Humor in the Bible

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Understanding the world of the Bible can seem daunting for those of us who live in the twenty-first century. Not only are we confronted with an ancient language radically different from modern, especially Western tongues, but we also face a bewildering assortment of customs and cultural conventions that often leave us puzzled. And the content of biblical literature is so very serious. In its pages, we are reading about Almighty God, trials of faith, sin and punishment, truth and justice, heaven and earth. It is understandable that few people turn to the Bible for really good jokes.

But once in a while the veil lifts and we see that even holy ancient narrators could not always resist the humorous angles of a story. In this essay, I want to examine several such instances. To be sure, each of these stories deals with matters of utmost gravity, which even a bit of comic relief does not mask completely. But once in a while, a humorous touch makes an otherwise serious biblical narrative particularly delightful—and unforgettable.

AARON AND THE MIRACULOUS GOLDEN CALF: EXODUS 32:1-24

We turn first to the picture of a sober religious professional, the father of all priests, Aaron himself. The story of the golden calf constructed in the wilderness is among the better-known narratives in the Bible. Following closely upon the apodictic commandments in Exodus 20 and the “if . . . then” regulations set forth in “The Book of the Covenant” (Exod 20:22-23:33), Moses takes his leave of the people to commune alone with God and receive instructions for the construction of the portable shrine in which the two sacred tablets containing the Ten Commandments will be housed. During the absence of Moses, the people are left without human leadership and without visible evidence of divine presence. We know that Moses and YHWH spend forty days discussing the architectural plan for the miškan because we are allowed to read their conversation. Yet even for us, the architectural details, given both in the planning (Exod 25-31) and later during the actual building stages (Exod 35-40) are difficult to grasp with full appreciation. While God could create the entire cosmos in six days and a single chapter in Genesis, several weeks and thirteen long chapters of Exodus are expended on the construction of
one small portable shrine. During all this time, the people have no idea why Moses is staying away so long.

From a theological perspective, three major ideas stand forth. First, the people whose status in slavery [ʼavôdah] had once required that they build whatever the Pharaoh ordered (Exod 1:11) now must construct a portable sanctuary to be used in the “service” [again ʼavôdah] of their new Master. Second, the God who had heretofore been accessible only on occasion now offers a permanent symbol of His presence among the people. Third, the geographical possibilities for worship are expanded from a single holy mountain standing in a fixed location to a portable sanctuary that will move wherever the people must travel.

From a literary perspective, Exodus 24:12-31:18 prepare us to understand the anxiety experienced by people left alone at the base of the holy mountain (Exod 32:1) while their leader wanders off alone. A cursory reading of Exodus 24:12 leads us to imagine only a simple transaction between Moses and YHWH that will not take very long. But as our reading unveils the complicated nature of the forty-day conversation and as we remember that the people are not privy to it, their impatience is understandable. They clearly panicked at the thought of being without their great leader: “We do not know what has become of this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt” (Exod 32:1). Still, it is one thing to disbelieve, as the people have done often earlier, and quite another to disobey, as they do now. Thus their command to Aaron, “Make us a god” (Exod 32:1), comes as a structural shock in the narrative. We have observed Israel longing for the security of Egypt (Exod 16:3), frantic for water (Exod 15:24; 17:2), driven to despair by hunger (Exod 16:3), and desperate for answers (Exod 18:23). But not until this moment have they completely disregarded not only the miracles of YHWH that they have witnessed both in Egypt and in the desert but also their own solemn promises to accept Him alone as their exclusive deity.

God, of course, knew all along what they were doing and accordingly ordered Moses back to camp to face the sordid situation. There he prepared a magic potion for the sinners to ingest, threw down and shattered in disgust the two tablets of the Law, and finally came face to face with his older brother Aaron. His opening question (Exod 32:21) is telling: “What did these people do to you?”

I was married for fifteen years to an artist and watched her create jewelry on many an occasion. First she made a precise cast that was filled with wax. Next she melted the metal at an extremely high temperature. Then she poured the liquid metal into the cast, careful not to spill a single drop, and waited for
it to harden back into solid form before breaking the cast with great care so as not to damage her creation. And then she would take a variety of rasps and files to smooth out the burrs and other imperfections of the image being created. This step alone involved hours of sweat and great patience. Only then was she ready to use a variety of engraving tools to create the finished product.

The response of Aaron indicates clearly that my former wife wasted a lot of time and effort in these preliminary steps. Had she been a more careful student of Scripture, Aaron’s answer to Moses would have saved her countless hours: “The people gave [miscellaneous pieces of gold] to me, I threw them into the fire, and out came this calf” (Exod 32:24). And such a calf! It was so awe inspiring that it looked like a god in whose honor a great party was necessary (Exod 32:6). This is surely a greater miracle than has been previously recognized!

Years ago, when my son was about six years old, I entered the kitchen shortly before supper time to find him standing on the counter top. Both of his cheeks bulged, he was clutching two chocolate cookies in each hand, his face and hair were littered with crumbs, and the cookie jar stood beside him gaping open. “Baraq,” I sputtered, “did you get into the cookie jar?” Not an original question, I admit, but I really was at a loss for words! I can still see him standing there caught in the act. And I can still hear his response, the sound mangled so badly through the mouthful of cookies that only a trained linguist—or a father—could understand him: “No sir.”

Well, actually, it was more like, “Nuw thioor.”

I know I should have looked stern, but I could not keep myself from laughing. And I think the Torah is probably being kind to omit the true response of Moses as he faced Aaron standing there, still clutching his engraving tools but denying all involvement in the creation of the golden calf. I am convinced that Moses laughed too.

I am not arguing that the point of the golden calf story is to serve as the background for a standup comedy routine, nor do I overlook the implications of the text regarding the relative significance of Aaron vis-à-vis Moses. The fact that Aaron refused to accept personal responsibility for his actions also remains clear, and the narrators could have made the point forcibly with arid prose. But they did not. They used a comical description of Aaron to great advantage, giving us a word picture not easily forgotten.

BIL’AM’S ASS: NUMBERS 22:21-35

The second story involves a foreign religious professional and a “dumb” animal. According to the prevailing scholarly view, Numbers 22:2-25:9 is not an
artistically crafted unit offering a single point of view but a puzzling gumbo of stories featuring a character who, although he is given only one name throughout, nevertheless seems to be at least two very different individuals. On the one hand, Bil'am is a money-grubbing “diviner.” On the other hand, he is merely a pawn of YHWH. He is introduced as a professional “seer,” but he does not “see” his own heavenly destroyer standing with sword drawn directly in front of him. At times, he stands up boldly to King Balak, but at other times he is entirely the sycophant. So it is clear, even for the person who is committed to understanding the theological impact of biblical stories in their canonical shape, that “Bil’am” presents a great challenge.

We begin with a simple question. Why are the Bil'am stories placed just here in the overall Torah narrative? The first twenty-one chapters of Numbers have chronicled six episodes of Israelite rebellion in the wilderness, even including the “sin” committed by Moses himself (Num 20:12), an act viewed so negatively as to provide justification for the fact that Moses would not be allowed to lead the Israelites into the land of promise. Everett Fox is surely correct that Bil'am provides “a welcome relief from the depressing and at times exasperating narratives of rebellion [suggesting] that, as we leave the old generation to die out in the wilderness, God’s own ‘cursing’ of the people because of their rebelliousness will somehow, ultimately, be turned into blessing.” Bil'am and Balak are the two new characters introduced here for the first time. And it is telling that the narrators need to explain to us that Balak was the King of Moab (Num 22:4) because otherwise we would not know who he was. Conversely, mere mention of the name Bil'am ben Be'or is deemed sufficient for us to recognize who he was and what he did for a living. He was truly a character who “needed no introduction”! What is significant is that the biblical text has little doubt that he was capable of affecting the outcome of a confrontation between Moab and Israel.

It is important to note the similarities between these Bil'am stories and the earlier story of the plagues in Egypt, and the biblical narrators call attention to these similarities using specific terms that cannot be misunderstood. The “loathing” felt by the Moabites for the Israelites links to similar feelings held earlier by the Egyptians, and Balak’s hyperbolic description of Israelite numbers echoes the paranoid fear of the earlier Pharaoh. Likewise, the struggle over which people would “drive out” the other reflects a clear exodus theme, and the word yada’ [know] is chosen to describe yet another foreign ruler who will be proven mistaken on all counts. Indeed, after Balak confidently asserts that he “knows” all about the efficacy of Bil'am’s professional expertise (Num 22:6), the narrative proceeds to prove that he, like the
earlier king of Egypt, actually had no idea of the true identity and power of the deity of Israel (Exod 5:2).

We encounter in Numbers another king who is accustomed to giving orders that must be obeyed (22:16), acquiring whatever he wants by command, power, money, or any other means. His dramatic opposite is the deity of Israel who decrees that “only the word that I speak to you [Bil’am], that you may do,” a theme repeated so often that we clearly recognize it as the central idea of the entire corpus of stories. In other words, while Balak thinks he “knows” the outcome of the activities of Bil’am, he does not know that YHWH alone is in total control of that outcome. And just as YHWH’s control over Egypt had been certain before the first visit paid by Moses to the Pharaoh (Exod 3:8), so too is His control over Balak and Bil’am established from the outset. Bil’am refuses two lucrative offers from Balak not as a negotiating ploy to prompt an even higher offer but as an admission that there simply is not enough money in Balak’s kingdom to thwart the power of Israel’s God. Never in the stories does Bil’am say “I will not” to the offers of Balak. From start to finish, he simply says “I can not” [lo ‘ukhal] do what you ask.

So where is the humor in all of this? On one side are Moab and a paranoid but dangerous king seeking to hire a famous religious professional who has access to powers that could spell the doom of every single Israelite. On the other side stands YHWH, the deity of Israel. In the middle are the people of Israel, blissfully unaware that any danger exists. We want to believe that YHWH is in control, but we wonder why He inexplicably dispatches Bil’am on what the narrative understands to be his mission to destroy Israel. Who could hear this part of the story without questioning the very wisdom of God?

But, just as He had done in hardening the heart of the Pharaoh to set the stage for additional embarrassment right in his own country, out of nowhere God sends an emissary of death to kill the potential destroyer. OK. That makes more sense. There will be a fight to the death between Bil’am and the messenger of God, and that will be the end of it. Still, before there can be a fight, the two opponents have to find each other, and Bil’am, the internationally famous seer, cannot see his heavenly opponent. Enter the ‘aton, not just a silly ass, but a girl to boot! She sees the divine messenger of death whom Bil’am cannot see and swerves off course, only to receive a whack from her rider as he attempted to keep her on her original path (Num 22:25). When the messenger positioned himself in a narrow place between two walls to prevent the passage of Bil’am, the high-priced professional still saw nothing. So when the ‘aton pressed herself against the side of the mountain pass and crushed Bil’am’s foot in the process, she received another beating (Num 22:24-25). Then the
messenger advanced farther and took a position that trapped the hapless Bil’am completely, preventing him from turning right or left (Num 22:26). Almost incomprehensibly, Bil’am still saw nothing! So the ‘aton, who had seen the danger all along, simply lay down under her rider. Her reward was beating number three.

Finally, the frustrated lowly animal began to converse with Bil’am in fluent biblical Hebrew. “What have I done to you that you have hit me three times?” And Bil’am, ever the consummate professional, answered (Num 22:28-30)! Only when YHWH uncovered his eyes (Num 22:31) did he finally see the messenger of death whom the ‘aton had spotted from the outset. There can be no doubt about the ability of the deity who can manipulate a man stupid enough to converse with a jackass. Or, as one of my students suggested, perhaps the kind of man who thinks he can have an intelligent conversation with a jackass is more to be feared than any other kind!

KING SAUL IN DISGUISE: 1 SAMUEL 28:1-12
In our third incident, King Saul seeks advice following the death of Samuel. Once again the setting of the story is crucial. Samuel, long the trusted advisor to Saul, had died, and when the abandoned king sought answers via dreams, Urim, or prophets, “YHWH did not answer him” (1 Sam 28:6). In desperation, Saul ordered his courtiers to locate a “medium” [‘eset ba’alat ōv] to serve as his advisor (1 Sam 28:7), despite the fact that he himself had ordered their expulsion earlier (1 Sam 29:9). Of course, even in those days, long before Ronald Reagan’s presidency, it would not do for the leader of the nation to be seen consulting a medium. So Saul contrived the brilliant idea of wearing different clothing to fool his consultant. Thus we are given the tongue-in-cheek picture of the Yao Ming of his day, King Saul, who towered over everyone in the kingdom from the shoulders up (1 Sam 10:23), attempting to disguise himself by the subtle means of changing his suit (1 Sam 28:8).

What is more, this professional, perceived to have secret access to information that was crucial to the entire nation, was absolutely fooled. One can only imagine Shaquille O’Neal walking into a local synagogue wearing a kippah [skull cap] and expecting not to be noticed. The biblical narrator could not have found a more striking way to underscore the truth that God alone possesses the wisdom of the universe.

GIDEON, THE MIGHTY WARRIOR IN HIDING: JUDGES 6:11-13
The next story centers on the career of Gideon, introduced in the narrative as he cowers inside the winepress of his father trying to keep the Midianites
from stealing his supper (Judg 6:11). But the divine messenger approaches him with nary a word of reproach about his attempt to hide, not a hint of the “be strong and courageous” encouragement so familiar from the conversations God had with Joshua (Josh 1:6, 9). Instead, he addresses the fearful Gideon with a title that smacks of irony: “May YHWH be with you, mighty warrior” [gibbôr heHayil].

Later, of course, we will learn that Gideon was such a master of military tactics that he could engineer the slaughter of 135,000 professional Midianite soldiers assisted by 300 Jews armed only with flashlights and kazoos (Judg 7:16; 8:10). That the story is about the power of God rather than Gideon is certain. But surely there is a hint of the humorous in the description of the fearful “mighty warrior” divinely chosen to lead the victory.

THE MAGICAL BONES OF ELISHA: 2 KINGS 13:20-21
The career of the great prophet Elisha was filled with miraculous deeds. His first recorded miracle was the parting of the Jordan River, which he accomplished with the mantle of his departed mentor Elijah (2 Kgs 2:14). But that was just the beginning. The new prophetic leader twice purified poisonous water (2 Kgs 2:19-22 and 4:38-41), called two she-bears from the woods to demolish forty-two truants who were taunting him about his baldness (2 Kgs 2:23-24), rescued an impoverished widow financially by multiplying her oil provisions (2 Kgs 4:1-7), helped a childless woman with an old husband become pregnant and bear a son (2 Kgs 4:16-17), and then brought the boy back to life after he died (2 Kgs 4:32-37).

There is more. With only a few ears of corn and twenty loaves of barley, Elisha fed 100 hungry men, who left satisfied and carrying doggie bags (2 Kgs 4:42-44). Our redoubtable prophet continued by healing a leper (2 Kgs 5:14), making an iron axe-head float (2 Kgs 6:1-7), and blinding an entire regiment of Syrian soldiers (2 Kgs 6:8-19).

Even after his death, the miraculous power of Elisha did not abate. His ultimate feat is described as follows: “Elisha died and they buried him. Now robber bands of Moabites came into the country annually. One time, people were burying a man when they spied the robber band. So they threw the dead body into the grave of Elisha and took off. When the dead man touched the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and stood on his feet” (2 Kgs 13:20-21). No one could fail to be impressed at such power. Yet in this narrative, what is left unsaid is terribly important, at least to one character in it. Put yourself in the place of the resurrected man. You have just died. Without your awareness, faithful members of the hevra qaddisha [burial society] have prepared your life-
less body for burial. Then the miracle happens, and you regain consciousness. You come back to life but are still tightly wrapped in your shroud and unable to run. The first thing you see is a robber band of Moabites ferocious enough to have chased away all of your pallbearers. Now you will surely die a second time, more than likely in quite an unpleasant manner. Resurrection for you would be a mixed blessing at best.


I believe it is not inappropriate to include two incidents from the New Testament that contain a hint of the humorous, especially since both stories include details of interest to Jewish readers. The first concerns an incident that occurred in the region of Gerasa where Jesus encountered a man possessed by an evil spirit. The poor unfortunate had been forced to live in the cemetery and was frequently shackled to prevent him from hurting himself. But so powerful was the evil spirit that eventually even shackles did not work, and the man set about gashing his body with sharp stones, running around shrieking twenty-four hours a day.

Naturally, the powerful evil spirit met its match in Jesus, who commanded it to depart from the poor victim. At that point, Jesus asked the evil spirit its name and learned that it was “Legion” because apparently an entire group had been working together against their victim (who is not named in the narrative). When “Legion” begged Jesus not to kick them completely out of the country, they also suggested an alternate plan, which Jesus adopted. So instead of banishing “Legion,” Jesus ordered them to infest a herd of 2,000 pigs (the ultimate unkosher animal) that happened to be feeding close at hand. The frightened pigs thereupon rushed headlong over a steep bank into the sea and drowned. We are not told whether “Legion” survived the fall. Furthermore, since the Sea of Galilee was about thirty-seven miles away from Gerasa, we may once again be dealing with a miracle of greater significance than is commonly realized.

Clearly the point of the story is to emphasize the power of Jesus over the spirit world, and all who witnessed the event were appropriately awed. But imagine the plight of the hapless pig herders who were forced to report to their boss that all of his pigs were dead. Further, imagine the dismay of the owner, bereft of his entire capital investment in a single AIG-like stroke of misfortune. As we are not told whether “Legion” survived the angry waters, nor are we privileged to learn whether the herd owner declared bankruptcy or sought a
federal bailout. All in all, it is surely not surprising that the local Association of Pig Farmers officially requested that Jesus leave their region (Mark 5:17).

PAUL THE MAGICIAN: ACTS 19:11-16
The story of Paul’s conversion to Christianity and subsequent evangelization endeavors is among the better-known stories in the New Testament. The book of Acts, which covers a large part of Paul’s missionary travels, includes the notation that, along with his preaching in Ephesus, God worked countless miracles through the new apostle. This is very Elisha-like. In fact, Paul predates modern televangelists in sending out handkerchiefs that healed sick folk on contact and vanquished evil spirits (Acts 19:12). We are not told whether he charged a fee for this service. But naturally, some Jews who knew the history of miracle workers in the Bible felt that they should be entitled to copy the methods of Paul. So the story explains that “Some wandering Jewish exorcists attempted to use the name of the Lord Jesus over people who had evil spirits” and adds the specific formula they employed: “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches” (Acts 19:13).

Now the narrative specifically identifies the exorcists as “the seven sons of Sceva,” identified by Luke as “a Jewish chief priest,” and this is problematic. Sceva may be a Greek or a Roman name, and no high priest by that name ever served in Jerusalem, leading some scholars to doubt that Sceva was in fact Jewish.

But these are details that need not detract from the point of the story, that only a certified Christian could access the power latent in the name Jesus. This is made clear by the reaction of the evil spirit, which did not simply ignore the uncertified exorcists but entered into dialogue with them: “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” Failing to hear an adequate response, “the man with the evil spirit jumped on them, subdued all of them, and overpowered them so that they fled from the house naked and wounded” (Acts 19:15-16). In other words, attempts by Jewish exorcists to use a Christian magical formula not only failed but, as F. F. Bruce framed it, “like an unfamiliar weapon wrongly handled it exploded in their hands.”

CONCLUSION
I have chosen only a few examples of biblical narratives that employ humorous, or at least whimsical, descriptions of certain characters and incidents to describe events that carry heavy theological freight. My contention is not that the biblical authors intended any story to be funny but simply that they sometimes chose humorous ways of expressing otherwise serious ideas. For me,
these sometimes surprising humorous descriptions help make serious stories unforgettable. And that, at the very least, the authors would have welcomed.

NOTES

1 This is the word used in Exodus 25:9 for the portable sanctuary constructed in the wilderness. The more common designation is 'ohel mo'ed, “tent of meeting” [with God], which occurs about 150 times. In Exodus 39:32, miškan and 'ohel are combined in the phrase miškan 'ohel mo'ed, attesting that they are synonyms (as is also the case in Ugaritic). In Exodus 25:8, the miškan is called simply a miqdaš [sanctuary], while Exodus 28:29 designates it as ha-qodeš [The Holy Place]. The innermost section of the sanctuary is known as the qodeš ha-qodašim [The Holy of Holies or The Holiest spot anywhere].

2 Of course, God did not have to work with a building committee!


4 Jacob Milgrom, The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers (New York: JPS, 1990), 471, draws a helpful distinction between diviner (“one who foretells events but cannot alter them”) and sorcerer (“the magician who claims to curse or bless”).


6 Archaeological evidence in the form of an eighth century inscription from Deir 'Alla has fleshed out for us just how famous Bil'am was. Milgrom has given an excellent translation of this inscription along with a helpful overview of the significance of the text (The JPS Torah Commentary, 473-76). The most extensive treatment of the inscription is by Jo Ann Hackett, The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984).

7 See qutz in Numbers 22:3 and Exodus 1:12.


9 See Numbers 22:6, 11, and Exodus 6:1; 11:1.

10 Note the formulaic “messenger formula,” koh ’amar Balak, comparable to koh ’amar par’oh in Exodus.

11 Note the root k-b-d in Numbers 22:15, 17, 37; 24:11.


13 Literally, “a possessor of ghosts”—that is, someone who was able to communicate with the dead.

14 An act that I and other bald men understand fully!

15 This was long before the discovery of Viagra, Levitra, or Cialis. We are not told by what method she bears this child!

16 Or two such men according to Matthew.

17 “Gadara . . . is also too far away, 5 miles SE of the sea” (John McRay, “Gerasenes,” ABD, II, 991).

18 See W. Ward Gasque, “Sceva,” ABD, V, 1064, for references. However, many Jews had both a Latin or Greek and a Hebrew name, as did Paul (Sha’ul) the apostle himself. If the Hebrew name of Sceva were known, it might become possible to identify the person named in Luke’s narrative.
