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Some Reflections on Humour in Scripture and Otherwise.

E.A Russell

Is there something called "humour" in scripture? The matter gives rise to some debate. There are those who would maintain e.g., that the life of Jesus and his words were characteristically serious with little sign of the reaction to life which we call "humour"¹. It is also claimed that the very nature of the NT must be sober, concerned as it is with the repentance brought about by the Holy Spirit. Sin becomes a grave business. Humour can find no room in it. "It belongs to its very nature for the NT not to be a book of humour: it is the book of fulfilment, the witness of the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ who through the thoroughly serious act of repentance brings about complete joy and freedom"²

On the other hand there are those who maintain that humour occurs throughout the Testaments. One scholar, in a book entitled Le Rire de Dieu has claimed that "God, in the person and work of Christ, has ridiculed the 'powers'... that cause man in his arrogance and mockery to set himself against God³." Bultmann although he does concede the existence of Christian humour denies that such is to be found in the NT⁴.

Mark Twain, otherwise Samuel Langhorne Clemens, in his book New

¹ Cf Jacob Jónssen, Humour and Irony in the NT (Reykjavik, 1965), 12; this paper is indebted to Dr Jónssen's work and the material it makes available.

² Cf Hans von Campenhausen, Christentum und Humor. ThRund, Neue Folge 27, Heft 1 (Tübingen, 1961), 76; the German text (Jónssen, *ibid.* 13) runs: "Dass das NT kein humoristisches Buch ist, folgt aus seinem Wesen; das Buch der Erfüllung zu sein, das Zeugnis von der Kraft des Heiligen Geistes Christi, der mit dem vollkommenen Ernst der Umkehr auch die vollkommene Freude and Freiheit bewirkt."

³ *Ibid* 13; the scholar is René Voeltzel, Le Rire de Dieu (Strassburg, 1955) " Dieu a ainsi en la personne et l'oeuvre du Christ, ridiculisé les 'puissances' qui se représentent toutes les divinités négatives entraînant l'homme à se dresser, arrogant et moqueur, contre Dieu."

⁴ R Bultmann, Das Christentum als Orientalische und Abendländische Religion. (1949, Glauben u. Verstehen II), Tübingen, 1952, *ibid* 13.

Pilgrim's Progress, claims that there is only one facetious remark in scripture, the phrase in Acts: "The street which is called Straight", which he understands as "the street which is supposed to be straight!" Unhappily for his claim that it was the only facetious remark in scripture, most modern translators translate it "go to Straight Street."⁵ That it should be seen as the only comical remark in scripture does indicate a fairly general attitude fostered by centuries of reverence for the sacred text, that it is irreverent or blasphemous to suggest humour in such a sacred writing. It is so easy for people to forget that the writings of scripture were human writings by living people of flesh and blood as we are. Were they in their writings completely lacking in humour? Or is it wrong to expect humour to emerge in a totally serious writing?

We are not at this point identifying humour with joy though a joyous spirit and a humorous spirit are surely not unrelated. Listen e.g. to the words: "When I think upon my God, my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap from my pen." They are the words of the composer and musician, Franz Josef Haydn. Such a spirit of joy is not far from laughter and humour. It was a certain Rabbi Baroka who reflected much of the spirit of Judaism when he wrote: "A clown may be the first in the kingdom of heaven if he has helped to lessen the sadness of the human heart." And what about the prophet who tells us that "The mountains and the hills break before us into singing and all the trees of the field clap their hands."

Laughter and humour are members of the same family. Hilaire Belloc expressed the relationship very well when he declared: "Genuine laughter is the physical effect produced in a rational being by what strikes his immortal soul as being damned funny." Luther had a remarkable sense of fun. When he was in Coburg castle in Bavaria, he consoled himself by writing humorous letters to his friends. At one time he said: "If you're not allowed to laugh in heaven I don't want to go there."

But if it is conceded that it would not be out of place to find humour in scripture, this is not to deny that scripture has primarily to do with matters of serious moment e.g. salvation, forgiveness, life after death. It is not to deny that the most solemn event in all history for us is the crucifixion of Jesus, that he is "the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief." On the other hand it is also true that we live in the light of the resurrection, in the era of hope and inexpressible joy. There is nothing fundamentally sad about the position of

⁵ Acts 9:11.

a church where "mouths have been filled with laughter and... tongues with singing."

But, we may ask, what is humour? What is it that makes a person burst into laughter, the physical response to something seen or heard? Another person in the same situation might not laugh at all. What constitutes the risible for one person may leave another quite unmoved. The attempt to define humour, to pin down its precise nature immediately discovers just how elusive such a definition is. "The quality of humour shares in the mystery which attaches to all forms of human emotion. In its genuine manifestation it is as spontaneous as laughter and as inexplicable. It mocks all attempts at definition. We can 'see' it and possess it, and enjoy it, but cannot say with definiteness what it is." Someone has calculated that there are some eighty theories as to what constitutes humour⁶.

One scholar suggests that behind every humorous or comical expression lies the attempt to express the ludicrous⁷ i.e. something which expresses what is absurd, or crazy, incongruous, ridiculous or preposterous. An example may be taken from a home-help who had a wonderful way with words. The man of the house used to come in in a breezy fashion. She described his rather rushed entry into the house: "Mr So-and-so comes in like a Toronto." She wanted to say of course that he came in like a tornado which is what the hearer expected. That she was confused and blissfully unconscious of her gaffe creates what is ludicrous. It arises out of the woman's ignorance and evokes laughter.

Humour and Scripture

In Genesis, we are told that Abraham laughed. He was informed that his ninety-year-old barren wife was to bear a son. It was utterly contrary to ordinary expectation. He laughed because it was absurd. Sarah too joined in the laughter. Abraham and Sarah were, in effect, saying "God is having a joke at our expense" (17:17; 18:12). A later interpretation gave a sober interpretation that Abraham did not stagger at the promise of God through unbelief (Romans 4:20).

⁶ E Berger, Laughter and Sense of Humour. (New York, 1956), cited in Jonssen, 16.

⁷ So Carritt, The Theory of Beauty. (London, 1949) 333 cited in Jonssen, 17.

Another seeming impossibility gave rise to mocking laughter. This is the story of the young, untried David facing up to the contest with Goliath. We are told that the giant mocked and derided him, a mere strip of a boy prepared to tackle the unequal contest. The whole contest was an absurdity. Again, in Luke's gospel, when Jesus entered Jairus' house where his daughter had died, Jesus denied that she was dead. The mourners laughed him to scorn. They had seen too many corpses to be in doubt. The idea of the daughter being alive was so unreal, so against all the probabilities, they found it preposterous.

Humour is often linked with "wit" in a biblical context. "Wit" has been defined as "the [power of giving sudden intellectual pleasure by] unexpected combining or contrasting of previously unconnected ideas or expressions.⁸" We may note the word "sudden". It is often noted that the people described as "witty" have an amazingly quick perception and response.

In scripture especially the OT we have an abundance of wordplays, estimated by one writer at five hundred. It is not necessary to think of puns in a modern way. Biblical humour has for its background an ancient and oriental society whose forms of humour might not be immediately clear to us. Whether translation alone will ever uncover the hidden thrust can be uncertain. One thing is certain: biblical writers are fond of wordplays, intended presumably as expressions of wit⁹. Oddly they occur not only in humorous contexts but in passages linked up with judgement. Do we have here an ancient view that where words can form a wordplay it has to be taken seriously? Do wordplays assume a greater significance for them than they do for us, just as numerals might do?

In Genesis 2:7 we find the words:

Then the Lord God formed man (adham אָדָם) from the
dust of the ground (adhamah אֲדָמָה)

Thus the stress lies on the earthly and probably the transient and mortal nature of man. It is poking fun at human arrogance and pride, all too petty that it is?

Another wordplay brings out the close relationship of man and woman (Gen.2:23)

This at last is bone of my bone

⁸ The Concise Oxford Dictionary. New edition, on "Wit".

⁹ Cf W F Stinespring, art, "Humour" IDB, 1962.

And flesh of my flesh.
She shall be called woman (ishah אִשָּׁה)
Because she was taken out of man. (ish אִישׁ)

Thus the close relationship of man and woman is brought out but is it meant to be taken seriously? Modern man would look on this account as absurd. Some indeed see it as a deliberate attempt to downgrade woman, perhaps someone who had suffered at the hands of "the monstrous regiment of women!"

The story of the Garden of Eden, given in a parabolic form enshrines within it a profound understanding of God, of creation, of man, his guilt and responsibility. The account is given with rare simplicity. We have a picture of the Almighty God walking in the garden, who has to say to Adam, "Adam, where are you?" He has to make garments for Adam and his wife - an emphasis on their utter dependence. Such a portrait of the Almighty God having to look for Adam and Eve has a simplicity and, to us, a touch of humour about it. These poor, puny creatures, attempting the impossible, escaping God and, on the other hand, the Almighty God spoken of in very human terms.

One example of wordplay is especially striking. It is found in the prophet Isaiah (5:7). It runs:

He looked for justice (mishpat מִשְׁפָּט)
And, behold, bloodshed (mispah מִשְׁפַּח).
For righteousness (sidhaquah סִדְחָאָה)
And behold a cry (tsaqah תְּצָאָה).

The verse gives us two wordplays, mishpat and mispah, sidhaquah and tsaqah¹⁰. The antithetic parallelism shows the careful construction, intended to drive home the sin of Israel. Here we have "humour" of a most solemn kind, seen as juxtaposition of a divine kind. One translation has it:

He expected them to do what was good.
But instead they committed murder,
He expected them to do what was right
But their victims cried for justice (TEV).

An interesting example, more ironical than humorous, is to be found in Hosea 13:10 where the Lord inquires of faithless Israel, "Where now is your king to save you?" It is a reference to King Hoshea who reigned from 732 BCE to 724 BCE and whose kingship is being removed. The reference appears to be

¹⁰ *Ibid*

ironical. Hoshea means "Yahweh saves." (Contrast Matt.1:21)

Many other examples can be found¹¹. The writer of Ecclesiastes insists that "for everything there is a season... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance," (3:1,4) "I know", he declares, "that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live." (3:12) Is there a hedonistic touch about this, entertainment, fun and laughter, humour and its relatives? And is there a sigh of the over-worked student, perhaps not meant to be taken seriously, but often used in jocular fashion in the sentence: "of making many books there is no end and much study is a weariness of the flesh." (12:12b)

But it is to another writing of the so-called "Wisdom Literature" we turn where we have what some might describe as "wisecracks". the matter of idleness is delightfully and vividly described:

A little sleep, a little drowsiness,
A little folding of the arms to lie back
And poverty comes like a vagrant
And like a beggar dearth. (Proverbs 6:10,11; 24:33).

And what about the following:

The door turns on its hinges.
The idler on his bed.
Into the dish the idler dips his hand

But is too tired to bring it back to his mouth. (Ibid. 26:14f; cf 19:23)

We cannot miss the sarcasm in this comic portrayal. The writer appears to speak from his own sad experience when he writes:

Better the corner of a roof to live on
Than a house shared with a quarrelsome woman (21:9)

And what about the scathing sentence:

A golden ring in the snout of a pig
Is a lovely woman who lacks discretion. (11.22)?

Is there a note of despair in the following:

A continual dripping on a rainy day
And a contentious woman are alike;
To restrain her is to restrain the wind
Or grasp oil in his right hand. (27:15,16)?

We can hardly miss the impact and the impossibility in the expressive imagery!

¹¹ *ibid*

But the writer is by no means chauvinistic. He turns to deal with men, and quarrelsome men at that:

As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire

So is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife (26:21)

And what of this sweeping incitement of the roving eye of the greedy man:

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied

And never satisfied are the eyes of man (27:20)?

Discipline within the family is a regular theme in the wisdom literature but especially amusing is the following:

Do not be chary of correcting a child

A stroke of the cane is not likely to be fatal (23:13)

The theme of self-control is given an unusual and entertaining expression:

If you have been foolish enough to fly into a passion
and now have second thoughts, lay hand on your lips.

For by churning the milk you produce butter,

By wringing the nose you produce blood

And by whipping up anger you produce strife (30:33)

We have a comical and entertaining comparison in which a king finds himself in strange company.

There are three things of stately tread;

Four indeed of stately walk.

The lion bravest of all beasts,

He will draw back from nothing,

A vigorous cock, a he-goat

And a king when he harangues his people. (30:29-31)

The association of lion, cock and he-goat with a king suggest little that can be accepted as complimentary to his royal highness!

One further illustration from Proverbs and this to do with the garrulous:

You see someone too ready of speech?

There is more to be hoped for from a fool. (29:20)

Jewish Humour in the Early Christian Period¹²

It is worth stressing that Jesus was a Jew, brought up probably in a strict Jewish home and open to the emphases of his tradition.

When we examine the rabbinic traditions as evidenced in the Mishnah and Talmud, we find many humorous illustrations, not generally what we find in the teachings of Jesus but serving to show that the comic sense

¹² Cf Jónssen, op.cit. chapter V, 51-89.

could very suitably be found there. We propose to give some examples.

We are told that Rabbi Gamaliel, in the course of a lecture expresses the view that "Woman is destined to bear every day." He quoted in support the saying "The woman conceives and bear simultaneously." One of his students found the idea preposterous and said so. The Rabbi then showed him a hen to prove that in this world a similar thing could take place. The key to the riddle is to understand "woman" as generally "female".¹³

Other teachers give us a frolicsome view of God without any hint of awkwardness¹⁴.

In the world to come God will lead the dance with the righteous, the righteous on one side and the righteous on the other and God in their midst, and they will dance before him with vigour and they will point their finger and say: This God is our God for ever and ever. He will lead us in this world and the world to come.

Another story verges on the irreverent. In it Moses goes up to heaven and finds God weaving crowns for the letters of the law, but Moses gives no greeting. God said to Moses: "Do men give no greeting in your city?" Moses replied: "Does a slave greet his master?" God replied; "You ought to have wished me success." Then Moses said: "May the power of the Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken."¹⁵

Another tells of a Rabbi who went to a certain place where men complained: "The mice eat our grain." The Rabbi wove a spell on the mice with the result the mice came together and squeaked. He said to the men gathered, " Do you know what they say?" They replied, "No." The Rabbi rejoined, "They say the grain has not been properly tithed."¹⁶

Another quaint story tells of a certain Rabbi who had run across a Sadducee who annoyed him continually by giving his interpretation of texts. Now it was generally believed that, at a certain hour of the morning, the comb of a cock would change in a particular way and any curse pronounced at that

¹³ *Ibid.* 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 53f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*54

¹⁶ *Ibid* 60

time would be specially powerful. One day the rabbi took a cock and placed it between the legs of his bed and watched it. He thought: when the cock's comb changes, I will curse this heretic Sadducee. But, to his dismay, when the moment arrived he was asleep! The Rabbi accepted this as a sign that he and his students should not act in such a way.¹⁷

The Rabbis give us a quotable story about a talkative woman and her son. On a Sabbath when his mother was especially tiresome he reminded his mother that it was a day of rest.¹⁸

The Humour of Jesus

When we turn to the sayings of Jesus, we find that very often they belong to a floating tradition and the original context is well and truly lost. This meant that whether it be the oral tradition or that of the Gospel writers, a context often had to be devised. The so-called Sermon on the Mount, for example, is made up of a collection of sayings which Matthew has put in order for teaching purposes.

What we seek for in approaching the sayings of Jesus is the preparedness not only to look seriously as is usual but to inquire whether there is a real vein of humour all too often concealed.

The saying, "You are the salt of the earth" while directed to the disciples, sets them in the context of the listening crowds.

The saying of course has several traditional explanations: preserving what is good for the world; being different from the world imparting flavour to life. But when Jesus goes on to say: "if the salt has lost its flavour it is

¹⁷ *Ibid* 62

¹⁸ This collection of strange, mythical stories which are intended to instruct may have little appeal to the modern reader. Jewish humour including the Talmudic has been described as "self-derogatory" and "self-irony". It is important to remember that in early times, there was no clear distinction between the religious and the secular. "Everything belonged to God, and everything was, in a way, religious, even the most unimportant things of daily life and surroundings. The consequences of this way of thinking are to be found in two different traits of Hebrew humour. Firstly, practically anything, even the strange and ridiculous, would be used for the benefit of religious education. Secondly, humour itself was dependent on the judgement of religious authorities" *Ibid* 85,86

good for nothing", he leaves himself open to the charge of having made a mistake. Everyone knows that salt cannot lose its flavour. But the Greek word for "losing flavour" (μωρανθη) strictly means "become foolish". In the context of wisdom sayings Jesus is highlighting the opposite, folly and thus speaks of the fool who has nothing good to contribute to life. Here is one example among many where Jesus makes an incredible hypothesis to drive home his point.

Another example is the hypothesis that any sane person would put a lamp under a bushel. But such a humorous picture of stupidity helps to underline the folly of the disciple of Jesus who refuses to bear witness (Mt. 5:15).

In the context of Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, the following saying must be considered ironical:

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:20)

Jesus is dealing with the necessity of absolute truthfulness in the passage on oaths in the course of which he says:

Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair black or white (5:36).

A certain rabbi by name Alexandrai declared that even if all the nations of the world were gathered together to make the wing of a raven white they would not succeed. Jesus similarly makes such a task seem ridiculous in order to emphasise man's helplessness.

The vexed question of non-provocation is made all the more absurd and heightens the impact of what Jesus says:

If someone takes your shirt (χιτών)
let him have your cloak as well (ιμάτιον)

In other words get rid of the clothes you have. Stand unclothed before the final judge.

The unpopular Romans had the right to press-gang members of the occupied country if necessary. The thought of going two miles instead of the required one is quite grotesque and thus adds tremendous impact to what Jesus says on reconciliation.

It is notable that the Jesus tradition is full of memorable sayings, sayings easily remembered. Indeed it is difficult to find a saying of Jesus that is not striking. Again and again he gives us pictures, not things that are abstract or theoretical. He is a master of the ridiculous or the absurd, not for its own sake, but bound up with his commitment to the kingdom of God or

God's sovereign rule.

On the matter of sitting in judgement on others, the censorious spirit, Jesus' use of the ridiculous may derive from a Palestinian proverb which Jesus freely employs to drive home his point. Here again we have the gross exaggerations which are typical of his personal style.

Why do you look at the speck of dust in your brother's eye with never a thought for the great plank in your own? (Mt. 7:3).

In the Talmudic literature, the saying is used where two students of the rabbi are criticising one another. One says "Take out the splinter from your eye." The other replies, "And what about the plank in your own?"

Later on in Matthew we have another illustration of what G.K.Chesterton describes as the "gigantesque" quality of Jesus' illustration.

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. (Mt 19:24)

This saying proved too absurd for some scribes who changed "camel" (καμήλοσ) into "cable" (κάμλοσ) or those commentators who suggested the "needle's eye" was the name of a small wicket-gate in Jerusalem. The saying is apparently proverbial. It is found in the Talmud in relation to highly intelligent and subtle rabbinic scholars in a place called Pumbeditha. The saying runs: "Perhaps you are from Pumbeditha where they draw an elephant through the eye of the needle." The impact of Jesus' hyperbole shows the stringent demand associated with entry into the fellowship of the rule of God given edge by the use of the absurd.

We could multiply instances in the sayings of Jesus that have to do with the absurd, e.g. a father giving a child a stone instead of bread or a snake when he asks for fish (7:9,10); and what about those who try to gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles (7:16,17) or the folly of the simpleton who built his house on sand. Here is folly to the point of idiocy contrasting with what is wise or sensible. The folly is laughable and, more important perhaps, for an illiterate audience, unforgettable.

Some final thoughts

How often do we find the humour of Jesus dwelt on in the average sermon or Bible-Class? Have we so solemnized Jesus that we have squeezed out his humanity and his joyous outlook, and, if we may permit ourselves to say it, his sense of fun?

We are of course children of the Reformation and have an incalcu-

lable debt to our Fathers. But it is common knowledge that they imparted an austerity and severity to the faith and, to some extent, created an equally austere and joyless Jesus.

Before their time there was widespread use of comedy alongside devout religion, especially in the Greek Orthodox Church. They had what were called "Holy Fools". From the fourteenth century to the seventeenth no less than twenty-six were canonised as saints¹⁹. A Jewish woman writer traces the emergence of Jewish humour from the disparity between the prophetic role of the Jews as the chosen people and the harsh realities. She asserts that "The comic alone is able to give us strength to bear the tragedy of existence."²⁰

To end with we can do no better than quote from Reid's splendid article on humour in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics:

The sense of humour is universally desired and is highly valued. No one will readily acknowledge that he does not have it. Without it man is scarcely human. It is a means of self-criticism, and saves us from the folly of self-importance and the sin of self-righteousness... Humour tends to keep the heart young. As a criticism of social life and character it is invincible and invaluable. Humour is the inveterate foe of convention, and loves to make fun of Mrs Grundy and all who follow in her train... It adds a joy to life without which life would be dull and poor. It is a relaxation and a delight to step aside for a moment from the sober, grey and solemn world, where reason and order rule, into a realm where the whimsical, the incongruous and the absurd hold sway and summon us to laughter and to play. Some of the world's greatest benefactors have been its humorists. They brighten with a touch of fun the horizon of life which is often dark and dismal.

I have no doubt whatever that Jesus would wholly identify with such sentiments!

Belfast

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¹⁹ Cf Joseph W. Bastien, Enc.Brit 1980(?) Art "Humour".

²⁰ *Ibid* 520