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Psychological Roots of the Bible's Humor

Though the importance of humor is still undervalued in biblical interpretation, the Bible contains many widely recognized examples of humor and still more that are less well known. From the abundant laughter in the stories of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac to the comic narrative about Balaam and his talking donkey and on to the absurd images and funny characters in Jesus' teaching, the Bible uses humor to teach and entertain, two very compatible purposes.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the Bible's use of humor in terms of modern psychological theories about how humor works or about the functions of different types of humor. There are plenty of opportunities to muddle this since psychological theories of humor overlap with philosophical theories of humor on the one hand and, on the other, also overlap with practitioners' descriptions of devices comics use to construct humor. Still, with that caveat, let's note several theories psychologists commonly propose to explain humor. (Compare Martin's orderly presentation)

The first is a relief or release theory, often associated with Sigmund Freud. This theory proposes that when people have excess energy or stress or they feel constrained by social norms, humor provides a release from that energy or a way of breaking out, at least temporarily, from social norms. Interpreters often associate borderline or naughty humor with breaking through norms that feel confining.

A second theory emphasizes the use of humor to establish one's superiority, often by disparaging or degrading others. Theorists often point to aggression and hostility in humor, and, as a practical matter, some of the best contemporary comic writers teach that to get a laugh, you need to build on hostility. (Helitzer 36-51) The positive outcome of mocking or deriding others is supposed to lead to self-esteem, a sense of personal well being, and so on. Some suggest that the language of aggression can be more playful than dead serious and still have the same effect.

A third theory focuses on the use of incongruity. According to this theory, we laugh at what seems surprising, absurd, unusual, different from what we expect, or what seems a terrible misfit. This category can take in a wide variety of

examples from the tall and short or the fat and lean to the surprising victory of the unexpected hero. The absurd and the impossible can somehow happen.

A fourth theory may point to simply being in fun. It recognizes that we can go through life with a playful way of engaging the world and our experience. It may simply be a lightening up or, put a bit more seriously, a habit of creating a “psychological safety zone” (Apter in Martin 75-6). So one might use devices of humor for fun, without more mysterious deeper purposes. At the same time, we should remember that humor is not merely frivolous. People often say serious things (and sometimes say them more effectively) with humor in the mix.

A fifth theory that I’ll suggest comes from psychiatrist Christian Haggseth, a proponent of using humor positively. (Haggseth 11, 19, 21-24) He proposes that one source of humor is love. One example he offers is of the smile and laughter exchanged between a parent and an infant as they look into each other’s eyes. It seems to me that similar (and sometimes unexpected) laughter that springs up in early romance or even in the mature years of a loving marriage may also come from similar roots. It may simply be being captured by the surprise of love, by the too-good-to-be-true actually being true, by the astonishment of being loved in a measure you really can’t imagine. At least some of the laughter in the Bible may well come from this.

Two points about humor in the Bible may help frame this discussion. First, the humor in the Bible works in a broader frame than analysts often use to describe types of humor. Analysts of humor often describe jokes or short, funny stories. The humor in the Bible is more diverse than that, usually in narrative. Sometimes it is in the structure of a story or in the development of a character. Sometimes it is in elements within a story, perhaps in an action, in description, or even in a funny line within the story.

Second, the humor is told and retold to a sympathetic audience. In a familiar story, the surprise element may be missing, but hearers still laugh at the playfulness, the incongruity or absurdity, and the impossible victories again and again. It confirms their joy in faith.

My sense is that the humor categories of superiority and incongruity are the two that are most represented in the humor of the Bible, but let’s examine some illustrations for each of the theories outlined here.

No doubt there are others, but two examples may serve to illustrate the relief or release theory. The first comes from the story of Laban overtaking Jacob and demanding to know who had stolen his household gods. Jacob denies knowing anything about it and gives Laban permission to kill anyone who has them, permission Laban seems glad to use. The tension builds as the search narrows to the last tent, the tent of Rachel, who has indeed stolen the gods and hidden them under the camel saddle on which she is sitting. When Laban looks in, she apologizes coyly, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” (Genesis 31:35) She is spared and tension is released, all with a hint of overstepping social norms.

I suspect that biblical writers enjoyed some naughtiness in using circumcision humor. One telling example is when Saul, who is bent on killing David, generously informs David that instead of money as a dowry for his daughter Michal, Saul would only require 100 Philistine foreskins. The offer assumes that getting a guy's foreskin is more difficult than picking his pocket and that David will surely get killed in the process. But David jumps at the offer and in a fine comic touch at the end of the story is shown back in Saul's court counting out 200 foreskins. (1 Samuel 18:17-29) I suspect that the story of Jacob's sons using circumcision as part of their scheme to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah would have been told with laughter, though it certainly is dark humor. And we can wonder whether the Apostle Paul in his frustration with the circumcisers may have made a point in jest when he hopes the knife would slip. (Galatians 5:12, *Jerusalem Bible*)

Superiority or disparagement humor occurs often in the Bible. Though it no doubt has playfulness in it, as ethnic humor often does, it reassures Israel of their special place and helps reinforce good action over against stupidity. Among the judges, the story of Ehud is especially humorous, noting his left-handedness, his clever ruse and escape, and more. In the process it also presents the Moabite enemies as fat and stupid, a common comic device. King Eglon's servants, who should protect him, leave the king alone with the foreign agent and then stand outside the royal chamber doors puzzled, thinking the king has enjoyed the privacy of his throne room ("he must be relieving himself") for a very long time. Eglon himself is so fat that his body entirely enfolds Ehud's short sword. (Judges 3:3-30)

At Mt. Carmel, Elijah makes comic catcalls from the sidelines while the prophets of Baal cried out and cut themselves trying to get Baal to send fire on their offering. (1 Kings 18:20-29) Second Isaiah includes an extended satire about a fellow who cut down one of the trees he grew, baked bread and warmed himself with fire from half of it and then used the great tools in his shop to make the stump into a god. He cries out to it, "Save me, you are my god." The prophet pointedly notes that the guy didn't have the brains to figure out that he had eaten bread and been warmed by the other half of this tree and that the "god" to whom he cries is nothing but a block of wood. (Isaiah 44:9-20)

While David is trying to elude Saul, he goes to the King Achish's Philistine town of Gath. When the king's servants mistakenly identify him as the king of Israel, David anticipates trouble and begins to feign madness, scratching at the gate, drooling, and more. The act fools the servants, not to their credit. And the writer pictures King Achish himself adding to the disparagement humor when they bring David to him: "Look, you see the man is mad; why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?" (1 Samuel 21:10-15)

The Bible abounds in humor based on incongruity, partly because so many of the stories feature surprise, long odds, unlikely heroes, silly battle plans, and more. This type of humor may actually be structural throughout the Bible as God

acts in unexpected, even absurd ways. The covenant with Israel, for example, turns freed slaves into a kingdom of priests, a chosen people, but not on merit, as the people themselves point out. Similarly, in speaking of Jesus' parables, Frederick Buechner writes: "I think that these parables can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are essentially about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people, and I believe that the comedy of them is not just a device for making the truth that they contain go down easy but that the truth that they contain can itself be thought of as comic." (Buechner 66)

The individual examples of incongruity are many and often familiar. There are the laughter-filled accounts of Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age. (Genesis 17, 18, 21) There is the prophet Balaam who is spared and scolded by his talking donkey, who could see the danger when the seer could not. (Numbers 22) There is young David, naïve and brash, annoying his older brothers by asking what everybody is scared of, stumbling about awash in Saul's too-large and unfamiliar armor, and trash-talking and defeating Goliath, everybody's odds-on favorite. (1 Samuel 17)

From Jesus' teaching we can add the absurd and funny images of straining out gnats and swallowing camels, trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle, and plucking out or cutting off offensive body parts and throwing them away. From Acts we could include the account of people continuing to pray for Peter's release from prison all the while he's left standing, knocking at their door. (Acts 12:6-17) Luke also includes the story of exorcists falsely trading on Jesus' name getting beaten up by the man whose evil spirit they challenged. (Acts 19:13-17) Surely Paul was teasing and teaching when he wrote "suppose the whole body were an eye" as well as when he described himself as a fool, an image taken from contemporary theater.

The fourth theory we proposed is simply being in fun, taking a playful look at the world. No doubt this category overlaps others, but I suspect it is involved in a lot of the humor in the Bible. Perhaps the trickery and double-crossing stories that surround Jacob, with both Esau and Laban, fall in this category. The stories of the wily folk hero David on the rise, shot through with naïveté and shrewdness, impishness and blessing, would have been fun to tell over and over again. Jesus' cast of comic characters, full of grumps, nags, and deadbeats, likely fits here, too.

Finally, let's consider humor prompted by love, particularly by the astonishment of being loved in a measure you really can't imagine. Theologically we could simply use the word grace. So in the mix of the absurdity and surprise of Isaac being born to Abraham and Sarah, there must be the laughter of love, of knowing that nothing is too wonderful for God. Perhaps also this is the deepest root of the sustained humor of Jonah, especially when he bitterly complains that God is too loving, that it's just not right that God should forgive the Ninevites, the worst people in the history of the cosmos. It's also the heart-touching humor of the story of the Prodigal Son, whose father runs down the road to embrace him even before the son can begin his well-practiced speech of contrition.

We have now reviewed five psychological theories of humor and offered some biblical examples of each. Of course, the biblical writers knew nothing of psychological theory, but we can admire and be grateful for their humor, their craft, and the continuing legacy of their witness.

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