

“A time to laugh”

Laughter in the Bible

Ben C. Ollenburger

“Laughter is the Best Medicine.” That was the title of a joke column in the *Reader’s Digest*, which my grandparents subscribed to many years ago. I entertained myself by reading their old *Digest* issues when my parents and I traveled from Oklahoma to Kansas to visit them. Whether laugh-

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ter really is the best medicine surely depends on the malady it hopes to treat. For a ten-year old boy, it provided adequate treatment for boredom. Even so, the *Reader’s Digest’s* jokes provoked less laughter than did the stories my parents and grandparents told. It may be that my family’s rich inventory of stories—from

the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, the depravations of World War 2 and from stories about random people, incidents, and their own foibles—drew me to the Old Testament. That and, of course, God.

Abraham and Sarah’s laughter

Stories form much of the Old Testament—and perhaps most of what we remember of it. In “popular” culture, the Old Testament has a reputation for wrath, anger, judgment. Those features should not be denied or erased. But along with them there is some really funny stuff. Have you ever fallen down laughing at something a comedian said? Well, Abraham did; he “fell on his face laughing” (Genesis 17:17),¹ not at a funny quip or a comedian’s routine but at the fantastic thing God had just told him: that at one hundred years old, he would become the father of a son whom Abraham’s ninety-year-old wife, Sarah, would bear. Abe found God’s announcement to be hilarious, and he fell down laughing. Sarah was similarly amused when she overheard the announcement: she laughed to herself.

1 Quotations of and references to biblical texts generally follow the NRSV, which I have modified in some instances in faithfulness to the Hebrew.

And her own response is amusing, while frank: "After I am worn out, I'm going to have pleasure?!—also, my husband is old" (Genesis 18:12). Though Sarah had laughed to herself, God knew and asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?" (v. 13). Apparently, Sarah again overheard and said out loud, "I didn't laugh." To which God replied, laconically, "Yeah, you laughed" (v. 15).

That wasn't the last time Sarah laughed. To her surprise, she did have pleasure, apparently, and Abraham did, too: Sarah bore a son. "God,"

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she says, "has made laughter for me; all who hear me will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6). The laughter may be because this ninety-year-old woman could conceive and bear a child, or because her decade-older husband could help make it happen. Perhaps it was holy laughter at the miraculous work God had done. I'm sure it was that . . . and the other things as well. But was it also, perhaps, vindictive? Sarah, long childless, had arranged for Abraham to provide a child through a surrogate, Sarah's Egyptian maid Hagar. Hagar had born Ishmael, but now Sarah had her own son, Isaac.

And she engages in a pun: in Hebrew, the name Isaac means "he laughs/will laugh," and when Sarah said God "made laughter for me," she spoke Isaac's name.

For those familiar with the few elements of Isaac's story in the Old Testament, laughter would not be the first thing to come to mind. In the next chapter—Genesis 22—Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac at God's command. It's hard to see something funny after that, or even before, when Abraham responds obsequiously to Sarah's instruction—and God's endorsement of it—to send Hagar and Ishmael to almost certain death in the desert. No laughing matter, that.

Mocking laughter

Western philosophers have not looked favorably on laughter. To be sure, it is hard to imagine Plato or Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes or René Descartes laughing, never mind Immanuel Kant. But they did comment on laughter. Their specific reasons for disparaging laughter differed, but they

seemed to agree on one point: laughter tends to be, on one hand, an expression of scorn for another party, and on the other hand, an expression of superiority on the part of the person laughing.² Whether their point is a sound one generally, these philosophers could draw on the Bible for support.

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Habakkuk 1:10 describes the Babylonian army laughing at cities that would hope to defend themselves with walls: “At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it.” When King Hezekiah sent couriers to invite all the people of Israel and Judah to Passover, they “laughed them to scorn” (2 Chronicles

30:10). In Proverbs, Wisdom—personified as a woman—promises to laugh when those who refuse her counsel experience dread (Proverbs 1:26). In the New Testament, Jesus provokes mocking laughter. When he announces that the presumably dead daughter of a synagogue ruler is merely sleeping, not dead, the people around him laugh at him (Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53).

While all of these examples describe laughter as mocking, they do not occupy the same space on a register of scorn. The laughter of the Babylonian army is that of a vastly superior force expressing amusement at the effort of feeble opponents. The laughter that Israel’s and Judah’s people direct to Hezekiah’s couriers is dismissive. And the laughter Jesus provokes is of the *Yeah, right!* sort of usually justified disbelief. But Wisdom’s laughter has a different quality, expressing glee at the consequences suffered by those who ignored her counsel—*Schadenfreude* is an appropriate German term: in this case, joy, laughter at someone’s predictable misfortune.


That sort of laughter the Bible also attributes to God, who laughs at the wicked because God “sees that their day is coming” (Psalm 37:13). When the nations and kings and peoples conspire against God and God’s anointed, “the One who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them

² John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.

in derision” (Psalm 2:4). Psalm 59:8 says much the same about God’s laughter at the nations: they belch out with their mouths and have swords between their lips, but God laughs derisively. In 2 Kings 19:21 (cf. Isaiah 37:29), God laughs scornfully at Sennacherib, the Assyrian king whose imperial army lays siege to Jerusalem. This is not laughter provoked by something funny; neither is it joyful laughter—as at a feast, where “wine makes merry” (Ecclesiastes 10:10).

Laughter as confession of faith and resistance

I think of laughter in these passages from Psalms and 2 Kings as disarming and fortifying. The wicked who wield domestic power (Psalm 37),



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the nations who wield international power (Psalms 2 and 59), and the army that wields imperial power (2 Kings 19) are laughed at, exposed to ridicule, disarmed in light of the incomparable power of God. These texts implicitly encourage communities in which they were read, and continue to be read, to laugh along with God—and to do so even when imperial forces exercise all the evident power, and God is not in evidence. This is laughter as confession of faith and resistance.

Comedy has been a medium of social and political critique from antiquity. When the leaders of the Greek city states were engaged in continual war, the comedian Aristophanes laughed at them through his play *Lysistrata* (411 BCE). In it, the women of Greece agree to withhold sex until the men stop fighting. Peace soon followed . . . in the play. It does not always follow on the ground. Life does not always imitate art, and laughter does not always disarm the imperial power, even if it may fortify the oppressed or beleaguered. But if Easter doesn’t make you laugh, maybe you haven’t been reading along in the Bible. It’s good medicine.

About the author

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