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Excerpt

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*Introduction: an anatomy of comedy in
the Bible*

Holy Books never laugh, to whatever nations they
belong.

(Charles Baudelaire)¹

IS THERE COMEDY IN THE BIBLE?

Most readers of the Bible would likely echo Baudelaire's argument about "holy books," contending along with many philosophers, theologians, and literary critics that the Bible is not a congenial home for the comic vision. A. N. Whitehead echoes a host of readers past and present when he asserts: "the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literatures."² It should occasion, therefore, no great surprise that for many the coupling of comedy and the Bible is a contradiction in terms.

Moreover, when one scans the more standard approaches of biblical criticism, comedy receives scant place – at least until the present time.³ For example, a random glance at a

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter, and, in General, on the Comic in the Plastic Arts," in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, Robert W. Corrigan, ed. (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 455.

² A. N. Whitehead, cited in *Dialogues*, Lucien Price, ed. (Boston: Little and Brown, 1953), p. 30. I owe this citation to Yehuda T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, eds. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), p. 21 (see also footnote on p. 31).

³ See, however, the pioneering books of A. J. Baumgartner, *L'Humour Dans l'Ancien Testament* (Lausanne: Grayot, 1896); J. Chotzner, *Hebrew Humor and Other Essays*, (London: Methuen, 1905). These two works are the exceptions that prove the rule, since they have had very little impact on biblical interpretation and are seldom cited.

number of Bible dictionaries reveals that most do not even have an entry under comedy or humor until the most recent ones such as *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*.⁴ Standard commentaries reflect a similar paucity of interest in comic forms in biblical literature, though the situation is changing notably with books such as Esther and Jonah (see below). One usually finds, however, only scattered references to the comic dimensions of texts such as Balaam's talking ass (Num. 22) or Abraham's negotiations with God on behalf of the "righteous" in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18).

The lack of focus on comedy in the Bible is not altogether surprising: after all, the term "comedy" is Greek in origin, usually Aristotelian in its literary critical application, and hence seemingly remote from the more obviously central and constitutive biblical genres. To be sure, in the long, complex history of Judaism and Christianity, there were notable exceptions to this prevailing pattern such as we find in medieval Christianity's display of a comic sensibility in its miracle and mystery plays, the role of the carnivalesque in such medieval Christian institutions as "The Feast of Fools,"⁵ and Hasidic Judaism's affirmation of the intimate interplay between humor and religion. However, centuries of liturgical and theological use of the Bible have helped to obscure and largely exclude a vital role for comedy and humor in biblical literature and religion.

As a consequence, the rich, variegated history of the Bible's multiple roles in Western culture shows at best ambiguous encounters between the Bible and comedy – encounters

⁴ W. F. Stinespring, "Humor," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, et al., eds. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 660–662; Gary A. Herion, et al., "Humor and Wit," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. III, pp. 325–333 (see especially the section on the "Old Testament," by Edward Greenstein, pp. 330–333); S. E. Medcalf, "Comedy," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden, eds. (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 128–129.

⁵ See especially the brilliant analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); note also the more popular examination in Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

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often strained and hostile, sometimes subtle and nuanced, almost always ambivalent, and occasionally even volatile. Interaction between comedy and biblical religion has swung from one extreme to another. On the one hand, from early on many influential interpreters opposed any significant link between comedy and the Bible, sometimes claiming that such a linkage might be blasphemous.⁶ On the other hand, we discover by way of contrast that both Judaism and Christianity could allow a significant place for the comic spirit. For example, on the Jewish side, a festival like Purim and its accompanying text of Esther developed a vibrant carnivalesque tradition involving comic forms and rituals; Jewish humor also emerged as a weapon of an oppressed and marginalized people to help its survival amidst the perilous conditions of exile. The tradition of Christian humor and festivity became especially prominent in the Middle Ages. Of course Dante gave the most memorable expression to the comedy of redemption when he immortalized the Christian biblical and theological vision in his grand Medieval poem which came to be known as *The Divine Comedy*.

Northrop Frye has made the Dantesque view a central aspect of his own approach to the Bible, a vantage point that sees comedy as an overarching category of the Christian tradition:

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-lay 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.⁷

It is symptomatic of the relative neglect of comedy in biblical studies that few scholars have taken up the challenge of Frye's observation and looked at the potential of comedy as

⁶ See Radday's salient remarks on differences and similarities between Judaism and Christianity on this hostility toward the presence of comedy in the Bible: Radday and Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 33–38.

⁷ Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in *Theories of Comedy*, Paul Lauter, ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 455.

an illuminating perspective for exploring biblical texts. As I observed earlier, biblical scholars have not totally ignored the possibilities of comic forms, but observations have been few and far among the commentaries. For example, the great German critic Gunkel offered some sharp-eyed remarks on comic episodes in Genesis (see below); one should also single out for special praise Edwin M. Good's pioneering book, *Irony in the Old Testament*, a volume that presents a series of provocative, penetrating interpretations of both comic and tragic irony in the Hebrew Bible.⁸ But on the whole comedy as an important interpretive perspective appears infrequently in the standard commentaries, dictionaries, and journals, though recent years have seen the emergence of greater interest.⁹ Even when comedy does enter the arena of biblical criticism, its particular focus, form, and function do not receive adequate and systematic representation. The volumes edited by Exum and Radday/Brenner have begun to make amends for the desultory application of comic categories to biblical literature, but a more comprehensive and cohesive exposition is still lacking.¹⁰

In this book I intend to develop a more adequate anatomy of biblical comedy, an anatomy that is grounded in contemporary literary criticism. As an epigraph for my presentation I cite Baudelaire's provocative assertion, "Holy books never laugh . . ." – an assertion that I have chosen ironically as a backdrop against which to argue a contradictory thesis: the Holy Book we call the Bible revels in a profoundly ambivalent laughter, a divine and human laughter that by turns is both mocking and joyous, subversive and celebrative, and finally a

⁸ Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965).

⁹ See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum, ed., *Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible in Semeia: An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* 32 (1984); Radday and Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*; Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987); Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981). Hyers deserves credit for a probing exploration of the vital place of comedy in religious life and literature.

¹⁰ See references in note 3.

laughter that results in an exuberant and transformative comic vision.

I wish further to argue that what gives this comic vision its passion and vital depth is precisely its recognition of the place and power of tragedy, of that vision of the dark, jagged side of human existence which unveils the stark presence of unredeemed death, of unjustified disaster, of unmitigated despair.¹¹ But tragedy is generally episodic in the overarching movement of the Bible, though no less terrifying in its effects. The comic vision, I submit, can embrace the tragic dimension without eliminating or negating it – let alone explaining or totally healing its destructive effects.¹² Yet comedy cannot be felt in its full force apart from tragedy, nor can comedy be delineated and fully appreciated without tragedy. So it is in general, and so it is, I contend, in the concrete forms of the biblical heritage.

SKETCHING AN ANATOMY OF COMEDY IN THE
 BIBLE

Comedy has been unpropitious to definers.

(SAMUEL JOHNSON)¹³

Before turning to the Bible and its diverse modes of expressing a comic sense and sensibility, I need briefly to delineate the chief lineaments of the comic vision. At the outset I recall

¹¹ See the splendid exploration of biblical tragedy in J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); I wish, too, to express my gratitude to Cheryl Exum for early conversations on this theme which led to our collaborative essay, J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," in Exum, *Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible*, pp. 5–40.

¹² Note Wylie Sypher's formulation: "the range of comedy is more embracing than the range of tragedy; and if tragedy occurs at some middle point in ethical life where failure is weighed against man's nobility of spirit, comedy ventures out into the farther extremes of experience in both directions. . . ." See his "The Meanings of Comedy," in *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy, George Meredith and Laughter, Henri Bergson* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1956), p. 213.

¹³ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, Number 125 (1751), in Lauter, ed., *Theories of Comedy*, p. 255.

the pithy observation of Samuel Johnson as a cautionary note: “Comedy has been unpropitious to definers.”¹⁴ Hence I will not offer a definition or a reductive formula; rather I want to draw out certain recurrent features of comedy, features which appear throughout the ages in classic comic works and thus tie disparate comic forms together in a kind of “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein).¹⁵ Such a delineation will necessarily be eclectic and expansive, obviously demanding due limitation and qualification when assessing specific literary texts. One must be acutely sensitive to the risk of imposing later and perhaps alien schemas on the ancient biblical literature. The persuasiveness of any interpretation of the Bible in terms of a comic vision depends on the degree to which one can argue for comic forms that are congenital and congenial to the biblical texts within their native Hebraic and Near Eastern setting. I would hasten to add, however, that a larger comparative context embracing the relationship between the Bible and its complex, continuous roles within Western culture can also illumine the whole spectrum of biblical and post-biblical texts. Going back and forth between the Bible and its varied dramatic, literary, and religious “afterlives” may open up the possibility for fresh insights into both the original biblical texts and later works which have been influenced by the Bible. In sum, though caution must be exercised against the threat of anachronistic and alien readings, careful attention to the full network of possible intertextual linkages can extend and deepen the range of potential comic resonance within the texts and their multiple contexts and subtexts.

I will focus on the comic vision from four interrelated per-

¹⁴ Wylie Sypher is almost as pithy and offers a general explanation: “If we have no satisfactory definition of laughter, neither do we have any satisfactory definition of comedy. Indeed, most of the theories of laughter and comedy fail precisely because they oversimplify a situation and art more complicated than the tragic situation and art. Comedy seems to be a more pervasive human condition than tragedy . . . Tragedy, not comedy, limits its field of operation and is a more closely regulated form of response to the ambiguities and dilemmas of humanity. The comic action touches experience at more points than tragic action.” See “The Meanings of Comedy,” p. 206.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (third edn.), G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1953), p. 32.

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spectives: (1) plot-line; (2) characterization of basic types; (3) linguistic and stylistic strategies; (4) functions and intentions.

First, the typical plot-line of comedy begins with a view of a largely harmonious, integrated society, a situation which is challenged or tested in some way as the action unfolds; but comedy conventionally swings upward at the end and reintegrates the hero 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, with action sinking into deep and often potentially tragic complications, and then suddenly turning upward into a happy ending."¹⁶ Thus whatever trials and threats the hero must endure, comedy usually ascends from any momentary darkness and concludes with celebration, joy, and at least the promise of new life, whether in a marriage festival or the birth of a new society. In brief, comedy typically ends in carnival, whereas tragedy ends in catastrophe. Thus comedy contains a "U" in contrast to tragedy's inverted "U." Using this pattern of divergent plot-lines, Robertson has offered a stimulating comparative treatment of Exodus 1–15 as comedy over against Euripides' tragedy, *The Bacchae*.¹⁷ Similarly, Tribble has invoked Frye's model to explicate the Book of Ruth as "A Human Comedy."¹⁸ Finally, to anticipate my own argument, the U-shaped plot is embedded in the comic vision in Genesis, Exodus, Esther, and especially Job.

Second, we find certain conventional types within comedy. Buffoons, clowns, fools, simpletons, rogues, and tricksters, incarnate the human, all too human, and sometimes sub-human or animal form. For example, the sly serpent of Eden is a seductive trickster who raises uncomfortable questions about God's motivations and serves as an agent of transformation for the primal couple; Jacob and Rebekah appear as

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), p. 25.

¹⁷ David Robertson, *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 16–32. See the discussion below in chapter three.

¹⁸ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 166–199.

consummate tricksters in a family of tricksters, whereas Isaac and Esau appear as befuddled simpletons; Balaam the diviner-seer is satirized as a blind fool in contrast to his talking ass that has super-vision (she sees the “angel of the Lord,” whereas her master doesn’t!);¹⁹ even the mighty Moses reveals some blind spots, receiving a sometimes parodied treatment in his call narratives in Exodus. Thus, whenever great or noble personages appear, they are often satirized and subjected to subtle parody or outright ridicule, thereby undercutting their pretentiousness and reducing them to the common lot of humanity. Foreign kings are favorite targets: the Egyptian Pharaoh in Exodus is savagely satirized as an arrogant imposter and then finally destroyed; King Ahasuerus emerges as a fool who can be easily manipulated both by the wicked Haman and the wise Esther; and the mighty Nebuchadnezzar is reduced to the ridiculous posture of an animal grazing in the fields until he recognizes his proper place of submission to the high God Yahweh.²⁰ Typically, however, when comedy isolates a figure for ridicule, the ultimate goal is still reintegration into the social group, though not always, as the case of the Egyptian Pharaoh vividly illustrates.

Third, comedy has characteristic linguistic and stylistic habits and strategies. Comedy typically delights in various forms of verbal artifice such as punning or word-play, parody, hyperbole, redundancy, and repetitiousness. Moreover, comedy especially exploits incongruity and irony, high-

¹⁹ After I had completed this manuscript my attention was called to David Marcus’ new book, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), a book which came into my hands too late for appropriate inclusion.

²⁰ See the fine essay by Athalya Brenner, “Who’s Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who’s Afraid of Biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 63 (1994), pp. 38–55. It is gratifying to read a comprehensive and compelling analysis of the role of humor in satirizing “the obtuse foreign ruler,” an analysis reached independently from mine. In addition to the cases I have dealt with, Brenner adds the unnamed king of Jericho in Joshua 2, Balak and Balaam in Numbers 22–24, Eglon of Moab in Judges 3, Ahab in I Kings 21, and Belshazzar in Daniel 5. Brenner offers penetrating and forceful observations about the subversive power of humor, especially in the hands of marginalized women.

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lighting discrepancy, reversal, and surprise. Comedy moves with relish into the realm of the ludicrous and ridiculous. Comedy cannot be reduced to a simplistic equation with the humorous and laughable, though comedy nevertheless often seeks to elicit laughter. The laughter is often complex and ambivalent, ranging from sardonic and subversive to joyous and celebrative. To be sure, mocking, sardonic laughter is more dominant in biblical literature. The laughter is often at someone's expense – laughing *at*, not laughing *with*.²¹ This side emerges when the comedy takes the form of parody and satire, serving to deflate pretentious, pompous figures. Comedy celebrates the rhythm of life with its times of festivity and joyous renewal, but it must frequently resort to ridicule in order to bring down the arrogant and boastful who block or threaten the free movement of life. Comedy perennially takes up arms against the forces that stifle life and laughter, though even here its barbed arrows generally only sting, not kill. If satire fails to move on to the genuinely restorative and celebrative, it is questionable whether it still remains in the domain of comedy.²²

Fourth, and finally, comedy has a multiple range of functions and intentions befitting its complicated forms within literature and life. Paradoxically comedy throughout the ages has oscillated between conservative and subversive tendencies, being used both to maintain the status quo and to undercut prevailing ideologies in the name of revolutionary and utopian goals.²³ Thus one pole of comedy serves to undergird and conserve social norms, using its weapons of satire to inhibit and even destroy forces that threaten the status quo. Such comedy may, nonetheless, follow the pattern of the

²¹ See Brenner's discriminating analysis, "On the Semantic Field of Humour," in Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 51–52 and 57–58.

²² Cf. the classic treatment offered by Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire," in his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), pp. 223–242.

²³ "The ambivalence of comedy reappears in its social meanings, for comedy is both hatred and revel, rebellion and defense, attack and escape. It is revolutionary and conservative. Socially, it is both sympathy and rebellion." So Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," p. 242.

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U-shaped plot-line with its ineluctable drive through the crises and complications befalling the heroes until the concluding upswing which restores the rightful society and celebrates the victory of life and love. At the other pole comedy reveals its subversive and even revolutionary functions. It takes dead aim at a tyrannical and oppressive society and attempts to subvert it in order to institute a new society built upon traditions that foster liberation and life. Hence such comedy can ultimately be transformative, not just restorative.²⁴

This dual thrust of the comic vision – its conservative, restorative tendency and its subversive, revolutionary power – emerges in various ways in the biblical exemplars of comedy. Moreover, these seemingly disparate functions can be manifested in the intrinsic aggressive force of comedy, an aggressiveness that appears in the defense of conservative values or in the promotion of revolutionary aims. To illustrate only the latter case, comedy has contributed to revolutionary impulses in the drive for liberation represented in the dramas of deliverance that form foundational narratives in the Bible. The Book of Exodus, for example, represents a comedy of deliverance that manifests a revolutionary mythos of liberation, revealing both the theme of freedom from bondage and reveling in the festive spirit of a newly liberated society. To anticipate my argument below, the comic vision animates the Exodus story both by dramatizing the subversive power of comedy in its relentless satire of Pharaoh as archetypal oppressor whose arrogance and folly are ruthlessly exposed as Israel's God "makes sport of" the Egyptians (Ex. 10:2) and by celebrating Yahweh's triumph over the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Ex. 15). Though obvious moral and theological

²⁴ See the superb recent exploration of comedy in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, an analysis which especially highlights the disruptive, subversive, and ultimately transformative power of the comic vision: Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith, *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); for example, note the following formulation that resonates very well with my perception into the power of biblical comedy: "If Dickinson's comedy stems from profound discomfort with society as it has been constructed, . . . then her transformations sketch the outlines of a world that more readily suits her aspirations" (p. 138).