

Humor and wit

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Humor and Wit

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I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Biblical humor has a prophetic dimension. It works subversively in order to constitute congruity to a former imbalanced situation, thus revealing an al-

ternative reality. Therefore, biblical humor provokes laughter, an involuntarily response to the realized incongruity. Since humor is oriented to the audience, biblical humor depends on the cultural conventions of the author and his intended audience, both living in biblical times.

Since religious books tend to be serious, the existence of humor is often denied for the biblical corpus (A. N. Whitehead). However, since humor is a fundamental aspect of human nature (H. Plessner), it would be surprising if humor was absent in the Bible. In fact, there are many biblical stories utilizing different humorous techniques like paronomasia, hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, parody, satire, ridicule, trickery, and turnabouts. Moreover, different comic character types can be found in the Bible, like tricksters (Samson), simpletons (young naïve David), buffoons (drunken Noah), and clowns (Balaam). Even God himself is portrayed laughing at the foolishness of his enemies trying to emancipate themselves from God (Ps 2:4; similarly Ps 37:13; 59:9).

Though there is no biblical idiom for humor, laughter – the involuntary response to humor – is expressed by a set of Hebrew roots forming nouns and verbs. Laughter, the medium through which humor is realized, is phrased by the root *šhq* and the late byword *šhq*. Both roots range between the positive and negative poles of laughter. In contrast, most of the other roots within the semantic field of humor have a negative connotation like *tl*, *qls*, *l'g*, *l'b*, meaning “to mock, deride.” The root *lys*, “to speak indirectly,” refers primarily to the dimension of incongruity within humor, but can also denote “to mock.”

A comic effect could be produced by onomatopoeia. In Isa 28:10 the monotonous sounds *šaw lāšaw qaw lāqaw* imitate the stammering language of drunkards. The galloping of horses seems to be copied by the sound *middahārôt dahārôt* in Judg 5:22. Therefore, assonances within the applied semantics could be understood on a humorous level.

Biblical humor can be found in personal names that pinpoint to certain narrative traits. The subtleness of names is directly expressed at times, e.g., in 1 Sam 25 when Abigail entreats David to spare her husband's life: “Nabal (= fool) is his name and *nēbālā* (= folly) is with him.” Sometimes names are explained differently. The name Isaac is related to *šhq* “to laugh,” but is explained differently: Abraham's laughing at the improbable birth of a son (Gen 17:17), Sarah's laughing at receiving a child (Gen 18:12), laughter concerning the birth of Isaac (Gen 21:6) or Isaac sporting with his “sister” Rebecca (Gen 26:8). Though the topic of progeny is a rather serious problem in the stories of the patriarchs, the biblical author seems to have fun with the sensational twist of events when old parents were getting a son.

Since names are often ambiguous and could be explained with many etymologies, the progression of the narrative often reveals the comic element of a given name, e.g., Jacob “he betrays” (Gen 27); Balaam “abuser of people” (Num 22–24), Cozbi “deception” (Num 25), Eglon “little calf” (Judg 3); Samson “sunnyboy” vs. Delilah “one of the night” (Judg 16). Sometimes names are slightly changed to evoke humor. The Canaanite deity Baal-Zebul is changed to Baal-Zebub “Lord of Flies” (2 Kgs 1). The altered name might refer to the many sacrifices slaughtered for Baal since the meat is attracting flies. Esau is called either Edom “the Red One” alluding to the red pottage (Gen 25:30) or Seir “hairy” because Esau was shaggy since his birth (Gen 25:25). The application of non-Semitic names in a story has a humorous effect because these names could be interpreted within the Hebrew language as allusions to their actual behavior, e.g., Mehuman from “panic,” Biztha from “plunder” (Esth 1:10). Many fictitious names underline certain notions of the story, e.g., Adam from “ground,” Eve from “life,” Cain from “javelin,” Abel from “transience” (Gen 4). Some names are chosen to show some incongruity to the content, e.g., the stubborn prophet Jonah ben Amittai rejecting the will of God. For Jonah “dove” symbolizes kindness and Amittai derives from “honesty.”

Place names could be humorous as well. After slaying his brother Abel, Cain resides in the otherwise unknown land of Nod “land of swaying.” Therefore Cain – the paradigmatic murderer – does not settle in security in his city, but lives in fear all the time. The toponym Babel means “confusion” thus pointing to the later confusion of tongues. Furthermore, some of the campsites in the wilderness allude to the rebellious Israelites, e.g., Haradah “trembling” or Makheloth “riots.”

Apart from ambiguous names, humor and wit abound in biblical narratives, prophecies and wisdom teachings. Within the Pentateuch and historical books a variety of narrative forms have been developed by the biblical authors like comedy, fairy tale, joke, parody, ridicule, fable, or ethnic humor. The plague narrative resembles comedy when Pharaoh's magicians imitate the first plagues and thereby cause harm to the Egyptians, but had to surrender later on (Exod 7–12). Samson – especially cunning in other exploits – acts like a fairytale figure always making the same mistake and trusting Delilah four times though he must have known all along (Judg 16). King Achish of Gath is portrayed like a political laughing stock, not in control of the situation at court and duped by David several times (1 Sam 21; 27; 29). Parody could be found in the stupid excesses at court burlesquing Persian protocol (Esth 1–3). At the contest of mount Carmel Elijah ridicules the prophets of Baal supposing that Baal has gone aside or is sleeping (1 Kgs 18:27). Fa-

bles tend to be comical as well, e.g., the story of Balaam's talking jenny halting when seeing the threatening angel contrary to blind Balaam (Num 22) or Jotham's fable electing the thornbush to be king, thus eliminating more promising candidates (Judg 9). A prime example for ethnic humor is the stabbing of the Moabite king Eglon in the toilet by the left-handed Benjaminite warrior Ehud (Judg 3). This surprising attack brings about Eglon's evacuating his bowels with the side effect that the murderer could escape from the palace while the guards were thinking that their king is relieving himself.

Prophetic sayings use especially negative forms of humor like irony, satire, parody, and sarcasm. The designation "(fat) cows of Bashan" for the Samaritans is ironic since the contrary is intended. The satiric taunt song in Isa 14 is deriding the arrogant king of Babylon. The book of Jonah is a parody of a prophet insisting on false theology. The summons of Amos to transgression (Amos 4:4) and the polemics against idols are pure sarcasm (Isa 44:14–17).

Wisdom teachings use proverbial wit, wordplay, and punning. Biblical proverbs often apply grotesque hyperbole, irony, surrealism, and caricature. They make fun of persons with serious misconduct, like the drunkard (Prov 23:29–35). Especially lazy people are cartooned: Lazy people have silly excuses, are sleeping all the time, are too weak to eat, and consider themselves sapient (Prov 26:13–16). Proverbs also mock the idiot who repeats his silly behavior all the time (Prov 26:11).

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