

HUMOUR AND PLAY: A BIBLICAL REFLECTION

By ALICE L. LAFFEY

WHEN ASKED TO WRITE some biblical reflections on the topic of humour and play I readily agreed. In my opinion, we, that is, late twentieth-century inhabitants of the first world (and in my case a middle-class American female), don't laugh enough—at ourselves, at the incongruities and ambiguities of life, at the absurdities of what we take so seriously—nor do we play enough, though we exert a great deal of effort to ensure that we are not bored. I locate myself as a particular author at the beginning of this piece, and locate you, its potential reader, as English speaking, reasonably well educated, religiously informed and spiritually motivated, because our social location affects our definitions of humour and play (as well as of time, of work, of the appropriate construction and meaningfulness of relationships, etc.). To ignore this is to ignore our limitations, and to risk a total misrepresentation of the biblical texts, and of the insights they can present to us about humour and play. Just as we are limited by gender, race, class, ethnic origin and place in history, so are the biblical texts' expressions of humour and play. And so we must ask, 'How are we and our society different from the people who produced the biblical texts and the characters whom they produced?' (over a thousand-year time span more than two thousand years ago), but also, 'How are we and our society like them?'

One major difference is that most of us in the first world—and probably all of you who will read this article—take physical survival for granted. One may be blue collar as opposed to white collar; victimized by racial or ethnic prejudice in the particular milieu in which one lives and/or works; limited by education or even educational opportunity; yet whatever one's limits with regard to advancement or affluence in the particular society of which one is a part, still, the struggle for physical survival—to have enough food and water and sufficient protection from the elements—is not our issue. In contrast, physical survival was very much *the* driving force for many of the ancient peoples described in the biblical texts, and a corollary of this is the fact that the people had little time for play. One should

not be surprised, then, to find few references to play, as such, in the biblical texts. On the other hand, our ancestors in faith may have benefited even more from the opportunities for humour and play which their social world provided than we do from ours!

Another major difference which we experience is the so-called separation of Church and state. Because all of us who hold these texts to be sacred live today in countries and in a world which is religiously pluralistic, we distinguish between secular activities in which we participate with people who represent different religious beliefs and traditions (e.g., a soccer game) and activities limited to those who share our religious beliefs and tradition (e.g., the Eucharist). One activity appears to be clearly secular, the other more explicitly religious. The people of the ancient near eastern world would not identify with what I am trying to distinguish here. They lived in a world of many gods and many peoples, but all activity—war, childbirth, sheep-herding, crop-raising, house-building—as well as the success or failure of these activities, was understood to be undertaken and executed in relation to some god/s. I make this cultural distinction at the outset, because some of what we would today understand to be secular humour and play was for our ancestors decidedly religious.

I. *Story-telling as play*

A. *The Old Testament's oral traditions*

Modern biblical study has shown that many of the texts of the Old Testament originated as oral traditions, unwritten stories about the ancestors which were only centuries later committed to writing. The common hypothesis is that the earliest stories in the Pentateuch were not written down until the time of the monarchy (approx. 1000 B.C.E.), yet the characters in the stories have been dated to as early as 1850 B.C.E. or even earlier. This would suggest that their memory was kept alive in story-telling. But who were the story-tellers? When and where were the stories told? How were they passed on from one generation to another?

Think about it. There was no electricity. What could one do during the many hours of darkness? Sleep and procreate, to be sure, both of which activities were necessary for survival. Most likely, story-telling was the major form of recreation come nightfall. Imagine sitting around the camp fire sharing your memories of the achievements of your ancestors (and perhaps even filling in the unknown gaps and exaggerating a little). Even today a grandfather

fishing with his grandchildren can tell stories from his childhood, about his father and mother and their parents, or about the three-foot trout (!) he once caught, and a mother can pass on to her children cooking short-cuts and secret recipes confided to her by her mother and grandmother. Much of what we know today as the 'history' of Israel's ancestors, of our ancestors—of Sarah and Abraham, of Rebecca and Isaac, of Leah and Rachel and Jacob—are wonderful stories, wonderfully entertaining stories told and retold at the end of very long days filled with the hard work essential for survival. We can well imagine the story's listeners hanging onto every word as its suspense builds (e.g.: How will Abraham have the promised child if his wife is barren [Gen 18,10-11]? Will Abraham actually kill Isaac [Gen 22,2]? Will Isaac discover that Jacob is pretending to be Esau [Gen 27,19]?) Moreover, some stories bear repeating with only slight modification (e.g.: What will happen when Sarah is with Pharaoh [Gen 12,15]? with Abimelech [Gen 20,2]? Will Abraham's wife be compromised? Will Abraham's deceptions be discovered? And if they are discovered, what will happen to him [Gen 12,18; 20,9-10]? What will happen when Rebecca is identified as Isaac's sister in Gerar? Will Isaac's deception be discovered [Gen 26,6]? Will Isaac and Rebecca survive [Gen 26,20]?) I have no idea how much money is spent each year in first world countries on theatre, film and television (by producers as well as by consumers), or how much is spent on books—biographies, autobiographies and novels—but I do know that one major medium of recreation is a good story. But, after all, that insight is hardly new!

One major difference between most of our stories and the biblical stories of our ancestors is that God is an active character in many of Israel's stories. It is God through a messenger who tells Abraham that he will have a son (Gen 18,10); it is God who alerts Rebecca to the fact that Jacob will rise above Esau (Gen 25,23); it is God who opens the wombs of barren women (Gen 21,1-2; 25,21; 30,1-2.22-23; 1 Sam 1,11.17); it is God who is credited with orchestrating what happens to Joseph (Gen 45,7-9); it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exod 9,12). God is frequently the character who overcomes the insurmountable obstacles which the stories depict. The Israelites' memory of their ancestors is integrally related to the activity of God in their ancestors' lives and, implicitly at least, in their own lives. The same can be said about the later texts of the Old Testament as well, though many of them did not have as long, if any, oral history. The fact is, all of the bible's stories were carefully

preserved and handed down not only because they were entertaining but also because they were insightful, didactic, and revelatory.

B. The New Testament's stories by and about Jesus

The people who came to believe in Jesus and who later comprised the early Church recalled their memories of Jesus in the form of stories, and they recalled also stories which Jesus had told. We must constantly remind ourselves that the gospels do not have only four authors (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) but are the memories of early communities whose stories were shaped into the canonical texts we preserve today. Imagine the communities coming together to remember Jesus, and to tell others about Jesus—those who came to believe in Jesus only after his death and their own children who were too young to remember him. Imagine the listeners sitting intently, hanging onto every word that poured forth from the speaker's mouth. What would Jesus say to the haemorrhaging woman who dared to touch his garment (Mk 5,27; Lk 8,44)? How would the crowd react? Or to the woman who washed his feet in the Pharisee's house (Lk 7,37-38)? How would Jesus's host and the others at dinner react (v 39)? How would Jesus react to the lepers who, disobeying the laws of contamination and quarantine, approached him asking to be cured (Lk 17,11-13)? And it was one thing when Lazarus was only sick, but how would Jesus respond when, upon his arrival in Bethany, he learned that his friend had already been in the tomb for four days (Jn 11,17)? What guts it must have taken to throw the money-changers out of the temple (Mt 21,12; Mk 11,15; Jn 2,15) and to denounce the lifestyle of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23)!

The New Testament's stories recall not only what Jesus was remembered to have said and done, but some also are stories which he himself is said to have told. How is a typical Pharisee's prayer different from a tax collector's (Lk 18,11-13) and how do you think Jesus judges their respective prayers (v 14)? And what about the poor Samaritan who fell among robbers (Lk 10,30)? What would happen to him (vv 31-35)?

We can only conclude that all these stories entertained as well as taught; they were cherished, told and re-told. Now is this work or is this play? It is the carrying on of a religious tradition, which is pretty serious business; it is sharing the community's understanding of God and life's meaning, but it is likewise clearly meant to be enjoyed. Robert Coles, a Harvard University psychiatrist and himself a magnificent story-teller, has recently recounted the life-stories of

some of the more recent of our significant ancestors (e.g., Dorothy Day and Simone Weil). He reminds us, in his *The call of stories*, of the value of stories. This latter book is an excellent illustration of how stories fuse work and play.

The brevity of this article does not allow me to show in detail how irony functions in many Old and New Testament stories: the least likely event or person becomes the one who either triumphs or is chosen—e.g., the younger over the elder (Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his brothers, David over his brothers), the smaller over the larger (the tribe of Benjamin over the other tribes), the least over the greater (the clan of Saul over the other clans of the tribe of Benjamin), the female over the male (the Hebrew midwives over Pharaoh, Deborah and Jael over Barak, Esther over Haman, Judith over Holofernes), the military leader whose brawn accomplishes what his brain could not (Samson), and a host of other unexpected turns of events. The stories about and by Jesus pursue some similar but also some significantly different sorts of ironies, for example, the poor over the rich (the widow in the temple), the socio-religious outcast over the socio-religious establishment (e.g., the prostitutes, the lepers, the tax collectors). How the stories' ironies were received would, of course, be dependent on the identity of their audiences, but at least some of these stories would, no doubt, have delighted their audiences.

II. *Meals as play*

Eating is essential for survival and is therefore a necessary task. On the other hand, healthy humans enjoy eating and often associate eating with celebration. This is true of ourselves but it was also true of our ancestors, as the biblical texts amply testify.

A. *The Passover*

The Jews celebrate the Exodus, that greatest of religious events when God made them his people by bringing them up out of slavery in Egypt, with a meal (e.g., Exod 12,1-13; Deut 16,1-8; 2 Chr 30). The historical roots of this feast combine the slaughtering of a year-old unblemished male lamb with the celebration of newly harvested grain.

B. *Harvest's first-fruits*

It is impossible for us in the first world to appreciate how closely survival was experienced as directly dependent on good harvests. In a

land not so fertile as 'milk and honey' might have us believe, drought easily led to crop failure and eventuated in famine. On the other hand, if no pestilence or other natural or human disaster intervened, sufficient rainfall would lead to abundant crops and a fattened herd. Offering to God the 'first-fruits' of the herd and of the field was a natural consequence of believing that God was responsible for the blessings of the earth. But the blessings of the earth were to be enjoyed by its inhabitants (Lev 26,3-5; Deut 11,13-15), and consequently, the Israelites celebrated not only their liberation from bondage but also the grain harvests (Deut 14,22-23) and the first-fruits of their flocks (Deut 12,6-7; 15,19-22) with a celebrative meal.

C. Other meals in the Old Testament

That other meals were associated with enjoyment and celebration is clear from the hospitality Abraham offered to his three visitors (Gen 18,5-8), from Isaac's sumptuous repast shortly before his death (Gen 27,3-4), from Saul's eating with Samuel (1 Sam 9,19-24; cf 11,14-15), from the food David distributed after he had brought the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6,19), from the feasting which took place after Solomon had built the temple (1 Kg 8,62-65), and from the covenant renewal meaning of the post-exilic community meal (Neh 8,12), to name but a few examples. Many of these meals are taken in connection with occurrence of significant events, including the promise to Abraham of an heir, Isaac's blessing of Jacob, the anointing of Saul as Israel's first king, and Israel's pledge of renewed faithfulness to Yahweh.

D. The new Passover

For Christians, Jesus's death and resurrection is the new Passover. We believe that Jesus was the paschal lamb (Jn 1,29) who was sacrificed (Acts 8,32-35) in order to bring about our liberation from sin and death. The Eucharist, given to us at Jesus's 'last meal', is the sacred meal at which we celebrate Jesus's triumph over death. The passover lamb is sacrificed—we behold 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'—and eaten. Although the thin white wafers consumed at most eucharistic celebrations may satisfy our spiritual hunger, they unfortunately do not address physical hunger and it is easy to forget that we are at a meal. This is particularly true if we only receive a wafer of bread and do not receive the Eucharist under the form of consecrated wine. It is a meagre meal for our bodies, indeed! The early Church seems to have celebrated the

Eucharist at meals where the body was also satisfied (cf 1 Cor 11,20-22).

E. Other dinner parties

The New Testament records additional celebrative meals, all of which were connected with significant events: at Peter's home after Jesus had cured Peter's mother-in-law (Mt 8,14-15); at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, before Mary anointed Jesus for his burial (Jn 12,1-2); on three different occasions at the homes of unnamed Pharisees, each of which meals/parties became an opportunity for Jesus to teach (Lk 7,36; 11,37; 14,1); at Zaccheus's home after Jesus affirmed the despised tax-collector (Lk 19,5); and even at a wedding banquet where Jesus changed water into wine (Jn 2,1-2). Perhaps because food is essential to survival and because, consequently, its availability has been understood in history as reason for rejoicing, meals are frequently associated with celebration.

And where would we be without 'ethnic foods' and holiday meals? One may or may not associate Yorkshire pudding with the English, or potatoes with the Irish, or veal with Italians; but most of us fortunate enough to live in the first world recognize that certain peoples have been associated with certain foods, and that most people have special foods for special occasions, though precisely what these special foods are may differ among peoples.

III. Victory celebrations

The Old Testament depicts another kind of celebration, one almost totally absent from the writings of the early Christian communities. After liberation from Egyptian bondage and victory over oppressive enemies, the Israelites held celebrations which often included victory songs (Exod 15; Jg 5; 1 Sam 18,6-7; 21,12; cf Num 21,27-31; Ps 21). The book of Revelation also contains a victory song, one which celebrates the definitive destruction of all God's enemies (19,1-3). As I write these thoughts we are currently engaged in a war with Iraq. How long before there are negotiations and peace I know not but I have no doubt that if the allied forces are successful in forcing Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, there will be victory celebrations. The loved ones of returning soldiers will surely celebrate.

IV. Music

If only because of the victory songs cited above, one can appropriately conclude that music was a part of partying. Many, if not

most, of Israel's songs were religious, a way of 'partying with God'. Moses recites the words of a song which proclaims the greatness of God (Deut 32); David speaks the words of a victory song which thanks God for delivering him from all his enemies (2 Sam 23). The restoration of the temple takes place when singers sing the song of the Lord and trumpets sound (2 Chr 29). The barren one is to break forth into song for the numerous children she will bear (Isai 54,1). In addition to such celebrative songs, the collections of Psalms contains many which are clearly songs of joy and rejoicing (e.g., Pss 32-33; 65-66; 145-50).

Moreover, the author of Ephesians counsels the community to 'address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord' in their hearts (5,19; cf Col 3,16). Rom 15, 9 and 11 counsel 'to praise the Lord among the Gentiles, and to sing praises' to God. Likewise, the letter of James encourages those who are in good spirits to sing praise (5,13).

Just as story-telling (for many, story-watching!) is today a favourite recreational pastime, so also is music. The recording industry thrives on classical, folk, jazz, blues, pop, and rock music. The artists are many but the music-lovers many more. We, like our ancestors, use music as a form of play.

IV. *Some concluding remarks*

I have failed to mention the Sabbath which secured for the Israelites, their children, their slaves, their resident aliens and their animals, a day of *rest* each week (Deut 5,13-14), the sabbatical year which recognized the land as deserving of *rest* (Lev 25,3-7), and the feast of Jubilees which redistributed the land more equitably every fifty years (Lev 25,8-55). These provisions *tempered work*, placing it in the broader framework of praise to God and justice to one another.

Like our ancestors, we still have story-telling and irony, but our stories often lack ironic twists on behalf of the powerless which many of the New Testament's stories possess; like our ancestors, we still have celebrative meals, though too often our most religiously significant meals lack the character of meals, and our more ample meals lack religious significance; like our ancestors, we still have music, though more often than not it is explicitly 'secular'; like our Old Testament ancestors, we still have victory celebrations, because we still have war. Moreover, few of us, at least in my opinion, have not found a good balance between work and rest.

Though the milieux which produced the biblical texts are different from our own, we can learn from our ancestors' stories, from their

meals and their music, from their sabbaths and sabbatical years, and perhaps most importantly, from their year of Jubilee. Humour and play can remind us, as the biblical versions of humour and play do so consistently, that despite all our illusions and best efforts, we are not in ultimate control. God acts in history; we are creatures in God's hands.

May we draw your attention to an important editorial change? Sadly, after six years, first as Assistant Editor then as Co-Editor, Lavinia Byrne I.B.V.M. has moved to an exciting new post. She is Associate Secretary for the Community of Women and Men in the Church at the new ecumenical Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Lavinia made a major contribution to all aspects of editing, policy and planning and will be greatly missed.

Lavinia is temporarily replaced by an experienced, part-time Assistant Editor, Simon Barrow, while we conduct a thorough review of longer-term staffing needs.