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**Whedbee, J. William**

***The Bible and the Comic Vision***

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Oft-read texts gain dimension and depth when read in new contexts. Whedbee offers just such an experience in his readings of segments from the Hebrew Bible in light of the comic vision. While many readers have noted what he calls "lineaments of the comic vision" (p.5) in a variety of materials from the Bible, sustained readings of extended texts as comic are rare. As Whedbee notes, for many readers and their interpretative contexts "the coupling of comedy and the Bible is a contradiction in terms" (p.1). By contrast, he suggests just such a coupling leads to interpretative riches. His study falls into two central parts: "The Genesis of Comedy" which involves a serial reading of Genesis as comedy; "Generating Comedy" which entails readings Exodus, Esther, Jonah, Job, and Song of Songs as a "drive to comic regeneration" His introduction traces four interrelated aspects of the comic vision; his conclusion pulls core themes into a comprehensive view relating the comic and the tragic.

Four aspects or "lineaments" of comedy are focal: (1) A U-shaped plot ends in an upswing toward life, regeneration, and festive celebration. (2) Characters tend toward conventional types - "buffoons, clowns, fools, simpletons, rogues, and tricksters" (p. 7). (3) Various "linguistic and stylistic habits and strategies" (p. 8) come into play: punning, parody, hyperbole, redundancy, repetition; incongruity, irony, discrepancy, reversal, surprise. (4). Functionally, comedy plays between the conservative and subversive, calling all structures into question even as it transforms them into new creations. These

four aspects play through Whedbee's readings, often in combinations making strong cases for reading the selected texts as comic.

Whedbee deals first with the two parts of Genesis in two chapters. All four aspects play through the "comedy of creation" in Genesis 1-11, which trace what happens to a "good" creation in the course of human's incongruous and partial fulfillment of the commandment to multiply and master" (p. 60). Humans struggle with sliding limits in which they are to be like God, but not too much like God. The latter brings on "divine suspicion and jealousy" and "various punitive reactions" (p. 60). Yahweh is at several points as a "capricious, whimsical deity" (p. 61) the object of satire who can strike out at his creation, and then, soothed by a sweet smelling "bountiful barbecue of slaughtered animals" (p. 52), promise never to do so again. God is a "comical creator" (p. 62), at once "solemn and sovereign," yet given to mistakes, second thoughts, and new attempts - all accented by reading Genesis 2-3 as a parodic double of Genesis 1. Throughout, puns and other forms of linguistic play abound. In plot and in the designs of God there is - for all the reversals, twists, and turns - an urge toward life, regeneration, and renewal.

The several aspects of comedy are also at play in Genesis 12-50, a "domestic comedy of the household of faith." There is, for example, the extended incongruity between God's repeated promises to the patriarchs and his delayed and limited fulfillment. God is an "uncanny, unpredictable creator who oscillates between . . . high and holy transcendent power and intimately involved anthropomorphic personality" (p. 66). Jacob is a classic trickster figure, with Isaac, Esau, and Laban as dupes. The plot of the Joseph story is shaped in the comic manner with its final recognition, reconciliation, forgiveness, and regeneration. Indeed, there is little in Genesis that Whedbee is not able to draw within one or another aspect of the comic vision - Only Genesis 34 seems in its violence and abrupt conclusion to stand outside. Diverse stances emerge. Sometimes we laugh with (Sarah finally a mother) and sometimes at (Moabites and Ammonites as children of incest; Esau/ Edom and Laban as dupes). God Yahweh is at times arbitrary and uncanny, a trickster in his own right, but he is finally on the side of compassion, life, and celebration. Whedbee's consideration of Genesis as a whole as comic, with its overarching U-shaped plot and final celebration, is important. Yet the book ends with the "household of faith" being "in Egypt" (literally Genesis' last word), with the promise of offspring and land still on a course toward possible fulfillment.

Part II picks up with the story with Exodus. As "liberation and laughter," Whedbee reads Exodus and Esther together as "two comedies of deliverance" (p. 130), sharing similar plots, types of characters, and rhetorical features. Each encourages us to attend to the social and religious functions of comedy. Moses as a hero is both made and unmade, as we trace his failure, flight from Egypt, call and commission (with him resisting again and again), and "return and reintegration into his true community" (p. 132). For all his potential, he is subject to ironic unmaking as he "persistently fails," in order that Yahweh (the unnamable deity in this book of names) may appear as the "unique and ultimate

hero" (p. 170). Women also play unexpectedly heroic roles at key points in the story. Pharaoh is in the model of the classic *alazon*, a villain and fool who becomes evermore the object of satire and scorn as he repeatedly tries and fails to block Yahweh and Moses. The story ends in a celebration of life for Israel, but in it we also see the dark side of a "sardonic comedy" with "tragic components," especially in a deity who toys with his opponents "even when death and destruction come as a consequence" (p. 154). In life or death, Israel and Egypt are ironically joined in knowing "Yahweh's power to destroy and to save" (p. 169). To his credit, Whedbee at least raises the issue of the ethics of our reading this story predominately from the perspective of Israel who is saved (with its grain) and not of Egyptians who loose their firstborn (against its grain).

Many of the same comic aspects are found in Esther, especially the U-shaped plot (even more formally balanced in its fall and rise) ending in life and its celebration of Purim, "an overweening king" and court exposed "to ridicule and laughter," a villain, two heroes (one a woman), and elements of satire, hyperbole, and repetition. Yet the deity is absent from the story's surface (reading Esther in relation to Exodus highlights possibilities that he is quietly active just in the wings), the heroes are not unmade through parody (yet just why is Mordecai so persistent and then so passive?), and the king turns out to be someone they can live with as long as they can mold him. Persia, unlike Egypt, is home, and the heroes rise within its courtly ranks. In the end, in fact, with their letters and legalese that allow Jewish defense and fix Purim as an annual celebration, they begin to seem a lot like Persian bureaucrats. These two comedies serve to "undercut the authority and stature" of reigning kings in alien lands in which Jews found themselves. We unite against the oppressors on a course toward deliverance, but with a difference. For all of the Scroll's satire, laughter at the Persian king falls short of dismissive scorn (which is reserved for Haman), for we much continue to life in Persia, with (and as?) Persians, knowing the "terrors of death and darkness" (190) are always just out there.

In reading "Jonah as joke," Whedbee draws on Mary Douglas' suggestion that jokes yoke disparate elements (e.g., God's will and the prophet's) in ways that challenge accepted patterns (e.g., who should receive divine mercy). The prophet is "caricatured" (p. 218) in a satire that confronts him and us with "the mystery of (a) divine freedom" that can appear capricious but (as in Exodus and Esther) also celebrates "the feverish rush of life . . . in the midst of ever-threatening death" (p. 219). If reading Jonah as comic will surprise few, reading Job in this light may strike some as more problematic. Here the interplay of comedy and tragedy is most apparent and nicely developed by Whedbee. Again the aspects are all there in his reading through the book. It is especially in reading the ending - Job's repentance and Job 42:7-17 - that his comic perspective is most telling. As in Jonah, the disparity between the ways humans and God sees becomes apparent in all its ambiguity as Job sees God only to re-view himself. Thus his repentance is "authentic but paradoxical" (p. 256), and sets the basis for a comic movement from repentance to festivity. This nicely integrates what are sometimes seen as superfluous elements at the conclusion to the so-called folktale, where Job is reintegrated into family

and community Whedbee suggests a comic reading of Job that encourages exploration into the functions of the drama within exilic communities (as proposed by S. L. Terrien) and the interaction of comedy and exile in Jewish tradition.

The Song of Solomon serves as a comic answer to Job that subverts basic social roles and parodies "bodies beautiful." Erotic love levels such class distinctions as king commoner, country folk and city dwellers, female and male. Whedbee takes up A. Brenner's suggestion that certain songs celebrating female and male bodies be read as satires. While not a narrative the songs plays within rhythms of separation and union with (at least anticipation of) celebration of the latter.

Throughout Whedbee offers engaging readings. At the least he demonstrates that aspects of the comic, taken in the expansive and encompassing definition he gives it, shape a variety of texts in the Hebrew Bible. Especially significant are his suggestions about "the dual faces" of comedy, that it functions both to attack and affirm, ridicule and revel, correct and celebrate. In fact, this underscores the importance of attention to just where we as readers stand in relation to both narrators and characters in the ideologically complex story-worlds of these comedies, offering a nice entree to the ethics of reading and interpretation. His suggestions about the functions of comedy merit further exploration. Especially significant are his observations on the roles of key women in many of these comedies. His recognition that comedy and tragedy are not simple polar opposites is important, even as we note a danger of defining them together so broadly that they take in everything and lose their interpretative edges. It is a risk worth taking, since both the tragic and the comic visions overtly shape remarkably few readings of the Hebrew Bible. Whedbee takes us significantly forward toward realizing their potential.