

God's humour

The 10 most amusing Bible verses

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A German, an American and a Dutch minister meet each other one day in the park. They swap how they determine what their share of the collection-money should be.

‘I draw a line on the floor,’ says the German minister, ‘then I throw my money up in the air, and all that lands on the right side is for God. Everything that comes down on the left side is for me.’

‘I do exactly the same,’ says the American, ‘except that I draw a circle instead of a line. And everything that comes within the circle is for God, and what lands outside is for me.’

‘My system is entirely different,’ says the Dutchman. ‘I take all my coins and throw them up in the air. And everything God takes out, he can keep!’

Little worm

‘Let us go down to them...’ (11:7)

Genesis 11:1-9

Jan the new building supervisor wants another tile so he can add a bit more onto the tower of Babel: ‘Geef mij een dakpan. Een dak pan. Dak Pan!’

Jim shrugs his shoulders in despair. Then his face lights up and he disappears and comes back later with a roast duck in a frying pan.

Jan starts tearing his hair out. Then he gets himself under control, goes and picks up a soft clay roof tile and gives it to Jim. ‘Neem het mee en in de zon bakken. Bakken. Ba-ken.’

Jim places the duck and the pan on the ground in the sun, then walks away and returns a few minutes later and wraps the roast duck in rashers of bacon... just to make sure that he’d understood Jan properly.

In comparison with God we are just tiny grubs. But we try to tough it out and build a skyscraper. God debates with his household. ‘There’s something going on down there; but,’ he grins, ‘it’s so miniscule. I can only just make it out. Perhaps I ought to get a bit closer and have a look at what’s happening...’ (11:5-7)

No panic, just the calm of Someone who oversees everything. Just the same kind of humour as when Adam and Eve had just decorated his masterpiece. ‘Look now, the man has become as Someone like us...’(3:22) It’s a global disaster, but God permitted himself a quiet irony. And naturally his humour is different from ours, but the same goes for his justice and his love. The Holy One laughs and enjoys himself. (Psalm 2:4; 37:13; 59:9; 104:31)

There is so much fooling around here on earth, you wish you were an angel, but then you would rumble what’s going on and be shaken to

the core. All these elaborate plans, all these confident words, the cooked up schemes – it's all so charming. God laughs merrily at our chatter, our whining and snivelling about his plans. Laughs about what's still evident in his creation, and even more: what he's going to make of it.

His laughter reverberated through the universe when he created it all. He was delighted, enthralled with his people. (Proverbs 8:30,31) On the fifth day God was more or less finished with an animal, and on the sixth day Gabriel pointed out something about it to God. 'It certainly looks like a duck,' he said, 'it's got a beak and webbed feet.' God smiled (the rabbit had just come out of the hat): 'But today I'm busy with mammals, so...' And suddenly there was the platypus: a mammal that swims and lays eggs... a bizarre combination of land animal, bird and fish. Gabriel looked baffled, fell about laughing and called all the angels together. And still they can't believe it. If an angel hasn't had a good day (forgive me for putting this in human terms), he thinks about the platypus and then everything is OK. (Luke 15:7)

The platypus is one of God's jokes, and he had the bit between his teeth, and thoroughly amused himself. Take the okapi: the legs of a zebra, the body of an antelope and the head of a giraffe. Or the donkey, the parrot, the anteater, the manatee, the seahorse, the chimpanzee, the sloth...

We are just a little worm and God picks us up and inspects us with pleasure. Not the horrid pleasure of a child that gets hold of an insect and pulls all its legs off one by one. But the pleasure a farmer has when he finds a worm while he's ploughing, lays it in his hand and smiles in amazement, and then puts it back on the ground. 'Don't be afraid, you little worm.' (Isaiah 41:14)

If there were no one who had real pleasure in us, we would be lost. But 'God's pleasure is our salvation.' (Nehemiah 8:10) *(To be continued)*

Little worm (cont'd)

‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will know that *I am.*’ (8:28)

John 8:21-30

Moses trembled, he nearly fainted. All that fire! But then he wanted assurance. Who *is* this God? And then, the big moment, God reveals his name, that must be very extraordinary ...God made a play on words: ‘I am: I am!’ (Exodus 3:14)

That’s what Jews do. As it is written in the Bible: ‘They went whithersoever they went’, that means: ‘I haven’t got a clue where they went.’ God actually answers: ‘What I am called, that doesn’t matter!’ The most unique name for God, Jahweh, THE LORD in translations of the Bible, is the result of a joke, in which God wanted to say particularly that he has *no* name, that he is intangible...

Much later someone walked on earth who also names himself ‘I am.’ (e.g. 8:58) But at the same time he calls himself ‘son of man.’ (e.g. 12:232, 34; 13:31) Intangible and tangible at the same time. And around his mouth played a delicate smile. You say that I am only a man, well now, I do indeed belong among the people, I am one of you. Son of man. But even by stressing the casualness of it, he insinuated more. If an Englishman keeps on repeating to himself ‘I’m the Englishman,’ it makes you think. Jesus spoke about himself in the third person, he actually stands for something – he stands for humanity. His absurd claim is that in him all humanity comes together and that the destiny of everyone is linked with his destiny.

But Jesus only called himself ‘Son of man’ in a completely illogical context. He spoke about ‘the Son of Man’ who will do these spectacular miracles and be ‘lifted up’. (8:28) Suppose someone said: ‘The Englishman has become Prime Minister.’ Then there’s something a bit strange happening. Either this is an idiot, or someone

with a very peculiar notion of democracy... It is the second. His sentences tumble over the ambiguities. 'Lifted up' can just as well refer to being lifted up for a crucifixion as to *exaltation*. His crucifixion is simultaneously glory – and in that, he hauls all humanity with him. Shall the Englishman become Prime Minister? The son of man shall be eternally happy.

As the Jews gossip about whether or not Jesus will perhaps commit suicide (8:22), they are sitting nearer the truth than they want to. Just for fun, God came down to view the skyscraper at Babel, because it was reckoned to be too small for his eyes. Now you see the bitter gravity of it. This is the only way by which he can still save mankind. The Son of Man is at the same time the ancient 'I am': God. 'You are from beneath, I am from above, I am not of this world. Believe that *I am...*' (8:23,24) Just as if he's a little common-or-garden worm. And yes, he really did become that. 'Little wormpy,' said Mary as she pampered her baby. We were little worms, but God became a wormpy too.

Gilbert Chesterton says about this: 'The awe inspiring paradox that lies in the fact, that the hands that had created the sun and moon and stars, were too small to reach the large heads of the animals – that's what we would almost call a joke.' He, whose Name knows no reduction, has allowed himself to become a tiny baby, in a little crib, with a little donkey. Only God can allow himself to do that.

You would almost call it a joke. In any case it has caused a laugh for two thousand years already. Mostly in the form of songs.

The crucified Cavalier

‘Can the blind lead the blind? Won’t they both fall into the ditch?’ (6:39)

Luke 6:36-42

Jesus *could have* put forth an argument entitled: *The limited critical fortunes of the contemporary people*. But he comes with a cunning tale instead (that in reality has surely lasted much longer, so as to build up the effect). A toddler understands it, even a senior citizen still finds it funny. The blind leading the blind? Priceless! Pure slapstick, especially as Jesus takes it just that bit further and has the birdbrains clatter into a hole...

Laurel & Hardy in the Bible. I never realised that such a thing as *humour* existed in the Bible, I was delightfully wrapped up in a haughty earnestness – if Jesus himself hadn’t proved to be so irresistibly funny. Without his mischievous stories that gurgle down the centuries, Christianity would have become a petrified lacklustre religion. He became known literally as a glutton and a drunkard. (Luke 7:34), and that was certainly not because he only partook of herb tea and dry biscuits. His first miracle was 600 litres of wine! (John 2:6)

That says everything. This haggard man who would soon be crucified is no less than (and I mean this respectfully) a Cavalier.

Look at the twinkle in Jesus’ eye as he talks about the camel that had to worm its way through the eye of a needle: that must have become a bloody thread...All his parables have this smile about them. How can you do anything but grin at the five wise and five foolish girls? (Matthew 25:1-12) Or the cool dude in the wilderness? (Luke 7:24,25) And you don’t *do* that do you, hide the light? And how would you like your hair, white or black, by magic? (Matthew 5:15,16) And these flabby devotions then, and the lazy animals, and a stone that you give to your kids, the senseless house on the quicksand...(Matthew 6:7,

25-34; 7:9,10,26) All these ridiculous images, the Sermon on the Mount must have elicited roars of laughter from the listeners. As the Teacher, Jesus knew exactly what would work best with his students.

What can you expect from the Man who speaks about someone who does the smart Alec thing about a splinter in someone else's eye, while at the same time (wait for it, this gets really bizarre) he has a *plank* in his own eye? That doesn't gibe very well, does it. And pearls that are fed to porkers – don't park your Rolls Royce beside the elephants in Regents Park Zoo. Or give consecrated meat to dogs – hold on a minute, we would translate that today as: don't feed Communion bread to the ducks...What can you expect from someone who finds that you must turn your other cheek (humour wins over aggression indeed), and if your jacket's stolen, you suddenly have to hand over your shirt as well?

You expect something totally different. But here's Someone who switches everything around. The first shall be the last. The rich are poor and the poor rich. If you're miserable then you're fortunate. You're over the moon if you're starving. Lucky old Peter, he's the most uninhibited and impulsive of the lot of them, yet he's the one who becomes the cornerstone! The mattress becomes the buttress. And so it goes on. And it all started off completely bonkers with that hopeless family tree full of sinners. That's either utterly deranged, or it's the biggest joke of all time. (*To be continued*)

The crucified dandy (cont'd)

‘Am I a criminal?’ (26:55,56)

Matthew 26:47-56

Now I can so cheekily call Jesus a Cavalier, but above all he is the ‘Man of Sorrows.’ (Isaiah 53:3) Wasn’t it sorrow that most typified him? He wept in the garden of Gethsemane didn’t he; he wasn’t grinning then was he?

The very idea that Jesus was cheerful can be irritating (Luke 7:34). Once again by ‘Cavalier’ I mean it very respectfully. As a matter of fact I think the picture of an emaciated Jesus on the cross is not genuine. Even before his crucifixion he had eaten well. He was indeed brutally tortured, but that doesn’t make you thin. The soldiers were flabbergasted that he died so quickly. (John 19:33) I’m afraid our crucifixes take away some of the gruesomeness from the crucifixion. That wasn’t an invalid who died there, he was a perfectly healthy man. It wasn’t a loser who died, it was life itself that died.

Jesus suffered intense sorrow. But he didn’t lose himself in it, he never lost track of everything. He constantly summoned up joy, no matter how oppressive the situation seemed to be. (Matthew 5:12; Luke 10:20; John 15:11) He was always emphasising that everything was going *according to plan*, and that he has everything literally under control: ‘My time has not yet arrived.’ (e.g. John 7:6) You even get the impression that he was despairing, in Gethsemane, but then immediately there was this brilliant common-sense. They come against him with weapons – and get this, he was betrayed with a kiss, but he sincerely calls his betrayer ‘friend’. (26:50) He knows he can drum up millions of angels, but in this situation, for such a titchy little army it would be ridiculous ((26:53), but he kept himself under control and then comes this breathtaking irony: ‘all these weapons – am I a criminal? I was in

the temple every day, so grab me for that if you like. But be sure this is how it was planned...’ (26:55)

Christ knew all that was ahead of him. He knew how ambiguous the inscription above the cross would be: King of the Jews. He knew how everything about his suffering would mirror the emperor’s victory parade. He knew the unprecedented stroke God would lay on the devil. It was as if God was telling a shaggy-dog story, and he smiled as he saw the devil yawning and not paying any attention – until all of a sudden he got to the punch line, and God burst out laughing, and to his horror, the devil has to admit that he hadn’t seen the pay-off coming, and the whole world exploded with laughter and...all that time, during all those ages, the joke was on him.

This joke was so brilliant. The arch-deceiver was himself deceived. A divine practical joke. No one saw it coming, no one could have invented it, and afterwards we can only look back full of bewilderment. And laugh like a drain. Or cheer if that’s more your style. Or control yourself, naturally.

There in Gethsemane *he knew the end result, the happy ending*. How humorous it will be, as in the midst of all our pompous technology, all of a sudden Jesus Christ will appear, floating on the clouds. See the scientists looking completely gob-smacked; see us looking perplexed because after two thousand years of study we’ve still got it all wrong and it’s not what we imagined it would be! (Even ‘saints’ are stunned when Jesus comes. See 1 Thessalonians 1:10.)

He held himself together. Every time I read the Gospels it becomes clearer to me that Christ was not overwhelmed, but concealed something. I suspect there was just one thing that was too overpowering to show us when he walked on earth: his pleasure. The sun that lit up the class of Jesus’ students, appeared to be coming not from outside, but from within his own joy – the joy of a bridegroom on his wedding day.

If there's anyone who can judge human character...

“You have judged correctly,” answered Jesus.” (Luke 7:43)

Luke 7:36-50

It is quite a scene: a prostitute who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, and dries them with her hair, and eventually rubs them with fragrant oil. What you quickly overlook is that you would have to cry uncontrollably to get anywhere near washing them properly, and that above all, drying anything with your hair is very difficult.

Try it, it’s altogether impractical. It is just a question of seeing if you could invent a more laborious method of foot-washing than with tears and hair. Did the prostitute do this in order to make it clear that she won’t excuse herself too readily? That this is really serious? That her unrestrained sins also require an unrestrained penitence? She must have been busy with it for some time, quite a demonstration, and undeniably a shame.

Now there was someone sitting there who was clearly very proud of his knowledge of human character and religious insight. You can see directly that this is a whore, and you are immediately aware that this Jesus can’t really be a prophet if he can’t discern *that much?* (7:39) Jesus sees him nodding in self-satisfaction, and decides to apply a bit of judo: he uses the strength of the other man to put him on the mat.

A simple story about a large and a small debt that is waived. (7:40-42) Notice how Jesus immediately indicates that he knows that this is a prostitute of course, but that he does this *en passant*, without emphasising it and wants to get it across more subtly. Then he makes an appeal to all that insight the good man has: ‘Who do you think is the most thankful?’

The man is naturally up for it, he knows the answer to this one, he's got it sussed, and immediately: 'Naturally, the person who is forgiven the most.' (7:43-44)

And now you see Jesus smile, now I've caught you with all your insight, I'll give you just one compliment and then you've got no way back, and you're well and truly trapped. 'You've seen that very well.'

Yea-yea, nods the man, thanks...and suddenly he's flat on the mat, while Jesus just waits for him to be counted out. With his brilliant knowledge of human character and penetrating insight he has tackled him precisely at the point of his smugness, namely his religious insight and his understanding of what makes people tick. – and Jesus did it without descending to the level of his pedantic pride. The man who quietly imagined himself the lord and master is floored by Jesus' humble words of wisdom from the one who is utterly restrained about the nature of the sin.

Then he can quietly talk about the difference between this dignity and the whore. (7:45-50)

This story is but one of countless examples. There are more in the chapter on the Top 10 most brilliant texts. I hope you learn to see Jesus' smile. After his resurrection he didn't take revenge on the unreliable disciples the way the gods and the heroes did in the contemporary stories, but with that smile said: 'Peace be with you!' (John 20:21) And when he met Paul, the mass-murderer of Christians, he appeared to him and used a phrase from an old, well-known Greek joke: 'You're kicking against the thorns!' Or: you're kicking a cactus, you're hurting yourself more than me! (Acts 26:14) The unforgettable calm he had with everything. The tempestuous prospect that drove him on. The idiotic love that embraced the world.

God in bits

‘Dagon had fallen headlong.’ (5:3)

1 Samuel 5:1-5 (eventually Isaiah 28:7-13)

Children seldom find anything funnier than seeing someone fall over. Week after week I’ve been in convulsions watching *America’s Funniest Home Videos*; another child bouncing out of the buggy, a minister cart-wheeling out of the pulpit, a dog skidding across the ice-rink... I couldn’t get enough of it. And perhaps falling over is humour in its purest form. Isn’t it irresistibly funny if you’re watching the Changing of the Guard and one of the busbies slips off?

In any case, Isaiah still understands the delight there is in childish fun. He talks about all the prim and proper priests staggering about drunk. (Isaiah 28:7-13, see also 29:9-16.) The tables are smothered in vomit, not a clean patch anywhere. They are gabbling a strange drunken song: ‘Tsav latsav, tsav latsav, kav lakav, kav lakav, a bit of this, a bit of that.’ Gibberish, in Hebrew as well. It was probably a cradle song to begin with. And God makes fun of it and mimics it: ‘Tsav latsav, kav lakav...’ God uses sozzled speech, and with a broad grin lets all these puking priests wallow in their own technicolour yawns. (28:13)

Or take this other little bit of slapstick. Such a stately idol, with a sturdy head, and piercing eyes. Be very careful when you’re anywhere near him, put on your most respectful face, because you must make a good impression on Dagon. You never know, he might be able to fix something for you... And then one morning you find this divine Handy Harry has tumbled over, flat on his face, biting the dust. (5:3) Quick-quick-quick, no one must be allowed to see him like this, put him back up again! But the following morning you wouldn’t credit the disaster: now he’s been smashed to bits! (5:4) What shall we do? Put him in splints? Who’s got the Unibond?

It's all so hopelessly parochial. And the funniest part is yet to come: The head and arms have fallen on the doorstep, and what do these dignified gentlemen dream up next: the threshold has now become holy, don't tread on it! (5:5) No indeed, your idol is smashed to bits like shattered china, and that *must* be a sign of extreme holiness. Hallowed be the day when our god fell to pieces.

But bless the day when... Christ fell over and he was broken. That's what you call foolishness. (1 Corinthians 2) Now it's not funny any more, this is endless embarrassment. That's not how you deal with the Son of God. But that's exactly how God dealt with his 'image'. (Colossians 1:15) And it became just the same kind of slapstick, and as bad a raw deal as it was for the Philistines – you mustn't even think about it – as two mornings later this Christ wasn't just seamlessly put back together again; even better than that, he appeared alive to his disciples.

The Philistines didn't find their idol completely repaired, they had to sit with the broken shards, and stood guard over the fragments, then for the sake of peace they had to declare the doorstep holy. Christ stepped over the threshold of death and offers healing and restoration to everyone who has ever been broken.

And this is from a wisecrack that God finds so delightful that later it's repeated millions and millions of times.

Jolly firewood

‘Half of it I use for firewood, and what I’ve got left over I make an idol out of it. I bow down to a block of wood. What they cherish is just ash!’ (44:19)

Isaiah 44:9-23

Isaiah is enjoying this. He made his point long ago, but now he’s in the mood, and mischievously carries it a bit further. His giggle has been heard down the ages. Yep, and then you get the low down on these people: they take a lump of wood, and one bit they burn up to cook a meal, and from what’s left, you can’t believe your ears, with a solemn face they chisel out an idol! And they kneel down in front of it, and you can also take this seriously, that this is how it works! A heap of ash: that’s what he prays to...

But then something strange happens. Suddenly these same elements come to life. You think metal is dead? It cries out from the depths of the earth! Mountains, bushes, trees break out in cheering! (44:23) Aren’t they all the grafts from the *Lord of the Rings*? The Bible uses this enthusiastic double absurdity more often than this. The rivers clap their hands, the mountains rejoice. (Psalm 98:9) Yes, the mountains even *skip*! (Psalm 114:4,6)

It is another of those teasing inversions in the Bible. Not that we worship these things so that we can use them, but they themselves worship God so that we can use them. Not that we harness these things to our cart, but God uses us. (44:21) It’s not that we make our own god, but he makes us. It brings this reversal of desire for control out into the open. The egotism that wants to rule everything, comes down to this: keep an eye out for everything and keep praising.

Isaiah often makes fun of idols. ‘Have a look at this: they hump their idol onto their shoulders and then lug him away. Where they set him

up, that's where he stays. He can't move from that spot. Even if they cry to him for help, he can't answer them.' (46:7) That's the problem if you make your own god: you have to help it up. If there's no one else around, you have to lug everything about yourself. Because they are only *things*. No one reacts to you when you have a problem. Because all you've done is profess yourself.

But it's really all the other way round. God carries us: "I have carried you in my arms since you were born, and I will carry you until you are old and grey.' (46:4) He takes the initiative and demonstrates that we're not alone. We don't have to pant and puff and traipse along with our petty idols. *Christ* carries us. He carried the cross.

The pretend crown that Jesus wore was made of firewood. (Mark 15:17) Part of the cross would be used for the same purpose. He was nailed to our meaningless false gods, our firewood. And he destroyed them. He carried away our control-freak mentality through surrendering all control. He gave up all freedom to release us. He became utterly alone so that we would never have to be lonely.

The false gods have all died. We don't have to worship things as if they were all there is. There is more than just things. Someone is listening to us. The things and the timber applaud us: God has released us!

Blair as a cow

‘I ate grass like the cows.’ (4:30)

Daniel 4:15-34 (eventually 4:1-34)

You can see it all in front of you: Prime Minister Blair, who one day is proudly surveying Number 10, suddenly gets this rubbish into his head, convinces himself of a conspiracy-theory, doesn’t shave any more, and runs in his swimming-trunks through the Downing Street residence making machine-gun noises... Quickly dismissed, naturally, later divorced, becomes world news, and in no time at all is shared around among the junkies at King’s Cross ...

‘Hey, green horn! Would you be Tony Blair?’

‘No, I’m a cow.’

‘Oh really, well now cow, ahh, that’s Julius Caesar over there, that’s Jesus, and I’m Napoleon...’

It’s funny that this story about Nebuchadnezzar isn’t written in the third person, but is recounted as a letter in the first person. You can feel the extreme contrast better this way. His majesty, the megaphone, *crawls* in this confession. The most typical message in the entire Old Testament is recounted here: ‘the first shall be the last, and the last the first.’ Pride goes before a fall, and discretion wins out in the end.

But that is not self-evident. As a rule it seems to be the other way round, where the loud mouths appear to be successful and the softies get all the hard luck. ‘That’s just how it is in the world,’ we say then, ‘welcome to the adult world.’ I don’t believe it; it looks like the most naïve cynicism to me. Because those people who give up everything for their career, do indeed get higher up the ladder – but they are demonstrably less fortunate. Top managers are often unusually paranoid types, pop artists jump from one relationship to another, yuppies burn themselves out by working three times as hard. *It’s lonely*

at the top. Arrogance works within a sphere of mistrust that actually works against you. Modesty creates real confidence around you; so long as you don't just defend your self-interest, you get that in return. Modesty is constricting, you have to come out of the bunker of cynicism, but it does work.

Daniel wasn't laughing up his sleeve when the great Nebuchadnezzar was having a nightmare. He didn't get any malicious pleasure from it, but lived intimately through it. And you know how far this took him.

Why is this letter of Nebuchadnezzar's unknown in the Babylonian archives? Undoubtedly because everyone was ashamed and perhaps later Nebuchadnezzar was as well. It is also possible that the letter isn't historical, but simply the method the writer of Daniel used to maintain his style. But then the question remains why the archives don't have anything to say about a psychotic king.

The Jewish archives are full of shameful anecdotes about their own heroes. Noah the drunkard, Abraham the liar, David the dirty player. Dozens of Psalms are actually confessions in the first person. (e.g. Psalm 51) The Jews dared to do it! That tiny little nation by the Mediterranean Sea dared to bring down the family honour with a flourish, so long as the panic-stricken super-powers immediately censured every disgrace. It looks as if that nation did it with a certain appetite. Not wallowing in it, but out of a sort of jovial pride. Look at us, we can hack it! We don't censure ourselves. We're honest.

Self-mockery is a Jewish invention. This revolution could only allow itself to exist because its honour is not dependant upon status or a good name. They could accept all this shame (and thus the only way to improve and to expand) because they have a God who is love. (*To be continued*)

Blair as a cow (cont'd)

‘David danced with all his might before the Lord, clad only in a priest’s linen garment.’ (2 *Samuel* 6:14)

‘David was clothed in a robe of fine linen, besides a linen priest’s garment.’

(1 *Chronicles* 15:27)

When I was travelling around in Nicaragua, I saw signboards everywhere: ‘This road, this bridge was built by Aléman.’ Aléman was the former president. The word ‘corruption’ was coined for him, but he wanted to actually be remembered by the couple of little roadways and bridges that he scattered from his begging bowl. When I preached in a church somewhere there, a poverty stricken shed with no floor or windows, I got very angry about it. Aléman is a boastful macho-man, I said, he bragged his robbery away. But in the Bible you don’t find any macho-men. In the Bible no one is presented as any better than he is, in the Bible you don’t find any advertising hoardings. We’ve got a king who danced in his underpants! We have a King who *cried*. (John 11:35) Aléman hasn’t erected thousands of boards that say: ‘Aléman danced here in his jocks.’ In the Babylonian archives you won’t find that Nebuchadnezzar danced in his underwear. And if Tony Blair did something like this in Downing Street he would be removed from office. The world’s press would pillory him with jokes about a nitwit and ‘the British male model from The Fens’.

And you can be sure that in David’s day the gossip columnists lapped it up. Only they all crawled back in a hurry. On closer inspection it appears that a king in boxer shorts was no scandal, but something that was written up with pride in their history books. It sat perfectly well with the humorous self-mockery of the Jewish people, still recognised today in their famous Jewish gags. Occasional self-mockery frees up a society. You have to loosen up your outward appearance, your status

orientation, your panicky retention of social classes, your patronising of other people. There sat Michal, David's wife, up to her neck in it. But he is defiant: 'I will humiliate myself even further than that and be honoured by the slave-girls.' (6:22)

That was said by a king! If only there had been a David in the terrible caste system in India. If only there had been a David in Nicaragua. You wish every nation could have a king who would be prepared to dance in his underpants.

The writer of Chronicles didn't see it quite like that; he reacted a bit like Michal, David's wife. Without a second thought, as if David was smartly dressed in a sharp suit (right from the start of the procession, naturally) he reported only that he 'danced', in inverted commas. Evidently he felt no more than that, just like Michal, how liberating it is to be *small*. We're just small and that's fine. Unbelief also feels how small we little people are, but doesn't find that very pleasant. It is threatening.

David could be small because God looked on with love and would always accept him. He didn't have to bolster himself up with status. That's how he magnified God. By briefly calling attention to our smallness, warm humour makes God greater. Everywhere that people eventually come to this point, and God is given the room, there's healthy laughter. Whoever laughs knows about the Fall. Each show of pomposity is a legitimate target for humour and there is no better technique for pricking that balloon than a well-placed joke.

If we are not prepared to get down to a little self-criticism we waste the revolution of the Bible. This could not permit itself to hide the faults, but to present the saints in all their vulnerability. Humour is the first to go in the face of arrogance. Humour makes reductions. Wonderful, every minister a wretch, every Christian a clumsy oaf – hallelujah for God who is willing to associate with such wretches and oafs! (2 Corinthians 11:30 – 12:10)

The divine comedy

‘Your eyes saw my unformed beginning,’ (139:16)

Psalm 139

‘Your eyes...’ There is the Hebrew word from which we get our word ‘fun’. ‘Fun’ is the friendly face of God. Psalm 139 is about a life in which loving eyes are always leading you and warm arms embracing you. You can also translate it as: ‘Your amusement saw me as little worm.’

Perhaps you don’t see this warmth on the first face. The world comes over as very bleak. Unfeeling, impersonal, implacable. You can imagine, as the literary experts discovered, that the oldest stories are *tragedies*. In a tragedy the hero really tries hard but things go from bad to worse. Destiny is all-powerful and inexorable. Out of the polytheism of those days grew a certain understandable mythology: you’re stuck with a set of quarrelsome little gods who are themselves subordinate to an impersonal Destiny.

You also find this melancholy in many modern films and literature; Post-modernism is very similar to polytheism. And with the Evolution theory we’ve now got a new Destiny that matches the old one even more precisely. Chaos reigns, the ‘right’ of the strongest, and everything will ultimately end in chaos.

In the midst of all this despair it is Judaism that is the inventor of the happy ending. Don’t think immediately about the jolly Hollywood substitutes; they are just clumsy echoes of these dizzying Jewish inventions. The people for whom life is obviously not shut down, but that there’s ‘fun,’ that we are lovingly observed. There’s a Person who looks after us and breaks open the kosher chaos!

That unleashed a revolution in their stories. Their writing was no longer fatalistic, everything becomes a comedy. The hero feels pain,

terrible things happen – but eventually good comes out of it. A comedy certainly understands the tragic depths, but sets it in a humorous framework, around which everything turns. Now the little man *is* heard, in all the fun-filled stories in which, note this for example, Abraham or Moses try to persuade God. You never saw the tragic hero Oedipus trying *that* on with Destiny.

If there's the grim sniggering from Abraham and Sarah at first, a year later you hear the sound of a different kind of laughter, much freer, and the same Sarah says: 'God has made me laugh. And everyone who hears it will laugh with me.' (Genesis 21:6) Is that what we do? Do we *laugh* with Sarah, or do we preach a heavy sermon about her? How Sarah would laugh at such a sermon! For that's how God's people begin, with a roar of laughter. The one who was declared to be barren according to all natural laws, had a baby. The unheard of, the ludicrous – yet it did happen! And what was that first child of God's people called? Isaac, 'he laughs.' In old age one of God's jokes still frolicked around them. Hey, Giggler. Come on home mate, tea's ready...

And then the resurrection. The pagan tragedy was turned into a divine comedy. The revolution of Judaism was fulfilled in Christianity. The Jews still had to sacrifice and didn't believe in life after death, but with the coming of Christ it became relatively possible, because now guilt and death are no longer a threat. (John 5:24-29) The full-bodied, uninhibited laugh is an invention of Christ. Christianity is no naïve optimism, because Christianity is not optimistic. Christianity is comical and that's something very different.

As a matter of fact it can always say: 'yes but.' (Habakkuk 3:18) Yes but evil does *not* have the last word. Evil is crippled, what we see is a cat with its back up, the final convulsions. Now we weep, but you can't weigh that up against the relief that's coming. God's people began with a resounding laugh and that's how things will finish.

The comedian

‘I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness... receive me then as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting about myself... How unrighteous of me! Forgive me! (11:1; 11:16; 12:13)
2 Corinthians 10-12 (eventually 11:16-29)

What is Paul doing here? Is this something to laugh about?

I have to think about how my little brother climbed up a lamp-post years ago, to steal the inner tube of a bike tyre that was stuck at the top of it. One way or another he managed to get to the top of the pole, hanging down head first, with one foot tangled in this inner tube... But he and my sister came home (he got himself free, but don't ask me how) laughing themselves sick!

Now was this something to laugh about? What we laugh about is never really funny. We don't laugh when we watch Stan Laurel, with a lot of suspense involved, struggling to get the piano up the hill, but only as the rotten thing starts to move on its own and bounces all the way back down again. And when my brother was hanging up there, he and my sister were both shocked, naturally, but from the base of the streetlamp she quickly saw the hilarious side of the situation. Then my brother had to laugh as well, even though he was hanging upside down three meters from the ground.

That you can still laugh... Plato and Aristotle were amazed about this contradiction and they explained that we laugh whenever there's something really awful, *but not too awful*. If Tony Blair slips over on a banana-skin we laugh, because this is indeed dreadful, but not *too* dreadful. Conversely, if our grandma were to slip on the same banana-skin, that *is* too bad. Unless she's all right, of course, and laughs it off and dryly observes: ‘Yes, I should have paid more attention. Thank you!’ Then we can see that it's no longer *too* bad, and with that it becomes really comical.

To put it briefly, we laugh so long as the danger is only relative. When things get serious, you sit, as it were, locked into the centre of your emotions. You're dead scared, you're dispirited, you're worried sick, and that's all you are aware of. But when you can get the gravity of the situation into perspective and break it open – that is humour. When situations are grave, everything becomes *too much*. But when *too much* turns out to be not *so much* after all, they you can laugh about it. Humour is using the zoom lens.

Christians are comedians. They were once potty about paradoxes and absurdities; their Bible and doctrine were their chief concerns. And they feel comfortable with foolishness, because they have learned from Jesus that the greatest foolishness later appears to be the greatest wisdom. But now the entire universe is called upon: it is finished! Since then everything has been magnified.

That's why Paul can tie the Corinthians up. No laughing it off, no sickly Anglican smile. 'Even in laughter the heart may ache.' (Proverbs 14:13) Earlier on he was a persecutor, he has been a mass-murderer. (1 Corinthians 15:9; Acts 8:3) Therefore humour is certainly not naïvety, but the sober-minded discovery that trouble has its limits. Nothing is *too bad* any more. That's why the Babylonian Captivity at first appeared to be endless, but later just the blink of an eye. (Isaiah 42:14; 54:7) Using the zoom!

In order to really know that nothing is too terrible, you need to have a deep sense of safety, trust. True comedians live from a serene love towards the world. That is the reason why Dutch comedian Toon Hermans can keep on being funny, and Hans Teeuwen is well past his best and has become dull and boring. Humour without sympathy is not humour at all. 'Like a madman loosing off arrows at random is a man who deceives his neighbour and then says 'I was only joking.'" (Proverbs 26:18,19) Paul had learned to use the zoom and still be loving. The fanatic Paul became a comedian.

In a single breath

‘The seven chamberlains: Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas.’ (1:10)

Esther 1:1-20

What are these chamberlains doing in the book of Esther? Really quite senseless to name them all? (Esther 1:14,14; 2:3,8,14,21; 4:4) My Word spell-check makes the following suggestions from this list of names: Me human, Biz talk, Hambone, Bight, Bath, Zither and, of course, Carcass. Made me smile. A Jew would hear something even more comical in the list: The first name in Hebrew means Panic, the next one Loot, then Drought, Talkative...

These flunkies are like stand-ins for tailor’s dummies, saying nothing, just sitting there as self-important as Lord Muck. Like a dress rehearsal for the opera chorus. The catalogue of the jewellery in 1:1-9 only serves to bring us right into this sphere of decadence. And perk up, says the writer, here comes the glamour and the glitterati. And with these ambiguous names the chamberlains certainly give the impression that every one of them is a fairy queen.

They get these fancy names just for a laugh. The same thing happens with the names of Haman’s son’s, in a list crammed into 9:7-9. Faithful to tradition, this list is written in Hebrew writing with the smallest of letters and when recited in the synagogue it has to be read in a single breath! They are worth no more than a short breathing space.

Esther is another of those typical Bible stories in which pride goes before a fall. Whoever thinks he’s it, becomes no more than a last gasp. Israel plays around a lot with names. This is what they did with the foreign god ‘Baal Zebul’, which means ‘Lord of the lofty house’. The Bible turns it into ‘Baal-Zebub’, Lord of the flies. (2 Kings 1:2) The

Jews saw so many filthy flies buzzing around all his sacrificial flesh, that with a smile they ‘improved’ the noble name.

Or take the obese king Eglon – that also means ‘big calf’. (Judges 3:22) Another king is called ‘square criminal super-negro’. (Judges 3:8) Phicol is a chatterbox and his name also means ‘mouthful’. (Genesis 26:26) And what do you think of king Only Just, king Trouble, king Rebel and king Pompous? (Genesis 14:2) Sounds almost like a kid’s picture book. Then you’ve got the sons of Nahor: The Beastly Heavy-breather, Contempt, Faller, Butcher, Giraffe and Red Eye. (Genesis 22:20-24) And Jonah means Dove, and his father Amittai means Honest – precisely what he isn’t.

If this isn’t humour, what is? Adam = ground, Eva = living, Cain = weapon, Noah = consolation, Abel = nothing. And it’s not their parents who could have chosen these names, but they had to have been invented later. They are pseudonyms, purely for the fun of the story.

The curses on the Jews appear to be a lot sharper than anything else, but their humour is conspicuously mild. It is not destructive, just like the typical Jewish wisecracks that are still so famous. The humour of the Greeks and Romans who were contemporary with Jesus was often graveyard humour, extremely pessimistic and needle-sharp. More often than not it was the lower classes that were the butt of some very caustic jokes. Is it surprising, now that Holland and the U.K. have become more secularised, that their cabaret is becoming a lot harder?

You only have to think of some of the ‘comedy’ programmes on the unregulated channels to understand why I think there’s something missing. You see, the humour of Jesus and the Bible is never frivolous or hate-filled, but always sympathetic. Since the death of Christ it became impossible to mock at victims. He reverses all the values. The loudmouths shall indeed crawl. But he died for the loudmouths as well. Whoever honours his Name, gets a new name. (Revelation 2:17)

Jewish humour

‘It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly.’ (Proverbs 20:25)

Not so long ago an organist played ‘When the saints go marching in’ as the parish council made their entrance. The brethren smirked furtively, but had a word with the organist after the meeting: sorry, but next time we’d rather you didn’t...What about that? How can it be that two billion Christians have never developed a Christian joke, while that tiny, mysterious Israeli people have stolen the show for millennia with their jokes?

Bill Watterson, the writer of the *Casper & Hobbes* strips, said somewhere: ‘Surprise is the essence of humour, and nothing is more surprising than the truth.’ Is the Bible truth? Come on, laugh then! ‘But the most overwhelming Easter present, the most illustrious, sunniest joke in world history we welcome with a contorted face.’ (Thijs Booy) The Church that has only just learned to put things into perspective and to look around lovingly, is precisely the same Church that looks so deadly serious.

I know of only one sort of people that get an unpleasant feeling from putting things into perspective: ministers, managers and media stars. People *at the top*. Do Christians also take themselves too seriously? In any case, that is something that the history of the Jews makes impossible, but Christianity is far and away the most settled religion. Can we not have a clearer perspective ourselves sometimes?

Now a lot of humour is indeed debased. But we are still inclined to think that gravity offers a guarantee of holiness. Whereas it is still possible that much of our seriousness is even more disgraceful. Gravity is no safety zone, nor a safeguard against excess. Really, seriousness is most sensitive to haughtiness, and a lot of seriousness is directed towards self-preservation. Then above all we don’t take God but

ourselves all too seriously and we talk so solemnly so that we're not shown up. We attempt to create a reservation on earth that has something absolute about it. What we can't laugh about is made absolute. And God alone is absolute.

Gilbert Chesterton: 'Pride drags everything down to the level of an easy rite. You install yourself in a sort of self-directed seriousness. But to be serious is not a virtue. It is more of a natural inclination to make yourself too heavy, because that's the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good leader in the *Times* than a good joke for *Punch*. Because ceremoniousness comes natural to people, but a laugh is a leap. It is easy to be overweight, but difficult to be slim. Satan fell through gravitation.' Gravity sometimes has something demonic about it. 'The devil is faith without a smile, the devil is sombre because he knows where he's going and he's always going back to where he came from.' (So says a fictitious character from Umberto Eco.)

Michel Palin from *Monty Python*: 'The first thing fundamentalists lose, and it doesn't matter whether it's a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim, is their feel for humour. Fundamentalists are humourless people.'

Therefore: 'It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly.' (Proverbs 20:15) There are church services that are as dry as dust and doctrines that are as musty as it's possible to be. This is even more remarkable because the Jewish people's jokes are traditionally more superior. On closer inspection, where have our [Sam and Moos?] got to? Now that on closer inspection the Christian religion has become so much more lively? Have we appropriated God too much and can we therefore not laugh any more? Genial self-mockery is a first step on the road to wisdom.

'We can laugh because God is more than Destiny. And we can laugh, because Destiny takes on the airs of a god.' (Okke Jager) The Jewish joke will die out if we ever get a Jewish pope and a Jewish dogmatic theology.