Don't make me laugh!

Humor in the book of Job

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Der Vogel, scheint mir, hat Humor.
–Wilhelm Busch[1]

On a high school exchange program in Germany the summer after my junior year, one of our resident teachers was Frau Butt. With typical adolescent perspicacity, we found this hilarious and were constantly sharing humorous asides predicated on her name. One lazy, bilingual afternoon the resident wit offered yet another joke at her expense. There was a burst of laughter, but then my friend Sherman suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "That's not funny! I just found out Frau Butt's husband died last year."[2]

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That was enough to sober us up—then. By the end of the summer, however, after we had come to know Frau Butt better, the going-away gift we presented her was an ashtray with the inscription (in English): *Place your butts here*. She loved it. The specter of loss and grief had wiped the smiles off our faces. Two months of growing familiarity and fondness returned them.

1 The poem from which this line is derived depicts a bird fluttering on a branch, caught in tree sap, aware of a keen-eyed cat creeping toward it. Awaiting its imminent demise, the bird decides that it might as well sing its heart out as long as it can, culminating in the poet's whimsical remark: "It seems to me the bird has a sense of humor."

2 Even at the time, the exclamation "That's not funny!" struck me as odd, since whatever was said obviously made us laugh. What Sherman meant by the term, no doubt, was that the new information about death rendered our joking inappropriate.

The standard reading of Job

If there is any book of the Bible that should wipe the smiles off our faces, it is the book of Job. Nowhere does biblical literature paint a more poignant picture of physical and mental anguish. The character Job is introduced as a pious non-Israelite from the ancient East who has it all, whose blessings seem to line up perfectly with his virtues. Suddenly he is crippled by a series of devastating losses, announced by messengers in rapid sequence.[3] They report the loss of property and progeny. A morally compromising depiction of God appears in the framing narrative. YHWH engages with "the Satan" in a contest to see whether the bragged-on piety of Job is authentic. At first Job persists in his integrity, but then he succumbs to the trauma that has engulfed him and curses (no euphemism!) his existence. Deeply troubled by his lament, his friends engage him in a cycle of increasingly acrimonious dialogues of recrimination. The vexing question of human suffering and its relation to the moral order has remained with us over the centuries and is no less acute today.

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The literary and theological legacy of Job has long been fixed as that of a faithful hero of steadfastness and longsuffering for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.[4] For Christians, Job's sufferings come to foreshadow those of the crucified Christ. As early as the Testament of Job (first century BCE) and extending into its modern reception, Job's struggle is against Satan rather than God. What remains in this reconstruction of the book of Job is a model for the way the faithful might handle suffering and how the community of faith might support those who suffer pain and loss. There would seem to be little room for humor in this reading. In fact, it bears all the hallmarks of a tragedy.[5]

3 Reflected in the German proverb "Hiobsbotschaft," a Joban message.

4 Cf. TJob 27:1–5; James 5:11; Quran 21:83–84.

5 Embodied in Kallen's rewriting of the book as a Greek tragedy.

Comedy amid tragedy in Job

There is much about the standard reading of Job that is askew. In order to maintain such an image of heroic steadfastness, important segments of the book of Job must be neglected and overlooked. Moving from Job's deep lament (chap. 3) to the impassioned debate with his friends that follows, the careful reader notices immediately that all of the characters have been endowed by their creator with a facility of language that equips them to utilize elements of the comic in the midst of the tragic.

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First of all, there are eight explicit references in the book to laughter (Hebrew *śaḥaq*) of various kinds.[6] But there are many more passages that exhibit a comic framing of situations in the midst of debate. These are not intended to evoke laughter but represent interaction rituals in literary terms like those that Goffman refers to as "face work" in conversation.[7]

For example, in the midst of Job's first response to his friend Zophar, toward the end of the initial cycle of dialogues, Job exclaims in exasperation:

> *If you [all] would only keep silent,*
> *that would be your wisdom. (13:5)*[8]

This ironic reversal of the conventional image of the wise comes after more than five hundred words have already been exchanged among the friends. And why not? Speech was the currency of wisdom. As the preamble of the book of Proverbs makes clear, the purpose of that didactic collection is, among other things:

> *To understand a proverb and a figure,*
> *the words of the wise and their riddles. (1:6)*

6 See 5:22; 29:24; 30:1; 39:7, 18, 22; 41:5 [H 40:29], 22.

7 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 5–45.

8 Perhaps Job is also evoking the profound empathy first expressed by the friends when they sit with him for a week in silence (2:13).

One might say that sages were paid by the word. But at this point in the controversy, once everyone has had the chance for barbed riposte, Job wryly asserts that their silence would be wiser than their speech. He makes this ironic declaration in the midst of accusing the friends of "speaking falsely for God" (13:7). Their wordy "wisdom," Job maintains, is a pathetic attempt to "plead the case for God" (13:8). To be sure, the tropes of wisdom literature allow that verbal reticence may be a virtue, especially for those who imagine themselves wiser than they are:

> *Even fools who keep silent are considered wise;*
> *when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.*
> *(Proverbs 17:28)*

Perhaps it is doubly ironic that Job's chiding is itself verbose and will provoke an increasingly acerbic debate for another thirty-one chapters.

Humorous terms and literary devices

Many of the key terms associated with humor and the comic defy narrow definition. There are subjective and objective features. What constitutes humor, what kinds of laughter, what is considered comic—all these overlap on closer observation into a broad fabric of phenomena, many determined heavily by culture and language. So for the purposes of these reflections, I will be using key terms rather broadly. Humor is that which makes us laugh, or smile, or chuckle, or giggle, or guffaw, or silently reflect. The recognition of humor may be enhanced, or blocked, by factors such as interpretation or translation. What seems funny in English may not meet the standard for humor in the Hebrew original. And elements of the comic in Hebrew, especially those using word play, may not translate into Greek or Syriac or other language as witty. Furthermore, it can be difficult to determine if a text is deliberately humorous when the meaning is unclear or when dealing with variant readings, or in the midst of a serious treatise.

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There are many passages in the book of Job that support the thesis that the author(s) of Job makes use of literary strategies we identify as

humorous. Here are some examples, not an exhaustive list, arranged by theme/type:

1. *Imputations of Bloviating*

   a. *8:2 (Bildad)*

   How long will you say these things,
   and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

   b. *11:2–3 (Zophar)*

   Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
   and should one full of talk be vindicated?
   Should your babble put others to silence,
   and when you mock, shall no one shame you?

   c. *15:2 (Eliphaz)*

   Should the wise answer with windy knowledge,
   and fill themselves with the east wind?

   d. *16:2–4 (Job)*

   I have heard many such things;
   miserable comforters are you all.
   Have windy words no limit?
   Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?
   I also could talk as you do,
   if you were in my place;
   I could join words together against you,
   and shake my head at you.

2. *Irony*

   a. *7:17–19 (Job)*

   What are human beings, that you make so much of them,
   that you set your mind on them,
   visit them every morning,
   test them every moment?
   Will you not look away from me for a while,
   let me alone until I swallow my spittle?

b. 9:11–12 (Job)

Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
He snatches away; who can stop him?
Who will say to him, "What are you doing?"

c. 18:3 (Bildad)

Why are we counted as cattle?
Why are we stupid in your sight?

d. 20:6–7 (Zophar)

Even though they mount up high as the heavens,
and their head reaches to the clouds,
they will perish forever like their own dung.

3. Incongruity

a. 7:21b (Job)

For now I shall lie in the earth;
you will seek me, but I shall not be.

b. 8:14 (Bildad)

Their confidence is gossamer,
a spider's house their trust.

c. 11:12 (Zophar)

But a stupid person will get understanding,
when a wild ass is born human.

d. 12:4 (Job)

I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called upon God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock.

e. 19:13–19 (Job)

He has put my family far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.
My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my serving girls count me as a stranger;

I have become an alien in their eyes.
I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;
I must myself plead with him.
My breath is repulsive to my wife;
I am loathsome to my own family.
Even young children despise me;
when I rise, they talk against me.
All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me.

f. 17:13–14 (Job)

If I look for Sheol as my house,
if I spread my couch in darkness,
if I say to the Pit, "You are my father,"
and to the worm, "My mother," or "My sister," . . .

g. 20:15 (Zophar)

They swallow down riches and vomit them up again;
God casts them out of their bellies.

h. 25:5–6 (Bildad)

If even the moon is not bright
and the stars are not pure in his sight,
how much less a mortal, who is a maggot,
and a human being, who is a worm!

4. Sarcasm

a. 12:2 (Job)

No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.

b. 12:3 (Job)

But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things as these?

c. 13:25 (Job)

Will you [Shadday] frighten a windblown leaf
and pursue dry chaff?

d. 15:7–9 (Eliphaz)

Are you the firstborn of the human race?
Were you brought forth before the hills?
Have you listened in the council of God?
And do you limit wisdom to yourself?
What do you know that we do not know?
What do you understand that is not clear to us?

e. 21:3 (Job)

Bear with me, and I will speak;
then after I have spoken, mock on.

f. 21:14–15; et alia (Job)

They [the wicked] say to God, "Leave us alone!
We do not desire to know your ways.
What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?"

g. 26:2–3 (Job)

How you have helped one who has no power!
How you have assisted the arm that has no strength!
How you have counseled one who has no wisdom,
and given much good advice!

h. 38:1–3 (YHWH)

Then the LORD *answered Job out of the whirlwind:*
Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

i. 38:21 (YHWH)

Surely you know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!

Perhaps we can imagine these and other rhetorical formulations in the book as part of a "fleshing out" of the incongruities of the situation: pious Job's misfortune, YHWH's wager with the Satan, euphemisms of blessing and cursing, a self-negating lament, the foolish and harmful talk

of caring friends, a futile insistence on justice, the tedious mansplaining of an overconfident youth, a divine theophany that answers none of Job's questions, a fairy-tale ending.

Job as comedy

Acknowledging that the purpose and genre of the book have been the source of much controversy, William Whedbee proposed that "when the poem of Job is set in its full and final literary context, replete with Prologue and Epilogue as well as the Elihu speeches, the most apt generic designation of the book is comedy."[9] Few scholars have accepted this proposal, though the extensive use of irony in the dialogues has not gone unnoticed. Some have objected on literary grounds—that is, how a work so full of anguish could be considered a comedy. Others have rejected the compromised role of God as theologically questionable. Still others assume that an overemphasis on the comedic features of the book is tantamount to dismissing its serious intent.

We should sharpen our wits and attune our ears to the many ways in which the wisdom of the fool and the foolishness of the wise engage us in vivid dialogue with reality, as it appears and as it is.

Among the few who have been inspired by Whedbee's proposal, Abigail Pelham argues that these disturbing features are intentionally built into the book.[10] She attempts to show that the "darkness" of its genius is not incompatible with its comedic structure. She concludes: "It may be that the author has written a comedy for the express purpose of exposing the tragedy that lies at the heart of human existence: the tragedy is that it is a comedy."[11]

Nothing about the depiction of Job's situation is funny. But the way literature both reflects human life and challenges our assumptions about the world means that we need a balanced perspective. To take everything in the Bible with the same level of seriousness is to distort its message.

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9 William Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," *Semeia* 7 (1977): 1.

10 Abilail Pelham, "*Job* as Comedy, Revisited," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 1 (2010): 89–112. This reading is reminiscent of Carol Newsom's brilliant reading of Job as a "Polyphonic Text." See Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 3 (2002): 87–108.

11 Pelham, "*Job* as Comedy, Revisited," *93*.

Nothing that obscures our view of the truths about ourselves and about God can be a theological virtue. The friends learn this lesson the hard way (42:7–9).

In the midst of the natural and moral orders in which we live and move and have our being, we should sharpen our wits and attune our ears to the many ways in which the wisdom of the fool and the foolishness of the wise engage us in vivid dialogue with reality, as it appears and as it is. Then, like the bird on the limb, even when we are stuck in the sap and our mortality is stealthily creeping towards us, we can decide to sing our hearts out. We should live, and read our Bibles, with a sense of humor.

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