable for dealing with a flesh-and-blood object of desire.

to Samson's hair is obvious.

1 Goulder, p. 57.

2 Consult Pope for the use of the root *n'm*, pp. 631-32.

3 The palm, vine, vine clusters, wine—together with the focus on the woman's breasts—all point to sexual intoxication. Cf., for instance, Landy, p. 75.

4 So Goulder, who translates the latter part of v. 10 as the woman's = his 'princess' answer (pp. 54, 58-59).

## V

The descriptive love poem of 7.1-7, together with its appendix in vv. 8-10, is a parody of the serious *waṣf* genre. I find it possible to define it so not as a result of speculations in regard to the author's intent but, rather, through an analysis of the functionality of the imagery within the word context; and the tracing of this imagery to the extra-linguistic situational context. To draw a loose analogy, the poem relates to its counterparts in chs. 4 and 5 much as a humorous Shakespearean love sonnet[1] relates to its serious equivalents within the repertoire of the same poet,[2] or other poets who use the same poetic conventions. If we do not hesitate to retain the title 'love sonnet' for some of Shakespeare's light-hearted lines, we should not refrain from accepting our poem for what it is either: 7.1-10 is a jocular/comical treatment of the theme of love, through form and imagery similar to other treatments, but in a different mood.

Is the change in the present case brought about by authorial design, and what can the possible motivation for such an admittedly deviant presentation be? These questions will be dealt with shortly.[3] Meanwhile, let it be stressed that the deviations of this poem from the norms inherent and displayed by its counterparts, if and when they are recognized as deviations by the listener and/or reader, are proof enough that low comedy is at play here. However, in order to recognize the humour of the piece, one has to forego two separate sets of prejudices. One, that no passage in the Scriptures can or

1 See below, sonnet no. 130.

2 Cf., for example, the glorifying tones of sonnets 132 (description of eyes) or 18, both of which celebrate the beloved in purely conventional terms.

3 Authorial design in the present case—as in others—can never be proven conclusively. Yet, to my mind, it can be attempted—in spite of general and justified methodological considerations—wherever it seems possible to define. I think that the existence of humour and parody in our passage is difficult to contest. Nonetheless, since there is no scholarly consensus regarding it, it is a 'moot point'. Further, and despite the difficulties inherent in the method, a discussion that departs from the viewpoint of the informed though subjective reader (whatever that strange animal might be), is generally agreed by modern literary theorists to be more fruitful.

should treat love and sex jokingly and with good cheer, especially a passage from an opus that has received such extensive allegorical treatment.[1] And two, that love and desire themselves should be treated with respect in any type of literature, if they are not to be demoted from eroticism to pornography. I believe that these two kinds of objection have hindered many readers from admitting the true nature of the passage in question, and from laughing openly together with the voice of the speaker(s), the assumed male lover(s).

To sum up. It appears that the dancer of 7.1-10 cuts a comical figure. The commentator's jokes are not cynical or vicious but, nevertheless, self-revealing[2] and tendentious.

I would like to conclude this part of the argument by quoting from two seemingly unrelated pieces. The first is sonnet no. 130 by Shakespeare, in which he pokes fun at his love object in no uncertain terms. Yet, in the concluding couplet he celebrates the fact that all her physical faults, funny and maddening as they are, do not have any bearing on his love for her.

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
> And in some perfumes is there more delight

[1] In his commentary, M. Pope supplies both Jewish and Christian allegorical interpretations for each verse of the biblical text. This practice has enormous religio-historical value for any reader. Still, its contribution towards the comprehension of the poetics of the text itself is limited. On the contrary, the respect most of us entertain towards allegory and its supposed orthogenesis may inhibit fresh insights into the possible *p^ešaṭ* (explicit meaning).

[2] Freud states (p. 166) that 'The pleasure in the case of a tendentious joke arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place'. He goes on to say (pp. 166-67) that two types of obstacle might prevent the immediate realization of pleasure (to which jokes are a substitute): external circumstances and/or internal impulse. If we agree that the *waṣf* of Song 7.1-10 has a purpose (= seduction) that must be delayed until the end of the dance, and that humour is a way of dealing with the resultant tension or an attempt to suppress this tension temporarily, then Freud's observation is pertinent to the psychological state reflected in the passage.

> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
> I grant I never saw a goddess go,—
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.

The protest against conventional, idolized, idealized images of love and of the female love object, similar to those expressed in love poetry of the *waṣf* type and intentionality, speaks for itself. Nevertheless, the humorous attack on social and literary convention retains the traditional formal guise of a sonnet and, through an explicit twisting of stock metaphors, a reversal of meaning is achieved. The criticism is levelled through humour, but its serious message is unmistakable. I suggest that the *waṣf* of Song 7.1-10 operates in much a similar manner.

The second quotation is from Freud. It sums up the question of 'sexual' humour, the existence of which in our passage I have tried to demonstrate.

> The spheres of sexuality and obscenity offer the amplest occasions for obtaining comic pleasure alongside pleasurable sexual excitement; for they can show human beings in their dependence on bodily needs (degradation) or they can reveal the physical demands lying behind the claim of mental love (unmasking).[1]

In my opinion, these two quotations sum up the case for a comic/humorous tone of Song 7.1-10 admirably well.

## VI

So far, and without saying so directly, my reading of all three *waṣfs*, and especially 7.1-10, has not been gender-free. It was a male reading. I asssumed the artificial guise of a male reader, since the voice of the parody seems to be a male voice commenting on a female figure; most of the commentators explaining the passage have been males; the pertinent literary

1 Freud, p. 286.

analogues from Western literature were composed by males (Shakespeare, Marvell, the Metaphysical poets); and I used Freud as chief authority for psychological interpretation.

A male reading is, naturally, not the only option. I will therefore briefly transform myself now into a female reader and, from this perspective, entertain the notion of viewing the Song as a piece of female *writing*. Such a transformation makes good sense not only for me personally, but is actually called for by the text as well. Amazingly for the widely agreed upon patriarchal background of the OT, the female figure(s) in the Song is (are) much more dominant than the male's (males'). Landy says:

> The woman is the more interesting because she is the more active partner, nagging [*sic*!], restless, decisive. The man on the other hand is predominantly passive and complacent, as befits a king; his most memorable cry is the fourfold repetition of '*šubî*' 'Return' in 7.1... Even when he is stirred into ineffective wooing, we hear it only through her mouth (2.10-13; 5.2); her voice thus mingles with his, and we cannot tell whether it may not be her wish-fulfilment.[1]

Thus it seems that the predominance of the female(s) in the Song, as against the lesser role(s) assigned to the male(s) who feature(s) in it, can hardly be ignored even by those who do not espouse feminist causes.

Because of the predominance of the female voice(s) in the Song of Songs and because of additional factors,[2] it is now commonly argued that female authorship—perhaps enveloped by male editorship, like the rest of the Hebrew Canon—should be considered for the Song of Songs or most of it. It is conceivable that the Song was dramatized and sung to a bride inside her mother's compound just before she was led to her groom, when women played the roles of all parties mentioned, including the male roles. Such a hypothesis would satisfactorily explain quite a few aspects of the Song—the female voices' boldness, the frequent mentioning of the mother's home, the female predominance, the freedom of speech implausible in mixed company. It would also explain the

1 Landy, p. 69.

2 Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, pp. 46f.

daring sexual humour attributed to a male voice, through the knowing filter of a woman's perception and dramatization—like a play within a play, a parody within a parody. The message would be clear. Females are not ignorant of the problematics of male sexuality. They realize that males may resort to an idealization of their love objects. Alternatively, they may poke fun at those same objects publicly in order to mask their desire and accompanying embarrassment. Women object to both. The female voice(s) behind the literary male voice implicit in this passage of the Song of Songs (7.1-10) seem(s) to be advocating a firm view. It is possible to be an attractive female without becoming or pretending to become an idol or a statue; it should be possible for males to desire without either putting their women on pedestals (thus conforming to convention) or denigrating their appearance (by resorting to sexual humour).

A woman (or women) putting such a message across through a male voice—and such a reading makes sense for a female reader—will make her message much more poignant than if it were delivered directly, explicitly, by a female speaker. After all, when all is said and read and performed, these 'biblical women' still remain within the boundaries of patriarchy and its confines. And so, for that matter, are we—readers of both genders. We all know about stereotypic patterns of sexually motivated male behaviour in public. A female reader could satisfactorily sum the case up thus: sexual humour of the ribald male variety exposes the desire it is designed to mask. A parody of a *waṣf* type male-voiced poem, done female style, doubles the fun and the exposure of literary convention and its underlying social conventions.

## APPENDIX

### Andrew Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side

Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, Lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.
  But at my back I always hear,
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity
And your quaint honor turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place
But none, I think, do there embrace.
  Now therefore, while the youthful hue,
Sits on thy skin like morning dew
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in this slow-chapt power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

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13

# QOHELET'S FOOL: A COMPOSITE PORTRAIT

Etan Levine

> On Judgment Day every person will be called to account for every permissible pleasure he might have enjoyed but didn't.
> Jerusalem Talmud, *Qiddushin* 4

> *Hoi kuboi Dios sei eupiptousi*
> (The dice of the gods are always loaded).
> Erasmus

## *Introduction*

As Qohelet accounts for the conditions of human life, compounded, as it is, of both tragedy and comedy—the absurdities and follies that men commit, as well as the necessary accidents that befall them during their brief span 'under the sun'—both laughter and tears are induced, as human expectations for happiness are alternately accepted and rejected by the author, in sympathy or in disdain. Since humans are the only creatures that are struck by the disparity between what things are and what they ought to be, they consequently are the only creatures that both laugh and weep: they laugh at what disappoints them in trifles whereas they weep over their serious disappointments. Thus,

> We shed tears from sympathy with real and necessary distress; as we burst into laughter from want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable and unnecessary, the absurdity of which provokes our spleen or mirth, rather than any serious reflection on it.[1]

[1] William Hazlitt, 'On Wit and Humor', in J.J. Enck, *The Comic in*

Humankind's propensity to folly has evoked widespread despair over ameliorating this condition. Thus, for example, even the great Erasmus, in his aptly-titled *In Praise of Folly* (*Moriae Encomium*), writes:

> Since so much of the human race insists upon being completely crazy—from mighty rulers to the humble poor—since the whole world has firmly set its heart against using its God-given brain, but insists upon letting itself be guided by its greed, its vanity and its ignorance, why in the name of a reasonable Deity should the few truly intelligent people waste so much of their time and effort in trying to change the human race into something it never wanted to be? Let them be happy in their follies. Don't deprive them of that which gives them more satisfaction than anything else: their sovereign power to make fools of themselves.

Such cynicism, however, is like the proverbial 'maid with no breasts': attractive but unable to suckle progeny: alluring but sterile, standing in stark contrast to the ancient Qohelet and the intellectual-literary school he represents.

Biblical *ḥokmāh* is well translated as 'Wisdom Literature',[1] for it involves talking about humanity and about the world so that the talk will fit the perceived world and peoples will act more sanely. It deals with how we observe with our senses and how we interpret; how we doubt and how we attain certainty; how we evaluate the views of others, and how we differentiate

*Theory and Practice* (New York, 1960), p. 16.

[1] Cf. F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (henceforth BDB) (Oxford, 1907), *s.v*. For background material see R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (New York, 1965); James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1955); W.F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (New York, 1957); W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960); S.N. Kramer, *Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Leiden, 1955); E.I. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs* (Philadelphia, 1959). Brief surveys of Wisdom Literature may be found in W.A. Irwin, 'The Wisdom Literature', *The Interpreter's Bible* I (1952), pp. 212-19; S.H. Blank, 'Wisdom', *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* IV (1962), pp. 852-61; as well as J. Leclant *et al*., *Les Sagesses du Proche-Orient ancien* (Paris, 1963); M. Noth and D.W. Thomas (eds.), *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near–East* (New York, 1955). On speculative thought in the ancient Near East, see Henri Frankfort *et al*., *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1967).

fact from opinion; how we remember and how we forget, how we solve problems, and how we invent and create. It addresses such fundamental questions as 'Who am I?'; 'What should I want?'; 'How should I act?'; 'What values should I internalize?'. In sum, biblical *ḥokmāh* is no less than the art and science of how not to be a damn fool. And no ancient thinker addressed the issue more cogently than the author of a brief work known as *Qohelet*.[1]

### *The Parameters of the Possible*

Through personal experience as well as by empiric observation, Qohelet was well aware that ultimate wisdom is a chimera and can never be attained.

> Many words merely add to the futility: what benefit does man derive from it? Who knows what is good for man in life, during the brief days of vain existence which he spends like a shadow? Who can tell man what will happen under the sun after he is gone (6.11f.)?

Furthermore, at times everyone acts like a fool, for 'There is no person on earth always in the right, who does the correct thing and never errs' (7.20). With remarkable candour this sage retrospectively admits to having spent his own energies on a fool's mission when he decided,

> Here I greatly increased my wisdom beyond all those who were before me in Jerusalem, for my heart has attained great wisdom and knowledge. But as I applied my mind I discovered that wisdom and knowledge are madness and folly. Indeed, the more wisdom the more grief, and increasing knowledge increases anguish (1.25f.).

Despite his repeated *caveat lector* that available knowledge is limited[2], Qohelet is the Bible's most militant advocate of wis-

[1] For reactions to this intellectual ferment cf. Étan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York, 1978), and Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and his World* (New York, 1955). Although Qohelet refers exclusively to the *male* Fool, the content of the foolishness is not gender-exclusive. In this article, quotations of the Qohelet text generally follow this exclusive use of, and appeal to, the male gender.

[2] Thus, e.g., 'I perceived that this too is a chasing after wind' (1.17).

dom and most strident critic of folly. 'Better a young pauper who is wise than an aged king who is a fool' (4.13). Whereas 'A wise man's mind is his support, a fool's mind is his calamity' (10.2). The fool is an annoyance to God as well as to humans (5.4), and is sustained neither by piety (5.1) nor by attempts at being convincing, for 'The wise man's speech wins favour; the fool's lips cause him to be ensnared' (10.12) and 'The beginning of his talking is foolishness and its finale is complete irrationality' (10.13).

Qohelet's fundamental postulate is that people are capable of change; that the Fool, *in potentia*, can become wise.[1] Of course, the tired justification of every human failing is the explanation that 'It is a complex, extremely difficult problem'. *Everyone* knows that all life problems are very complex, but only those in love with the complexity of the *status quo* that leaves everyone so neatly equal in blame and blamelessness could fail to see that no problem as fundamental as life itself lacks *some* solution: that some way is better than its alternatives. Furthermore, despite the widespread association of the Fool with the Evildoer in conventional Wisdom Literature (since both undermine the conventional norms and traditional order of society), throughout Qohelet there is a clear distinction between the two: whereas the Evildoer wrongs *others*, the Fool is *his own* worst enemy.[2] And if Qohelet's *opus* were to bear an admonition as an explanatory sub-title, it might well read: *How not to be a fool within the parameters of the possible.*

### *Recognizing the Fool*

Identifying the both comical yet annoying Fool does not require great acumen, according to Qohelet, for 'Even on the

So too 2.12; 6.10ff.; 7.13f.; 7.23ff.; 8.7; 8.16ff. and similar reflections on the inadequacies of Wisdom.

[1] On the philosophical basis for reconciling Free Will with Determinism see Bernard Berofsky, *Freedom from Necessity; The Metaphysical Basis of Responsibility* (New York, 1987), and Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Bible; Contents and Context* (Berlin/New York, 1988).

[2] BDB, *s.v. ksl* and *rš'*; and note Qohelet's descriptions in 1.14; 4.1ff.; 4.5; 4.13; 5.3; 5.7f.; 7.17; 8.10ff.; 10.15, etc.

road, as the fool walks he shows a lack of sense and demonstrates to all that he is a Fool' (10.3). His thoughts centre on nothing more profound than drunken revelry (7.2), and his brainless laughter grates on the ear (7.6). His delusions of intellectual adequacy are ridiculous, 'for he doesn't even know the way to town' (10.15). It is small wonder, therefore, that an intelligent person will attach no weight whatsoever to a Fool's criticism for 'It is better to hear the rebuke of a Sage than the praise of fools' (7.5).

Although, in the final analysis, human beings are mortal and one fate overtakes the wise and the foolish (2.15), Qohelet verifies the conventional adage that 'Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness', and that 'The wise man has eyes in his head, whereas the fool stumbles in darkness' (2.13f.). Similarly, whether or not one's wisdom be despised or respected, 'Wisdom is better than power (9.15)', and 'Wisdom is better than weapons' (10.1). This is not meant to minimize the destructive power of the Fool or of folly, however, for 'One fool can destroy much good', and 'Just as a dead fly befouls the perfumer's ointment, so does a light folly outweigh weighty wisdom' (9.17f.). And 'Woe to the land whose ruler is childish and whose kings carouse in the morning' (10.16). When fools reign all suffer (10.19).

Humankind's very mortality—the fact that one ultimate fate awaits everyone—may well be the root of all foolishness, so that 'men's minds are filled with evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, for they realize that afterwards they go to join the dead' (9.3). Still, the Fool does not realize 'the advantage of knowing that wisdom preserves the lives of those who possess it' (7.12), however transitory life may be. The Fool is a loser. And whereas by providing the lovely illusion of human greatness tragedy brings us consolation, the comic is crueler: it brutally reveals the meaninglessness of things. *Of course* all things human have their comic aspect, which in certain cases is recognized, acknowledged, utilized, and in others is veiled.[1] But the real geniuses of the comic are not

[1] J.J. Enck *et al.*, *The Comic in Theory and Practice* (New York, 1960); Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art* (London, 1955); Henri Bergson, *Comedy* (New York, 1956); Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*

those who make us laugh hardest but those who reveal some unknown realm of the comic. History has always been considered an exclusively *serious* territory, but there is the undiscovered *comic* side to history, just as there is the (difficult to accept) comic side to sexuality. That is the trouble with intelligent people: there is an *esprit de sérieux* lingering around the premises. Qohelet circumvents the bog.

### *Fighting Nature and History*

What a comical yet pathetic Fool a person must be to consider fighting against nature and history, according to Qohelet: the very elements of the cosmos defy the Fool's mission: earth, fire, air and water are all subject to immutable laws of causality that only a Fool would attempt to change.[1] Should someone opine, 'Look, this is new', it is only because of abysmal ignorance (1.10f.). And paradoxically, even though trying to fully comprehend reality is 'a vanity and chasing of the wind, a crookedness not to be straightened, a void not to be filled' (1.15), there is scant benefit in retreating into vapid folly. Thus, in autobiographical candour, Qohelet admits,

> I said to myself, 'Come, let me try pleasure and experience joyfulness', but this too was vanity: of laughter I concluded, 'It is foolishness' and of joyfulness, 'What did it accomplish?' (2.1).

Thus, for Qohelet wisdom was a door opening to show him the unsettled landscape of the world, something beyond his control and indifferent to him, knowing no discernible laws, opaque, mysterious and terrifying. And the only person with 'verities' is the Fool. He doesn't tell us precisely who he is, of course, because he is the village idiot: if he knew who he was, he would be exceedingly embarrassed. Nevertheless, the Fool cannot escape the critical eye of Qohelet.

For example, to repeat the experiments of the past is sheer

(New York, 1953); and B.F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* (New York, 1957) for surveys of the genre.

[1] 1.2-9. For the wide currency of this futilistic posture cf. Etan Levine, 'Ecclesiastes in New England', *Journal of Reform Judaism* S2 (1981), pp. 60-64.

folly (2.12), and to attempt the unattainable is stupidity, as well as *hubris*. The Fool is such a *pathetic* figure in attempting to struggle against the parameters that God has established. And it is the intellectual Qohelet who admits,

> I know the agitation which God has afflicted men with. He has established everything in time, also placing the love of the world in men's hearts, though they cannot understand God's work from beginning to end... I know that whatever God does remains forever: one cannot add nor detract from it... What exists has already been, and what is yet to be has already been established, and God invariably repeats the past (3.10ff.).

Who but the Fool would even conceive of doing battle with God, for 'What has been has already been determined', and it is common knowledge 'that man cannot argue with one mightier than he' (4.10).

### *Fools Rush In...*

Where angels fear to tread the Fool tramps in hobnailed boots, and what he lacks in discretion the Fool compensates for in sheer obstinance. Consider, for example, another

> folly under the sun: this single man, with none beside him, neither brother nor son. Yet there is no end to his toil nor is he ever satisfied with his wealth. He never asks himself, 'For whom am I labouring and depriving myself of happiness?' (4.7).

The Fool may recognize the folk tradition that 'The Fool folds his hands and thereby destroys himself' (4.5), but he isn't wise enough to understand that, on the opposite extreme, 'Better a handful gotten with ease than two handsful gotten with torture and chasing the wind' (4.6).

In religious matters too the Fool is marked by enthusiasm and ecstasy more than by prudence, hence Qohelet's warning:

> Watch your step when you enter God's house, for it is better to understand than to offer sacrifices like those fools who don't even know *how* to perpetrate evil. Do not hasten to speak, lest you be hurried into declaring words to God. For God is in heaven whereas you are on earth. Therefore, make your words few (4.17f.).

If ever there was a hallmark of the Fool it is this: 'Just as dreams bring many worries, so does the fool speak with many words' (5.2). Hence Qohelet warns that God

> takes no pleasure in Fools... Do not let your mouth bring punishment upon your body, for you cannot tell the messenger that it was a mistake (5.3f.).

How apropos, therefore, is the warning of Qohelet: 'Despite all your illusions, follies and idle pratter, this remains: fear God' (5.6).

Can the fool understand that 'All a man's striving is for his "wants" yet his desires are never satisfied' (6.6), or that 'Better a joy at hand than longing for distant pleasures?' (6.8). If not, then 'The stillborn is more fortunate than he!' (6.3). For although the permanent defeat of life comes when dreams are surrendered to reality, the permanent temptation of life is to confuse dreams with reality. The Muse of the Fool is completely emancipated, mischievous and irresistably attractive, serving up on her appetizing *smorgasbord* slices of waggery, wit and supposed wisdom. The Fool is simply incapable of understanding the simple truth that 'Better is a joy at hand than longing for distant pleasures' (6.9). Consequently, though God may grant him 'wealth, means and pleasure so that he lacks nothing one can possibly desire', he still does not benefit from that which he has (6.1), and it is better not to live at all than to live the life of the futilely-striving fool (6.5).

Since the cycles of history, like the cycles of nature, are determined by God, only the Fool refuses to recognize that 'Everything has its ordained time, and there is a time for every happening under heaven' (3.1), from birth unto death (v. 2). Be it the seasons of nature, war and peace, birth and death, the menstrual cycle or whatever (3.2-8), there is a natural order, and only a Fool doesn't realize that 'there is no other good in life but to be happy while one lives. Indeed, every person who eats, drinks and enjoys happiness in work—that is God's gift' (3.12f.), and that 'whatever God does remains forever; one can neither add nor detract from it' (3.14).

Only a Fool, typically wise in his own eyes, thinks that he understands the divine plan, hence the instructions:

> Observe God's ways, for who can straighten what He has

> obscured? In the time of good fortune enjoy it, and in the time of adversity remember that God has juxtaposed one against the other (7.15).

And only a Fool would be God's adversary. Stated alternatively, ultimate ignorance and inexperience is a quality of the human condition: a human being is born only once and can never start a new life equipped with the experience gained from a previous one. One leaves childhood without knowing what youth is, marries without knowing what marriage is, and enters into old age without knowing what it is to be mature. Thus, even in old age one's world is the universe of inexperience, and one cannot help but be somewhat the Fool. Ultimately *everything* is unknown, according to the sage:

> Just as you do not understand how life enters the embryo in the pregnant woman's womb, so do you not fathom the work of God who causes everything (11.5).

Consequently, to avoid being a Fool means to cooperate with the incomprehensible and the inevitable.[1] For the greatest discovery is that human beings can alter the outer aspects of their lives by changing the inner attributes of their minds, and it is in this sense that 'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom' (Prov. 3.13).

### *The Efforts of the Fool*

It has been observed that

> The comical appears primarily as an unintentional discovery in the social relations of human beings. It is found in persons—that is, in their movements... actions and characteristic traits... The answer to the question, 'Why do we laugh at the actions of the clowns?' would be that their actions appear to us immoderate and inappropriate; that is, we really laugh over the excessive expenditure of energy... In the same way we find it comical to see unnecessary motions or even marked exaggeration of expressive motions in adults.[2]

[1] 1.14f.; 3.1-15; 7.24; 8.7ff.; etc.

[2] Sigmund Freud, 'Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious', in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York, 1938).

As portrayed by Qohelet, 'The efforts of the fool exhaust him' (10.15). Only the Fool ignores the simple truth that, 'If an axe is blunt and one doesn't sharpen it first, one must exert great effort when using it' (10.10). Similarly, how useless it is to prepare *after the fact*, for 'If the snake has bitten *before* it has been charmed, there is no value in snake-charming' (10.11). But it is not only to these comical aspects of inappropriate efforts that Qohelet directs criticism: there is a principled critique of all wasted effort, even those of society's lauded 'achiever':

> For here is a man who has laboured with knowledge and skill yet must leave it to someone who has not toiled over it. This surely is vanity and a great evil, for what benefit does man derive from all the labour and anguish he expends under the sun? During all his days his lot is pain and grief, and even at night his mind is not at rest (2.21ff.).

It is easy enough to recognize the caricature of the Fool who ridiculously digs pits, hacks away with a dull axe and charms a snake that has already bitten, but it is less easy to escape the *normative* societal foolishness which, since it is approved and lauded, is even more pernicious. For example,

> Here is a single man, with none beside him, neither brother nor son. Yet there is no end to his toiling nor is he ever satisfied with his possessions, never asking himself, 'For whom am I labouring and depriving myself of pleasure?' (4.7).

How ironic are the efforts of the 'successful' Fool: the person so caught up in amassing wealth that he even deprives himself of candlelight while eating, so that he can save the pittance of expense (5.16). One's very mortality *ex definitione* means that 'As he came forth naked from his mother's womb so will he return, just as he came, carrying off nothing with him for all his toil' (5.14), yet his life is an unceasing fool's treadmill, 'and he suffers great frustration, exhaustion and franticness' (5.16).

Even a wise person can become a fool through avarice (7.7), and Qohelet repeatedly stresses that the only rational course for a mortal is *to derive pleasure* from what is available, rather than to exert exaggerated efforts. And this is the 'formula':

> This is what I discovered: that it is fitting and proper for a person to eat, drink and self-indulge in return for the effort one undergoes under the sun in the few years God has granted one, for *that* is a person's reward (5.17).

Not only is this *not* sinfulness, but it is the divine will itself:

> Indeed, every person to whom God has granted wealth and means, and has given *power to enjoy them*—taking his share and enjoying the fruits of this labour—*that* is the gift of God. For it is God who provides him with joy in his heart (5.19).

Conversely,

> Here is a person whom God has given wealth, possessions and status, so that he lacks nothing that he can possibly want... And even if one begets a hundred children and lives a long life, no matter how many be his days, if he derives no pleasure from his wealth, even if he has an honoured funeral, I say that the still-born infant is more fortunate than he (6.2ff.).

Again and again Qohelet returns to this fundamental thesis: that the good life consists of deriving pleasure whereas the Fool's life is one of exaggerated and inappropriate effort.[1]

### *The Fool and the Unknown*

It has been widely observed that

> The same impulse that drove people, even in prehistoric times, to enact fertility rites and celebrate all phases of their biological existence, sustains their eternal interest in comedy

and that

> The sense of precariousness that is the typical tension of light comedy was undoubtedly developed in the eternal struggle with chance that every farmer knows only too

[1] Cf. 2.18-23; 'There is no greater good for one than eating and drinking and enjoying oneself from the fruits of one's labour. I have learned that this is from the hand of God, for who can enjoy a pleasure or not enjoy it, except through His Will? To the man God favours He grants the wisdom and knowledge to enjoy, but to the wrongdoer He gives the compulsion to gather and to amass' (2.24ff.). See also 3.13ff.; 5.9–6.9.

> well—with weather, blights, beasts, birds and beetles. The embarrassments, perplexities and mounting panic which characterize that favourite genre... serve to develop a fundamental trait of the comic rhythm—the deep cruelty of it all, as all life feeds on life. There is no biological truth that feeling does not reflect, and that good comedy, therefore, will not be prone to reveal... Whatever the story may be, it takes the form of a temporary triumph over the surrounding world, complicated, and thus stretched out, by an evolved succession of coincidences.[1]

In other words, the vision of life conveyed is that of an

> oncoming future fraught with dangers and opportunities, that is, with physical or social events occurring by chance and building up the circumstances with which individuals cope according to their lights. This ineluctable future—ineluctable because its countless factors are beyond human knowledge and control—is Fortune.[2]

Qohelet carefully crafts the stage: comprehending reality 'is a vanity and a chasing after wind, a complexity which cannot be straightened, an abyss which cannot be filled' (1.14f.). Only a simpleton would deny the fact that human beings 'cannot understand the working of God from beginning to end' (3.11). There *is* no 'answer' to the ultimate mysteries of life, no predicting the future, and no verities as to the 'meaning of life'. In terms of certainty, therefore, 'Who knows what is good for man in life during the few days of his vain existence which he passes like a shadow?' (6.12). Yet existence *demands* the making of decisions, the recognition of alternatives, the exercising of options, and the evaluating of contingencies and probabilities. And it is in this arena that a person may be a Sage or a Fool. To be immobilized by the unknown constitutes the ultimate *self-defeat*. One cannot, by way of example, predict the course of nature, and what will be will be:

> If the clouds are filled with rain they will empty them upon the earth, if a tree is blown down by the wind in the south or

[1] Susanne K. Langer, 'Feeling and Form', in J.J. Enck, *op. cit.*, pp. 84ff.
[2] So Langer, *op. cit.*, p. 81, who adds: 'Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy; it is developed by comic action, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium'.

> the north, wherever it falls it shall lie (11.3),

but despite the necessary uncertainty of all human endeavour,

> Whoever watches the wind will never sow, and whoever stares at the clouds will never harvest (11.4).

The workings of nature and of history cannot be fully determined, and to allow the unknown and unknowable a veto rather than a vote is to sustain a foolish loss; hence,

> In the morning sow your seed and in the evening do not be idle, for you cannot know which will prosper, or whether both may equally succeed (11.5).

Is there a greater Fool than the person who refrains from risk in any and all dimensions of life? Obviously foolhardiness is equally absurd, and in all things one is well-advised:

> Cast your bread upon the waters so that you may recoup it again after many days. Divide your assets into seven or eight portions, for you cannot predict what disaster may come upon earth (11.1f.)

The unknowable must be both accepted and confronted.

> The fool multiplies words; one does not know what will be...
> The efforts of the fool (to understand) exhaust him (10.14f.).

One of the essentials of wisdom is to know its own limits and then to proceed on the basis of this limited knowledge. And this is what the Fool violates, either by an exaggerated security or by an exaggerated insecurity, in a self-transformation into an object of mirth or of pity.

### *The Fool in Human Relations*

A dominant theme in Qohelet as both observation and exhortation is that of foolish human relations, ranging from the most intimate to the most public. For the archetypal fool is a person at war with the world, an annoyance to both God and humans.[1] And just as 'Every thing has its appointed time, and there is a season for every event under heaven' (3.1), so is

[1] Cf. 5.14; 10.2, 12f.

there

> A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek and a time to give up, a time to preserve and a time to discard, a time to rend and a time to repair. A time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time of war and a time of peace (3.5ff.).

In brief, there are appropriate and inappropriate relations and expectations in human relationships.

For example, to expect absolute justice from society is foolishly naive, for, as Qohelet observed, 'In the place of judgment *there* was wickedness, and in the place of justice *there* was evil' (3.16). And since the political hierarchy is necessarily corrupt and corrupting,

> If you observe the denuding of the poor and the perverting of justice and of righteousness in the State, do not be surprised, for each official is higher than the next, with still higher ones above (5.8).

In confronting someone in authority, commonsense dictates that whereas panic is improvident ('Do not hasten to flee from him'), so is direct confrontation: 'Do not persist in something that is unpleasant to him, for he can do whatever he desires' (8.3). Only a Fool would challenge the king by saying, 'What are you doing!' (8.4). The wise person is more discreet, for 'a wise mind knows the proper time and procedure' (8.5).

In keeping with the sexist prejudice which pervades biblical literature in general and is exaggerated by Qohelet, he states that the most common interpersonal blunder, and the most vexing ('more bitter than death'), is to fall into the hands of a woman whose 'heart is full of snares and traps, whose hands are chains' (7.26). Apparently Qohelet recognized that, paradoxically, it is harder to leave a loveless relationship than a loving one because a loveless one is born of desperation while a loving one is born of choice. And there *are* women who bring villainies of temperament as their only dowries to marriage, and a man is often fooled by his own sexuality into not recognizing the universal truth that his generative organs have a greater capacity for introducing pain than for deriving pleasure. And whereas ideally the soul may be lifted by a sexual relationship, it can also be plunged into misery.

Sexual temptation is so irresistible a lure that Qohelet absolves males of *part* of the responsibility: 'He who is favoured by God will escape her, but the wrongdoer will be trapped by her' (7.26). Still, the wise male knows to be cautious and not to be made a fool by women, for 'they have discovered many machinations' (7.29).

Despite these warnings, the deadliest sin, and the most foolish of life-postures, is that of cynicism. As Sören Kierkegaard observed,

> To cheat oneself out of love is the most terrible deception; it is an eternal loss for which there is no reparation, either in time or in eternity.

Hence, in his exhortation to live a wise, happy life, Qohelet raises love to the level of life's central joy:

> Enjoy life with the woman you love, through all the days of your vain life which God has given you under the sun, throughout your brief days. For that is your life's reward for your labour under the sun (9.9).

In sum, all human relationships, particularly love-bonds, evoke poignant feelings of disappointment and disillusionment as well as of loyalty and gratitude; we are all doomed to a measure of disaffection as well as of fulfilment, for our self-important expectations virtually guarantee that whatever our individual experiences with people be, they could not have been what we expected. Still, to be fatalistically dispassionate is to be a Fool, for then all the good, the ennobling and the beneficial in human relationship and fellowship is denied or unseen. Ambivalent feelings are the very hallmarks of wisdom.

### *The Fool with Folded Hands*

The Fool's characteristic posture is described in the observation, 'The fool folds his hands and thereby destroys himself' (4.5). The self-destruction applies not only to the material realm but to the enjoyment of life itself, hence Qohelet's exhortation,

> Whatever you are able to do, do with all your might, for there is no action, no thought, no knowledge and no wisdom in that Sheol to which you go (9.10).

Cynicism is not born of courage and of wisdom, according to Qohelet, but of cowardice and foolishness. To feel like a hapless victim of the world's inscrutability and injustice is to allow tattered fragments to masquerade as the entire tapestry, and 'Whoever is attached to the living has hope, just as surely as a live dog is better off than a dead lion' (9.4). Life is a matter of daring—of taking chances. True, only a Fool does not compute probabilities, and there is always the unforeseen, the overlooked contingencies that overtake a person. And it is a piece of dangerous sentimentality to believe that truth, merely as truth, has an inherent power denied to error, of prevailing in life. Consequently, the motto must be 'Hasten slowly' (*Festina lente*). Nevertheless, the greatest foolishness of all is to waste life:

> Sweet is the light, and a pleasure to see the sun. And should a man live many years, let him rejoice in all of them, and remember that the days of darkness will be many, and that thereafter everything is nothingness (9.7f.).

To join the human race means to discover that ultimately everybody loses. And along with this loss of innocence comes the realization that in order to minimize the loss, life requires that you pay your own way and earn your own way. One must avoid the pitfalls of the Fool, of course, and these are many: engaging in unnecessary toil (4.4ff.); being greedy (5.9–6.9), falling into one's own pit (10.8); exaggerating one's knowledge (6.10ff.); being tricked by women's wiles (7.26ff.); alienating authority (8.1ff.); straying from a rational Golden Mean (7.15ff.); and a host of others. Nevertheless, however silly a (male) Fool may appear while walking down life's road (10.3), no picture is more pathetic than the Fool who sits passively with folded hands while life and its potential satisfactions pass by.

### *The Foolish Society*

It is not only the Fool in society to whom Qohelet relates, but also society as an aggregate of fools and an institutionalization of foolishness. Thus, for example, there is the mortally endangered city facing imminent destruction which refuses to listen

to the wise man who has a plan which could rescue it simply because the wise man is not wealthy.[1] Human society often elevates fools to leadership and authority and then suffers the consequences, for 'Through sloth the ceiling sinks, and through slack hands the house leaks' (10.18). Thus Qohelet observes, 'Here is an evil I have seen under the sun, indeed a blunder decreed by the ruler: the Fool enthroned on high' (10.5). And having attained power, the simpleton proceeds to abuse it.[2]

Certain brutal kinds of knowledge come early to the observing thinker: that human beings are attracted to power in all its forms and much less respectful of its uses than of its attainment; that with only the slightest provocation people are ready to vent extraordinary viciousness; also, that there is nothing very original about sin. Because of, or despite these realities, one may appreciate how exhilarating it is to come across a simple act of decency, and how precious goodness is, making a good man 'one in a thousand' (7.28). But it may also disillusion the observer, and, as is the case with Qohelet, cause him to advocate disengagement: becoming as independent as possible from society's power structure which is typified neither by wisdom nor by benevolence.[3] Consequently, a 'Golden Mean' of pragmatism is one's only wise course: 'Be not a fool' (7.15ff.).[4] If, in fact, much of civilization and of human society involves 'vanity and chasing after wind, with no advantage under the sun', and if the various institutions—religious, juridical, national, etc.—are of dubious benefit to the *individual*, then society too is a ship of fools, for instead of maximizing human pleasure it largely increases human misery. Consequently, only a fool would pay more allegiance to society and its institutions than is absolutely necessary for survival.[5]

1 9.13–10.1. The term *zkr* here means 'heeded', hence Qohlet's observation that 'Whereas "Wisdom is better than strength", the poor man's wisdom is ridiculed and his words are not heeded' (v. 16).
2 See 10.16f.
3 Cf. 4.1ff. and 5.7f.
4 See 7.11 and 5.7f. for advocacy of self-sufficiency.
5 See 3.16f.; 4.1ff.; 4.17ff.; 5.7f.; 8.2ff.

## *Epilogue: The Fool in Comic Perspective*

Comedy is criticism because it exposes human beings for what they are in contrast to what they think they are or profess to be and, at its most severe, it is not just sceptical but cynical:

> All tragedy is idealistic and says in effect, 'The pity of it'—that owing to this fault of circumstance or that flaw of character, a man who is essentially good does evil, a man who is essentially great is toppled from the heights. But all comedy tends to be sceptical and says in effect, 'The absurdity of it'—that in spite of his fine talk or noble resolutions, a man is the mere creature of pettiness and vanity and folly.[1]

> Comedy is always jarring us with the evidence that we are no better than other people, and always comforting us with the knowledge that most other people are no better than we are.[2]

And this constitutes the comic foundation of Qohelet's relating to the Fool and to human foolishness. Then again, whereas in tragedy human beings *aspire* to more than they can attain, while in comedy they *pretend* to more, there is also the tragic dimension to Qohelet's portraiture of the Fool. The observer may smile or shed a tear, or, like Qohelet, do both.

[1] Louis Kronenberg, *The Thread of Laughter* (New York, 1952), who adds, 'It thrives on a revelation of the true rather than the trumped-up motive, as it is in one way sustained by imposture, so in another it is sustained by incongruity... But always it is the enemy, not of virtue or idealism, but of hypocrisy and pretense... The social basis rests in the very subject-matter of comedy—in all that has to do with one's life as part of a group... brings us face to face with a hundred things out of which comedy is distilled: ambition and pride, arrogance and obsequiousness; a too-slavish following or a too-emphatic flouting of convention; all the strategisms men use in order to outwit or get their way... here enter all the prejudices, the taboos, the aspirations, the absurdities, the snobberies of a group... And with ignorance of one kind or another we begin coming close to the very mainspring of comedy, or at any rate of comedy in action. For most comedy is born of ignorance or false knowledge; it is based on misunderstanding.'

[2] See Kronenberg, *op. cit.*, who adds, 'Comedy at its greatest is criticism indeed: it is nothing less, in fact, than a form of moral enlightenment'. Note how the biblical *ksl* means both 'fool' and 'security', whether well-founded or not, e.g. Ps. 78.7; Prov. 3.25; Job 8.14; 31.24. Cf. BDB, *s.v.*

14

# ESTHER WITH HUMOUR

Yehuda T. Radday

The Esther Scroll is frightening and funny at the same time. The many commentaries written on it deal with its historicity and historical background, its linguistic properties and literary structure, the date of its composition, and other aspects of this odd short story. That it is also highly amusing and full of half-spoken and occasionally caustic satire has of course been noticed and pointed out by scholars, but by and large only *en passant*. It is the aim of the following running commentary to fill this gap. Consequently, it will disregard every other aspect, e.g. all those mentioned above, and focus on nothing else but the humour of the book. To follow this commentary, it is suggested that the reader refer to a copy of the *New English Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). The commentary is divided into chapters, and numbers in parentheses refer to verses.

## *Chapter 1*

(1) In Hebrew, the king's name is Ahashwerosh. As portrayed here, he is so much of a caricature of a typical Oriental potentate that he can easily be identified with many of this genre. This includes the kings of the same name mentioned in Ezra 4.6 and Dan. 9.1 of whom not much good is known either, as well as Xerxes I (579-456) if one lets oneself be guided by his name, or, if it is a nickname, Cyrus the Great (559–539), Darius II (423–404), Artaxerxes II (404-358), Ptolemy II (170–164), Alexander Balas (153–140), John Hyrcan (153–104) or Herod the Great (73–74 CE). Jews have indeed had

much experience of similar unpredictable rulers, from antiquity until modern times. The name sounds funny in Hebrew, and would correspond to something like King Headache in English (*Midrash Esther R.* 1). Nothing in the story warrants the mention of the exact number of the provinces, so that it can only be intended to show how cumbersome an administration is needed to keep them under control, while the king uses the same administration mainly to assist him in indulging in his excesses, as in an exaggerated Ruritania. (3) It takes him two years to establish himself and then he immediately throws a huge party (banquet no. 1) for the army and the higher echelons of the civil service (4) in order to display his greatness. The six synonyms standing in Hebrew side by side (wealth, glory, royalty, pride, splendour, pomp) emphasize the bombast. The banquet lasts for half a year—who took care of the realm while it continued? And did the Jews also attend the drinking bout? They probably did: their behaviour in the course of events is not altogether blameless (*b. Meg.* 12a).

Immediately after this drawn-out state-banquet, (5) a second banquet follows, but, as only the *misera plebs* is invited, it is very short—it lasts no more than seven days. To compensate the populace for so brief a festivity, (6) they are allowed to get a glimpse of how royalty lives, and shown the palace interior with its curtains, garlands, rings, expensive linen and decorations made of purple, alabaster, mother-of-pearl, turquoise, and (7) precious cups. (8) As a special sign of his favour, the king recalls for the duration of banquet no. 2 his command that, at his table, each guest has to consume a minimum amount of wine. This usual minimum was so high that, if we believe the Rabbis (*Yalq. Shim. ad loc.*) the guests used to tip the waiters not to denounce them if they cheated and drank a little less. Another banquet (no. 3) takes place simultaneously in the harem (9), but only ladies attend, so it was probably less rowdy.

(10) Instead of fireworks, the *pièce de résistance* on the seventh day of the public feast is to be (11) the spectacle of Queen Vashti accompanied by a bodyguard of seven eunuchs. Persian women did not cover their faces with a veil and the Queen must have appeared before at royal occasions—that

queens (or ladies of high standing) attended Persian court banquets is expressly borne out by a chance remark in Neh. 2.6. Hence another look at the beauty of her face was hardly much of a treat for the revelling male *haute volée* of the realm. This is what the Rabbis had in mind when they tell us that this time Vashti had to appear in the nude. The Rabbis think that it occurred to her husband to summon her because a dispute had arisen whether Persian women were prettier than Median. To settle it and to avoid bloodshed between the 127 delegations, he wished to present Vashti the Chaldean (*Midr. Esth. R.* 3). At any rate he is vain and conceited, as we shall learn soon enough. (12) But lo, Vashti refuses to abide by the royal command and to perform her striptease act. Such disobedience—or is it courage?—has never happened before. The king is understandably enraged and feels disgraced in front of his subjects, and so (13) the Privy Council is called. All their Lordships are listed by name because of the severity of Vashti's insolence—a *cause célèbre*!—and consulted: after all, law and order must be upheld and justice not only done, but also seen to be done.

(16) Justice Memucan's considered opinion is as follows: 'Her Majesty the Queen has committed a crime which not only puts His Majesty to shame, but borders on subversion and undermines every good order in the empire. The insult to His Majesty cannot be kept secret as it happened in front of multitudes. (17) A precedent has been created and, in future, whenever one of our womenfolk fails in duty towards her husband, she will have a ready answer, "I am only following the Queen's example". (18) The households of us, the aristocrats, are especially endangered through this lack of discipline. (19) I therefore beg to advise His Majesty to take the following steps: First, her disrespect should be recorded in black and white in the official annals of each province; second, she shall not have access any more to His Majesty; third, her exalted position should be transferred to another lady of a more compliant nature; (20) fourth, it should be proclaimed throughout all the provinces—may their number increase—that from now on all wives are duty bound to do as their husbands wish, pay homage to them and in general behave themselves, be they of high or low provenance.' In short, male

chauvinism is to become legal. (21) The idea pleases the king greatly. He was proud of Vashti's beauty; he is perhaps already bored by her and now finds her disloyalty a good excuse to get rid of her. (22) Therefore, the scribes and dragomans are set in motion and the new royal decree, translated into 127 languages, is dispatched to the ends of the empire from India to Ethiopia. Liberty for husbands will now ring throughout the land and each will be lord in his own house. It is to be regretted that by an unnecessary emendation and truncation of the verse the NEB translation misses a joke which clearly stands in the original. The RSV is slightly superior: 'Every man be lord in his own house and speak according to the language of his people'. No one speaks *according* to a language, one speaks *in* a certain language. Furthermore, just as the RSV reads 'in his own house' when the Hebrew has 'in his house', it should also read 'speak in the language of his *own* people'. The implication is that Persian husbands were so henpecked until this edict was issued that they were not permitted by their wives to speak at home in their own mother tongue, but had to learn and use that of their spouse. Since polygamy was customary, these poor husbands must hitherto have been rather polyglot. These simple and apparently long-overdue laws are now codified once and for all and the supremacy of hitherto suffering husbands is at long last guaranteed.

## *Chapter 2*

(1) The king is not expressly evil, only an immature, fickle-minded and unbelievably stupid dynast. Thus, as long as his anger has not abated, he forgets the outrage, and remembers Vashti only when he has calmed down—the reverse sequence of events would make better sense but maybe he was too drunk until then to recall what had happened. Only then he remembers to depose her and decides to live for a while, if not in celibacy, then at least queenless. (5) Seeing their king's loneliness and commiserating with him, certain members of his entourage, always ready to humour his whims and play upon his weaknesses, come up with a piece of practical advice. However, this time it is not his wise counsellors who do so, but

the younger generation—according to the Hebrew—who show more understanding for his relative abstinence. Their counsel is to appoint *ad hoc* commissioners to summon from all over the country the most beautiful young girls who, still being virgins, qualify for queenship and are also eligible to join the royal harem which is now depleted—perhaps a number of faithful women accompanied their mistress into exile. The candidates will have to compete for the vacant position under the supervision of Hegai, the Chief Eunuch. (4) This idea again appeals much to the king who relies heavily on the opinion of his confidants, who, in turn, recommend only what is likely to receive his assent.

(5) We cannot be sure whether the narrator wants to satirize Jews who live happily in exile. That they formed an ethnic and linguistic entity we learn from 8.9. This is why they must have received an invitation to the banquet which they could hardly have refused. Hence, they seem not to have been too particular about the dietary laws. Here we learn, in addition, that they carry non-Hebrew names such as Mordecai (= Marduk, a deity) and Esther (= Ishtar, a goddess) whose former Hebrew name was superseded by a foreign one. (7) Also, for Mordecai the Jew who seems to be a bachelor, to live under the same roof with a young and exceedingly beautiful girl is not exactly *comme il faut*. (8) Hegai must have been much overworked. Nonetheless, and although probably a eunuch, he has an eye for the ladies and at once recognizes (9) that Esther outshines the other competitors, probably not so much because of her looks—all the girls are of course very beautiful—as by her intellect and character. Maybe he guesses that she has a good chance to become Queen and thinks it advisable to be in her good books. At any rate, she receives especially luxurious accommodation; she is given a few ladies-in-waiting and plenty of cosmetics. The Hebrew says that Hegai 'changed' her. This may simply mean that she received preferential treatment, whereas the Rabbis thought that Hegai had provided her with kosher food (*Yalq. Shim.*, *ad loc.*).

(10) The story does not reveal why Mordecai forbids Esther to tell anybody of her Jewish origin. Is it one more symptom of the assimilationist tendencies among Persian Jewry, or his

prophetic foresight which makes him do so? We shall never know, but we are permitted to surmise that the author, when calling his heroine by her non-Hebrew name, had a word play in mind: *hestēr* means 'concealment'. (11) While she resides inside the harem waiting for her turn to come, Mordecai displays his nervousness by walking up and down the courtyard. As so often in the story, we are not told the reason for his strange behaviour. Perhaps he feels remorse for not having hidden his ward. (12) Before a girl is to be received by the king she must spend an entire year in preparation: she is oiled, anointed, perfumed and otherwise beautified beyond her natural looks. (13) Finally, her great day arrives: she is escorted to the king's bedchamber for one night, (14) to be fetched in the morning and lodged in another part of the women's quarters, so that virgins and those who had lost their virginity would not get mixed up and the king be annoyed by a possible oversight. The Rabbis can find only one good thing to say about the king's promiscuity—that at least nothing took place in broad daylight (*ibid.*). Eroticism is in evidence in this section of the story, but it is kept at a minimum. Thus, for instance, it does not disclose how long Esther had to wait for her turn, whether she too was sent away in the morning, or whether she remained for a second and third night and what exactly endeared her to the king.

(15) In any case, she relies on her charm and spurns all artificial adornment. The Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 74b) discusses the question whether she should have committed suicide rather than submitted to the king's embrace, and reaches the decision that she need not have done so. (16) The night of her rise to glory is perhaps another jibe at the Jews of Susa: it was the tenth of Tebet, a day of fast commemorating the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Why did she not pretend to be ill on that day and postpone her turn or persuade Hegai whose protegée she was, to let her change places with another girl? (17) The king falls in love with Esther at first sight and she is crowned—he consistently makes sudden decisions without too much premeditation. (18) Another banquet (no. 3) is given in her honour, liberal gifts are distributed by the king to his favourites and—perhaps on her initiative—taxes are temporarily reduced. Maybe also because of her, the

king mends his ways: the ex-virgins who missed their chances before her accession are not recalled by the king, and those still in Hegai's charge are no longer being prepared for the king.

(21) Conspiracy! Mordecai overhears two officers who intend to kill the king. There can be no lack of motives for an attempt on his life. The scene is quite comical: Bigtan and Teresh speak to each other in secret so as not to be overheard, and probably in their own language, which they trust few people in Susa understand. However they were not secretive enough to prevent of all people Mordecai, who was walking in the courtyard, from listening to their treacherous plans and to understand what they are saying. Where are the king's spies? Where is the palace guard? Probably playing games as idle officials are wont to do. The only loyal subject the king possesses is—unknown to him—one of those whom he is soon to condemn to death. (22) Mordecai informs on the conspirators, yet he addresses himself to Esther and not to the police who cannot be trusted. (23) The criminals are hanged without much ado—in Persia people are either immediately elevated to high office or immediately executed. The incident is duly registered in the state archives without the king being told in order not to irritate him with matters of so little consequence. Mordecai's part is also recorded, but instantly forgotten. 'In the presence of the king' cannot be more than an empty phrase, since we read in 6.3 that he had no idea of what had happened—or was he so preoccupied with wine and women that he had no recollection?

## *Chapter 3*

(1) The king is gullible. If one knows how to handle him, one has no difficulty in persuading him to do absolutely anything. A parvenu by the name of Haman, a foreigner to boot, succeeds in impressing him somehow, and is promptly appointed Grand Vizier, while Memucan and the other Chief Justices, Royal Astronomers and the rest are passed over. Agag, Haman's alleged forefather, was king of Amalek about a millennium before (cf. 1 Sam. 15.8, 32-35); Amalek, a Bedouin tribe of robbers, is the eternal antagonist of Israel in Jewish history. Haman could hardly be a direct descendant of Agag or

an Amalekite by birth because of the distance in time and locale, but was rather an Amalekite by choice and nature, even a super-Amalekite (an 'Agagite'): an Amalekite *fit, non nascitur*. He is merely in search of prestige, which the king, no great judge of men, does not notice.

As his first act as Premier, (2) he makes the king order that wherever he appears everybody must prostrate themselves. Imagine him walking down Susa's main street as human bodies cover it instead of pavement, with one single person standing upright like a pole: Mordecai! Why Mordecai does not bow to Haman is a riddle because Jews, while forbidden to bow to idols, may freely bow to living persons—did not Joseph's brothers bow to him? The author may have wanted once more to reprove the Persian Jews who, while disregarding a number of explicit commandments on the one hand, display excessive piety in the wrong place, on the other. Of such, Ecclesiastes (7.16) says, 'Be not righteous overmuch'. (3) Had it not been for his obstinacy, the Jews would never have been threatened with a pogrom. Mordecai's wellwishers warn him, but when he does not pay attention to their words, they do not hesitate to denounce him to Haman. This newcomer must have been hated by the oldtimers, and Mordecai's unreasonable comport serves them as a welcome test case for finding out how far Haman's influence goes with the king. At the same time, Mordecai's Jewishness intrigues them.

(6) One thing is clear: the king could not have chosen a worse Chief Minister: what the latter does from now on is irrational to the highest degree, and irrationality has remained typical of anti-Semites for generations. Haman feels offended by one single Jew, which is reason enough for him to annihilate all, not a rare phenomenon in Jewish history. It is common knowledge that (7) irrationality and superstition go hand in hand—the most propitious day for the slaughter is to be decided for Haman by lot. Haman's superstition seems to go hand in hand with stupidity—one would expect him to draw lots first for the most opportune month and then for the most opportune day of that month, but he draws lots in the opposite order.

(8-9) The Jewish reader especially will hardly fail to recognize the bitter humour hidden in Haman's slanderous speech.

It contains all the ingredients of vicious latter-day anti-Semitism. The Jews, according to Haman's calumny, are *one* (not 'a certain' as the translation has it) people and stick together; at the same time, they are dispersed and not *staatenbildend*; they do not integrate; their customs are fundamentally different from those of their 'hosts' and incomprehensible to all other nations; they acknowledge an authority above the king; a final solution for the 'Jewish question' is therefore urgently called for; their destruction takes precedence over possible financial loss; and violating a few basic laws must in this case be no obstacle. It all sounds so familiar, the corruption included: Haman offers a huge bribe, said to amount to two-thirds of the annual income of the Persian treasury (see note in NEB). The king pretends to refuse, but (see commentary on 4.7) actually accepts the money since he presumably needs it for his festivities (10.11). The king shows no compassion for those who are to be condemned. He rules 127 provinces and to lose just one is, for him, no cause for concern; hence his remark, 'Do with them what you want'.

(12) The royal mail is once more set into motion—one day before Passover, a bitter irony attributable to Haman's vengefulness. The author's finesse is displayed by the means in which the imperial bureaucracy is ridiculed. Repeated reference is made to the fact that it was previously used to organize beauty contests, whereas now it is used to commit genocide. Were the letters handed to the Jews in their language? This is unlikely, as Haman in his anti-Semitic frenzy, may well have intentionally 'forgotten' Hebrew as a means of spiting them further. He also makes sure not to be misunderstood by juxtaposing three synonymous verbs for killing, one after the other, and, by giving licence to the killers to enrich themselves at the expense of their victims, he appeals to popular rapacity.

Just as the virgins had one whole year to prepare themselves for the competition, so the people are allowed twelve months to organize the wholesale massacre. (14) Everything is being done in compliance with prescribed procedure: the decree is published, filed and dispatched through the usual channels—the ancient Persian post service was famous and functioned smoothly. Susa, surely used to the king's eccentric moods, is nevertheless thrown into confusion: his latest folly

surpasses all former ones. But the general commotion does not affect him and his minister: banquet no. 4 takes place as it must and as if nothing extraordinary had happened—life must go on, must it not?

*Chapter 4*

(1) The account may be slightly satirical towards Mordecai. His excessive piety in refusing to bow to Haman was the initial cause for the imminent catastrophe. Now, by the same token, instead of crying loudly, he should have prayed and recited psalms. (2-10) Furthermore, he and his fellow-Jews could have taken some practical steps and should not have relied on miracles to happen which is, in any case, strictly forbidden to Jews (*b. Pes.* 64b). So why did the Jews not turn for help to other Jewish communities abroad? Why did they not make use of the respite of a full year and emigrate, for instance to the Holy Land? The story ironically exposes their passivity and peculiar theology. Incidentally, v. 7 lets us know that the bribe was indeed pocketed by the king, as otherwise there would be no reason for Mordecai to tell Esther of it.

(11) A prohibition on approaching the palace gates is for security reasons and rightly so: busy with banquets, the king lives in constant fear of rebellion. Obedience is here carried to the absurd: as we have seen, the only punishment known in Persia for whatever transgression, be it no more than asking for an audience with the king, is the death penalty. On the same subject: what is the reason for the king's inordinate one-month long abstinence from exercising his marital rights as mentioned by Esther? (13-14) These few words are the only ones spoken directly by Mordecai throughout the story, as all others are reported in indirect speech. He is not a skilful talker, which in itself is not humorous at all, but will emerge as such below. (16) Whereas all Susa, if not all Persia, seems to be inordinately busy with eating and drinking, Esther proclaims three days of non-banqueting as a fitting counter-example.

*Chapter 5*

(1) We wonder how beautiful Esther could have looked when she entered the inner court and stood in front of the throne after fasting for three days. On the other hand, we may rely on Hegai's art as a cosmetician to overcome her momentary disadvantage. (3) That the king offers her half his kingdom is without doubt a figure of speech. This reveals how ineffective is the Persian court custom which lays down, as we shall see in 8.8, that whatever is once uttered by the king is irrevocable. To put it simply the king is as frivolous in speech as in deed. Incidentally, he has so far spoken only twice: once, when he gave his consent to the annihilation of all the Jews, and now, when he makes a present of 63 and a half provinces to a woman who, unknown to him, is a Jewess. (5) Banquet no. 5 takes place. Again, hasty and thoughtless action is the order of the day. (6) See above, v. 3. (7-8) At first glance it looks as if Esther was afraid to make her request. In reality, however, she acts with great wisdom—in fact, she is the only person in the story to do so. By postponing her request until another day she lulls Haman into trusting her goodwill toward him, and evokes the king's curiosity and perhaps jealousy. Thus, she is a foil for his and Haman's customary rashness.

Whereas Mordecai is taciturn and the king's few speeches are staccato and silly, hers are subtle. It is humorously interesting to compare the lengths and frequencies of these speeches. Mordecai opens his mouth only once and utters 31 words, the king 14 times and utters 138, i.e. on average ten words for each of his mostly formulaic utterances. Esther, who gains in stature as the plot unfolds, speaks eight times and utters 232 words altogether, showing great intuition by pandering to the king's vanity with long circumlocutions, apologies and flattery. The great orator is Haman, but, compared to Esther's circuitous ways with the king, his speeches are clumsy. He is loquacious: one of his orations extends to over 52 words! The total (132) is divided into three sections, each at once revealing his hidden intentions, bad as they are, and overshooting his aims.

(11) Boastfully, he reports to his family and followers of the royal favour he enjoys. How could even an Ahasuerus have

nominated such a simpleton to become his chief adviser? (13) Neglecting his other duties as such, he is so preoccupied with his morbid *idée fixe* of revenging himself on Mordecai that he cannot rejoice in his recent promotion. (14) At this point, his wife Zeresh, who is obviously familiar with her husband's complexes, comes to his help with a piece of very good psychological advice: 'Why don't you meanwhile erect a high gallows for Mordecai's impending execution?' Anticipatory activity helps to reduce tension before an eagerly awaited event. The height of the gallows is exaggerated, a frequent symptom of psychologically disturbed persons. In any case, Haman gleefully accepts the suggestion and feels much relieved. The irony lies in that by letting himself be influenced by his wife's meddling in his affairs, he evidently transgresses the royal command that women should mind their own business—see 1.22.

*Chapter 6*

(1) Even a profligate suffers from insomnia from time to time—and here at the very time when insomnia is needed. Had he drunk too little that evening? Be it as it may, (2-3) Mordecai is remembered and due not to be hanged but rewarded for his loyalty. As so often, the king excels at quick decision-making: a queen is chosen after a one-night stand; a premier is appointed on the spur of the moment; a nation is condemned to die because of a false charge, suddenly trumped up and insubstantiated, and honours are bestowed in the middle of the night. Command is given to one of the secretaries on night duty and Haman is let in. (4) Why is he lingering in the court at midnight? Typically precipitate and imprudent, he thinks that is the right moment to ask the king to sign Mordecai's death warrant, although Mordecai was to die anyway in a few months' time with the rest of the Jews. (5-6) Another king would have suspected Haman's nightly perambulations in the palace to be signs of a rebellion in preparation, but not so the insouciant Ahasuerus. Whatever his intentions, Haman is so impatient and blinded by hate that he can think only of himself.

(7-9) Upon Haman's advice, all imaginable honours,

including a crown, are to be showered on the man whom the king favours. True, whose head is to be crowned is not clear: the translation believes it to be the horse's head which, apart from being too absurd an idea even in such a humorous story, would be unthinkable and totally out of character for Haman. Therefore, it is more plausible that he has his own head in mind, presumptuous as he is, and unable to see that the moment of truth is near. (10) For the first time, the king talks sensibly and coherently. (11) It must have been quite a spectacle to watch an old Jew on horseback, and funnier still to see great Haman serving as his herald. Has he really not the faintest suspicion that the Queen is related to his enemy? With so much office work in the civil service, surely the background information on all the virgins would be recorded in a register, but *quem deus vult perdere dementat.*

(12) Haman is obviously unbalanced. Yesterday he was still in high spirits, today he is desperate. This time, Mrs Haman is of little assistance to him. On the contrary, and characteristically for persons of her and her husband's type—and comically to the reader—(13) her former presence of mind leaves her in a second and turns her hate for the Jews, which she shares with Haman, into fear of them. The couple is thus the archetype of inveterate Jew-haters and Jew-baiters, (14) but there is no time for them to take counsel in this emergency as the coach is waiting outside to carry Haman to the banquet—and to his doom.

### *Chapter 7*

(1) Now we come to banquet no. 6 with the usual toasts and (2) empty promises. The king's mood is excellent, since the food is good, the wine plentiful and the hostess charming; Haman wallows in his pride. Suddenly, catastrophe strikes and (3) he is exposed as a liar, an irresponsible minister, a traitor, a potential mass-murderer and one who schemes to kill the queen. Esther wisely plays down the danger to herself, (4-6) claiming that her main concern is for the king's peace of mind. Neither does she mention that, by accepting Haman's bribe, the king himself is far from innocent. Actually, she emerges as the only diplomat at a court otherwise populated

by incompetent menfolk. (8) This scene is the height of humour. Haman, who was forgiven throughout the story, for neglect of duty, disloyalty and planned genocide, must now pay with his life for a crime he has not committed and, with all his ambitious hopes, could not have wished to commit: the rape of the queen right upon the royal couch, while the king relaxes for a few minutes on the terrace to cool off. Clearly, Haman has never studied the book of Proverbs: 'When you sit down to eat with a ruling prince, be sure to keep your mind on what [or: who] is before you' (23.1). (9) In true sycophantic fashion, the courtiers who kept silent at the sight of Haman's impudence and evil designs, now hasten to denounce these as soon as they perceive his possible ruin. Harbona, for instance, has been aware of Haman's plans, since he knows of the gallows and its exact height, but kept his knowlwedge to himself until the right moment had come.

## *Chapter 8*

(1) The reader who, unlike Haman, naturally knows the book of Proverbs, is reminded of the warning, 'A king shows favour to an intelligent servant, but his displeasure strikes down those who fail him' (14.35), and the assurance 'A righteous man is rescued from disaster and the wicked man plunges into it' (11.8). (3ff.) From here on, after Haman's downfall, after Mordecai's elevation to high rank in his stead and with the mortal danger to the Jews over, the author who, as we have seen, enjoys a good laugh at kings, oversized empires, flatterers at court and, occasionally, Jews themselves, has only very few chances left for giving further vent to his sense of humour. This is the reason why this running commentary ends here and why only a number of disconnected examples of his tendency follow.

(5) Esther cunningly glosses over the fact that the letters were written with the king's approval and signed with his own signet-ring. Easily taken in by her eloquence and beauty, the king agrees to whatever she says. (9) Mordecai makes sure that his edict is promulgated, this time in Hebrew too. His couriers, unlike Haman's, are mounted so that the good news may reach the outlying provinces as soon as possible. (17) The

Hebrew verb at the end of the verse is in the reflexive mode 'judaizing themselves' and may signify either that people only professed to be Jews (as the translation renders it) or that they really converted. The truth, as so often, probably lies in the middle. The narrator, far from rejoicing in this increase of the number of Jews by proselytes, ridicules them: they are motivated by fear of being killed and not by fear of God, and will perhaps re-convert when the danger is over.

### *Chapter 9*

(7-10) For the names of Haman's sons, see the essay 'Humour in Names' in this collection. (16) Despite his occasional and hidden criticism of the Jews, the author has a natural inclination to support their viewpoint, and therefore mentions more than once that they did not touch any of the plunder although permitted to do so. (17-22) This time, there is no banqueting, but a holiday, and instead of robbing their neighbours, the Jews send presents to each other and distribute alms. Why is there no thanksgiving service? (20) Are we searching too keenly for humour and/or ironical criticism on the part of the narrator, when we suspect him of implicitly censuring Mordecai's declaration of a permanent date for a new holiday without consulting the legal authorities in the Holy Land and in disregard of the prohibition in Deut. 13.1? (29) A woman takes over part of the government—Esther and not Mordecai is the first to sign the letters—and some order is finally restored in the state. In fact, the author has nothing but contempt for males, his pro-female bias is consonant with many other instances of this kind in the narrative parts of the Scriptures. With the exception of Deborah in Judg. 4–5 (two more, Queen Jezebel in 1 Kgs 21–2 Kgs 9 and Queen Athaliah in 2 Kgs 11, played too horrible a part to deserve mention), this is the only example in the Bible of a woman being in charge of public affairs. Many an ancient male audience may have read the story and a few people, particularly women (who have been enjoined ever since by Jewish tradition to listen to the annual reading in Synagogue of the Scroll), may have smiled with satisfaction.

*Chapter 10*

(1-3) The book ends on a strange note. First, in good Jewish fashion as a financier, it is probably Mordecai who institutes forced labour which, at least being an orderly form of taxation, the population may well have preferred to bribes and blood-letting, and which made Mordecai a popular hero with the masses. Yet his fellow-Jews' attitude towards him and thus that of the narrator remains ambivalent. He is now 'a great man among the Jews', e.g. specifically put in charge of the Jewish sector of the populace. The translation of the last sentence, however, is not too fortunate. Literally, the Hebrew reads that he is well-liked by the majority of his own people (but not by all). For a Jew, to be a leader of Jews is no easy job. True, he looks after their interests, 'speaks friendly' without arrogance, unlike his predecessor, and is a proponent of welfare. Yet whose welfare? That of his own (and not, as the English has it, 'of their') offspring? But as a bachelor he was probably childless—or does his niece Esther perhaps bear children to the king? God save the queen from such a fate! It would be more to her advantage to be pensioned off like Vashti. Thus, the matter of his offspring remains a puzzle. If Mordecai favoured Jews above non-Jews, why was he not popular with all the Jews? Or, on the contrary, was this why he was disliked by some Jews? Later Jewish history knows of many cases of Jews whose promotion to exalted political position was viewed with less than satisfaction by their brethren, as it frequently brought in its wake the downfall of both the people and their leaders.

This commentary has so far tried to investigate the Scroll verse by verse for aspects of humour. But humour of a kind can also be found in its structure as a whole.

The ten chapters divide into two parts: one progressing from a rather humorous beginning to a situation of mortal danger, the other from narrowly avoided slaughter *en masse* to a felicitous ending. The critical point is when a seemingly casual event, namely the rare occurrence of a king's insomnia, turns imminent disaster into salvation—a case of 'small causes, great consequences'. Following the literary convention of

chiasmus (= symmetry) in biblical narration, this event correctly takes place in the middle (6.1). Haman's rise and fall in the first five chapters is neatly matched by Mordecai's fall and rise in the last five. That the second half is designed to serve as the exact counterpart of the first is brought explicitly to the reader's notice by the remark 'and the opposite happened' (9.1), omitted for obscure reasons in the translation. In addition, there is an overwhelming amount of concentrically placed expressions, items, contrapositions and the like. They are too numerous (and so humorous) to be cited here, but they can be found in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, ed. J.J. Welch (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), pp. 54-57, where they are listed in diagrammatical form by the present writer. The playful nature of this device is obvious.

Many instances of the author's sense of humour can be appreciated by the modern reader, a few perhaps not. Three cases, at least, are unusual and apart from adding another touch of humour to the Scroll in its totality, underline that not everything the author tells in his opus is as incredibly horrible and incredibly miraculous as related, but rather contrived.

The first case concerns the frequency of the names Mordecai and Susa in each of the two halves. It cannot be sheer coincidence that the name Mordecai occurs thirty-five times, and the name Susa nine times on each side of the climax in 6.1. Whether such symmetry can also be defined as humour is a matter of the reader's predilection and of the term's definition.

Furthermore, several entire blocks of text in the third chapter recur in ch. 8, the third from the end: e.g. the appointments of two extremely dissimilar viziers, the summoning of the same secretaries to write two almost identical, but in fact contradictory decrees; and the dispatching of the letters by couriers.

Thirdly, another feature of the overall pattern indicates that the writer took great pleasure in this private kind of humour. The first five chapters consist of ninety-two verses, with Haman's triumph in the forty-sixth verse, i.e. in the exact middle of this, the first, part. Seventy-five verses make up chs. 6–10 and the account of Mordecai's glory is placed again in the middle, namely in the thirty-ninth verse, the exact centre of Part II. There is, admittedly, a slight disparity

because the central one is in fact verse no. 38. Such a minor inbalance need not trouble us too much, as it could easily be rectified if the three verses comprising the list of Haman's ten sons (9.7-9) were differently partitioned.

Apart from these details and from the general plan of the story, it transpires that, when writing it, its author was in a satirical mood and intended to make fun of the top-heavy Persian state machinery and the ostentatious royal court. This aim he achieves by two means.

Of the book's 3270 words, no fewer than 439 belong to the semantic field of staff, etiquette and wealth. They are listed below with the number of occurrences of each word given in brackets. (My translation into English of these terms does not always conform to the NEB).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| king (187) | signet ring (6) | major (2) | splendour (1) |
| honour (117) | sceptre (5) | riches (2) | abundance (1) |
| queen (25) | silver (5) | throne (2) | power (1) |
| kingdom (23) | greatness (3) | purple (2) | valour (1) |
| general (13) | crown (3) | linen (2) | horseman (1) |
| capital (9) | governor (3) | curtains (2) | malachite (1) |
| eunuch (7) | satrap (3) | alabaster (2) | mother-of-pearl (1) |
| gold (6) | officer (2) | coronet (1) | turquoise (1) |

To paraphrase Juvenal's famous saying, it is difficult not to recognize the satire implied in this deliberately overblown enumeration. While thousands are almost killed and hundreds actually killed, 14% of the text speaks of nothing but official hierarchy and royal grandeur.

A final stylistic device for stressing the indolence or pointless activity reigning at court is that the writer departs from the usual forceful manner of the Bible of telling a story in the active voice and instead shows a tendency to prefer the passive: of the 650 verbs occurring in Esther, 69 are in passive voice, i.e. about 11%, whereas in Genesis and Samuel, both apogees of the biblical art of narative, the percentage is lower by one half. The passive voice makes the tale sound as if no one of consequence does anything himself, and that all events come about through the actions of a host of inflated and useless authorities with nobody being personally responsible for anything. In the certainty that ultimately the shedding of innocent blood was prevented, we now can only laugh.

But how could the author of this story find it humorous? He was undoubtedly a Jew and may have lived in Susa. But then, he knew of the happy ending right from the start, so we may presume that his sense of humour and his compassion for his fellow-Jews influenced his technique. For various reasons, the Rabbis were inclined (see *b. Meg.* 7a) to exclude the Esther Scroll from the biblical canon. That they did not exclude it attests to their own sense of humour.

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