Whedbee, J. William

*The Bible and the Comic Vision*


Scott B. Noegel
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195

The search for humor in the Bible is not an entirely new quest. Several scholars including the author of the monograph under review, have undertaken such work, but typically, their foci have been on brief pericopes believed to have comic import. Moreover, such studies usually have proceeded without defining what is meant by "humor" and how one might spot it in an ancient text, whose cultural and social matrices are so removed from our own.

This work is distinctive. It sets out to establish research parameters by shifting the discussion of humor away from definitions and toward an anatomy of general characteristics: "I will not offer a definition or 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 of resemblance'" (p. 6).

After grounding his conception of humor in contemporary literary criticism, Whedbee looks anew at biblical texts and sees in them a series of conditions that, when combined, demonstrate the presence of humor. These conditions include a context of central themes, textual or thematic incongruity, and an ironic central theme or U-shaped plot. "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" (p. 7).

Whedbee's study further divides comedy into types e.g., tricksters, buffoons, rogues), linguistic and stylistic strategies (e.g., word play, parody, redundancy), and functions and intentions, by which he means both transformative (subversive) and restorative (conservative) aims. A careful study of these types reveals the comic programs of biblical
authors: "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 laughter that results in an exuberant and transformative comic
vision" (p. 5). Thus, Whedbee's agenda is restorative in nature, aiming to reveal what
"centuries of liturgical and theological use of the Bible have helped to obscure," namely
"a vital role for comedy and humor in biblical literature and religion" (p. 2).

To demonstrate his thesis, Whedbee examines six biblical texts for the various
comedic types they contain (Genesis, Exodus, Jonah, Job, Esther, and the Song of
Songs). Thus, in Genesis, "Parody enters the narrative at virtually every level, whether in
the characterizations of God, the serpent, man or woman, or in strategic plays on
language and theme" (p. 34). Such parody alleviates "the sometimes deadly serious tone
of the primeval narratives, injecting the power of humor at key points and infusing the
energy of fresh life in the midst of death and dying" (p. 61).

Jacob's manipulation of flocks (Genesis 30) demonstrates a trickster-type comedic
form, yet "knows suffering and death even in the midst of the coming of new life" (p.
107). These forms of humor are punctuated and defined in part by the presence of tragedy
with which they interact, and which they embrace to create "the concrete forms of the
biblical heritage" (p. 5).

Given this expanded understanding of humor, it is easy to understand how Job and
Jonah are comedies since they both subvert "traditional ideas of patriarchal and prophetic
existence" (p. 279). Esther and the Song of Songs too brandish "a satirical knife against
the royal protagonist, the poet of the Song against the Israelite Solomon and the narrator
of Esther against the Persian Ahasuerus, in order to deflate royal pretension" (p 279).
God too does not escape the comic. "Hence from Genesis and Exodus to Job and Jonah,
God reveals his conflict-ridden sides: is he omnipotent creator or bungler, tyrant or
friend, warrior or healer? The various narrators display all these dimensions and more in
their parodied descriptions of a multi-faceted deity" (p. 280).

Thus, for Whedbee, humor is "a serious strategy for dealing with the most profound
problems of human existence" (p. 283). Indeed, in this book comedy is a far more
complex device: "The subversive and celebrative sides of comedy often appear in the
same biblical book, with the polarized, 'comic attitude' set within a dynamic interplay and
tension, thus unveiling a comic vision that oscillates between attack and affirmation,
corrective and celebration, ridicule and revel" (p. 278). Such a characterization leads
Whedbee to see the Hebrew Bible as a divine-human comedy.

As thought-provoking as this book is, its conclusions are based primarily on a
theoretical model that derives its general characteristics of humor from later Western
literature. While Whedbee notes that "caution must be exercised against the threat of
anachronistic and alien readings" (p. 6), no comparison is made to Mesopotamian and Egyptian literatures, especially those with so-called "comic" features. Comparisons with such texts would perhaps better help determine what is considered humorous in an ancient Near Eastern context.

Employing a primarily Western theoretical model involves assumptions concerning comedic strategies. A poignant example is punning, which the author uses to demonstrate the presence of comedy. The ubiquitous presence of word play in prophetic texts and ancient Near Eastern magic, ritual, and cultic texts suggests a purpose very different from comedy. This does not mean that puns cannot serve humorous ends, or that Whedbee has not rediscovered comedy buried in the text. It only suggests that the biblical data must be checked against the wider range of ancient Near Eastern literature to assure greater confidence in the results.

Nevertheless, this is a bold and refreshing book and a wonderful read. It provides a fresh perspective on biblical narrative generally, while more subtly offering a new and meaningful paradigm into which readers can place numerous biblical incongruencies, theological problems, and redundancies. It doubtless will inspire discussion and research.