

GROWING Together

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IS THE BIBLE A COMIC BOOK?

The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that “the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature.”¹ But did Whitehead really know his Bible? Do we?

Open the cover and it will soon be apparent that the writers of scripture, while intending to convey a serious message, were willing to use humour to accomplish their purpose. Humour has a way of drawing us into stories, making us think about words and their intended meaning, showing us parts of ourselves that we easily recognize – and are sometimes embarrassed to admit.

Biblical humour is not an end in itself, but a literary device used in the service of God. If readers are searching for the biblical equivalent of television sit-coms they will be disappointed. Scriptural humour takes many forms, but it always enriches the text and helps drive the message home.

Sometimes biblical humour is obvious. For example, when the prophet Balaam steers his donkey down a forbidden path, the donkey turns out to be more faithful than the prophet. A (not so) dumb ass saves the prophet's life. (Numbers 22:22-35)

Other times, humour in the Bible is more subtle. When Pharaoh commands the midwives to kill every male child, they offer a very creative excuse: “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian woman, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them!” Later, when Pharaoh orders Hebrew babies thrown into the Nile, Moses' mother does just this – with the addition of a reed basket to cradle him. Later still, Pharaoh's daughter plucks the baby out of the Nile, returns him to his mother to nurse, and afterwards brings Moses to live in Pharaoh's own household. The story puts a smile on our face, while demonstrating that God's purpose triumphs over powerful forces of opposition. (Exodus 1:15-2:10)

¹ Lucien Price ed., *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954).

Other memorable – and humorous – stories include the reluctant prophet Jonah's encounter with a giant fish. (Jonah 1:17) And Elijah's sarcastic taunt of the apparently absent Baal: “I'm sure Baal is a god! Perhaps he has too much to think about. Or maybe he has gone to the toilet. Or perhaps he's away on a trip. Maybe he's sleeping. You might have to wake him up.” (1 Kings 18:20-40)

Jesus himself was well-schooled in Jewish humour. It's not hard to imagine a sparkle in his eye when he makes a word-play on Peter's name. “I tell you that you are Peter (Kepha/Petros) and on this rock (kepha/petra) I will build my church.” (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus taught in parables that present incongruities and surprising exaggerations. Who can fail to see the humour of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle? (Matthew 19:24) Or imagine straining tiny gnats from a drink, but *swallowing* full size camels whole. (Matthew 23:24) When Jesus advises that we take the log out of our own eye before attempting to remove the speck from someone else's, we are surprised. But we understand the message. (Matthew 7:1-5)

Jesus lived as he taught. Elton Trueblood wrote, “If Christ laughed a great deal, as the evidence shows, and if he is what he claimed to be, we cannot avoid the logical conclusion that there is laughter and gaiety in the heart of God.”²

² Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964)

2012 Writing Team: Rev. Dr. Jan Bigland-Pritchard (Anglican), Rev. Paul Matheson (Baptist), Vern Ratzlaff (Mennonite), Frank Roy (Roman Catholic), and Rev. Michael Webster (United). Frank Roy is also our editor.

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Prairie Centre for Ecumenism
600 - 45th Street West
Saskatoon, SK S7L 5W9
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phone: (306)-653-1633
fax: (306) 653-1821
email: pce@ecumenism.net
www.ecumenism.net