

HUMOR AND WOMEN IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND IN JUDAISM  
A FRAMEWORK AND SOME EXAMPLES

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Generalizations are often unjust. Nevertheless, let me generalize and state that humor in the Bible and Early Judaism is more tendentious (Freud's classic definition in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*) than incidental and light-hearted. It is, psychologically speaking, more conscious than unconscious; sociologically speaking, the weapon of the weak or inferior against oppressors or against other inferiors; and from the literary viewpoint, more of the satire, parody, ridicule, mockery and scorn, laughing at rather than laughing with sorts of humor, including also heavy irony, sarcasm and self-criticism.

It is therefore not surprising that women, certainly socially inferior to males, get their fair share of 'humorous' treatment in the Bible and beyond; perhaps we can also find women's voices using humor of those kinds for critiquing male behaviour, here and there. In this paper we shall trace some examples in the Hebrew Bible and beyond, in ancient Jewish literature from Josephus to the Midrash. A key concept will be the recognition of tendentious humor's social function as safety valve for aggression as well as for its expression, and its didactic possibilities.

In this short essay, I shall excuse myself from defining 'humor', and not only because its definition is more elusive than its recognition. I shall do so also because—although it is time- and place- and situation bound—most people, scholars included, would agree that jokes, witticisms, certain sound and word plays, comedy and the comic, farce, grotesque, caricature, even irony, anything that produces laughter or even the slightest smile of recognition, falls under humor. Furthermore, there is agreement that beyond the physical reaction there exists a social and educational value that is made possible by the process of release humor sets into motion. Having said all that, three lines will be pursued in parallel fashion here. Let me introduce them, to begin with.

One. Humor is part and parcel of Judaism as a religion, which in Judaism's case is a way of life for the observant. This humor is specialized and far from light hearted, and includes

exaggeration, criticism and self-criticism in a way that is seldom allowed others who choose Jews and Judaism as their target. Significantly, the Jewish god is described as having a sense of humor too. One example will suffice here. In a Talmudic passage, there is a controversy between R. Eliezer and the other sages.

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again he urged: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have ye to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.' What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline. R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'

It can clearly be seen how humor, farce, grotesque and self-irony are at play here. Let me suggest that understanding the passage literally — assuming the story tellers didn't deal with the scholarly disputer without a wink — is not suitable. Nevertheless, R. Eliezer, a known loner and troublemaker, is treated by the sages seriously:

On that day... they took a vote and excommunicated him.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T.B. Baba Metzia 59b. English translation from [http://www.come-and-hear.com/babamezia/babamezia\\_59.html](http://www.come-and-hear.com/babamezia/babamezia_59.html), which contains I. Epstein's translation in the Soncino Edition of the translated Talmud (1935-1948).

Two. Freud was a much maligned and celebrated non-observant Jew. Freud's most accessible book, perhaps, is his book about humor. In its translations into English from the German (first published 1905) the book is variously called *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*<sup>2</sup> or *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*.<sup>3</sup> This supports the difficulty of defining humor, to the extent that the original German term used, *Der Witz*, includes both meanings of 'wit' and 'what's funny'.<sup>4</sup> In the analytic part, Freud discusses techniques and purposes of jokes (pp. 14-138); in the synthetic part, pleasure and motivation (pp. 143-193); and in the theoretical part, the relation of jokes to dreams and the unconscious, and species of the comic (pp. 197-293).<sup>5</sup> What I find most important for the present discussion is Freud's differentiation between non-tendentious ('innocent', situation bound, conscious) and tendentious humor, since he defines tendentious humor as emanating largely from the unconscious, much like dreams and fantasy. The psychological, individual as well as social, functions of humor and human production of the comic are enhanced by a recognition that their origins lie in but also deeper than with conscious intention. This recognition, for instance, will allow us to understand that tendentious humor, in cases of ridiculing the enemy to the many exaggerated levels of demonizing and dehumanizing, is not only an effective propaganda tools but also and many times the only or best weapon of the weak against their oppressors, or whom they view as oppressors or adversaries.

And Three. Feminist criticism of the last decades has taught us that attitudes to women in the three major monotheistic religions are invariably as to social inferiors. While this is a matter

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<sup>2</sup> Ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990=1960).

<sup>3</sup> A. Arden Brill, trans.; last edition to my knowledge by Dover Publications, 2007. Can also be read on line at <http://wordspal.wordpress.com/2007/01/06/read-it-online-wit-and-its-relation-to-the-unconscious-by-sigmund-freud-and-abraham-arden-brill/>.

<sup>4</sup> See also <http://www.awordinyoureye.com/Freud%20page.html> for the translation history of the book into English and the existence of a bilingual text.

<sup>5</sup> Page numbers are from the 1960 Strachey edition.

of degree that varies from one period and one place and one religion to another, it is unavoidable for a religious construction that places a Father or Son at its epicenter. This basic fact neither mean that all sacred texts about women are misanthropic, nor that women have no rights in monotheistic societies; but it does mean that from on religious, civil, moral and societal levels women as a group suffer from a built-in inferior position, although it is recognized that society's continuation is in their bodies. This would make them into an internal cultural Other.

Furthermore, it has been well established that in patriarchy women and femininity and the fertility power associated with them inspire male anxiety and fear, of them and for masculinity, which are the chief reasons for limiting women socially and in any other way. Thus, by being a feared Other and paradoxically a feared inferior, women are as suitable a butt for humor and jokes as other cultural Others—political, economic, social or ethnic Strangers.

Defining the Other is, mirror-wise, defining the self. Another way of expressing this axiom is to state that releasing aggression towards the other is easier than turning one's hard feelings against the self, and that humor—even ridicule—is more culturally acceptable as a norm of human behavior. Women in Hebrew literary cultures, fundamentally male cultures as they are, are feared but paradoxically treated largely as minors, are respected but often put down, are loved but constantly ridiculed, are valued but minimized and, most of all, are dreaded because of their sexuality and fertility. This ambiguity can be coped with by direct scorn or statement, such as by the biblical saying 'And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands; who pleases God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her' (Qoh. 7.26, my translation, AB), which is closely followed by its opposite, 'Have a life with the woman you love' (9.9). It can also be driven home by using tendentious humor, creating a story or a situation that are comic at the expense of women but, at the same time and precisely

according to Freud's description, exposing the joke makers' anxieties by identifying the emotions underlying them. Humor, then, is a two-sword business; the creator is perhaps as liable as the target. At any rate, and just like the Carnavalesque principle so ably described by Bakhtin,<sup>6</sup> ultimately the humor, although it seems and may be subversive, upholds the usual world order, that is, patriarchy and its education and its institutions. And this holds true for the worlds of the Hebrew Bible as to the worlds of rabbinic Judaisms.

I have chosen two extended examples in order to make my point. In each of the examples I shall compare texts from the Hebrew Bible to Talmudic texts. Why Talmudic texts? because their status, hence their study, were much higher than that of the Midrash. However, those texts are not *halacha* texts—it is well known that women have less obligations as well as less rights in rabbinic Judaism—but of narratives, *aggada*, containing norms as reflected in or advanced by the sages. These examples will juxtapose treatments of similar themes in the Hebrew Bible as against Talmudic texts with or without humor.

The context of the first theme is sexuality and how men can be trusted with non-chaperoned women more than the other way around. Beruria wife of R. Meir is famous as a Tanaitic scholar, a single example of its magnitude that probably hides the truth: if sages had to say that 'Whoever teaches his daughter Torah [=oral Torah, that is Mishna and Gemara, not the Bible] is like someone who teaches his daughter obscenity' (*T. Bab. Sof.* 21b), this means that daughters *did* study rabbinic literature—much to the chagrin of male sages, whose monopoly was thus endangered and their erotic love of 'Torah' put at competition, even to the point of

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<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (H. Iswolsky, trans.; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968=Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984).

undermining their very way of life.<sup>7</sup>

The sages think that ‘women are lightminded’. This, from the context in tractate *Kiddushin* (‘Consecrations’), *Seder Nashim* (‘Women’), 80b, of the Babylonian Talmud, means primarily that women are considered more amenable to temptation,<sup>8</sup> especially to sexual temptation than men are, and should be protected against this moral weakness. A conventional way to drive this dictum home is to supply a story, a narrative, fictive or otherwise. A story in the Talmud recounts how R. Meir saved Beruria’s sister from being a prostitute in Rome, and having to escape to Babylon. Others, the story concludes, say he escaped because of the Bruria affair (*T.Bab. Avoda Zara* 18b). This opaque reference is elaborated in his Talmud commentary by Rashi, on the basis of circulating medieval stories, thus. Beruria complains to R. Meir about the disparaging rabbinic dictum. Her husband warns her about her attitude to the sages, which would bring serious consequences. Indeed, the sages—or he, in some versions—appoint a student to seduce her. She resists, then capitulates, and when found out commits suicide and R. Meir departs in disgrace and goes into exile. Conclusion: even an exceptional scholarly woman like Beruria<sup>9</sup> fails the required test of sexual steadfastness, a norm for scholarly as well as non-scholarly men.

Now, how is this theme treated in the Hebrew Bible? Many times, as seriously—see for instance the descriptions of Madam Potiphar (Genesis 39) or the Other Woman of Proverbs 1-9, especially Proverbs 7. However, women’s cupidity can also be presented humorously. When

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Also the views of Ben Sira on women, especially in chapters 9, 25, 26 and 42, from which it is clear that negative aspects associated with women are born out of fear and anxiety, especially in the case of a marriage. For gender and Torah see D. Boyarin, ‘Torah Study and the Making of Jewish Gender’, in A. Brenner and C.R. Fontaine (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 515-546.

<sup>8</sup> See RaDaK for Eve’s behavior in Gen. 3.2. He asks: why did the Snake approach the woman, and not the man, in order to tempt the eating from the forbidden tree? And his answer is, because she is easier to tempt, ‘women are lightminded’.

<sup>9</sup> For some of her scholarly wisdom (and biting tongue) see *Eruvin* 53b, *Berakhot* 10a.

Saul goes looking for the asses (Samuel 9), eventually to find the kingship, he looks for Samuel to gain an orientation. At the city gate, Saul and his companion find young girls out to draw water. A classic situation for ‘boy-meets-girl’ (Genesis 24 and 27, Exodus 2), a stock scene for sexuality and dallying with the other sex. Now, Saul and his companion are not tempted by the site of young girls to forget their mission, as evidenced by their laconic question, ‘is the seer here?’ (v. 11). But the girls, here is how they respond:

He is; behold, he is before you; make haste now, for he comes today into the city; for the people have a sacrifice today in the high place. As soon as you come into the city, you shall straightaway find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat; for the people will not eat until he comes, because he does bless the sacrifice; and afterwards they eat what is offered. Now therefore go, get you going, for at this time you shall find him (vv. 12-13; my translation, AB).

Many words as against the very few of the question. What’s happening here? Is a single sentence assigned to every girl (then how many do we have as a reception committee?), or do they speak together? And note the repetitions! In any case, their eagerness is acutely felt, their welcome of the good looking and tall stranger (9.1) more than enthusiastic, undoubted all of them, or some, already hear marriage bells ringing—when all he wants is to find his asses! Light and sweet, this female depiction, humorous, but in effect as much a critique of female behavior as if the narrator had told us, in his [yes!] own voice, ‘Women are lightminded’.

And to my second example. Women of the Hebrew Bible are often described as ‘tricksters’.<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>10</sup> The literature on Trickster figures in general, and in particular in the Bible, has been growing apace in recent years. A good sample overview can be found in William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, ‘Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues: The Problem of the Trickster’, in William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (eds.), *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Context, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993), pp. 13-32; Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Richard D. Patterson, ‘The Old Testament Use of an Archetype: The Trickster’, *JETS* 42 (1999), pp. 385-94. Especially relevant to female tricksters in the Hebrew Bible are *inter alia*: Claudia V. Camp, ‘Wise and Strange: An Interpretation of the Female Imagery in Proverbs in Light of Trickster Mythology’, *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 14-36 and *idem*, *Wise*,

ably shown by Melissa Jackson in a recent PhD dissertation,<sup>11</sup> and on the basis of the works cited here and more, not only the matriarchs—Rebekah, Leah, Rachel—resort to trickstery at times, but also other woman figures such as Lot’s daughters, Tamar, women round Moses’ birth, Rahab, Yael, Delilah, Abigail, Naomi and Ruth, and Esther. To this list we may add other, more minor figures such as Micaiah’s mother (Judges 17), the wise woman from Tekoa (2 Samuel 14), Jeroboam’s wife (1 Kings 14), and both the wise and Other figures in Proverbs (1—9). All exhibit most or all of the trickster’s universal characteristics: low and/or ambiguous social status, liminality, strangeness, wisdom, liminality and above all, the ability to expose others. Tricksters are ridiculed and in turn ridicule, and their social role is to educate through their manipulations, which often include deceit and humor of many sorts as a weapon.

There are male tricksters in the Hebrew Bible and beyond, in as much as there are fools: Jacob is the first example that comes to mind, the spies who come to Jericho are fools (Joshua 2) and David is a trickster in Achish’s court when he pretends madness (1 Samuel 21.13-16). But this is hardly the issue since women resort to being tricksters, in biblical stories, much more than men. And this is not difficult to understand. Their lower status leaves them not much of other choices; and paradoxically, it also gives them the freedom of behaving inappropriately. Furthermore, all the major female tricksters operate within a framework of improper sexuality, in a way unacceptable by social norms applicable to them, which is interesting and in keeping with

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*Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (JSOTSup 320=Gender, Culture, Theory 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000; Ann W. Engar, ‘Old Testament Women as Tricksters’, in John R. Maier and Vincent L. Tollers (eds.), *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 143-57; Good, ‘Deception and Women: A Response’, *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 117-32; Marilyn Jurich, *Scheherazade’s Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature* (Contributions in Women’s Studies, 167; London: Greenwood Press, 1998); Edwin M. Naomi Steinberg, ‘Israelite Tricksters, Their Analogues and Cross-Cultural Study’, *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Melissa A. Jackson, ‘The Comic Phenomenon in Hebrew Bible Narrative and its Implications for Feminist Hermeneutics’ (PhD Thesis, Regent’s Park College, Oxford, unpublished, defended 2/2009).

the trickster's function. In other words, the biblical affirmation of these female tricksters' deeds and courage simply verifies their status rather than elevating it.

Later sources tell similar stories. One of them concerns the wife of On, one of the rebels against Moses in Numbers 16. In the Bible she is not mentioned; neither is On, who is listed among the Korahite rebels at the story's beginning (16.1) mentioned later, when they are all swallowed by the ground (16.31-35). The rabbis have to explain On's omission from the actual story and the punishment, and they do it by inventing two female figures, much in parallel to the wisdom and foolishness figures in proverbs. The rabbis endow On and Korah, the chief rebel, with wives. Korah's wife, with her counsel, incites him thus causes his demise. But On's wife saves him by trickery. Here is part of the story.

Rab said: On, the son of Peleth, was saved by his wife. Said she to him, 'What matters it to thee? Whether the one [Moses] remains master or the other [Korah] becomes master, thou art but a disciple.' He replied, 'But what can I do? I have taken part in their counsel, and they have sworn me [to be] with them.' She said, 'I know that they are all a holy community, as it is written, seeing all the congregation are holy, everyone of them. [So,] she proceeded, 'Sit here, and I will save thee.' She gave him wine to drink, intoxicated him and laid him down within [the tent]. Then she sat down at the entrance thereto and loosened her hair. Whoever came [to summon him] saw her and retreated (*T. Bab. Sanhedrin* 109b-110a, to Num. 16.1).<sup>12</sup>

The similarities to deeds of biblical female tricksters are transparent—a woman, here a wife, saves, wine is used, deceit, something to do with sexual norms (the loose hair). Thus, On and his wife are saved. Order is restored. The anachronistic humor of the fictive situation will be clear to any observant Jewish reader: you can't look at a married woman with uncovered hair, it's immodest. Thus, a woman's limitation becomes her weapon; by affirming her delimited status she manages to do good. And thus women remain in their place, and this is the lesson of patriarchy, biblical or otherwise.

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<sup>12</sup> See also <http://forum.g.co.il/judaism/1241.html>, signed 'Yael' but from private knowledge, Yael Shemesh).

I do not know whether you find my examples funny, but I do hope you find them enlightening. To read more about humor and the comic in the Bible, I am inviting you to look at the book I edited with the late Yehuda Radday, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*.<sup>13</sup> For more on women and humor, let me refer you to a later volume, called *Are We Amused?*<sup>14</sup> For an interdisciplinary volume about Jewish humor in general, including religious humor, let me refer you to Avner Ziv's book, the result of a conference held at Tel Aviv University.<sup>15</sup> Especially relevant to our subject today is Esther Fuchs's essay, 'Humor and Sexism: The Case of the Jewish Joke',<sup>16</sup> for an analysis of Jewish Jokes and dirty jokes on women, particularly as partners and mothers. And this brings me to my conclusion.

Jews are famous for their humor and jokes, targeted against the self as against the Other. The subjects are many and varied, and almost all social taboos are thus touched, if not broken. In fact, what is actually honored will serve as a most suitable subject for humor, be it of religious or social significance. Jewish jokes about the Jewish Religion, or God, and about other religions are legendary and easily accessible. But even more so are the jokes about the Jewish Mother, that most revered and limited member of the Jewish household, the lynchpin of the Jewish family, the pillar of social existence.<sup>17</sup> These self-critical jokes transcend place, origin, class and other boundaries and are very popular.

Jewish mother jokes are as sexist as sexual jokes, cruel in their stereotyping, masking

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<sup>13</sup> Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> A. Brenner (ed.), *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds* (London; T&T Clark, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> A. Ziv (ed.), *Jewish Humor* (Transactions Publishers, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> In Ziv (ed.), pp. 111-123.

<sup>17</sup> For a small collection see Dan Greenberg, *How to be a Jewish Mother* (1987 and many editions later). See also many internet sites, such as [http://www.sillymusic.com/jewish\\_jokes\\_mother.asp](http://www.sillymusic.com/jewish_jokes_mother.asp), [http://www.jewishsearch.com/article\\_1468.html](http://www.jewishsearch.com/article_1468.html), and many more.

admiration and exposing it, releasing frustration and belittling through ridicule. In short, not much is changed since Beruria, or Woman Wisdom, or the trickster Matriarchs. And this is not funny ha-ha, this is funny ridiculous.