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The Humor of Jesus of Nazareth

DONALD WAYNE VINEX

RODOLPH BULTMANN ARGUES that the spiritual treasures of the Bible can be fully appreciated only by stripping away its outdated worldview, in a word, by demythologizing Scripture. Elton Trueblood suggests a parallel process by which the Gospel can be freed from "the excessive sobriety provided both by the authors and by us" (Trueblood, 10). As Bultmann would demythologize the New Testament, Trueblood would divest it of its overly somber tone to find the humor that is there. I call this interpretive strategy *desobrietyization*. This neologism is meant not only to promote a fruitful hermeneutic, but also to be a word ugly enough to be remembered by scholars and laypersons alike.

I may speak of the *man* from Nazareth, not to deny his theological identity as Christ, but to emphasize that Jesus was a real man who enjoyed life. As far as information on the historical Jesus is concerned, the primary sources are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas. Assessments of the reliability and relative merits of the five Gospels vary among scholars, although it is generally agreed that they achieved their present form in the later half of the first century, between twenty and eighty years after Jesus died. In any event, they are the primary sources (see Koester).

In the first section I discuss the stereotype of the Jesus who rarely smiles and never laughs and I show that there are good reasons to believe that it is a mere caricature of Jesus. Next, I turn to actual examples of Jesus' wit preserved in the ancient writings. I conclude with reflections on why we often fail to see the humor of Jesus.

No Kidding?

There is no gainsaying that Jesus is usually pictured with the utmost seriousness. For example, film incarnations of Jesus are generally one-dimensional and staid—although there is something funny about a blue-eyed Caucasian Jesus reciting King James English. In refreshing contrast, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) casts Biblical themes in a truly comic light. At the Sermon on the Mount Jesus' words, "Blessed are the peacemakers," are misconstrued by someone on the edge of the crowd as "Blessed are the cheese makers." A pious man explains that Jesus is not simply talking about cheese makers but about all makers of dairy products. The scene ends with hilarious irony as a quarrel and a fist fight erupt. However, even here, it is not Jesus who laughs, but we who laugh at the buffoons who misunderstand his message.

If Jesus is rarely portrayed as laughing, perhaps it is to vouchsafe his role as a spiritual leader. Jorge of Burgos argues this point with William of Baskerville in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Jorge claims that Christ never laughed. William counters that Jesus was a man and that laughter is "proper to man." Jorge concedes that Christ had the ability to laugh but that it is never written that he did (Eco, 95-96). It is true that the canonical stories make no mention of Jesus laughing, although a Nag Hammadi tractate says he did (Robinson, 208). In any event, Jorge's theology is no laughing matter: Christ's dignity requires that he found nothing funny enough to laugh at.

On the other hand, perhaps the greatness of Jesus should make us suspicious of the dour stereotype. Is it not a mark of a great soul to be able to find humor even in things of grave concern (Trueblood, 22)? Consider Socrates: When the Athenian referred to himself as a "midwife" he must have elicited a smile. Socrates saw himself as helping his fellow citizens give birth to knowledge, although he claimed that he was himself barren of ideas (*Theaetetus*, 149F). There is a sub-

the humor in the metaphor that gaining knowledge is "laborious." In Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* a student of Socrates complains when a loud knock on the door interrupts his reverie: "I was pregnant with thought," he cries, "and it's miscarried, all because of you" (Aristophanes, 8).

Socrates' humor is evident during his trial. Following the ancient poets he compares Athens to a noble steed; he adds the ludicrous image of himself as a gadfly specially appointed by God to bite the horse's ears and bottom (*Apology*, 30e). After the assembly finds him guilty and sentences him to death, Socrates is allowed to suggest a less severe punishment. He proposes that he be given free room and board for the rest of his life in the finest guest-house in town (*Apology*, 37a). No wonder that Socrates' contemporaries remarked that his style seemed calculated to anger the jury (Xenophon, 1).

Only a prosy intellect could fail to recognize Socrates' wit-tiness. Yet the humor of Jesus often receives little more than a footnote. What can be known of Jesus apart from special claims to revelation is a subject of intense debate. Most impressive is the attempt by the controversial "Jesus Seminar" to identify, within the parameters of responsible scholarship, authentic sayings of Jesus, including sayings in noncanonical sources. This think tank concludes that no more than twenty percent of the recorded sayings of Jesus were uttered by him. Nevertheless, they note that "Jesus' sayings and parables are often characterized by exaggeration, humor, and paradox" (Funk and Hoover, 31).

Recovering the *ipsissima verba*, the actual words of Jesus, requires a heroic effort beyond the competence of ordinary laypersons. Indeed, considering that Jesus spoke Aramaic and most of his words were recorded in Greek (Mk 5.41, 14.36, 15.34; Mt 27.46), we may have no untranslated words of Jesus. However, desobrietization may better prepare one to hear the *ipsissima vox*, the distinctive voice of Jesus, speaking through his editors and translators.

When one surveys the general testimony of the Gospels, it is difficult to understand how one could conclude that Jesus was not a man "complete with both tear ducts and funny bone" (Phipps, 104). How could one who was popular with children (Mt 19.13-14; Mk 10.13-16; Lk 18.15-17) and who encouraged his followers to become as little children (Mt 18.3) not be cheerful? How could one accused of indulging his palate not laugh (Mt 11.19; Lk 5.33; Lk 7.34)? How could one who told his followers that they were at a wedding party while they were in his presence not be jovial (Mt 9.15; Mk 2.19; Lk 5.34)? Is joy not a sign of wisdom, and is wisdom not vindicated by all of her children (Lk 7.35)? It only remains to provide more direct textual evidence.

The Wit and Wisdom of Jesus

The wit of Jesus ranges from the so-called lowest form of humor, the pun, to a sophisticated use of understatement. With the tool of desobriety, numerous examples of Jesus' exaggeration, satire, sarcasm, and irony preserved by the Evangelists may be discovered. These categories are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, there is exaggeration in Jesus' irony, sarcasm in his satire, and word play throughout.

Exaggeration. Jesus often uses hyperbole to convey his wisdom. For example, he asks why we so easily see the speck in our neighbor's eye and fail to notice the log in our own (Mt 7.3; Lk 6.41; Th 26). There is a cartoon quality to this image. The idea of part of a tree trunk sticking out of one's eye socket is preposterous. Equally ludicrous is the picture of a hypocritical hypocrite inspecting someone else's eye for tiny flaws. The combination of these images is a recipe for a wry smile.

Other examples of exaggeration involve Jesus' use of camels as metaphors. He accuses Pharisees of straining gnats and swallowing camels (Mt 23.24). The saying would have been memorable in Aramaic because of a word play between "gnat" [*kahna*] and "camel" [*gama*] (Phipps, 87). In pursuit of ritual purity a devout man would strain the unclean gnat from his wine (Lev 11.20). Yet, by meticulous observance of

the law he manages to swallow a camel, a much larger unclean animal (Lev 11.4), and thus commits a greater sin. Jesus portrays the Pharisees as being zealous about trivialities while overlooking their graver transgressions. Once again, the very small is juxtaposed with the very large to humorous effect.

Another use of the camel metaphor is the saying, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk 18.25; Mt 19.24; Mk 10.25). The disciples were astonished at this saying. Some commentators are no less amazed and, failing to see the obvious use of overstatement, attempt to domesticate the image by looking for deeper meanings. Scholars used to say that Jesus was referring to a gate in Jerusalem called the needle's eye through which camels could pass only on their knees, but this interpretation has no basis in fact (Phipps, 90). George Lamsa says that the Aramaic word translated "camel" also means "large rope" and that Jesus probably meant that a rope could sooner pass through a needle's eye than a rich man could enter the kingdom of God (Lamsa, xi). If Jesus was exaggerating then these exegetical gymnastics miss the point. We use similarly outrageous comparisons when we speak of a snowball's chance of surviving in hell.

Satire. Voltaire, who was probably the funniest philosopher to have lived, once prayed to God to make his enemies look ridiculous ("Trueblood, 68). Voltaire realized that nothing deflates the pretensions of the pompous like a lampoon. Anyone who reads his satirical *Candide* understands what he meant when he said, "I have dared to pop many metaphysical balloons but all that came out of them was hot air." Jesus too punctured self-righteousness with satire.

Matthew's twenty-third chapter encapsulates the condemnation of hypocrisy, a recurrent theme in Jesus' teaching. It is the Pharisees who are the brunt of his ridicule. He exhorts people to do as the Pharisees say, not as they do, for they do not practice what they preach. He says that they make a public show in their regalia, making their "phylacteries broad and their fringes long." They parade their piety for all to see,

praying aloud and fasting with disfigured faces. They prefer the best seats at feasts and enjoy being the honored guests (cf. Lk 11.43). They cherish their official titles. They are blind guides of the blind (cf. Th 34), straining gnats and swallowing camels. They clean the outsides of their plates and cups but leave the insides—the part from which they eat and drink—dirty (cf. Lk 11.39; Th 89). They are “evil and adulterous” because they seek for signs (cf. Lk 11.29). They are white-washed tombs with shiny exteriors which belie the spiritual decay inside. They pay lip service to the prophets and decorate their graves only to reject the teachings of the prophets, thus showing that those who murdered the prophets are their ancestors (cf. Lk 11.47). Jesus calls the Pharisees snakes and a brood of vipers.

Jesus is obviously upset. For this reason, the humor is easy to miss. Furthermore, the satire is so clearly relevant to contemporary Christian practice that it may be difficult to appreciate. What would Jesus say about liturgical vestments—tall miters, fringed stoles, ornate crucifixes, and ceremonial robes? What would he say when evangelists squint their eyes, wrinkle their brows, and pray in quivering voices for the cameras? Would he keep silent when we reduce religion to accounting by tallying up converts or ignore accounting by tithing only to ease our consciences? What would he say to those who dissect the book of Revelation and search the headlines for portents of Armageddon, and make big money in the process? Would he bid us have special respect for the “Reverends,” “Monsignors,” “Fathers,” “Th.D.s,” “Ph.D.s,” or even “the Holy Father” himself? What would he say to those who call themselves his followers who continue in slavish adherence to traditions like barring women from the clergy or casting opprobrium on homosexuals that have nothing to do with the “good news”? Would Jesus lampoon us less often than he did the Pharisees?

Abraham Lincoln once said that he was confident that God was on the side of the right. He added, however, that “it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation may be

on the Lord's side” (Bachelder, 16). This is a proper prayer, too little considered because it requires the humility to acknowledge that Jesus' teaching may actually apply to us.

Sarcasm. Jesus' use of satire is enough to show that the idea of a meek and gentle Jesus is at best a half-truth. The prophet's words, “he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth” (Is 11.4), apply to Jesus. William Phipps says that Jesus never engaged in sarcasm (96); however, there is evidence to the contrary (cf. Trueblood, 64). Jesus' tongue could be sharp and his wit biting and sardonic.

On three occasions Jesus responds to a question by saying “You say so,” or as we might say, “You said it.” Judas asks Jesus if he is the one who will betray him (Mt 26.25); Caiaphas demands that Jesus say whether he is the Messiah (Mt 26.64); Pilate asks Jesus if he is king of the Jews (Mt 27.11; Mk 15.2; Lk 23.3). In each case Jesus turns the question back on the questioner, embarrassing him, for he realizes that the questions are not put in good faith. The reactions of the questioners to Jesus' response indicates that they were abashed. Judas commits suicide in remorse (Mt 27.5), Caiaphas rents his own clothes, and Pilate publicly washes his hands. Jesus' sarcastic replies remind each man of his duplicity.

Another example of sarcasm is in the parable of the new wine and the old wine skins (Mt 9.14-17; Mk 2.18-22; Lk 5.33-39; Th 47). However, as Trueblood notes, only Luke preserves the humor (96). Jesus says that no one puts new wine in old wine skins since it would crack the skins and the wine would be lost. Similarly, religious legalism is not an adequate vehicle for Jesus' radical teaching. In Luke, the parable is rounded out by an afterthought: some are sure to say, “Aged wine is just fine!” (Funk and Hoover, 286). Jesus was realistic enough to realize that there would be many who would say, “Give me that old time religion.” People will trust the old ways rather than venture into untested waters, or wines.

Another possible example of Jesus' sarcasm is the story of the coin in the fish's mouth (Mt 17.24-27). The collector of

the temple tax asks Peter whether Jesus pays the tax as commanded by the Torah (Ex 30.11-16). Peter says that Jesus pays the tax. Jesus questions Peter and argues that they should not have to pay the tax since they are not foreigners in God's house. He adds, however, that rather than offending the tax collector Peter should go catch a fish. He would find a coin in the fish's mouth to pay the tax. We are not told whether Peter went fishing for a coin, or whether the tax was paid.

Is this another example of Jesus' impatience with strict adherence to Mosaic law? He speaks of not offending the tax collector, but he must certainly have offended tax men when he turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple (Mt 21.12-13; Jn 2.13-17). His question to Peter indicates that he did not think that the tax collector had any business asking for the money. Jesus' instruction to Peter could have been a mock command, as though he were saying, "Pay the temple tax? In a pig's eye!" On the other hand, it would be in keeping with Peter's character if he made haste for the sea shore to inspect the mouth of his first catch.

Irony. Irony involves a discrepancy between what a speaker means and what he or she says. To intentionally say the opposite of what one means is to be ironic. Socrates is famous for his irony, which was a feigned ignorance in discussion with those less wise than himself. The result is often humorous as the foolishness of the pretenders to wisdom is revealed. Jesus' irony is not self-deprecating. Rather, he exaggerates the piety of others and thereby exposes their spiritual shortcomings, which is to say, their need for spiritual renewal. True-blood remarks that "Humor is redemptive when it leads to comic self-discovery" (54). Thus, we can say that Jesus' irony has a redemptive purpose.

An example of Jesus' irony is his exchange with the Pharisees and their scribes when they criticize him for hobnobbing with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For

I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mt 9.12-13; cf. Mk 2.15-17; Lk 5.30-31). If read literally, Jesus is implying that the Pharisees are righteous, that they have no need of his message. But this was obviously not his meaning. Earlier he warns, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5.20). The Pharisees and their scribes to whom Jesus refers had what we would call a "holier than thou" attitude; they set themselves apart from those they considered sinners. Modern homespun wisdom would say that they put their pants on one leg at a time just like everyone else. One can imagine the Pharisees going away from the exchange with Jesus miffed while others elbow each other and muffle their laughter.

Another example of irony is when Jesus names Simon Peter "Cephas" (Jn 1.42) and says "on this rock" the church would be built (Mt 16.18). It is well-known that there is a pun on Peter's name. The Aramaic word for rock is *keppha* and the Greek word for rock is *Petra*. This same play on words is possible in French. The French word for Peter is *Pierre* and the word for rock is also *pierre*. The pun is obvious. What has not been obvious to many is that the pun is ironic.

The Gospel's portrait of Peter is anything but flattering. He is the one who tried to walk on water but lacked the requisite faith (Mt 14.29). Reverend Joyce Jenkins quipped that Peter sank like a rock. Peter also seems to have been slow to grasp some of Jesus' basic ideas. When Peter asks for an explanation of a parable Jesus replies in exasperation, "Are you also still without understanding?" (Mt 15.16). Peter displays a crass pragmatism when he asks Jesus what one gets for following him (Mt 19.27). Peter's hubris is apparent when he boasts that he will stay with Jesus when others flee (Mt 26.33). Then he has the audacity to disagree with his master's prediction that he would deny him (Mt 26.35). Later, Peter, with the other disciples, abandons Jesus in his hour of need (Mt 26.56) and denies knowing Jesus (Mt 26.69-75; Mk 14.66-72; Lk 22.55-62; Jn 18.17f). When Jesus expressly asks

Peter, James, and John to keep the watch with him in Gethsemane they fall asleep; after he exhorts Peter to pray to avoid temptation Peter falls asleep again (Mt 26.36-43). Paul's testimony is consistent with this portrait. Immediately after referring to Peter as one of the "acknowledged pillars of the church" he relates how he had to correct Peter publicly for bowing to peer pressure concerning the issue of circumcision (Gal 2.9-14).

Peter's character mirrors perennial human frailties. There is nothing special about him. However, a rock is solid, calling to mind stability and reliability. These connotations are evident in Jesus' comparison of the man who heeds his words being like someone who builds a house on a rock where the wind and rain cannot dislodge it. Those who do not heed his words are like those who build their houses on shifting sand (Mt 7.24-26). Peter does not fit the description of one who is a rock. He is more like the sand. Rather than call him Rocky, Jesus might have called him Sandy.

To say that there is irony in calling Peter a rock is not to deny that there is also truth in the saying. Harry Emerson Fosdick was fond of pointing out that Jesus saw people more for what they could be than what they were (1946, 34f). Something like this happens when a parent who is changing a baby's soiled diaper calls the baby "sweet." A disinterested observer might notice that the odor coming from the baby's bottom is anything but sweet. But the parent knows the baby for what she can be, not merely for what she is. Peter may have sunk like a rock, but he had the faith to venture onto the waters. According to the church historian Eusebius, Peter died a martyr's death in Rome (Barclay, 27). He may not have been a "rock" when Jesus met him, but he became one during his journey of faith.

Another place where I find irony is in Luke's Gospel when Jesus encounters the Pharisees and says, "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped" (Lk 16.17). The Greek word translated as stroke (dot or tittle in other translations) is *kerata*

which literally means "little horn"; these are the little projections which distinguish similar Hebrew letters from each other. This passage is often interpreted (with Mt 5.18) as Jesus' endorsement of all the minutiae and trivial details of the Torah. I believe, with Trueblood (64-65), that this is better seen as an example of Jesus' irony.

According to Jesus the law was made for human beings, not human beings for the law. He did not believe that every human activity could be fit into the law's straitjacket. He was critical of the law's eye-for-an-eye morality (Mt 5.38-42; Ex 21.24; Lev 24.19). He liberalized the laws concerning the Sabbath (Mt 12; Ex 20.8-10). He freed his followers from strict adherence to Scripture's dietary laws (Mt 15; Acts 10.9-16; Rom 14.18-21). He reinterpreted the law about divorce as a concession to human stubbornness and not as a divinely sanctioned institution (Mt 19.7-8; Deut 24). Jesus understood that tunnel vision with respect to the letter of the law prevents the wider peripheral vision necessary to seeing the spirit of the law. To the legalists of his day he was saying: Your priorities are so topsy-turvy that you would sooner heaven and earth perish than not dot every *i* and cross every *t* of the law.

Of all the aspects of Jesus' humor, irony is perhaps the most important, for it presents a Jesus who sometimes means the opposite of what he says. He may say something false in order to reveal the truth. If this is correct then those who read the Gospels in a merely mechanical fashion, attending only to the truth or falsity of Jesus' sentences, run the risk of completely misunderstanding his teaching. One can imagine Jesus reprimanding the literalist as once he reprimanded Peter, "Are you still as dim-witted as the rest?" (Mt 15.16; Funk and Hoover, 203). If one had no other reason for studying the humor of Jesus, this would be enough.

Seriously Folks

If Jesus laughed and if there is abundant evidence in the Gospels of his sense of humor, then why have these facts been missed by so many for so long? Why is it that one whose heart

was filled with joy' has so often been portrayed with a poker face that hides his true nature?

One reason that the humor of Jesus has been difficult to detect is because those who originally told his story did not always understand him. The Gospels often portray Jesus' followers as maddeningly obtuse. Nicodemus thought that Jesus' talk of being reborn had something to do with re-entering the womb (Jn 3.4). When Jesus warned of the leaven of the Pharisees (Mt 16.6; Mk 8.16) his disciples thought that he was referring to real bread, as though they thought he was worried about food poisoning. With L. M. Hussey, I believe that Jesus' humor is preserved despite the literal mindedness of the disciples (Trueblood, 27).

Trueblood notes that Socrates had the good fortune to have an admiring student who combined philosophic greatness with literary genius—Plato. One result of this happy coincidence is that Socrates' wit is now famous. A record of Socrates' humor might not have survived if we had only Xenophon's prosaic portrait to rely on. Socrates' charm would have been lost to history if we had only Aristotle's stiff analysis. Jesus of Nazareth had no Plato. But he did have some Xenophons (Gospel writers) and an Aristotle (Paul), who detected no lightheartedness in him. It is not that the most ancient authors do not inspire with their accounts of Jesus, but his laughter can be heard, *mirabile dictu*, only through their seriousness.

Another obstacle to appreciating the humor of Jesus is a theology that found laughter incompatible with deity. Since the Middle Ages most theologians have maintained that God, being self-sufficient and perfect, is in all respects unchangeable and without emotion. Such a God could take no delight in creation, could not enjoy the creatures, and could be surprised by nothing. Jesus was believed to be the incarnation of *this* God, making it difficult to imagine him guffawing over anything. Laughing would have been an expression of human weakness, and thus, as Jorge suggests, he could laugh, but he would not allow himself the pleasure.

Most school children have heard the conundrum about omnipotence: Could God create a rock so heavy that he could not lift it? If he cannot create the rock, then there is something he cannot do. If he can create the rock, then he cannot lift it, and again there is something he cannot do. In either case there is something God cannot do. The puzzle for God's sense of humor might go like this: Could God tell a joke so funny that even he would laugh? The answer is "yes" because there is no limit to how funny God can be, and "no" because God would already know the punch line. I offer this mind-teaser half in jest and half in earnest. To recognize that Jesus laughed may require rethinking traditional ideas about deity.

The final reason we miss the humor of Jesus is because his message and his story are matters of the utmost gravity. The Sermon on the Mount is no comedy routine and the Last Supper is not a roast. Fosdick characterizes what he calls "the Master's joy" in these terms: "He never jests as Socrates does, but He often lets the ripple of a happy breeze play over the surface of His mighty deep" (1928, 16). Trueblood agrees: "The humor comes in quietly, unostentatiously, as an extra dividend which we do not expect" (98). Jesus was no stand-up comedian who told jokes to get a laugh or valued humor for its own sake. Nevertheless, beneath the solemn exterior there is mirth.

John says that Jesus did many things that were not recorded (Jn 21.25). The Gospels, desobtrified, reveal "the son of man," from behind the clouds of gloomy tradition, with—dare we say?—a sunny disposition. Jesus' humor is not likely to send one into paroxysms of hilarity. There are no jokes, no punch lines. It is more subtle than that, more like a "spin" on his teachings. He understood what the Psalmist meant by the invitation to "Serve the Lord with gladness" (100.2). If we take his advice and become as little children we can hear his words anew, as they might have sounded to his first audiences, and we may, if we are lucky, detect a smile upon his face.

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