

BOUNDARIES AND HUMOUR: A case study from the ancient Near East

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Abstract

Human beings spontaneously form ethnic, economic, religious, political, sexual, occupational, and other groups. For people belonging to one group to have certain prejudgements about people from another group, is normal. Such prejudgements may, however, grow into prejudices (Allport 1954:3-47). Where prejudice gets effect boundaries are solidified. People benefiting from such boundaries seek their reinforcement, while those who are ill-affected by them either learn to live with them or invest in their removal. There are many ways in which people cope with, reinforce, or challenge boundaries. One of these mechanisms is humour. What follows illustrates this observation with a very broad sketch of the use of humour in ancient Near Eastern texts.¹ According to Funk & Wagnell's Standard dictionary of the English language 'humour' may, among other things, refer to 'a facetious turn of thought' or 'the capacity to perceive, appreciate or express what is funny, amusing, incongruous, ludicrous'. In this essay humour will be taken in this fairly generic sense, and I will include genres such as witticism, pun, comic, joke, irony, cartoon, ridicule, satire, and even sarcasm.²

1. Erecting and reinforcing boundaries through humour

1.1 Occupational boundaries

In the ancient Near East one of the most effective strategies for reinforcing a person's group identity had been ridicule. In the Egyptian *Satire of the trades*, for example, a father encourages his son to become a scribe by mockingly stressing the disadvantages of various other occupations. A smith, for example, has fingers like crocodile claws and he stinks worse than fish roe, while a potter grubs in the mud like a pig and, covered with soil, looks like someone retrieved from a grave. A mason, clothed in a mere muddy G-string, eats with filthy hands. Yet, he is better of than a washerman, who has to wash the clothes of menstruating women.³ 'See, there is no profession without a boss, except for the scribe; he is the boss' (Lichtheim 1973:185-189).

Consider also the less ridiculing, yet clearly tongue in the cheek, passage in Sirach 38:24-31: the farmer can only talk about bulls; the craftsman has to labour night and day; the smith sits by the anvil, the fire melting his flesh, and his eyes taking on the form of the object he is moulding; the potter,

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- 1 Unfortunately, due to the dividing lines drawn by literacy in that region and at that time, most examples originate from the upper ranks of the various societies. Nevertheless, they give some impression of humour among groups that made up the elite. From this one may deduce something about the social function of humour in relation to the creation of and destruction of boundaries.
 - 2 Carroll (1990:169-170) would disagree with this definition of 'humour'. The problem here is that on the one hand 'humour' is a modern word implying a certain level of cultural sophistication that would reject debasement, mockery, burlesque, taunt, lampoon, etc as ill-mannered, when on the other hand we are dealing with a more than two thousand year old culture that consisted mostly of unsophisticated peasant people whose 'humour' included these genres. It would be, to my mind, wrong to deny them 'humour' simply because they lacked sophistication. My definition here is more in line with Carroll's second 'definition' (Carroll 1990:188).
 - 3 Compare, with this image, Isa 30:22 (KJV) 'Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold: thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth ...'

sitting at his wheel, counts his output by number. Compared to all these occupations, where people rely on their hands for a living, the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure, becomes wise and gets appointed in positions that matter.

Mockery was not the privilege of elite scribes, though. Other occupations could hit back, like the plain-spoken Babylonian washerman, who got tired of his wealthy client's meticulous instructions on exactly how his clothes should be washed. The washerman interrupts the chattering client, '... It is only my money lender and my tax collector who have a nerve like you, and there's no-one whose hand can achieve the work ... Come, at a place upstream from the city ... let me show you a washery (?) and then carry out yourself the great toils which are on your hands! ... If you do not set your heart at ease, there is no fuller who will pay attention to you' (Livingstone 1988:178-179).

Jokes about other people's occupations today still set 'us' apart from 'them': doctors from lawyers, ministers from teachers, private sector employees from civil servants, farmers from office clerks. Friendly as such jokes may have become, they still demarcate and reinforce boundaries. People do not normally tell jokes about their own occupation. Laughing at 'us' is not that easy, for it would mean to soften the boundaries constituting 'our' identity. But laughing at the 'other' creates distance and a degree of detachment, as Van Heerden (1992: 61) correctly observes, and creates space.

1.2 Ethnic and political boundaries

Ethnic and class boundaries were in ancient times often, if not mostly, reinforced by ridiculing the other's genealogy or physical looks. A Sumerian school text suggests that this craft might even have been part of the curriculum of scribe! One pupil wrote about another, 'He is spawn of a dog, seed of a wolf, stench of a mongoose, a helpless hyena's whelp, a carapaced fox, an addepleted mountain monkey whose reasoning is nonsensical' (Foster 1995:2464).

Many a pun played on a group's name and their looks or alleged habits. According to folklore Edom, living in the mountainous area of *Seir* (שַׁעִיר Gen 36:8) was the descendant of Esau, the 'hairy' one (שַׁעִיר, שַׁעִיר), whose name reminds of the hairy 'mountain goat' (שַׁעִיר עִזִּים). Likewise, the Judaeen author in Genesis did not mind punning on the name of Jacob, the ancestor of the northern Israelite tribes. When Esau and Jacob were born, his story goes, Jacob (יַעֲקֹב) was holding on to his brother's heel (בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו), a deed that became a habit, as Esau had to learn the hard way: 'Is he not rightly called Jacob (יַעֲקֹב)? For he has done me in (יַעֲקֹבֵנִי) two times. Not only did he rob me of my birthright. He has now also robbed me of my blessing' (Gen 27:36).

Such playful boundaries were often drawn more clearly by stories relating the lack of intelligence on 'the other side'. For instance, a Babylonian physician - whose professional skills still occupy scholars today - is said to have visited the centre of Sumerian learning called Nippur, to collect his outstanding fees. Because his 'clever' debtor had given him rather vague instructions the doctor lost his way in the city and had to ask a passing lady for directions. When she addressed him in fluent Sumerian, he thought that she was swearing at him and protested. Irritated by his ignorance the lady repeated her directions in equally fluent Babylonian. He finally arrived at the debtor's house, only to discover that he was not in. Such an ignoramus or quasi-Babylonian, the author of the story concludes, deserves to be chased out of town (Foster 1995:2462).

In an Egyptian story, Pharaoh Apophis of Upper Egypt ('our camp') sends a letter to Seqenenre Tao II of Upper Egypt ('their camp') complaining that the roaring of the hippopotamuses in the far-off Teban canal disturbed his sleep. The pharaoh commanded him to put an end to the noise. On receiving the letter Seqenenre promises Apophis to attend to the matter immediately and summons his advisors ... (Foster 1995:2463).

This reminds one of Jacob outwitting his father-in-law every time he changed the conditions of his wages (Gen 30:28-43), and of the fact that, in Israelite lore, *ordinary* Israelite men and women time and again outwitted foreign 'wise men', such as those in the Egyptian and Babylonian royal courts (Gen 41:8-13; Ex 1:18-19; 2:1-4; 7:10-12; Dan 2). It was, therefore, only natural that professors from all over the ancient Orient flocked to Jerusalem to spend their sabbatical leave at the feet of *King* Solomon (1 Ki 4:29-31).

Perhaps the harshest boundaries had been erected by stories with humorous sexual references, which seem to have been rather a favourite in the ancient Near East (Foster 1995: 2460). Stories about Moabites and Ammonites that circulated in ancient Israel might at first have evoked laughter, but later they stuck to feed a prejudice. One of these stories had it that the Moabites and Ammonites were the offspring of a drunken father by his two daughters (Gen 19 - see Gunkel 1964: *ad loc*). Even though the Deuteronomic Code provides another reason for the exclusion of Moabites and Ammonites from 'us', the juxtaposition of this prohibition with laws on the exclusion of sexually mutilated men and children born from incest (Deut. 23:1-4) would reinforce the memory of every Israelite of their archenemies' genealogy.

Ethnic jokes are still shared by 'us'. The people at whom we laugh never hear them. If 'we' are Belgian we tell jokes about the Dutch among 'us' Belgians. If 'we' are white, we tell them about black people. If 'we' are leftist we tell them about right-wingers. Of course, everyone among 'us' knows they are 'mere' jokes. But 'we' laugh at them, because they somehow motivate or reinforce our sense of boundaries. Although such joking may have a nasty side to it (like racism), it need not always be wrong or malicious.

1.3 Boundaries of power

Given the fundamental social function of honour and shame in ancient Near Eastern societies one often finds powerful people employing crude humour (sarcasm) in face to face encounters with the weak. In such cases references to bodily functions, normally avoided or euphemised in public conversation, were publicly made with a view to shaming the weak, and thereby crushing possible resistance. Words had power in those days.

Consider, for instance, the case of the Assyrian general in 2 Kings 18:27. In an effort to discourage the Israelite soldiers from trusting their Egyptian allies and having faith in their own ability to defend the city he says: 'Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders upon them' (2 Ki 18:23 - RSV). Knowing what the effect of such talk would be on their soldiers the Israelite leaders plead with the Assyrian, 'Pray, speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall' (2 Ki 18:26 - RSV): This is exactly the little crack in their confidence for which the general had been waiting. He now turns to such crude humour that his words have faced serious Bible readers with difficulties ever since the Massorettes pointed the Hebrew text. Referring to the *food shortage* that would occur in the city if they refused to surrender, the general says, 'Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine?' This is the RSV's attempt at imitating the *K^etib w^elô q^ere*' of the Massorettes, who also found it impossible to pronounce the general's words during public reading and therefore suggested an alternative wording. The AV comes closest to the written Hebrew text, 'who are doomed with you to eat their own dung, and drink their own piss ...'.

An Assyrian king compares a Babylonian vassal with a potter's dog that, after having warmed himself at the potter's oven, barks at the potter, and then gets kicked out (Livingston 1988: 185-186).

Goliath also knew the trick. Having invoked fear in the Israelite army by his boastful talk (1 Sam. 17:24), the giant cursed the approaching David by his gods, and proceeded 'Am I a dog, that you

come to me with sticks? ... Come on, then, let me feed your flesh to the birds and to the wild beasts' (1 Sam 17:42-44).

Most people today would disagree with such tactics. Frowning on a habit does, however, not make it disappear or undermine its effectiveness. Public sarcasm remains to be a powerful mechanism of those who can 'afford' to publicly draw clear border lines between them and the powerless in an effort to discourage them from contemplating resistance.

1.4 Religious boundaries

Joking about the stupidity of other people's convictions also served in the ancient Near East to boost a group's religious identity. In challenging the Baal prophets Elijah resorts to joking, 'And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened'' (1 Ki 18:27 - RSV).

In like manner Jeremiah employed humour to declare the wisdom of acknowledging the uniqueness of Yahweh, and the folly of recognising any other god. For example, '[T]he customs of the peoples are false. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move (waver). Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good. There is none like thee, O Lord; thou art great, and thy name is great in might. Who would not fear thee, O King of the nations? For this is thy due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like thee. They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood!' (Jer 10:3-8 - RSV).

Deutero-Isaiah elaborates on this picture, 'All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an image, that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his fellows shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are but men; let them all assemble, let them stand forth, they shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together. The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals; he shapes it with hammers, and forges it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil; he fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, 'Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!' And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for thou art my god!' They know not, nor do they discern; for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their minds, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, 'Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?' He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'' (Isa 44:9-20 - RSV).

Even today there are many jokes about 'other' religious convictions. To joke about one's own religion or denomination is often seen as heresy, if not sacrilege, because 'we' experience it as a threat to the wisdom of belonging to 'us', and therefore to 'our' identity as the custodians of the 'real' truth.

2. Challenging boundaries through humour

Since religion played a central role in ancient Near Eastern societies, priests came to occupy influential positions. With the rise of the scribal profession friction naturally arose around power boundaries. It is therefore not surprising to find one party challenging the power of the other through ridicule.

A Sumerian cult poet, who was a scribe, for example, ridicules the deterministic piety of a particular priest (Foster 1995:2463): if he falls down he hesitates getting to his feet again, since his falling down might have been the wish of the gods. Even if his boat sinks and he loses his whole cargo, he wishes the river-god enjoyment of his possessions. Humour here highlights, from the perspective of a scribe, the difference between 'our' critical and rational behaviour, compared to that of gullible, irrational priests.

Other important religious functionaries, like exorcists and medicine men, were also the object of humorous talk in Babylonia. A buffoon, for example, brags that he had short-cut solution for a ghost-ridden house: simply burn it down! (Foster 1995:2462). In another satire on exorcists and medicine men a scribe relates how the gods had once been disturbed by the constant bleating of a goat. Then Enki devised a spell: Marduk should go down, take a piece of goat's dung and stick it into its *left* ear. That would make the goat drop dead (Foster 1995: 2463).

In Israel, too, priests and prophets resorted to debasing humour in their battle for the attention of the audience - or was it power? For example, when Isaiah, who had probably been a scribe in the royal court (Anderson 1960), attacked the priests, they accused him of trying to reinvent the moral alphabet. 'Whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast? For it is 'tsaw-la-tsaw, tsaw-la-tsaw, qaw-la-qaw, qaw-la-qaw', a little bit here, a little bit there'' (Isa 28:9-10 - see Fohrer 1967:55). The priests ridicule the scribe by comparing his constant nagging about their conduct with a mother playfully teaching the alphabet to her little child: first *tsaw* then *qaw*, remember!

In answering them Isaiah paints them as drunkards, a rhetorical strategy that had often been employed in the ancient Near East.⁴ For example, 'all tables are full of vomit, no place is without filthiness ... [they] 'reel with wine and stagger with strong drink; the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they stagger with strong drink ...' (Isa 28:8, 10 - RSV; cf. 5:11; Jer 48:26; Prov 26:11).

Israelite prophets often used such degrading humour in challenging the powerful elite of society (see Deist 1996a: 181). Amos, for one, challenged Samaria's self-satisfied high society⁵, 'Hear this word, you (complacent) cows of Bashan, living in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their lords, 'Bring, that we may party!' The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, beware, times are coming, when they shall drive you away with thorns, even the last of you with thorny branches. And you shall leave through the breaches, every one straight ahead; and you shall be driven forth into Harmon,' says the Lord' (Amos 4:1-3). In that day, he says later on, it would be for them like a man who 'fled from a lion, only to meet a bear; then fled into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, where a serpent bit him' (Amos 5:19). Isaiah would say, '[T]he

4 Consider, for instance, the Egyptian tomb painting depicting a finely dressed lady vomiting after having had too much to drink (Foster 1995:2460).

5 This text is, admittedly, difficult to read, but it would seem wrong to understand it as an address to the *ladies* of Samaria. The metaphor for complacency (*cows* of Bashan) is feminine and requires feminine verbs and noun suffixes. When addressing the audience the speaker mixes up feminine and masculine forms (e.g. השלכתנה, אחריתכן, אחרים, ארניהם, האמרה). This I take as an indication that the wealthy class as a whole is addressed. Living behind safe walls in Samaria, they will be driven away through breaches in those selfsame walls like one drives cows: with prongs (בצמות) and thorny twigs (בסירות דוקה). The translation with 'hooks' and 'fish hooks' does not fit the context.

bed is too short to stretch oneself on it, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it' [Isa 28:20 - RSV].

Isaiah, too, uses this kind of humour to break down the artificial boundaries of class, wealth, and power around the women of the Jerusalem elite, 'The Lord said: 'Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; the Lord will smite with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts'. In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs; the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. Instead of perfume there will be rottenness; and instead of a girdle, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a girding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame' (Isa 3:16-24 - RSV).

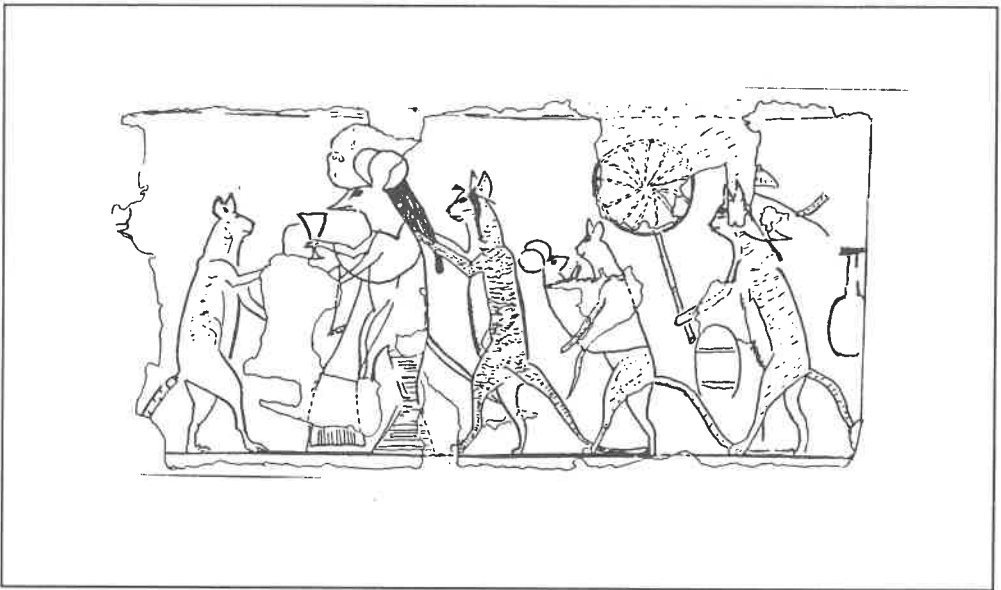
That even the power of kings and gods could be challenged - or their loss of power be described - through the use of humour may sound strange to a Western ear and may be foreign to the traditional Christian mind (cf. Morreall 1983:125-126; Radday 1990:34-35). Yet, even kings and gods were not beyond the reach of humour. So, for instance, the Ugaritic text KTU 1.23 depicts the old god El as having to perform a ritual to overcome impotency (De Moor 1987: 123-128; Pope 1979:705-708; Watson 1977: 281). In Israel the once virile King David became totally impotent in his old age: '[H]is servants said to him, 'Let a young maiden be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait upon the king, and be his nurse; let her lie in your bosom, that my lord the king may be warm.' So they searched for a beautiful maiden throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king. The maiden was very beautiful; and she became the king's nurse and ministered to him; but the king knew her not.' (1 KI 1:2-4 - RSV). In both cases a humorous play on impotency signifies loss of control or influence. And in both cases the power of the older man is contested by younger, virile men; in the case of El by Baal, and in the case of David by several of his sons.

3. Empowerment through subversive humour

The somewhat sarcastic prophetic challenge to the powerful elite of Samaria and Jerusalem referred to above may perhaps also be interpreted as subversive talk. It certainly was seen as such by the authorities. What I have in mind here is something different, though. Under this heading I am thinking of what Scott (1990) calls 'the hidden transcript' of the powerless, i.e. the stories socially, politically and economically marginalised people tell among themselves about the powerful. One of the strategies of this kind of story is (debasing) humour.

Powerful people are often grandiloquent. A Sumerian proverb ridicules, 'While the backside was breaking wind, the mouth brought forth babble' (Foster 1995:2460). Powerful people also often boast of achievements for which they do not really deserve credit, since it is ordinary people who labour for them for years (consider, for instance, the boastful 'I' of royal inscriptions). On a Sumerian vignette a urinating fox also thinks that *he* gave rise to the ocean (Foster 1995:2460). Powerful people can also make ridiculous demands on their subordinates. Nebuchadnezzar, for instance, is said to have demanded from his magicians and soothsayers to tell him not only the meaning of his dream but the dream itself (Dan. 2). In an anonymous tongue in the cheek Sumerian letter in the name of Gilgamesh the king demands from his vassal: 'Send me 70,000 black horses with white stripes, 100,000 mares whose hides have markings like wild tree roots, 40,000 continually gambolling miniature calves, 50,000 teams of dappled mules, 50,000 fine calves with well-turned hooves and horns intact ...' (Foster 1995:2463).

Powerless people often dream of and tell stories about the day when the tables will be turned (see Landy 1990:100-101). From the time of the 19th and subsequent dynasties in Egypt comes a series of mice and cat cartoons. In one of these the mice army lays siege to a cat fortress and ... wins. In another, a mouse wins a dual with a cat. In yet another, cats are the domestic servants of mice - even raising mice children. In some other scenes a cat gets a hiding under the supervision of a mouse judge (Brunner-Traut 1968). Even though the interpretation of these satirical drawings is problematic (Brunner-Traut 1968:21-33), the reversed order of mice and cats suggests something of an upside down social order. This reminds one of Ipu-Wer's complaint made some five hundred years earlier when the social order collapsed during the First Intermediate Period: those who had been ladies are now servants, who used to beg for food now even have enough liquor, who previously had to toil as weavers now wear fine linen clothes, the poor of the land have now become the rich.



Lady Mouse is served by a cat butler and a cat baby-sitter, while a third cat presents her with flowers and a fourth is responsible for waving the fan (From Brunner-Traut 1968: Figure 2)

The Babylonian story of Gimil-Ninurta's revenge definitely falls in this category. In this story the mayor of Nippur, much in the style of the rich man in Nathan's parable (2 Sam 12:1-7), slaughtered the one sheep which the desperately poor Gimil-Ninurta had bought by selling his last garment. In the end Gimil-Ninurta made the mayor, who mistook him for a high official, howl at his feet and beg for mercy.

Among the Israelites various humorous stories were told about oppressive powers, a good example being the narrative about the Egyptian plagues. In it pharaoh's magicians succeeded in repeating the miracles performed by Moses and Aaron, only to aggravate the problem by turning more water sources into blood and creating more frogs (Radday 1990:21-22). Moreover, the river Nile, divine in itself and a source of life, turned into undrinkable blood, while frogs, that normally

served as symbols of the life giving force (Fensham 1970: 36), die and rot by the thousands, giving off an unbearable stench. The story of Ehud, who outwitted the Moabite guard, killed their mighty king and escaped through the toilet's trap door is also pertinent here (see Alter 1981: 37-41; Deist 1996b). When King Belshazzar of Babylon saw the handwriting on the wall, we are told that 'the knots of his loins were released and his knees knocked one against the other' (Dan 5:6 - see Brenner 1990:43). But perhaps the most colourful of all the stories, is the story about the megalomaniac Nebuchadnezzar.

'All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and he said, 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?' While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, 'O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field; and you shall be made to eat grass like an ox; and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.' Immediately the word was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws' (Dan 4:28-33 - RSV).

Humiliating images of powerful figures enabled the oppressed to see those figures as frail people. Once one has pictured a powerful king lying on a toilet floor struggling with a dagger protruding from his anus, or a mighty king going on all fours to eat grass like an ox, with hair as long as eagles' feathers and with nails like birds' claws, and has laughed at them, their spell was broken.

Van Heerden (1992:61, 64-65) is certainly right in linking the use of humour with Victor Frankl's logotherapy and Edward de Bono's idea of lateral thinking. This is especially true of 'subversive' humour in oppressive and hopeless situations. Logotherapy's strategy of paradoxical intention assists people to laugh at their anxieties and fears. Frankl (1980:46) explains, 'Important for the therapy of paradoxical intention is that it [i.e. the pictured paradox] should be *as humorous as possible*.' Once people succeed in imagining the funniest way of acting out the paradoxical intention they find the power within themselves to overcome their anxiety.

Likewise, Edward de Bono's idea of lateral thinking encourages people to follow up seemingly illogical ideas. 'It is always difficult for a person to believe that, if he escapes from the logic of a situation, he will snap into the logic of another situation,' De Bono (1988:50) writes. What a person needs to accept a solution that will bring about a new situation with its own logic, is an *edge effect*, a little 'push' forward. That edge effect is often created by humour. 'A good story,' De Bono (1988:78) remarks, 'no matter how amusing - never proves a point in an argument. Nevertheless, a story can show a type of relationship or process which then becomes a *possibility*. Once it has been thought a 'thought' cannot be unthought.'

The edge effect is perhaps best illustrated by two biblical narratives, namely those about Jonah and Ruth. Both these books may be dated in the period after the Babylonian exile, that is, the period subsequent to the loss of everything that constituted Israelite identity: their land, their temple and their king. If ever a group has suffered cognitive dissonance it was the Jewish exiles. Everything they believed in collapsed and nothing would ever be the same. They were in desperate need of suggestions for the way forward.

Some, like the circles of Haggai and Zechariah, suggested the re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom. Others, like Ezra and Nehemiah, set out to make an intensive study of the law of Moses and to give effect to it by stressing exclusivity and distinguishing symbols, like circumcision and keeping the Sabbath. Others, thoroughly sceptical of political solutions, opted for apocalyptic dreams and hopes. Another group, however, suggested that ethnicity should not be the sole criterion of being Jewish. This option was not propagated directly, but through stories.

In the story of Ruth, Naomi did her level best to convince her Moabite daughter-in-law to stay behind in Moab, but in vain. In the end this Moabite woman convinced the whole community of Bethlehem of her worthiness and the sincerity of her conversion to Judaism. And, so the story concludes, she became no less than an ancestor of King David, the symbol of the divine promise. This story thinks and publicises the unthinkable, thereby creating thinking space. The addition of David's genealogy to the story provides the necessary edge effect.

In the second story Jonah, the right-wing prophet of the eighth century, is commissioned to proclaim God's judgement over Nineveh, but rejects the opportunity. Knowing God's mercy, Jonah chooses to rather die than to admit Assyrians into the congregation (see Davies 1990:212 n. 1). But Jonah's *God* is filled with passion, not only for uncircumcised Assyrians, but even for their children and animals (Jonah 4:11). Whoever smiles at this story, has accepted the paradoxical solution and regains vision.

4. Conclusion

Whether or not their fellow Greeks would have agreed with them on the usefulness of humour, ancient Near Eastern people would certainly have disagreed with Plato and Aristotle. For Plato humour suspended reason and was, for that reason, undesirable. Also for Aristotle humour could only benefit relaxation, not serious thinking (Morreall 1984:305-306). Ancient Near Easterners would have been much happier with Morreall's opinion that, even though humour may perhaps appeal to a human faculty other than reason, *that* does not render humour itself irrational. People of the ancient Orient would have experienced first-hand that humour was effective in areas of their life where rational thought could barely reach or make a real difference. This is especially true of areas in life where *commitment* and *novel insight* matter.

They used humour to draw, underscore and solidify the boundaries of areas where commitment mattered for them, for example, in defining their identity as social, occupational, ethnic, or religious groups. They also employed humour when power relations needed to be challenged, or when hope had failed them. It is especially in the last respect that rational thought often leads to circular arguments and, consequently, to hopelessness. It is under these conditions that humour may, by assisting paradoxical intention and supply the edge effect, create some space for novel insight and positive action.

Academy may sing the praises of rationality. Political, economic and other powers may applaud the achievements of 'rational behaviour'. But humour will remain one of the most efficient strategies employed by *ordinary folk* to define their identity, to counter or subvert the violence of power, and to rekindle hope where rational thought sees no way out.

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