

HUMOR-NEUTICS:
ANALYZING HUMOR AND HUMOR FUNCTIONS
IN THE
SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

By

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ABBREVIATIONS

Translations of the Bible

<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
<i>NA²⁷</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th ed.</i>
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint

Journals and Books

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992
<i>Am J Sociol</i>	American Journal of Sociology
<i>Am Sociol Rev</i>	American Sociological Review
<i>BDAG</i>	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3d ed. Chicago, 1999.
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>BibT</i>	The Bible Today
<i>Bib World</i>	<i>The Biblical World</i>
<i>Bib Rev</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CQ</i>	The Classical Quarterly
<i>Currents</i>	Currents in Theology and Mission
<i>Dialog</i>	Dialog: A Journal of Theology
<i>DocLife</i>	<i>Doctrine and Life</i>
<i>Gos Thom</i>	<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>
<i>HB</i>	Hebrew Bible
<i>HRAF</i>	Human Relations Area Files
<i>Humor</i>	<i>International Journal of Humor Research</i>
<i>IDB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville, 1962,
<i>Int</i>	Interpretation
<i>Int Pol Sci Rev</i>	International Political Science Review
<i>ISHS</i>	International Society for Humor Studies
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>J Folk Res</i>	<i>Journal of Folklore Research</i>
<i>JPS</i>	<i>The Jewish Publication Society of America</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>The Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRS</i>	Journal of Roman Studies
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>

JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. With revised supplement. Oxford, 1996.
<i>Method Q Rev</i>	<i>Methodist Quarterly Review</i>
NT	New Testament
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>Novt</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>Philos East West</i>	<i>Philosophy East and West</i>
<i>Pastoral Psychol</i>	<i>Pastoral Psychology</i>
<i>Rev Bene</i>	<i>Revue Benedictine</i>
<i>SF</i>	<i>Social Forces</i>
Soc Forum	Sociological Forum
Soc Ident	Social Identities
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
Soc Psychol Q	Social Psychology Quarterly
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche wissenschaft und die kunde der älteren kirche</i>

Classical, Hellenistic, Early Christian Works

Aeschines	
<i>Ctes.</i>	<i>In Ctesiphonem</i>
<i>Fals. leg.</i>	<i>De falsa legatione</i>
Apuleius	
<i>Metam.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses</i>
Aristotle	
<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Ethica nichomachea</i>
<i>Poet.</i>	<i>Poetica</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetorica</i>
Aristophanes	
<i>Lys.</i>	<i>Lysistrata</i>
<i>Nub.</i>	<i>Nubes</i>
<i>Ran.</i>	<i>Ranae</i>
<i>Ach.</i>	<i>Acharnenses</i>
Cicero	
<i>Att.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Atticum</i>
<i>Brut.</i>	<i>Brutus</i>
<i>Clu.</i>	<i>Pro Cluentio</i>
<i>De or.</i>	<i>De oratore</i>
<i>Fam.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad familiares</i>
<i>Inv.</i>	<i>De inventione rhetorica</i>
<i>Mil.</i>	<i>Pro Milone</i>

<i>Off.</i>	<i>De officiis</i>
<i>Or. Brut.</i>	<i>Orator ad M. Brutum</i>
<i>Part. or.</i>	<i>Partitiones oratoriae</i>
<i>Quinct.</i>	<i>Pro Quinctio</i>
<i>Rosc. com.</i>	<i>Pro Rosico comoedo</i>
Clement of Alexandria	
<i>Paed.</i>	<i>Paedagogus</i>
Demetrius	
<i>Eloc.</i>	<i>De elocutione (Peri hermeneias)</i>
Demosthenes	
<i>Fals. leg.</i>	<i>De falsa legatione</i>
Diodorus Siculus	
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historicus</i>
Dionysius of Halicarnassus	
<i>Comp.</i>	<i>De compositione verborum</i>
<i>Dem.</i>	<i>De Demosthene</i>
Hesiod	
<i>Op.</i>	<i>Opera et dies</i>
<i>Theog.</i>	<i>Theogonia</i>
Homer	
<i>Il.</i>	<i>Illias</i>
<i>Od.</i>	<i>Odyssea</i>
Horace	
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satirae</i>
<i>Ser.</i>	<i>Sermones</i>
[unknown]	
<i>Invect.</i>	<i>Invectivae (In Ciceronem, In Sallustium)</i>
John Chrysostom	
<i>Hom. Heb.</i>	<i>Homiliae in epistolam ad Hebraeos</i>
Josephus	
<i>A. J.</i>	<i>Antiquitates judaciae</i>
<i>B. J.</i>	<i>Bellum Judaicum</i>
Juvenal	
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satirae</i>
Lucian	
<i>Demon.</i>	<i>Demonax</i>
<i>Dial. Meretr.</i>	<i>Dialogi meretricii</i>
<i>Dial. mort.</i>	<i>Diologi mortuorum</i>
<i>Fug.</i>	<i>Fugitivi</i>
<i>Peregr.</i>	<i>De morte peregrini</i>
[Longinus]	
<i>Subl.</i>	<i>De sublimitate</i>

Macrobius	
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Saturnalia</i>
Martial	
<i>Spect.</i>	<i>De spectaculius liber</i>
Menander	
<i>Dysk.</i>	Dyskolos
<i>Epitr.</i>	Epitrepontes
<i>Georg.</i>	Georgos
<i>Mis.</i>	Misoumenos
<i>Phasm.</i>	Phasma
<i>Perik.</i>	Perikeiromenē
<i>Sam.</i>	Samia
<i>Sik.</i>	Sikyonios
Origen	
<i>Cels.</i>	<i>Contra Celsum</i>
Persius	
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satirae</i>
Philo	
<i>Abr.</i>	<i>De Abrahamo</i>
<i>Agr.</i>	<i>De agricultura</i>
<i>Cher.</i>	<i>De cherubium</i>
<i>Congr.</i>	<i>De congress eruditionis gratia</i>
<i>Det.</i>	<i>Quod deterius potiori insidari soleat</i>
<i>Ebr.</i>	<i>De ebrietate</i>
<i>Flacc.</i>	<i>In Flaccum</i>
<i>Fug.</i>	<i>De fuga et inventione</i>
<i>Her.</i>	<i>Quis rerum divinarium heres sit</i>
<i>Legat.</i>	<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>
<i>Mos.</i>	<i>De vita Mosis</i>
<i>Mut.</i>	<i>De mutatione nominum</i>
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>De plantatione</i>
<i>Post.</i>	<i>De posteritate Caini</i>
<i>Praem.</i>	<i>De praemiis et ponies</i>
<i>QG</i>	<i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesin</i>
<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini</i>
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>De somniis</i>
<i>Virt.</i>	<i>De virtutibus</i>
Philostratus	
<i>Vit. Apoll.</i>	<i>Vita Apollonii</i>

Plato	
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Leges</i>
<i>Phileb.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Resp.</i>	<i>Respublica</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>
Plutarch	
<i>Mor.</i>	<i>Moralia</i>
<i>Quaest. conv.</i>	<i>Quaestionum convivialum</i>
Quintilian	
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Institutio oratoria</i>
<i>Decl.</i>	<i>Declamationes</i>
[Unknown]	
<i>Rhet. Her.</i>	<i>Rhetorica herennium</i>
Seneca (the Younger)	
<i>Ben.</i>	<i>De beneficiis</i>
Seneca (the Elder)	
<i>Contr.</i>	<i>Controversiae</i>
Stobaeus	
<i>Flor.</i>	<i>Florilegium</i>
Suetonius	
<i>Aug.</i>	<i>Divus Augustus</i>
<i>Jul.</i>	<i>Divus Julius</i>
Tertullian	
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologeticus</i>
Theophrastus	
<i>Char.</i>	<i>Characteres</i>
Xenophon	
<i>Cyr.</i>	<i>Cyropaedia</i>

Mishnah, Talmud, and Other Rabbinic Literature

<i>b. B. Bat.</i>	<i>Babylonian Bava Batra</i>
<i>B. Meṣiṭa</i>	<i>Bava Meṣiṭa</i>
<i>b. Qidd.</i>	<i>Babylonian Qiddušin</i>
<i>Ber.</i>	<i>Berakot</i>
<i>Deut. Rab.</i>	<i>Rabbah Deuteronomy</i>
<i>Lev. Rab.</i>	<i>Rabbah Leviticus</i>
<i>Midr. Ps.</i>	<i>Midrash Psalm</i>
<i>m. Qidd.</i>	<i>Mishnah Qiddušin</i>
<i>Šabb</i>	<i>Sabbat</i>
<i>S. Moʿed Taʿan.</i>	<i>Seder Moʿed Taʿanit</i>

S. Naš. Qidd.
Ta ʕan.
Tanḥ. B. Num.

Seder Našim Qiddušin
Ta ʕanit
Tanḥuma B. Numbers

ABSTRACT

Scholarly works on the Synoptic Gospels reflect a basic presupposition that the content of the Gospels is serious, and thereby, seriousness precludes humor. This dissertation demonstrates that humor in the circum-Mediterranean world was often serious, even deadly serious. The aim of the study is threefold: to challenge basic presuppositions regarding humor in the Synoptic Gospels, to construct a model that would aid in the recognition of humor in the Synoptic Gospels, and to explore examples of Synoptic humor.

The discussion includes a survey of the types and uses of humor found in ancient Mediterranean sources. Most notably tendentious forms of humor surface in recollections of agonistic exchanges between adversaries, or in status degradation rituals, or in harrowing triumphs over rivals. In biographies, histories, philosophical and rhetorical treatises, and in theatrical performances of antiquity, folk-heroes and other renowned persons engaged in agonistic uses of humor in order to demonstrate superior wisdom, courage, virtuous character and honorable reputation. Essentially, humor surfaced as a critical rhetorical device for the acquisition and defense of honor, but not without cost. In the oft-public antagonistic exchanges of antiquity, successful uses of humor helped a humorist to garner public support, but such successes tended

to bring public derision upon powerful rivals. Their subsequent anger and loss of face frequently led to violent, even deadly reprisals.

The survey of ancient Mediterranean humor reveals a basic framework for exploring and recognizing the forms, functions and effects of tendentious humor. This framework provides a model for identifying and studying the use of Synoptic humor within the cultural context of Roman antiquity. Both ancient emic sources and etic perspectives inform the model. Etic perspectives serve primarily to elucidate social constructs such as honor, reputation, and character in emic sources, and they help to clarify the impact of humor on social constructs. In particular, etic perspectives include critical insights from social science and the sociology of humor.

The model guides subsequent discussions on the forms, functions and effects of humor in several Synoptic examples. Particular attention is given to the cultural context of agonistic exchanges between the Matthean Jesus and his opponents in the Temple precinct (12:12-23:36) and in the antagonistic setting of the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus (Luke 22:67-70; Matt 26:64). Additional discussion situates Synoptic humor within the context of ancient oral performances, and provides examples of Synoptic humor that exemplify the kinds of humor that surface in the oral performances of biographical encomium and in the authorial commentary of in-group literature.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in biblical humor grew as a result of a class offered by Athalya Brenner, co-author of *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* and editor of *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds*. She helped me to understand humor from a broad perspective, and frankly, she helped me to see humor in the last place I expected to find it—the Bible. She challenged my own cultural presuppositions regarding humor and biblical texts. As a result, I found myself wondering if humor was present in the Synoptic Gospels. I began to explore further the presence of humor in ancient Mediterranean sources. I found that tendentious forms of humor repeatedly surfaced in mythologies, biographies, theatrical performances of tragedies and comedies, and in recollections of judicial proceedings. The seeming absence of tendentious humor in the agnostic exchanges recounted in the Synoptic Gospels struck me as inconsistent with the kinds of humor indicative of the literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. In what follows, I construct a *humor-neutic* framework that aids our recognition and understanding of Synoptic humor within the cultural context of the Roman era.

Challenging Presuppositions

In writing this dissertation, I have four main objectives. First, I want to challenge the basic presupposition that Synoptic texts are only serious, and therefore, void of humor. I would not be the first to make this challenge. Generally, dismissive reactions from some scholars and shocked or inquisitive curiosity from others indicate to me that Synoptic humor remains, for the most part, misunderstood. The Synoptic texts do contain tendentious as well as non-tendentious forms of humor. *Tendentious humor* refers to a type of humor that is derisive in nature and produces harmful effects.¹ Harsh forms of Synoptic humor, as I will demonstrate in a survey of ancient literature, are quite serious.

My second objective is to challenge the presupposition that humor has no serious power or gravity of meaning in ancient social relationships and structures. I present emic sources that strongly suggest that Synoptic humor was quite serious and even deadly. Humor had the power to deflect hostility, to win powerful allies and to kill. In Roman antiquity, witty ripostes to honor challenges played a critical role in defending or acquiring honor.

The third objective is to lay out a humor model that will guide our recognition and understanding of Synoptic humor, its use, forms, functions and

¹ Cf. Athalya Brenner, "Between Intentionality and Reception," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Raddy and A. Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990), 15; see also Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strache (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 106–39.

effects. This model will be informed by emic sources, that is, it will be informed by humor artifacts from the ancient Mediterranean world, and it will be informed by modern etic perspectives. *Emic* is an anthropological term, which is typically used to refer to an indigenous perspective or the perspective of in-group members. In this case, it refers to the perspective of persons in antiquity (e.g., ancient Romans, Greeks, Jews, and Christians) whose writings reveal the values, behaviors and beliefs representative of their particular in-group. Contrasting emic, *etic* refers to the perspective of an outsider. Etic perspective is usually based on criteria held to be universal.² The primary purpose for etic perspectives is to help us understand the cultural presuppositions we bring to Synoptic texts and to help us understand more fully, and as best as is possible, the cultural values of Roman antiquity. Etic perspectives serve to clarify emic sources.

My fourth objective is to use the model as a guide in recognizing and examining examples of Synoptic humor. I will give particular attention to the use of humor in agonistic exchanges between the Matthean Jesus and his opponents. I will also provide examples of Synoptic humor that exemplify the kinds of humor that surface in the oral performances of biographical encomium and in the authorial commentary of in-group literature.

² For concise definitions of emic and etic, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142. For a discussion on these perspectives in cross-cultural comparisons, see “Emic and Etic” in Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 180–83.

Synoptic Humor in Its Cultural Context

In applying my humor model to the Synoptic Gospels, I want to be clear that I am not seeking to recover the humor of the historical Jesus, but to recognize the humor of Jesus as portrayed by the Synoptic authors. The Synoptic Gospels arose out of the context of the first century Roman Empire through cultures and languages quite distinct from my own. Therefore, the genre forms within the Synoptic material (e.g., biographical encomium, anecdotes and parables, aphorisms, etc.) must be viewed through the standards of Roman-era antiquity and more distinctly, where possible, through the standards of specific cultures (e.g., Syrian, Judean, Roman, Antiochian, etc.). Viewing the Synoptic Gospels through the standards of Roman antiquity means, for example, that the Synoptics will contain witty dicta that Jesus probably never said, because such dicta were expected in ancient biographical encomium as a way to demonstrate the character of a central figure. Stated succinctly, the Synoptic authors will relate such witty dicta in their Gospels, because it speaks to the character of Jesus in a way that is standard of ancient biographies. In short, in my application of the humor model, I am not seeking to identify the humor of the historical Jesus; instead, I am seeking to identify the humor of Jesus as conveyed through the Synoptic authors.

Overview

In Chapter 1, I will survey various publications on humor in the New Testament. Of particular importance will be the types of approaches that authors and scholars use to explain the presence of humor in NT texts. I will note how their

perspectives shape our understanding of Jesus. As I survey the various publications, I will highlight those scholars whose works critique NT humor from sociological and anthropological strategies and whose works apply literary and rhetorical approaches from ancient Greek, Jewish, and Roman sources. After reviewing key concepts that have or have not surfaced in NT studies on humor, one of my main objectives will be to consider why critical approaches to NT humor are given so little attention and credence in modern biblical scholarship. Critical to the discussion on humor research, I will make some observations on the fundamental concerns and obstacles related to humor recognition and ancient humor terminology. My second main objective will be to offer some sociological perspectives on humor, which I will follow with some suggested sociological approaches to humor.

In Chapter 2, I will present a representative survey of humor artifacts from ancient circum-Mediterranean sources. My objective will be to highlight ancient beliefs regarding humor and its use. In addition, I will observe the forms, the functions and effects of ancient humor. My focus will be on examples of humor from Mesopotamian mythologies, Hebraic and Arabic literature, Egyptian images, Grecian comedy and philosophy, and Roman satire and rhetoric. Regarding Mesopotamian artifacts, I will discuss the effects of derisive laughter and other forms of tendentious humor in status degradation and dethronement rituals and I will discuss the forms and effects of humor that occur in clashes between rivals. A short look at Egyptian humor will bring to our attention the apotropaic and regenerative power of laughter. Regarding Grecian artifacts, I will speak briefly to the tendentious forms of humor

that surface in mythologies and in comic and tragic performances. In these venues, we will see the use of humor between entities of various statuses. Greek theatrical performances and philosophical treatises will give us some insights into the common forms and functions of ancient Grecian humor. Grecian performers become the mouthpiece for social critique. Grecian philosophers expound on the appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor. Their treatises also include thoughts on the effects of humor. After considering Grecian sources on humor, I will observe what Roman sources have to say about humor. My observations will focus on those rhetoricians in the Roman era who discuss the functions and the effects of humor in oral presentations and in antagonistic exchanges. I will conclude this chapter by reviewing the insights given to us about ancient humor through the works of Roman-era satirists. I will note specifically the role of satire in addressing social ills and hypocritical behaviors.

In Chapter 3, my main objective will be to highlight the forms, functions and motifs of humor that occur in anecdotes and in recollections of agonistic exchanges between folk heroes and their opponents. My focus here will be on ancient Jewish and Christian literature. In the works of Josephus, I will give specific attention to the exchanges of humor that occur between folk heroes and their opponents. In particular, I will provide examples in which renowned folk leaders successfully aim witty barbs at their opponents and I will describe how their clever use of barbs leads to their eventual elevation in status. Regarding the works of Philo, we will find extensive references to laughter and jesting behavior, and even explicit references to comic

ridicule. Here I will discuss Philo's views concerning the proprieties of humor use. My observations will also include Philo's use of tendentious forms of humor, especially his use of derogatory epithets and stereotypes, which he aims at behaviors/persons he deems despicable. In the final section of this chapter, I will consider parallel humor motifs that occur both in the Hebrew Bible and in early rabbinic literature. I will also make some observations about comparative humor motifs in rabbinic literature and in the Christian Synoptic Gospels.

In Chapter 4, I will summarize some key observations about ancient humor based on my survey of humor, its use, forms, functions and effects as noted in Chapters 2 and 3. I will briefly recapitulate the ancient forms of humor as well as the critical functions and the serious effects of humor in ancient social relations and structures. My objective is to raise critical questions. Is humor really absent in the Synoptic Gospels or do we fail to perceive it? If the Gospels stand as some form of ancient biographical encomium, would they really be devoid of humor? In response to these questions, I will propose a humor model for the purpose of helping us to recognize the presence and power of humor in the Synoptic Gospels. I will describe three core aspects of this humor model. Then I will proceed to discuss what we can learn from emic sources and etic perspectives, both of which inform the core aspects of the model.

In Chapter 5, I will use the humor model as a guide to explore tendentious forms of humor in three Synoptic texts (Matt 12:12–23:36; 26:64; Luke 22:67–70). First, I will consider what Roman-era emic literature tells us about the use of humor

in agonistic settings and in judicial proceedings. Key questions will include whether we should expect humor in these contexts, and if so, what kinds of humor we would expect to find? In order to identify humor cues in the content of a Synoptic text, I will observe what kinds of rhetoric occur in agonistic settings, and what types of humor are characteristic of such rhetoric. Because humor use in ancient rhetoric served specific functions, I will discuss what emic sources say about these functions of humor. I will also examine what emic literature says about the effects of humor use in agonistic settings. Once I have explored emic insights into the forms, functions and effects of humor in ancient antagonistic settings and in judicial proceedings, then I will discuss humor in three Synoptic examples. I will consider humor in agonistic exchanges between the Matthean Jesus and his opponents in the Temple precinct (12:12–23:36); humor in the Lukan Jesus’ antagonistic ripostes in the Sanhedrin trial (22:67–70); and humor in the Matthean Jesus’ shocking use of a familiar dictum (26:64). My observations of the functions and effects of tendentious humor will presume an etic sociological perspective of the social constructs at work (esp. honor, shame, reputation, and status degradation).

In Chapter 6, I will again use the humor model as a guide, but in this chapter I will focus primarily on humor cues in the Synoptic Gospels. I will begin by situating the Synoptic texts within the context of ancient oral performances. Some basic presuppositions (e.g., the notion of “stable” text) will be challenged as I will raise some questions about the function of humor in ancient performances. My discussion will include a modern sociological approach to the functions and effects of humor in

ancient Roman-era oral performances. Then my focus shifts to humor cues in the content. I present these cues under the following four topics: biographical encomium, humorous authorial commentary, comic typologies and humor use in rhetorical styles. For each of these topics, I will provide examples from the Synoptic Gospels.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM WITH HUMOR

A host of exasperating problems and a few insurmountable obstacles plague our recognition of Synoptic humor. There is no question that cultural, linguistic and chronological gulfs hamper, even permanently prevent, the identification and appreciation of Synoptic humor. We also lack the nonverbal cues and the vocal intonations of oral performers that help us detect humor. Inconsistent terminology, ambiguous descriptions, and narrow views of humor plague humor recognition and impede clarity. While a plethora of humor theories focus on the humorist and the recipient, authors rarely observe audience response. Some biblical scholars have flat missed seeing or acknowledging humor, even though their main thesis deals with biblical irony, one of the most prevalent and ancient forms of humor. Many authors produce heavily theological and pastoral works, and skew humor into positive characterizations to salvage their perceptions of Jesus' divine nature.

Survey of Synoptic Humor

From as early as 1893, various publications have noted humor in the New Testament. However, many of these sources consist of highly subjective

interpretations highlighting pastoral and theological biases.¹ These perspectives on New Testament humor emphasize the divine nature of Jesus and his perfect, non-tendentious sense of humor.² A rather bizarre example comes from Harris, who in 1908 states that “Jesus did not exhibit or express humor.” Why? He adds, “Because Jesus was fully human, and being both feminine and masculine, his feminine side lacked humor.”³ Obviously, Harris’ statement is absurd and remarkably dim-witted. Other authors are not so offensive, but they still approach Synoptic humor with a heavy pastoral and theological bias. For example, Nelvin Vos gives a provocative exposition on Jesus as a redeeming clown in *For God’s Sake Laugh*. Henri Cormier demonstrates a soupy rendition of Jesus as the perfect comic in *The Humor of Jesus*. In another example, Earl Palmer stresses that Jesus is the greatest humorist of all time. Palmer goes on to state that Jesus was not like the people around him.⁴

¹ Eivind Berggrav, “Humor and Seriousness,” *Dialog* 22 (1983): 206–10; Henri Cormier, *The Humor of Jesus* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1977); M. C. Hazard, “Humor in the Bible,” *Bib World* 53, no. 5 (1919): 514–19; Wilhelm C. Linss, “The Hidden Humor of St. Paul,” *Currents* 25 (1998): 195–9; Earl F. Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2001); and *Laughter in Heaven: Understanding the Parables of Jesus* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1987); Marion D. Shutter, *Wit and Humor in the Bible* (Boston, MA: Arena, 1893); and Nelvin Vos, *For God’s Sake Laugh!* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1952).

² Throughout his work, Cormier makes an extreme argument that Jesus’ sense of humor was perfect (cf. Cormier, *The Humor of Jesus*).

³ Henry F. Harris, “The Absence of Humor in Jesus,” *Method Q Rev* 57 (1908): 460–7.

⁴ Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus*, 25–26.

Facetiously, and often rambling humorously, Dudley Zuver makes the claim that humor is never offensive. He suggests that Jesus uses humor only in beneficial and loving ways.⁵ In a similar vein, Denis Bost argues that Jesus never used humor in an aggressive manner.⁶ In a brief and rather weak exposition on New Testament humor, Lorenze Nieting notes that articles on humor are neither serious, nor scholarly.⁷ Perhaps, the most creative pastoral approach comes from Douglas Adams, who analyzes humorous biblical episodes from the analogical perspective of a grandparent as opposed to a parent.⁸

Other authors have used linguistic, rhetorical, narrative and literary approaches to explore Synoptic humor. Elbert Russell produces one of the earliest and most helpful semantic analyses of biblical humor in his dissertation entitled *Paronomasia and Kindred Phenomena in the New Testament*. His study highlights Greek wordplays, puns and other sound-plays associated with ancient humor. John Pilch also takes a semantic approach and reveals the possibility of an Aramaic pun in Matthew 7:6.⁹ From the perspective of rhetorical criticism and literary analysis,

⁵ Dudley Zuver, *Salvation by Laughter: A Study of Religion and the Sense of Humor* (New York: Harper & Harper Brothers, 1933), 14, 21.

⁶ Denis Bost, *L'humour du Christ* (Versailles, Fr.: Editions de Paris, 2004), 13.

⁷ Lorenz Nieting, "Humor in the New Testament," *Dialog* 22 (1983): 168–70.

⁸ Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

⁹ John J. Pilch, "A Window into the Biblical World: The Bible's Sense of Humor," *BibT* 33, no. 6 (1995): 353–8.

PHEME PERKINS examines comic reversals and character typologies in the parables of Jesus.¹⁰ Through Donald Fletcher's semantic and linguistic approach, one learns that irony is the key to understanding the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1–13. However, Fletcher only alludes to the presence of humor in Jesus' telling of the parable.¹¹ Willie Van Heerden recovers some examples of humor from the Synoptics by applying J. William Whedbee's literary approach.¹² From a literary and existential perspective, Dan O. Via distinguishes Jesus' parables as either comic or tragic parables.¹³ From a narrato-semiotic approach, Stephen Hatton demonstrates the

¹⁰ PHEME PERKINS, "Reversal, Equality, and Reward," in *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 133–60. Most typologies associated with biblical humor have originated in studies conducted by Hebrew Bible scholars. For examples, see Athalya Brenner, ed., *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003); and "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who's Afraid of Biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler," *JSOT* 63 (1994): 38–55. For examples of comic stock characters related to New Testament studies, see Kathy C. Williams, "At the Expense of Women: Humor in Acts 16:14–40," in *Are We Amused? Humor about Women in the Biblical World*, ed. by Athalya Brenner (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2003), 79–89.

¹¹ Donald R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" *JBL* 82, no. 1 (1963): 27.

¹² Willie van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek with Us," *Soc Ident* 7, no. 1 (2001): 75–96. Whedbee's literary approach covers four elements: 1) U-shaped plot line, 2) characterization of basic types, 3) linguistic and stylistic strategies, and 4) functions and intentions. See J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 6–11.

¹³ Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1967).

comedy of discipleship gone awry.¹⁴ Patrick Marrin discusses narrative similarities between parables of Jesus and humorous stories.¹⁵ His observations include common elements in structure and purpose. Jerry Camery-Hoggatt examines the types and functions of irony in the Gospel of Mark through a literary and sociology of knowledge approach.¹⁶ Of particular interest is his description of humorous features related to story performance (e.g. gallows humor, hyperbole, double entendre, incongruity, sarcasm, and textual winks).

A few authors have analyzed Synoptic humor from a sociological perspective, but most of these works fall short in their application of sociological theory.¹⁷ Gary Webster offers a somewhat undeveloped sociological perspective of biblical humor in

¹⁴ Stephen B. Hatton, "Mark's Naked Disciple: The Semiotics and Comedy of Following," *Neot* 35, no. 1 (2001): 35–48.

¹⁵ Patrick Marrin, "Did Jesus Have a Sense of Humor?" *BibT* 33, no. 2 (1995): 68–73.

¹⁶ Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext*, SNTSMS 72 (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Although J. Bullard focuses his study on humor in Hebrew Bible, his sociological approach to humor and his comparative approach to ancient oriental folklore and mythology offers some insights for the study of Synoptic humor. Bullard believes biblical texts have their original in oral forms of folklore that contained humorous elements of wit and cleverness. He states that humor in biblical texts serves several functions: it increases the intensity of utterances, oracles, or narratives; it helps to convey character in biblical personages, it makes the text more memorable, it enlivens repartee and clarifies argument, and it conveys a tone of condemnation or chastisement. The polemical function of biblical humor is to ridicule everything from discredited philosophers to foolish behaviors, from hypocritical customs to foreign idolatry. See John Moore Bullard, "Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function" (Phd dissert., Yale University, 1961), 5, 207–9, 117–51.

Laughter in the Bible.¹⁸ However, he is one of the earliest authors to associate Jesus' humor with more tendentious types of humor.¹⁹ A more comprehensive sociological perspective of humor is found in Peter L. Berger's *Redeeming Laughter*. Although Berger focuses mainly on social and cultural constructions of the comic in religion, he does include some theoretical aspects applicable to Synoptic humor.²⁰

Most authors on Synoptic humor examine comparative literature in order to situate or clarify types of ancient humor. From a background in comparative mythology, Conrad Hyers critiques the Bible as divine comedy in his book, *And God Created Laughter*. He focuses on two prevalent themes: divine foolishness and comic reversals.²¹ In his book, *L'Humour du Christ des les Evangiles*, André de Peretti notes that humor is quite common in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic literature, but it is comparatively lacking in the New Testament.²² Jakob Jónsson compares some

¹⁸ Gary Webster, *Laughter in the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany, 1960), 109–16. Gary Webster is a pseudonym. The author reveals only that he was a pastor of a Methodist Church in Indianapolis.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin, Ger.: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 187–9. For other authors who study the role and effect of humor in religion, see John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion* (New York: State University of New York, 1999); Donald Capps, "Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows," *Pastoral Psychol* 54, no. 5 (2006): 413–38. Note: these authors include only a few references to New Testament humor.

²¹ Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1987), 2.

²² Andre D. Peretti, *L'humour du Christ dans les Evangiles* (Paris, Fr.: Cerf, 2004).

examples of Synoptic humor with parallels in the Talmud and Midrash.²³ His narrow view of humor and his dismissal of literature from the Greco-Roman period remain persistently problematic. In *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus*, William Phipps surveys Greco-Roman literature and the Hebrew Bible to determine the different types of humor utilized by Jesus in his teaching. He notes that Jesus' humor often targets persons with wealth, power and prestige, but he remains unaware of stratification humor and its functions. Like many authors before him, Phipps concludes that Jesus' humor, although barbed, is never tendentious. David Donaldson's M.A. thesis, *The Humor Jesus Uses in His Teaching*, focuses on defining various types of humor found in Jesus' teaching.²⁴ He claims to utilize comparative literature, but sparsely references Greco-Roman literature. His work leans heavily on Jakob Jónsson's parallels in rabbinic literature. Donaldson's main contribution consists of a challenge directed toward the tradition of seriousness—a tradition of interpretation which presumes that Jesus was a somber and serious teacher. Similar to Donaldson, Robert Stein also focuses on the various forms of humor found in Jesus' teaching.²⁵ Unfortunately, he does not develop his descriptions

²³ Jakob Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: Illuminated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash* (Leiden, Ger.: E. J. Brill, 1985).

²⁴ David Donaldson, "The Humor Jesus Used in His Teaching" (MA thesis, Lincoln Christian Seminary, 1993).

²⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus' Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985). Several authors discuss the teaching and preaching techniques of Jesus. Their works are primarily pastoral expositions. See also John E. Benson, "The Divine Sense of

on the characteristics of oral circum-Mediterranean cultures, and on the function of humor within oral-based cultures.

Scholars have also approached humor in the New Testament from postmodern perspectives. In his book, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan uses a structuralist approach.²⁶ He explores Jesus' parables as paradoxical metaphors replete with role-reversals and image inversions. In addition, he does not explicitly claim any sociological perspectives, but he certainly alludes to sociological humor theory when he cites examples of possible comic audience reactions (e.g., reactionary, revolutionary and conservative) to the parables.²⁷ Crossan's main thesis argues that "parabolic polyvalence" allows for a variety of interpretative reactions. He further argues that the comic potential of the parables links back to the notion that culture and language have their roots in play.²⁸ Crossan offers an interesting, albeit unintended, sociological perspective on the

Humor," *Dialog* 22 (1983): 191–7; John Vannorsdall, "Humor as Content and Device in Preaching," *Dialog* 22 (1983): 187–90; Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus Teachings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

²⁶ Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1980). See also Dan O. Via, *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist Approach to Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975).

²⁷ Notably absent in Synoptic humor studies is any explicit statement regarding the humor response of in-text bystanders and audiences.

²⁸ Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall*, 65–104.

question: Does the de-familiarization process of a parable turn it into a comic parable?

From a somewhat postmodern and re-constructionist perspective, Michael D. Mooney discusses the parables of Jesus as Jewish protest literature in his dissertation entitled *Myth and Irony in the New Testament*.²⁹ He notes common elements found in ancient mythologies (e.g., incongruity, paradox, dramatic reversal, humor, metaphor, irony, and storytelling) and compares these elements with the paradoxical parables of Jesus. In a somewhat confusing plethora of ideas, Mooney's discussion does not stress irony as a form of humor, but as a device of mythologizing literature. He observes irony in the inability of the disciples to identify Jesus as the Messiah.

In the only example of a historical critical approach, Elton Trueblood puts forth *The Humor of Christ*, a classic on Synoptic humor.³⁰ He gives an anthology of humorous episodes and sayings. Elton bases his observations on cultural history and on Bergson's philosophically based humor theory.³¹

Finally, a survey of biblical commentaries and dictionaries suggests that humor remains peripheral, even though countless examples of humor exist in ancient literature, drama, and poetry exist. The term, humor, is located in three Bible

²⁹ Michael Duane Mooney, "Myth and Irony in the New Testament" (Phd dissert, University of California, 1993).

³⁰ Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

³¹ Henri Bergson, *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton (New York: MacMillian Company, 1911).

dictionaries. A review of dictionary entries reveals some inconsistencies in humor typologies and a somewhat persistent narrow view of humor. W. F. Stinespring makes a relatively lengthy entry for humor in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.³² In one instance, Stinespring incorporates wit as a subcategory of humor, and in a somewhat confusing turnabout, he distinguishes humor from wit. To his credit, Stinespring is one of the few biblical scholars to classify irony as a type of humor. In a very brief synopsis, R. Alan Culpepper specifically differentiates humor from wit. He fails to note that wit, more often than not, constitutes a form of humor.³³ John McKenzie provides no entry for humor. Instead, he provides examples of biblical passages that cite laughter. There is no biblical text, notes McKenzie, which suggests Jesus ever laughed.³⁴ However, my study of Jesus' use of humor indicates that he is probably far from being a stoic individual.

We should not get the notion that exegetical work on Synoptic humor has been extensive. A few authors have merely footnoted the allusions to Synoptic humor

³² W. F. Stinespring, "Humor," in *IDB* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 660. Stinespring's examples of Synoptic humor are drawn from Elbert Russell, *Paronomasia and Kindred Phenomena in the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1920); and Zuver, *Salvation by Laughter*.

³³ Alan R. Culpepper, "Humor," *ABD* 3:333. Culpepper's examples of Synoptic humor are taken from an earlier work of Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*.

³⁴ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 495.

or re-iterated previous works.³⁵ For the most part, authors have examined humor in exegetical tidbits here and there. New Testament scholars have used approaches ranging from historical criticism to comparative literature, from linguistics to literary criticism, from rhetorical to narrative criticism, and from semiotics to postmodern approaches. I find many of these works offer significant insights for future work on biblical humor. The lack of in-depth scholarly discussion on New Testament humor and its notable absence in social science and social context approaches suggests that much work is required to advance future studies in New Testament humor.

In my survey of extant works on Synoptic humor, I have briefly noted some deficiencies, which challenge us to reconsider our presuppositions regarding humor. These deficiencies challenge us in several contextual ways: to revisit the seriousness of humor in its ancient milieu; to broaden our understanding of ancient humor and humor devices; to re-consider the humor event as inclusive of the humorist, the target, and the audience/by-standers; to examine the functions of humor effects; and to question the presupposition belying the tradition of seriousness. These challenges mark only the beginning in a humor-neutics of the Synoptic Gospels and their early cultural context. In summary, the process of “recovering” humor from a sociological perspective or “discovering” humor from a postmodern point of view has left a quandary of work for humor studies in the New Testament.

³⁵ For example, see Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward," 15–30; Sean P. Kealy, "Humour and Jesus," *DocLife* 52, no. 2 (2002): 132–7.

In the following sections, I will revisit several key questions summarily raised in this brief introductory preface: Why is humor in the Bible so obscure? In addition, what is the confusion concerning humor terms? Then I shall proceed to take a brief look at the history of humor studies, three sociological approaches associated with humor theory, and the deficiency of social science criticism with regard to humor in the Synoptic Gospels.

Elusiveness of Humor in Biblical Texts

Relatively recently, Hebrew Bible exegetes have produced significant works addressing the obscure nature of biblical humor.³⁶ Their interpretative lenses have revealed various forms of humor from comic character typologies to humorous biblical episodes. These scholars have revealed humor embedded in texts previously deemed too serious for humor (e.g. the Book of Job).³⁷ They have forged pathways in understanding that humor can be serious in tone and serious in meaning. They have argued that “sacred” Scripture can contain tendentious, even at times, derisive and raunchy humor. Hebrew Bible scholars have shown how the humor appreciation of a

³⁶ The contributions of Hebrew Bible scholars include: Immanuel M. Casanowicz, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (Boston, MA: J. S. Cushing and Company, 1894); Brenner, *Are We Amused?* and "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism?" 38–55; Radday and Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 23 (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990); Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*; John A. Miles, "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," *JQR* 65, no. 3 (1975): 168–81; Hector I. Avalos, "The Comedic Function of the Enumerations of Officials and Instruments in Daniel 3," *CBQ* 53, no. 4 (1991): 580-8; and Bullard, "Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function."

³⁷ Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," *Semeia* 7 (1977): 1–39.

reader can obscure biblical humor.³⁸ In other words, a reader who approaches biblical texts with a broad view of humor will be more apt to recognize and appreciate biblical humor.³⁹

Hebrew Bible scholar, Willie Van Heerden, offers the most comprehensive explanation for the elusiveness of humor in the Bible.⁴⁰ He suggests seven major culprits, which are worth summarizing here. The first culprit is the reader's narrow

³⁸ Brenner and Radday discuss textual intentionality and reader's reception/response, see *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, 13–14. See Carroll's conclusion on reader response and personal definition of humor in R. P. Carroll, "Is Humour also among the Prophets?" in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990), 169–89. See also Davies' perspective on reader response in Philip R. Davies, "Joking in Jeremiah 18," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990), 191–215. Levine notes the comic effect is contingent upon the reader's awareness and response, see Etan Levine, "Qohelet's Fool: A Composite Portrait," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990), 277–94.

³⁹ See van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek with Us." Another excellent explanation for the elusiveness of biblical humor is found in Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, 3–7.

⁴⁰ Van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek." See also Brenner, *Are We Amused*; Raddy and Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*; and Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*. Although their studies of religion and humor do not specifically include biblical humor, Capps and Saraglou offer insights into the obstacles of religion that inhibit the perception of biblical humor. See Donald Capps, "Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows," 413–38; and Vassilis Saroglou, "Religion and Sense of Humor: An *a Priori* Incompatibility? Theoretical Considerations from a Psychological Perspective," *Humor* 15 (2002): 191–214.

view of humor.⁴¹ A narrow view of humor is restricted to positive characterizations (e.g., frivolity, laughter, smiling, and bantering), while a broad view of humor encompasses characterizations that are both beneficial and baleful. The broad view of humor includes not only frivolity, punning, merriment, and playful bantering, but also mockery, scorn, barbed wit, tendentious irony, and satire (see Figure 1: Broad and Narrow Views of Humor).⁴²

Moreover, Van Heerden stresses that mediating agents of humor (e.g., smiling and laughter) are difficult, at times impossible, to detect.⁴³ The lack of these nonverbal cues makes tenuous the identification of humor. Tendentious humor can also exhibit mediating agents of humor. However, even if smirks, sneers, snubbing and ridiculing smiles are explicitly noted in a text, most readers are unlikely to associate these nonverbal cues with humorous episodes. While Van Heerden does not suggest so, attention to subtle nonverbal cues can point to possible humorous reactions (e.g., the sneer of the target, or the reaction of shock or amazement from the audience). Scholars often overlook verbal and nonverbal cues from audience and target reactions.

⁴¹ Van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek with Us," 76–77.

⁴² My diagram includes: 1) an illustration of van Heerden's description on broad and narrow views of humor; and 2) a modified version of van Heerden's illustration on the "Functions of Humor" (cf. Van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek with Us," 76–77, 94).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 76.

ability to appreciate ambiguity and paradox.”⁴⁵ He adds, “The stories never had a chance to surprise us.”⁴⁶ Van Heerden notes that in many cases repetitive familiarity has dampened the element of surprise. A second reading deficiency is our lack of comprehensive knowledge of textual interplays, languages, and cultural contexts. Thirdly, our presumptions about divine and eternal truths in biblical texts can skew our perceptions of humor in texts precisely by downplaying the incongruities on which humor often plays.⁴⁷

In his description of the third culprit, Van Heerden develops further his notion of linguistic and cultural hurdles.⁴⁸ Humor can be elusive because of the vexing problems involving language translation and the cultural specificity of language.⁴⁹ As Van Heerden notes, “the translation of puns, wordplay, ironic twists, satirical allusions, humorous expressions and the contexts that make them humorous are the most difficult elements to convey from one language to another.”⁵⁰ Translators and exegetes often have to explain humorous words or episodes in “cumbersome

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 78–79.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

footnotes or parenthetical explanations.”⁵¹ In addition to problems related to cultural and linguistic transmissions, biblical texts lack vocal and facial cues, which often signal humor (e.g., tongue-in-cheek, smiling, and vocal intonations).⁵²

Concerning the fourth culprit, Van Heerden states, “Western people are often bothered by the idea of enjoying incongruity, given the supreme value they place on rational understanding... in which everything is explainable... Westerners try to solve incongruity rather than appreciate it.”⁵³ Without the enjoyment of incongruity, humor appreciation is severely limited.

The fifth culprit rests in Western philosophical and religious traditions that relegate humor to the realm of the non-serious and silly.⁵⁴ Van Heerden briefly traces how centuries of theological reinforcements have embedded solemnity within Christian traditions.⁵⁵ Because scholars construed humor as “frivolous and non-serious activity,” they deemed such activity “unbecoming of a deity or the worship of a deity.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 81–82.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 83–84.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

The sixth culprit relates to the process of de-sacralizing humor. Humor was de-sacralized in the “humour-devastating periods of deification.”⁵⁷ The disassociation of humor from scriptural images of Jesus and from Christian theology and ecclesiology occurred most notably in three phases. The first phase occurred during the Romanization and institutionalization of the Church. Some prominent early Church leaders of this pre-Byzantine era made theological expositions against laughter.⁵⁸ Church officials ushered in the second phase by suppressing comic feasts in the late medieval period. Van Heerden notes that the “Feast of Fools,” and other similar comic feasts, began to generate a great deal of apprehension. The threat of subversive humor prompted the powerful and privileged in religious institutions to curtail the use of humor.⁵⁹ Van Heerden argues the third phase occurred when the rise of modern rationalism adversely affected the use and expression of humor. Religious

⁵⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁸ Views of laughter shifted as the early orthodox view of Christianity took root. Clement of Alexandria urged the restraint and control of laughter (*Paed.* 2.5.249–250). John Chrysostom opposed laughter, especially in the context of prayer, and he sought to portray Jesus as the one who weeps, not the one who laughs (*Hom. Heb.*). For discussions on the hostile views toward laughter in the works of Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, and Pseudo-Cyprian, see Ingvild S. Gilhus. *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), 61–62. Gilhus cites the works of Neil Adkin, “The Fathers on Laughter,” *Orpheus* 6, no. 1 (1985): 149–52; and I. M. Resnick, “*Risus monasticus*: Laughter and Medieval Monastic Culture,” *Rev Bene* 97, no. 1–2 (1987): 90–100. For other related discussions, see M. A., Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London, UK: Penguin, 1997), xxiii.; and John Morreall, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought,” *Philos East West* 39, no. 3 (1989): 243–65.

⁵⁹ Van Heerden, “Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek with Us,” 84–85.

leaders sought to distance religion from associations with the irrational, including superstitious acts and beliefs. Such leaders aligned humor with “irrational” superstitions.⁶⁰

The seventh culprit concerns the particular humor appreciation of an individual. Unless a reader enjoys sophisticated kinds of humor, he or she will not appreciate puns and word play, redundancy and repetition, incongruity and irony, and the other forms of humor that tend to characterize biblical humor.⁶¹ Van Heerden notes, that other types of humour such as ridicule and bantering may not appeal to a listener as humorous.⁶²

Jakob Jónsson gives three additional reasons for the elusiveness of humor in the Bible: avoidance of blasphemy, deficiencies in linguistic appreciation, and theological distractions. First, there is a fear of mocking the divine in blasphemous ways.⁶³ In my experience, Christians seemed surprised and delighted at the notion of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁶¹ Ibid., 86.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 31. Fear of blasphemy and its societal ramifications exerts tremendous control over publication of religious or bible-based cartoons. Noteworthy, there is a growing online resource of biblical humor in popular cartoon format. Greenspoon notes that when biblical humor did occur in cartoons, it tended surface in non-biblical characters (e.g., Andy in *Andy Capp*, Linus and Lucy in *Peanuts*, and the child character in *Family Circus*) or through biblical characters associated with Jesus (e.g., favorites are Peter and Mary), but in recent years have cartoonists begun to depict Jesus as being humorous. See. Leonard Greenspoon, "The New Testament in the Comics," *Bib Rev* 9 (1993): 40–45.

humor in the New Testament, but their responses cooled remarkably, if I demonstrated an example of Jesus using tendentious humor.⁶⁴ This frigid reaction probably has its roots in Nathan Söderblom's claim that humor at the expense of others "threatens the holiness of the holy."⁶⁵ One has only to review the work of Cormier, and to some extent the work of Palmer, to see their skewing interpretation of Jesus' humor toward divine perfection and holiness.⁶⁶

Jónsson also notes a second reason biblical humor is elusive: biblical studies emphasize linguistic and grammatical studies of the Greek texts, while neglecting the "life of the text."⁶⁷ He adds, Greek studies of New Testament rarely, if ever, stress techniques for "hearing" humor (e.g., paronomasia) or reading narratives with the inflections and tones that highlight humor.⁶⁸ Finally, Jónsson proposes those who

⁶⁴ Frequently, people ask me what the topic of my dissertation is. Typically, their initial reaction is one of surprise and delight. Some react with silence or befuddlement. A few respond with doubt or outright dismissal. Two persons have stated that I must be desperate for a topic. When I proceed to give examples of non-tendentious humor, persons generally react with light amusement and agreement, but when I give examples of tendentious humor, almost everyone responds incredulously. One sister in my religious community even warned me not to associate Jesus with tendentious forms of humor such as sarcasm.

⁶⁵ Nathan Söderblom, *Humor och melankoli och andra Lutherstudier* (Stockholm, Sweden: Proprius, 1983), 27.

⁶⁶ Cormier, *The Humor of Jesus*; Palmer, *Laughter in Heaven* and *The Humor of Jesus*.

⁶⁷ Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 312.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

study biblical texts tend to focus on “dogmatic teachings, moral codes, and historical facts.”⁶⁹

The establishment of certain categories also presents a major interpretative obstacle in recognizing biblical humor.⁷⁰ In short, how we categorize our perceptions has a great deal to do with what we will or will not perceive, even if humor is before our eyes.⁷¹ Recovering humor (e.g., cross-cultural or comparative approaches) or discovering humor (e.g., Derridian or literary approaches) in the New Testament challenges us in two fundamental ways: to re-visit the categories that obscure humor recognition; and to re-visit the presuppositions we bring to the text. Perhaps, in accepting these challenges, we will discover that humor in the Synoptic Gospels is not so elusive after all.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 31, 312–3.

⁷⁰ Categories or classifications present very mechanical and narrow ways of perceiving reality. For example, focusing on the literal translation of a word prevents one from exploring the dynamic use of a word. When we learn a new language, we often learn from a very rigid categorical perspective and through a very formalized and conventional grammar of the language. Only through advanced language studies do we begin to learn the dynamics and life of a spoken language. The construction of categories is a thriving remnant of the era of mechanical science. Quantum science and post-modern perspectives continue to undermine the presuppositions that categories are objective. Interestingly, paradigm shifts in biblical methods occur when categories are de-constructed and re-constructed with new insights.

⁷¹ For an enlightening discussion on categories, and how categories shape our perception, see Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Problem of Humor Terms and Humor-Associative Terms

Insufficient definitions of humor and ambiguous uses of humor terms cause problems with humor recognition. Hebrew Bible scholars, who focus on biblical humor, note the complexities of formulating an adequate all-encompassing definition of humor.⁷² As for now, the problems of defining humor remain extensive and extant definitions remain inadequate.

At times, scholars fail to clarify references to humor or they use humor terms in vague and inconsistent ways. For example, it is common to read entire books on biblical irony in the New Testament and find few, if any, allusions to humor.⁷³ In some cases, scholars perpetuate confusion when they deliberately distinguish humor from irony.⁷⁴ Yet, more often than not, irony in antiquity comprised a form of humor and comedy. *Wit* is another example of a problematic humor term. In antiquity, wit is characteristic of the trickster, a stock figure of comedy. In classic Greco-Roman comedies, wit's barbed point and its thrust of reversal serve to elicit a reaction of surprise or shock, most likely intended to provoke laughter. In public forums, wit functions as an effective usurper of honor and power. Wit is a form of rhetorical

⁷² See Radday and Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, 22–24.

⁷³ See Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985); Mooney, "Myth and Irony in the New Testament"; and Aida B. Spencer, "The Wise Fool (and the Foolish Wise): A Study of Irony in Paul," *Novt* 23 (1981): 349-60.

⁷⁴ For narrow interpretations of humor regarding irony, see Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel*.

humor characterized as a shrewd sardonic barb. However, scholars tend to identify wit as quick repartee and rarely qualify it as a type of humor or device associated with ancient humor.

Studies of the Synoptic Gospels continuously reinforce the narrow view of humor by focusing on words like joy and laughter, or by focusing on linguistic features such as puns and wordplays, while the broad view with its inclusion of tendentious humor receives little such reinforcement. For the most part, New Testament scholars have been reluctant to link Jesus with tendentious humor, especially with sardonic barbs.⁷⁵ Yet, this kind of humor abounds in literary examples of challenge-riposte exchanges. Tendentious humor terms belong to the repertoire of ancient humor. Biting satire and sardonic jabs characterize whole works in Greco-Roman comedies and satires.⁷⁶ Ancient playwrights and writers used tendentious humor as a means: to establish boundary identification, to challenge or condemn societal or behavioral inconsistencies, and to claim or re-claim honor.

Another problem seems to arise from the lack of recognition of terms associated with humor. In the Synoptic Gospels, one encounters non-humor terms (e.g., ἐκθαμβέω—to shock, βατταλογέω—to babble, and ἐκμυκτηρίζω—to sneer) that

⁷⁵ Laughter at the expense of others, especially in a public forum, may seem as merciless, humorless, and antiquated to a modern reader, but one need look no further than the modern sardonic television episodes of *The Daily Show* or *Real Time with Bill Maher* to see that terse stinging mockery persists as a popular form of humor.

⁷⁶ For examples, see Juvenal, *Sat.*, Horace, *Sat.*, Persius, *Sat.*, and Lucian, *Dial. meretr.*

may very well signal the presence of humor.⁷⁷ Cues of humor are not limited to the words and deeds of the humorist (i.e., obvious humor cues like mimicry, hyperbole and wordplay). Cues might also be revealed in humorous reactions from the humorist's target (e.g., shock) or from the audience (i.e., laughter). When the humorist fails to exhibit any cues signaling humor, the presence of terms associated with humor may cue us to a range of audience reactions from smiling smirks to guffawing laughter.⁷⁸

Sociological Approaches to Humor Theory

Biblical scholars who hope to examine sociological approaches to Synoptic humor will encounter three major obstacles related to Eastern Mediterranean humor: the lack of publications; the lack of accessible indigenous materials, and the lack of inter-cultural forums. Currently, sociologists and cultural anthropologists offer no extensive studies on Eastern Mediterranean humor.⁷⁹ While humor studies continue

⁷⁷ See Matt 6:7; Mark 14:33; 16:6; and Luke 16:14; 23:35.

⁷⁸ A collective response from an audience can add to the humiliation of a targeted person.

⁷⁹ As of 2007, only three articles on humor in the HRAF (Human Relations Area Files) cover Eastern Mediterranean cultures. There is a severe lack of accessible data regarding humor in the Eastern Mediterranean cultures, and such data would be extremely helpful in broadening cross-cultural perspectives of biblical texts. The HRAF is a two-part research collection of worldwide ethnographical and archaeology materials. The collections, which require a subscription before they are accessible, are online at <http://www.yale.edu/hraf/collections.htm> (accessed on July 18, 2007). The categories under which humor may be found include: status and prestige; social relations; loss of face; socialization; in-group antagonisms; breaches of ethics; social norms; behavior modifications; transmission of cultural norms; and hospitality.

to gain slow momentum as a specialized field, scholars of sociology, anthropology, and religion remain largely missing from the interdisciplinary, international association on humor.⁸⁰ These observations are surprising given the serious social ramifications of humor. The effects of humor can traverse the spectrum ranging from the creation of new friendships to the destruction of property and life. Recent examples of humor's deadly serious side include Khomeini's 1989 fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie for his humorous book, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), as well as the deaths and destructions resulting from the Cartoon Riots of 2006.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Davis notes the slow progress in establishing humor as a specialized field. Humor studies began to gain the attention of scholars after the first international conference on humor in England in 1976. The ISHS annual international conference is the only current gathering for interdisciplinary and international scholarship on humor studies. Since 2001, one peer-reviewed journal known as *Humor* serves the ISHS (*International Society for Humor Studies*). Davis particularly discusses the lack of sociologists in humor studies. See Murray S. Davis, "The Sociology of Humor: A Stillborn Field," *Soc Forum* 10, no. 2 (1995): 327–30.

In a survey of ISHS membership for 2005–06, I observed the following statistics: psychology-health services-social work (123 members); literature-language studies-linguistics (99 members); communications-technology-public relations-business (59 members); education instruction (22 members); anthropology and cultural studies (9 members); sociology (8 members); drama (7 members); philosophy (6 members); history (5 members); religion (4 members); biblical studies (1 member); and unknown (34 members). In the fields of anthropology, sociology, and religion, there is remarkably low representation in humor theory. Currently, I am the only biblical scholar in ISHS.

⁸¹ During a NPR (National Public Radio) broadcast of *Weekend All Things Considered* (Jun 24, 2007), Rushdie discusses his book, *The Satanic Verses* as humorous fiction. He explains that this fictive narrative was born out of his own experiences as a refugee in exile. Hear also to the NPR broadcast of *Talk of the Nation* (May 3, 1999) in which Rushdie discusses death threats issued against him because of the publication of *Satanic Verses*. Cf. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992).

During the spring of 2006, a series of deadly riots broke out through largely Middle Eastern and Eastern Islamic societies. During the cartoon riots, large numbers

Sociological approaches to Synoptic humor require both the application of culturally based humor theories and knowledge of the cultural context and social patterns of the ancient circum-Mediterranean world. Presently, biblical scholars must rely on the universal aspects of primarily Western European-U.S. humor theories because of the lack of known particulars related to Eastern Mediterranean humor. In addition, biblical scholars can supplement observations from ancient literature, visual arts, and other social *realia* in order to illuminate the particulars of first century circum-Mediterranean humor.

In applying humor theory to Christian biblical texts, three sociological approaches: structural, phenomenological and political, stand out as most informative.⁸² A brief explanation of each follows. A structural approach examines the functions of humor within social categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and urban-rural designations) and social institutions (e.g., religion, politics, occupation, and family). The basic premise presupposes humor as primarily a survival mechanism with secondary functions in social bonding, relief from stressful or tense situations, passive aggression, defensive repartee, self-effacement, and social correction.⁸³ From

of Muslims protested against the publication of a series of cartoons in a Dutch newspaper. The cartoons depicted Mohammed in ways many Muslims felt were blasphemous.

⁸² For structural strategy, see Marvin Koller, *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor* (Houston, TX: Cap and Gown, 1988). For phenomenological strategy, see Michael Mulkey, *On Humor* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1988). For political strategy, see Chris Powell and George Paton, *Humor in Society: Resistance and Control* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

⁸³ Koller, *Humor and Society*.

a structuralist perspective, humor functions to secure and stabilize in-group entities against internal and external threats. The application of a structuralist approach requires knowledge of specific social categories and social institutions related to ancient societies. Sample questions may include the following: How does humor identify, control and solidify in-group boundaries of a particular social category or institution? How does humor identify outsiders? How does humor function in the acquisition and maintenance of honor? How does humor salvage or undermine honor?

The phenomenological approach examines the negative and positive impact of applied humor on social structure.⁸⁴ This approach examines how humor functions in situations that are structured (e.g., formal settings such as court proceedings and temple precincts) and unstructured (e.g., dinner parties, roadsides and marketplaces). The basic premise of this approach presupposes two primary modes of perception: serious and humorous. In short, understanding the mode of perception has implications for interpretation of texts as serious or humorous. The existence of ambiguity, paradox, and multiple interpretations within a text tend to be characteristic of a humorous mode of perception.⁸⁵ Applying the phenomenological perspective to antiquity requires extensive work in comparative literature. Sample questions of a

⁸⁴ The negative impact of humor generally includes critiques against social structures and traditions, while the positive impact of humor stresses support of social structure and traditions.

⁸⁵ See Mulkay, *On Humor*.

“structured” setting might look like this: What constitutes acceptable behaviors or responses during a court proceeding in an imperial Roman province? Is defendant-based humor permissible? What is the form and type of humor utilized? What verbal or nonverbal cues signal the defendant’s shift from serious to humorous mode? What is the effect of the humor on the plaintiff, the audience, and the judge? What happens when a person uses humor to deflect an accusation?

A political approach bases its premise on the resistance and control functions of humor.⁸⁶ Humor can serve two polarizing groups, the conservative, which aims to flatter social conventions or the radical, which aims to undermine social conventions. Conservative strategies utilize humor as a control mechanism in defining and maintaining in-group boundaries. This watchdog effect of humor seeks to expose and to restrict incongruities between ideologies and praxis. Humor is a powerful device aiding in-group formation, especially through normalizing ethnic or religious stereotypes of those perceived to be outsiders. Radical strategies use humor to reveal newly emergent beliefs and practices, and to undermine prevailing institutionalized ideologies. Among sample questions are the following: How does humor aim to build up, maintain or undermine an existing belief or pattern of behavior? In what ways does humor function to support or antagonize an established pattern? Does humor serve a controlling function within an in-group forum, or does humor serve a conflict function between in-group and out-group members?

⁸⁶ Powell and Paton, *Humor in Society*.

These three sociological approaches incorporate various perspectives and insights into the control and conflict functions of humor. The conflict function of humor is rooted in some form of aggression. This function of humor usually aims to undermine power-based ideologies, to de-stabilize prevailing systems, to usurp some type of power, or to empower the disenfranchised by targeting sympathetic public sentiment. Humor expressed in aggressive forms, especially within mixed forums, often results in bitter disputes or deadly confrontations. Humorists use tendentious humor such as barbed wit, ridicule or sarcasm to induce conflict.

Humor also functions as a control mechanism for defining boundaries and creating cohesion within a common value system.⁸⁷ Social stratification humor is an example of the control function of humor. In social stratification humor, boundaries distinguish the identity of the insider from the identity of the outsider. Social stratification humor resides mainly in the domain of insider literature, and utilizes stereotypes and deviance labeling to define in-group status by discrediting out-group opponents (e.g., the lazy laborer, the over-bearing businessperson, the dishonest manager, the miserly rich, the possessed person, and the ignorant poor). In addition to social stratification, another form of control humor is playful bantering. In both of these types of humor, we see humor functioning to induce in-group loyalty.

⁸⁷ See Richard Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," *Am J Sociol* 56, no. 6 (1951): 569–74.

The application of these three, at times overlapping, sociological approaches provide particular insights into humor analysis. In Chapter 4, I will describe in more detail how these sociological approaches inform the model I have constructed.

Social Science Criticism and Humor Studies

Social science and social context approaches are notably absent among published works on Synoptic humor.⁸⁸ Scholars simply do not mention humor, even in relation to subjects where a disposition toward humor is highly probable, such as in stratification illustrations, classical rhetorical expositions, deviance labeling, and challenge-riposte exchanges. Additionally, humor and the functions of humor are among the most pervasive of human universals, both in chronological and cross-cultural aspects.

Humor in ancient folklores and mythic literature remind us that humor had many sociological functions. Humor served to entertain travel-weary visitors, to

⁸⁸ John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, (Peabody, MA: Henderickson, 1998), 111. No mention of the role of humor appears in Malina, Rohrbaugh or Pilch's co-authored or edited works. See Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 33–34; and Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003). No humor is mentioned in Elliott's study on the evil eye (see John H. Elliott, "The Evil Eye and the Sermon on the Mount," *BibInt* 2, no. 1 (1994): 51-84. Clarke notes the use of laughter as a device to warn off evil in two of his works on art in antiquity. See John R. Clarke, "Look Who's Laughing at Sex: Men and Women Viewers in the Apodyterium of the Suburban Baths at Pompeii," in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power and the Body*, ed. David Frederick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 149–81; and *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

instruct youths in the ways of the gods, to salvage soiled honor and to incite bloody revenge. In these ancient narratives, the gods used humor in rough ways to gain power and prestige among themselves, and to subdue and manipulate humans.⁸⁹ Through ancient art, objects, and literature, people of the circum-Mediterranean societies frequently used various forms of humor as apotropaic devices.⁹⁰

Why have scholars of social science and social context approaches not given more attention to the role and functions of humor in New Testament texts? I have already cited possible reasons for this shortcoming. For example, scholars may hold tightly to a tradition of seriousness, because the basic premise of traditional scholarship is to view biblical texts through a serious and solemn lens. Because of the premise of “serious tradition,” scholars must demonstrate extraordinary proof that humor exists in biblical texts. Scholars may also cleave to a constricted view of humor. Perceptions of humor rest almost exclusively in the narrow domain of laughter, frivolous smiles, or casual play. Humor is neither associated with serious activity nor with tendentious terms such as sarcasm. Exegetes of humor in the New Testament may fail to realize that humor has a deadly serious side, and a side that frolics with frivolity. Finally, I suggest that scholars of social science approaches fail to see the important role of humor and the functions of humor in ancient patterns of socialization.

⁸⁹ See a discussion on the history of gods and their laughter in various ancient mythologies in Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*.

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*; and "Look Who's Laughing at Sex."

We might find it helpful here to recall certain key aspects of general social science theory. Social science theory (with its emphasis in cultural anthropology) maintains that the universal aspects of human culture change relatively little in spite of chronological periods, migratory patterns, and evolutionary developments. The general theory presumes that routinized behavior in human societies serves to maintain and sustain some predictability in shared collective living.⁹¹ Societies pass on and reinforce these routinized behaviors through familial and communal socialization. Examples of universals in human societies include complexities in social relations (e.g., hierarchies of power, status, and privilege); organizations of social groups (e.g., political, familial, and value-oriented groupings such as religious groups); patterns of social behavior (e.g., dominant and submissive roles); and patterns of social interaction (e.g., verbal expressions and visual cues related to communicating challenge, acceptance, rejection, hurt, anger, joy and humor).

Although biblical scholars use social science theories to explore a range of cultural universals in the circum-Mediterranean world of the New Testament, it is striking that they fail to examine one of the most pervasive universals in human culture, the role of humor and its various functions. Biblical scholars have offered studies on a host of universals (via social science criticism) with cultural particulars (via social context) related to the study of biblical texts, and these studies have focused primarily on socialization patterns and societal stratifications (e.g., social

⁹¹ John H. Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 14–16, 76–77.

roles and statuses, group formations, the customs of social interactions, and religious, political and familial structures). The question surfaces, how can biblical scholars study the socialization patterns of a culture without understanding the role and function of humor and the range of responses it can elicit in the socialization process? Humor is a powerful mechanism of social interaction and an effective device in challenge-riposte exchanges. Humor is also an effective rhetorical device in the acquisition and maintenance of honor, and in the building of in-group solidarity.

Humor plays a significant role in the Synoptics, especially in the challenge-riposte exchanges between Jesus and his opponents. Public challenges frequently prompt Pharisees and other opponents of Jesus to salvage their honor through attempts to catch Jesus in public traps. For Jesus, humor is an especially effective device in deterring these entrapments. In an exchange of wits, Jesus utilizes humorous barbs to usurp public sympathy and to gain publically affirmed honor. Public reaction probably intensifies the effect of Jesus' humor on his opponents. For Jesus' opponents, the loss of honor incurred through public ridicule and other forms of tendentious humor is devastating, resulting in harsh consequences for Jesus. During challenge-riposte exchanges, Jesus' humor elicits responses ranging from light-hearted waivers to anger-laden executions. It is not too incredulous to surmise that tendentious humor may have been a serious contributing factor leading to Jesus' execution.

Conclusion

Hebrew Bible scholars have made significant contributions to the study of humor in biblical texts. They have broadened our understanding of humor, and challenged our presupposition that biblical texts are always solemnly serious. Through the identification of linguistic cues, comic typologies, and other humor devices, Hebrew Bible scholars have given us a deeper appreciation of biblical humor.

In this chapter, I have noted several deficiencies related to study of humor in the Synoptic Gospels. First, the ambiguous and inconsistent uses of modern humor terms have plagued our attempts to recognize Synoptic humor. Secondly, lexical and linguistic cues that signal the presence of humor in Greek texts remain somewhat underdeveloped in New Testament scholarship. Notably, the universal elements of humor as well as the roles of humor in socialization have remained unobserved. New Testament scholars, who stress approaches in social science and social context, have failed to consider the weight of humor in ancient Roman-era societies.

On the up side, scholars have made some contributions to humor recognition in the New Testament. Most of these contributions have surfaced through exegetical works utilizing literary, semantic, rhetorical, and linguistic, and comparative literary approaches. In an ironic twist, a number of these scholarly works contain no explicit references to humor; even so, they offer significant insights into the literary devices (e.g., irony and typologies) that ancient persons would have associated with humor.

From the perspective of humor theory, sociologists have offered several approaches aimed at exploring the effects and functions of humor. They have underscored the universal nature of humor and its role in socialization and in-group identity formation. However, biblical scholars who seek to apply sociological humor theory remain persistently impeded by a severe lack of Mediterranean perspectives on humor.

Overall, recovering New Testament humor remains a challenging endeavor. For the most part, humor is cloaked in absent or subtle nonverbal cues, and shrouded in linguistic, cultural and chronological mists. Advancing New Testament humor studies requires the interpretative lens of an interdisciplinary approach. Yet the challenge of bringing together the insights of sociologists skilled in humor theory and the contributions of biblical scholars, who examine the cultural and linguistic elements of biblical humor, is a complex and perpetually evolving endeavor.

In chapter 4, I will bring together the results of two interdisciplinary questions: How can biblical approaches, which address linguistics and communication (i.e., through comparative literature, literary, rhetorical and narrative strategies) help identify and clarify humor events in the Synoptic Gospels, and how can sociological approaches to humor help inform and illuminate the effect and function of humor? I will formulate a two-part interdisciplinary model to serve as a stepping-stone in moving us toward an understanding of the humor event and its corresponding humor effect.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMOR IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Within the honor-shame societies of antiquity, humor remained a persistent and pervasive rhetorical device in human interaction. Playwrights, actors, teachers, orators and philosophers used humor to display power, to assert control, and to provoke conflict. Humor served a range of sociological functions in the tragedies and comedies of theatrical performances, in biographies of great personages, in philosophical and rhetorical treatises, in apotropaic art, and in street graffiti. Whether ancient writers used humor to demonstrate the cleverness of a folk hero, or to warn disciples of impending consequences for foolish deeds, they knew the power of public laughter.

I present in this chapter a survey, by no means comprehensive, of humor artifacts (i.e., texts, objects, or art, etc.) from ancient circum-Mediterranean sources. This survey focuses on representative examples from Mesopotamian mythologies, Hebraic and Arabian literature, Egyptian images, Grecian comedy and philosophy, and Roman satire and rhetoric. In addition to the examples I highlight the beliefs, the forms, the functions, and the effects of ancient humor. In the conclusion, I summarize some key sociological observations on the use of humor within the context of the honor-shame societies of the ancient circum-Mediterranean world.

Humor in Mesopotamian Artifacts

Derisive laughter and trickery were the common forms of humor expressed by powerful deities in Akkadian and Hurrian mythologies. For the most part, derisive laughter functioned to maintain hierarchical order in the potentially chaotic and unpredictable world of the Mesopotamian valley.¹ For example, the Akkadian god, Ea, advised the mortal Adapa, how he might appease an angry god, and gain immortality.² However, Ea instructed Adapa to eat nothing that the angry god offered to him. When the angry god placed the Bread and Water of Life before Adapa, he refused to consume it, because of Ea's advice. And so, Ea wisely kept humans mortal so that he would always have sacrificial offerings to eat. Ea's trickery effectively suppressed Adapa's ambition. In an ancient Hurrian myth, Gilhus recalled the example of Kumarbi, the Hurrian deity, who used derisive laughter to gain a supreme position in the hierarchy of deities.³ Kumarbi attacked and subdued his father, one of the principal Hurrian deities. He swallowed his father's genitals and broke out in triumphant laughter. Such tendentious laughter functioned to complete status

¹ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 9–10, and 14–21. Gilhus discusses two primary types of laughter in Mediterranean and Near Eastern texts: the laughter of derision and the laughter of regeneration.

² *Ibid.*, 14–18. Gilhus provides more discussion on the humorous episodes of Ea and Adapa. She notes that scribes in Egypt and Babylonia were familiar with Akkadian mythologies (p. 141, fn 1).

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

degradation and dethronement of rival deities. In mythologies, derisive laughter and trickery played a critical role in defeating rivals and establishing domination.

The laughter of derision appears quite often in Hebraic texts, especially in the folktales of early patriarchs, the denouncements in prophetic writings, in the Exodus grumblings of the Israelites, and in the Israelite dealings with foreign threats. A well known example of derisive laughter occurs when God promises progeny to a decisively elderly couple. In their response, Abraham and Sarah laugh derisively (Gen 17;18:10–12; 21:6). In return, God mockingly dubs their child with a name that left Philo defending it centuries later. Another example of derisive laughter occurs in a gruesomely appalling form of comedy. Young mockers meet their horrifying fate after aiming derisive laughter at the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 2:23–24). Even in the form of songs, the psalmist prayed for Divine derisive laughter to accompany the defeat and humiliation of Israelite enemies (Pss 37:12–13; 59:8–10).⁴

Satirical barbs, often embedded in curses and ironic anecdotes, were one of the most widespread and feared vehicles of derisive laughter in antiquity.⁵ As a control mechanism, the satirical barb threatened perpetrators with public ridicule, a

⁴ Ibid., 24–25.

⁵ Thomas Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Westminster & John Knox, 1992), 21. Jemielity cites several examples of satirical behavior in the Hebrew Bible, including David's collection of one hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Sam 18:25), and Ezekiel's plethora of offensive images (Ezek 16). He observes that, at times, prophets used bizarre and grotesque images, hyperbolic language, and wildly exaggerated behavior to deliver satirical barbs.

powerful shaming device.⁶ Prophetic pronouncements were most notable for ridiculing people, who had either taunted the undeserving, or meted out unjust oppressions.⁷ The Israelite prophets used satirical barbs against a host of social evils, including hypocritical religious practices, unethical behaviors, unjust oppressions, and exploitations of unfortunate and powerless people.⁸ For example, Amos' railing against other nations for their acts of barbarism turned back unexpectedly upon Judah and Israel.⁹ In early Israelite literature, other examples of satirical barbs found their targets in outsiders.¹⁰ In one example, the foreign prophet, Balaam, received his satirical barbs from a donkey (Num 22:4–35)!

⁶ Cf. Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).

⁷ Jemielity, "Ancient Biblical Satire," 17–18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23. Jemielity notes the similarities between the topics (e.g., hypocrisy, exploitation of the unfortunate, unjust oppressions) satirized by Hebrew prophets and the Roman satirist, Juvenal. Carroll also examines the use of satire by the Hebrew prophets. Cf. Carroll, "Is Humour also among the Prophets," 169–89. Derisive barbs contained within curse pronouncements were common in Grecian and Roman satirical works. Classic examples of satirical curses in the Synoptic Gospels include Matthew 23:13–36 (see also Luke 11:42–52).

⁹ After satirizing the foreign nations of Damascus, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab and the northern kingdom, Amos turned the satirical attack unexpectedly upon his Israelite audience (Amos 1:3–2:16). Jemielity and Plaza discuss the use of satire to condemn social evils. See Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*, 84–85; and Maria Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 57–85.

¹⁰ Jemielity, "Ancient Biblical Satire," 26–27. Jemielity cites the example of satirical barbs in Elijah's mockery of the priests of Baal (1 Kgs 18:27).

In times of warfare, the satirical barb carried preternatural powers. As a weapon, the satirical barb held the power to effect injury, and death on feared opponents.¹¹ The Israelite story of Goliath and David recounted the exchange of satirical barbs as a pre-battle weapon (1 Sam 17:10–11, 20, 23–48). When Goliath stepped forth to mock the armies of Israel, they fell back in terror. More than his appearance, the words of Goliath produced shock and fear. His satirical barbs shot arrows of terror at them (cf. the *qal* form of *אָרַךְ* in 1 Sam 17:11). Satirical barbs sought to bring both terror and dishonor upon the enemy (1 Sam 17:48). The Philistines and the Israelites were not the only ancient people to use satirical barbs as weapons of war.¹² Arabic poets composed satirical barbs, known as *hija*, against their enemy.¹³ The *hija* became a spear-like weapon, which poets hurled at the enemies

¹¹ Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*, 21.

¹² Elliott notes that the ancient Celtic poet-prophets, known as *filid*, also inspired terror by their satirical barbs. Before a battle ensued between two opposing armies, the *filid* stepped forth between them and caused the enemy to halt their advances. The *filid* would utter satirical verses aimed at creating terror in the enemy. Magical satirical invectives, not only decimated the honor of the enemy, but brought about their demise. Elliott noted that early citations of the *filid* were rare. Early Celtic practices were almost exclusively oral and never written. Cf. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, 15, 19, 23–24, 50. He based his observations of the Celtic *filid* on the writings of Diodorus of Sicily (ca. 60–30 BCE). Cf. Diodorus of Sicily, *Hist.* 5.31.3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15. Arabic poetry existed in oral form until shortly before the Islamic period. Generally, the literary period of ancient Arabic poetry was dated from BCE 750–634 CE, but the oral transmission of ancient Arabic poetry makes dating poetry notoriously difficult.

before any physical fighting actually began.¹⁴ In the form of an extemporized verse, the *hija* consisted of taunts, ridicule, curses and an occasional obscenity.¹⁵ The *hija* aimed at decimating the power of the enemy.¹⁶ The poet would physically dodge a *hija* from the enemy in the same way he would dodge an actual spear.¹⁷

In addition to satirical barbs and derisive laughter, Israelite literature offered a plethora of ironic episodes. I have already noted the example of Balaam (Num 22:4–35). Another example of biblical irony occurred in Jonah's game of hide-n-seek (Jonah 1:3–2:10). The prophet tried foolishly to run away from God, even hid in a ship hold and slept, in order to shut out God.¹⁸ In spite of such efforts, the prophet found himself in the presence of God in a very unlikely place—the depths of the sea. Ironic scenes and dialogues filled the story of Jonah. Other classic episodes of biblical irony occurred in the salvation of Israelite spies by the shrewdness of a woman named Rahab, a foreigner and prostitute (Joshua 2:1–21), and in the decapitation of the

¹⁴ In addition to his satirical barbs, the poet's appearance also created fear. The poet appeared before the enemy with his mantle untied, with one sandal-less foot, and with disheveled hair. Cf. *Ibid.*, 15–16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ Bishr Fares, *L'honneur chez les arabes avant l'islam* (Paris, Fr.: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1932), 214–8.

¹⁷ Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 15.

¹⁸ Jemielity, "Ancient Biblical Satire," 25. Jemielity cites the example of Jonah. He notes that if Jonah had just accepted God's commission, he would have avoided all the trouble that beset him.

Assyrian Holofernes by a daring Israelite woman (Judith 8:1–14:18).¹⁹ In these stories, ultimate ridicule came in the manner of shameful behavior (e.g., the shame of hiding on the roof of a prostitute's abode) or shameful death (e.g., the shame of being killed by a woman in the most vulnerable of positions).

Humor in Egyptian Artifacts

Forms of ancient Egyptian humor included apotropaic art.²⁰ One classic image was that of the Egyptian deity, Bes, a comic gnome-like figure.²¹ His distorted and surprising appearance averted the evil eye while humans were in liminal and vulnerable states (i.e., birthing, sleeping, childhood and sexual activity).²² Bes aimed to elicit the laughter of diversion, in order to distract the evil eye and avert its ill

¹⁹ For discussions on humorous biblical episodes, see Brenner, *Are We Amused? Humor About Women in the Biblical Worlds*; and Radday and Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*. Regarding the humor of Holofernes' beheading and other occurrences of tendentious humor in the apocryphal writings, see Toni Craven, "Is That Fearfully Funny? Some Instances from the Apocryphal /Deuterocanonical Books," in *Are We Amused? Humor About Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner (New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 65–78.

²⁰ Cf. Baudouin van de Walle, *L'humour dans la littérature et dans l'art de l'ancienne Égypte* (Leiden, Ger.: Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1969); and P. H. Houlihan, "Comic Relief in Ancient Egyptian Art." *Ancient Egypt* 2, no. 5 (2002): 14–21. Egyptian humor included satire, puns, fables, caricatures, and painted comic scenes.

²¹ Cf. Paul G. P. Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy* (Leiden, Ger.: Brill, 1995).

²² Donald B. Redford, ed. *The Ancient Gods Speak* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28–29.

effects.²³ Other apotropaic images consisted of dwarfs and pygmies.²⁴ In the circum-Mediterranean world, the Egyptian *Aethiops* and pygmies seemed to gain extreme popularity with Romans as apotropaic images.²⁵

Egyptian humor included caricatures of human activity found in wall paintings. For example, on a wall of Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri, a painted scene depicted an oversized queen followed by a rather small donkey. Egyptian hieroglyphics underscored the humorous caricature with the inscription, "The donkey that had to carry the queen."²⁶ In antiquity, overweight rulers were often the butt of humor.²⁷ Much of Egyptian's humorous caricatures displayed animals doing human tasks.

Egyptian mythologies recounted humor as an essential key to creative events. Deities exploded with re-generative laughter in acts of creation, re-creation, and fertility. For example, the creation myth of Hathor and Re gave birth to deities

²³ See Leonard H. Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Bryon E. Shafer (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), 87–122; Redford, *The Ancient Gods Speak*, 159.

²⁴ Cf. John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representations and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.–A.D. 315* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); and "Look Who's Laughing at Sex."

²⁵ Cf. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*; and "Look Who's Laughing at Sex."

²⁶ Andrews, an Egyptologist of the University of London, referred to this inscription in a lecture entitled "The Ancient Egyptian Sense of Humor" on May 17, 2004 at the University of Washington (Seattle, WA).

²⁷ Cf. Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism?"

through bursts of laughter.²⁸ Within mythological stories, shocking words and gestures served specifically to provoke laughter, which in turn served to stimulate the birth of life.²⁹

Overview of Humor in Grecian Artifacts

A survey of Grecian mythologies, theatrical performances, and philosophical treatises offered abundant insights into ancient humor, and revealed an overwhelming Grecian preference for tendentious forms of humor.³⁰ In Grecian mythologies, numerous episodes revealed deities who mocked foiled plans, engaged in trickery, and laughed in derision at the shortcomings of mortals and the spats of immortals. In theater performances, humor highlighted motifs related to failed social mores. In addition to comedies, humor also found its way into tragedies. In the extant fragments

²⁸ See Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 19; Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," 87–122; and Redford, *The Ancient Gods Speak*, 159. Gilhus writes that in the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, the depressed Egyptian god, Re, laughed when Hathor exposed herself to him. Hathor's shocking act helped to stimulate Re into action. Gilhus recounts that Hathor had a tendency to fluctuate between her joyful nature and her destructive nature (Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 19).

²⁹ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28. See Bracht Branham, *Unruly Eloquency: Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). See humor associated with symposium in B. Fehr, "Entertainers at the Symposium: The Akletoi in the Archaic Period," in *Symptotica: A Symposium on the Symposium*, ed. O. Murray (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1990), 185–95. These major genres provided the earliest extensive vocabulary of humor and humor-related words. Cf. S. Halliwell, "The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture," *CQ* 41, no. 2 (1991): 280. Halliwell notes sixty word-groups associated with Grecian humor. He presents a study of Greek terms related to laughter and places the terms along a continuum from playful to consequential.

of the Seven Sages, philosophers put forth beliefs about humor in tidbit sayings, while in philosophical treatises, Plato and Aristotle conveyed the benefits and the ethics of humor.

After an extensive survey of humor and humor-related terms, I have presented below some representative examples, along with some sociological observations, of Grecian humor. These examples provided further insights into the forms, beliefs, functions and effects of ancient humor.

Humor in Greek Mythologies

In ancient Greek mythologies, numerous incidents of tendentious humor occurred in power plays between gods and mortals, and between gods within the pantheon. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* frequently depicted episodes of such tendentious humor.³¹ Deities derided mortals in order to demonstrate their superiority. In one example, the gods made great sport of the mortal, Hephaestus.³² When a deity mocked another deity, humor serves as a means to usurp power from another deity. In short, derisive laughter helped to undermine a rival deity's hierarchical status.³³ Such tendentious laughter signaled a moment of mockery and triumph. For example,

³¹ See P. Friedländer, "Lachende götter," *Die antike* 10 (1934): 209–26; A. Lesky, "Griechen lachen über ihre götter," *Wiener humanistische blätter* 4 (1961): 30–40.

³² Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion*, 29–33.

³³ Friedländer, "Lachende götter"; and Lesky, "Griechen lachen über ihre götter."

Prometheus smiled deceitfully as he tricked Zeus out of the best of a sacrificial offering.³⁴ The use of humor in power play provided comic moments between deities, such as Hera's belittling slap delivered to Artemis' ear, which prompted Zeus to laugh uproariously.³⁵ The gods' shrewd tactics and trickery often culminated in mocking laughter.³⁶

Humor in Greek Theatrical Performances

The early Grecian comedies focused on exposing the social ills of the *polis* and relied excessively on tendentious, often malevolent, forms of humor.³⁷ The humor of Old Comedy (ca. 448–380 BCE) ranged from abusively buffoonish to heavily satirical.³⁸ Mockery and derisive laughter in theatrical comedy served to

³⁴ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 29. Cf. Hesiod, *Theog.* 546–7 and *Op.* 54–9. Gilhus cites the work of J. P. Vernant, "The Myth of Prometheus in Hesiod," in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 183–201.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30. See humor associated with symposium in B. Fehr, "Entertainers at the Symposium."

³⁶ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 29–33.

³⁷ See M. Dillion, "Tragic Laughter," *Classical World* 84, no. 5 (1991): 345; Halliwell, "The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture"; and G. S. Meltzer, "The Role of Comic Perspective in Shaping Homer's Tragic Vision," *Classical World* 83, no. 4 (1990): 265–80. Plato, Gorgias, Xenophon, and Democritus were renowned philosophers during the era of Old Comedy.

³⁸ Early Grecian comedy developed from the phallic processions of Dionysius, the god of laughter, and the antics of satyrs during city festivals. These processions occurred as early as the sixth century (BCE) and lasted into the Aristotelian era.

induce shame against perpetrators of unethical mores.³⁹ In the era of Old Comedy, comic poets often assumed the role as “*didaskalos* of justice.”⁴⁰ Aristophanes epitomized this *didaskalos* role through his satirical critique of the abuses of powerful leaders and the absurdities of war.⁴¹

New Comedy, which used a variety of humor devices and elements, highlighted the dangers and laughable antics of comic type scenes.⁴² Audiences related to the familiar type scenes and found them humorous (e.g., the antics of secret lovers, the mishaps of slaves, etc.). Inter-personal and domestic plots were common in New Comedy. Although presented as laughable, comic authors stressed plots that ridiculed situations of real danger (e.g., the husband’s discovery of a secret adulterer, the patron’s belittlement of a slave, etc.). A repertoire of standardized masks emerged in New Comedy to express a variety of stock characters within certain kinds of type scenes.⁴³ An example of some stock characters included: ὁ εἰρων (the eiron), ἡ κόλακας (the flatterer), ὁ ἀδολέσχης (the idle chatterer), ὁ ἄγροικος (the boor), ὁ

³⁹ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 28.

⁴⁰ Catherine Keane, "Defining the Art of Blame: Classical Satire," in *A Companion to Satire*, ed. Ruben Quintero (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 37.

⁴¹ Cf. Aristophanes, *Nub.*, *Ran.*, and *Lys.*

⁴² *New Comedy* (ca. 342–323 BCE) describes a genre of comic performances that emphasized domestic, rather than political themes.

⁴³ Theophrastus wrote a description of stock characters in theatrical plays, shortly before the era of New Comedy. Cf. Theophrastus, *Char.* Many of the public areas of wealthy houses contain painted frescoes of the masks of stock characters.

ἄρεσκος (the pleaser), ὁ ἀναίσχυντος (the freeloader), ὁ μικρολόγος (the miserly penny pincher), and ὁ βδελυρὸς (the obnoxious person).⁴⁴ Elements of tension, surprise and release heightened the comic effect of type scenes. One recurring plot included variations of scenes involving an adulterer hiding in the bedroom of a married woman, because the husband had arrived home unexpectedly.⁴⁵ The adulterer was reduced to an undignified position before (e.g., hiding in a basket) and after his discovery (e.g., running for his life).

Theophrastus wrote an early work identifying the traits of stock characters, usually found in comedies.⁴⁶ He aligned each character with an explanatory title and presented a brief summation of each character's traits and behavior.⁴⁷ His delineation

⁴⁴ Cf. Theophrastus, *Char.*

⁴⁵ For themes common to the plots of New Comedy, see the works of Menander (e.g., *Dysk.*, *Epitr.*, *Georg.*, *Mis.*, *Phasm.*, *Perik.*, *Sam.*, and *Sik.*).

⁴⁶ Cf. Theophrastus, *Char.* It remains uncertain which parts of *Characters* Theophrastus actually wrote. Scholars detect some editing from later unknown revisionists. In the Aristotelian age, theater attendees witnessed an explosion of stock characters. Aristotle's student, Theophrastus wrote a now lost treatise on laughter entitled Περὶ γελοίου. Quintilian referenced Περὶ γελοίου in *Inst.* 6.3.22. Theophrastus was head of the Peripatetic School in Athens (ca. 306–285 BCE). As Aristotle influenced Theophrastus, Theophrastus' work eventually influenced the Greek, Plutarch and the Roman, Quintilian. Cf. Mary A. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable: The Greek Rhetoricians and Cicero* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1924), 34–38.

⁴⁷ Theophrastus, *Char.* Rusten and Cumingham explain that a description of each character begins with the formula “οἷος τις τοιοῦτος (i.e., One such as this is...)” They recall that in antiquity the term, *χαρακτήρ*, referred to an *imprint* such as those found on coins. For this reason, they urges the use of “traits” rather than “characters” as the English equivalent of Theophrastus' *χαρακτήρ*. See introductory

of character traits highlighted stereotyped behavior.⁴⁸ One example of his characters included ὁ ἀπονενοημένος (a shameless person who usually manages an inn, administers a brothel, or collects taxes).⁴⁹ In another example, Theophrastus’ included a description of the ὁ αἰσχροκερδής (i.e., a person who uses others for dishonest gain).⁵⁰ He described other characters: ὁ λογοποιὸς (the gossip), ὁ περίεργος (the meddling person), and ὁ μεμψίμοιρος (the complainer).⁵¹ Theophrastus’ contribution has aided the recognition and identification of comic stereotypes in Christian biblical texts.

material in Jeffrey Rusten and I. C. Cunningham, trans. *Theophrastus’ Characters*, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 12–13.

⁴⁸ I list other examples from Theophrastus’ *Char.* in Chapter 6 (see Figure 11: Theophrastus’ Descriptions of Social Types).

⁴⁹ Theophrastus, *Char.* 6.5, 9.

⁵⁰ Christians are warned not to associate with αἰσχροκερδής in 1 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:7; and 1 Peter 5:2.

⁵¹ In both a Pauline and a pastoral epistle, the authors admonish associations with certain kinds of gossipers. Paul refers specifically to the person who spreads rumors—the ψιθυρισμός (2 Cor 12:20; Rom 1:29). This term connotes a whispering and secretive tone as opposed to the more abrasive and open tone of λογοποιία. 1 Tim 5:13 uses φλύαρος to refer to gossipers. 1 Tim 5:13 uses the word, περίεργος, which is generally interpreted “busybody or meddling person.” Jude 1:16 relates a satirical comment regarding malcontents or faultfinders (cf. BDAG comment on μεμψίμοιρος).

Humor in the Writings of Greek Philosophers

In Greek philosophy, views on laughter swelled from a few early maxims to extensive treatises.⁵² Theories on humor ranged from the tidbits of pre-Socratics and Sophists to the treatises provided by Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. The Peripatetic philosophers, the Stoics and the early Cynics all contributed to theories on humor. Although several key writings on humor were lost in antiquity, fragments of other writings survived through those who cited their works. Eventually, Greek discussions on the virtues and ethical use of humor influenced Roman rhetoricians such as Cicero.⁵³

Extant fragments from pre-Socratic philosophers recorded the earliest annotations on humor. Cleobulus cautioned against laughing at a person who jeered, joked, or mocked another person. He stated that if the recipient reacted with scorn, then the one who joked, and all those who laughed along with him, became the target of the recipient's scorn. In his view, derisive laughter provoked dangerous responses.⁵⁴ Other Greek philosophers shared their views. Chilon warned against laughing at the unfortunate, and Democritus of Abdera, known in antiquity as the

⁵² For examples of humor theories and discussions, see Plato, *Phileb.*; *Resp.* 2.388e; *Leg.* 5.732C, 7.816–817); and Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1448–1449; *Eth. nic.* 4.8.14; 10.6.6; *Rhet.* 1.11.29; and 3.18.7).

⁵³ Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*. Grant gave a detailed progression of ancient humor theories and discussions.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13. Grant cites Hermann Diels, ed. *Die fragmente der vorsokratiker*. (Berlin, Ger.: Weidenmannsche Buchlandlung, 1906).

laughing philosopher, would have agreed with Chilon on this point. Democritus condemned laughing at the misfortunes of others.⁵⁵ Critias urged moderate drinking in order to maintain good cheer and avoid dangerous, unrestrained laughter.⁵⁶

Plato had very definite views about unrestrained uses of humor. His abhorrence of guffawing and excessive laughter immediately preceded his discussion on the virtue of self control.⁵⁷ He stressed that severe and “belted-out” kinds of laughter threatened eruptions of intensely angry and violent exchanges.⁵⁸ He believed that severe and excessive laughter exhibited undignified conduct, and constituted shameful behavior for an honorable person or a god. He detested Homer’s depiction of the gods in an uncontrollable fit of laughter as they watched Hephaestus bustling about like a house servant.⁵⁹ He profoundly objected to fits of obnoxious and excessive laughter, and cautioned against obsessions with laughter.

Plato’s view of laughter, in part, was formed from his revulsion of the absurd behavior displayed during comic performances. He noted that laughter during comic plays often depended on ridiculous behavior. He described “ridiculous” as that which is ignorant and evil. Plato cautioned against too much jesting, precisely because such

⁵⁵ Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 13, 16–17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Resp.* 389d–e; see also *Phileb.* 45d–e.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 388e.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 388d–e, 389a.

extreme behavior made one appear ridiculous.⁶⁰ In Plato's view, laughing at persons who exhibited absurd behavior or engaged in ridiculous talk was shameful. For this reason, Plato believed that slaves or foreigners, or other shameless persons, were fit to act the parts of comic plays.⁶¹

Plato established parameters regarding the appropriate uses of laughter. His advice was “μηδὲν ἄγαν—nothing too much.”⁶² A lack of self-restraint and ignorance produced dangerously foolish behavior.⁶³ Plato established parameters around appropriate uses of ill-natured jesting.⁶⁴ He believed the ill-natured jest was rooted in anger, and for the most part, he advocated against engaging in such verbal barbs. The ill-natured jest, especially in the form of ridicule, held the terrible potential to result in deadly consequences. However, Plato did not completely oppose the use of ridicule, if an opponent deserved a derisive response.⁶⁵ Satirical verses were permissible verbal weapons for those deemed enemies, yet Plato abhorred their use against citizens. In his view, laughing at citizens demonstrated a lack of dignity.⁶⁶ For Plato,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 606c.

⁶¹ Plato, *Phileb.* 48–50; and *Leg.* 7.816–817.

⁶² Plato, *Phileb.* 45d–e (Fowler, LCL).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Plato, *Leg.* 11.935. Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 21–22.

⁶⁵ Plato, *Resp.* 5.452d.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Leg.* 11.934–936.

it was permissible to laugh at the misfortunes of enemies, but it was wrong to laugh at the misfortune of friends, except in cases where powerful friends displayed ignorance.⁶⁷ Acknowledging attribution to Socrates, he described three aspects in which friends displayed ignorance: when they imagined themselves to be richer, more physically endowed, or more virtuous than they actually were. In Plato's view, when friends displayed such ignorant behavior, they deserved derision.⁶⁸

For Plato, humor held the potential to produce both baleful and beneficial effects. Baleful effects of humor included violence and shamelessness. In cases of mockery, obnoxiously loud and prolonged laughter increased the likelihood of violent repercussions. Buffoonery and other ridiculous behavior brought shamelessness upon those engaging in such actions. One beneficial effect of humor included the motivation to reform societal ills. In particular, derisive laughter exposed and challenged societal evils.⁶⁹ The desire to avoid ridicule made humor a beneficial motivator. Humor also benefited teachers of philosophy. Plato argued that serious matter could clarify laughable matter, and laughable matter could clarify serious matter.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Plato, *Phileb.* 45d–e, 48–50; esp. 49d.

⁶⁸ Cf. “...γελοῖα μὲν ὅποσα ἀσθηνῆ, μισητὰ δ’ ὅποσα ἐρρωμένα...(Plato, *Phileb.* 49e).”

⁶⁹ Plato, *Resp.* 5.452D.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Leg.* 7.810e and 8.838c.

The Greek philosopher, Xenophon (ca. 430–350 BCE), applauded the clever use of humor for the amusement of house guests. He admired the Persians for their use of hospitable humor, and praised the absence of insolence, insults, and harshness in their jestings.⁷¹ The Persians' jestings, in his estimation, did not provoke shame. For Xenophon, even fabricated humor shared in hospitable settings was commendable, but humor that came at the expense of others, or humor motivated by personal gain, was unacceptable.⁷²

In *Poetics*, Aristotle offered his views about humor in comedies.⁷³ He noted that stock characters of comedies typically represented persons with worse vices than average persons, while the stock characters of tragedies portrayed persons as typically better and more virtuous in nature than average persons.⁷⁴ In his view, stock characters of comedy did not inspire emulation as their counterparts in tragedy did. Aristotle believed that comedy produced laughter, because its characters engaged in shameless activity, and because its characters portrayed the φαυλότατοι (i.e., persons low in rank, common folk, or persons lacking sound judgment). In his view, the

⁷¹ Xenophon, *Cyr.* 5.2.18. Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 23.

⁷² Xenophon, *Cyr.* 2.2. 12–14. Cf. *Ibid.*

⁷³ Cf. Aristotle's discussed comedy, along with tragedy, in *Poet.* 1.1447a–5.1449b.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Poet.* 2.1448a.

φαυλότατοι engaged in ridiculous (i.e., ignorant or embellished) behavior.⁷⁵ In comic performances, he preferred the stock character of the εἴρων, because he enjoyed it when the εἴρων outwitted and deflated the boastful disposition of the ἀλαζών.⁷⁶ Aristotle noted that comedy depended, not only on stock characters, but relied heavily on the native dictions and the idioms of its characters. This suggested that ethnic stereotypes as well as stock characters constituted laughable matter.⁷⁷

Aristotle observed common techniques or devices used to raise a laugh, either through actions or speech. He summarized six ways to elicit laughter: 1) through deception; 2) through assimilation; 3) through accentuating the impossible or illogical; 4) by introducing the unexpected; 5) by making bad choices or using faulty reasoning; and 6) by engaging in surprisingly despicable behavior.⁷⁸ Characters deceived by ridiculous notions such as Strepsiades' belief in Socrates' sophisticated method of measuring a flea's jumping distance, were laughable in Aristotle's view.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.1449a. Cf. Richard Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II* (London, UK: Duckworth, 2002), 93. Janko reconstructed the lost section of *Poetics* in which Aristotle delineated his discussion on comedy. Janko's work on *Poetics II* presented a hypothetical and highly methodical approach, using the *Tractatus Coislinianus* and on other related ancient manuscripts.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 94–95.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 95. Aristotle referred to Strepsiades in Aristophanes' *Nub*. Perhaps, Aristotle would have laughed at Nicodemus' question to Jesus, “μη δύναται εἰς τὴν

According to Aristotle, the assimilation of characters provided opportunity for laughter when a lesser person disguised himself as a greater person. He illustrated the example of Xanthias, Dionysius' complaining slave, who disguised himself as the mighty Heracles. Aristotle would have laughed at the effeminate Dionysius dressed in the rustic hunter outfit of the mighty Heracles.⁸⁰ Assimilation also occurred when the greater person disguised himself into the lesser person. For example, the Dionysius disguised himself as the lesser Xanthias.⁸¹

Aristotle strongly advocated the appropriate use of humor. He urged orators to use the kinds of jests that were appropriate to the orator's status (i.e., irony, and not buffoonery).⁸² He supported the use of mockery, as proper laughable material, as long as it did not result in the destruction of a person's honor or dignity.⁸³ In particular, he encouraged the use of humor in exposing other's faults, but only in embarrassing, and not in vicious and shameless, ways.⁸⁴ Aristotle believed the appropriate use of humor

κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δεύτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι—Surely, one cannot re-enter the mother's womb and be born a second time (John 3:4)?”

⁸⁰ Cf. Aristophanes, *Ran.*

⁸¹ Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*, 95. Aristotle referred to the comic assimilation of Xanthias, Dionysius, and Heracles in Aristophanes' *Ran.*

⁸² Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.18.7.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Poet.* 5.1449a. Aristotle believed that laughable matter should avoid painful or destructive consequences. He also stressed this viewpoint in *Poetics II*. Cf. Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy*, 96–97.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

benefited society, especially when laughter exposed faults, because the fear of public ridicule tended to reduce propensity toward improper behavior. He cautioned against the use of humor in acts of retaliation, in acts of self-promotion, or in acts to establish superiority over one's social equals.⁸⁵ He disparaged the use of arrogant wit in attempts to establish superiority.⁸⁶ He discussed, in some detail, the potential repercussion of anger, if one made light of something deemed valuable, or if one showed contempt toward someone deemed virtuous and honorable.⁸⁷ According to Aristotle, persons engaged in shameless behavior, if they aimed mockery toward those susceptible to volatile reactions.⁸⁸

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle commended the appropriate use of humor in defeating opponents.⁸⁹ He recalled an adage from the lost works of the pre-Socratic

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.2.12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.12.16.

⁸⁷ See references to ὀλιγωρέω and καταφρονέω in Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.2.18–26.

⁸⁸ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.2.12.

⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.1.8. Aristotle believed the orator needed three qualities to convince his hearers: φρόνησις (i.e., logic, understanding, insight to a way of thinking, or thoughtful planning), ἀρετή, (i.e., excellence of character or virtue), and εὐνοία (i.e., benevolence, fellowship with audience, and goodwill) (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.1.1–7). He argued those enthymematic proofs (i.e., logical proof) as well as ethical and emotional proofs were necessary to convince the hearers of a particular judgment (cf. *Rhet.* 2.1.1–7). The economic condensation of an enthymeme made it highly amendable for humor. See Sherwood's elucidation on the use of enthymeme and its connection with humor. Cf. Steven E. Sherwood, "Echoes of Cicero's Laughter: Applying Classical Wit to Contemporary Writing Instruction" (Phd dissert., Texas Christian University, 2004), 26–31.

philosopher, Gorgias, who said, “τὴν μὲν σπουδὴν διαφθείρειν τῷ ἐναντίων γέλωτι τὸν δὲ γέλωτα σπουδῇ—one should spoil the opponent’s seriousness with jesting, and the opponent’s jesting with seriousness.”⁹⁰ Aristotle noted that laughter aided an orator by causing confusion in the opponent.⁹¹ He favored the technique of the εἴρων, because it allowed the opponent to bring ridicule upon himself. However, Aristotle cautioned, the trickery and deception perpetrated by the εἴρων made it a risky endeavor. In serious conversation or discussion, unsuspecting persons could, often did, become quite angry when an disguised εἴρων mislead them in order to make a point. In other words, they tended to react unkindly to laughter made at their expense.

In Aristotle’s discussion on the character of a great person or of a well-liked friend, one finds advice in the use of humor.⁹² In order to stress one’s good character, he noted, one should avoid the extremes of ὑπερβολή (excess) and ἔλλειψις (deficiency).⁹³ Aristotle urged moderation in one’s deeds, words, and even in the use

⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.18.7.

⁹¹ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.18.7.

⁹² Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 4.6.9–8.11.

⁹³ Aristotle’s provided some of the earliest stereotypes of character traits. Many of these extremes in behaviors are portrayed in comic stock characters. He separated and identified those vices that exhibited a deficiency from those vices that exhibited an excess. Vices related to deficiency included: (δειλός) (cowardliness), ἀναίσθητος (inability to be emphatic), ἀνελευθερία (lack of generosity), μικροπρεπία (miserliness), μικροψυχία (timidity), ἀφιλότιμος (lack of ambition), ἀοργησία (passivity), εἰρωνεία (self-deprecation), ἄγροικος (boorishness), δύσερις (quarrelsomeness), δύσκολος (ill-temperedness), ἀναίσχυτος (shamelessness) and ἐπιχαιρεκακία (spitefulness). Vices related to excess included: θρασύς (rashness),

of jesting.⁹⁴ He found no use for the extremes of βωμολοχία (i.e., buffoonery) or ἀγροικία (i.e., boorishness), especially in the course of a dinner party.⁹⁵ Instead, he promoted εὐτραπελία (i.e., true wittiness) as the middle way.⁹⁶ Aristotle praised the character of a well-liked friend, who engaged in light-hearted banTERS and in good-natured jests.⁹⁷ In his view, a good and loyal friend always returned jesting in good taste.⁹⁸

Overall, Aristotle supported the use of humor in its acceptable forms and in its proper application.⁹⁹ He denounced the use of provocative ridicule. Persistently, he

ἀκολασία (lack of restraint), ἄσωτία (reckless extravagance), βαναυσία (offensiveness), χαυνότης (narcissism), φιλότιμος (excessive ambition), ὀργιλότης (irascibility), ἀλαζονεία (boastfulness), βωμολοχία (buffoonery), ἄρεσκος (obsequiousness), κόλαξ (flattery), καταπλήξ (excessive shyness), and φθόνος (enviousness) (cf. Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 2.6.16–9.3). Aristotle had noted that comedy highlighted character flaws and used such traits to raise laughter (Aristotle, *Poet.* 2.1448a). Theophrastus' delineations of character traits also noted these types of character flaws (Cf. *Char.*).

⁹⁴ Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 2.7.7–9.2; 4.2.5–9.8. Paul was the only NT author to use ὑπερβολή, which occurred eight times in his letters (1 Cor 12:31; 2 Cor 1:8; 4:7, 17 (2x); 12:7; Romans 7:13 and Gal 1:3).

⁹⁵ Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 4.8.1–3; 10–11.

⁹⁶ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.12.16. Interestingly, Ephesians 5:3 explicitly forbids εὐτραπελία. Cf. Peter van der Horst, "Is Wittiness Unchristian? A Note on 'Eutrapelia' In Eph V 4," in *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 40 (Leiden, Ger.: E. J. Brill, 1978), 163–77.

⁹⁷ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 4.4.13.

⁹⁸ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 4.4.1–29.

⁹⁹ Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 4.8.3–9.

stressed moderation, and urged the guarded use of tendentious forms of humor. He preferred irony, rather than direct derision, because it allowed an opponent to bring ridicule upon himself by his own words. Aristotle affirmed that tactful wit came from admirable character, while buffoonery displayed shameful and servile behavior.¹⁰⁰ He presented some of the earliest vices associated with character flaws and stereotypes, and he noted how comedies capitalized on the shortcomings and excesses of its characters.

Plutarch offered advice for appropriate jesting.¹⁰¹ He advocated that jests between houseguests should evoke pleasure and not pain, particularly during dinner conversations. He also noted that persons were more apt to receive, without offense, a jest from a fool than from a person, who acted with shrewdness.¹⁰² He advised against asking questions that set persons up for ridicule.¹⁰³ The use of ridicule sharply raised the potential of an angry response. He observed that a jest could sting like many barbed darts and leave the person seething in anger, especially if others took pleasure in the cleverness of the jest and added to the taunts.¹⁰⁴ Plutarch cautioned against

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4.8.5.

¹⁰¹ Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 2.1.629–13.634.

¹⁰² Ibid., 2.1.4.631.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 2.1.1.629–2.630.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 2.1.4.631.

disguising insults or truths in the form of a jest.¹⁰⁵ He advised that inappropriate jestings might result in more humorous and shaming ripostes.¹⁰⁶

Plutarch advised against ridiculing certain subjects, at least, as far as in-group jesting went. He suggested it was dangerous to raise a laugh at a person's greed, violent tendencies or physical characteristics.¹⁰⁷ Good natured ribbing in the presence of friends allowed for making fun of a friend's hooked or snub nose, baldness, infatuation antics, or in some cases, a friend's slouched back. However, he warned against jests aimed at ridiculing another person's bad breathe, loss of an eye, or in some cases, a person's humpback.¹⁰⁸ Plutarch forbade jesting with persons in the presence of their wives, fathers or teachers.¹⁰⁹ He believed that teasing about one's own situation was one way to avoid tension.¹¹⁰ He gave the example that a person, who had experienced money woes, should make jests about his own matters of money, and no one else's.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 2.1.4.631 and 2.1.13.634.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 2.1.12.634. Plutarch gave several examples of witty ripostes. He noted that inappropriate jesting could result in a guest's expulsion from the dinner party.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 2.1.8.633–10.634.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 2.1.11.634.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 2.1.12.634.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

When it came to ridiculing out-groups and their religious practices, Plutarch used decisively tendentious humor. He exemplified the common practice of mocking deities and religious rituals of those deemed outsiders. His derisive humor, which aimed particularly at Judaic and Egyptian religious practices, served as an effective de-sacralizing and de-legitimizing device.¹¹²

Perhaps, the most vicious in their use of disparaging forms of humor were the early Greek philosophers known as Cynics.¹¹³ The Cynics publicly ridiculed the moral flaws of their friends and other targeted persons in the agoras, public lecture halls and streets of urban centers.¹¹⁴ They had a reputation for severe derisive denunciations of ethical breaches. Their tactics included truth conveyed through barbed wit and “mockery from below.” Cynics stressed a concept called σπουδαιολόγιον (i.e., speaking the truth through laughter).¹¹⁵ Frankness and outspokenness earned the Cynics a widespread association with the barking and

¹¹² Ibid., 4.4–5.669–670; 4.6.671–672. Cf. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 48.

¹¹³ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 27. The Cynic school experienced its heyday in Greece around 440–300 BCE. The most renowned Greek Cynics were Diogenes of Sinope and Menippus of Gadara. Cynicism revived again in the Roman era during the first two centuries (ca. 50–450 CE). Demetrius (ca. 37–70 CE) and Demonax (ca. 2 CE) gained infamy through Lucian’s *Demonax*. Diogenes and Menippus were brought back to life through Lucian’s *Diologi mortuorum*.

¹¹⁴ Demetrius, *Eloc.*, 170 and 259.27n.65.

¹¹⁵ Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 20, 22, 56.

biting dog.¹¹⁶ Interestingly, a revival of the Cynics during the Roman period corresponded with a sharp increase in social unrest (1–2 CE).¹¹⁷ They gained notoriety for mocking the excesses and pretensions of the wealthy and powerful, and for spurring populace participation in social revolutions.¹¹⁸

Overview of Humor in Roman Artifacts

Roman rhetoricians provide a great deal of insights on the use of humor in antiquity. Key contributions come from Cicero, Quintilian, and the unknown author

¹¹⁶ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire: Laughing and Lying*, 53–54.

¹¹⁷ Barry Baldwin, "Lucian as Social Satirist," *CQ* 11, no. 2 (1961): 203–7.

¹¹⁸ There were two prevailing typologies of Cynics: the serious-minded ones and the huckster types. The huckster-type Cynics sought to flatter their audiences with their use of puns and vulgar jesting. Other huckster-type Cynics presented pretentious speeches in order to gain fame. Cf. Baldwin, "Lucian as Social Satirist," 203–4, 208. Cf. Lucian, *Fug.* 12–17; and Abraham Malherbe, "'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to I Thess II," *Novt* 12, no 2 (1970): 206–9.

Satirists ridiculed Cynics who were involved in shameless solicitations of money and fame. Lucian (ca. 125–180 CE) satirized the huckster-type of Cynic, but he sympathized with the serious-minded Cynic. Dio Chrysostom, a Cynic-philosopher (ca. 40–120 CE), directed mockery at the glory-seeking speeches, and people-pleasing antics of huckster-type Cynics (*Orat.* 12; 32–33; 35; 72.4; and 77–78). Unlike the huckster-type Cynic, the serious-minded Cynic spoke with *παρρησία* (i.e., boldness or forthrightness), and with harshness, if the situation required it. The serious-minded Cynic avoided attempts to flatter the audience and seemed motivated by a concern for the plight of unfortunate persons. This kind of Cynic urged audiences toward reformative actions (cf. Malherbe, "*Gentle as a Nurse*," 208–9; and Dio, *Orat.* 32.19ff; 27.33; 33, 7.11ff).

Malherbe notes that during his widespread traveling and preaching, Paul may have experienced the mockery common to huckster-type Cynics. Paul persistently defended his bold rhetoric. He vigorously dismissed efforts to align him with glory-seekers. Cf. Malherbe, "*Gentle as a Nurse*," 216–7.

of *Ad herennium*.¹¹⁹ Apparently, after reading a Greek book about laughter, Cicero mocks the notion that anyone could ever teach anything like the theory of laughter.¹²⁰ In spite of his view, Cicero goes on to describe various kinds of humor and the effective use of humor from the perspective of rhetoric. In addition to Cicero, Quintilian discusses both good-natured and ill-natured types of laughter. Both authors note that laughter held an acceptable place in the repertoire of rhetorical devices.¹²¹ Quintilian's own critique of humor includes the use of witty dicta. The author of *Ad herennium* discusses the use of humor in fables and story-telling. He presents techniques of how to effectively use humor in oral presentations.

Roman satirists used tendentious forms of humor, especially derisive laughter and mockery, to perform their moral and social critiques. The premature deaths of some Roman satirists revealed the risky nature of their work, especially in their critique of wealthy and powerful persons. Their writings conveyed a range of humor devices (e.g., irony, hyperbole, etc.) and styles (e.g., bold, angry, discreet, and provocative, etc.). Some satirists relied on discretion through literary personas, while other satirists embraced more overt and confrontational approaches. Often satirists created idyllic personas to carry out their "mockery from below." Satirists provided

¹¹⁹ Cicero, *De or.* 2.54–71; *Or.* 26; *Off.* 1.29–30; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.

¹²⁰ Cicero, *De or.* 2.217–218.

¹²¹ Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 75–76. Cf. Cicero, *Or.* 87–88; *De or.* 2.17; 2.236; and Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.28–28, 34.

insights into the major targets (e.g., corrupt elites, superstitious believers, etc.) and topics of humor (e.g., pretentiousness, flattery, vanity, etc.).

In Roman antiquity, professional and crude forms of art in public places surrounded the general population. The abundance of apotropaic art in a Roman city included depictions of the shocking sex antics of lovemaking, and the playful antics of pygmy-clowns. From bathhouse and tavern frescoes to mosaics in the agora and triclinium, laughable images flourished in the ancient Roman world. Crude caricatures and graffiti scribbled on city walls and in latrines mocked religions, public persons, and philosophers. Skilled and crude forms of laughable art in ancient Rome revealed that the domain of humor belonged to a cross section of Roman society.

Below, I have provided representative observations of humor artifacts from Roman rhetoricians, satirists and Roman art. Some general observations on humorous dicta follow the observations put forth by Quintilian. My aim is to paint a picture of the public exposure to humor devices through performance and images that might deepen our appreciation of the cultural context of the ancient Roman world.

Humor in the Writings of Roman Rhetoricians

In *De oratore*, Cicero described specific ways in which humor served as a valuable rhetorical device. He claimed that through an unexpected and clever use of humor, an orator could disarm his opponent. Cicero himself often used humor to confuse, shock, and surprise his opponents.¹²² Cicero advised orators to “sprinkle

¹²² Cicero, *De or.* 2.58, 236.

[their speech] with salt.”¹²³ In rhetorical usage, salt generally implied the use of barbed wit or doses of sarcasm.¹²⁴ He noted that witty barbs aimed at opponents had an unsettling effect on them. He preferred the economical *acumen* (i.e., a shrewd and ingenious barb) as the most effective humor device in repelling or delivering verbal attacks.¹²⁵ Cicero preferred the use of humor in defensive repartee, rather than in

¹²³ Cicero, *Or.* 26.87.

¹²⁴ Cf. Aristotle’s use of ἄλας as a metaphorical reference to the nature of a true and enduring friendship (*Eth. nic.* 8.3.8–8.4.2). Salt alluded to either hardships shared by friends, or the witty barbs that could only be laughable within a tried and tested friendship. Salt as metaphor carried a number of meanings and nuances. Salt (i.e., כֶּחָל) sealed an enduring covenant between the ancient Hebrews and God (e.g., Lev 2:13; Num 18:19; 2 Chron 13:5). Salt also represented covenant between friendships and between citizens and their cities or nations (e.g., Demosthenes, *Fals. leg.* 19.191; Aeschines, *Ctes.* 3.224; *Fals. leg.* 2.22). Theophrastus associated ἄλας with two comic-type stock characters, the miserly penny-pincher (10.13) and the absent-minded person (14.11). Salt was highly favored by the gods (e.g., Aristophanes, *Ach.* 760; Plato, *Tim.* 60e; and Homer, *Il.* 9.214). Plato recalls Socrates’ maxim, “One should use laughter as one uses salt, sparingly (cited in Stobaeus, *Flor.* 3.34.18, 686).” Plutarch notes that a “bean and salt friendship” is one that has endured hardship. See Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 5.10.684 (Clement and Hoffleit, LCL).

¹²⁵ Cicero, *De or.* 2.236. Cicero did not explicitly use the word “economical,” however; he implied the concept by his words “*verbo positum maxime.*” When a humorist uses as few words as possible to elicit a surprise reversal of expectation, then this form of a joke is often called “economical.” In two or three part sequencing jokes, an economical use of words helps to establish a pattern, which then serves to set up a particular expectation in the mind of the hearer. In the conclusion of the joke, the humorist proceeds to undermine the hearer’s expectation through an element of surprise. Humor theorists believe that economy of words, pattern, expectation, and surprise are all essential elements for a joke.

In an ancient Greek manuscript, a collection of 265 jokes provide a number of examples of economical two-part sequencing jokes. Supposedly, this collection comes from the imperial Roman and Byzantine periods. Many of these jokes poke fun at the expense of a simpleton and a public lawyer, and a number of the jokes are ethnic ones. See R. D. Dawes, *Philogelos* (Munich, Ger.:K. G. Verlag gmbH & Co,

provocative attacks. In several examples, he illustrated how a repartee turned out to be more humorous than the original attack.¹²⁶

In Cicero's view, humor served critical roles in oratory performances. The uses of humor helped an orator gain or re-gain the attention of a bored audience or an inattentive jury.¹²⁷ It diluted the bitterness of unpopular arguments.¹²⁸ The orator's clever use of humor helped convince an audience or jury of his *eruditio* (i.e., knowledge and skill) and *urbanitas* (i.e., refinement, taste, and wit).¹²⁹ For Cicero, persuasion of an orator's *eruditio* and *urbanitas* was essential in building and in shoring up public esteem for an orator.¹³⁰ Cicero argued that the orator's persuasive powers rested in his ability to express and elicit a range of emotions that would excite

2000); and Barry Baldwin, *The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover*, London Studies in Classical Philology 10 (Amsterdam, Neth.: J. C. Gieben, 1983).

¹²⁶ Cicero, *De or.* 2.246, 255, 263, 276–277.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.216; 2.236.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.236.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Cicero, *Or.* 67.128. Cicero defined the Greek term, ἡθος, as inclusive of the orator's nature and qualities, his morals, and his customs and social relations. Cicero borrowed the Aristotelian concept of ἡθος. He would have agreed with Aristotle that humor helped an orator to display a benevolent and agreeable ἡθος, which in turn, helped the orator to gain the goodwill of the audience.

and energize the audience.¹³¹ He believed in building favorable relations with the audience through the Aristotelian concept of *παθος*.¹³²

Cicero discussed the appropriateness of language, manner and spirit in matters of the laughable.¹³³ He praised the liberal jest as worthy of an urbane person, while his disdain for the illiberal jest centered on the shamefulness of content and words deemed obscene.¹³⁴ Cicero preferred toning down obscenity through *surripat* (i.e., the use of indirect references).¹³⁵ However, he seemed to dislike innuendo in other matters of the laughable. Cicero advocated for witty dictums and straightforward talk, but cautioned against uttering a witticism every time an opportunity presented itself.¹³⁶ He urged care in the use of abusive barbs that resulted in insults.¹³⁷ He

¹³¹ Cicero, *Or.* 128.

¹³² Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 73–76. Cicero aligned the Greek *ἦθος* with the Latin *commendatio*, both terms conveyed the orator's publicly perceived worth (*Or.* 128; *De or.* 2.178–216). He aligned the Greek *παθος* with the Latin *concitatio*, both terms related to the orator's skillful use of passion and excitement (*Or.* 128; *De or.* 2.201). Cicero advised the orator to display emotions as long as they were appropriate to the content of the speech. He noted that a speech would remain unbelievable to an audience, if the content of the speech conveyed vehemence or anger, and the orator failed to demonstrate these emotions in the delivery of the speech (Cicero, *Or.* 67.128).

¹³³ *De Off.* 1.29.103–104; 2.244, 247, 256; *De or.* 2.229–230, 239, 241–242, 247, 256; *Or.* 88–89.

¹³⁴ For shamelessness and obscenity, see *Off.* 1.29.104. For maintenance of dignity and the avoidance of obscenity, see *De or.* 2.59.242.

¹³⁵ Cicero, *De or.* 2.59.242. Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 83.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.60.244–245.

advocated the use of laughable invective against adversaries, only if opponents provoked such invectives.¹³⁸

Cicero encouraged orators to observe propriety of good timing in their use of humor.¹³⁹ He believed that opportunity and proper timing increased the success and effectiveness of one's jesting. In attacks against one's target, Cicero urged proper timing.¹⁴⁰ He preferred the wait and watch strategy in which the orator's riposte was strengthened by surprisingly clever and pointed wit.¹⁴¹ He advised orators to respond wittily rather than to initiate with contrived wit.

Cicero had advice for appropriate jesting depending upon the place. During informal gatherings, and at banquets, people expected jesting because of the relaxed tone of the conversation.¹⁴² However, Cicero noted that introducing a jest at a banquet was inappropriate, if the table discussion centered on a serious subject.¹⁴³ During court proceedings, in royal forums and in other such formal places, Cicero advised against jesting. He considered jesting in such places a risky endeavor,

¹³⁷ Cicero, *Or.* 26.88–89; *Off.* 1.88–89, 103; *De or.* 2.229. Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 85–87.

¹³⁸ Cicero, *De or.* 2.229.

¹³⁹ Cicero, *Off.* 1.40.144.

¹⁴⁰ Cicero, *Or.* 89; and Cicero, *De or.* 2.66.230.

¹⁴¹ Cicero, *De or.* 2.63.256.

¹⁴² Cicero, *Att.* 2.18.2. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 84.

¹⁴³ Cicero, *Off.* 60.144.

especially if the orator makes a speech before the *iudex* (sg.—judge; pl.—jurors).¹⁴⁴ He cautioned against frequent or excessive jesting in any place.¹⁴⁵ He seemed to despise the *scurra*, whose jestings occurred all day long and without any observance of propriety.¹⁴⁶

Cicero suggested that the orator should use humor befitting his character and status.¹⁴⁷ Cicero commented that a free person should never direct ridicule at friends or unfortunate persons, nor ridicule those in powerful positions. A free person should use refined language, without resorting to abusive or obscene language and indecent subject matter.¹⁴⁸

From Cicero's perspective, there were appropriate targets at which one aimed humor. The ugly appearances and flaws of people, any bodily defects not caused by others, and any lack of personal cleanliness were off-limits as the butt of jokes.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Cicero, *De or.* 2.40.245; *Or.* 26.88. Cicero preferred caution when jesting with or in the presence of the *iudex*. He stressed the danger of ridiculing a powerful person (*De or.* 2.40.245; *Or.* 26.88). Quintilian preferred the use of mild humor, because he viewed it as more humane (*Inst.* 6.3.28). Cf. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 84.

¹⁴⁵ Cicero, *Or.* 88; *Off.* 1.29.103.

¹⁴⁶ Cicero, *De or.* 2.60.247.

¹⁴⁷ Cicero, *De Inv.* 1.25; *Off.* 1.29.103–104; *De or.* 2.221, 242, 252, 270–271. Grant discussed each of Cicero's topics on humor in detail, see Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 78–87.

¹⁴⁸ Cicero, *Off.* 1.29.104. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

¹⁴⁹ Cicero, *De or.* 2.236–239, 242, 245–246, 248–251, 257, 262, 265–269, 272–286, 289; *Or.* 26.88–89. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

Inappropriate targets also included: criminals, unfortunate persons (unless they acted arrogantly), friends, persons in authority, persons of dignity, and persons of power, such as judges or juries.¹⁵⁰

In summarizing Cicero's references to humor, I point out several key observations regarding Cicero's views on humor. Humor functioned best in defensive repartees; especially noteworthy was the ability of an orator to rebound from a vulnerable position in which his honor and position was threatened. As a rhetorical device, the use of humor produced a disorienting effect on opponents and allowed the audience or jury an opportunity to see and to react to a weakness in the opponent's position. In Cicero's view, the main function of humor served to curry the favor of an audience or a jury. For this reason, the use of humor required extreme caution. The orator needed to avoid arousing any anger in the audience or the jury that might impede his case. Therefore, laughable subjects included material that would generally cause laughter (e.g., slave behavior, ugliness, etc.). Orators were encouraged to avoid stirring up laughter at subjects that resulted in raising, particularly, the ire of powerful persons. However, Cicero went against his own advice, and employed humorous wit in his attacks of powerful persons. Cicero's advice on humor included the observance of certain proprieties: the proper subjects and targets; the proper language, manner, and spirit; proper place and timing; the proper type of humor suitable to the status of the humorist, and the appropriate targets of humor. Overall, Cicero's observations on

¹⁵⁰ Cicero, *De or.* 2.236–239, 242, 245–246, 248–251, 257, 262, 265–269, 272–286, 289; *Or.* 88–89.

humor aimed to benefit rhetoricians. His work emphasized the role of the public audience as crucial to the success of an orator's speech.

In *Ad herennium* (ca. 1 CE), another Roman rhetorician addressed the topic of humor. This unknown author suggested that orators revive weary audiences by provoking laughter. He encouraged orators to elicit laughter through a variety of humor devices and techniques: perverse imitation or caricature, irony, ambiguity, innuendo or allusion, bantering, ridicule, naivety or folly, exaggeration, recapitulation, paronomasia, comparison, an unexpected turn, a verse, or an interruption.¹⁵¹ He advocated weaving humor into a speech by telling: “*apologus*—a fable; *fabula veri similes*—a plausible fiction; *novitate*—a strange or new tale; or *historia*—a story.”¹⁵² In addition, there were two nonverbal effects that elicited laughter: a smile of admiration or a laugh of derision directed at some one.¹⁵³

In an *insinuatio* (i.e., covert) approach, the author of *Ad herennium* advised orators to employ a humor device known as dissimulation. Dissimulation, better known as irony, consisted of a deliberate attempt to setup opponents through an act of pretension. In dissimulation, the orator usually feigned ignorance by asking questions

¹⁵¹ The Latin terms for these types and techniques of humor are *imitatione depravata*, *inversion*, *ambiguitas*, *auspicio*, *irrisio stultitia*, *exsuperatione*, *collectione*, *literarum mutatione*, *similitudine*, *praeter expectationem*, *versu*, and *interpellation* (*Rhet. Her.* 1.6.10).

¹⁵² *Rhet. Her.* 1.6.10.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* *Adrisione* connoted either a smile of admiration directed at someone, or derisive laughter aimed at someone, and it remained unclear which meaning the author intended to stress, or if the author intended both meanings.

that misled the opponent(s) into thinking they had offered the correct answers. Once the opponent had presented a reasonable case, then the orator presented his not-so-ignorant argument (reminiscent of the old Greek εἴρων). The author of *Ad herennium* believed that the *insinuatio* approach, with its use of subtleness and dissimulation, served to dispose hearers toward receptive and attentive listening.¹⁵⁴

The Roman-trained rhetorician, Quintilian, discusses both the benefits of laughter-raising and the devices of humor in Book 6 of *Institutio oratoria*. Much of the content of his theories about humor resonate with the views of Cicero, and possibly the views found in Theophrastus' lost work, Περὶ γελοίου. Quintilian offers key insights into the study of ancient humor: 1) the effect of humor on emotions; 2) the use of humor in speeches; and 3) the functions of humor. He also offers some warnings regarding the effects of tendentious humor. Some of Quintilian's most important insights surface in his critiques and descriptions of witty *dicta*. Below, I summarize these major contributions of Quintilian.

Humor is an important device in stirring the moods and emotions of the audience.¹⁵⁵ Humor helps to alleviate the pains of sadness or to lighten serious moods. When the attention of an audience has been lost, humor creates an emotional diversion to redirect the attention of the audience. Humor also enlivens emotions by

¹⁵⁴ *Rhet. Her.* 1.7.11. The second method described an overt (i.e., *statim apertis*) approach, in which the orator applied a straightforward and direct technique.

¹⁵⁵ Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.20, 34–36; 6.3.1. Quintilian also relied on the theories of laughter produced in Theophrastus' lost work, Περὶ γελοίου. Theophrastus lived ca. 370–285 BCE.

refreshing and restoring energy to a bored or tired state of being.¹⁵⁶ From the Greek notion of *pathos*, the use of laughter by an orator sways the audience, or jury, in the orator's favor, and helps to dispel an audience's anger.¹⁵⁷

Quintilian observes three rhetorical functions of humor. First, an orator uses humor to ridicule an opponent by encouraging the hearers to laugh at the opponent. Directing laughter at the opponent serves the purpose of alienating the opponent from the support of the hearers. The orator accomplishes this estrangement by eliciting laughter through any of the following means: chastising, refuting, making light of, echoing or turning the opponent's words back onto him, and outmaneuvering the opponent.¹⁵⁸ Second, the orator uses humor to charm the hearers into laughing at the expense of the orator (e.g., by projecting a charming pretense of foolishness). Thirdly, the orator uses humor to attract attention to his speech, usually by deceiving audience expectations, or using words in a shocking manner.¹⁵⁹

For Quintilian, laughter holds great power and the potential to bring about very serious consequences. He observes that “...*a derisu non procul abest risus*—laughter is not far from derision.”¹⁶⁰ Ridicule has deadly repercussions. He warns that

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.3.1.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.1.9–10.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.3.23.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.3.23–24.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.3.7 (Russell, LCL).

humorous provocations, specifically aimed at persons of power and prestige, can result in serious hostility.¹⁶¹ Adverse effects of laughter threaten the honor and dignity of an orator.¹⁶² Quintilian suggests that orators exercise extreme care in provoking laughter, so as to prevent the need for ingratiating apologies; for this kind of behavior is shameless and undignified.¹⁶³

Quintilian offers four bits of advice regarding the use of humorous wit. He believes an orator must deliver wit in a refined manner (i.e., *urbanitas*), and not in the obscene or obtrusive manner of country folk.¹⁶⁴ The decorum of *urbanitas* requires the orator to deliver wit with a certain grace and charm (i.e., *venustus*).¹⁶⁵ Quintilian's third suggestion, *salsus*, concerns the orator's use of humor in his overall speech. *Salsus* seems to convey two things: 1) the use of a small amount of laughable material; and 2) the use of laughable material in a way that spices up a speech, and prevents it from becoming wearisome or bland.¹⁶⁶ Quintilian's fourth suggestion advises the appropriate use of wit by the appropriate persons. Only the lower ranks should engage in *lasciva* (i.e., playful wit). *Hilaria* is the kind of humor suitable for

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 6.3.34.

¹⁶² Ibid., 6.3.34–35.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 6.3.34.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.3.17. We have here a stereotyped view of peasants and their humor.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.3.18–19.

all people. However, Quintilian advises the reserved and cautious use of *contumelia* and *asper*. These tendentious kinds of humor can be delivered to opponents.¹⁶⁷ He stresses the cruelty inherent in taunts against the unfortunate.¹⁶⁸

Perhaps Quintilian's greatest and unique contribution to the study of humor comes in his observations of witty *dicta*. He observes that people, including himself, enjoy and laugh at various kinds of dicta, whether it comes in the form of barbed wit, an amiable saying, or a foolish, anger-laden, or cowardly saying.¹⁶⁹ Quintilian reiterates Cicero's observation that amusing sayings have their basis in deformity and ugliness.¹⁷⁰ He believes that a *ridiculum dictum* is usually untrue, mean-spirited, undignified, deliberately distorted, and never of praiseworthy intent.¹⁷¹ Quintilian notes that the repercussion of a laughable saying or witty barb can result in dire, unpleasant, and humiliating shamelessness. In targeting the flaws of others, the orator may well receive praise for a sophisticated use of barbed wit, but such wit can ricochet back upon him and a dose of hefty ridicule can surely follow.¹⁷² Similar to

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.3.27–28, 34. Quintilian distinguished between four kinds of verbal wit: *lascivum* (i.e., playful wit) or *hilaritas* (i.e., wit characterized by cheerfulness); *contumelia* (i.e., invective and insult); *asper* (i.e., bitter and severe); and *lenis* (i.e., gentle and mild).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.3.33.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.3.7.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Cicero, *De or.* 2.236. Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.8

¹⁷¹ Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.6.

¹⁷² Ibid., 6.3.8.

Cicero, Quintilian believes a *dictum* holds more charm when used in repartees than in provocations.¹⁷³

Quintilian stresses two principal functions of *dicta*: to preserve honor and to avert hostility. He explains further that witty sayings function to preserve a person's *dignitas* and *verecundia*, especially if delivered in repartee.¹⁷⁴ Powerful patrons use clever and witty *dicta* to maintain their honor and their sense of shame in the process of rejecting a client's request.¹⁷⁵ *Dicta* provides a clever, often humorous, way for a patron to deliver a rebuke to a client without provoking resentment and anger.¹⁷⁶ In some cases, the client can use a humorous *dictum* to return a clever riposte to a powerful patron. Quintilian cites the following example: "A Roman *eques* was drinking in the theatre, and Augustus sent him the following message, 'If I want lunch, I go home.' 'Of course,' replied the *eques*, 'you are not afraid of losing your place.'"¹⁷⁷ Laughter, suggests Quintilian, is an irresistible force that holds the power

¹⁷³ Ibid., 6.3.13. Cf. Cicero, *De or.* 2.230; 2.256.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.3.35.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Ray Laurence and Jeremy Paterson, "Power and Laughter: Imperial Dicta," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 67 (1999): 196. Laurence and Paterson note the largest collection of dicta are those connected with an emperor's responses to requests. Emperors had to either fulfill or refuse expectations regarding *beneficia* and acts of *liberalitas*. When these powerful patrons refused a client's request, their refusals required crafty and careful replies.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.: 197.

¹⁷⁷ Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.64 (Russell, LCL). Laurence and Paterson cite several examples from the works of Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.64; Suetonius, *Titus* 8; and

to dispel hostility.¹⁷⁸ He adds the example of a dinner guest, who averts serious repercussions by blurting out a witty *dictum*. The guest's *dictum* effectively dissolves the *invidia* of the host.¹⁷⁹

Satirists of the Roman Era

Satire in the Roman world ranges from a genre of literature and theatrical performances to a handful of satirical barbs preserved within various kinds of written works (e.g., comedies, tragedies, prophecies and biographies). Satire exists in a wide range of cross-cultural literature in the early Roman era. Public performances of Roman satires, and other kinds of theatrical performances, expose the general population to the wit of satirical barbs. Satirical barbs make famous persons, inter-personal exchanges, and intra-group conflicts memorable.

Below, I offer some key observations, by no means comprehensive, regarding the use and effect of satire within the social and cultural context of the Roman era.¹⁸⁰

Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Hadrian 20 (see Laurence and Paterson, "Power and Laughter," 196).

¹⁷⁸ Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.9–10.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.3.10.

¹⁸⁰ Satire served to diminish the behaviors or words of a target in a way that made the target look ridiculous. The satirist's primary aim was to ridicule the target, and in performative cases, to evoke derisive laughter, sneers or smiles from public onlookers, and to induce public affirmation of the satirist's barbed assessment of the target. Generally, the satirist conveyed a derogatory tone of condemnation, contempt, disdain, and even indignation. The prime objective of the satirist was to create a sense of shame in the target in order to elicit a correction in word or deed. A satirist's favorite targets included hypocrisy, pride and greed. Cf. Marc H. Abrams and

I include a few remarks about satire in general, and I note a few memorable contributions made by the more renowned Roman satirists, spanning the era between ca. 180 BCE–190 CE. Then I proceed to offer brief sketches in five areas: the types of satirists and their styles of delivery; the role of satirists as social and ethical critics; the standard repertoire of rhetorical and linguistic satirical devices; the satirists' creative use of exaggerations and personas; and the satirists' use of discreet or direct approaches. I conclude with some specific observations on the uses and effects of satire within the honor-shame cultures of the Roman era.

Among the most renowned and proliferate of the Roman satirists are Lucilius, Horace, Persius, Juvenal, and Lucian. Lucilius (ca. 180–102 BCE) receives commendation as “the *primis* inventor of Roman satire.”¹⁸¹ He is credited with the development of the genre of satire with its main thrust in social and moral criticism.¹⁸² Horace (ca. 65–8 BCE) claims, “*ridiculum acei fortius et melius magnas plerumque secat res*—Derision cuts more bitterly and powerfully through things.”¹⁸³ With the direct style and bold humor associated with Cynics and Old Comedy, he

Geoffrey G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 284–5.

¹⁸¹ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 30.

¹⁸² Kirk Freudenburg, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

¹⁸³ Horace, *Sat.* 1.10.14–15.

provokes laughter with his smile-disguised truth-telling.¹⁸⁴ Persius (ca. 34–62 CE) cites his intention “to unbury secrets and laugh them out of their hiding places in holes.”¹⁸⁵ He informs Rome’s elite that they should notice the sneers displayed when they are not looking.¹⁸⁶ Persius engages in dangerous mockery of powerful persons, and is known to invent his own anonymous interlocutor to warn him against the dangers of offending powerful persons.¹⁸⁷ Persius’ use of an audacious “belted-out” kind of laughter (i.e., *cachinno*—guffaw) would have earned a warning from Plato, himself, who cautions that this kind of laughter can provoke violent responses.¹⁸⁸ Like Persius, Juvenal (ca. 55–138 CE) also invents his own interlocutor to warn him against beginning a satirical attack that can ignite the rage of offended persons.¹⁸⁹ He claims to attack only those who are dead, but his assertion proves humorously and blatantly untrue.¹⁹⁰ Most notably, Juvenal’s satirical attacks deride the corruption of

¹⁸⁴ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 2. Cf. Horace, *Sat.* 1.1.25 (Fairclough, LCL).

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 43–45. Cf. Persius, *Sat.* 1.119–125.

¹⁸⁶ Persius, *Sat.* 1.60–63.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.107–109.

¹⁸⁸ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 32. Plato, *Resp.* 388e.

¹⁸⁹ Juvenal, *Sat.* 1.165–170.

¹⁹⁰ Juvenal, *Sat.* 1 (Henderson, LCL). See also Plaza’s discussion on the complexities of Juvenal’s satirical aims Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 48–50.

the patron-client system.¹⁹¹ Lucian (ca. 125–190 CE) is renowned for his derision of religious worship, especially the cult of Alexander of Abonoteichos.¹⁹² A Syrian rhetorician and sophist, Lucian performs his satirical dialogues throughout the Roman Empire. Lucian also ridicules Christians. He satirizes “their belief in immortality, their willingness to die, their brotherly love for each other, their denial of the Greek gods, and their worship of ‘that crucified sophist.’ He patronizes their great gullibility and portrays them as fools.”¹⁹³

The types of satirists and their styles of delivery vary among ancient satirists. A Horatian-type satirist takes on the character of a worldly, refined and witty person, who expresses tolerant amusement, rather than anger at human foolishness, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy.¹⁹⁴ He relies on casual language “to evoke from the readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities.”¹⁹⁵ A Roman Juvenalian-type satirist stands as a severe moralist. This person criticizes ethical flaws through a dignified and very public style.¹⁹⁶ The Hebraic Jeremiad satirists use a very provocative style of delivery, and often conjure up exaggerated or grotesque images

¹⁹¹ Juvenal, *Sat.* 1 (Henderson, LCL).

¹⁹² Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 49; Cf. Lucian, *Dial. d.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 57; Cf. Lucian, *Peregr.* 13.

¹⁹⁴ Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 286.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

to shock their audiences. They seek to stir up disdain and indignation against moral corruptions within the community.¹⁹⁷ Although three basic types of satirists predominate, scholars have noted a range of the satirical styles. These satirical styles can be described as scourging and biting (e.g., Lucilius); bold and provocative (e.g., Cratinus); angry and vindictive (e.g., Eupolis); indignant and sneering (e.g., Juvenal); smiling and amusing (e.g., Horace); and guffawing (e.g., Persius).¹⁹⁸

Ancient satirists share a common role as a critic of ethical transgressions or a διδάσκαλος of justice.¹⁹⁹ They proclaim their social and moral critique through some form of tendentious humor.²⁰⁰ Their critiques highlight societal problems such as the corruption of wealth, the perils of ambition, the negative impacts of parental behavior on children, the ills of tyranny, the encroachments of foreign influences, the problems of class mobility, and sexual and other kinds of deviant behaviors.²⁰¹ Driven by personal indignation, a sense of moral vocation, and a concern for public interest,

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 32.

¹⁹⁹ Keane, "Defining the Art of Blame," 38. Satirists were typically critics of their own in-group status members, in spite of their frequent self-portrayals as out-group persons of lower status (Keane, "Defining the Art," 32). See also Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 2.

²⁰⁰ The earliest known forms of satire occurred in ancient Hebraic prophetic literature and in Greek comedies, eventually evolving into its own genre in Roman literature.

²⁰¹ Keane, "Defining the Art of Blame," 32.

satirists express their vigorous dissent through a weapon of words.²⁰² They use absurdity to aim derision at various forms of vanity or hypocrisy.²⁰³

Ancient satirists knew their pronouncements put them in a precarious position. Executions (e.g., Hebrew prophets) and emperor-ordered suicides (e.g., the Neronian-ordered suicides of Petronius and Seneca) were not unusual repercussions for offending powerful authorities. However, in spite of grave personal risk, satirists continued to pursue their efforts to publicly shame transgressors with accusations.²⁰⁴

These satirists use a standard repertoire of rhetorical and linguistic devices such as irony, puns, hyperbole, burlesque, barbed wit, and deceptive jesting.²⁰⁵ Frequently, several of these humor devices are employed within a single work.²⁰⁶ Satirists seem to prefer the use of certain devices for specific purposes. For example, irony is the preferred device of the judicious satirist.²⁰⁷ Exaggeration becomes the

²⁰² Quintero, ed., *A Companion to Satire*, 1–2.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 7. See Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 284–5.

²⁰⁴ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse*, 2.

²⁰⁵ Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 287.

²⁰⁶ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 224.

²⁰⁷ Thomas Jemielity, "Ancient Biblical Satire," in *A Companion to Satire*, ed. Ruben Quintero (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 24–29. An example of circumspect satire may be found in Jesus' instructions to "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" (Matt 22:17–21). The use of a vocative epithet (i.e., You, Hypocrites!), which assumed an implicit belief (i.e., everything belonged to God), signaled Jesus' ironic tone and satirical response.

favorite device in highlighting absurd behavior.²⁰⁸ In order to provoke their targets, satirists focus their use of rhetorical and linguistic devices on behaviors, forms, or actions deemed grotesque, ridiculous, peculiar, or dubious.²⁰⁹ They prey particularly upon preventable acts of stupidity or words of foolishness. Persons, who bring unnecessary trouble upon themselves, are favorite subjects of satirical devices.²¹⁰ Overall, the success of the satirists depended upon their effective use of rhetorical and linguistic devices within public performances, which include theater performances and also public readings. Public performances are the vehicle of delivery of these devices, and their ultimate aim is to raise derisive laughter, sometimes for the purpose of encouraging the target to reform, sometimes for the purpose of obtaining a reactive behavior from either the target or the audience, and sometimes for the purpose of winning personal support for the satirists.

Perhaps, two of the most creative satirical devices consist of the exaggeration of the opponent's characteristics, and the creation of the satirist's idyllic persona. Ancient satirists absurdly exaggerate the flaws in their target's character, and sometimes even dwell on the target's powerful status. The satirist's construction of

²⁰⁸ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 3. Satirists used exaggeration to exponentially undermine a thing, behavior or belief that a person or a group of persons would take too seriously.

²⁰⁹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 224.

²¹⁰ Jemielity, "Ancient Biblical Satire," 25. Jemielity cites the example of Jonah. If Jonah had just accepted God's commission, he would have avoided all his troublesome situations.

his target as a powerful entity, and his simultaneous depiction of himself as a weak or innocent defender of just causes, served to generate an image of incongruity and humor.²¹¹ The audience favors “mockery from below,” that is, satire which depicts the innocent honorable and virtuous person embattled over the corruption of a power-welding despicable fool. What audience would not relish a satirist’s clever humor in a case of surprising reversal? A seemingly powerless person succeeds, not only in witty self-defense, but in shaming an abusive and powerful person through public ridicule.²¹² The stinging barb of the satirist, and the probable laughter of the audience, plunge the powerful target into shamelessness and honor degradation. By carefully crafting the downfall of powerful persons into the images of fools or morally flawed persons, a satirist succeeds in eliciting public ridicule.²¹³

Through an idyllic persona, the ancient satirists seek to persuade an audience to view them as truth-tellers and virtuous persons.²¹⁴ Through this persona, satirists depict themselves as disillusioned persons, who have abandoned the corruption of

²¹¹ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 56–89.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 54. Ancient orators cautioned against aggressive acts (i.e., an act of striking first). Public sympathy was best won by clever defense, not through provoking and attacking opponents. See Cicero’s comments on witty replies to personal attacks (*De or.* 2.246, 255, 263, 276–277).

²¹³ Keane, "Defining the Art of Blame," 45. Juvenal depicts the emperor Domitian as a fool when he recounts how Domitian summons a council in order to find out from them the best way to cook a fish (Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.37–72).

²¹⁴ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 25.

urban life and moved to a peaceful rural setting.²¹⁵ These satirists describe their preference for simple lifestyles and exemplify themselves as pastorally innocent.²¹⁶ It is by creating an idyllic persona and by exaggerating the power of an opponent that the satirist simulates an effective ploy of “mockery from below.”²¹⁷ Horace often presents his public persona as a lover of peace, but his smile-disguised delivery is brutally derisive.²¹⁸

Satirists also construct personas for their targets, so that they can attack targets in a more discreet fashion. The long-dead-person-type persona provides a judicious way to disparage a powerful person without actually naming the target.²¹⁹ The satirist’s audience probably makes the connection between the persona of the target, and its correlation with a living person(s).²²⁰ Another possible reason for using

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 65. For example, Horace gives an antagonistic character the name *Rex* (highly reminiscent of Julius Caesar) and builds him up as a powerful opponent in order to make his fall more pronounced. Eventually, when *Rex* does become the butt of a joke, he plummets far and hard. Playing with a pun on the word king, Horace has a clever merchant named Persius summon Brutus as the deliverer of Justice (Horace, *Sat.* 1.7). The allusions to the assassination of the tyrant, Julius Caesar, resonate through the Horatian scene.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 30–32. Horace reassures his readers/hearers that his aim is not to offend on a personal level. He claims he only seeks to criticize social ills; however, he persistently and viciously satirizes individuals in his attacks on social ills. Cf. Freudenburg, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire*, 7.

²¹⁹ Keane, "Defining the Art of Blame," 45, 47.

²²⁰ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 2–3.

personas is to fool the audience into thinking they are judging and laughing at persons of another time and place. In his satirical works, Horace directs a barb at the hearer, “*Quid rides? mutato nomine de te fibula narratur*—What are you laughing at? Change the name, and the story is about you.”²²¹

The ancient satirists tend to choose either a discreet or direct approach, and consistently present their satire in that mode. Some satirists exercise a cautious and more judicious approach, while others practice a more intense and severe approach.²²² The use of discreet forms of satire disguises antagonism within a thin layer of ambiguity.²²³ This approach includes: the creation of personas; more sophisticated devices such as irony; and more elusive references to targets through fables and allegories. Discreet forms of satire serve to confuse the target, to throw the target off guard, and to inhibit the target from making a quick witty response. The target might be stunned into silence in his initial response to a witty barb, but his predicament as a fool will probably result in an eventual response of violent revenge. On the other hand, satirists who use a direct approach expect violent reactions. Satirists of the direct approach issue blatant and overt challenges to conventional beliefs, systems, and values, and they openly criticize the inadequacies of prevailing

²²¹ Horace, *Sat.* 1.1.69.

²²² Jemielity, "Ancient Biblical Satire," 24–29.

²²³ *Ibid.*

norms.²²⁴ Severe in their barbed stings, these kinds of satirists strip, often publicly, the dignity of the target, and create a debilitating sense of public shame in the target.²²⁵ Whether covert or overt in their approach, satirists seek to solicit the sympathy of the public (or the audience) by attacking commonly hated or despised targets.²²⁶

In summary, the use and effect of satire within the honor-shame societies of the Roman era is often a deadly, or at a least violent, form of social and ethical critique. Whether discreet or direct in approach, the satirist undertakes great risk. In theatrical performances, or in other open forums, a satirist aims to elicit public ridicule through an assortment of satirical devices. The satirist often uses his weapon of words to garner public support against a despised person of power through the use of “mockery from below,” and cleverly barbed ripostes. In ancient times, powerful persons are known to exact a heavy penalty on satirists for these merciless attacks. Derisive laughter in public forums damages, at times decimates, the honor of the target, and frequently rebounds back upon the satirist in a number of possible ramifications. An audience, which favors the satirist, probably influences the target’s “delayed” act(s) of revenge. Repercussions for the satirist range from violent and

²²⁴ Ibid., 26–27. Jemielity cited the examples of Job questioning God’s norms and Elijah’s mockery of the priests of Baal (1 Kgs 18:27).

²²⁵ Ibid., 27–29. Jemielity cites the examples of a deity who threatens to abandon the people (Hosea 1:9) and the casting of unfaithful Israel in the image of a she-camel in heat (Jer 2:23–24).

²²⁶ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 224.

oppressive revenge to actual death by execution. The satirists, no doubt, know the risks of issuing satirical barbs, and probably hold strong convictions to make any such public display of the barbs. In essence, they know laughter could kill.

Visual Humor in the Roman World

Rarely in the modern media of television and movies do early Christian scenes include images of humor so common in the ancient world. The lack of such images has skewed our perceptions of early Christians. We have tended to perceive them as serious and somber. Yet, early Christians, living in urban centers controlled by Roman power, are surrounded by various forms of humor images. The visual humor include the unexpected antics of street mimes, shocking apotropaic frescoes, double-takes and witty mosaics, crudely drawn caricatures, and scribbled graffiti. Expressions of visual humor occur during comic and tragic performances at the theatre, during dinner banquets, during funerary processions, and during public executions in stadiums.²²⁷

Humor surfaces in all sorts of venues in the Roman world. The location of visual humor includes streets, temples, dining rooms and atriums of homes, the tombs, agoras, taverns, latrines, bath houses and public processions. Laughable apotropaic artwork abounds in ancient houses, shops and public spaces. The images of the pygmies and the images of taboo sexual antics serve to elicit laughter from

²²⁷ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 23–25; "Look Who's Laughing at Sex"; and *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*.

attendees of the bath houses and visitors of tombs.²²⁸ Public displays of apotropaic images include shocking images and obscene exhibitions. The humorous antics of satyrs aim to mock the serious movements of mourners during funerary processions.²²⁹ Some humor shows up in the impersonations of the deceased, by those who wear the “*imagines maiorum*—masks of the ancestors.”²³⁰ Comic masks, which are used during performances in the theater, represent an array of stock characters with their humorous stereotyped flaws. Old men, young men, male servants, old women and young women are particularly identified as common masks of comedy.²³¹ Specific masks represent specific character types. Examples of such masks include the sluggish, the difficult, the meddlesome, and the rustic type characters. Other masks represent the athletic, the braggart, the parasite, the flatterer, the hag, the garrulous, and the *hetaira*.²³² In addition to comic performances in the theaters, jokesters and mimes present their performances at dinner banquets, public festivals, and in the streets of everyday city life. Scenes from comedies, and other laughable

²²⁸ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 75–78, 191–227.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

²³² *Ibid.*

artwork, decorate large reception rooms and atria of wealthy Greco-Roman homes.²³³ Archaeologists have uncovered the atrium of a house in Pompeii that displays a gallery of theatrical pictures from comic scenes.²³⁴ Comic masks flourish as a common motif in the public spaces of large houses. A common triclinium mosaic is the *asarotos oikos* (i.e., titled the “unswept floor”), in which the artwork on the floor displays scattered bits of food, bones, and even a dining mouse.²³⁵ Graffiti, caricatures and descriptive labels scribbled or painted on walls provide opportunity for passing laughter. Rough drawn caricatures incite laughter by exaggerating some potentially laughable physical feature of a person.²³⁶ For example, a large bald headed man with an exaggerated chin sported the label, “*Rufus est*—This is Rufus.”²³⁷ Labeled frescoes in a Pompeian tavern portray ancient sages offering laughable adages rather than their traditionally wise and renowned maxims. For example, under one fresco, Thales of Miletus is quoted as advising “those who shit hard to really work at it.”²³⁸

²³³ Atriums, the welcoming spaces of wealthy homes, often displayed artwork demonstrating values held by a patron/paterfamilias (Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 32–33).

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37–44.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45–47.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130–31; See Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 175–6.

Conclusion

Humor in the ancient world appears in both tendentious and non-tendentious forms. In ancient texts, humor is decisively tendentious. Common tendentious forms include ridicule, mockery, barbed wit, satire, sarcasm, and derisive laughter. Common non-tendentious humor takes the forms of in-group bantering and playful jesting. Other relatively harmless kinds of humor consist of clever wit demonstrated at in-group banquets, the surprise plots of comic plays, the astonishing reversals in didactic stories, and the often shocking effects of apotropaic images. Both forms of humor elicit public reactions ranging from guffawing laughter to sneers, snorts and smiles.

According to the ancients, the functions of humor range from apotropaic to recreational, from didactic to polemical. Fundamentally, humor serves to create or regenerate, to avert, to subdue, and to undermine.²³⁹ Humor gives birth to new life (literally), creates energy, and renews bored and weary audiences. It helps to solidify in-group loyalties and friendships. Humor averts the ill-effects of the evil eye, alleviates tension, and diverts potential harm.²⁴⁰ The subjugating power of humor, especially in the form of derisive laughter, helps to establish and maintain

²³⁹ Cf. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*. Gilhus discusses three basic kinds of laughter: diversion, regeneration, and derision.

²⁴⁰ Relief theory refers to the concept that laughter serves as a release of psychic energy, especially in highly tense situations. See an example of the relief theory at work in Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.10.

hierarchical order, and to control social order.²⁴¹ Ancient persons use humor to undermine powerful ideologies and potent persons, and to create cohesive action against injustices and abuses. Perhaps, above all else, humor functions as an effective rhetorical device in the maintenance and acquisition of honor.

The use of humor in antiquity brings about various beneficial or baleful effects. Beneficial effects include the salvaging of honor or the diversion of physical harm. At times, humor helps a less powerful person win the favor and the support of powerful patrons and rulers. Time, and again, humor elevates less powerful persons to positions of respect and honor. The baleful effects of humor include possible and probable repercussions of explosive anger, and even death, as opponents seek to defend or reclaim their honor. Frequently, in antiquity, tendentious humor produces the effect of de-legitimizing the beliefs and practices of out-groups. De-legitimization

²⁴¹ Superiority theorists note that a sense of hierarchical ranking occurs when persons above laugh at those persons or behaviors perceived to be beneath them. Laughter that comes at the expense of someone else conveys superiority. Common motifs found in the laughter of superiority include laughter directed at: 1) reversals of fortune, 2) breaches of decorum; 3) deviations of societal norms; and 4) violations of the rules of law. In antiquity, the laughter of superiority also kept envy, that is, the evil eye, at bay. See an example of the superiority theory at work in Plato, *Phileb.* 48–50. According to Plaza, most ancient uses of humor seemed to support the superiority theory. Cf. Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 7. In her work, Plaza also noted the existence of dozens of humor theories, which arose from various disciplines (e.g., biology, cognitive science, linguistics, literary criticism, etc.). A common tripartite grouping of all humor theories reduced them into three overarching theories: superiority, relief, and incongruity.

occurs when in-group members mock the practices and beliefs of out-groups.²⁴² At times, the mockery of the religious beliefs of outsiders escalates into violence.

In summary, humor has surfaced in many areas of ancient life. Humor was everywhere readily available to be plucked up and adapted for new occasions. *Dicta* were frequently reused and adapted in humorous ways to help establish the character of a renowned person. Humorous stereotypes reaffirmed in-group suspicions about out-group persons, such as foreigners, strange people, and even in-house slaves. Through frescoes, mosaics, caricatures, graffiti, stories, mythologies, biographies, treatises, and performances, humor enhanced daily life, promoted teachings, defended arguments, entertained weary minds, and awoke inattentive audiences. Above all, humor in antiquity served as an effective rhetorical device in serious approaches to serious situations.

²⁴² Cf. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 45, 48. The act of de-sacralizing a religion includes ridiculing its symbols, ideas, and practices by depleting them of religious meaning and by exaggerating their ordinariness or raw form. For example, a mocker de-sacralizes a statue of a god by ridiculing it as a merely wood or stone. Gilhus notes examples of de-sacralization in the works of Roman Seneca and the Greek Plutarch, both of whom mock Judaic rituals. In other examples, she notes that the Christian, Clement from Alexandria, mocks pagan religions, and the African, Apuleius, makes fun of a Syrian goddess. Gilhus points out that the ancient Egyptians received ridicule from a wide range of ethnic groups in the Roman world (see Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 47–48).

CHAPTER THREE

HUMOR IN EARLY JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

In this chapter, I focus specifically on ancient Jewish and Christian humor. After an extensive survey of humor-related terms, humor episodes, and rudimentary theories about humor, I draw examples from the works Josephus and Philo, and from early rabbinic literature, as well as from the Christian Synoptic Gospels. Three key elements inform my choices. First, I select narratives in which the authors recount a humorous anecdote. The anecdotes provide insights into how humor functioned in honor acquisition and maintenance. In addition, I pay particular attention to the persistent motifs, common character types, humor devices and types of humor found in these anecdotes. Secondly, I select any statements that depict beliefs about humor and its effects. These statements or rudimentary theories reveal the author's views about dangerous types of humor, the unethical uses of humor, and expectations regarding the use of humor. Thirdly, I select examples that provided an overview of the various types of humor found in early Jewish and Christian literature.

In the conclusion of this chapter, I construct a few theoretical observations based on an analysis of the motifs, functions and common effects of humor as revealed in early Jewish and Christian literature. In particular, I put forth two sociological observations, informed by humor theory. Overall, a fundamental

question guides my analysis, “What did these humor sources reveal about the functions and effects of humor within the context of the honor-shame societies in the ancient circum-Mediterranean world?”

Humor in the Writings of Josephus

Josephus refers explicitly to laughter and jesting behavior some twenty-one times. In addition, he cites “ridicule” and “mockery” in twenty-two references.¹ He recounts several cases in which derisive laughter results in shame, and even death.² Josephus notes that recipients of jesting fear the very possibility of laughingstock status, and they fear being publicly shamed.³ He also provides examples of humorous episodes in which a less powerful person salvages his honor through a clever riposte, and effectively turns derision back upon more powerful aggressors. While Josephus relates humorous incidences and uses humor-related terms, he never makes any explicit statements or theories about humor, or its effects. Below I provide some examples of Josephus’ references to humor.

¹ This analysis included all forms of γελάω (to laugh), παίζω (to joke around), χλευάζω (to mock), ἐμπαίζω (to ridicule), and ἐξειρωνεύομαι (to turn into a ridiculing jest).

² Derisive laughter results in shame and deaths (cf. Josephus, *A. J.* 12.169–174, 179–183, 203–207, 210–214, and 216–219; *A. J.* 6.45–52. Mockery is a common part of Roman-era state executions (cf. Josephus, *B. J.* 7.373).

³ Josephus, *A. J.* 6.45–52; and 15.373–374.

Although biblical texts did not actually record this incident, Josephus details a verbal exchange in which Saul expressed his fear of public ridicule.⁴ According to Josephus, when Samuel tells Saul that he is to become king of Israel, Saul asks Samuel, why he is joking around with him. Saul objects to Samuel's attempts to turn him into an object of ridicule. Saul greatly fears the status of laughingstock, and Samuel seeks to put his fears to rest. Josephus proceeds to add his own commentary on Saul's attributes. He states that people prefer Saul's mind to his handsome physique (the opposite position was stressed in 1 Samuel 9:2). Josephus explicitly emphasizes Saul's mind over his un-kingly appearance.⁵ Ironically, Josephus stresses Saul's mind as his greatest asset, but the biblical story never emphasizes Saul's ability to use his mind, instead it recalls how Saul "lost" his mind in his jealousy over David. However, the persistent theme in both the biblical version and Josephus' version is Saul's fear of public ridicule.

Josephus relates two humorous episodes from the Hasmonean period.⁶ In both episodes, a pious and wise Jew gains unexpected status and power at the expense of powerful foreign elites. In the first episode, Josephus describes two interactions between Ptolemy, the king of Egypt, and Joseph.⁷ Josephus notes that Joseph is a

⁴ The biblical exchange between Samuel and Saul occurs in 1 Sam 9:1–25.

⁵ Josephus, *A. J.* 6.45–52.

⁶ Josephus, *A. J.* 12.160–185; 196–222.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.160–185.

well-loved, wise and pious Judean, while his uncle, the high priest, Onias, is tight-fisted and foolish in his behavior. According to Josephus, Joseph strategically gains access to King Ptolemy through his clever ploy of wining and dining the king's ambassador. The ambassador returns to Egypt and highly commends Joseph to Ptolemy. After sufficient time passes, Joseph arrives in Alexandria. His simple and plain appearance earns him ruthless ridiculing at the hands of elite men from Syria and Phoenicia, who are in the city to make their bid on tax rates with the king. Eventually, Joseph journeys onward to Memphis where he meets Ptolemy and explains to him how dimwitted his uncle is. Joseph explains to the king that Onias, like other old people, has lost his faculty of reasoning. He assures Ptolemy that as a younger person, he will fulfill the king's every request. Ptolemy gets a chuckle out of Joseph's explanation for his uncle's miserly behavior. When the king and Joseph journeys back to Alexandria, the elite men from Syria and Phoenicia, who had ridiculed Joseph, get their comeuppance. Joseph out-bids them for the right to collect taxes. Ptolemy again laughs at Joseph's clever scheme. The elite men experience shame and defeat. Eventually, Joseph kills the Syrian elites for not paying their taxes.

In the second episode, Josephus recalls other interactions between Ptolemy and Hyrcanus, Joseph's son.⁸ Hyrcanus demonstrates the same kind of wit as his father. In one scene, Ptolemy invites Hyrcanus to a feast, and as protocol dictates, Hyrcanus accepts his dining position at the lowest ranked place. Apparently, his

⁸ Ibid., 12.196–222.

position at the banquet table places him where bones from the meal tend to pile up. Interestingly, the more elite guests ask Trypho, the king's jester, to expose Hyrcanus to derisive laughter. In mockery of Hyrcanus, Trypho leans toward the king and said, "Do you not see, O King, all the bones in front of Hyrcanus?"⁹ The king laughs and asked Hyrcanus why he has so many bones. Hyrcanus wittily replies that dogs eat both the meat and the bones, but because he is a "man," he eats only the meat. Hyrcanus' clever answer had affirms his status as an adult (earlier, he is mocked for being a mere child), and simultaneously, ridicules the elite guests for being dogs. Ptolemy responds by laughing aloud, and directing the guests to approve of Hyrcanus' witty riposte. Josephus explicitly notes the facetiousness of Hyrcanus' humorous reply, but he does not describe the response of the elite guests to the mockery made of them.

In another noteworthy episode of humor, Josephus recounts how Jews ridiculed Roman trophies. According to Josephus, Jews caused such an upheaval that King Herod ordered the ornamental images stripped from the Roman trophies. Herod tries to curb the collective power of public ridicule in order to avoid the looming threat of revolt. Josephus observes that the Jews continued to ridicule the wooden objects, even after Herod had stripped the objects of their ornamentation.¹⁰ The mockery of a wooden object might have appeared ridiculous and laughable to

⁹ Ibid., 12.212.

¹⁰ Ibid., 15.277–279.

Romans, but Jews persistently mocked Roman power through objects associated with them (e.g., trophies, pigs, etc.). An assemblage of mockers, who united against a common enemy, posed a serious threat to social and political order, and such a threat required a swift response to avert a destructive mob.¹¹

In summary, although Josephus does not state any explicit beliefs about humor, he does contribute to four key observations of humor and its effects on honor acquisition. First, pious and wise persons employ humor in their clever ripostes to gain status and favor from powerful patrons. Second, targets rebuff provocative attempts to shame them through their use of humor (e.g., Joseph and Hyrcanus). Third, public ridicule ricochets back upon the aggressive humorists and brings about their humiliating defeat, shame, and in some cases, even death (e.g., the Syrian and Phoenician elites). Fourth, the possibility of acquiring the status of laughingstock produces reactions of fear and anger (e.g., Saul).¹²

Josephus also contributes to another key observation regarding derisive laughter and mockery. He observes the power latent in a mocked symbol, and he notes the dangers inherent in a public gathering of mockers. Whenever a crowd

¹¹ Philo illustrates the case of an unruly and destructive mob (*Flacc.* 33–44).

¹² In addition to Josephus, Philo also seems concerned about laughingstock status. In a wide range of Philo's works, there are extensive attempts to explain the origins of Isaac's name, which suggests that Philo seeks to disassociate Isaac from the status of laughingstock. Philo explains repeatedly that Isaac's namesake stands as a sign marking the birth of laughter and joy. Cf. Philo, *Leg.* 3.85–87; 217–219; *Det.* 123–124; *Plant.* 169; *Mut.* 130–131; 137; *Abr.* 201; and *Praem.* 31.

focuses on a common target and engages in common mockery, they pose a serious threat to social and political order (e.g., Roman trophies).

Humor in the Writings of Philo

A number of humor-related terms and several humor episodes surface in my survey of the works of Philo. Philo's use of humor-related terms is extensive. He refers explicitly to laughter and jesting behavior some forty-nine times with an additional fifty references to ridicule and mockery.¹³ He cites two references to the comic poets and surprisingly, referred once to a somewhat technical humor term, κωμικῆς χλεύης (i.e. comic ridicule).¹⁴ Philo provides a good deal of information related to both tendentious and non-tendentious forms of humor. He writes of ridicule and its use against hypocrites, family honor, drunken fools, clients, Jews, slaves, and foreigners. In terms of non-tendentious humor, he spends a good deal of energy on the motifs of joy and laughter as signs of a virtuous life. Across a wide spectrum of his works, Philo demonstrates a persistent interest in the etymology of Isaac's name, and the origins of laughter.¹⁵ His expositions on laughter generally include some

¹³ I include in this analysis all forms of γελάω (to laugh), παίζω (to joke around), χλευάζω (to mock), ἐμπαίζω (to ridicule), and ἐξειρωνεύομαι (to turn into a ridiculing jest). I have been unable to locate any scholarly articles related to laughter and humor in Philo's works.

¹⁴ Philo, *Congr.* 61.

¹⁵ Philo cited Isaac's name over ninety-five times in his works.

thoughts on the ethics of laughter. Below, I recount some observations and some examples of Philo's references to humor.

In Philo's discourses on laughter, he spends a good deal of discussion on two fundamental beliefs: 1) the origins of laughter, and 2) laughter as a sign of the virtuous life. In his belief about the origins of laughter, he states that God created laughter.¹⁶ It was God who chose to bring laughter (i.e., double entendre for Isaac and physical laughter) into the world through the virtuous lives of Abraham and Sarah. Philo explains that Abraham's belted out laughter at the birth announcement of Isaac (Gen 17:17) is an expression of joy.¹⁷ He rebuffs the notion that Abraham's laughter constitutes an act of blasphemous ridicule. After all, in antiquity, guffawing laughter conveys an act of mockery.¹⁸ His philosophical argument ultimately defends Abraham's laughter as an expression of *χαρά* (joy).¹⁹ On the one hand, he reasons that vices bring about pain, and generate misery within a person. Such misery prevents a person from experiencing joy and expressing laughter.²⁰ On the other hand, a virtuous life gives birth to joy and cheerfulness.²¹ Therefore, Abraham's virtuous life brought

¹⁶ Philo, *Leg.* 1.82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.85–87; 217–219; *Det.* 123; *Abr.* 201; and *Praem.* 31. See also Josephus, *Ant.* 2.213.

¹⁸ Plato, *Resp.* 3.389d–e, cf. *Phileb.* 45d–e.

¹⁹ Philo, *Leg.* 3.85–87.

²⁰ Philo, *Mut.* 31.167.

²¹ Philo, *Leg.* 3.217–219; *Mut.* 31.167.

forth an expression of joy.²² Essentially, Philo's view of Abraham's laughter can be summed up in his own words, "ὁ γέλως ἐστὶν ἡ χαρά—Laughter is joy."²³

Philo holds certain ethical views of laughter. He disapproves of targeting some groups or persons with derisive forms of laughter. He explicitly admonishes the ridicule of widows, orphans, and fathers. His chastisement of such behavior carries its own tone of laughable mockery as noted in the vocative denouncement, "...πάριτε νῦν, οἱ ἀλαζόνες, οἱ μέγα πνέοντες ἐπὶ ταῖς ευπραγίαις—Come, now! You Braggarts! You Great Windbags of Success!"²⁴ Philo specifically reminds his readers that persons of virtue do not engage in the evil behavior of mocking widows and children.²⁵ His condemnation of derisive laughter includes targeting shepherds and goat herders. Philo writes that Egyptians ridicule (χλεύη), and laugh outrageously (πλατὺν γέλωτα) at persons with these "lowly" occupations.²⁶ After his derision of the Egyptians, whom he stereotypes as an extremely boastful and excessively haughty

²² Cf. Philo, *Mut.* 167. Philo, not only writes about laughter as a sign of the virtuous life, he advises moderation as conducive to virtuous living. In his Aristotelian-like treatise, he urges a middle ground between extremes (i.e., no self-restraint versus severe discipline, austerity versus intense living, and laughter versus playful jesting, etc.). In addition, he notes that wealth, glory and pleasure are good so long as a person maintains a good character and an honorable reputation (cf. Philo, *Her.* 9.48).

²³ Philo, *Leg.* 3.219.

²⁴ Philo, *Mos.* 2.240.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Philo, *Agr.* 60–62. Philo used this unique phrase, πλατὺν γέλωτα, several times in his writings (*Cher.* 67; *Post.* 179; *Agr.* 62).

people, Philo goes on to explain how persons of higher status disdain the occupation of shepherds and goat herders.²⁷ He notes that generally persons of such despised (ἄδοξος) occupations avoid any mention of their occupations to persons of higher status. However, on occasions when shepherds and goat herders boast of their occupation, Philo explains, they do so to defend the honor of their fathers. He stresses that ridicule cannot always be avoided when arrogant people such as the Egyptians are present.

Philo abhors the arrogance of sons who expose their own fathers to public ridicule. He recalls the biblical story of how Ham *made fun of* (διαχλευάζω) his father's naked condition in the presence of bystanders, which he specifically notes, included both men and women (Gen. 9:22).²⁸ Ham publicly exposed his father's shame, and brought dishonor upon his family, and as a result, Ham suffered his own dishonor and the effects of shame heaped back upon him. In Philo's view, the son should have kept the dishonorable behavior of his father hidden from the public. When sons expose their fathers to public ridicule, Philo observed, they suffer the consequences of their own dishonorable demise.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Philo, *QG* 2.71; and *Virt.* 202. Note: The translation of *QG* 2.71 [Marcus, LCL] was a poor rendition in my opinion. See *The Works of Philo: The Contemporary of Josephus*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

Philo criticizes patrons for bringing undue mockery upon their clients.²⁹ He mocks patrons who display their wealth by giving clients absurd gifts. Belittling and derisive in tone, Philo states the obvious; “one should not give an anchor to a farmer, or a plow to a ship captain, or lyre to a physician, or food to a thirsty person, or an over-abundance of wine to a hungry person.”³⁰ He admonishes wealthy patrons to fulfill a client’s request for a loan in an appropriate and honorable manner.³¹

Obviously, Philo believes some persons or groups deserve ridicule. He targets specifically hypocrites, flatterers and treacherous persons.³² Regarding hypocrisy, Philo is leery of persons, who claim to despise glory and pleasure, and appear gloomy and austere.³³ When the pretentiousness of hypocrites is eventually exposed, he notes that they are ridiculed and despised.³⁴

Hypocrisy, couched in the form of flattery, raises Philo’s ire, particularly in his account of Gaius’ Egyptian household slaves.³⁵ He mocks Gaius’s gullibility for believing the Egyptians’ flattery concerning his deified status. He recounts how the Egyptians repeatedly used deceptive practices to appease Gaius and to warn off

²⁹ Philo, *Post.* 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Philo, *Legat.* 162–163.

³³ Philo, *Fug.* 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

³⁵ Philo, *Legat.* 162–178.

danger to their own well-being. Philo stereotypes the Egyptians' propensity toward flattery, trickery and hypocrisy.³⁶ The Egyptians called Gaius "a god," Philo observes, but then, he mocks, "They also referred to ibexes and asps as gods."³⁷ Philo's remark surely would have raised a bout of derisive laughter from first century Jewish readers.

Philo also expresses displeasure at Gaius' household slaves for their encouragement of Gaius' mockery of religious rituals. Philo probably has in mind Gaius' mockery of Jewish rituals. He recalls how Gaius' made jokes and laughed at serious things, especially making fun of prayers related to ceremonial cleansings and the journal recordings of these ceremonies.³⁸

Philo stereotypes and ridicules the Alexandrians, the ones he deems despicable. He reserves his most venomous mockery for Gaius' household slave, Helicon, an Alexandrian slave, who became one of Gaius' advisors.³⁹ Philo recounts how a Jewish delegation attempted to elicit the help of Helicon in pleading their cause, but Helicon's vehemence against the Jews prevented them from seeking his

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 162. In *Decal.* 80, Philo notes that foreign visitors to Egypt laugh at and ridicule the Egyptians for their worship of animals.

³⁷ Philo, *Legat.* 162–165.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 166–173, 203–205. Philo aims a host of derogatory epithets at Helicon. In mockery, he compares Helicon to Apelles, a tragic actor, who persisted to play his "youthful and handsome" stage role, even though he had grown too old.

assistance.⁴⁰ He portrays Helicon as a self-promoter, whose ability to joke (σκώπτω), to engage in clever wit (χαριεντίζομαι), and to playfully make foolish jests (παιδιὰς ληρώδει) won the favor of Gaius. Philo mocks Helicon relentlessly, calling him a chattering slave, a scavenger, and a scorpion. With a tongue-in-cheek remark, Philo states that Helicon received a fine reward (i.e., his torture at the order of Gaius, and his execution by Claudius).⁴¹

Without the aid of an influential insider (they could not count on Helicon), the Jewish representatives were left to plead their own defense. Philo describes the Jewish delegation's efforts in a scene that must have appeared comical to outsiders. In order to make their requests, the Jewish delegates have to follow Gaius on his inspection of private properties, which includes a scrutiny of his private harem.⁴² As the Jews proceed along behind Gaius, Philo describes how they are mocked and railed violently (κατακερτομέω) by onlookers, who behave as if they are mimes in a theater. Philo remarks that the whole scene looks like a mime production (i.e., theatrical performance of a specific form of comedy).⁴³ He abhors how the adversaries burst out

⁴⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁴¹ Ibid., 206. Gaius, known as Caligula, ruled as the Roman emperor from 37 to 41 CE, followed by Claudius (41 to 54 CE).

⁴² Ibid., 355–363.

⁴³ Mime production alludes to a theatrical performance of a specific form of comedy. Mimes might have originated in Alexandria, before they gained popularity in Rome. Philo's familiarity with mime productions suggests that he might have attended comic performances at the theater. Cf. R. W. Reynolds, "The Adultery Mime," *CQ* 40, no. 3–4 (1946): 77–84.

(καταρρήγνυμι) in laughter when Gaius asks about their abstention from pig meat. Using word-play, Gaius' derisive counter-response to the delegation's answer is quite sarcastic, “ὡς πολλοί γε καὶ τὰ προχειρότατα ἀρνία οὐ προσφέρονται εὖ γὰρ ἔστι γὰρ οὐχ ἡδέα—Indeed, as many also do not slaughter a young—*one not brought up*—lamb (at this point Gaius laughed). Well, indeed. For it is not kind to do such a thing.”⁴⁴ Philo remarks that Gaius' disparaging comments (φλυαρέω) and violent railing (κατακερτομέω) left the Jewish delegation at quite a loss (ἀμήχανος). Philo was well aware of how the Romans ridiculed Jews for their abstention from pig and their Sabbath practices.

Philo was probably aware of ridicule directed at Jews for their “intoxication of spirit.” He describes the “intoxication of spirit” as a state in which a person exhibits frenetic rejoicing (γηθέω), smiling (μειδιάω), and leaping and dancing (ἀνορχέομαι).⁴⁵ He notes that this type of frantic behavior (βακχεύω) is often confused with the kind of drunkenness caused by wine. He advises those who experience derisive laughter related to “intoxication of spirit” to reply to their mockers with the following dictum, “ὦ θαυμάσιε, γυνὴ ἢ σκληρὰ ἡμέρα ἐγὼ εἰμι, καὶ οἶνον καὶ μέθυσμα οὐ πέπωκα,

⁴⁴ Philo, *Legat.* 361–363.

⁴⁵ Philo, *Ebr.* 146–147.

καὶ ἐκχέω τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἐνώπιον κυρίου—Ah wonder! I had a hard day. I have not drunk wine, nor am I intoxicated. I am pouring out my soul to the Lord.”⁴⁶

On several occasions, Philo also discusses his philosophical views on laughter in relation to banqueting. He has advised virtuous persons to exercise constraint and moderation in both their drinking and in their use of laughter. He also has urged banquet attendees not to engage in gluttony and drunkenness, because such behavior opens the door to mockery and derisive laughter, which in turn, results in violent reprisals.⁴⁷ Philo’s advice includes the following dictum, “Be drunk in a sober way” or “Be drunk with soberness.”⁴⁸

Philo describes two specific types of dinner party attendees and their particular use of laughter: the virtuous person, who practices playful jesting; and the austere fool, who ridicules guests with sarcastic barbs and offensive speech.⁴⁹ The virtuous person engages in playful jesting, undeterred by anxiety or fear. This person

⁴⁶ The first part of this dictum is notoriously difficult to translate. The vocative exclamation of ὦ θαυμάσιε seems to be an idiomatic expression that loses its strength in translation. Its use suggests a sardonic riposte. The Greek “σκληρὰ ἡμέρα ἐγὼ εἶμι—I had a hard day (*emphatically stated*)” seems to be convey some sort of wordplay (e.g., double entendre). It is translated dynamically as “I am a deeply troubled woman (NRSV).” The rest of dictum is easily translated as, “I have not drunk wine, nor am I intoxicated. I am pouring out my soul to the Lord (Philo, *Ebr.* 149)!” Philo apparently takes a dictum from 1 Sam 1:15, “γυνή ἦ σκληρὰ ἡμέρα ἐγὼ εἶμι καὶ οἶνον καὶ μέθυσμα οὐ πέπωκα καὶ ἐκχέω τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἐνώπιον κυρίου (LXX).”

⁴⁷ Philo, *Fug.* 31–32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁹ Philo, *Somn.* 2.164–168.

holds a positive attitude, and a gracious and cheerful mood. In addition, Philo notes that when the wise and prudent become intoxicated at banquets, they become more pleasant.⁵⁰ Their intoxication promotes clever jesting and laughter. He describes their dispositions as relaxed, cheerful, and graciously joyful. On the other hand, the austere fool lashes out with derisive reproaches, yells obnoxiously, and fights with other guests. This person's melancholic mood, compounded with his intoxication and his threatening demeanor, provokes violent exchanges. Philo expresses his discontent at the austere fool and his morbid type of humor.

Philo provides an episode of tendentious humor that illustrates the dangers of collective public ridicule. Public ridicule aimed at a common enemy has the potential to empower oppressed groups to incite rebellions. He recalls how children mercilessly teased a defenseless person named Carabas.⁵¹ Philo describes Carabas as possessing a gentle kind of madness in which he wanders alone, day and night, naked in the streets. One day, he recounts, idle children and youths corner Carabas near the public gymnasium with their harassing ridicules. They place on his head a flattened papyrus as a crown, cloth him in a bed mat, and place a stick of papyrus in his hand as a scepter. They mock him as a king. The mockery of "King Madman" prompted bystanders to start shouting a derogatory epithet, which Philo noted to be a disguised

⁵⁰ Philo, *Plant.* 166–169.

⁵¹ Philo, *Flacc.* 6.38. We also find idle children engaged in merciless teasing in 2 Kings 2:23–24. Forty-two youths meet a dreadful fate when two bears mauled them after Elisha got tired of their harassment. Perhaps, the Grimm Brothers-like story originally served as an instructive story to warn children against teasing people.

slur directed at King Agrippa. Philo recalls how Flaccus saw the whole ordeal and failed to suppress the mob.⁵² Philo was quite angered by Flaccus' inept behavior, because his inaction led to the formation of a revolutionary mob, and had serious consequences for the Jewish population in Alexandria.

In one of his "serious" philosophical treatises, Philo offers a grotesque and humorous exposition on the body and its functions.⁵³ He puts forth a rather hilarious rendition of the body's interaction with food. He writes about the vapors associated with belching (or possibly gas), and the loudness of their sounds.⁵⁴ He describes how the body seeks out food, sees, hears, consumes, and digests food. Finally, he explains how the body disposes of food-remains in the appropriate earthenware, the one used specifically for relieving oneself.⁵⁵

In conclusion, Philo's discourses on laughter include six important summary observations. First, he believes that wise and faithful persons evoke beneficial laughter, because they have the capacity to experience joy, and because they live virtuous lives. This particular view on laughter and virtue resounds with Aristotelian thought. Secondly, Philo explains the origins of laughter and its association with

⁵² Philo, *Flacc.* 40–44.

⁵³ Cf. Philo, *Sacr.* 98. Mark 7:19 and Matthew 15:17 also describe body functions. Humor related to body functions is common among Greek and Roman authors.

⁵⁴ Philo, *Sacr.* 98.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

prayers of gratitude and with frenetic expressions of joy in the presence of God. He advises devotees of ecstatic prayer to respond to ridicule with a witty riposte. Thirdly, Philo admonishes certain unethical uses of tendentious humor. He condemns ridicule directed at widows and orphans. Regarding the familial context, Philo abhors the public exposure of a father's shameful deeds. In regard to patronage, he criticizes patrons for displaying their wealth in ways that shamed their clients. A fourth observation includes Philo's own use of tendentious humor. He believes some transgressors deserve ridicule, especially those persons exposed as hypocrites and flatterers. His disparagement of Alexandrian servants, who belonged to the emperor's household and sought to flatter him at every turn, is severe. His mockery of Egyptians in general includes the use of ethnic stereotypes. Fifth, Philo recalls the intensity of tendentious humor aimed against despised groups or persons. He describes the relentless Roman mockery of the Jewish delegation. The emperor's treatment of the Jews, as well as the taunts of onlookers, particularly reminds Philo of a comic scene from a theatrical performance. In his description of the children mocking Carabas, Philo remarks on the power of unrestrained mockery and its potential to inspire revolution. Finally, he describes two opposing kinds of verbal humor used during banquets (i.e., the playful versus the offensive kinds). His observations include the role that wine plays in intensifying certain kinds of humor. On the one hand, wine helps virtuous persons loosen up and it increases their capacity for witty and playful jests. On the other hand, wine exacerbates the sarcastic barbs of foolish persons.

Humor Parallels in the Hebrew Bible and Early Rabbinical Anecdotes

In this section, I provide a few examples of humorous anecdotes from the Hebrew Bible and early rabbinic literature.⁵⁶ Even though these anecdotes come from distinctly different eras, they share common elements. Their narratives offer insights into character typologies and motifs that generally surface in humorous anecdotes of Jewish folktale biographies.

In biblical and rabbinic anecdotes, humorous dialogues between the righteous and God occur frequently. These dialogues illustrate an intimate relationship between God and the righteous person.⁵⁷ At times, the righteous person even aims light-hearted mockery at God. For example, instead of asking God, outright, to be merciful, Abraham proceeds to haggle with God (Gen 18:23–33). He engages in extended bartering with God on behalf of two doomed cities. The Hebrew Bible provides other episodes of humor in dialogues between the righteous and God. For example, Jonah

⁵⁶ Cf. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 51. A number of Jewish scholars explore humor in rabbinic literature. Cf. Meyer Heller, "Humor in the Talmud" (MA thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1950); Joseph Klein, *Wit and Humor in Rabbinic Commentaries on the Bible* (Worcester, MA: Assumption College Press, 1987); Ian D. Morris, "Stop Laughing!...This Is Serious!: The Rabbinic Use of Humour in Midrash Rabbah" (Phd dissert., Hebrew Union College, 1984); Matthew S. Cutler, "Are We B'nai Yitzhak?: A Study of Jewish Humor" (MA thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1990); Heinrich Loewe, *Alter Jüdischer volkshumor aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Böhmen, Ger.,: Reichenberg, 1931); and Hershey H. Friedman and Steve Lipman, "Satan the Accuser: Trickster in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature," *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 18, no. 1–2 (1998): 31–41; Hershey Friedman, "He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh: Divine Humor in Talmudic Literature," *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 17, no. 1–2 (1998): 36–50.

⁵⁷ Cf. Friedman, "He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh," 36.

and God argue about whether God should have shown acts of mercy (Jonah 3:10–4:11). In a Talmudic example, Rabbi Eleazar b. Pedath attempts to acquire more gifts from God than apparently God is willing to give.⁵⁸ The rabbi replies shockingly to God, “That’s all I get?” He adds a disparaging note that God actually had nothing else to give him.⁵⁹ Another humorous exchange occurs in Talmudic literature when Rabbi Ishmael b. Elisha recounts the time he was in the Temple, God asked him for a blessing, and so, he blessed God, albeit in a comic way, saying, “May your anger always be suppressed with mercy...May you stop short of a strict interpretation of the law.”⁶⁰ This blessing benefited the crafty human. In another example, Rabbi Joshua b. Levi relates the story of Moses’ visit to heaven where God sarcastically asks Moses why he had not extended a greeting or an offering of good wishes.⁶¹ Friedman notes

⁵⁸ Genesis 18:23–33 and *Taanis* 25a. Cf. Friedman, “He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh,” 40–41; Henry Malter, trans. *The Treatise Ta’anit of the Babylonian Talmud* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 378–81; J. Rabbinowitz, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo’ed: Ta’anith*, ed. I. Epstein (New York: Rebecca Bennet, 1959), 130.

⁵⁹ *Taanis* 25a. Cf. Friedman, “He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh: Divine Humor in Talmudic Literature,” 40–41. Malter, *The Treatise Ta’anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, 378–81; and Rabbinowitz, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo’ed: Ta’anith*, 130.

⁶⁰ *Berachos* 7a. Friedman, “He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh,” 39. Cf. Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary: Balvi Tractate Berakhot*, South Florida Academic Commentary Series 24 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 34.

⁶¹ *Shabbos* 89a. Cf. Friedman, “He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh,” 40; Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo’ed: Shabbath*, 423–4.

that this depiction of God, disturbed by a snub from Moses, appears quite comic.⁶² Repeatedly, rabbinic humor demonstrates God's affection for the righteous through humorous exchanges, and witty ripostes. For example, Rabbi Nathan wants to know how God responds to a particular rabbinical argument.⁶³ So he asks Elijah how God responded when Rabbi Jeremiah had argued in favor of ignoring God's heavenly voice. The prophet of old responded that God had laughed and said, "My children have got the best of me."⁶⁴

Both biblical and rabbinic anecdotes include the comic situations involving the righteous and the various forms of the trickster (e.g., Satan).⁶⁵ The trickster uses disguises, deceptions, and clever wit to target the weaknesses and faults of the righteous.⁶⁶ In biblical texts, Satan often plays the role of the trickster.⁶⁷ For example,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Bava Metzia* 59b. Cf. Friedman, "He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh," 42–43; Salis Daiches, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin: Baba Mezia*, ed. I. Epstein (New York: Rebecca Bennet, 1959), 353.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cf. Friedman and Lipman, "Satan the Accuser," 32.

⁶⁶ The temptation of Jesus contains comic elements; both in trickster's attempts to lure Jesus, and in Jesus' ripostes (Matt 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13). Interestingly, Mark's Gospel, a gospel that is frequently associated with oral performance, does not emphasize the comic elements (1:12–13). Greek authors, including Septuagint authors, translate the trickster Satan as δίαβολος (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13) with the exception of Mark 1:13.

⁶⁷ See the comic anecdote in 1 Chron 21:1–17 (LXX). In this story, Satan entices David to take a census. As a result, God becomes furious and offers David a

in a comic anecdote in 1 Chronicles 21:1–17, Satan entices David to take a census. As a result, God becomes furious and offers David a choice of three punishments. Of course, David chooses the least severe of the three punishments. At the last minute, God intercepts the angel of pestilence and decides not to carry out the punishment that David has chosen. In a bit of a comic move, only after God's last minute reprieve does David begin his plea for mercy. In rabbinic anecdotes, the trickster character offers enticing temptations to lure the righteous into behavior they would not otherwise have chosen.⁶⁸ For example, the trickster tries to entrap Rabbi Meir, who had a renowned reputation for his faithfulness to the Torah.⁶⁹ He appears in the form of a woman to Rabbi Meir, and succeeds in luring him to cross a river.⁷⁰ When the Rabbi reaches mid-river, Satan disappears out of fear of Rabbi Meir and his Torah. Another example of Satan's trickery involved the Jewish teacher, Rabbi Matthew b. Heresh. In a comical scene with Rabbi Matthew, Satan again appears in the guise of a

choice of punishments. At the last minute, God decides not to carry out the punishment. David makes his plea for mercy only after God relents.

⁶⁸ Friedman and Lipman, "Satan the Accuser," 32–40.

⁶⁹ Ibid.: 34. Cf. C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 298–9; Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim: Kiddushin*, 417–8.

⁷⁰ *b. Kid.* 81a. Cf. Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 298–9; Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim: Kiddushin*, 417–8.

beautiful woman.⁷¹ Satan tries desperately to disrupt righteous Rabbi Matthew's study. Whichever way Rabbi Matthew turns to avoid looking at the beautiful woman before him, he finds the woman re-positioned in front of him. This comic scene eventually turns ghastly when Rabbi Matthew ends Satan's opportunity to lure him. He unexpectedly blinds himself. Comic scenes in rabbinic temptation stories often conclude with shocking acts of grisly humor (e.g., the blinding of R. Matthew b. Heresh). Stories of Satan's disguises and comic attempts to lure righteous men always end with either an implicit or explicit editorial admonition. Although quite misogynist by modern terms, righteous rabbis received frequent warnings about the temptations of women. Rabbis cautioned students against even looking in the direction of a woman, lest they succumb to temptation.

In conclusion, humorous anecdotes in the Hebrew Bible and in early rabbinic texts share some similarities. Comparative motifs center on such themes as arguing for mercy or enticing the pious person. Comparative character types include the trickster, the righteous person, and God. Overall, anecdotes depict righteous persons in humorous interactions with God, or with the trickster (e.g., Herod, Satan). Similarities in anecdotes suggest that a trajectory of humor episodes in religious-related literature continued from pre-Roman times down to the rabbinic period. The

⁷¹ *Tanḥ. B., Numbers, Parashah 6a*. Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 298–99; John T. Townsend, trans., *Midrash Tanhuma: Numbers and Deuteronomy* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2003), 203–4.

persistent motif in this trajectory includes the intimate dialogues and bantering affection between God and the righteous.

Humor Parallels in Rabbinic and Christian Texts

Common motifs and stock characters in humorous anecdotes surface in comparable texts from the Christian Synoptic Gospels and the early rabbinic texts.⁷² Jakob Jónsson presents extensive examples of these humorous parallels.⁷³ Below, I highlight a few of Jónsson's examples in order to illustrate the motifs and stock characters associated specifically with early Jewish humor.

Jónsson demonstrates the similarities between a Synoptic and a rabbinic story involving wisdom figures and their interactions with King Herod. In antiquity, King Herod gained infamy for his cunning spy tactics.⁷⁴ Given this knowledge of Herod's manipulative practices, any clever person who managed to out-maneuver him surely produced much derisive laughter from listeners who despised him. As we have already heard, persons react with anger at any attempts to make them into a laughingstock. Jónsson recalls the stories of how the Magi (Matt 2:1–12, 16) and

⁷² Cf. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*; and Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Baya Stein (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁷³ Jónsson examines some of these parallels between the Talmud and Christian biblical texts and argues for the continuity of humorous elements and episodes from oral traditions to written texts. He notes that elements and episodes of humor in Christian texts and rabbinic literature resonate with ancient Hebrew humor found in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

Rabbi Baba b. Buta avoided the deceptive ploys of Herod. Even in his blind condition, Rabbi Baba, not only avoided Herod's attempts to entrap him, but he succeeded in manipulating Herod into rebuilding the Temple.⁷⁵ In the Gospel of Matthew, Herod deceptively seeks information about a star's appearance from the Magi, but these wise foreigners simply change their route and avoid diplomatic protocol, but not before acknowledging a usurper king (2:1–12, 16). The Magi's action turns Herod into a fool because his attempt at deception failed.⁷⁶ Although Herod has long passed from the Roman-Jewish political scene, the motif carries a latent desire for those who wish to carry out such a clever deception against an oppressor in their own time. From the distant days of Esther's entrapment of Haman (Esther 5:4–7:10) to Judith's deceptive luring of Holofernes (Judith 10:13–14:18), from the Magi's evasion of Herod (Matt 2:1–12, 16) to Rabbi Baba's outmaneuvering of Herod (*b. B.B.3b*), the motif of clever deception has probably been retold with delight. These comic episodes of wisdom figures outsmarting the despised and powerful Herod certainly conjure up images of Josephus' account of Joseph and the elite men of Syria and Phoenicia.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *b. B.B.3b*. Cf. Neuser, trans., *Baba Batra*, 9–10. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 160–1; and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin, Baba Bathra*, ed. I. Epstein (New York: Rebecca Bennet, 1959), 10–12.

⁷⁶ See λάθρα in Matt 2:7; and ἐμπαίζω in Matt 2:16.

⁷⁷ Josephus, *A.J.* 12.172–173.

Both rabbinic and Synoptic texts share a humorous motif as a part of a similar *a fortiori* argument.⁷⁸ For example, Jónsson compares Jesus' words (Luke 12:22–32 // Matt 6:26–29) with the words of Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar.⁷⁹ Both teachers use humorous exaggerations to stress the absurdity associated with anxiety over daily provisions. Jesus depicts worry-free animals in his *a fortiori* argument. He stresses that if birds did not worry, even more so, his followers should not worry. Rabbi Eleazar portrays the image of animals engaged in human handiwork. In his *a fortiori* argument, he presents the following observation, “Who has ever seen a wild animal or a bird practicing a craft?—yet they have their sustenance without care, and were they not created to serve me? Yet my Maker created me to serve. How much more should I not worry about my sustenance without worrying?”⁸⁰ Rabbi Eleazar distinguishes the higher value of humans by asserting their status as servants of God, from the animals, who served only humans. Jesus contrasts one of the most vulnerable animals, the birds, and their worry-free state with the stronger, impervious

⁷⁸ Cf. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, 20–21. The *a fortiori* argument consists of a premise based on “if/then” or an “if/even more so” proposition.

⁷⁹ Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 103–4.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Jónsson cites from m. Kid. 82b. Cf. Herbert Danby, trans., *Kiddushin*, ed. H. Milford (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1938), 329; Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim: Kiddushin*, 425. Rabbi S. b. Eleazar uses images of animals with human-like abilities again in *b. Kid. 82b*, where he says, “In my whole lifetime, I have not seen a deer engaged in gathering fruit, a lion carrying burdens, or a fox as a shopkeeper... (Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim: Kiddushin*, 425).”

humans. Both Rabbi Eleazar and Jesus use the humorously exaggerated images of animals in their similar *a fortiori* argument so that they can effectively heighten the absurdity of human anxiety.

Rabbinical and Synoptic texts share similar humorous motifs in their didactic stories. Jónsson gave the example of Jesus' parable of the surprise treasure in a field (Matt 13:44; *GTh* 109) and Abba Judan's discovery of a treasure in a field (*Lev. Rab.* 5:4).⁸¹ The Matthean Jesus tells an anecdote about a person who unexpectedly discovers a hidden treasure in a field that does not belong to him (Matt 13:44). With great excitement, he re-hides the treasure and goes off to sell all his other property. Then he buys the field. The *Gospel of Thomas* presents a more elaborate version of the hidden treasure (*GTh* 109). Heightening the suspense of the outcome, Jesus notes that a father has buried the treasure in his field, and has forgotten about it (or has forgotten where he buried it). Then the father dies and the son inherits the property. The son sells the field, and subsequently, the new owner stumbles onto the hidden treasure while plowing the field. The new owner gains considerable status from the benefits of his treasure. Unlike the Matthean version, the Thomas version does not explicitly relate the excitement of discovering the treasure. In the rabbinic story, Abba Judan has a reputation for excessive charity.⁸² As a result, he eventually becomes

⁸¹ Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 130–1. Jónsson compares Matthew and Abba Judan's discovery of a treasure. I add the analysis of *GTh* 109.

⁸² *Lev. Rab.* 5:4. Cf. J. Israelstam and Judah J. Slotki, trans., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus*, ed. H. Freedman and Maruice Simon (London, UK: Soncino Press, 1939),

impoverished. When the time comes for him to contribute to the support of the rabbis, his wife tells him to sell half of his remaining field to acquire the necessary funds. Some days later, Abba Judan is plowing his field when his ox falls unexpectedly into a hole and breaks its leg. By now, the hearers of Abba Judan's misfortunes surely feel some sympathy for his travails. One has to wonder what else could possibly happen to the poor and deeply pious man. After Abba Judan climbs down into the hole to help his ox, he makes a delightful discovery. He has stumbled upon a sizable treasure. With his good fortune, Abba Judan acquires servants, and countless animals, and a seat of honor among the rabbis. The righteousness and faithfulness of Abba Judan have earned him an unexpected discovery and a reversal of status. All three of these anecdotes about hidden treasure must have delighted the audience to some degree.⁸³

66–67; Jacob Neusner, trans., *Leviticus Rabbah*, ed. J. Neusner et al., South Florida Academic Commentary Series, no. 95–97 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 59–60.

⁸³ The *GTh* 109 and *Lev. Rab.* 5:4 versions offer more of a developed sense of the comic than the Matthean version. Humor theorists have noted that a potentially humorous anecdote would have included three basic elements: a highly economical three-part sequencing; an escalation of suspense; and a surprise reversal of fortune. Both *GTh* 109 and *Lev. Rab.* 5:4 include these three elements. In *Lev. Rab.* 5:4, we find two three-part sequencing segments. The first set of a three-part sequence occurs as Abba Judan brings (1) hardship upon himself after he gives too much away, and then (2) he has to sell half his field so that he might provide (3) a donation to the rabbis' fund. In the second set of sequencing, the situation for Abba Judan worsens. As he plows along behind his ox, he suddenly sees (1) his ox disappear down a hole, and as he scrambles down the hole, he discovers that (2) his ox has broken its leg. The suspense occurs when Abba Judan climbs down into the hole, and the hearer considers what might happen next. Suddenly, a reversal of fortune occurs as Abba Judan happens upon (3) a hidden treasure. The final element unexpectedly deviates from the sequencing and disrupts the reader's expectations. Humor theorists have suggested that the sequencing effect helps formulate a pattern of expectation in the

The Synoptic Gospels and rabbinical texts share similar motifs in their stories about hired laborers. Although the message conveyed by the stories differed, Jónsson compares the similarities between motifs of anticipation and disgruntlement (Matt 20:1–16; *Deut. Rab.* 6:2).⁸⁴ In the rabbinical version, a king hires laborers, but he does not disclose the method by which he has determined their pay. At the end of the workday, the king pays the laborers according to the type of tree that is in the location where they worked. The king explains to the disgruntled workers that his method ensures that the laborers will complete all the work in the garden, including the less

mind of the readers, which predisposes readers to expect that something else “similar” would indeed happen. The readers are predisposed to believe that poor Abba Judan would suffer yet another misfortune—most likely, he would have to put his ox to death (we expect to hear this scene dramatized). The surprise reversal of the story occurs when Abba Judan’s misfortune turns into great of fortune—he finds a treasure. Humor theorists have studied patterns inherent in humorous anecdotes and jokes. Cf. Mulkay, *On Humor*; Harvery Sacks, “Some Technical Considerations of a Dirty Joke,” in *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, ed. Jim Schenkein (London, UK: Academic, 1978); Koller, *Humor and Society*. Raskin offered a semantic approach. Cf. Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic, 1985).

⁸⁴ Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 136–37. While *Midr. Ps.* 37:3 does not stress the motif of disgruntlement; it does portray common expectations regarding labor. In the *Midr. Ps.* version, an all-day worker rejoices in anticipation as he takes note of the wonderful benefits the one-day laborer receives. He has labored for a lifetime, and knows that he will receive much more. Rabbi Eleazar adds that if the wicked receive some rewards of prosperity, then the righteous will receive many more rewards. Cf. Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 208; William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, ed. Leon Nemoy, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 13:423–4.

desirable work.⁸⁵ In the Matthean version, the workers, who have work for a comparatively little time, receive as much as those who work all day. The latecomers rejoice at their unexpected windfall, but the generosity of the vineyard owner does not amuse the laborers who have worked throughout the day (Matt 20:1–16). Neither the disgruntled laborers of the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16) nor the disgruntled laborers of the king’s garden (*Deut. Rab.* 6:2) expect such disparate outcomes. In both stories, there are disgruntled laborers and laborers pleased with their payment. The incongruity of receiving less pay or more pay than expected, and of receiving payment based on some arbitrary measure, surely shocked and disturbed the hearers of these stories. The absurdity of the actions of vineyard owner (Matt 20:1–16) and king (*Deut. Rab.* 6:2) would have had repercussions throughout the labor market. One wonders if laborers in the audience would have laughed at the shock and absurdity of such unlikely events. After the laughter died down, the attention-getting stories probably produced an energetic flood of questions as they sorted through the meaning of these stories.

In conclusion, humorous anecdotes found in parallels of rabbinic literature and Christian Synoptic Gospels reveal similarities in characters (e.g., the deceptive trickster, the cunning oppressor, pious and witty underdogs) and similarities in themes (e.g., worry-free animals, hidden treasure, disgruntled workers, and a cunning

⁸⁵ *Deut. Rab.* 6:2. Cf. J. Rabbinowitz, trans., *Midrash: Rabbah Deuteronomy*, ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London, UK: Soncino Press, 1939), 121–22; Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 126, 208.

king). These humorous anecdotes use common humor devices, particularly exaggeration, hyperbole, elements of surprise, and reversals of expectations.

Theoretical Observations of Humorous Anecdotes

According to humor theorists, certain elements must occur in anecdotes in order for them to become potentially humorous.⁸⁶ First, comic situations depend a great deal on predictability and credibility. The basic unfolding story needs to mimic in some way real life interactions and dialogues. Second and simultaneously, the story needs to evoke emotional empathy from the reader. Whether an anecdote itself is fictional or historical does not matter as long as the reader becomes emotionally invested in the unfolding drama. For example, if ancient hearers experience a prolonged oppression of an elite person's actions in their daily lives, then they will likely hear anecdotes of an elite person's getting-their-comeuppance with some degree of pleasure. Their empathy for the victorious underdog will quite possibly bring about some sort of cathartic release.

In addition to the mechanisms of humor within an anecdote (i.e., elements observed by humor theorists), there are observations put forth by sociologists of humor. They offer insights into the sociological functions and effects of humor.⁸⁷ In

⁸⁶ Humor theorists have studied the role of probability in humorous anecdotes and jokes. Cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*; and Sacks, "Some Technical Considerations of a Dirty Joke."

⁸⁷ Sociologists, who study humor as a control and conflict mechanism include the following: Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor"; Davis, "The

regard to early Jewish and Christian anecdotes, there are two overarching functions of humor: polemic and didactic. Humor serves a polemic function when it brings about the loss of a person's honor and status. Humor serves a didactic purpose when it strengthens an in-group's solidarity and loyalty.

Humor also functions polemically on occasions when person(s) mock symbols of despised and oppressive opponents. The polemic function of humor occurs in Jewish and Christian anecdotes when opponents aim the weapon of mockery at despised persons for purposes of decimating their honor and character.⁸⁸ A derisive attack on a person's honor requires that the person maintain honor in such situations, usually by rebuffing the ill effects of mockery with a witty riposte or a triumphant clever scheme. Successful rebuffs of public ridicule often resulted in rebound effects (i.e., shamelessness, and even death). When disgruntled persons unite in mockery of a common enemy, the possibility of a public revolt becomes very real. As a polemical device, humor serves as a barbed weapon against unjust acts of mockery, and against persons deemed hypocrites, flatterers, or despicable and disloyal.

In the anecdotes recalled by Josephus, three persistent motifs surface in the polemic function of humor: the elite oppressor versus the underdog, the rebound

Sociology of Humor"; Powell and Paton, eds., *Humour in Society*; and Koller, *Humor and Society*.

⁸⁸ In the works of Josephus and Philo, we have seen examples of the polemic function of humor. In Chapter 4, I have provided examples of the polemic function of humor in the Christian Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Matt 21:23–27; 22:16–32; Mark 11:27–33; 12:13–27; and Luke 20:1–8; 20–40).

effect, and the rise in status. The first recurring motif involves two stereotyped characters: the elite person, who holds a prestigious and powerful position; and the underdog, who seems respected by the populace and renowned for his piety and sense of righteous. The elite oppressor(s) mercilessly mocks the supposedly weaker pious and righteous person(s). The pious person returns the ridicule with clever and witty ripostes, and often gains the favor of a more powerful patron. The second common motif occurs when elite mockers experience the rebound effect. The rebound effect is set in motion when the mockers attack the pious person, and force the pious person to respond with witty derisive riposte, albeit sometimes, they do not always respond immediately; rather, instead, they use a delay calculated for success. In the rebound effect, the pious person frequently silences the mockers. The third motif surfaces in the rise of the pious person's status. The pious person achieves prestige and honor, while the mockers suffer shamelessness, sometimes even death.

Humorous anecdotes within the context of in-group literature serve a didactic function. Humor theorists note that this particular function of humor serves as a form of control mechanism. As a didactic device, humor functions primarily in two key ways: 1) it reinforces group expectations in order to build solidarity; and 2) it promotes loyalty through models of behavior. Humorous anecdotes use kinship themes (e.g., renowned teachers and rabbis, prophets of old, common enemy) to build solidarity and to maintain boundaries. Often humorous anecdotes serve to illustrate instructive points, usually a lesson conveying the expectations of in-group practices (e.g., faithfulness to Torah). Some humorous anecdotes model the benefits of a close

bond between the righteous and God. At other times, humorous anecdotes instill inspiration and loyalty during difficult situations. In many of the stories, the persons of wisdom illustrate exemplary piety in their tactics to escape evil inclinations. Teachers use humorous anecdotes to encourage the faithful to remain steadfast in their struggles. At other times, humor serves simply to capture or re-capture the attention of the audience, and for this reason, some stories do not always relate to the points that follow. The shock effect of some stories suggests that their didactic function is to reinvigorate and puzzle the mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

HUMOR-NEUTICS: AN APPROACH TO HUMOR RECOGNITION

In this chapter, I summarize some key observations about ancient humor and its critical roles in ancient society. In light of these observations, I discuss why the lack of recognition of humor in the Synoptics appears quite striking. I continue by noting that the use of humor and its functions in the ancient Mediterranean world goes relatively unnoticed and unacknowledged in Synoptic scholarship, with an exception here and there. I attribute the lack of Synoptic humor, not to the texts, themselves, but to our lack of recognition of ancient humor and its cues. This lack of recognition, as well as the lack of interest in humor as a vital social tool, prompted me to ask the question, how can we better recognize humor in ancient texts, especially in the Synoptics? For the remainder of the chapter, I propose the basic structure of a humor model. The model consists of three inter-related core aspects: the social and cultural context, the content, and the social functions and effects. I proceed to develop the model by discussing some of the challenges and basic insights of ancient emic sources and modern etic approaches. Both emic and etic perspectives will eventually inform the model.

The model serves primarily as a guide for the social and cultural study of ancient, primarily eastern, Mediterranean humor. As we read ancient emic sources, I

believe it is helpful to understand, as much as is possible, the ancient social and cultural context out of which these sources arose. Otherwise, we bring unwittingly, our own presuppositions to the study of ancient texts. Our presuppositions, very likely, are one of the obstacles that prevent us from recognizing, even appreciating, humor in the Synoptics.

Pervasive and Indispensable: Humor in Antiquity

In Chapters 2 and 3, I surveyed the various forms and functions of humor from a broad range of ancient emic sources. I noted examples of humor in Mesopotamian mythologies, Hebraic and Arabian literature, Egyptian images, Grecian comedy and philosophy, and Roman satire and rhetoric, and early Jewish and Christian literature. Throughout the survey, I noted that humor appeared across the span of the ancient Mediterranean world, and it emerged in a multiplicity of forms. It surfaced in every aspect of ancient life. Humor took shape in the amulets, frescoes, mosaics and statues that graced street corners, water fountains, atriums, bedrooms, taverns and bathhouses. City walls and corridors gave evidence of painted caricatures and in crude graffiti. Laughable impersonations of the dead accompanied funeral processions as they traversed through the streets and mimes entertained by-standers as they poked fun at the behavior of others. Humor kept audiences engaged in theatrical and literary performances. It was the subject of rhetorical treatises and dinner parties. Teachers of tradition recollected humor in mythologies, and authors

recorded humor in their biographical renditions of folk heroes.¹ Philosophers and orators warned of the proper uses of humor, while cynics and satirists incurred wrath from those victimized by their stinging humor. Wherever and however ancient humor took its shape, there is little doubt that modern observers would have trouble recognizing most forms of humor (e.g., satire, puns, nicknames, etc.), and quite often, even its content (e.g., stereotypes of foreigners, typology jokes, etc.) Over the centuries and for the most part, humor has changed little, except for distinctions in linguistic mediums and culturally nuanced social constructs.

From the survey, we also learned that humor in antiquity served serious and crucial roles in the communication of social values and in the dynamics of social relations. Humor functioned as an essential rhetorical device in the acquisition and maintenance of status, honor, character and reputation. Persons used humor in

¹ Humor occurs in the ancient biographic recollections of folk heroes or renowned leaders (e.g., Cicero, Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus, and Apollonius of Tyana). Recall that biographic recollections in antiquity did not seek to emphasize accuracy and historical veracity in the way that modern biographies do. When humor occurs in biographic recollections, it usually serves the purpose of demonstrating favorable reputation or conveying the character of the folk hero or renowned person. For humorous sayings (i.e., dicta) and their use by Roman emperors, see examples in Suetonius, *Jul.* and *Aug.* (re: Caesar's dicta); and Cicero, *Fam.*; Macrobius, *Sat.* 2 (re: Cicero's dicta); and Quintilian, *Inst* 6 (re: Cicero's dicta). Laurence and Paterson present a number of witty dicta from ancient collections on Roman emperors. Cf. Laurence and Paterson, "Power and Laughter," 183–197. Rabbinical works often associate witty dicta and anecdotes with Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Meir (cf. Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*). Humorous ripostes and actions occur in a number of martyrdom accounts (e.g., the martyrdom of Polycarp, Carpus, Pionius, Attalus, and Satorus). Cf. Herbert Mursurillo, trans. *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, UK: Clarendo Press, 1972). Humor also occurs frequently in exchanges between Apollonius and his disciple, Damus, as well as in exchanges between Apollonius and various foreigners (cf. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.*).

tendentious ways in their efforts to antagonize, to shame, and to defeat opponents. These malevolent uses of humor often elicited unwanted public laughter, sneers and other scornful responses, which in turn, intensified the damaging effects of humor. Humor also played a critical role in the edification and strengthening of social relations and social structures. In particular, benevolent forms of humor helped to build friendships and tighten in-group solidarity. In such cases humor functioned as a control mechanism and as a powerful socialization tool. From the perspective of an authority figure or a dominating power, the dread of public derision supposedly, at times successfully, helped to manage and correct deviant behavior. Examples of tendentious forms of humor occurred frequently in public punishments (as we will see in Chapter 5), and even in public executions of criminal transgressors. From the perspective of the wrongly accused or the oppressed, humor at times surfaced as a final display of honor, or as a display of control over one's destiny. In oratory, theatrical and other kinds of oral performances, humor continuously reinforced social values. Humor often served a critical role in revealing important information about the character and reputation of ancient teachers, philosophers, orators, and other public figures. Ancient biographers used humor to demonstrate the wisdom of a holy person, a folk hero, a deity, a renowned civic person, or an exceptional philosopher. Generally, their biographies included recollections of these famous personages using humor devices, such as witty dicta, clever wit, sarcastic remarks, irony and ridicule, in their exchanges with disciples or opponents. Through the use of humor, public figures were able to clarify rhetorical or didactic points. They often relied on humor

to help them win public favor or the favor of juries and judges. Time and again, well-written Roman rhetoricians state explicitly what authors of biographies have tacitly implied in their works, that humor served numerous indispensable functions.

Conclusively, whatever the specific roles of ancient humor were, its impact almost always produced either beneficial or baleful social effects. In other words, the effects of ancient humor on social values and social dynamics were rarely neutral and dispassionate.

An Anomaly: The Absence of Humor in the Synoptics?

Given the association of ancient humor with serious endeavors of renowned folk heroes, wisdom figures, prophets and philosophers, the absence of humor in the Synoptic Gospels would indeed be quite striking. Repeatedly in ancient literature, folk heroes triumphed over their rivals with the use of tendentious humor, usually through sardonic barbs, trickery or clever wit. According to ancient biographers, wisdom figures cited witty dictums and responded to challenges with derisive ripostes. In other words, they defended their honor and reputations with humor devices. Teachers used humor to illustrate their points or to re-gain the attention of their listless audiences. Prophets aimed satirical barbs at perpetrators of injustice. And yet, the central figure of the Synoptics did not seem to use humor as a device for any of these reasons. Instead, he appears to be a humorless folk hero, a solemn wisdom figure, and a gravely somber teacher-prophet. Several questions surface, did the

Synoptic authors really depict Jesus as a humorless teacher, prophet or sage, or do we fail to recognize the humor of Jesus in the Synoptics?

There are definitely humor cues that suggest the possibility and probability of humor in the Synoptic Gospels, but we seem unable to recognize them. The typologies found in ancient comedies (e.g., the scheming servant, the miser and the fooled tyrant, etc.) appear in the Synoptics, but are rarely, if ever, linked with humor. The common indicators of humor such as those revealed in linguistic, narrative, and lexical cues hint strongly of the presence of Synoptic humor, yet they also go relatively unnoticed. Even public reactions that typically signal humor are present in the Synoptic texts. Consider the parables and teachings that tended to *shock* hearers, and on occasion, leave opponents *dumbfounded*. These reactions of *shock* and *confusion* are highly indicative of humor. Given the presence of humor cues in the Synoptic Gospels and the association of humor with ancient teachers, prophets and sages, it would seem quite an anomaly to depict these Gospels as void of humor.

And yet, as I noted in Chapter 1, most biblical scholars have traditionally neglected to recognize or acknowledge the presence and function of humor in the Synoptic Gospels.² Scholars, who have focused on the cultural particulars of honor-shame societies, have provided no discussion on the role of humor as an effective

² Refer back to Chapter 1. A few authors have discussed the presence of non-tendentious forms of humor in the Synoptics (e.g., hyperbole and wordplay), but modern exegetes and even preachers, seem reluctant to associate *tendentious* forms of humor with Jesus. I believe this deviates from the cultural norm of the time, and is indicative of later Church developments when notations of Jesus' divinity melded with medieval concepts of holiness.

rhetorical device in the acquisition and maintenance of honor, and much less, they have not discussed the importance of barbed humor found in the Synoptics. While scholars of social context have acknowledged the presence of apotropaic art in antiquity and the occasional paronomasia found both ancient literature and in the New Testament; but they have failed to discuss the roles of these forms of humor within the overall use of humor in the Synoptic Gospels, and they have failed to discuss the ramifications of humor in the subversive politics of ancient Rome.³ In general, the critical functions of humor in the ancient world, especially the necessity and impact of humor in ancient social systems, remain unexplored in Synoptic studies. And while it is true that scholars have acknowledged irony in the Synoptics, they failed to link irony explicitly with humor even though the ancient authors considered irony to be a sophisticated form of humor.⁴ Those relatively few biblical scholars, who have written about Jesus' use of humor, have pointed only to his use of benign forms of humor, which amounts to an occasional wordplay or an incongruous image. Some of these scholars link the attributes of holiness and divinity exclusively with good-natured humor. For them, it seems uncharacteristic that a *holy* and *divine* Jesus would use the harsher kind of humor, that is, the kind of humor that would wound

³ Cf. Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴ In his work *Irony in Mark's Gospel*, Camery-Hoggatt discusses the use of irony, but never associates irony with humor. While Jónsson separates irony from humor in his work, he affirms that irony can be humorous. See his work entitled *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*.

reputations, lash out in defense of honor, and antagonistically claim power and authority. In these cases, scholars have estranged the *human* Jesus from his own social and cultural context. Overwhelmingly, and for these aforementioned reasons, traditional scholarship has avoided associating Jesus with harsh kinds of humor.

So why do we fail to identify humor, especially tendentious forms of humor, in the Synoptic Gospels? In Chapter 1, I summarized Willie Van Heerden's seven reasons for why we fail to recognize biblical humor.⁵ Two of his reasons, our narrow view of humor, and our difficulty with linguistic and cultural hurdles, contribute significantly to our lack of critical familiarity with ancient humor. In addition, and generally speaking, we also do not tend to perceive humor as a serious social mechanism of conflict and control, nor do we tend to view harmful types of humor (e.g., ridicule, mockery, etc.) as humor. We also seem hesitant to associate the mediating agents (e.g., sneers, shock, etc.) of humor and elements common in humor theory (e.g., surprise reversals, shocking behavior, sudden disruptions, etc.) with humor even when they do occur in biblical texts. We remain generally unfamiliar with the signifiers, proprieties, functions and effects of humor in antiquity. And yet, I believe the more familiar we become with humor in ancient emic sources, the more likely we will find ourselves recognizing and appreciating the possibility and probability of humor, both its tendentious and benign forms, in the Synoptic Gospels.

⁵ Van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide And Seek with Us," 76–86.

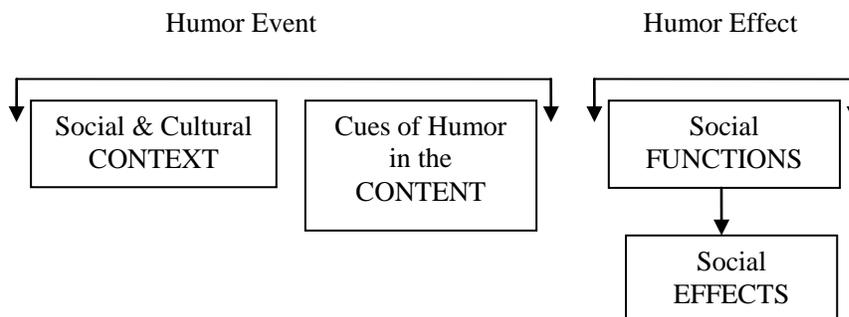


Fig. 2. Basics of a Humor Model

The Basic Structure of a Humor Model

In order to formulate an approach that will help us recognize the probability and possibility of humor in the Synoptics, we re-visit the survey of ancient humor in the previous two chapters, and note three fundamental areas that give us insights into ancient humor. These three areas are the cultural and social contexts, the content, and the functions and effects of humor (see Figure 2: Basics of a Humor Model).

Regarding the cultural and social contexts, we need to explore the cultural and social factors that affect the social dynamics of a possible humor event. We must also examine the content of a suspected humor event for cues that signal whether humor is likely. Finally, we need to understand what ancient authors say about the specific social functions and social effects of humor. By exploring these three areas, we may find ourselves more likely to recognize the occurrences of humor in the Synoptics, and perhaps then, override our tendency to “de-humorize” the Synoptics.

It is evident that humor occurred in a variety of ancient culturally nuanced social contexts. Humor was present in a wide range of artifacts in ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Grecian, Roman, and Jewish cultures. These artifacts reveal a great deal about the social constructs that provide the groundswell for humor.⁶ Ancient artifacts demonstrate the use of humor in a variety of social contexts (e.g., religious rites, court proceedings, theatrical performances, dinner parties, streets, and city shops and walls). Some of these sources reveal the proprieties of humor within precise social contexts. In other words, specific kinds of humor were appropriate only in particular situations and locations, and in exchanges between certain persons. The more we understand the proprieties and uses of humor, both those proprieties discussed explicitly by ancient authors and those actual uses of humor as revealed in the works of ancient biographies and literature, the more we familiarize ourselves with the cultural and social dynamics of humor.

Ancient emic sources also reveal much about the content of humor. In other words, authors provide insights into the kind of typologies, subject matter and

⁶ For example, it is the social construct of honor that gives barbed wit or mockery its shocking potential. When honor is at a stake, tensions run high. The exchange between persons, who are defending their honor, requires that one person deliver a riposte that “stops” the other from succeeding in a counter-riposte. Humor, especially witty barbs, offers the kind of insult that tends to stun an opponent into silence.

Humor often carries out a sudden and unexpected reversal of expectations. In another example, the social construct of the *evil eye* often requires laughter (spitting, etc.) to counter its effects. Laughter induced by shocking images was a common device used against the evil eye. Cf. Clarke, "Look Who's Laughing at Sex," 149–81.

participants one would likely find in a humor event. They discuss or reveal a variety of linguistic, stylistic, rhetorical, lexical and narrative cues that signal the presence of humor. Cues include unexpected barbs or mishaps, sarcastic or ironic comments, uses of humor-related words (e.g., ridicule, mockery, sneer and laugh, etc.), stereotypicalities (e.g., hypocrites, flatterers, misers, lazy laborers, ethnic stereotypes, etc.), and derogatory epithets (e.g., “You, Great Windbags!” and “You insolent, godless dunderhead!”).⁷ In addition, there are narrative cues such as sudden and unexpected reversals, the shocked reactions from the public, and the startled use of taboo topics/targets or obscene subject matter. Some cues of humor are easier to discern in cases where ancient authors write explicitly about humor. Other cues of humor remain more subtly present in the works of ancient authors, and often require extensive linguistic and cultural knowledge to recognize.

Emic sources frequently do discuss or reveal the function and effect of humor events. The functions of humor ranged from apotropaic to didactic, from recreational to polemical. Humor could protect an entity from harm, mediate the social bonds necessary for an entity’s survival, and preserve or enhance an entity’s honor, power and status. The effects of humor were varied and rarely, if ever, inconsequential. Rather the nature of the circum-Mediterranean societies made humor a serious rhetorical device in the acquisition and maintenance of honor. Sometimes humor

⁷ The epithet, “You, Great Windbags” is found in Philo, *Mos.* 2.240; and “You insolent, godless dunderhead!” is found in O. Cullman and A. J. B. Higgins, trans., “The Infancy Story of Thomas,” in *Edgar Hennecke New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1963), 393.

produced baleful effects; while at other times, it produced beneficial effects. Humor was advantageous in rejuvenating weary audiences, and in creating and solidifying in-group loyalties. It alleviated tension and diverted potential harm. Humor stimulated cohesive action against oppression and other kinds of injustice. Humor had powerful adverse effects. Authoritative persons used humor to decimate the honor and reputations of enemies and powerful opponents. Humor destroyed old alliances and silenced influential rivals. In short, the functions and effects of humor, whether baleful or beneficial, meant that humor in antiquity was never a frivolous or meaningless social medium.

Essentially, emic sources provide us with insights into three basic questions regarding humor. These fundamental questions include the following: how do social and cultural contexts shape a humor event? What cues in the content of the narrative support the probability or possibility of the presence of humor? And what are the functions and effects of humor events? It is these questions that form the basis of a model for recognizing and analyzing humor and its impact in ancient societies.

Challenges of Ancient Emic Perspectives

While aspects of the model require our use of ancient emic sources, the insights provided by these sources present critical challenges (see Figure 2: Basics of a Humor Model). One inescapable shortcoming surfaces when we consider that most extant written works in the ancient Mediterranean world convey humor through the

lens of elite males.⁸ Their works typically include humor expressed linguistically through Greek or Latin. The humor of elite males often targeted the social behaviors and beliefs of women, and they also did not hesitate to target people deemed inferior in status or who had no status at all. Quite often, their humor appears vindictive and tasteless to modern sensibilities, especially when their humor makes light of physical appearance, ethnicity, status and occupation. Frequently, the humor of ancient elite males included derogatory stereotypes. For example, they would describe or depict household slaves as lazy and untrustworthy.⁹ Humorists repeatedly made the most of stereotypes in both in-group jokes and in the public ridicule of outsiders.

Unfortunately, the elite male perspectives that dominate ancient literature have implications for the study of ancient humor. We rarely get a glimpse of how women, non-elite persons, and enslaved persons used humor. We possess very little material that gives us insight into humor aimed at elites and at males in general.

Another shortcoming surfaces when we consider that humor in ancient works encompasses a limited range of ethnic perspectives. Most of the accessible extant literature of the ancient Mediterranean world surfaces from Greek and Roman

⁸ Notably, the authors of ancient literature discuss humor and its use or presence through the lens of mostly elite males, primarily because such persons had the education and resources to write about humor or to record humor events. However, there are forms of humor such as graffiti and caricatures that did not depend on the ability to write and on the materials needed for writing, but instead, required crude materials (e.g., plant dye, rocks for etching, and city walls, etc.) and the ability to draw images. Crude materials for such works were accessible to the common person and within the abilities of persons, who were unable to read texts.

⁹ Cf. Cicero, *De or.* 2.248.

sources, although a relative handful of early Jewish works have also survived.¹⁰ Hindered by linguistic barriers and sparse resources, we lack a diversity of narrative samples of humor from many of the oppressed ethnic groups under Roman domination, including the Syrians, Persians, Gauls, Egyptians and other such groups. There is one exception, Philo, a Jewish writer, does use humor in his critiques of oppressive Roman leadership. For the most part, however, we possess more humor aimed at suppressed peoples, and less humor aimed at oppressors in general. When the humor of other ethnic groups does appear in ancient literature, it has passed almost exclusively through a Greek, Roman or Jewish filter. It is also not uncommon that the ethnic identity of the author (and often his/her targeted audience) remains elusive.¹¹ Without insight into the author's ethnicity, it can become difficult to ascertain whether the author uses a stereotype in a humorous matter, especially if other humor cues are missing.¹²

¹⁰ By using the word *Jewish*, I do not intend to convey a lack of heterogeneity in the Judaic sects of the early Roman era (ca. 1 BCE thru 2–3 CE).

¹¹ Apparently, the supposed recipient of the letter is not a Cretan. In Titus 1:12, we read, “Κρητες ἀεὶ ψεύσται, κακὰ θηρία, γαστέρες ἀργαί—Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” Verse 13 may be an affirmation of this stereotype or a tongue-in-cheek response to it—the matter is debatable.

¹² The insights we can gather from extant Roman, Greek and Jewish sources strongly suggest that the use of stereotypes in antiquity was pervasive. The ancient joke book, *Philogelos*, exemplifies the use of ethnic stereotypes in humor (e.g., jokes repeatedly dub Aberites and Sidonians as eggheads). Cf. Baldwin, trans., *The Philogelos*; and Dawe, *Philogelos*.

Perhaps, the most difficult challenge facing us in the use of ancient emic sources is our lack of knowledge regarding the social and cultural context in which a humor event occurs. Ancient authors did not typically explain what was socially and culturally obvious to their ancient readers. So we must turn to etic perspectives in order to flesh out as best we can the social constructs operative in humor events. However, filtering an ancient work, and the context out of which it has arose, through modern lenses present other layers of serious challenges.

Insights from Ancient Emic Sources

In spite of the shortcomings that I previously noted, ancient emic sources do provide important insights that aid our recognition of humor in ancient texts. In particular, these sources help us understand, albeit in a limited way, the social and cultural contexts in which humor takes place. These sources also make known a great deal about the content cues that convey and signal humor, and they discuss or reveal specifics about the social functions and effects of humor. In short, ancient emic sources provide insights into three important categories related to humor: the social and cultural context, the content, and the social functions and consequential effects (see Figure 3: Ancient Emic Sources).

Our understanding of the social and cultural context of a humor event is critical because we need to be able to recognize the proprieties and patterns

associated with the use of humor in certain social settings.¹³ In other words, it is helpful to know whether humor was typically expected and associated with particular settings, and it is helpful to know what parameters governed the use of humor. For example, we can seek answers in emic sources to questions such as, did humor generally occur in public executions, in court trials, and in high profile dinner parties,

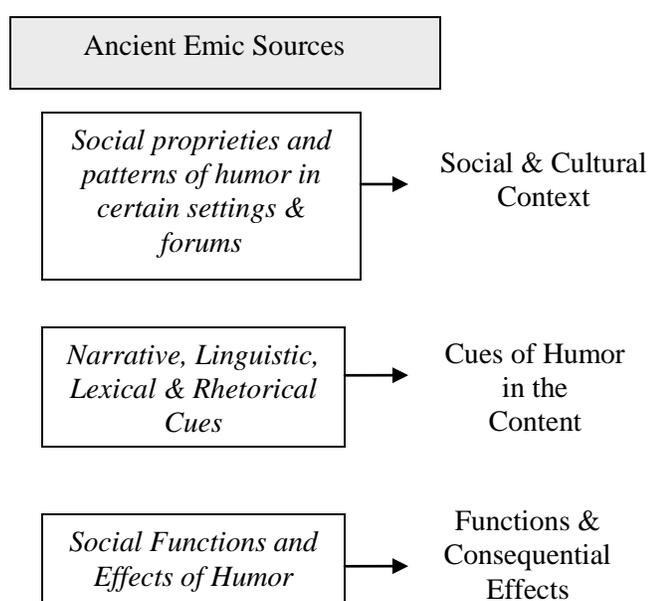


Fig. 3. Ancient Emic Sources

and if so, what kinds of humor one would expect in such settings. We also learn whether humor occurred in specific forums such as places in which in-group

¹³ *Proprieties* refer to the appropriate uses of humor. Authors such as Aristotle and Cicero have noted the appropriate times, places, targets, and subject matter for humor use. Humor theorists note that humor occurs when it is expected, but they note that humor also surfaces when it is not expected. Setting proprieties on humor, often and ironically, provides the groundswell for humor, because humor quite often surfaces when a humorist unexpectedly transgresses proprieties associated with humor.

members gathered apart from outsiders (i.e., in-group forums) and places in which both in-group members and out-group persons converged (i.e., mixed group forums). We learn what kinds of humor typically occurred in mixed group forums and what kinds of humor typically occurred within in-group domains.

Regarding the second category, ancient emic sources can help us to become acquainted with the content of the humor event. By studying these sources, we can learn to recognize the narrative, literary, linguistic, lexical, and rhetorical cues that are typically associated with ancient humor. Emic sources provide us with explicit descriptions of humor cues and they provide written works that actually employ humor cues. We can explore the use of humor in specific rhetorical styles (e.g., deliberative, forensic, judicial, etc.) and the cues within these styles that signal humor. We can learn from ancient authors the specific reasons why orators and teachers use humor in their speeches. Rhetoricians such as Quintilian teach us a great deal about the types of humor one should use in particular kinds of speeches, and other rhetoricians such as Cicero apply these kinds of humor in their speeches. In addition to rhetorical cues, there are lexical cues that help us identify humor. Lexical cues are words typically associated with humor such as fool, flatterer, and boaster or reactions to humor such as laughter, snort, sneer, and shock. Ancient comedies and satires are among the ancient works that provide us with sources by which we can study the use of lexical cues of humor (e.g., sneer, amaze, shock, confound, etc.). Closely related to lexical cues are linguistic cues, which are language specific (e.g., Greek, Latin, and Aramaic, etc.). Linguistic cues include wordplay. Emic sources

provide a plentitude of examples of paronomasia, which can help us identify specific morphemes and other linguistic units typically associated with wordplay. Narrative and literary cues discovered in ancient comedy, satire or other known works of humor could help point out the probability and presence of humor when it occurs in more subtle forms in other kinds of texts. Examples of narrative and literary cues include unexpected reversals in plots, surprise disruptions, hyperbole, irony, stereotypes and other kinds of typologies that surface frequently in connection with ancient humor. Other humor cues surface as we study the use of humor in particular literary genres such as ancient biographies. Biographers persistently use humor to convey the character and reputation of a renowned philosopher-like folk hero, or to demonstrate the wisdom of a central figure.

Regarding the third category, emic sources reveal crucial insights into the various social functions and consequential effects of humor. In Chapter 2 and 3, I surveyed a number of ancient sources and noted various functions of humor. According to ancient authors, humor repeatedly functioned as a device of subversion and of status degradation, and it served important roles in the reinforcing dominant power structures, and in defending against opponents and enemies. Emic sources also used humor as a mechanism of social control, as a medium to solidify social bonds, and as a device to stimulate thought and promote relaxation. Ancient emic sources not only wrote explicitly about the various functions of humor, but they also provide descriptions and accounts of the consequential effects of humor. Recall Josephus'

words regarding the dreadful effects of becoming a laughingstock.¹⁴ In addition to Josephus, other ancient authors such as Cleobulus, Critias, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Cicero, Quintilian and Philo also note the harmful effects of humor.¹⁵ Ancient emic authors provide much material to aid our understanding of how certain kinds of humor (e.g., barbed ripostes or derision) affected ancient humorists and their targets. In order to appreciate the effect of humor, we do well to study how ancient authors describe humor, and its consequential effects.

In summary, emic sources provide us with both explicit and more faintly nuanced insights into ancient humor. Some ancient emic sources offer treatises on the various forms of humor as well as the cues and proprieties associated with humor. At times, these emic sources describe the social functions of humor and its consequential effects. Other emic sources actually recount humorous episodes or apply forms of humor in their works. These works provide further insights into the more subtle linguistic, literary, lexical and narrative cues of humor. So we do well to study both authors such as Aristotle and Cicero, who write about humor, and authors such as Philostratus and Juvenal, who exhibit humor in their works.

¹⁴ Derisive laughter results in shame and even in death (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 12.169–174, 179–183, 203–207, 210–214, and 216–219; *Ant* 6. 45–52 and 15.373–374.

¹⁵ Cf. Diels, ed., *Die fragmente der vorsokratiker*; Plato, *Resp.* 388e; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.2.12; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 2.1.4.631; Cicero, *De or.* 2.221–222; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.34–35; Philo, *QG* 2.71; *Virt.* 202; and *Fug.* 34–35.

Challenges of Modern Etic Perspectives

There are serious challenges that surface when we apply etic perspectives to our studies of ancient Eastern Mediterranean humor. It is a given that chronological and cultural gulfs produce all kinds of challenges for modern scholars. One of these challenges relates to the lack of diversified ancient emic sources, which prompts scholars to depend rather excessively on generalizations. Another challenge concerns the lack of sociological and anthropological insights into Eastern Mediterranean cultures and their social mediums from the perspectives of Eastern Mediterranean scholars. A third challenge involves the lack of modern Eastern Mediterranean perspectives in sociological studies of Eastern Mediterranean humor.¹⁶ These challenges have serious implications for our interpretation of humor in ancient texts. I will briefly explain these challenges in what follows.

The lack of diversified ancient materials means that we often rely on etic models that promote generalized knowledge drawn from a limited range of emic perspectives. In other words, scholars, who apply social sciences to the New Testament, resort to piecing together generalized information on ancient social values, beliefs and behaviors through limited ancient emic sources. For example, many of us are familiar with the perspective that ancient persons viewed shepherds as despicable and shameful, because of their livelihood. This view originated in an etic-based approach that began with a hypothesis drawn from an ancient source (e.g.,

¹⁶ Currently, most etic perspectives filter through the lens of primarily U. S., Canadian and Northwestern European-based studies.

Philo, *Agr.* 60–62.) and, where possible, scholars corroborated such a view with other ancient sources. Typically, the etic process involves scouring of a range of emic sources to assess whether a certain tenet was *universal* in Mediterranean antiquity. Scholars give relatively little discretion to the notion of affirming a generalization through a broad range of ethnic sources (e.g., Greek, Roman, and Jewish, etc.), which quite often extend over a chronological span of 100 to 300 years or more. In addition, etic corroboration of a specific tenet (e.g., shepherds are despicable) usually rested on sparse data and in almost exclusively elite urban male sources. In other words, etic perspectives tend to generalize ancient beliefs and behaviors (e.g., that all ancient persons, regardless of status and ethnicity, viewed shepherds as despicable), even if such a beliefs and behaviors were found in only one or two ethnic-specific urban elite sources. These generalizations will have a filtering effect on our interpretative lens.

Scholars debate whether generalizations are helpful particularly in understanding the social constructs of the ancient world. These debates primarily focus on the generic all-encompassing social construct of *circum-Mediterranean* honor. Critics argue against the over-simplifications produced by etic models. They argue that such generalizations fail to account for the complexities existing in ancient societies.¹⁷ These complexities are notable in social interactions between persons of

¹⁷ The following are some scholars, who discuss the shortcomings and benefits of models and their simplification of cultural complexities. Cf. Timothy J. M. Ling, *The Judean Poor and the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2–7; Gerald Downing, “Honor Among Exegetes,” *CBQ* 61, no. 1 (1999): 53–73; and David G. Horrell, “Models and Methods in Social-Scientific Interpretation: A Response to Philip Esler,” *JSNT* 78 (2000): 83–105. Ling and

different statuses or ethnicities. For example, in Chapter 3, I recalled Philo's statement that Egyptians considered the occupation of goat herders to be despicable, but the goat herders, themselves, defended their livelihood as honorable. Philo noted that the goat herders' attempted to defend the honor of their livelihood, but their ripostes made them appear even more despicable to the Egyptians (Philo, *Agr.* 60–62). The Egyptians and the goat herders certainly held two divergent views of what they considered honorable and they even differed on their means of defending honor. When scholars over-simplify or generalize cultural values or behaviors, they fail to stress the variables expressed in local customs, ethnicities, social statuses, and so forth. Generalizations become problematic, because they tend to misrepresent or neglect the viewpoints of minority persons and ethnic groups. Instead, generalizations are typically drawn from the views of ancient elites, that is, those who had the means to produce the written works, which have survived and have come down to us. The voices of non-elites, slaves, peasants and a wide range of ethnic groups remain largely silent in ancient literary works, or at the very least, their voices pass through the filtered lens of those with means.

Among the challenges we face, there is a critical need for further sociological and anthropological insights into Eastern Mediterranean cultures from the

Horrell question the fundamentals of modeling. Downing and Esler argue for models and their importance in helping scholars to avoid ethnocentric and anachronistic interpretation of biblical texts. Esler defends the use of models as “the best strategy for dealing with cultural distance (107).” Cf. Philip F. Esler, “Models in New Testament Interpretation: A Reply to David Horrell,” *JSNT* 78 (2000): 107–13.

perspectives of Eastern Mediterranean scholars. For the most part, biblical scholars have filtered Eastern Mediterranean cultures through Western lenses. This is particularly true of biblical scholars, who have advocated social science methods. Without the insights of Eastern Mediterranean scholars, we are unable to fully appreciate, even recognize, the culturally nuanced social mediums that provide the groundswell and vehicle for humor expression. Some of these social mediums, which I will discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6, include social constructs, language and other forms of social communication, and social proprieties. The lack of insights into social mediums of Eastern Mediterranean cultures makes it very difficult for Western scholars to grasp culturally nuanced humor.¹⁸

There is also a critical need for sociological studies specifically on Eastern Mediterranean humor, especially studies presented through Eastern Mediterranean lenses.¹⁹ While humor theorists throughout the ages and from a wide variety of

¹⁸ Mahadev Apte discusses the culture-specific humor (e.g., the proprieties of humor use within certain cultures) and universal attributes of humor (e.g., mimicry, exaggeration, reversal, etc.). He states that to learn culture-specific humor, one must study indigenous language use, linguistic cues, the use of indigenous styles of speech in certain settings, ethnic nuanced gestures, and indigenous mediums of humor. Cf. Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985). According to Gumperz, linguistic cues that signal the use of humor are culturally learned. Cf. John Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ As of 2007, there is a severe lack of accessible data regarding humor in the Eastern Mediterranean cultures, and such data would be extremely helpful in broadening cross-cultural perspectives in biblical texts. The HRAF (Human Relations Area Files) is a two-part research collection of worldwide ethnographical and archaeology materials. The collections, which require a subscription before they are accessible, are online at <http://www.yale.edu/hraf/collections.htm> (accessed on July

countries generally do agree on the universal aspects of humor such as the types of humor (e.g., paronomasia, bantering, etc.) and the elements that produce humor (e.g., surprise disruptions of expectations, incongruity, etc.), there are social aspects of humor that are more elusive. Sociological insights help us to recognize and to understand the social nuances of humor. However, as I noted in Chapter 1, there are less than a handful of sociological contributions on Eastern Mediterranean humor in the digital database, HRAF (Human Relations Area Files). There is no doubt that an increase in modern Eastern Mediterranean humor studies would contribute significantly to our understanding of the social functions and effects of ancient Eastern Mediterranean humor. Of particular importance would be studies of humor that relate to key HRAF categories such as status and prestige, social relations, loss of face, socialization, in-group antagonisms, breaches of ethics, social norms; behavior modifications, transmission of cultural norms, and hospitality.²⁰ In addition to HRAF, there is critical lack of representation of Eastern Mediterranean contributions on the social functions and effects of humor in the scholarly journal, *Humor* (an

18, 2007). The HRAF consists of an organized collection of ethnographic data on nearly 400 cultures worldwide. The database tends to focus on studies, which utilize cross-cultural anthropology.

²⁰ I have listed the actual HRAF categories (i.e., status and prestige, social relations, loss of face, socialization, in-group antagonisms, breaches of ethics, social norms; behavior modifications, transmission of cultural norms, and hospitality). When a researcher first accesses the HRAF database, the files begin with a cultural region (e.g., Middle East) and progress in descending order from general topics (e.g., kinship) to more specific categories (e.g., humor).

international journal on humor research).²¹ As of 2007, a rare few articles in *Humor* include Eastern Mediterranean perspectives. Both the HRAF and the international journal, *Humor*, hold great potential as resources for sociological studies in Eastern Mediterranean humor, but for now, both of these resources need more comprehensive Eastern Mediterranean perspectives.

Etic Approaches to Humor Recognition

Although we can study what ancient emic sources reveal about humor, there are several reasons why we eventually must turn to modern etic approaches. First, etic approaches, particularly those approaches that utilize the strategies of sociology and cross-cultural anthropology, help us understand the cultural presuppositions we bring to ancient texts. They challenge us to read humor in an ancient text with sensitivity toward the cultural and social contexts of the ancient Mediterranean world (e.g., we cannot presume that a sarcastic barb would have the same effect on a person in Roman antiquity as it would have on a modern fifth generation United States citizen).²² Secondly, sociological and anthropological studies help us to identify and

²¹ It is notable that contributors to *Humor*, an international scholarly journal on humor studies, almost never disclose their social location in their articles. Furthermore, it would take additional, often considerable, effort to ascertain the cultural locations of the contributors that shape the studies presented in *Humor*.

²² The basic premise of sociological and anthropological models rests on the presupposition that cultures within a specific region change relatively little over time in an area. Rohrbaugh notes that while the ancient Mediterranean culture-continent differs in some degree from the modern one, the modern Mediterranean culture is closer to the social location of the NT than modern North American culture-continent. See Richard Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences and NT Interpretation* (Peabody, MA:

understand ancient social constructs at work in an ancient context. Social constructs, which often remain tacit in the artifacts of antiquity, convey the proprieties and patterns that make humor possible.²³ For example, it is the social construct of honor that gives a sarcastic barb, its consequential effect. If a sarcastic barb does not breach propriety and negatively affect honor, then its punch as a barb is lost. Thirdly, humor theory helps us to recognize elements of humor by providing insights into the phenomenon needed for humor to occur (e.g., scripts and patterns, linguistic, stylistic

Hendrickson, 2004), 7. Cross-cultural models do have serious limitations (cf. Rohrbaugh, 8). Mainstream anthropologists stress simple formulas cannot adequately describe the complexities within cultures (see Barnard and Spencer, "Culture," 137).

²³ Through the lenses of cultural anthropology, Malina has explained some key culturally nuanced social constructs that were at work in the ancient Mediterranean world. In particular, Malina describes social constructs such as honor, shame, reputation, collectivism, stereotypes, kinship, fictive kinship, social status, envy, and purity. Cf. Malina, *The New Testament World*.

Through the lenses of cultural anthropology and ancient rhetorical theory, Neyrey offers cultural insights into the social construct of encomium (cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Neyrey also cites a number of sociological studies on Mediterranean honor (*Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 6). Esler compiles a number of social scientific studies that focus on the social constructs of honor, kinship, the evil eye, and deviance (cf. Philip Esler, ed., *Modelling Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1995). These and other scholars provide significant insights into ancient social constructs. Their descriptions help us understand the proprieties that ancient persons associated with specific social constructs. Without these insights into ancient constructs, we would be unable to more fully appreciate the import, the dynamics and the social implications of ancient social interactions. Berger and Luckmann present a classic sociological exposition on social constructs. Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967). See also Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

and lexical cues, socio-linguistic cues and typology phenomena, etc.).²⁴ In particular, scholars of humor, who specialize in ancient emic sources, provide the most helpful resources in identifying linguistic and stylistic cues, and comic typologies that may well relate to biblical studies. Fourthly, sociological and anthropological theories of humor help us examine the functions and effects of humor from a macro-theoretical

²⁴ Krikmann provides brief descriptions on a variety of humor theories along with an extensive bibliography. See Arvo Krikmann, "Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humour," *J Folk Res* 33 (2008): 27–57. Extensive resources on humor theory are also available in the scholarly journal, *Humor*. See also Don L. F. Nilsen, *Humor Scholarship: A Research Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 32–42. For phenomenological approaches to humor, that is, approaches that explore linguistic cues, social constructs, humor elements, comedy theory and social phenomenon related to humor, see the following sources: Mulkay, *On Humor*; Sacks, "Some Technical Considerations of a Dirty Joke"; and Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York, NY: Macmillian, 1964). Koestler's treatise on the cognitive role of bi-sociation in humor events has been advanced in later key works: Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*; and Russell, "Humor's Close Relatives," *Humor* 13, no. 2 (2000), 219–233. Linguistic theories of humor have been advanced by Raskin, a Russian linguist who currently lives in U.S. via Israel, and by his student, Salvatore Attardo, an Italian linguist born in Belgium, who also resides in the United States. Both Attardo and Raskin are editors of the *Humor*, an international journal for humor research. Cf. Salvatore Attardo, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2001); and *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (Berlin, Ger.: Mouton, 1994); and Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*; and *The Primer of Humor Research: Read First!* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008). For a socio-linguistic and sociological approaches to humor theory, see the helpful compilation edited by McGhee and Goldsten. Paul McGhee and Jeffery Goldstein entitled *Handbook of Humor Research* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983). See also Anton Zijderveld, "The Sociology of Humour and Laughter," *Current Sociology* 31, no. 3 (Winter 1983): 61–100; Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter*; and "Humor Research, Methodology, and Theory in Anthropology," in *Handbook of humor Research*, ed. P. McGhee and J. Goldstein, 1:183–12 (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983); and G. A. Fine, "Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor," in *Handbook of Humor Research*, ed. P. McGhee and J. Goldstein, 1:159–82 (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983);

perspective (e.g., humor as a device of social bonding, deviance correction, and political subversion, etc.).²⁵

²⁵ Sociologists of humor provide macro-theories on the social effects and functions of humor. Through structural strategies, they offer insights into the functions and effects of humor within social categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, urban-rural, and class, etc.), social institutions (e.g., religion, occupation, kinship, etc.) and social relations. For example, Stephenson, a structuralist, offers insights into the function and effect of humor in stratification jokes (cf. Stephenson, “Conflict and Control Function of Humor,” 569–74). Koller, another structuralist, explains the humor and its significance in social relations and its effects on social institutions. Cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*. Typical functions noted by structural humor theorists include social bonding, relief from stress, expression of aggression, celebration, social correction, reinforcement of stereotypes, and so forth. Through political strategies, sociologists of humor emphasize the control and conflict functions and effects of humor. Powell and Paton emphasize the political functions of humor. Their study analyzes the watchdog effects of humor and the typologies in humor that reinforce social norms. They also analyze the radical effect of humor and its role in normalizing new emergent moralities. Of particular interest is their conclusion on the role of caricatures and cartoon stereotypes in reinforcing social norms (cf. Powell and Paton, *Humor in Society*). Apte has offered major contributions to the study of humor in preliterate societies. His studies emphasize the phenomenon of humor in ritual, in kinship-related roles, in culturally nuanced social interaction and in relation to cultural values. Cf. Apte, *Humor and Laughter*. He currently serves on the editorial board of *Humor*. The *Humor* series has a number of articles on anthropological and sociological approaches to humor; however, most of these articles emphasize Western-based studies. For another classical anthropological work on humor, see Mary Douglas, “Jokes,” in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, 291–310 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). Douglas’ bibliography includes various anthropological case studies on humor.

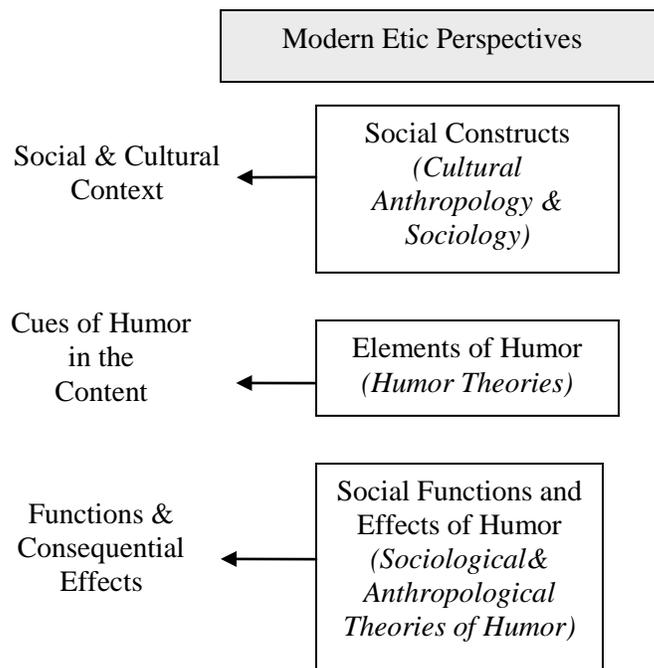


Fig. 4. Modern Etic Perspectives

Essentially, various etic approaches help us to view different aspects of a potentially humorous text. They can provide frameworks, models, or perspectives that help us critique whether an ancient social interaction, a parable, or a dictum in a text was likely to produce humor. Of course, aside from an explicit remark by an emic author, there is no etic approach that provides absolute certainty that an ancient text conveyed humor or produced a humorous response in ancient hearers.

In what follows, I discuss three key areas in which modern etic perspectives have offered insights helpful for recognizing ancient humor and understanding its functions and effects. I have categorized these areas as 1) social constructs, 2) elements of humor and 3) the social functions and effects of humor (see Figure 4:

Modern Etic Perspectives). My aim is to highlight what I believe are significant insights from the etic perspectives of cultural anthropology, humor theory and sociological theory of humor without over-burdening this chapter with explanations regarding the processes and intricacies of various methodologies and their observations.

Anthropological Contributions: Social Constructs

Before proceeding, it would be helpful to explain the term, social construct. This etic term refers to the phenomena that persons in a society share in common (e.g., proprieties regarding social behavior, values and value-laden objects, beliefs, norms and proprieties associated with certain values and places).²⁶ In other words, members of a society agree to a certain value or belief (e.g., the value of honor or shame, or the belief of a specific stereotype such as that of a foreigner, etc.) and they associate a collective of presuppositions, proprietary behaviors, and conventional norms with it. Examples of social constructs in Roman antiquity include social status, reputation, kinship, purity, limited good, the evil eye, honor, shame, epideictic speech, and stereotypes.

Social constructs serve vital functions in a society. Fundamentally, they serve to supply the predictability needed for a society to maintain social structure, cohesion,

²⁶ Berger and Luckmann note that individuals in a society objectify phenomena in patterned or similar ways so that they are able to engage in social interactions. See Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Searle discusses the importance of social norms in the maintenance of social constructs. See Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*.

and communication. Predictability results from the establishment of norms regarding social behavior. In the interactions of daily life, social constructs provide the social information that persons need to size up situations and respond accordingly.²⁷ In other words, because of social constructs, persons in a society are able, to large extent, to predict the behavior of others and to determine the social expectations that govern their interactions with others.²⁸

Essentially, societies pass on, convey and uphold culturally nuanced social constructs through a socialization process.²⁹ In effect, the socialization process teaches how people should behave and interact within specific settings and forums, and how they should behave and interact with regards to certain persons and objects. They also learn what to expect regarding certain social constructs (e.g., a successfully aimed riposte maintains or elevates one's honor), and they learn to associate certain

²⁷ See Elliott's definition of cultural scripts in *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism*, 128.

²⁸ Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism*, 19. Cf. David G. Horrell, ed., *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1999), 9.

²⁹ Social systems or structures play a key role in the socialization process. There are debatable differences among sociologists as to whether people *transform* or *reproduce* social values and institutions. If humans reproduce social values and institutions, their behavior is predictable and regular, and therefore, their behavior is presentable in generalized and typical patterns. If humans transform social values and institutions, then their behavior is unpredictable and models are severely insufficient. Without the predictability, a social system becomes unstable and chaotic. Social constructs play a key role in providing predictability. For a helpful presentation on the importance of predictable behavior and patterns, see Esler, *Models in New Testament Interpretation*, 110–1.

norms with specific constructs (e.g., epideictic speeches contain praise, and not insults, etc.). The socialization process reinforces, not only the proprieties and values regarding specific social constructs, but it also conveys the consequences for transgressing proprieties and values.

Insights into ancient social constructs are extremely important to humor studies for two fundamental reasons. First, they provided the predictability that ancient societies needed in order to establish some basic level of cooperation. Humor theorists repeatedly note that predictability of social behavior and patterns of social behavior are both critical prerequisites that make humor possible. Second, every ancient social construct embodied specific proprieties and values, and transgressions of these proprieties and values (e.g., disloyalty to one's kinship group such as exposing a familial secret to public ridicule, etc.) almost always carried some type of anticipated consequential effect. It was the anticipation of consequential effects that produced a heightened sense of tension. According to humor theorists, the presence of tension is another critical element that makes humor possible. And so, in order for us to recognize whether the critical elements of humor are present in a scenario; we must identify the norms conveyed by the social constructs operative within the social and cultural context.

The authors of antiquity did not typically describe the cultural and social dynamics that would have been obvious to their hearers. Instead, they revealed the proprieties and patterns of specific social interactions (e.g., between opponents) within certain settings (e.g., court proceedings), and often did not explain the social

constructs (e.g., honor, shame, etc.) that governed social behavior and social systems. For example, in public speeches before the Senate, Sallust and Cicero exchanged a flurry of sarcastic barbs aimed at each other, but we never hear an authorial explanation that these barbs had tremendous repercussions on the honor and reputation of these two fierce opponents.³⁰ Neither does the ancient author of *In Sallustum* explain why Cicero had to respond publically to Sallust, and why he had to deliver particularly witty and barbed ripostes to Sallust's challenges.³¹ Without an understanding of the ancient concept of honor, we might well miss the intensity of situation that made Cicero's barbs so poignant and potentially deadly.

Although the anthropological method of modeling has been the subject of much debate, it presently offers the best means for understanding the oft-tacit social constructs (as well as the proprieties associated with them) at work in the ancient social and cultural context of a humor event.³² Such models are especially helpful

³⁰ Cf. *Invect.* This pseudo Ciceronian speech, supposedly delivered before the Senate, is a riposte to a pseudo-Sallustian speech. Cicero responds in kind to the host of stinging invectives delivered by Sallust. Classical scholars believe *In Ciceronem* and *In Sallustum* are probably school exercises. See introduction in *Invect.* (Bailey, LCL).

³¹ Ibid. See an example of Sallust's barb and Cicero's witty barbed riposte in *In Sallustum*, 14 and *In Ciceronem*, 5. Even if these speeches were only school exercises, they represent a potential rhetorical exchange between opponents in a public forum.

³² The following works debate the benefits and shortcomings of anthropological models. Cf. Malina, *The New Testament World*, xi–xiv, 1–25; Esler, *Modelling Early Christianity*, 1–19; Horrell, ed. *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*, 3–27. Malina explains a model as an “abstract simplified representations of some real world object, event, or interaction constructed for the

when ancient authors do not elaborate on the social dynamics of a humor event. They help us to recognize social norms (e.g., the value of honor) and provide insights into the scripts and cues that explain social behavior (e.g., riposte to a challenge) in given situations (e.g., in defense of honor).³³ In short, models, otherwise known as social constructs, give us insight into the norms of social interaction. For example, through our understanding of the social construct of honor, we can presume that Sallust's barbs will not go unchallenged. Cicero must defend his honor or he will lose face. The conventional defense of honor included an increase in the intensity of *insulting* ripostes. We can further presume that the content of Cicero's speech will consist of sarcastic ripostes, which are quite shearing and ferocious.

Contributions of Humor Theory: Humor Cues

Humor theorists have provided insights into the various cues that signal the presence of humor. These cues include: 1) the sudden disregard of a social propriety; 2) the delivery of humor—particularly, the timing of humor and the streamlined presentation; 3) the setting; 4) linguistic and typological cues; and 5) the sudden reversals or surprise disruptions of expectations. Below, I offer a brief description of each cue.

purpose of understanding, control, or prediction (cf. Bruce Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Int* 37 (1982): 229–42, esp. 231.

³³ Malina, *New Testament World*, 1–7.

The sudden disregard of a social propriety commonly occurs in humor. Humor theory presents multiple field studies in which they examine why social properties are such a favored target for humor.³⁴ Essentially, these studies observe that social proprieties convey social norms, which in turn, shape social expectations. In addition, they observe that the function of social proprieties is to control social behavior and to suppress transgressions. Humor, it turns out, thrives on discomobulation, befuddlement, surprise or shock, which a sudden disruption of social expectations and a flippant dismissal of social repercussions tends to produce. In effect, humor surfaces when a humorist defies the norms that seek to suppress or control behavior, and when he or she proceeds to disrupt what one should not disrupt. In Mark 7:18–19, we have example of humor in which the Markan Jesus quite possibly transgresses social propriety and makes a rather shocking connection between purity and the filth of the latrine.³⁵

³⁴ For discussions on the disruption of social norms and proprieties in humor events from the perspective of humor theorists, see Paul Paolucci and Margaret Richardson, “Dramaturgy, Humor, and Criticism: How Goffman Reveals Seinfeld’s Critique of American Culture,” *Humor* 19, no. 1 (2006): 27–52; and in Thomas R. Herzog et al., “Joke Cruelty and Joke Appreciation Revisited,” *Humor* 19, no. 2 (2006): 139–56. Sociologists of humor, who take a structuralist approach, study the shared symbols, norms and values are make humor possible and probable (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*).

³⁵ The Markan Jesus says, “καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀσύνετοί ἐστε; οὐ νοεῖτε ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἔξωθεν εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸν ἄνθρωπον οὐ δύναται αὐτὸν κοινῶσαι ὅτι οὐκ εἰσπορεύεται αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἀλλ’ εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν, καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται—Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that what goes into a person from outside cannot defile [the person], since it does not enter [the] heart, but [the] stomach, and then passes out into the latrine?” The Markan Jesus

The timing of humor serves to maximize the abruptness and the surprise of disruptions in social expectations.³⁶ In the humorous mode, that is, in scenarios when the audience expects humor, the humorist must carefully plan the timing of humor as happens in the well-practiced lines of comic theatrical performances or joke telling. In the serious mode, that is, in scenarios when the hearers do not expect humor, humor surfaces best when its timing “punches” unexpectedly (e.g., witty barb) as happens extemporaneously during interpersonal exchanges (e.g., street talk, court trials, etc.).

Humorists typically deliver humor in a highly economical and streamlined presentation known in Freudian terms as “the process of condensation.”³⁷ The process of condensation refers to the condensing of conscious thought processes in the receiver of humor.³⁸ In other words, the humor event unfolds so quickly that the receiver does not have time to “think out” a solution, nor does the receiver have time to consciously process any implausibilities or incongruities. Condensation typically

begins his witty dictum with a word play (i.e., ὑμεῖς ἀσύνητοί...οὐ νοεῖτε). See also Matt 15:17–18.

³⁶ Robinson and Smith-Lovin note the role of timing and delivery in their case study. Cf. Dawn T. Robinson and Lynn Smith-Lovin, “Getting a Laugh: Gender, Status, and Humor in Task Discussions,” *SF* 80, no. 1 (2001):123–58.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 208–9. Freud uses these terms in connection with jokes, but humor theorists affirm the elements of economy and condensation in other kinds of humorous episodes (cf. Mulkay, *On Humor*).

³⁸ Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 210–1.

occurs in hyperbole, in brief anecdotes and dictums, and in jokes. An example of condensation occurs in the following ancient joke, “An egghead was told by someone, ‘Your beard is coming in now.’ The egghead went to the door and waited for it (*Philogelos* #43).” The joke reveals an obviously implausible and unexpected act (i.e., no one would actually go to the door to wait for a beard to come in), but it takes a split second for the hearer of the joke to catch the absurdity of the egghead’s action. In Matthew 23:24, Jesus directs a humorous epithet at the scribes and Pharisees. He tells them, “You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel!” The epithet is quite hyperbolic and includes an Aramaic pun—“You strain *galma* and *gema gamla*.”³⁹ Again, the implausible element in this dictum is obvious, that is, no one could actually swallow a camel. The process of condensation requires the hearer to let the joke “catch” up to his or her thought process. Once the joke “catches up,” to the hearer, he or she realizes the implausibilities or incongruities in the joke, and impulsively reacts (i.e., laughs, sneers, snorts, etc.).

The setting, in which humor occurs, often plays a significant role in humor, primarily because social proprieties govern every type of setting, albeit with different nuances. Again, the setting determines whether or not hearers expect humor, and

³⁹ The wordplay in Matt 23:24 involved the words, swallowed up (Aram. *gema*; Heb. *gama*), gnat (Aram. *galma*) and camel (Aram. & Heb. *gamlā*), which produced the following wordplay; “You strain a *galma*, and *gema gamla*.” See the discussions on the Aramaic pun of Matt 23:24 in Daniel J. Harrington, ed., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, Vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 326; Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, The Expositor's Bible Commentary 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 481.

whether or not, they find the use of humor in certain settings to be agonistic and susceptible to serious repercussions. There is tremendous social pressure (via the threat of consequential effects) on members of a society to conform to the social proprieties of particular settings.⁴⁰ When a humorist disrupts the social proprieties associated with a setting, he or she tends to discombobulate, surprise, or shock hearers. For example, one hardly expects to hear a lawyer deliver a sarcastic barb at a juror or judge during a court proceeding, because such a barb could elicit serious repercussions. Generally, the hearers of the defendant's barb will quickly recognize the breach of decorum, and likely react to the humorist's lapse of propriety. Public reaction to humor tends to intensify already tense situations.

The content of a written text or an oral performance can provide several kinds of cues that point to or hint at the possible presence of humor. Among the most helpful of these cues are linguistic cues, typological cues, and the unexpected disruptions or reversals of expectations.⁴¹ Linguistic cues can signal forthcoming

⁴⁰ From a theoretical perspective, phenomenological approaches are helpful in critiquing the proprieties of humor in structured and unstructured settings. Humor tends to surface in forms acceptable to specific settings and situations (e.g., ceremonial settings, dinner parties, etc). Of particular interest is the effect of humor on social structures. Phenomenological approaches continue to lack Mediterranean-based perspectives. Accepting this shortcoming as a stepping stone, we can gain some insights from Mulkay's phenomenological discussion (cf. Mulkay, *On Humor*, 153ff).

⁴¹ Discussions on linguistic and lexical cues occur in the following works: Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*; Nancy D. Bell, "Humor Comprehension: Lessons Learned from Cross-cultural Communication," *Humor* 20, no. 4 (2007): 367–87; Gumpez, *Discourse Strategies*; Norrick, *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*. Brenner presents a study of Hebraic semantic cues of

humor or reveal a form of humor. In humorous mode, certain linguistic cues serve as the telltale precursors to humor (e.g., the use of *knock-knock* in knock-knock joke or *there was a priest, a rabbi and a minister...*). In the ancient joke book, *Philogelos*, the word, “σχολαστικὸς—egghead” is a linguistic cue that signals a forthcoming joke.⁴² Every culture has its linguistic precursors that signal a forthcoming joke, and thus move the hearer from a serious mode to humorous one. In both humorous and serious modes, linguistic cues also surface whenever a humorist disrupts expectations concerning the use of language or words.⁴³ Common linguistic cues that often signal the use of humor include paronomasia, onomatopoeia, and puns, redundancy, the misuse of words, and sudden switches from standardized languages to dialects.

Comic typologies also provide cues to the presence of humor.⁴⁴ Typologies are socially constructed and include what we would call stereotypes and stock

humor in her work entitled, “On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and A. Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990), 39–58. Apte discusses sociolinguistic and ethno-semantic cues in *Humor and Laughter*.

⁴² Baldwin renders Σχολαστικὸς (lit. simpleton) as *egghead* (cf. Baldwin, *The Philogelos*; and Dawe, ed., *Philogelos*).

⁴³ See Mulkay’s theoretical discussion on serious and humorous modes of perception. He explains how the recipient of humor processes ambiguity differently when in humorous versus serious modes. His approach is helpful when considering how humor works in anecdotes and hyperbole, etc (see Mulkay, *On Humor*, 8ff).

⁴⁴ See theoretical discussions on typologies (and stratification of social types) in the following works: Stephenson, “Conflict and Control Functions of Humor,” 569–74; Apte, *Humor and Laughter*; Zijderveld, *The Sociology of Humour and Laughter*; Paolucci and Richardson, “Dramaturgy, Humor, and Criticism,” 27–52; and Orrin E. Klapp, “Social Types: Process and Structure,” *Am Sociol Rev* 23 (1958):

characters. A comic typology is a type of condensation and works in ways similar to condensed jokes. It packs social expectations and predictability into a well-defined and tightly compressed stock character or stereotype.⁴⁵ Essentially, comic typologies predispose hearers to expect humor. In Roman antiquity, they generally surface in comic performances and in ethnic and stratification jokes. In *Characters*, Theophrastus puts forth a number of typologies common in ancient Roman and Greek theatrical performances of comedy (for further discussion, see my Chapter 6 in the section entitled *Comic Typologies*).⁴⁶ Roman-era humorists either took on a role of a comic typology (e.g., buffoons, clowns, satirists, etc.) or they used typologies (e.g., the lazy laborer, overbearing businessperson, ignorant disciple, miserly tycoon, etc.) in their anecdotes. Through typologies, humorists essentially emphasize the absurd.

Unexpected disruptions or reversals of expectation also provide cues to humor. Humor theorists note that sudden reversals of “expected” patterns can evoke a humorous reaction of confusion or shock in hearers.⁴⁷ When a reasonable, plausible,

674–78. Whedbee discusses the role of literary typologies in humor (cf. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*).

⁴⁵ Cf. Mulkay, *On Humor*; Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*; Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*; and Stephenson, “Conflict and Control Functions of Humor,” 569–74.

⁴⁶ Theophrastus, *Char.* See introduction in *Char.* (Rusten and Cunningham, LCL).

⁴⁷ Discussions on the role of audience expectation and disruption of expectation in humor events occur in the following works: Lambert Deckers and P. Kizer, “Humor and the Incongruity Hypothesis,” *Journal of Psychology* 90 (1975): 215–8; Stephen Hall et al., “Toward an Understanding of Humor as Popular Culture

and inevitable outcome suddenly becomes disrupted, the hearer must quickly reassess what has happened. This disjunctive process in the hearer is what makes sudden reversals of social expectations potentially humorous.⁴⁸

Reversal of expectation is a common element in the genre of ancient comedy and it also occurs in comic episodes within tragedies and other kinds of literature. The genre of comedy typically involves an over-arching reversal, which literary critics call a *U-shaped* plot.⁴⁹ In the U-shaped plot, the central figure or hero undergoes some sort of misfortune or tragedy, and then experiences a celebratory upturn in fortune.⁵⁰ In addition to overarching reversals in plotlines, reversals also occur in periodic comic episodes within a plot. In Roman antiquity, these comic episodes typically involved usurpers who sought a surprising reversal in fortune, reputation, and status.

in American Society,” *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 1–6; and Herzog et al., “Joke Cruelty and Joke Appreciation Revisited,” 139–56.

⁴⁸ Works that discuss humor and societal patterns (e.g., social proprieties, social constructs, etc.) occur in the following works: Zijderveld, “The Sociology of Humour and Laughter.” Works that discuss artificially scripted patterns of humor include: Amy Carrell, “Joke Competence and Humor Competence,” *Humor* 10, no. 2 (1977): 173–81; Mulkay, *On Humor*; and Sacks, “Some Technical Considerations of a Dirty Joke.”

⁴⁹ Northrup Frye, *Fables of Identity; Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 25. See Frye’s extensive discussion on comedy in Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 43–51, 54, 163–86.

⁵⁰ Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 7.

It is noteworthy that ancient comedies included tragic elements. In other words, the central figure or hero suffered through remarkably dark and sometimes ghastly situations before experiencing the upward turn into a happy ending.⁵¹ To the modern reader, the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., God gets the last laugh in Jesus' resurrection) and other biblical books (e.g., Ruth and Job) do not typically evoke allusions to comedy, but the U-shaped plot found in them resonates with ancient forms of comedy.⁵²

Social Functions and Effects of Humor

According to theories proposed by sociologists of humor, there are several mainstream perspectives regarding the social functions and effects of humor. The most fundamental function of humor is survival.⁵³ The survival of a social group depends a great deal on helpful forms of communication and interaction that motivate individuals to remain in solidarity with the group.⁵⁴ The survival of both the group as a whole and the individuals, who comprise the group, are dependent upon a mutual exchange of services and benefits. Humor is one of the most effective means of

⁵¹ Ibid. See also Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 25.

⁵² Cf. Phyllis Tribble, "A Human Comedy," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1978), 166–99; and Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," 1–39.

⁵³ Koller discusses the functions of humor from a structuralist approach. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18–19.

eliciting mutual cooperation.⁵⁵ The secondary functions of humor aid in the survival of the group and individual, and these functions include social bonding, relief from stress, reduction of tension, celebration and recreation (i.e., rejuvenating form of play), self-effacement or face-saving, thought-provoking, social correction, expression of aggression or defense, enhancing desirability, and reinforcing social values and hierarchical structures.⁵⁶ If we take an example of a secondary function of humor, self-effacement, we can see how humor functions to preserve individual survival in a group.⁵⁷ Through the humorous use of self-effacement, fringe members of a society or vulnerable individuals are able to accommodate dominating in-group members. Their use of self-effacing humor keeps them within the group, although their position and inclusion can remain precarious. The basic function of self-effacing humor (and other secondary functions of in-group humor) is to maintain a connection with a group, usually for survival purposes. The more intensely members of a group

⁵⁵ Ibid. Koller stresses the functions and effects of humor on groups and notes the works of Kropotkin and Wirth. Kropotkin writes that an emergent group's survival depends on two factors: group cooperation and the need for mutual assistance. Cf. Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902; repr., London, UK: Freedom Press, 1998). Wirth discusses how a society communicates in concert toward common objectives. Cf. Louis Wirth, "Consensus and Mass Communication," *Am Sociol Rev* 13, no. 1 (1948): 1–15.

⁵⁶ Koller, *Humor and Society*, 9–11, 18–26, 150–66. For a discussion on the role of humor in hierarchy building as well as an extensive bibliography on the subject, see Robinson and Smith-Lovin, "Getting A Laugh: Gender, Status, and Humor in Task Discussions," 123–58. See also Bergson, *Laughter*.

⁵⁷ Koller, *Humor and Society*, 165–6.

share in solidarity and loyalty with one another, the more powerful the secondary functions of humor effect their in-group solidarity and loyalty.

Other sociologists tend to emphasize two specific functions of humor, that is, the conflict and control functions.⁵⁸ The conflict function of humor tends to express some form of aggression.⁵⁹ The effect of the conflict function is to strengthen the morale of the humorist (and the humorist's sympathizers), while demoralizing the humorist's opponents.⁶⁰ Humor used for antagonistic (i.e., conflict) purposes generally occurs in exchanges between in-group members and fringe members or outsiders. Humorists often use exaggerations or hyperbole as humor devices to undermine old ideologies and to make newly emergent moralities and ideologies stand out as relatively the new better norm.⁶¹ Other kinds of humor generally associated with the conflict function include irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature, parody and burlesque.⁶²

⁵⁸ Stephenson and Paletz discuss the functions of humor from a political approach. Cf. Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," 569–74; and D. Paletz, "Political Humor and Authority: From Support to Subversion," *Int Pol Sci Rev* 11, no. 4 (1990): 483–93. See also Koller, *Humor and Society*.

⁵⁹ Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," 569–74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 569.

⁶¹ Powell and Paton, *Humor in Society*.

⁶² Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," 569.

The control function of humor tends to reinforce a dominant group's approval of a social norm or regulation or disapproval of socially deviant behavior.⁶³ The primary effect of humor, which functions as a control mechanism, is to flatter social conventions, traditional morality, and to reinforce common in-group values.⁶⁴ The conservative or watchdog function of humor keeps excesses from becoming intolerable by challenging incongruities and contradictions between social conventions and behavior.⁶⁵ Humor, used with intent to control, generally occurs in intra-group exchanges. The typical kinds of humor associated with the control function of humor are derogatory stereotypes and stratification jokes.⁶⁶ By making light of the outsider's values, one expresses what one's own values are. For example, the lazy laborer, the overbearing owner, the miserly tycoon, the dishonest manager, and the ignorant poor are common stereotypes that degrade persons whose behavior exhibits laziness, stinginess, dishonesty, untrustworthiness, and ignorance.⁶⁷ In

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 570. Powell and Paton argue that humor functions as a control mechanism, and works to the advantage of powerful groups. Cf. Powell and Paton, *Humor in Society*, 336–7. In his work entitled, *Humor and Laughter*, Apte discusses that humor can function as a device of social correction, particularly in cases when one uses humor to criticize deviant behavior.

⁶⁴ Cf. Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," 569; and Powell and Paton, *Humor in Society*, 334–5.

⁶⁵ See Powell and Paton, *Humor in Society*, 334–5; Koller, *Humor and Society*, 17.

⁶⁶ Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," 570–1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

addition to the reinforcement of in-group values, the control function of humor also aims to validate the identity, likeability and worth of the in-group.⁶⁸

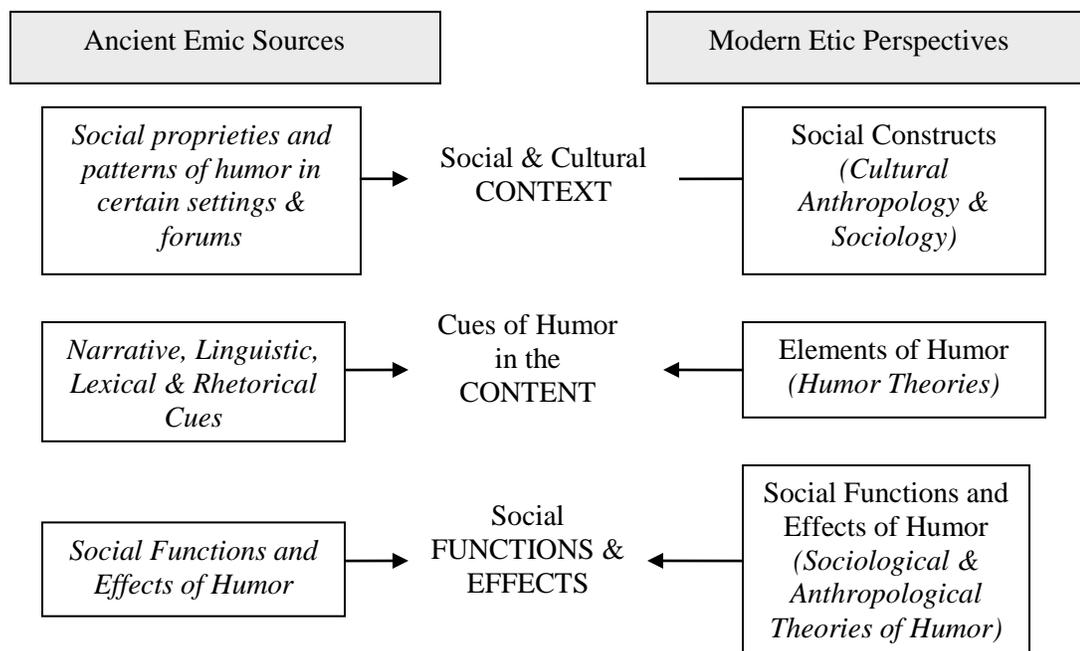


Fig. 5. Emic Sources and Etic Perspectives

Synthesis of a Humor Model

At this point, we view the model as a whole (see Figure 5: Emic Sources and Etic Perspectives). The central focus is the three core aspects: the social and cultural context; the cues of humor in the content, and the social functions and effects of humor. As we have seen, both ancient emic sources and modern etic perspectives help inform each of the three core aspects. Emic sources from the Roman era provide

⁶⁸ Ibid., 573. See also O’Quin and Aronoff, “Humor as a Technique of Social Influence,” *Soc Psychol Q* 44, no. 4 (1981): 349–57.

insights into the social proprieties (e.g., the socially acceptable uses of humor) related to humor use in antiquity. We also learn from these sources the patterns of humor that surface in certain settings and forums. In addition, rhetorical treatises, biographical encomium, comic performances, and other kinds of ancient genre can reveal a great deal about narrative, linguistic, lexical and rhetorical cues of humor and humor use. Regarding modern etic perspectives, we rely on cultural anthropological and sociological approaches (with their limitations in mind) to help us understand the social dynamics and the social values of ancient Mediterranean societies. Humor theorists, who use sociological strategies, also provide insights that help us to identify universal humor elements and the universal functions and effects of humor.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by noting that humor was pervasive in antiquity and it surfaced in every aspect of ancient life from mundane artifacts to sophisticated rhetoric. In short, humor appeared in a variety of forms. It appeared in countless contexts (e.g., comic performances, bathhouse frescoes and tavern walls, etc.) and in various forms of literature (e.g., mythologies, biographical encomium, philosophical treatises, and discourses on rhetoric, etc.).

Humor also served vital social functions. It functioned as a social mechanism in the socialization process—a process by which members of a society learned social values. Humor helped to strengthen the bonds of loyalty and solidarity between members of a society. In addition, ancient authors used humor as a literary and

rhetorical medium through which they portrayed and praised the ideological strengths (e.g., justice, wisdom, virtuous character, honorable reputation, etc.) of renowned public figures, heroes, and folk leaders.

Given the critical social functions of ancient humor and the role of humor in biographical encomium, it seems highly unlikely that the Synoptic Gospels would be void of humor. And so, I re-visited the question, why do we fail to recognize and appreciate humor, especially tendentious humor, in the Synoptic Gospels? It seems that we remain, not only unfamiliar with the cues that signal the presence of ancient forms of humor, but perhaps, we persist to see humor as lacking in power, gravity and therefore importance. In our modern Western culture, humor is often seen and experienced as inconsequential, but this was not so in the Roman world. For persons of antiquity, humor produced consequential effects, both harmful and beneficial ones, and it often produced serious repercussions.

My purpose in Chapter 4 was to construct an approach that would aid our recognition of ancient forms of humor, its use, functions, and effects. First, I presented a model with three core aspects: the social and cultural context; the cues of humor in the content; and the functions and effects of humor (see Figure 5: Emic Sources and Etic Perspectives). Secondly, I discussed the ways in which ancient emic sources provide various insights into the core aspects of this model. We can learn a good deal about the signifiers of humor (e.g., comic typologies, subject matter, wordplay, etc.) from emic sources. These sources reveal various linguistic, stylistic, rhetorical, lexical and narrative cues. They also give us insights into the social

expectations of humor use. In some cases, they identify quite explicitly the various functions and consequential effects of humor. In other cases, they provide examples of the functions and effects of humor.

Thirdly, I discussed the ways in which modern etic perspectives inform the three core aspects of the model. I noted particularly the strategies related to cross-cultural anthropology and the sociology of humor. Anthropological models, albeit not without their deficiencies, enlighten our understanding of the social constructs at work in an ancient context. They help us more fully appreciate the power of humor and its effect on social constructs. Most importantly, they challenge us to see cultural distinctions in humor use and humor effect. Sociological approaches provide insights into the critical elements needed to make humor possible. They also help us to understand the functions and effects of humor, particularly in regards to social interaction and socialization processes. Essentially, both cultural anthropologists and sociologists of humor supplement what ancient emic sources tell us about humor.

Finally, the model that I present is not without its limitations as I have already discussed. There are fundamental difficulties with emic sources. One inescapable challenge is the lack of diversified voices among ancient authors. Ancient literature comes to us, for the most part, through the lenses of elite males and within their limited range of ethnic perspectives. These authors also tend to convey ideals (re: rhetorical uses of humor and philosophical views of humor, etc.) rather than a plethora of actual practices. In addition, ancient authors did not, for obvious reasons, typically explain the social and cultural information embedded in their works.

Etic perspectives also present serious limitations. Perhaps, the greatest challenge is a cultural gulf that exists between Western perspectives and Eastern Mediterranean perspectives. As Westerner scholars, we rely heavily on our etic perspectives of Eastern Mediterranean cultures, which often lead us to make generalized *models* of ancient societies. These generalizations limit our understanding of the complexities and variations in both modern and ancient Mediterranean societies.

In spite of these limitations, emic sources and etic perspectives provide the stepping-stones we need to understand ancient humor and the presuppositions we bring to ancient texts. Keeping this perspective in mind, the humor model serves as a guide for exploring, identifying and understanding the gravity and importance of humor and its use in the ancient Roman world.

CHAPTER FIVE

HUMOR IN AGONISTIC EXCHANGES

In this chapter, I explore the context, content, functions and effects of humor in several agonistic exchanges that occur between Jesus and his opponents (see below Figure 6: Basics of a Humor Model). My overarching focus is on the use of tendentious humor in the agonistic exchanges that occur in the Temple precinct (Matt 21:12–23:36). I discuss in detail the use of humor in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus. In particular, I examine Matthew’s shocking use of a familiar dictum (Matt 26:64) and Luke’s use of sarcasm and barbed ripostes (22:67–70).

In the first part of this chapter, I began by examining what Roman-era emic literature says about rhetoric and the use of humor in highly antagonist situations. I discuss particularly the types of rhetoric and humor that are typical of the ancient judicial proceedings and of the public forums in which out-group and in-group member(s) engage in agonistic rhetoric. I include a discussion on what emic literature reveals about the functions and effects of harsh forms of humor on the social constructs of honor, status and reputation. My analysis of emic literature presumes a sociological understanding of the social constructs at work (i.e., honor, reputation, shame, etc.) and the impact of rhetoric and humor on those constructs.

In the second part of the chapter, I apply what Roman-era emic literature reveals about the use of rhetoric and humor in agonistic exchanges to several Synoptic examples. I discuss the use of harsh forms of humor in the agonistic exchanges between Jesus and his opponents in the Temple precinct (Matt 21:1–23:36). I also discuss the use of tendentious humor during the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus (Matt 26:64–68 and Luke 22:67–68).

In an important addendum to this chapter, I make some observations about the use of tendentious humor in ancient Roman-era criminal punishments and public executions. In particular, I describe fatal charades and the effect of fatal charades on the social construct of honor. Then I note the use of fatal charades in the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' criminal punishment and public execution.

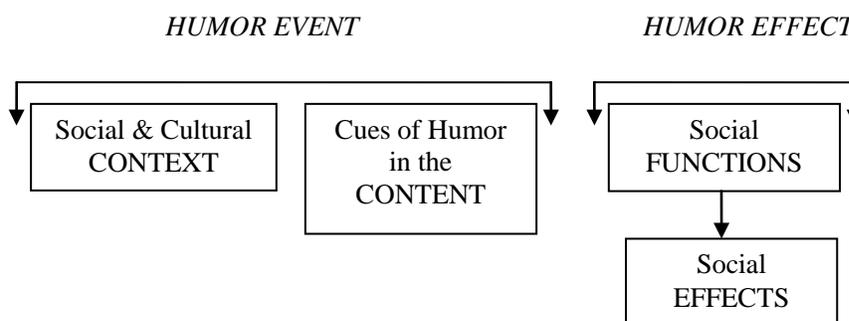


Fig. 6. Basics of a Humor Model

Application of the Humor Model

Several key questions guide my discussion of humor usage in ancient agonistic exchanges. Regarding the *humor event*, I address the following questions:

What kind of rhetoric is operative in agonistic settings, and what is its function? What is the function of humor in antagonistic rhetoric and what types of humor generally occur in this type of rhetoric? What are the proprieties associated with the use of humor in this setting? Regarding the *humor effect*, I address the following questions: What are the repercussions and effects of tendentious humor? What is the reaction of the public (i.e., the public verdict)? What is the effect of the public reaction on social constructs? What is the reaction of the opponents (i.e., the target of humor) towards the tendentious use of humor? I have illustrated these questions in the diagram below (see Figure 7: Exploring an Ancient Humor Event & Its Effects).

Emic Perspective: Humor in Agonistic Exchanges

There are several key observations we can make about ancient agonistic exchanges.¹ First, these exchanges commonly involved forensic-type (i.e., defensive and offensive rhetoric) and forceful style (i.e., a specific style of delivery that conveyed anger or intense emotions, accusation and power) rhetoric. Second, tendentious forms of humor commonly surfaced in these kinds of rhetoric. In particular, Roman-era forensic speeches were replete with derisive barbs, insults, name-calling, and derogatory epithets and insults. Third, we know that agonistic

¹ The issue here is not whether the agonistic exchanges between Jesus and his opponents actually occurred. The point is that ancient hearers of the Synoptic Gospels would have heard these exchanges through their own cultural lens. They would have understood the rhetoric, risks and dynamics involved in such exchanges regardless of whether these exchanges were reconstructions of actual events or fictitious narratives.

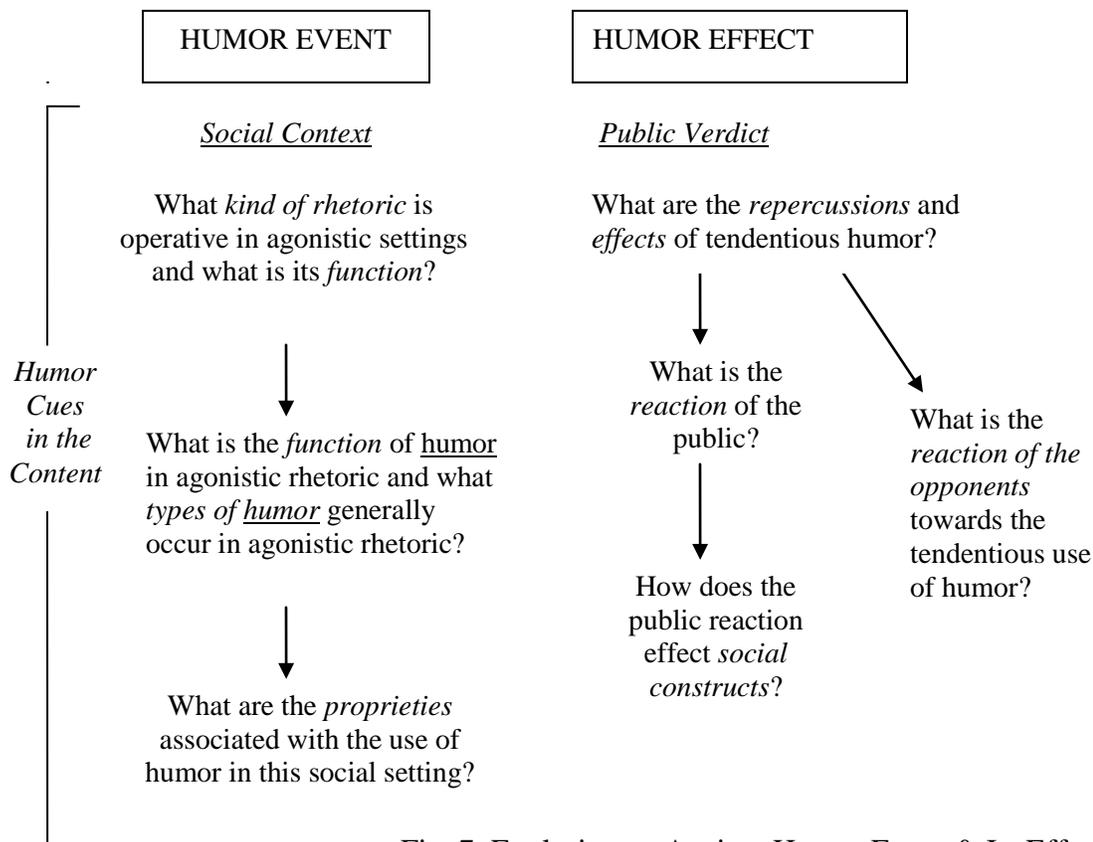


Fig. 7. Exploring an Ancient Humor Event & Its Effects

exchanges had a serious effect on social constructs such as honor and reputation. The use of tendentious humor in forensic and forceful styles of rhetoric had decisive repercussions on the target(s) of humor, which eventually and usually did not bode well in the end for the humorist. Finally, agonistic exchanges tended to occur in public places where the court of public opinion often intensified the effects of tendentious humor.

Antagonistic exchanges, and the tendentious forms of humor that frequently surfaced in them, played a critical role in ancient in-group literature. Primarily, these

kinds of exchanges and contemptuous forms of humor served as a means to build up the reputation and character of a favored or renowned in-group person, while simultaneously discrediting the reputation and character of an opponent or delegitimizing an out-group. In short, agonistic exchanges in in-group literature became an effective literary device for building the honorable character and status of a heroic figure by portraying them with great rhetorical skill and wit.

Tendentious Humor in Antagonistic Rhetoric

In Roman-era literature, agonistic exchanges between opponents very often involved forensic-type and forceful-style rhetoric.² This is particularly evident in a

² In Roman antiquity, forensic rhetoric, also called judicial rhetoric, typically referred to rhetoric used in (specifically legal) controversy where persons made accusations against perpetrators of injustice or where persons defended themselves against accusations of injustice. According to the author of *Rhet. Her.*, forensic speeches (generally) consisted of six parts: an introduction, statement of facts, division, proof, refutation, and conclusion (I.2, 4). In certain parts of a forensic speech, the substance of rhetoric was characteristically adversarial and included invectives and other derogatory rhetoric aimed at what we would call today, character assassination. One of the critical aims of forensic type rhetoric was to elicit public hatred and contempt for an opponent by pointing out despicable character flaws in the opponent, which was a highly antagonistic endeavor. For discussions on forensic rhetoric, its aim, elements (incl. the use of humor) and styles, see Aristotle, *Rhet.* I.3, 10; II–III; *Rhet. Her.* I–II, IV.8.11–10.14; Cicero, *Or.*; *De or. I–II*; and Quintilian, *Inst.* 6, 8.

An orator constructed and delivered his forensic speech in a style (e.g., plain, elegant, or forceful) which he deemed most appropriate and persuasive for a particular audience. The forceful and plain styles of rhetoric were the most suitable styles for forensic rhetoric, especially in the parts of a forensic speech in which the orator sought to antagonize opponents and to energize the emotions of the public or jury. Forceful and plain style rhetoric included linguistic structures amenable to barbed ripostes and other kinds of terse forms of tendentious humor. The forceful style in particular conveyed an angry or intensely passionate and biting tone. An

relatively large number of ancient recollections on judicial proceedings.³ The forensic rhetoric of a Roman-era judicial proceeding was typically antagonistic, often forceful in style and derogatory in substance (e.g., derisive invectives). The *ad hominem* attacks (i.e., disparagements of an opponent's character) were standard in specific parts of forensic speech (i.e., the *exordium*, the *indignatio* of the *peroratio*, and in the *argumentatio*).⁴ Forensic and forceful style rhetoric also occurred in non-judicial forums as noted in ancient biographical recollections. The agonistic exchange between Jesus and his opponents is such an example (Matt 21:23–23:39).⁵

When jurists/advocates, philosophers and orators used forensic and forceful styles of rhetoric in agonistic exchanges, they primarily sought to gain public favor

orator, who used forceful style rhetoric to display indignation at an injustice, came across as trustworthy in the opinion of the public/jury. For discussion on style in forensic rhetoric, cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* III; Demetrius, *Eloc.* 241–301; Cicero, *Or.* 75–109; *De or.* I.137–147; II. 17–208; and *Rhet. Her.* IV.

³ Cicero's speeches provide numerous examples of forensic and forceful style rhetoric in the agonistic exchanges of judicial proceedings (e.g., *Mil.*, *Quinct.*, *Rosc. com.*, and *Clu.*). For an extensive listing of Cicero's forensic speeches, see Powell and Paterson, eds. *Cicero the Advocate*, 416–22. Kennedy discusses the forensic rhetoric of Matthew 21:14–23. See George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 86–96.

⁴ Cf. Cicero, *Inv.* 1.22, 98–105; 2.32–37; and *Rhet. Her.* 1.8; 2.5, 47–49. Powell and Paterson explain the role of invectives in forensic speeches, particularly in regards to character assassination. For discussions on the humorous invective, see the following: Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter*, 16–20; and Craig, "Audience, Expectations, Invectives, and Proof," in *Cicero the Advocate*, ed. J. Powell and J. Paterson (New York: Oxford University Press), 187–213.

⁵ Cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 86.

(i.e., *conciliatio*) in support of a position or an argument. In order to gain public support, the orator or advocate had to boost his or her own *ethos* in the eyes of the public/jury. The orator also had to skillfully stir the public's emotions against the adversary (i.e., *pathos*).⁶ The use of forensic rhetoric in the Roman era was not so much about persuading public favor on the facts of a case (i.e., *logos*), as it was about persuading the public/jury that the adversary had the character capable of committing an injustice. For this reason, orators and advocates had to make the adversary appear disreputable, corrupt, shameful and despicable so that the public would view them with *odium* (animosity), *invidia* (typically, it means jealousy, but in forensic terms, *invidia* connotes ill will, hatred and hostility), and *contemptio* (scorn and disdain).⁷

Tendentious humor served critical functions in forensic and forceful-style rhetoric.⁸ Foremost, the orator used humor to secure the *conciliatio* (i.e., the favor) of

⁶ The primary aim of a forensic or judicial speech was to obtain the agreement (i.e., the desired judgment) of the hearers (Cf. *Rhet. Her.* I.2.2; II.1.5–7; Cicero, *De or.* II.178). In order to gain public favor, an ancient speaker had to establish his *ethos* (i.e., credibility and trustworthiness), elicit *pathos* (i.e., emotional reactions from the audience) and demonstrate *logos* (i.e., a logical argument) (cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* I.2.3–6; Cicero, *Or.* 69, 128, 131; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.2). For an additional discussion on securing public favor, see Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 15.

⁷ Cf. *Rhet. Her.* I.4.7–5.8; Cicero, *De or.* II.178, 216, 236; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.1.7–16, and 21–23.

⁸ Cicero remarked that laughter-raising was a common occurrence in judicial settings (*De or.* II.219). He noted that humor served two critical functions: it helped convey the urbanity of the orator and it helped stir the audience against the opponent (cf. *De or.* I.17–18, 143, and 216). He cited examples of tendentious humor in forensic rhetoric (*De or.* II.220, and 222–226). In forensic speech, orators could express tendentious humor in any of the three major styles of delivery: plain, forceful

juries, judges, and the public hearers.⁹ Through the clever use of tendentious wit, the orator could publically display his skill and urbanity—qualities that increased public admiration.¹⁰ In addition, tendentious humor was an effective means of undermining the reputation and character of his opponent(s), hence eliciting public scorn for the opponent.¹¹ In order to achieve this aim, the orator ridiculed any number of character flaws in the opponent(s) such as moral corruption, arrogance, foolishness, treacherousness, cruelty, audaciousness, and craftiness.¹² These attacks on an opponent's character usually took the shape of witty barbs and stinging ripostes. By using tendentious forms of humor, the humorist aimed to direct public *odium*, *invidia*,

and elegant. Forceful and plain styles were more conducive to economically terse wit (cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 7, 27). The forceful style was suitable for invectives and other kinds of explicit, direct, and harsh forms of humor (see an example in *Eloc.*, 131). The clarity, brevity and vividness of the plain style made it ideal for witty insults (cf. *Eloc.*, 211). The elegant style was the style of charm. In this style, humor surfaced in more subtle ways (see an example in *Eloc.*, 128–130). A lengthy discussion of the plain style (190–239), the elegant style (128–189) and the forceful style (240–304) occurs in Demetrius' *Eloc.*

⁹ For full discussion on humor in rhetoric, see Cicero, *De or.* II.216–289; Cicero, *Or.* 20, 25–27, 87–89; *Rhet. Her.* III.13.23,14.25; Quint., *Inst.* 6.3.

For discussions on the use of humor in securing *conciliatio*, see Cicero, *De or.* I.17–18; II.216, 219–227, 229–230, 236; 242; *Rhet. Her.* I.5.8; Quint., *Inst.* 6.1.7–8, 46–49; 6.2.15–17.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De or.* I. 17, 142, 146–152, 159; II:236; and Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.8.

¹¹ Cf. *Rhet. Her.* I.5.8.

¹² *Rhet. Her.* I.5.8. Forensic speakers in their rhetoric of accusation and blame also drew invectives from vices such as foolishness, hypocrisy, trickery, and fearfulness and other flaws that they believed to be despicable (see also Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9.39–10.1–4).

and *contemptio* at the opponent.¹³ Tendentious humor helped to raise public laughter, and laughter tended to benefit the humorist, at least in the short term.¹⁴ Juries particularly favored laughter-raising, and they admired advocates, who used terse barbs in clever and witty ways.¹⁵ Witty barbs tended to leave opponents speechless, exasperated, unsettled, confused, or subdued.¹⁶ As a result, the clever use of a witty barb and the foolish-looking predicament of an opponent that followed its use, generally elicited a response of derisive laughter from the jury or public. For this reason, Cicero lauded the use of witty barbs, especially in repelling attacks from opponents.¹⁷

Tendentious types of humor were quite prevalent in agonistic exchanges that involved forensic and forceful-style rhetoric. Many forms of tendentious humor

¹³ Cicero noted the importance of awaking *invidia* (hostility) and *iracundia* (anger) in hearers (*De or.* II.214). He expounded heavily on various types of humor and their effects. He also illustrated a number of examples in which persons aimed humor at opponents (*De or.* II. 216–289).

¹⁴ While Cicero wrote concerning the beneficial uses of humor in forensic rhetoric, he also knew that humor could backfire or result in a serious or deadly repercussion. An advocate could experience a serious setback if an opponent responded with a wittier riposte (cf. Cicero, *De or.* II. 219–220). Other ancient authors noted that witty barbs or other kinds of humorous insults could elicit violent anger from targeted persons (Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.2.12, 18–26; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 2.631–634).

¹⁵ Cicero, *De or.* II. 236.

¹⁶ Cicero, *De or.* II. 236.

¹⁷ Cicero, *De or.* II. 236. Students of rhetoric practiced the use of witty barbs in their school exercises (cf. *Invect.*).

occurred in forensic rhetoric as part of *vituperatio*.¹⁸ In *vituperatio*, the opponent's physical looks, reputation, habits, and ancestry were all vulnerable to the rhetoric of derision.¹⁹ *Cavillatio*, which included verbal raillery, jeering, and scoffing, was a popular form of tendentious humor used in the *vituperatio* and in other parts of a judicial speech.²⁰ Quite often, jurists or advocates uttered captious *cavillatio*, that is, derisions aimed at the moral failings, character faults and physical appearances of their opponents. Other forms of tendentious humor were *dicacitas* and *facetia*; both of these terms referred to some type of witty barb or stinging invective.²¹ Notably,

¹⁸ *Vituperatio* consists of accusations made in the form of witty barbs and invectives. A jurist used *vituperatio* to besmirch an opponent's name (cf. Cicero, *Inv.* 1.34–36; 2.28–31, 177–178; *Rhet. Her.* 3.10–15). See the discussion and description of *vituperatio* in the rhetoric of blame in Craig, "Audience, Expectations, Invectives, and Proof," 188–97.

¹⁹ Defendants generally sought to avoid court appearances, because they dreaded the effects of derision on their honor (and reputation). Mobs would sometimes form outside the defendant's residence and shout out derogatory epithets and accusations in a sort of a shaming ritual (i.e., *flagitatio*) in order to compel the person to show up for a trial. Cf. Andrew Borkowski and Paul du Plessis, *Textbook on Roman Law*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65. Unfavorable judgments carried a dreadful penalty. In addition to the possible loss of some or all one's property, the defaming of a person's name and reputation meant that the person would lose honor, and likely be ineligible for municipal offices. Cf. John Crook, *Law and Life of Rome 90 B.C.–A.D. 212* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 83–85. Judges were private citizens and like the defendants, they feared damage to their honor. If judges rendered unfavorable judgments, they risked putting their own honor in harm's way (Crook, *Law and Life of Rome*, 80).

²⁰ Cicero, *De or.* II.218–221.

²¹ Cicero, *De or.* II.218–221 (see also *Or.* 87–90). Cicero argued in favor of well-placed *cavillatio*, *dicacitas*, and *facetia* in forensic speeches. These terms are difficult to define or describe. At times, Cicero used them interchangeably, and at other times, he used them as if their meanings and uses were somewhat distinct. In

Cicero gained infamy for his humorous use of two particular forms of tendentious humor, verbal missiles (*iaculatio dictorum*) and tightly compacted wit (*inclusa breviter urbanitate*). In forceful style rhetoric, tendentious humor surfaced in the following literary forms: allegories, similes, metaphors, hyperbole, and in dicta.²² Tendentious humor also appears in forceful style rhetoric in the form of derisive insults, comic invectives, and mockery—these types of tendentious humor are quite Ciceronian.²³

Cicero and Quintilian were among the ancient Roman-era authors who discussed some proprieties regarding the use of tendentious humor.²⁴ They note that it was permissible and, often expected, that advocates raise public laughter through the humorous use of *contumelia* (i.e., invectives or insults), *ridicula* and *dicacitas*.²⁵ However, the potential repercussions of these types of humor required the orator to

synonymous terms, both *dicacitas* and *facetia* refer to witty barbs. As is the case with many terms related to ancient humor, modern scholarship has been unable to determine precisely what ancient rhetoricians meant by their use of these terms.

²² For a discussion on the forceful style (δεινός), see Demetrius, *Eloc.*, 240–304. Demetrius provides several examples that are reminiscent of Ciceronian humor. Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* (Innes, LCL, 241–243, 272–274).

²³ These tendentious forms of humor appear in forceful style rhetoric, but they also appear in plain style rhetoric, especially in the form of pithy invectives. Essentially, Demetrius notes that the plain style, which consists of the everyday language of the populace, carries the punch power of brevity and clarity. In theatrical performances and in narrative discourses, he observes that gestures and actions add humorous effects to short and snappy lines (cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 7, 9, 137).

²⁴ Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.26–35; and Cicero, *De or.* II.237–239.

²⁵ Cicero, *De or.* II.218–222; Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.20–21, 25–28.

use them with prudence.²⁶ The orator had to avoid the potential for recoil, that is, a witty barb could backfire and damage the orator's own dignity, respect, reputation, and character. Both Cicero and Quintilian noted that one had to guard against the possibility of an opponent issuing an even wittier riposte.²⁷ Quintilian cautioned readers to use humor in ways that would not diminish their own reputations and authority.²⁸ Derisive barbs aimed at judges and juries, instead of their opponents, exceeded the appropriate and common sense uses of tendentious humor.²⁹ Serious repercussions awaited those orators who dared to attack persons of authority or persons of considerable respect.³⁰ Quintilian added, "...*laccessat hoc modo quem laedere sit periculosum, ne aut inimicitiae graves insequentur aut turpis satisfactio*—one should not provoke anyone whom it is dangerous to offend, or one should do it in a manner that one could avoid any serious hostility or shameful reprisal."³¹

Tendentious forms of humor had the potential to produce positive and negative effects. The positive effects of tendentious humor included an admirable

²⁶ Cicero, *Or.* 88–90, *De or.* II. 237–239; Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.28.

²⁷ Cicero, *De or.* II. 230, 236; Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.8, 13. Cicero give an example, see *De or.* II. 220.

²⁸ Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.30, 35.

²⁹ Cf. *Or.* 88. Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.32–35. In *De or.* Cicero recounts how an advocate made a witty remark that produced laughter, but it came at the expense of one of the jury members (cf. II. 245).

³⁰ Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.33–34.

³¹ Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.34

reputation, an increase in honor and a favorable public verdict—for the witty advocate and the persons whom he represented.³² As I have already noted, the witty advocate often earned an increase in public esteem, because the public/jury generally favored advocates who demonstrated cleverness and skill in their use of humor. Successful uses of tendentious humor tended to produce a favorable public verdict.

The negative effects of tendentious humor included shame, violence, and death. If a targeted person did not successfully respond to tendentious forms of humor, he or she suffered a serious loss of face. *Dicacitas*, *contumelia* and *ridicula* produced particularly damaging effects on a targeted person's honor and reputation.³³ While the targeted person suffered humiliation and shame at the hands of a witty advocate, they also generated a desire for vengeance. Therefore, an advocate's use of tendentious humor also had the potential to produce serious repercussions. Violence, albeit often delayed due to public favor, was a common repercussion of tendentious humor. Reprisals generally ranged from death threats to economic damages and from physical assaults to violent deaths. It was not unheard of in Roman antiquity for jurists/advocates to flee for their lives when powerful persons threatened revenge for *loss of face* due to tendentious uses of humor.

Reaction to tendentious forms of humor helped to convey whether or not a humorist had gained a favorable public verdict. According to ancient sources, typical

³² Cf. Cicero, *De or.* II. 236. Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.8–10, 19.

³³ Cicero, *Or.*, 87–90; *De or.* II.218–222; Quint, *Inst.* 6.3.20–21, 25–28.

reactions to tendentious humor included sneers, scorn, shock, surprise, astonishment, stunned silence, confusion, violent anger, fear, laughter and guffawing laughter.³⁴

Reactions of anger, fear, or shock from the targeted person typically signaled that the humorist had succeeded in insulting his opponent's honor.³⁵ In most cases, the public would have reacted favorably to the humorist's triumph over the targeted person.

Reactions of surprise, astonishment, smiles and laughter (especially guffawing laughter) from an audience or public often signaled public admiration for the humorist's skill.³⁶ We know that the public favored orators and advocates, who

³⁴ For reactions to tendentious humor in Hebraic, Greek, and Roman sources, see my references in Chapter 2 (e.g., 1 Sam 17:11; 2 Kgs 2:23–24; Plato, *Resp.* 388e; Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.2.12–27; III.18.7; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 2.629, 631–634; Persius, *Sat.* I.100–130; Juvenal, *Sat.* I.160–170; Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* 6.3.8ff; Cicero, *De or.* I.27; and II.219, 233, 236–239, 245, 252). For reactions to tendentious humor in first century Judaic sources, see my references in Chapter 3 (e.g., Philo, *Cher.* 67; *Flacc* 40–44; *Fug.* 31–32, 34–35; *Legat.* 359–363, 368; *Post* 142, 179; *QG* II.71; *Virt* 202; Josephus *J.W.* XII 172–179, 207, 212–221; XV.373–374 25).

³⁵ In cases where targeted persons reacted with sneers, anger, fear, silence or shock, their reaction signals that the humorist has leveled an insult at them. In cases where the audience, jury or public reacted with shock, surprise, laughter (especially guffawing laughter), their reaction intensifies the effects of the insult. A good discussion on insult, dishonor, and ridicule occurs in Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.2–III.17 and in Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.7–8, 28; 6.4.10–11. For humor and insult, see Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.33–34, 83 and Cicero, *De or.* II.221–222. Reactions of anger, shock, and fear to harsh forms of humor surface in the following examples: Plato, *Resp.* 388e; Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.2.4, 10–16, 22, 24–25; 5.2–15; 9.12–15; III.7.3; *Eth. nic.* IV.8.3; Cicero, *De or.* II.236; Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* II.631c; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.28, 33–34; Horace, *Ser.* 1.4.34–35; and Seneca, *Contr.* 2.4.13.

³⁶ Humor was a critical rhetorical device in winning public admiration. In order to win public admiration, an orator needed to convince the public that he possessed three qualities: 1) *urbanitas*; 2) *venustas*—grace and charm; and 3) *salsa*—salty wit (cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.17–18). While a public reaction of shock, applause, delight, laughter, and guffawing laughter had devastating effects on the humorist's

skillfully employed humor through their use of charming witticisms, jests, raillery, stinging barbs and comic displays and gestures.³⁷ Cicero particularly noted that humorous barbs tended to produce “*clamores et admirationes*—loud shouts of approval and admiration” from the public.³⁸

Since agonistic exchanges regularly occurred in very public places, in open-air forums or in semi-public lecture halls, the reaction of the public (i.e., outbursts of laughter and loud shouting) tended to intensify the negative effects of derision upon a targeted person’s honor.³⁹ Public reaction to ridicule was a critical factor in driving

target, it generally signaled public approval for the humorist’s quick and clever wit (Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.1ff; Cicero, *De or.* II.216, 236). Reactions of laughter, guffawing laughter, surprise, delight, and applause surface in the following examples: Plato, *Resp.* 388e; Cicero, *De or.* II.223ff; and Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3ff.

³⁷ Cf. Cicero, *De or.* I.17; II.216, 218–219; *Or.* 87; *Rhet. Her.* III.37; Quintilian *Inst.* 6.3.4, 7, 13, 20–21, 26, 37, 39, 43, 45, 67–69, 79, 110 and 8.3ff.

³⁸ Cicero, *De or.* I.152.

³⁹ Cf. Plato, *Resp.* 388d–e; Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.2–III.17; *Eth. nic.* IV.8.3; Cicero, *De or.* II.221–222, 236; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* II.631c; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.7–8, 28, 33–34, 83; 6.4.10–11. When ancient authors refer to humorous barbs as insults, they are implying that the barbs damage a targeted person’s honor.

Discussions on honor and the role of public verdict (also variously referred to as *public court of reputation* and *public award of reputation*) surface in the following works: David D. Gilmore. “Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11 (1982): 175–205; D. D. Gilmore, ed., *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, American Anthropological Special Publication 22 (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987); John G. Peristiany, ed. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966); and J. Peristiany and J. A. Pitt-Rivers. eds., *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 15–16, 19–21; and Malina, *The New Testament World*, 31–36.

targeted persons to avenge insults to their honor, reputation, authority, and status. In honor-based societies, persons simply did not take lightly to barbed wit that made them appear foolish, ridiculous, and disreputable in the eyes of the jury or public.⁴⁰

Tendentious Humor in the Synoptic Gospels

I turn now to explore some examples of tendentious humor that occur in the agonistic exchanges between Jesus and his opponents as recollected in the Synoptic accounts. In particular, I discuss the use of tendentious humor in the Temple precinct (Matt 21:12–23:36) and in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus (Matt 26:64–68; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:67–68).

In my discussion, I make some observations based on what I have learned from ancient emic sources about tendentious uses of humor in agonistic exchanges. I structure my approach based on the guiding questions illustrated in Figure 7: Exploring an Ancient Humor Event & Its Effects. First, I describe the context and the kind of rhetoric operative in the social setting and, in addition, I observe how rhetoric functions. Then I note which types of tendentious humor occur in the agonistic exchange between Jesus and his opponents, and how humor functions. I discuss any adherence or breach of particular proprieties regarding the use of tendentious humor,

⁴⁰ Citizens dreaded the tendentious use of humor in judicial proceedings, precisely because a rival advocate targeted their honor, the honor of their family, their dignity, and their reputation (cf. Powell, and Paterson, ed. *Cicero the Advocate*. See the examples of humorous attacks on an opponent's honor in Cicero's *Quinct.* and in pseudo-Ciceronian *Pro Sallustium (Invect.)*).

and I discuss the effects and possible repercussions of Jesus' use of humor. Finally, I observe the public reaction and the reaction of Jesus' opponents to his use of tendentious humor.

Tendentious Humor in the Temple Precinct

There are several observations we can make about the social setting in which the Matthean Jesus and his opponents engage in a series of agonistic exchanges (Matt 21:12–23:36). The exchanges occur in the very public setting of the Temple precinct, which means that crowds will serve two critical roles: they will be a powerful force of social control, and they will exact a public verdict on the agonistic exchanges that occur.⁴¹ In addition, the Temple precinct is a mixed group forum, which means that in-group members and out-group persons converge in a public space. Therefore, the stage for antagonistic environment is set and competition for honor is operative.

In their exchanges in the Temple precinct, the Matthean Jesus and his opponents rely on antagonistic types of rhetoric, particularly the kinds of derisive rhetoric reminiscent of forensic speeches and forceful styles.⁴² Such derisive rhetoric occurs when the Matthean Jesus disparages his opponent's character with witty dicta, stinging barbs and derisive epithets (21:13, 16, 31, 42–43; 22:29, 31–32; 23:13, 15–

⁴¹ For references to the presence of crowds, see Matt 21:26, 46; 22:33; and 23:1.

⁴² Kennedy explains that Matt 21:23–23:39 consists of judicial rhetoric. He also notes that the Matthean Jesus' extensive denunciation of the Pharisees is typical of the invective found in Roman forensic speech (cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism*, 86).

17, 19, 23–27, 29, and 32–33) and when he cleverly traps his opponents in predicaments that make them appear ridiculous (21:24–26; 28–32; 33–43; 22:18–21, 29–32; and 42–45). Quite characteristic of forensic rhetoric, Jesus repeatedly attacks the hypocrisy of his opponents and derides their moral failings (21:13; 23:3–7, 13–33).

The forceful style of rhetoric, which is quite suitable for forensic speeches and other kinds of antagonist rhetoric, is somewhat characteristic of the Matthean Jesus' rhetorical style.⁴³ In forceful style rhetoric, short phrases take emphasis over the use of longer clauses, primarily because wordiness drains intensity.⁴⁴ Brevity creates more force and leaves less opportunity for denial or rebuttal.⁴⁵ In the agonistic exchanges in the Temple precinct, the Matthean Jesus excels at succinct barbed ripostes (cf. 21:13b 16, 27, 31, 42–43; 22:18, 21, 32, and 45). An example of brevity in forceful style rhetoric occurs when Jesus responds to the chief priests and scribes with a somewhat ridiculing riposte. He says, “ναί οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε—Certainly, you must have read (21:16)?” Jesus then quotes the first part of a psalm, “ἐκ στόματος νηπίων καὶ θηλαζόντων κατηρτίσω αἶνον—Out of the mouth of little children and nursing infants, you prepared praise... (Matt 21:16; LXX, Ps 8:3).” His opponents

⁴³ Cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 98, 101–4; and Demetrius, *Eloc.* 240–302. Both forensic speech and forceful style rhetoric include the controversial and powerful uses of invectives and enthymemes (cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 27, 30, and 241–242).

⁴⁴ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 241.

⁴⁵ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 242.

might well have picked up the innuendo implied in the remainder of the verse, “...ἕνεκα τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου τοῦ καταλῦσαι ἐχθρὸν καὶ ἐκδικητήν—for the sake of your enemies and to destroy the hostile ones and seek vindication (LXX, Ps 8:3).”⁴⁶

According to Matthew, the chief priests and scribes make no rebuttal—silence portrays the opponents’ inability to make a clever rebuttal.

The use of invective and other kinds of shock-producing speech also epitomizes the forceful style.⁴⁷ Shock inspires fear in one’s opponent.⁴⁸ In the Gospel of Matthew, opponents reacted to shock in one of three distinct ways: 1) stunned silence or no further response; 2) vigorous questioning; or 3) pronounced anger.⁴⁹ We frequently hear no response at all from the opponents when Jesus’ makes his barbed ripostes. Silence or a lack of response suggests that the opponents are left stunned. An example of shock-producing speech occurs in Matthew 22:29–32. When the

⁴⁶ Demetrius advises that innuendo serves as a device of forcefulness. He notes that orators might best point out offenses in an implied and obscure manner, especially if one intends to publically expose the faults of powerful persons (*Eloc.* 292–294).

⁴⁷ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 283.

⁴⁸ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 283.

⁴⁹ In the simile of the comic fool, who builds a house on sand, the Matthean Jesus shocks the crowds, and there is no further response (Matt 7:24–29). When Jesus offers a teaching on wealth, he elicits a reaction of profound shock (as related in the words ἐξεπλήσσαντο σφόδρα) from the disciples, who proceed to respond with a desperate question (Matt 19:23–25). A reaction of shock also followed Jesus’ utterance of the “Son of Man” dictum in Matthew 26:64–65. Here the high priest expresses a reaction of shock by tearing his garment (vs. 65).

Matthean Jesus concludes his teaching on resurrection, he leaves the crowd shocked (v. 33) and the Sadducees silenced (v. 34).⁵⁰

When hyperbole serves to shock hearers, it becomes an effective device of forceful style rhetoric.⁵¹ The Matthean Jesus frequently uses shocking hyperbole. Through hyperbole, Jesus aims insults at his opponents, which the ancient public may well have reacted to with delight or laughter.⁵² An example of insulting hyperbole occurs in Matthew 23:24: “ὄδηγοὶ τυφλοί, οἱ διῦλίζοντες τὸν κώνωπα, τὴν δὲ κάμηλον καταπίνοντες—You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel.”

Another technique of the forceful style is to ask questions that trick opponents into implicating themselves and making them appear to be ridiculous.⁵³ The Matthean Jesus cleverly poses such a question to his opponents, when he asks them, “Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ—What do you think (21:28)?” He then proceeds to present a case involving two sons and their response to a command issued by their father. He concludes by asking another question, “τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς—Which of the two [sons] did the will of his father (vs. 31)?” Jesus turns their answer into an implication against them.

⁵⁰ Although Mark 12:27–28 and Luke 20:38–39 recount Jesus’ teaching on resurrection, neither of these authors refer to the reactions of shock or silence.

⁵¹ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 282–283.

⁵² Demetrius notes hyperbole as a device of comedy (cf. *Eloc.* 161).

⁵³ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 279.

When we step back and consider the agonistic exchanges in the Temple precinct as a whole, we find that the Matthean Jesus' use of forceful style rhetoric is quite commanding. Reminiscent of Demetrius' metaphoric description of the forceful style, the Matthean Jesus delivers a series of short jabs in a style that rushes downward and creates momentum as it goes (Matt 21:25–27; 31–32; and 42–43).⁵⁴ In the first interaction in the Temple precinct, the chief priests and elders of the people challenge Jesus' authority (21:23).⁵⁵ Jesus undermines the authority of his opponents by requiring them to answer a question in one of two ways (21:25). Jesus gives them two choices, which serves to entrap them (21:25–27). The pace begins in a somewhat slowed manner as the opponents engage in deliberations. Finally, the opponents are unable to figure out how to get out of the trap and they proceed to give a non-flattering response, that is, a response of ignorance. Essentially, their answer makes them appear foolish. In the second interaction, the pace begins to quicken as Jesus asks his opponents for their opinion on a parable (21:28–31a).⁵⁶ Their answer opens the way for Jesus to lambaste their actions (21:31b–32). In the third interaction, Jesus tells a parable that he eventually uses as an analogy against his opponents (21:33–

⁵⁴ For a description of the forceful style, see Demetrius, *Eloc.* 240–253. He describes the forceful style as “... ὥσπερ οἱ τὰς κατάβασεις τρέχοντες... (*Eloc.* 248).”

⁵⁵ The Matthean Jesus issues a condition, “...if you can tell me, then I will tell you—ὄν ἐὰν εἴπητέ μοι κἀγὼ ὑμῖν ἐρωῶ...(21:24).”

⁵⁶ The parable of the two sons is lacking in Luke and Mark.

44).⁵⁷ At the conclusion of the parable, he again asks the opponents a question, which they answered saying, “κακοὺς κακῶς ἀπολέσει αὐτοὺς—he will destroy those wickedly evil ones (vs. 41).” Then Jesus moves rapidly to a dictum and onward to a severe reprimand. The strong reaction from the chief priests and the Pharisees demonstrates the temerity of Jesus’ accusations (vss. 45–46). The opponents appear speechless and powerless before the crowd in the Temple precinct. No doubt, the intensity of his barbed ripostes antagonized his opponents to seek vengeful reprisal.

Notably, in Matthew 21:14–23:36, Jesus persistently holds the most potent barbed ripostes until he is ready to deliver the punch.⁵⁸ His jabs come in rapid-fire succession and produce a sort of endless rush downward upon his opponents—the kind of rush typical of forceful style rhetoric. In a public forum of a Roman judicial proceeding, such a series of jabs would have produced delight, smirks, smiles, or outbursts of laughter from a crowd. It is likely that a crowd in the Temple precinct or a Matthean audience would have responded in much the same way as a Roman public during a judicial proceeding, especially if they resented the power of the religious elites and their advocates.

The antagonistic type of rhetoric, which appears in the agonistic exchanges between the Matthean Jesus and his opponents in the Temple precinct, serves a

⁵⁷ Elements of the forceful style in Matt 21:33–44 include the following: the use of allegory and the use of a question to entrap the opponents. The allegory leads to the biting barb in vs. 43 (found only in Matthew’s version).

⁵⁸ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 249.

critical function. Regarding Jesus' opponents, they used the rhetoric in an effort to entrap him and make him appear foolish in a public forum. Their efforts to discredit and expose him as a fraud repeatedly failed as Jesus succeeded time and again in his rhetoric against them. His opponents persistently lose face in the exchanges.

Regarding Jesus' use of antagonistic rhetoric, he persistently wins public favor when he exposes the character flaws of his opponents and undermines public perception of their status, reputation, and honor. Jesus accomplishes this objective by disparaging his opponents' character with witty dicta, stinging barbs and derision. His successful use of antagonistic rhetoric helps him defend and promote his own status and authority and his virtuous reputation. By winning public favor, he secures and acquires honor for himself, while confirming his status as a legitimate authority.

As I have already noted, tendentious humor is an effective device in achieving the *conciliatio* of the public, and the Matthean Jesus uses such humor effectively to win a favorable public verdict.⁵⁹ The Matthew's account makes an implicit reference to this favorable verdict in 21:26, 46 (see also 26:5). Jesus secures his favorable public verdict in two fundamental ways. First, he portrays his opponents as fools, and

⁵⁹ The Matthean Jesus' clever and skillful use of challenges and ripostes as well as the barbs aimed at the religious elites and other opponents in the Temple precinct exchanges suggest that the crowds (i.e., the hearers) despised the adversaries of the Matthean Jesus. Of course, this is a perspective promoted by the Matthean author, who presents the Gospel as in-group literature. Three references indicate the crowds' admiration of Jesus and their contempt of the Temple authorities. First, Jesus exceedingly amazes (ἐκπλήσσω) the crowds by his teaching (Matt 22:33). Second, Jesus' adversaries feared the crowds' disposition towards him—the crowds considered Jesus to be a prophet (Matt 21:46). Third, Jesus aimed derogatory insults at powerful religious authorities in a public forum (e.g., Matt 21:43; 23:13–36).

second, he exposes their disreputable character. He achieves these objectives by using tendentious forms of humor to display the dignity, grace, quick and clever wit befitting his status as a rabbi and a prophet. Through his clever use of barbed ripostes and derisive epithets, the Matthean Jesus repeatedly demonstrates his wisdom (and his virtuous character) and portrays his opponents as fools—these objectives are essential for winning public favor. Furthermore, his barbed ripostes and derisive epithets (21:13, 16, 31, 42–43; 22:18, 29; 23:13, 15–17, 19, 23–29, and 33), his allegorical depictions of corrupt religious leaders (21:28–31; 33–40; 22:2–13), and his series of invectives (23:13–35) all serve to draw out public (or audience) *odium* and *contemptio*. The second fundamental way in which the Matthean Jesus secures a favorable public verdict is by using tendentious humor to undermine the reputation and character of his opponents. He persistently uses a derogatory epithet (i.e., *you hypocrites*) to epitomize the disreputable character of his opponents (22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, and 27–31). Through his barbed ripostes, allegorical depictions, and derisive epithets, he repeatedly alludes to their character flaws: moral corruption, arrogance, foolishness, treacherousness, and heartlessness (21:13, 28–32, 33–41, 43; 22:2–14, 18; 23:3–7 and 13–35).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ In the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus accuses the merchants of being thieves (Matt 21:12–13). His use of Jeremiad dictum (see 7:11) attacks not only the merchants, but it also attacks those who fiscally require such activities or those who approve the merchants' activities. In other words, a public insult aimed at the merchants also takes aim at the patrons whom the clients represent. Therefore, Jesus' insult attacks the religious elites as well as the merchants in the Temple precinct.

Tendentious humor appears in various forms in the agonistic exchanges between the Matthean Jesus and his opponents (Matt 21:12–23:36). On the one hand, Jesus aimed insulting barbs, witty dicta, and humorous anecdotes with surprise twists, derogatory epithets, derisive word play, and ridiculing ripostes at his opponents. On the other hand, Jesus’ opponents use pretentious or tongue-in-cheek flattery (22:16) and they use trick questions intended to entrap him (22:15, 24–28, 35 and 36). If Jesus had been unable to make a clever riposte, he would have appeared foolish and ridiculous and exposed as a fraud.

The most common form of tendentious humor was by far Jesus’ witty barbed ripostes. In his first barbed riposte, Jesus responds to the shock and the anger of the Temple elites (21:15–16). His riposte begins with a condescending remark, “οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε—Have you not read... (v. 16)?”⁶¹ Such a riposte implied that the chief priests and the scribes did not know their own religious literature.⁶² Another barb occurs in 21:27 after Jesus puts his opponents in an insulting predicament. He

⁶¹ Matthew 21:14–16 does not occur in Luke or Mark. Jónsson notes that the Jesus *happily* quotes Psalm 8:3, but he does not discuss Jesus’ use of a tendentious humor. Cf. J. Jónsson. *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 153. Versions of the *have-you-not-read* barb occur six times in Matthew, three times in Mark, and once in Luke. Cf. Matthew 12:3 (// Mark 2:25; Luke 6:3), 12:5, 19:4; 21:16; 21:42 (// Mark 12:10); and 22:31 (// Mark 12:26).

⁶² Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 49. Neyrey discusses the use of sarcasm and ridicule in the public exchanges between Jesus and his opponents (see also Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 47–50).

requires that they answer his question before he will answer theirs (v. 24).⁶³ In a very public forum, the chief priests and elders find themselves trapped by his question and forced to plead, “οὐκ οἴδαμεν—We do not know (v. 27a).” Subsequently, Jesus replies, “οὐδὲ ἐγὼ λέγω ὑμῖν—Neither will I tell you (v. 27b).” Because the chief priests and elders confessed their ignorance publically, they appeared comically foolish.⁶⁴

A uniquely Matthean barb comes at the conclusion of a parable of the two sons (21: 28–31).⁶⁵ Jesus begins by asking a question of the chief priests and the elders; “Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ—What do you think (Matt 21:28)?” Then he proceeds to present a scenario in which two sons exhibit shameful (i.e., unrighteous) behavior toward their father. He notes that the first son refused his father’s request, but

⁶³ Jónsson notes that Jesus’ opponents are losers in the controversy (see *Humour and Irony in the NT*, 152).

⁶⁴ Mark 11:33 and Luke 20:8 also record this barbed riposte.

⁶⁵ Jónsson notes that two similar parables exist in rabbinic literature. One parable depicts a king offering a field to his tenants in order for them to work it. In the parable, the king calls in the first tenant and asks him if he would take over the field, but the tenant says, “No, the labor is too hard for me.” The second, third and the fourth tenant also refuse the king’s request, but finally the fifth tenant tells the king that he will work the field. However, he neglects to work the land. The parable concludes with a question. With whom was the King angry? (*Exod. R.*, *Yitro* 27: 9; *Rabb. Anth.*, p. 121). The second parable tells about two laborers in a king’s garden. One laborer planted trees, but then he proceeded to cut them down. The other laborer did not plant trees and nor did he cut them down. The parable again concludes with a question. With whom was the King angry? (*Deut. R.*, *Ki Tabo* 7: 4; *Rabb. Anth.*, p. 671). Jónsson notes that Jesus’ hearers would have known the traditional form of the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28–31). He believes they would have smiled, knowing that Jesus was forcing his opponents into a comical situation. Cf. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 138–9.

eventually repented and completed the task, while the second son accepted his father's request, but he did not complete the task. At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus asks his opponents which son followed his father's command. They respond by pointing out the first son. It does not matter that Jesus' opponents answered correctly, he proceeds to insult them by comparing them to the second son. He instructs his opponents that their practice of justice (i.e., virtuous character) falls far below even those considered the least virtuous of all (i.e., the tax collectors and prostitutes). Jesus' skillful use of a parable and his barbed riposte in 21:31b–32 takes aim at the reputation and character of the religious elites. Jesus essentially attacks their *character* by claiming that the character of the unrighteous ones far exceeds their own. The barb hits its mark as Jesus tells his *righteous* opponents that “λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ—the tax collectors and the prostitutes will beat them into the kingdom of God (21:31).”⁶⁶

Another barb occurs at the conclusion of the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33–44). After telling them about the death of the vineyard's heir, Jesus again asks the chief priests and elders a question, “ὅταν οὖν ἔλθῃ ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος, τί ποιήσει τοῖς γεωργοῖς ἐκεῖνοις—Then whenever the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants (Matt 21:40)?” His opponents again answer correctly, and again, Jesus implicates them as wicked tenants!

⁶⁶ Trueblood notes humor in Jesus' comment about the worst of sinners proceeding the professionally righteous into heaven (cf. *The Humor of Christ*, 50).

In Matthew 22:15–29, we find another series of barbs as Jesus faces more challenges to his honor and reputation. The Pharisees send their disciples (note: they send their own proxies to take the brunt of Jesus’ witty insults) and the Herodians to entrap Jesus (v. 15). In response to their trick question, Jesus issues a witty riposte with a clever dictum, “ἀπόδοτε οὖν τὰ Καίσαρος Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ—Then give back to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and [give back] to God the things that belong to God (22:21)!”⁶⁷ Jesus’ dictum leaves his opponents unexpectedly surprised (θαυμάζω—a sense of being dumbfounded or discombobulated) (v.22). They are unable to outwit him.

Jesus’ next barb follows the Sadducees’ question about resurrection (22:23–32). First, we hear the Sadducees address Jesus with the title *teacher*. Then they proceed to present a clever scenario, which makes a mockery of the belief in resurrection. Their question is a challenge and an attempt to make Jesus appear ridiculous (22:28).⁶⁸ Jesus responds quite bluntly, “πλανᾶσθε μὴ εἰδότες τὰς γραφὰς μηδὲ τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ θεοῦ—You are being deceived (πλανᾶω) because you do not know the Scriptures, nor the power of God (v. 29).”⁶⁹ Jesus’ rhetoric is publically

⁶⁷ This witty dictum also occurs in Mark 12:17 and Luke 20:25. Trueblood notes humor here (cf. *The Humor of Christ*, 86–87).

⁶⁸ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 48–49.

⁶⁹ The Markan version states “οὐ διὰ τοῦτο πλανᾶσθε μὴ εἰδότες τὰς γραφὰς μηδὲ τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ θεοῦ—Is this not why you are being deceived, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (12:24)?” Luke does not have such a riposte in his account (20:27–38).

insulting in three aspects: first, he tells the Sadducees that they are being fooled; secondly, he tells them that they do not know the Scriptures; and thirdly, he tells them that they do not know the power of God. In essence, the Matthean Jesus informs the Sadducees that they are ignorant fools. His rhetoric shocks (ἐκπλήσσω) the public and silences the Sadducees (vv. 33–34).

So far in Matthew 21:14–22:33 Jesus has issued a series of barbs aimed at the chief priests and the scribes, the elders, the Pharisees’ disciples, the Herodians, the Sadducees, but up to this point, he has not directly insulted the Pharisees. However, in Matthew 22:41–45, we finally see the Matthean Jesus make fools of the Pharisees as he did with his other opponents. His question, “εἰ οὖν Δαυὶδ καλεῖ αὐτὸν κύριον, πῶς υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ἐστίν—If David calls [the Messiah] Lord, then how is he his son (22:45)?” The Pharisees’ silence makes them look foolish [in the eyes of the public]. From this point on Matthew tells us that “οὐδὲ ἐτόλμησέν τις ἀπ’ ἐκείνης τῆς ἡμέρας ἐπερωτῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐκέτι—no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions (v. 46).” Essentially, Jesus’ opponents did not want to expose themselves to further public insult and ridicule.

The Matthean Jesus does not cease his barbs even after he publically silences his opponents. Instead, he continues to ridicule his opponents in a public arena with the crowds hearing his rhetoric (23:2–36).⁷⁰ Within the hearing of the crowds, Jesus

⁷⁰ In comparison with Matthean version (23:2–36), Jesus’ derisive remarks in the public forum of the Temple precinct are very sparse in the Markan version (12:38–40) and Lukan (20:45–47) versions. The Lukan Jesus accepts a dinner

facetiously praises the special status of the scribes and the Pharisees by saying, “ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι. πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε—The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat. Therefore, do whatever they should tell you, and hold to it (23:2–3a)!” He then proceeds to expose the scribes and the Pharisees for failing to practice what they teach (23:3b). Jesus continues with a succession of barbs: 1) he makes a sarcastic remark about their clothing; 2) he notes their love for special places; and 3) he observes their love for attention (23:5–7). Jesus insults the Pharisees and scribes for their display of status, because their actions do not measure up to the status indicated by their special apparel (Matt 23:5).⁷¹ His rhetoric is replete with witty dicta, insults (character and reputation assassination), name-calling (hypocrites, blind fools, blind guides, whitewashed tombs, brood of vipers), derisive rhetoric, and even an instance of witty hyperbole (23:24).⁷² This relentless barrage of ridicule compels Jesus’ opponents to plot their arrest of him (26:3–5).

The Matthean Jesus’ use of tendentious humor both met and exceeded the proprieties that Cicero and Quintilian had warned about in their writings. His uses of

invitation to a Pharisee’s house and it is during this dinner that he aims a number of derisive remarks (11:39–44, 46, and 49–52).

⁷¹ Neyrey discusses clothing as a display of honor, status and worth (cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 62–65).

⁷² Quintilian notes that the use of derisive epithets and derisive wordplays on an opponent’s name as well as the mockery of a person’s character are ways in which an orator can increase scorn for an opponent (cf. Quintilian *Inst.* 8.3.21–23).

barbed ripostes (and laughter-raising) were acceptable forms of humor in forensic rhetoric, especially in cases where his opponents tried to entrap and trick him. As a matter of propriety, the Matthean Jesus used humor in ways that never recoiled upon him; therefore, his use of humor never diminished his own authority. Instead, his humor effectively silenced his opponents and reinforced his own status. Typical of forensic rhetoric, his derision centered appropriately on disreputable character of his opponents. However, his excessive use of derogatory epithets and his use of humorous anecdotes with their shocking and derisive allusions went far beyond propriety. He persistently shamed dangerous persons of considerable power and authority in a very public forum. His opponents repeatedly lost face with his use of tendentious humor. They could never outdo his witty and clever ripostes and, therefore, they appeared foolish time after time. His public derision of the religious elites amounted to dangerous provocation.⁷³

We see the negative effects of the Matthean Jesus' public ridicule of his opponents.⁷⁴ His derisive ripostes infuriated them.⁷⁵ His clever use of witty barbs

⁷³ Cf. Quintilian *Inst.* 6.3.33–34

⁷⁴ Negative reactions to Jesus' barbed ripostes include the following: ἐσκανδαλίσθησαν—they were angrily offended/shocked (Matt 15:12); ἐθαύμασαν—they were extraordinarily disturbed (Matt 22:22); ἐξεθαύμαζον—they were grudgingly amazed (Mark 12:17); θαυμάσαντες—they were extraordinarily disturbed (Luke 20:26); οὐδὲ ἐτόλμησέν—no one dared or no one had the courage (Matt 22:46); οὐδεὶς... ἐτόλμα—no one dared or no one had the courage (Mark 12:34); οὐκέτι... ἐτόλμων—no one dared or no one had the courage (Luke 20:40).

⁷⁵ The public expected a targeted person to issue a repartee to a challenge. If a person responded with a surprisingly clever and tendentious witty riposte that

(e.g., 21:16, 27, 31 and 42–43) quite effectively left *powerful* authorities speechless, shocked and silenced, thereby making them appear foolish on a number of occasions (Matt 21:15–16; 45–46; 22:22, 34).⁷⁶ His most striking barbs, characteristic of forceful rhetoric, typically came at the conclusions of his ripostes so that his ripostes carried a punching and gut-wrenching effect.⁷⁷ His one-two punch of the parable of

unexpectedly silenced the challenger, the expected pattern of the challenge-riposte exchange was broken. The stunned silence of the challenger was not what the public expected in a counter response. The abrupt disruption of the challenge-riposte pattern caused by a witty response generally produced a humorous reaction (e.g., shock, astonishment, delight, smiles, laughter, or mockery) from the public. When the challenger failed to issue a successful counter-riposte, the derision of the public was especially insulting. Public reaction and derision intensified the effect of the insult. In the court of public opinion, the challenger becomes a ridiculous fool for his unsuccessful attempt to acquire honor. Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 47–52.

⁷⁶ As I noted in Chapter 2, Cicero and Quintilian wrote about the use of various kinds of tendentious humor in rhetoric, but typically, they did not explicitly detail the effects of humor on honor. Nevertheless, in the honor culture of Mediterranean antiquity, it was a given that tendentious humor constituted an insult, especially if derisive laughter accompanied the use of such humor. Quintilian explicitly noted that witty ripostes tended to elicit [derisive] laughter. Witty ripostes included barbed wit, bitter invectives, ridiculing dicta, attacking remarks, bitter jests, clever sayings, ironical twists, and implicating narratives. Rebuking or ridiculing an opponent's words or turning the opponent's word back upon him also elicited public laughter (cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.4–67). Witty ripostes helped an orator secure a favorable verdict from an audience or jury. For discussions and examples of the rhetorical use of humor, see the following works: Cicero, *De or.* 2.223, 230–256 (witty repartee); Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3 (humor in speeches); Cicero, *De or.* 2.216–289 (judicial humor); *Or.* 26.87–90 (humor in plain-style and judicial rhetoric); *Rhet. Her.* 3.13.23–14.25 (voice intonation and humor, especially in factiousness) and 3.22.37 (the comic effects of images). Examples of witty invectives occur throughout Cicero's *De or.* II; in the Ciceronian-type rhetoric of *In Sallustium* (*Invect.*); and in Cicero, *Clu.*

⁷⁷ For a discussion on forceful rhetorical styles, see George Kennedy, *Invention and Method: Two Rhetorical Treatises from the Hermogenic Corpus*,

the two sons (21:28–31) and the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33–43) left his opponents deeply insulted and they reacted with deep anger and a desire for vengeance (21:45–46). Consistent with the forceful style, he dumbfounded and even silenced his powerful opponents (22:22, 34, and 46) and utterly overwhelmed the crowds (ἐκπλήσσω) (22:33). Insulted and angered, these powerful authorities were never able to save face; and consequently, they resorted to plotting his death.⁷⁸ Eventually, the effect of Jesus' barrage of humorous barbs was a deadly one.

The Matthean account gives us both implicit and explicit references to the public's reaction to the agonistic exchanges in the Temple precinct. Recall that public reaction is important because it gives insight into public verdict. Matthew tells us that the crowds in the Temple precinct reacted with extreme astonishment at Jesus' riposte to the Sadducees (22:33).⁷⁹ The author also tells us that Jesus' opponents feared the public support of him (21:46); and they also feared public derision and disdain (21:26, 46, and 22:46).⁸⁰ Essentially, the authorial comments in 21:45–46 and 22:22,

Writings from the Roman World 15 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 204–67; and Demetrius, *Eloc.* 240–304.

⁷⁸ Authorities and other powerful persons dreaded public ridicule and the shame that accompanied it (cf. Josephus, *J. W.* 6.45–52). Shame, scorn and death were common repercussions of derisive laughter (cf. Josephus, *J. W.* 12.170, 178–183, 207, and 210–219).

⁷⁹ Neyrey explains that the crowds' astonishment in Matt 22:33 indicates a favorable public verdict for Jesus (cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 49).

⁸⁰ Matthew 22:46 implies public disdain in the sense that Jesus repeatedly succeeded in his challenges and ripostes. His opponents persistently lost face in a very public forum. Public response would have been one of increasing derision and

33, 34, and 46 imply a favorable public verdict for Jesus and an unfavorable verdict for pretentious religious authorities.

We know that the use of tendentious humor in a public forum has serious effects on the social constructs of honor, reputation or character, and status. The Matthean Jesus' rhetoric in 21:12–23:36 did much to strengthen his own honor, reputation and status in the eyes of the public (or in the eyes of the Matthean audience). In turn, his skillful use of tendentious humor did much to disparage the honor, reputation, and status of his opponents. I have discussed several ways in which Jesus acquired honor, built his reputation, and defended his status. He used a condescending barb that insinuated that his opponents were ignorant (21:16). He put his opponents in insulting predicaments and forced them to plead ignorance (21:24–25, 27). Twice Jesus asked his opponents a question, which they answered correctly, and then he insulted them with their answers (21:31–32; 40–43). His questions repeatedly made them appear as fools (21:25, 27, 28, 31–32, 40, 42–43; 22:45, 46) and his derogatory epithets exposed them as pretentious frauds (23:13–33). Ironically, his opponents' efforts to expose him as a fraud turn against them. Jesus' skillful use of tendentious humor repeatedly earned him public favor, but it fiercely angered his opponents, who consistently suffered a terrible loss of face in the exchanges. As a

disdain. Matthew 23:1–7 implies at least some sympathizers in the crowd. No doubt, critics of the pretentiousness of some scribes and Pharisee would have relished Jesus' public derision.

result, their only recourse was to salvage their honor by seeking a reprisal that resulted in a shameful death for Jesus (26:3–5).⁸¹

Tendentious Humor in the Sanhedrin Trial

There are several observations we can make about the social setting of the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus. It is very probable that the trial was not open to the general public; instead, only council members and their approved witnesses and attendees could be present at the proceeding.⁸² Without the presence of the general public, Jesus could not rely on public opinion to secure a favorable judgment. In effect, Jesus had to secure a favorable verdict from the council members who were present, and if they were hostile, he had little hope. Furthermore, the use of any antagonistic rhetoric and tendentious humor would only have exacerbated the hostility of the council members. With the absence of a public, the council members' response would have

⁸¹ Aristotle noted that taking vengeance (τιμωρέω) on an hostile opponent demonstrates an act of justice and honor. A courageous person should not succumb to a hostile person, nor submit to defeat (ἡττάομαι). In such cases, he urged retribution (ἀνταποδίδομι) over reconciliation (καταλλάσσω) (cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.9.24).

⁸² The Synoptic authors stress some distance between an enclosed complex or hall associated with the high priest and a courtyard (cf. Matt 26:57–58; Mark 14:53–54; Luke 22:54–55). Luke used the term *house* or structure (οἰκία) in his reference to the location of the assembly (22:54–55). Matthew and Mark referred only to a gathering place, and not to an enclosed structure (Matt 26:57–58; Mark 14:53–54). This gathering place, complex or hall included a courtyard (αὐλή) (Matt 26:58; Mark 14:54; Luke 22:55). The use of ἔξω strongly suggests a controlled environment, which was somewhat secluded from the general populace (cf. Acts 4:5–15; 5:21, 27–34). Without the presence of the general public, Jesus had no opportunity to secure a favorable public verdict in any of his exchanges with the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin could render a decision without succumbing to fears of a possible social revolt.

been free to exact an immediate reprisal, even a violent one (e.g., slap in the face, spitting, or a blow). In the eyes of the council members, the reprisal would have made Jesus appear a despicable fool without honor. Only from the perspective of in-group members would Jesus' courageous use of antagonistic rhetoric and tendentious humor have earned him honor.

In the judicial proceedings of Roman trials, one expects an exchange of forensic and forceful style rhetoric, and in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus, we read of brief uses of such rhetoric. The rhetoric of the high priest (Matt 26:62–63b) is quite forceful as noted by the use of ἀνίστημι (which signals a stance of power) in verse 62 and by the use of ἐξορκίζω (to solemnly command) in verse 63b.⁸³ Jesus' riposte of “πλὴν λέγω ὑμῖν—But I tell you” in Matthew is quite forceful and threatening rhetoric (26:64).

The agonistic rhetoric, which occurred during the Sanhedrin trial, served several critical functions. First, the rhetoric of the high priest and the council members helped them to secure a guilty verdict for Jesus (Matt 26:59).⁸⁴ After the Sanhedrin rendered their judgment, their rhetoric quickly turned into derisive

⁸³ Neither Mark nor Luke's version carries a sense of the high priest's use of forceful rhetoric.

⁸⁴ The high priest and the council members intend to find Jesus guilty. They seek false testimony against him in order to pronounce his guilt and to carry out a death sentence against him (Matt 26:59; see also Mark 14:55). Luke's version does not explicitly state the intentions of the council (22:66).

charades intended to shame Jesus (Matt 26:67–68).⁸⁵ Through their mocking actions and words, the council essentially labeled him a fraud. So for the council, rhetoric helped them to 1) find Jesus guilty; and 2) expose him as a fraud. For Jesus, the use of forceful rhetoric in his ripostes served to demonstrate his courage to in-group readers/hearers and to convey to them how he succeeded in shaking up the members of the council. Through their forceful type rhetoric, the council had sought to unsettle or rattle Jesus, but in effect, it was Jesus' rhetoric that unnerved his opponents. While Jesus' antagonistic rhetoric did little to boost his honor in the eyes of the council members, it demonstrated to his in-group remarkable courage in the face of despicable authorities.

Tendentious humor in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus (albeit each Synoptic author nuances it differently) functions in much the same way as it does in Roman judicial proceedings. In Roman judicial proceedings, the prosecutor attacks the accused person's reputation and honor, and depicts their despicable character. The use of tendentious humor by Jesus' opponents served to weaken and to undermine the reputation and character of Jesus. False witnesses literalize Jesus' claim that he would tear down the huge Temple and rebuild it in a ridiculous amount of time (Matt 26:61).⁸⁶ In other words, they depict him as a foolish boaster (i.e., a comic *ἀλαζών*). The mockery of Jesus by the Sanhedrin is a further disparagement of Jesus'

⁸⁵ Cf. Mark 14:65. In Luke, the ritual of status degradation occurs before the council proceeding (Luke 22:63–65).

⁸⁶ Cf. Mark 14:58.

reputation and status (Matt 26:67–68).⁸⁷ In turn, Jesus' use of tendentious humor functioned as a means of ridiculing the legality of the council's proceedings. In short, Jesus deflected the Sanhedrin's efforts to degrade his status. Instead, an ironic twist, Jesus redirected the status of sham back upon his accusers. Through sarcasm, Jesus demonstrated that he was not the fraud; instead, he implicates the Sanhedrin for conducting a sham judicial proceeding. In another instance of tendentious humor, Jesus uses an ominous dictum to re-establish his status and authority as a prophet (Matt 26:64). In effect, he shocks the Sanhedrin members and makes them appear ridiculously shaken (Matt 26:65).

Various forms of tendentious humor occur in the Matthean accounts of the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus (Matt 26:57–68, and 27:1–2).⁸⁸ One tendentious form of humor included a derisive authorial comment in which Matthew noted the Sanhedrin's blatant corruption of justice (Matt 26:59–60). Other forms of tendentious humor included Jesus' shocking use of a dictum (Matt 26:64). Finally, the Sanhedrin's mockery of Jesus as a sham prophet at the conclusion of the trial was another decisively tendentious form of humor (Matt 26:67–68).⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Cf. Mark 14:65.

⁸⁸ Cf. Mark 14:53–65, and 15:1–4. For more information on the Sanhedrin proceedings, see Cf. Anthony Saldarini, "Sanhedrin," in *ABD* 5:975–9; and Kennard, "The Jewish Provincial Assembly," *ZNW* 53 (1962): 25–51.

⁸⁹ Cf. Mark 14:65. The Sanhedrin's mockery of Jesus as a sham prophet is a status degradation ritual. Another status degradation ritual occurs in Luke's account where Herod mocks Jesus as a sham king (23:11). The Roman soldiers also mock Jesus as a sham king in Matthew 27:28–30 and Mark 15:17–20. For an explanation

It would be helpful to illustrate further the tendentious humor that appears in the Matthean Jesus' unsettling use of a familiar dictum (26:64). During the Sanhedrin trial, the Matthean Jesus shocks the high priest with his unexpected use of an ominous dictum and his unsettling adaptation of it (26:64).⁹⁰ The humorous reaction unfolds immediately after Jesus makes his initial riposte to the high priest (i.e., “*YOU* said so” in 26:64a). The Matthean Jesus then precedes straight away to utter the threatening dictum to the entire Sanhedrin, saying, “πλὴν λέγω ὑμῖν—*Indeed* I tell [all of] you...(Matt 26:64b).” The use of πλὴν carries a great deal of rhetorical weight in the Matthean account as it often precedes Matthean passages of ominous warnings (Matt 11:22, 24; 18:7). In other words, the tone of “πλὴν λέγω ὑμῖν” is a foreboding one. By uttering the clause, “πλὴν λέγω ὑμῖν,” the Matthean Jesus has created suspenseful tension. Jesus then proceeds unexpectedly to adapt an ominous scriptural saying (supposedly from Daniel 7:13). He says, “ἀπ’ ἄρτι ὄψεσθε τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καθήμενον ἐκ δεξιῶν τῆς δυνάμεως καὶ ἐρχόμενον ἐπὶ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ—
From this time on, [all of] you will see the Son of Man seating [himself] at the right

on a status degradation ritual, see Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 133, 412–4.

⁹⁰ This dictum occurs in all three of the Synoptic accounts (compare Matt 26:64; Luke 22:69; and Mark 14:62). The saying comes in part from Daniel, which says, “...Behold, upon the clouds of the heaven, he/one came like a son of man—ἰδοὺ ἐπὶ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὡς υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ἦρχετο...(LXX, 7:13).”

hand of power and coming [himself] on the clouds of heaven (Matt 26:64b).”⁹¹

Because Jesus’ riposte is highly threatening to the high priest and the Sanhedrin, they react with fear and anguish as indicated by the high priest’s act of tearing his robes.⁹²

The tendentious humor in Jesus’ riposte surfaces when we consider the distressed (διαρρήγνυμι) reaction of the high priest (v. 65) to Jesus’ daring use of the ominous

⁹¹ The apocalyptic imagery provokes frightening images of upheaval and alludes to the changes inevitable with the establishment of a new sovereignty. Of course, one presumes that members of the Sanhedrin (or the hearers of the Matthean community) would have been familiar with the apocalyptic allusions evoked by the verse. Perhaps, they would have also known the remainder of the verse, “And all authority and glory was given to him. And all people of the earth serve him. And his authority is eternal authority, which shall never be taken away. And his kingdom, shall never be destroyed—καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία καὶ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς κατὰ γένη καὶ πᾶσα δόξα αὐτῷ λατρεύουσα καὶ ἡ ἐξουσία αὐτοῦ ἐξουσία αἰώνιος ἥτις οὐ μὴ ἀρθῆ καὶ ἡ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ ἥτις οὐ μὴ φθαρῆ (LXX, Dan 7:14).” In-group hearers might have taken pleasure in the comic episode of Jesus’ fear-provoking riposte and the fearful reaction of the high priest.

⁹² Blasphemy means to “slander, revile, defame, speak irreverently, impiously, disrespectfully of or about [a deity or deities]” and in relations to humans, it also means “to speak in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, maligns (see the entry for βλασφημέω in BDAG). The Matthean text never explicitly makes a connection between blasphemy and God since the name of God is never mentioned (cf. Lev 24:16). In Matthew (and Mark), Jesus never curses or insults God’s name (Matt 26:65; Mark 14:63). In addition, the high priest is not reacting with grief—which is the typical usage of διαρρήγνυμι (distress) in the Septuagint (e.g., Gen 37:29, 34; 2 Sam 1:11; 13:19; 2 Kgs 2:12; and Job 1:20). It is more probable that the high priest reacts with anger to Jesus’ highly demeaning and insulting riposte (e.g., Jdg 11:35; 2 Kgs 5:7; 22:11; esp. 2 Kgs 11:14; 2 Chr 23:13). It is also possible that the high priest reacts in distress to Jesus’ threatening use of the dictum as words tantamount to treason or conspiracy (see the tearing of garments and its connection with קשר or σύνδεσμος—conspiracy or treason in 2 Kgs 11:14). In either case, Matthew and Mark portray the high priest in a less than dignified position. Matthean and Markan Jesus sympathizers would have relished Jesus’ courageous stand in the presence of the powerful elites.

dictum (v. 64b).⁹³ In effect, the Matthean Jesus has left the high priest visibly shocked and distressed. The expression of fear portrays the high priest in an insulting light as it shows him to be in a state of weakness and fear. The image is classically comic—the Sanhedrin appear to be frightened fools (i.e., they look ridiculous), while Jesus appears courageous.⁹⁴

It would be helpful to illustrate further the tendentious humor that appears particularly in the Lukan Jesus' barbed ripostes to the Sanhedrin (22:67–70). In Luke 22: 67b–68, we hear Jesus make a barbed riposte to the Sanhedrin. This rather evasive riposte follows an earlier challenge in which the Sanhedrin requests that Jesus tell them if he is the Christ (Luke 22:67a). The Lukan Jesus does not answer their question directly, but instead, quite sarcastically, responds, “ἐὰν ὑμῖν εἴπω, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε· ἐὰν δὲ ἐρωτήσω, οὐ μὴ ἀποκριθῆτε—Even if I should tell you, you would not believe. Even if I would question you, you would not answer (22:67–68).”⁹⁵ His riposte suggests that the judicial proceeding is not a legitimate one as it

⁹³ Luke does not relate the incident of the high priest's “tearing his robes” nor does the Lukan version recount the high priest utterance of the word, blasphemy.

⁹⁴ Courage and unflinching demeanor demonstrated an admirable and honorable response to an unjust interrogation. Insulting powerful opponents to their face also took tremendous courage (cf. Josephus, *Jew Ant.* 15.287–289; Philo, *Flacc.* 33–44). In Roman antiquity, honorable persons despised any public attempts to make them appear ridiculous. The noble virtue of courage epitomized an honorable disposition (cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 49, 148–51).

⁹⁵ How do we characterize the Lukan Jesus' riposte in 22:67–68? Did he make an abrupt retort? Did he quip his response? The Lukan texts tell us only that Jesus is *emphatic* in his riposte—he asserts that the high priest and the Sanhedrin are the ones who are claiming that he is the Christ. If the Lukan author wished to confirm Jesus'

deviates from the accused person's right to question his accusers. After Lukan Jesus utters the apocalyptic "Son of Man" dictum in verse 69, the *entire* Sanhedrin asks him, if he is the Son of God (v. 70a).⁹⁶ As the *entire* Sanhedrin persists to get an answer from Jesus, their voices make quite an uproar, perhaps even a chaotic chorus.⁹⁷ Again, the Lukan Jesus evades their question, because he does not provide a resounding affirmative as occurs in Mark 14:62; instead, he emphatically tells them,

identity, why depict Jesus answering evasively? Why deviate from the Markan Jesus' simple and clear riposte of "I am—ἐγώ εἰμι" as noted in Mark 14:62? I believe the Lukan Jesus' riposte served to make the Sanhedrin appear ridiculous and to make the proceeding itself appear comic (i.e., the Sanhedrin is powerless in its efforts to outwit Jesus in their own corrupt judicial proceeding).

As I have already noted, in judicial proceedings, one expects a degree of forceful style rhetoric, but in Luke's version of the Sanhedrin trial, we note that Jesus' ripostes lack elements characteristic of the forceful style. In his riposte, the Lukan Jesus expresses a derisive and biting gibe, but he does so through an expression of parallelism—an element characteristic of the elegant style (22:67b–68) (cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.*, 140–141).

⁹⁶ Only Luke has the Sanhedrin ask twice about Jesus' identity (22:67, 70).

⁹⁷ Chaotic disturbances such uproars of loud shouting and outbursts of laughter did occur during judicial proceedings. Cicero connects humor with such uproars (cf. Cicero, *De or.* I.152). Chaotic disturbances and scenes of a comic court occur in the Lukan account of Paul's trial before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin (Acts 23:1–10). In Acts 23:9, we read particularly of loud shouting (κραυγή μεγάλη) during the Sanhedrin trial of Paul, shortly before comic pandemonium breaks out. The whole Sanhedrin council deteriorates into a chaotic brawl in which Paul becomes the central figure in a violent tug-of-war (Acts 23:10). In the preceding events, Paul had cleverly won the favor of some of the Pharisaic jurists to the chagrin of the Sadducees (Acts 23:6–10). His speech ended up causing dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees. After all hell broke loose, the Roman tribune had to rescue Paul (Acts 23:10).

“ὕμεις λέγετε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι—*YOU* are saying that *I* am (Luke 22:70).”⁹⁸ He ardently insists that they are the ones making the claim. As a response, the Sanhedrin turns Jesus’ words against him in order to condemn him. They reply, “...αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἠκούσαμεν ἀπὸ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ—for we ourselves have heard this from his own lips (22:71)!” The Sanhedrin’s reply demonstrates again that the Sanhedrin proceeding is itself a sham, that is, they have misconstrued Jesus’ response in order to pronounce his guilt.

So far, the whole scene of Luke 22:67–71 includes forms of tendentious humor that essentially serves to mock the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus. Jesus’ sarcastic riposte in vv. 67–68, the Sanhedrin’s chaotic uproar in v. 70a, Jesus’ evasive answer in v. 70b, and the Sanhedrin’s twisting of Jesus’ words in v. 71 each serve to depict the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus as something of a kangaroo or comic court.

There are several observations we can make regarding the proprieties of tendentious humor in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus. As for the Sanhedrin, their use of derisive exaggeration and their mockery of Jesus’ reputation and status were well within the confines of a judicial proceeding, at least according to the Ciceronian view. Mockery was an expected and acceptable form of humor that commonly surfaced in Roman trials. The use of mockery in court proceedings even surfaced in theatrical

⁹⁸ In both Matthew 26:64 and Luke 22:70, Jesus emphatically states that his opponents are the ones making the claim that he is the Son of God. Mark differs from Matthew and Luke in that Jesus unequivocally affirms his status (14:62).

renditions of court proceedings as noted by Philo.⁹⁹ The Sanhedrin's mockery of Jesus was apparently a typical part of the judicial process, especially in the sentencing phase of the proceeding.¹⁰⁰

Regarding Jesus' use of tendentious humor, his ridicule of the Sanhedrin's proceeding would have been recognizable by Roman satirists, who mocked the proceedings themselves as gravely unjust. In addition, Roman satirists would have recognized the gravity of aiming insulting barbs at powerful persons. In the presence of a hostile jury, that is, the Sanhedrin, Jesus' use of tendentious humor exacerbated the hostility of very influential authorities.

Tendentious humor in the agonistic exchanges of the Sanhedrin trial had serious effects on the honor, reputation and status of those involved. On the one hand, the Sanhedrin's mockery had a devastating effect on Jesus' honor, reputation and status. They used ridicule to shame Jesus and to exact status degradation. They perceived Jesus' ripostes to be insulting and threatening, and they reacted with physical violence. They exposed Jesus as a sham—a false prophet. Their belittling

⁹⁹ Cf. Philo, *Legat.* 359–360. Philo notes that silence can serve as a means of defense against mockeries perpetrated by powerful and unjust judges. His remark about silence comes in a recollection on how the Roman emperor, Gaius, and other Roman citizens mocked the Judeans in an oppressive manner and their mockery made light of any answer they attempted to give. Jesus' response of silence may indicate that the Sanhedrin proceeding against him is a mockery (Matt 26:63; Mark 14:61).

¹⁰⁰ Philo notes the mockery of unpopular and sham kings (*Flacc* 33–44). Public derision occurred frequently in capital punishments (cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 7.373). I discuss the mockery of fatal charades in the section entitled *Humor in Criminal Punishments and Public Executions*.

actions were not only violent, but also humiliating. At the conclusion of the trial, Jesus was unable to respond in defense of his reputation and his honor. On the other hand, Jesus used humor in a clever and courageous ways to defend against attacks upon his honor, reputation and status.

Humor in Criminal Punishments and Public Executions

In the first and second centuries of the Roman-era, mockery surfaced as a common form of tendentious humor in criminal punishments and public executions. Typically, such mockery unfolded in amphitheaters where Romans forced the guilty or condemned person to take on some sort of sham role (e.g., deity, king, or mythological figure). Once the criminal appeared in a sham role, crowds or by-passers derided and laughed at the condemned criminal.¹⁰¹

During the reign of Claudius, this particularly cruel kind of humor became increasingly popular in Roman public executions.¹⁰² In horrific parodies of

¹⁰¹ Roman executions of lower status citizens, slaves and non-elite peregrines tended to occur in highly populated public settings such as along major urban roads or in amphitheatres (cf. Quintilian, *Decl.* 274.13; see also Josephus, *J.W.* VII.373).

¹⁰² For an extensive discussion on derision in criminal punishment in Roman antiquity, see K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments," *JRS* 80 (1980): 44–73. Coleman states that Romans set up executions in ways that re-enacted mythological plots. I think the better term is parody, that is, the executions consisted of parodies of mythological plots. Coleman gives examples of fatal charades from Roman-era sources (e.g., Martial, *Spect.* 6, 7, 10) (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 49–73). He notes that the phenomenon of fatal charades probably began during the reigns of Claudius (41–54 CE) and Nero (54–68 CE). These mythological re-enactments grew in sophistication and realism as mechanisms and stage enhancements developed (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 65–68).

mythological scenes, Roman officials forced condemned persons to take on the identities of deities and mythic heroes.¹⁰³ These parodies of well-known mythological scenes involved decisively shocking and brutal elements in which something always went horribly wrong. For example, in a Roman amphitheatre, officials built a replication of a mythological scene reminiscent of an Orpheus myth.¹⁰⁴ The scene included rocks, trees, and various sorts of live wild animals. The officials then dressed the condemned person to resemble Orpheus. With a musical instrument in hand, they forced the poor condemned person to play before the wild animals, but instead of flocking peaceably to Orpheus as had occurred in the myth, these creatures attacked the terrified person.

These horrific fatal charades in public executions served several poignant functions.¹⁰⁵ First, the spectacles aimed to humiliate and shame the condemned person. The public act of stripping condemned persons of their dignity and personhood through fatal charades exposed these persons to the utmost forms of shame (i.e., nakedness, extreme losses of control over one's emotions and bodily functions).¹⁰⁶ Essentially, the mockery of a condemned person in a sham role was one

¹⁰³ Cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 55, 60–67, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Martial, *Spect.* 24.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 45–49.

¹⁰⁶ During the first century, Roman officials subjected only non-status or low status persons to the mockery and shams of criminal punishments and public executions. Their prime targets were low status peregrines, *humiliores*, captives, and slaves (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 53–57).

of the most effective ways to accomplish the degradation of the person's status and to label them as deviants.¹⁰⁷ This manner of death had devastating effects, not only on the honor of the condemned person, but also on the honor of his/her family. Secondly, the fatal charades aimed to remove public's sympathy for the doomed transgressor. Supposedly, by portraying the person as a sham, the crowd could ridicule the person without feeling sympathy for him or her. Thirdly, the mockery of the condemned person lessened the potential for further public rebellion. The Romans believed that the shame and the horrific suffering associated with public execution served as a deterrent to discourage future deviance.¹⁰⁸

How did ancient audiences generally react to these fatal charades? Ancient authors tell us that when a familiar mythological story took an unexpected and dastardly turn (e.g., in the case where the wild animals attack a condemned person playing the role of Orpheus or when a condemned person plunges to death; instead of flying like some mythical deity), the audience generally reacted with shock or laughter. Tertullian recalled how spectators laughed during such mythological parodies, and how they laughed at the antics and demise of the criminals during these

¹⁰⁷ Status degradation is "a process of publicly recasting, relabeling, humiliating, and thus re-categorizing a person as a social deviant (cf. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 413).

¹⁰⁸ Coleman notes that fatal charades, not only served to discourage crime or punish perpetrators, they also provided a vehicle by which Rome could eliminate unwanted *humiliores*, whether innocent or guilty, while simultaneously inflating the emperor's appeal (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 69–72).

spectacles.¹⁰⁹ Plutarch described a fatal charade in which a group of criminals engaged in a Pyrrhic dance.¹¹⁰ He noted that these doomed dancers, who were elaborated dressed, appeared happy (perhaps unaware of their pending doom) until their gruesome and sudden deaths. Spectators watched in amazement and shock as executioners unexpectedly flogged and stabbed the dancers. It seems that spectators and by-standers typically reacted with shock to these grisly fatal charades, but they apparently recovered from their shock and joined in the mockery of the accused.

In the Synoptic Gospels, we find reminiscences of fatal charades. In the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus, as I have already noted, the Sanhedrin derided Jesus as a sham prophet (cf. Matt 26:67–68). Herod and his soldiers (Luke 23:11), Pilate’s soldiers (Matt 27:28–30; Mark 15:17–20, 26; Luke 23:36–38) and the chief priests and the scribes (Matt 27:41–42; Mark 15:32) all engaged in mocking Jesus as a sham king. Herod and his soldiers dressed Jesus as sham royalty (Luke 23:11). Before his crucifixion, Pilate’s soldiers used crude parodies of royal objects: a thorny crown, a reed scepter, and an inferior purple robe in their mockery of Jesus (Matt 27:28–29).¹¹¹ They also knelt before him in a derisive display of mock submission (Matt 27:29).

¹⁰⁹ Coleman cites *Apol.* 15.4–5 in which Tertullian comments on a criminal who experienced castration under the guise of the deity, Attis (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 60).

¹¹⁰ Coleman cites *Mor.* 554b in which Plutarch describes the horrific death of the Pyrrhic dancers (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 70).

¹¹¹ Cf. Mark 15:17–19. Luke does not recount such a scene. Coleman notes that the mockery of Jesus is a parodied imitation of a divine ruler and is strikingly similar to the image found on Roman coins (cf. Coleman, *Fatal Charades*, 47).

During his crucifixion, they derisively displayed the charge made against him with an inscription that read “οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων—This is Jesus the King of the Judeans/Jews (Matt 27:37).”¹¹² The chief priests along with the scribes and elders of the people ridicule (ἐμπαίζω) Jesus, saying, “...βασιλεὺς Ἰσραήλ ἐστιν, καταβάτω νῦν ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ—He is the King of Israel, let him come down now from the cross... (Matt 27: 41–42).”¹¹³ The by-passers also mocked (lit. reviled) Jesus by shaking (κινέω) their heads as a sign of derision (Matt 27:39; Mark 15:29).¹¹⁴

The criminal punishment and public execution of Jesus thoroughly stripped him of honor and status and gave his opponents the vengeance they sought. They had reclaimed the honor that they suffered in the agonistic exchanges with Jesus in the Temple precinct. Jesus’ portrayals as a sham prophet and as a sham king effectively eliminated any possible riposte that would have salvaged his honor. Essentially, he had no way to deflect the mockery aimed at him.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the context, content, functions and effects of humor in the agonistic exchanges between Jesus and his opponents. My critique centered on

¹¹² Cf. Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38.

¹¹³ In Mark’s version, the chief priests and the scribes mock (ἐμπαίζω) Jesus (15:31). In Luke’s version, it is the rulers who sneer (ἐκμυκτηρίζω) at Jesus (23:35).

¹¹⁴ Luke notes that the crowd only watches as the rulers engage in mockery (23:35). See the use of κινέω in Ps 21:8 (LXX).

two primary contexts: the public forum of the Temple precinct (Matt 21:12–23:36) and the Sanhedrin’s judicial proceeding against Jesus (Matt 26:64; Luke 22:67–70). I noted that forensic and forceful-style rhetoric were typical forms of rhetoric expressed in public settings in which mixed groups converged and engaged in antagonistic exchanges and in settings that involved judicial proceedings. The use of such inflammatory rhetoric provided content cues to the kinds of humor that might occur in exchanges between in-group person(s) and out-group person(s) or between adversarial opponents. I demonstrated that tendentious humor surfaced again and again in the exchanges between Jesus and his opponents. This oft-vindictive kind of humor included expressions of the types of humor (i.e., derisive barbs, derogatory epithets, trickery and mockery) that appeared frequently in Roman judicial proceedings and in the non-judicial antagonistic exchanges recounted in the works of Cicero and in other Roman-era literature.

I also explored the functions and effects of humor in the agonistic exchanges between Jesus and his opponents. In writing for an in-group audience, the Synoptic authors repeatedly display Jesus’ successful use tendentious forms of humor with an aim to convey Jesus’ remarkable wit and wisdom as a renowned teacher and his courage as a famed folk hero and prophet. Jesus’ use of humor served to elevate his honor, reputation, status and authority in the eyes of ancient in-group hearers. Through his humor, Jesus won the *conciliatio* of the public.

While humor helped to build Jesus’ status and reputation, its use came at a great and predictable cost. According to the Synoptic authors, especially Matthew and

Luke's versions, Jesus cleverly and repeatedly demonstrated and defended his status and reputation at the expense of his opponents. He shrewdly responded with derisive barbs or witty dicta when his opponents challenged him. He repeatedly mocked the hypocrisy of his opponents and aimed derogatory epithets at them in order to disparage their reputation and character. He deflected their attempts to entrap him, and he used his own form of trickery to belittle his opponents and make them appear ridiculous and foolish. Powerful authorities did not appreciate Jesus' public ridicule of them, and like Cicero and the satirists, Petronius and Seneca, Jesus' use of humor had deadly repercussions.

The repeated loss of face that occurred in the public forum of the Temple precinct left powerful authorities galvanized to exact a decisive reprisal. During the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus and in the criminal punishment following their judgment, the opponents of Jesus targeted him with their own forms of tendentious humor. Through status degradation rituals, they succeeded in ridiculing him as a sham prophet, and they eventually handed him over for further mockery as a sham king.

In summary, tendentious forms of humor were expected and typical of agonistic exchanges in Roman antiquity, especially in forensic and forceful-style rhetoric. These antagonistic types of humor served as rhetorical devices by which persons displayed or defended their honor and virtuous reputation, while besmirching the character and reputation of their opponents. The public tended to favor and admire those persons who could use barbed humor cleverly and courageously. Yet, the use of tendentious forms of humor in public forums was always a highly risky endeavor,

especially when the humorist exposed powerful authorities to public laughter. As noted in the warning of Quintilian, “*derisu non procul abest risus*—laughter is not far from derision,” and derision is never far from violent reprisals.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.7, 33–34 (Russell, LCL).

CHAPTER SIX

HUMOR CUES IN SYNOPTIC LITERATURE

There are significant cultural differences between ancient performances in the Roman world and modern performances in the *dominant culture* of the modern United States. Typically, in the United States, there is an unwritten, but understood, social norm that audiences of dominant culture productions do not engage in interactions with performers, regardless of whether they are storytellers, poets, or readers of texts. Hearers remain passively quiet except for bouts of laughter—and there is almost always some comic relief—punctuating the silence of the audience. For the most part, U.S. audiences remain quiet and performers adhere strictly to their scripts.

In Roman antiquity, there were interactions between performers and their audiences. Performers expected responses from their audiences. Outbursts and comments from a hearer might well have elicited laughter from the audience, and a performer's riposte to an outburst or commentary might well have rallied the audience to laugh yet again. They also deviated from scripts and texts in order to connect with their audiences.

We simply know little about the oral performances of the so-called “stable”

texts of the Gospels; instead, we bring a host of presuppositions to them.¹ One basic presupposition is that ancient performers presented Gospel texts with dead seriousness and somberness. Another presupposition might be that ancient Gospel performers adhered strictly to their texts. Finally, we oft presume that ancient audiences were dutifully quiet.² The task ahead of us is to ask questions that might challenge these presuppositions and help us to gain a better understanding of how ancient performers presented texts.

There are some critical areas that need further exploration, if we hope to recognize humor and appreciate its critical function in the Synoptic texts. Foremost, our understanding of the role and function of humor in ancient oral performance is of considerable importance. We have much to learn about oral performances in antiquity since the research is still in its relative infancy, and in particular, we have much to learn about humor and its use in oral performances. Another critical area of study is the use of humor in ancient biographical encomium. Humor often appears in biographical encomium. Do we recognize its appearances? Do we understand its function? The use of humorous authorial commentary (an area heavily impacted by

¹ In his discussion on the presuppositions regarding the performance of ancient written texts, Horsley notes that written texts were not necessarily “stable” texts. In other words, he does not believe that strict adherence to texts occurred in oral performances. Cf. Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 4–8, 13–14; see also Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 27–30.

² Shiner discusses the reactions of ancient audiences to oral performances, and the interactions between performers and their audiences. Cf. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark*, 4–5, and 143–70.

oral performances) is another area in need of critical research. I believe authorial commentary has much to reveal about the use of humor with audiences. For example, a snide remark about hostile adversaries in in-group literature reveals critical insights about the audience. Comic typologies are also a significant area of exploration since humor depends a great deal on familiarity and association. Finally, ancient rhetoric and rhetorical figures provide cues for our recognition of humor. Roman-era rhetoricians tell us which forms of humor are conducive to certain styles and kinds of speeches. While it is not reasonable for me to explore in-depth all of these areas, I will offer some insights and explorations into these critical areas. My emphasis will include some discussion on recognizing the oft subtle cues and nuances of humor in Synoptic texts.

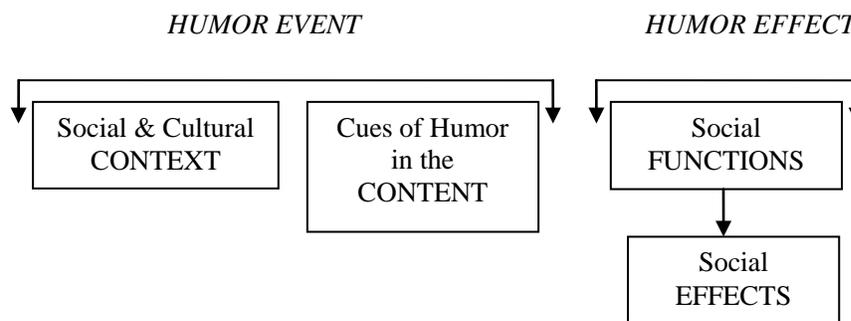


Fig. 8. Basics of a Humor Model

Application of the Humor Model

In this chapter, I primarily explore some *cues of humor* that appear in the *content* of the Synoptic literature (see Figure 8: Basics of a Humor Model). These cues of humor relate to four specific topics: 1) biographical encomium; 2) humorous

authorial commentary; 3) comic typologies; and 4) humor in rhetoric and rhetorical figures. In my approach, I put forth what the authors of the Roman era rhetoric reveal about these topics, and then I offer some Synoptic examples.

Before I delve into the cues of humor, I situate the Synoptic texts within the *social context* of oral performances. I begin by providing a brief description of the role of oral performance in aural-based societies, which I follow up with a discussion on the use of humor in oral performances. This discussion includes some points on the critical sociological *functions* of humor. I have provided an illustration below that sums up the flow of this chapter (see Figure 9: Humor Cues in In-group Literature).

Humor in Ancient Oral Performances

Oral performances in antiquity occurred in a variety of communal settings with a range of different types and sizes of audiences.³ Audiences consisted of groups of disciples gathered in stoas, or guests gathered at household dinners, or members of

³ The following scholars have provided studies on oral performance in the transmission and formation of the early Synoptic literature: Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Werner H. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983); Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 55–57; and *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q*, *Semeia* 60 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*; and Joanna Dewey, ed. *Orality and Textuality in Early Christian Literature*, *Semeia* 65 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1995). See also Horsley's discussions on the oral performances of Q and the Gospel of Mark in *Jesus in Context: Power, People and Performance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 12–14, 56–108.

guilds and kinds of associations gathered in lecture halls, synagogues, and other public spaces.⁴ Depending on the purpose of the gathering, oral performances included epics, histories, satirical works, literary productions, or rhetorical treatises.

Oral performances filled an important critical need in the ancient Mediterranean world. Since most persons in antiquity were illiterate, they relied on others to *read*

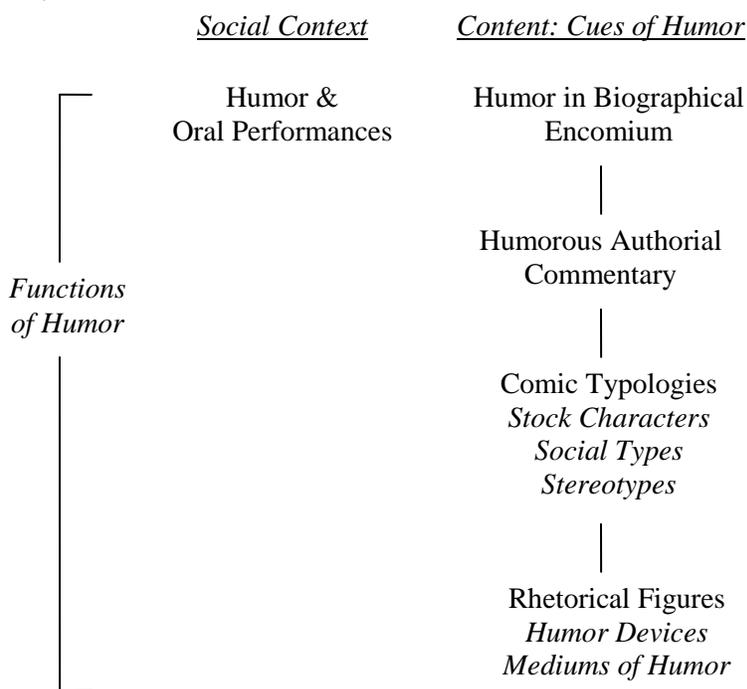


Fig. 9. Humor Cues in In-Group Literature

texts to them.⁵ The aural effects conveyed in oral performances helped ancient hearers to appreciate and to understand texts.⁶ Ancient hearers of an oral performance

⁴ Cf. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 39–45, and 47–48. For discussions on ancient meeting places, see Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

listened to performers and reacted to their performances.⁷ In other words, performances were not the sterile and passive experiences typical of modern plays. Performers expressed feelings, moods, tones, and even improvisational comments in their transmissions of a text.⁸ It is quite reasonable that these performers elicited humorous reactions through their interpretations and transmissions of texts.⁹

⁵ Only about two to four percent of the population was able to read in any given region in the first century Roman world. Cf. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary of the Synoptic Gospels*, 7; and Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 11). For extensive discussion on ancient literacy, see William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. Shiner discusses variables in literacy rates and provides an extensive bibliography on literacy in Roman antiquity (cf. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 11, 30–31). He also recounts the logistical difficulty of reading ancient texts. Because the typology of written texts made reading by sight unwieldy and labor intensive, Shiner notes that it was necessary for performers to memorize texts rather than simply read them to audiences. He explains that performances of ancient texts consisted of one or more persons. If performers were illiterate, then they listened as other persons read the texts aloud to them. Essentially, literate persons coached the texts to illiterate performers. The performers could also learn the texts aurally through other oral performances of the texts (cf. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 12–13, and 49–52).

⁶ Shiner clarifies that in Roman antiquity, written texts primarily served to revive memory. They were not an adequate medium for communication. The full meaning of a text came to light through a “living voice” and the performer’s *interpretation* of the text (cf. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 14–19).

⁷ Cf. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 4–5, and 143–70.

⁸ The wording of performed texts varied in order to appeal to the specific dynamics of the context and the hearers (cf. Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 13).

⁹ Humor served several critical functions in performances and the complete absence of humor in a performance would have been a deviation from the conventions of the day. Importantly, humor helped the performer to secure the *conciliatio* of the hearers. In addition, humor served as a device for stimulating interests and reviving tired audiences (e.g., Cicero *De or.* I.17, 142–43, 152, 159;

Early oral performances of various Christian texts probably occurred in households and in lecture-halls and they probably involved specialized performers.¹⁰ Early Christians would have relied on literate members, or they would have needed access to patrons, who would have provided them with slaves or hired freedpersons with special skills in performing texts.¹¹ Oral performers of Synoptic texts could have learned the texts through reading them, or through a literate person's reading aloud to them, or they could have learned a text through other performances of it. In any case, they did not necessarily "adhere to the text word for word."¹² They would have had some freedom in performing the texts with their own nuances. It is likely that their performances included interpretations of texts that were contingent on the needs and interests of specific audiences.¹³

It is helpful for us to remember that when performers presented Synoptic texts, both in their earliest oral forms and in their later literary forms, they performed expressions of humor found in the texts (e.g., sarcasm, tongue-in-cheek, hyperbole, paronomasia, etc.). These expressions of humor surfaced typically in social exchanges between persons in the text or in the author's commentary on some

II.216, 236; *Or.* 13, 24, 87–90; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3.1; *Rhet. Her.* I.10, III.35, 37; and Longinus, *On the Subl.* 34).

¹⁰ Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27

¹³ *Ibid.*, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 26; and Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 13.

character, element, or situation in the text. It is simply unlikely that a performance of a Synoptic text would have been void of humor given the role of humor in securing the *conciliatio* of the hearers and in reviving and engaging the hearers. In addition to the humor embedded in Synoptic texts, performers might also have added humorous commentary in their performances in their efforts to connect with their hearers.

Humorous commentaries, and even the nuanced and distinctive forms of humor of various performers of early oral traditions, most likely helped to shape the later literary forms of the Synoptic Gospels. In other words, it should not be surprising that in some ways the Synoptic authors use nuanced or distinctive forms of humor unique to their particular texts and favored by their audiences/ hearers (e.g., Matthew's use of paronomasia and derogatory epithets; Mark's use of comic antics; and Luke's use of humorous parables).¹⁴

Etic Perspective: Functions of Humor in Oral Performances

From an etic perspective, humor in the oral performances of ancient in-group literature likely served critical sociological functions. The overarching function of humor was to aid in the survival of the in-group.¹⁵ For early Christian communities,

¹⁴ Culpepper points out an example of paronomasia in Matt 6:16 (cf. Culpepper, "Humor," 3: 333). For examples of nuanced humor, see Matthew's excessive use of derogatory epithets (e.g., 6:2, 5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, and 29); Mark's use of comic antics (e.g., 5:2–14; 9:14–27; and 14:51–52); and Luke's use of humorous parables (e.g., 16:1–8 and 18:2–6).

¹⁵ Sociologists, who use a structuralist approach to humor, generally agree on three salient points: humor is a human universal; most functions of humor are universal; and humor does serve critical social objectives. Koller notes that humor

survival was precarious, precisely because formations into new in-groups meant some degree of disassociation from older, more established in-groups.¹⁶ In order to appreciate the function of humor as a survival mechanism, we must first recall that survival in Roman antiquity depended heavily on mutual assistance and cooperation. In pre-industrial, agrarian societies, individuals met their basic and extraneous needs through the assistance of an in-group (i.e., a kinship or fictive kinship group, or a

serves a variety of valued social functions, but he emphasizes that the primary and underlying function of humor is the survival of a collective (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 10, 26).

¹⁶ Stark explains in his sociological study of the early Christian conversion process that the disciples had to be willing to break with old familial attachments and they had to build strong attachments within their “new” family (Matt 10:35, 37; 19:29; Luke 12:53; 14:26; and Mark 10:29). He discusses how vulnerable Christian communities survived and thrived as in-groups, precisely because they relied on strong interpersonal attachments and in-group benefits. New interpersonal attachments must be stronger, Stark notes, than the recruit’s old familiar and established attachments. This conversion process usually involved a slow transfer of allegiances. Stark theorizes that early Christians, for the most part, did not leave old kinship attachments without first establishing strong attachments in their new fictive kinship group. He notes two examples in which the Matthean Jesus uses familial language for the purpose of bonding his disciples into a new “family.” In the first example, the Matthean Jesus explains how his disciples should treat each other as family (Matt 25:35–40). In the second example, he instructs his disciples that they are his family members as long as they follow the teachings of the “Father” (Matt 12:50).

In addition to interpersonal attachments, Stark emphasizes that in-groups needed to protect their members from marginality. When members transferred their allegiance from a familiar in-group into a new in-group, they needed to be convinced that the benefits, including physical sustenance and other forms of assistance of the new group would exceed the assistance that they would have received from their old allegiances. Stark theorizes that it was not ideology or theology, but interpersonal attachments and protection against marginalization that prompted persons to convert. Cf. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 16–21, 52–53.

guild or association, etc.). In turn, an in-group relied on the cooperation and assistance of its members.¹⁷ In-groups encouraged mutual assistance and cooperation by building and maintaining in-group solidarity and membership loyalty. They achieved this aim through several means: by building strong interpersonal attachments, by providing benefits to members, and by proving the legitimacy and the attractiveness of the in-group.¹⁸ Once a member broke ties with a former in-group and committed themselves to a new in-group, the avoidance of marginality or disassociation from the new in-group was a serious motivator for membership loyalty.¹⁹ Disassociation in Roman antiquity typically meant lack of access to the social network of an in-group. Without a social network, there was virtually little, if any, access to critical sustenance and assistance. In short, it was the benefits (i.e., social bonds, social assistance, etc.) of the in-group that helped to induce the loyalty of members and their conformity to the ideals and values of the in-group.

Humor in oral performances played a critical role in in-group survival, precisely because it helped to foster and reinforce in-group solidarity and membership

¹⁷ Koller, *Humor and Society*, 18–19.

¹⁸ Cf. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 16–21, 52–53; and Koller, *Humor and Society*, 18–19, 163–4.

¹⁹ Cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 18–19. Disassociation from one's kinship or fictive kinship attachments was a serious matter in the preindustrial, agrarian, and dyadic societies of the Roman era Mediterranean world. It meant the loss of access to basic services and mutual assistance that were critical for survival. A person's desire to remain attached to a group makes humor a powerful device of social pressure (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 27).

loyalty.²⁰ Laughter-raising among members tended to strengthen interpersonal attachments.²¹ In addition, when in-group members engaged in laughing together at some humorous anecdote or some other instructive story, they shared the consensus of solidarity.²² It is not improbable that in-group members also experienced the consensus of solidarity during performances when they took pleasure or laughed at humorous triumphs of old heroes, particularly when folk heroes defeated powerful adversaries. They might have relished a folk-hero's clever use of barbed ripostes against an in-group's despised opponents in a battle of wits (e.g., Matt 21:12–23:36). Consider whether Jews, who knew the sting of mockery from Roman oppressors, would have laughed at a re-telling of Hyrcanus' barbed and witty riposte to an unbearable group of oppressors (Josephus, *Ant.* XII. 212–214).²³ Consider also an oral performance of the derogatory authorial commentary found in Matthean and rabbinic sources, which ridiculed King Herod (e.g., Matt 2:1–12, 16; *b.B.B.* 3b). Both

²⁰ Humor theorists believe that humor serves significant and critical functions in the survival of an in-group, primarily because humor helps in-group members to bond socially, which in turn, encourages membership loyalty and solidarity among members (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 10, 26, 28, and 166).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18, 26

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

²³ Cf. Philo, *Legat* 352–367.

the Matthean and the rabbinic author reflected their community's distaste of a despised leader.²⁴

Humor also served other critical functions for in-group members. Notably, it functioned as a socialization tool.²⁵ Essentially, humor served as a means of social pressure to encourage, or coerce conformity to in-group values.²⁶ Usually through the use of some type of derision, central figures in in-group literature targeted

²⁴ Laughing at despised opponents not only contributed to a consensus of solidarity, but it probably had a cathartic effect of lifting in-group morale (Koller, *Humor and Society*, 10). In addition, derisive laughter aimed at outsiders also served to affirm in-group legitimacy and status. Plutarch engages in the practice of delegitimizing outsiders by mocking their deities and religious rituals (Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 669f–672). In his critique of Christians, the Roman satirist, Lucian, might well have provoked a sense of unity and pleasure from those united against the “strange” superstition (Lucian, *Peregr.*). In *Contra Celsum*, we recall Celsus’ famed mockery of Christians. According to Origen, Celsus ridiculed Christians, saying that they were only able to proselytize the foolish, the dishonorable, and the stupid. In other words, Celsus said that slaves, women, and little children became Christians, because they were the only ones foolish enough to do so (Origen, *Cels.* 3). In the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, mockery of adversaries and rivals occurs no less than seventy-eight times. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we find mockery repeatedly aimed at Jesus (e.g., Matt 20:19; 27:29; Luke 16:14; 23:11, 36). By their mockery of Jesus, the religious elites repeatedly sought to de-legitimize Jesus and his authority.

²⁵ Koller notes that humor helped to reinforce a collective’s commitment toward common values, objectives, and endeavors (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 18–19). For example, derision aimed at hypocritical practices of outsiders conveyed a powerful message that hypocrisy was unacceptable in-group behavior (e.g., Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51; Mar 7:6; Luke 12:56; and 13:15).

²⁶ Cf. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay in the Meaning of the Comic*. Bergson noted that humor could serve to humiliate or shame an individual into conformity.

hypocritical religious practices, unethical behaviors, oppressions and exploitations, and other types of behavior inconsistent with in-group values.²⁷

Humorous anecdotes, derogatory epithets, stereotypes, and satirical barbs were among the common types of humor used to expose pretension, deceit, trickery, false pride, and blind loyalty.²⁸ For example, the Synoptic Jesus aimed derision at the pretension, deceit, and hypocrisy of his opponents (e.g., Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51; Mar 7:6; Luke 12:56; 13:15). His disparaging barbs included derogatory epithets (e.g., “brood of vipers” in Matt. 12:34 and 23:33) and stereotypes of religious elites and their practices (Matt 23:3–7).²⁹ Satirical barbs and stereotypes communicated to in-group members how they should not behave.³⁰

Recall Amos’ ranting list of satirical barbs aimed at the social evils committed by his

²⁷ While anecdotes and aphorisms in biographical encomium served to demonstrate the wisdom of the favored person, they also conveyed in-group values (e.g., trust/loyalty, steadfastness, courage and generosity). Cf. Koller, *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor*, 18–19.

²⁸ Cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 22. Koller offers his sociological perspective on the role of humor as a medium for exposing social ills.

²⁹ Laughing at the stereotypical characteristics, beliefs, and antics of outsiders also served to build solidarity as stereotypes distinguished insiders from outsiders, and reinforce the in-group’s boundaries (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 24–25; and B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

³⁰ Stereotypes of outsiders often conveyed practices and behaviors that in-group members despised or devalued (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 24–25; see also Stephenson, “Conflict and Control Functions of Humor,” 569–74. Derisive laughter aimed at in-group members was also a motivator in correcting deviate behaviors of in-group members (cf. Koller, *Humor and Society*, 9).

own people, the people of Judah and Israel (2:4–3:8). Roman satirists like Horace as well as the Roman-era Cynics excelled in their use of barbed wit and mockery in their denunciations of social and ethical flaws.³¹

Humor also surfaced in light-hearted forms to encourage and reinforce in-group values such as occurs in the humorous anecdotes of rabbinic and Synoptic literature. Examples include the use of exaggerated images of animals to demonstrate the absurdity of human anxiety and to accentuate the value of trusting in God's provident care (*m. Kid.* 82b; Matt 6:26–29 // Luke 12:22–32). Humorous stories about Satan also served to inspire and to instruct members on the value of avoiding temptations and remaining steadfast (*b. Kid.* 81a; *Tanh. B.*, *Numbers*, *Hukkat* 66a; Matt 4:3–11).

Humor in Biographical Encomium

In Roman antiquity, encomium was one of the ways in which in-group persons could claim public recognition for a member's honorable reputation and virtuous character. Encomium occurred in a variety of forms such as in funerary epitaphs, in speeches, and in ancient biographies and other forms of literature. Quite often, these various forms of encomium included expressions of humor or recollections of humorous events.

³¹ See my discussion in Chapter 2 on Roman satirists. For further discussion on Roman satirists, see Plaza, *The Function of Humor*, 27, 53–54. For examples of Cynic social critique, see Lucian, *Peregr.* and Seneca, *Ben.*

In biographical forms of encomium, ancient authors used humor to build the honorable reputation and the virtuous character of their in-group person, and they used humor to decimate the reputation of an opponent.³² On the one hand, authors typically associated opponents with derogatory terms such as despised and morally corrupt, hypocritical and arrogant, and foolish and deceptive. On the other hand, authors portrayed their in-group person in complimentary terms such as courageous, wise and witty. In order to build up a person's honorable reputation and virtuous character, the author frequently recounted a battle of wits between the favored person and his opponents.³³ In these agonistic exchanges, the favored person persistently outmaneuvered opponents with humorous barbs and dicta, while the opponents repeatedly suffered public derision.³⁴ We see excellent examples of tendentious

³² Neyrey discusses the rhetoric of praise and blame in his work entitled *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 70–89. See also [Cicero] *Rhet. Her.* 3.10–15 and Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9.33–10.4.

³³ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 115–6.

³⁴ Neyrey uses the following example to illustrate Jesus' virtues of wisdom and prudence. A particular instance of a witty dictum occurs in Jesus' riposte to a Pharisaic challenge in Matthew 9:12–13. Here, Jesus says, "Healthy people are not in need of a doctor, it is the sick who are in need—οὐ χρείαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλ' οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες (vs. 12)." Jesus quickly follows his dictum with an insulting imperative and another dictum; "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice—πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε τί ἐστίν· ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν· οὐ γὰρ ἦλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλοὺς (vs. 13)!" As if his opponents would actually need "to go and learn" what has been made quite plain to them. Jesus has ironically pointed out the ill state of their own well-being. Jesus' dictum references Hosea 6:6: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God, not burnt offerings—διότι ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν καὶ ἐπίγνωσιν θεοῦ ἢ ὀλοκαυτώματα." See Neyrey's full discussion in *Honor and Shame*, 118.

humor in the biographical encomium of the Matthean Jesus, where Jesus repeatedly turned adversarial provocations into opportunities to make witty dicta and derisive ripostes (cf. 21:14–23:36).³⁵

In biographical forms of encomium, ancient authors could also use humor to salvage a person's honor from an undignified and shameful death. Typically, proper encomium required the author to give an account of a person's courageous and dignified manner of death; but this expectation of encomium became problematic when the person died in a despicable manner.³⁶ If the author could demonstrate that the person had the last laugh, then the author could claim a dignified and courageous death for the person.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' death, we see the distinctive way in which the author uses humor to salvage Jesus' honor. We begin by noting that Jesus' crucifixion, in no way signaled a dignified and courageous death; instead, it was one of the most horrendous and shameful kinds of deaths in Roman antiquity. This manner of death stripped Jesus completely of an honorable reputation and virtuous character.³⁷ As Neyrey points out, Jesus' shameful death ended his opportunity to respond to the challenges against his honor (recall the opponents' accusations and

³⁵ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 42.

³⁶ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 139–62.

³⁷ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 139.

mockeries during Jesus' trials and crucifixion).³⁸ He notes that Jesus died unable to utter any public riposte to salvage his honor. Matthew demonstrates that God, Jesus' powerful patron, delivers a comeuppance for Jesus that mocks his fiercest adversaries (Matt 26:53; 27:51–53).³⁹ First, God creates a comic confusion and fear among the religious elites; and second, God gives Jesus the ultimate riposte—resurrection!⁴⁰ Just as the high priest had torn his robe in pronouncing judgment on Jesus, God has torn God's own proverbial garment—the Temple veil (Matt 26:65; 27:51).⁴¹ Matthew follows this visual imagery with a rapid barrage of images (i.e., the tearing of the veil, the quaking of the earth, the splitting of rocks, the opening of tombs and the walking of the dead) meant to elicit undignified fear and cowardliness in Jesus' adversaries (Matt 27:51–53).⁴² The Matthean images were not only a resounding riposte to the

³⁸ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 141–8.

³⁹ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 146.

⁴⁰ While the other Synoptic authors also note Jesus' resurrection and the tearing of the temple veil, none of them depict the series of scenes that would have produced terror in Jesus' opponents—the religious elites (compare Matt 27:51–53; Mark 15:38; and Luke 23:45).

⁴¹ Cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 142.

⁴² Neyrey does not allude to the reaction of Jesus' adversaries in the rending of the Temple veils, the earthquake and other frightening phenomenon (cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 141–8). Cowardliness (i.e., lack of courage) and ridiculousness are the opposite of courage and self-restraint. In *encomium*, an author praises a favored person's virtues of courage, justice, and self-restraint. In *vituperatio*, the author demonstrates the opponent's lack of such virtues. The use of *vituperatio* and *laudis* (i.e., praise) occur both in judicial and epideictic type speeches (cf. *Rhet. Her.* 3.10–15). Aristotle discusses praiseworthy virtues and vices worthy of invective in *Rhet.*

insults made to Jesus' honor, but they surely created a comic scene of confusion for the Temple elites, which made them appear ridiculous.⁴³ These images would have produced a comic effect due to a combination of humor devices: surprise reversal, shock, chaos, and the unexpected comeuppance of the Temple elites. By demonstrating Jesus' getting the last laugh through God's riposte, the Matthean author has given Jesus a splendid biographical encomium.

Humorous Authorial Commentary

Authorial commentary occasionally interjected into the Synoptic accounts is reminiscent of the kinds of comments, often in the form of snide remarks, which a performer might use to win his audience's favor. By referencing a common adversary, a Synoptic author connects with his audience. Examples of snide remarks about Herod occur in Luke 3:19–20; 9:9; 23:8; and Mark 6:20.⁴⁴ These kinds of

I.9.33–10.4. For an in-depth discussion on *vituperatio* and *laudis*, see Powell and Paterson, eds. *Cicero the Advocate*, 188–9.

⁴³ Neyrey explains the posthumous vindication of Jesus' honor (cf. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 141–8). While Neyrey never refers to tendentious humor in the final events of Jesus' death, I believe the ancients would have appreciated the tendentious humor arising from God's vindication of Jesus and the comeuppance of the Temple elite.

⁴⁴ In his authorial commentary, Luke aims several derogatory barbs at Herod: 1) he could not find Jesus, a renowned subversive Galilean; 2) he wanted to see a magic show from Jesus; and 3) he was ineffective as he kept questioning Jesus to no avail. Luke's comment about Herod's friendship with a despised Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, was probably also intended as a derogatory slur (Luke 23:6–12). Jónsson notes humor in the comment about Herod and Pilate's friendship (cf. *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 164).

remarks might well have produced responses of humor from their respective Synoptic audiences.

In what follows, I discuss the use of humorous authorial commentary in the judicial proceedings against Jesus. Note that humorous commentary on judicial proceedings was common in Roman-era writings.⁴⁵ In the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus, we hear Matthean barbs that portray the Sanhedrin authorities as foolish and ridiculous (Matt 26:59–60). In the Roman trial of Jesus, Luke essentially ridicules the foolishness of Pilate (Luke 23:2–5, 13–16, 18–25).

⁴⁵ It was not uncommon in Roman antiquity for comic playwrights to ridicule judicial proceedings as kangaroo courts. Court proceedings were a common stock scene in comic performances (Cf. Apuleius' *Metam.*; R. G. Summers, *Roman Justice and Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association 101 (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University, 1970); Regine May, *Apuleius and Drama: The Ass on Stage* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182, 185; and Patrick G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel: The "Satyricon" of Petronius and the Metamorphoses of Apuleius* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 58.

In his work, *Metam.*, Apuleius pokes particular fun at the gimmicks that advocates use in Roman trials to make wrongly accused defendants appear guilty and foolish. Apuleius tells a supposedly humorous story (albeit, it is rather cruel humor) of the trial of Lucius. During the trial, Lucius' guilt hinges on a false murder charge, but his real crime goes unnoticed. After awakening from a night of heavy intoxication, Lucius finds himself arrested and charged with three counts of murder. On the way to the court proceeding and during the trial, the merciless laughter of bystanders adds to his humiliation. As his impending judgment is about to be pronounced, Lucius becomes quite despondent with grief. At a particularly crucial moment, the prosecutor reveals the evidence of the three dead bodies. When the prosecutor uncovers the bodies, Lucius discovers that he had actually murdered three wineskins. Laughter belts out from everywhere. The city tries to honor Lucius, who has fallen victim to an annual festival of sorts, for his unwitting participation in a hoax, but poor Lucius never really recovers from the trauma (cf. Apuleius, *Metam.* 3). Summers notes that Apuleius tells the story in an effort to ridicule the capriciousness of the Roman justice system. For a discussion on humor and Roman court proceedings, see Summers, *Roman Justice and Apuleius' Metam.*, 511–31.

In the humorous authorial commentary on the trial of Jesus, the Matthean author mocks the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:59–68). The commentary takes the form of a barrage of slight barbs, and notably, these barbs do not appear in the Markan account (see Figure 10: The Sanhedrin Trial of Jesus).⁴⁶ In order to appreciate the Matthean barbs, we should first recall that the Sanhedrin supposedly consisted of a very large number of members.⁴⁷ Secondly, we should notice that the Matthean account places a great deal of stress on the *unjust* activity of the Sanhedrin (i.e., seeking out a *reliable* false witness). The Matthean commentary is derogatory as it describes the *righteous* Sanhedrin members as deceptive, unjust and manipulative.

<p>“Now the chief priests and the <i>entire</i> Sanhedrin were seeking a <i>false</i> witness against Jesus so that they might put him to death. Even though many [false witnesses] came forward, they did not find <i>one</i> [false witness]. But at last, two [false witnesses] came forward....”</p> <p>“Οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ τὸ συνέδριον ὅλον ἐζήτουν ψευδομαρτυρίαν κατὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ὅπως αὐτὸν θανατώσωσιν, καὶ οὐχ εὔρον πολλῶν προσελθόντων ψευδομαρτύρων. ὕστερον δὲ προσελθόντες δύο... (Matt 26:59–60).”</p>	<p>“Now the chief priests and the <i>entire</i> Sanhedrin sought witnesses against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they were finding no [witnesses]. For many were providing false testimony, and their testimonies were not in agreement...and not even in this was their testimony in agreement.”</p> <p>“Οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ ὅλον τὸ συνέδριον ἐζήτουν κατὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ μαρτυρίαν εἰς τὸ θανατώσαι αὐτόν, καὶ οὐχ ἠύρισκον· ...πολλοὶ γὰρ ἐψευδομαρτύρουν κατ’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἴσαι αἱ μαρτυρίαι οὐκ ἦσαν... καὶ οὐδὲ οὕτως ἴση ἦν ἡ μαρτυρία αὐτῶν (Mark 14:55–56, 59).”</p>
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Fig. 10. The Sanhedrin Trial of Jesus

⁴⁶ Although Mark recounts the false testimony of witnesses at the trial, there are no derogatory Markan comments (14:53–65). Luke never recounts false witnesses or false testimony in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus (Luke 22:66–71).

⁴⁷ Cf. Saldarini, “Sanhedrin,” 977.

In order to recognize the barbed commentary of the Matthean account, we turn to examine the linguistic cues in the text (Matt 26:59–60). In Matthew 26:59, we note that the adjective ὅλος in “τὸ συνέδριον ὅλον” stands in an elative position to the noun. The elative position points to the intensification of the adjective, so that ὅλον becomes an emphatic expression. Therefore, we can stress the translation in following way, “...τὸ συνέδριον ὅλον ἐζήτουν ψευδομαρτυρίαν—the *entire* Sanhedrin was looking for a [single] false witness (26:59).”⁴⁸ The first Matthean barb attacks the Sanhedrin’s all-out-effort to find one *false* witness. The barb is both tragic and comical. In Matthew 26:59–60, we read “ἐζήτουν ψευδομαρτυρίαν κατὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, καὶ οὐχ εἶρον πολλῶν προσελθόντων ψευδομαρτύρων. ὕστερον δὲ προσελθόντες δύο—the entire Sanhedrin was looking for a false witness against Jesus, but they did not find any [false witnesses], although many false witnesses came forward.” The Matthean commentary notes that the Sanhedrin had great difficulty locating a single false witness, even though plenty of false witnesses came forward. The second Matthean barb attacks the ineptitude of the Sanhedrin (i.e., they could not get false witness to lie reliably). The third Matthean barb is recognizable when we realize that a *credible* (implied) *false* witness is, in itself, an oxymoron (26:60a). A fourth Matthean barb occurs with the adverbial phrase, “ὕστερον δὲ προσελθόντες δύο—Then *finally* two [false witnesses] came forward (26:60b).” The superlative use of the adverb ὕστερος suggests that it took quite a bit of effort for the Sanhedrin to produce a

⁴⁸ Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MN: Zondervan, 1997), 300, 303.

[*credible*] false witness. And so, after considerable effort, the Sanhedrin *finally* locates two false witnesses. In rapid-fire succession and within a very short verbal span, the Matthean author has essentially aimed four derogatory barbs at the Sanhedrin.

We can stress the sardonic wit of Matthew by using italics in the following translation. “The chief priests and the *entire* council kept searching for *at least one* [*credible*] false witness...but they could find *not one*, even though *a ton of* false witnesses came forward. Then *finally*, [*after considerable effort*] two [FALSE witnesses] came forward... (26:59–60).” The council’s inept ability to locate quickly a credible false witness as well as the Sanhedrin’s search for false witnesses serves to make the Sanhedrin appear foolish, and therefore, it serves to portray the council as a somewhat comic or kangaroo court. By the conclusion of verse 60, Matthew has presented a humor event consisting of four consecutive barbs. The condensed rendering of these barbs has added to their comic effect.⁴⁹ Through these sardonic barbs, the Matthean account has seriously challenged the reputation and, therefore, the honor of the members of the Sanhedrin and the validity of their trial proceedings.

In the case of Pilate’s proceeding against Jesus, the Lukan author depicts Pilate as a foolish and inept ruler. He demonstrates Pilate’s shortcomings in three

⁴⁹ Compare Matthew 26:59–60 with Mark 14:55–57, 59. In Mark 14:55, the adjective ὅλος in “ὅλον τὸ συνέδριον” occurs in a normal and unstressed position. In addition, Mark’s commentary on the council proceedings does not display the succession of condensed barbs. However, Mark repeatedly belittles the inconsistencies of the witnesses (14: 56, 59). Luke does not recount the presence of false witnesses at all.

aspects: Pilate's inability to put down a possible threat to Roman order, Pilate's inability to release an *innocent* insurrectionist (an oxymoron in itself), and Pilate's inability to outmaneuver the Sanhedrin (Luke 23:2–5, 13–16, 18–25). When we turn to the proceeding, we hear Jesus twist the words of Pilate to make it seem as if Pilate declares a new Judean king. A wise Roman prefect, especially one in a Judean outpost, would not have accepted Jesus' reply, "You said it" as a response to the question, "Are you the king of the Jews (23:3)?" What becomes more striking is Pilate's response to Jesus' answer in which he says, "οὐδὲν εὐρίσκω αἴτιον ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τούτῳ—I find no grounds for a charge against this man (23:4)." The Lukan Jesus' accusers in the Sanhedrin must fervently insist that Jesus is a political threat (23:5). Yet, Pilate keeps persisting that Jesus is innocent (Luke 23:14, 22). His persistence is rather comical for a Roman prefect. Pilate never responds to Jesus' kingship as a threat; instead, he offers to release the usurper *king* (Luke 23:16).⁵⁰

Comic Typologies

In Roman antiquity, various kinds of ancient literature (e.g., satires, biographies, histories, etc.) and comic performances included stereotypes and stock

⁵⁰ Mark 15:7 makes a comment that Barabbas was a murderous insurrectionist. Pilate's release of a relatively minor insurrectionist over a usurper king is quite ironic. In addition, there is a suggestion of humor in the observation that Pilate never bothered to charge Jesus with insurrection for the chaos he caused in the temple (or his triumphant entry into Jerusalem). One could reasonably argue that the Synoptic authors intended to stress the guilt of the Judeans in the death of Jesus by downplaying Pilate's traditional role as prefect. Ancient hearers of the Synoptic texts would still have noticed the foolish and absurd behavior of Pilate.

characters drawn from the oversimplification of social types. These social types were targets of laughter and ridicule. *Philogelos* is an ancient joke book that makes fun of a variety of social types, including simpletons, misers, doctors, bad-tempered persons, and false prophets.⁵¹ The jokes also belittle ethnic groups such as the Abderites, Sidonians, and Kymians.⁵² In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes extreme social behavior.⁵³ His description of these behaviors correspond to such social types as the ambitious person (φιλότιμος), the quarrelsome or difficult person (δύσπερις), the bad tempered or surly person (δύσκολος) and the wasteful or licentious person (ἀκόλαστος).⁵⁴ In *Characters*, Theophrastus puts forth generalizations of social types.⁵⁵ They include the arrogant person (ὁ ὑπερηφανία), the coward (ὁ δειλός), and the slanderer (ὁ κακολόγος) (see below Figure 11: Theophrastus' Description of Social Types). All of these social types and characterizations of social types appear in Roman era comedies.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Cf. Baldwin, *The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 110–27; 132–9; 154, and 159–82.

⁵³ Aristotle explains extreme social behavior in his discussion on virtues and vices and the middle way (cf. *Eth. nic.* II.6.16–9.9).

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* II.7.3, 8, 13; 8.2, 8.

⁵⁵ Theophrastus, *Char.* (Rusten and Cunningham, LCL).

⁵⁶ See the discussion on characterizations and comedy in the introduction to Theophrastus, *Char.* (Rusten and Cunningham, LCL, 12–23). In the Aristotelian age, theater attendees witnessed an explosion of stock characters. Theophrastus wrote a now lost treatise on laughter entitled Περὶ γελοίου. Quintilian referenced Περὶ γελοίου in his *Inst.* 6.3.22. Theophrastus became head of the Peripatetic School in

Christian literature references various stereotypes and social types. The Matthean Jesus repeatedly, and quite copiously, stereotypes the Pharisees as hypocrites (Matt 15:1; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). Stereotypes of ethnic groups surface in the letter to Titus: "Κρήτες ἀεὶ ψεῦσται, κακὰ θηρία, γαστέρες ἀργαί—Cretans are always liars, evil creatures, lazy gluttons, and idle gluttons (Titus 1:12)." In the pastoral epistles, we hear warnings that Christians were to avoid the ἀισχροκερδής, that is, the person who uses others for dishonest gain (cf. 1 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:7; and 1 Peter 5:2). Paul refers to a person who spread rumors as ψιθυρισμός (2 Cor 2:12). This term connoted a whispering and secretive tone as opposed to the more abrasive and open tone of λογοποιία. In 1 Tim 5:13, we hear references to φλύαρος (i.e., a gossip) and περίεργος (i.e., a busybody or meddling person). The author of Jude makes a satirical barb regarding the γογγυσταὶ (i.e., persons who grumble) and the μεμψίμοιροι (i.e., complainers), saying, "...τὸ στόμα αὐτῶν λαλεῖ ὑπέρογκα, θαυμάζοντες πρόσωπα ὠφελείας χάριν—they marvel open-mouthed in order to gain a favor (i.e., they engage in excessive flatter) (1:16)."

In the Synoptic Gospels, we hear parables and didactic analogies that reference social types. Many of these stock figures are common in comic performances and they would have triggered comic associations. Derision of these

Athens (ca. 306–285 BCE). As Aristotle influenced Theophrastus, Theophrastus' work eventually influenced both Plutarch and Quintilian. Theophrastus' student, Menander, became a prolific writer of New Comedy. See Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 34–8.

behaviors might well have elicited ridicule from Synoptic audiences. Examples include the ignorant fool (Matt 7:24–27); the complaining laborer (Matt 20:1–16); the lazy servant (Matt 25:14–30); the son that lives off his father’s wealth and squanders it (Luke 15:11–32); the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21); the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1–9); and the arrogant braggart (Luke 18:9–14).

Humor Devices and Mediums of Humor in Rhetoric

Humor was an essential element in ancient rhetoric, primarily because it played a critical role in helping orators or authors achieve the aims of their speeches.⁵⁷ Aristotle, Cicero, the author of *Ad Herennium*, and Quintilian are among the ancient authors who explained the use of humor in rhetorical speeches.⁵⁸ Their expositions stress the indispensable role of humor in rhetoric. For example, in deliberative speeches, derision of despicable behaviors (e.g., hypocrisy) served to

⁵⁷ The three types of rhetorical speeches were deliberative, judicial and panegyric or epideictic. Deliberative rhetoric served primarily hortatory or admonitory aims. Epideictic rhetoric conveyed a formal expression of encomium and did so by displaying a favored person’s virtuous character and honorable reputation. In literary form, encomium often involved the favored person’s triumph(s) over a despicable foe. Forensic rhetoric served to persuade a jury or public in favor of the defense or the prosecution of a person. Typically, forensic rhetoric occurred within a judicial proceeding, but elements of forensic rhetoric also surfaced in literature in cases where a person’s defended his virtuous character and reputation against verbal assaults from adversaries (Cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 19–20).

⁵⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.2.12–17; 3.6–9; 12.16; 3.11.6–7, 18.7; Cicero, *Off.* 1.103–104; *De or.* 1.17, 27, 141, 159, 243; 2.216–289; *Or.* 87–90; *De Op. Gen. Or.* 11; and Quintilian *Inst.* 6.3.

shameless person (ὁ ἀπονεινημένος)	absent-minded person (ὁ ἀναίσθητος)
gossiper (ὁ λογοποιός)	grouch (ὁ αὐθάδης)
meddlesome person (ὁ περίεργος)	superstitious person (ὁ δεισιδαίμων)
complainer (ὁ μεμψίμοιρος)	mistrusting person (ὁ ἄπιστος)
trickster or dissembler (ὁ ἔρων)	squalor (ὁ δυσχερής)
flatterer (τὸν κόλακεία)	person with bad taste (ὁ ἀηδής)
idle chatterer (ὁ ἀδολέσχης)	braggart (ὁ ἀλάζων)
boor (ὁ ἄγροικος)	arrogant person (ὁ ὑπερηφανία)
pleaser (ὁ ἄρεσκος)	coward (ὁ δειλός)
garrulous person (ὁ λάλος)	power hungry person (ὁ ὀλιγαρχικός)
freeloader (ὁ ἀναίσχυντος)	juvenile elder (ὁ ὀψμαθής)
miserly penny pincher (ὁ μικρολόγος)	slanderer (ὁ κακολόγος)
obnoxious person (ὁ βδελυρός)	

person who bummed off others for dishonest gain (ὁ αἰσχροκερδής)
 person lacking in generosity (ὁ ἀνελεύθερος)
 person of petty ambition (ὁ μικροφιλότιμος)
 person with bad timing (ὁ ἄκαιρος)

Fig. 11. Theophrastus' Description of Social Types

dissuade hearers from engaging in such behaviors. Public ridicule and other types of humor became devices of rhetoric that aimed to motivate (i.e., a hortatory device) or to chastise (i.e., an admonitory device). In judicial speeches, humor served as a means to win the *conciliatio* of an audience or jury and it served as a means to contemptuously disparage a plaintiff or defendant (or an opponent or adversary), thus eliciting public scorn for the targeted person. In epideictic speeches, encomium often involved a favored person's triumph over opponents. These triumphs involved agonistic exchanges in which the favored person used invectives and other forms of

tendentious humor to display skill at repartee, wisdom, virtuous character and honorable reputation.

Ancient orators and authors delivered their speeches in a particular style.⁵⁹ Specific styles (e.g., plain, forceful, and elegant, etc.) were suitable for specific kinds of speeches (deliberative, judicial and forensic).⁶⁰ Although a speech could include several compatible styles, every speech ideally adhered to a predominate style.⁶¹ The primary objective of style was to help orators and authors persuade their hearers.⁶²

Each style was suitable for particular kinds of humor devices. For example, the comic or charming hyperbole was suitable to the elegant style, while the contemptuous hyperbole was suitable to the forceful style. Innuendo (such as double

⁵⁹ The enumeration and description of various rhetorical styles can be found in the following works: *Rhet. Her.* 4.8–4.10; Cicero, *De or.* 3.45.177; 52.199–55.212; *Or.* 5:20–29.103; and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Dem.* 1ff; and *Comp.* 21ff. Style describes the particular use of linguistic elements (i.e., choice of analogy, metaphor or allegory; choice of words, ordinary or archaic terms, etc.) and grammatical elements (the use of phrases, clauses, sentences, etc.) that an orator uses to add vigor, charm or vehemence in his speeches (cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 25–30).

⁶⁰ Cf. Cicero, *De or.* III.55.210–212.

⁶¹ Demetrius notes that some styles can incorporate other styles. The elegant style can incorporate grand, plain and forceful style figures and constructions. The forceful style can incorporate the plain style (as often occurs with the use of barbed wit and invectives). However, Demetrius cautions against mixing the plain and grand styles, because he cites that they are inherently polar opposites (Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 36). See Kennedy's discussion on mixing styles and the use of a predominate style (cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 19).

⁶² Rhetorical styles function as one of the essential persuasive tools of rhetoric (cf. Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 25).

entendre), a figure of the elegant style, was effective in conveying charming humor, but innuendo in the forceful style dissipated intensity. In another example, an invective would lose force if it was rendered in flowery language. Brevity and clarity help the invective produce its edgy and barbed force. In other words, each style requires humor that is suitable to the style.

In his work, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, Kennedy discusses the styles of rhetoric used by the Synoptic authors.⁶³ He notes that Mark uses the plain style (ἰσχνός), while Luke adopts the elegant style (γλαφυρός) reminiscent of ancient biographies, and Matthew applies the forceful style (δεινός).⁶⁴ Each Synoptic author uses a distinct rhetorical style that includes a repertoire of rhetorical figures associated with it. Many of these rhetorical figures are devices of humor (hyperbole, onomatopoeia, paronomasia, etc.) or mediums of humor (e.g., allegory, simile, dicta, etc.).⁶⁵ The rhetorical figures of a style tell us a great deal about the kinds of humor that we might expect to see in a literary work or in a performed text (e.g., speech, play script, etc.). This raises the question, what can we learn about humor in the styles found in Matthew, Mark and Luke?

⁶³ Ibid., 97–108.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁶⁵ The author of *Rhet. Her.*, and Quintilian discuss these devices and mediums of humor (cf. Cicero, *De or.* 2.216–289, 340, 349; 3.105, 202–205; *De Partitione Oratoria* 6.22; 21.70–71; *Or.* 87–90; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.3ff; and *Rhet. Her.* 3.11.23; and 1.6.10).

In what follows, I briefly summarize some of Demetrius' descriptions of rhetorical figures as they relate to the plain, forceful, and elegant styles.⁶⁶ I focus specifically on rhetorical figures that are conducive to certain types of humor or that are expressive of certain types of humor. I provide examples of humor from plain style figures found in Mark, forceful style figures found in Matthew, and elegant style figures found in Luke.

Humor in Plain Style Rhetoric

Demetrius discusses the essential figures of plain style (ἰσχνός) rhetoric.⁶⁷ He describes plain style as consisting of simple constructions, familiar words, and short sentences.⁶⁸ Metaphoric words are not suitable to this style.⁶⁹ Demetrius notes that the figures used in the plain style must, first and foremost, promote clarity and

⁶⁶ The author of *Eloc.* actually remains unknown. A superscription in a tenth century manuscript attributes the work to Demetrius. Scholars believe this attribution is dubious. The date is also unknown, but scholars suggest a time period between 200 BCE and 100 C.E. See introduction to Demetrius, *Eloc.* (Innes, LCL, 312–4).

⁶⁷ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 190–239.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 190–192, 202, 204, 208–209.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, *Eloc.* 190.

vividness.⁷⁰ Figures that help achieve this aim include the repetition of a word, alliteration and *onomatopoeia*.⁷¹ Connectives (e.g., *καί*) are also helpful.⁷²

The figures of plain style make it conducive to certain types of humor. Economic conciseness (i.e., brevity), clarity and vividness make the plain style ideal for witty dicta, derogatory epithets and barbed wit.⁷³ For example, consider Jesus' riposte to some Pharisees and scribes, who had asked him why his disciples were eating with dirty hands (Mark 7:5). Conciseness and clarity characterize the whole of the Markan Jesus' riposte in 7:6–23 where he puts forth several short pithy barbs: “καλῶς ἐπροφήτευσεν Ἡσαΐας περὶ ὑμῶν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν—Isaiah got it right when he prophesied about you hypocrites... (v. 6b);” “...ἀκυροῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ παραδόσει ὑμῶν ἣ παρεδώκατε—you do away with the word of God through your tradition which you hand on (v. 13a);” and “καὶ παρόμοια τοιαῦτα πολλὰ ποιεῖτε—you do a lot of things like this (v. 13b).” In addition to derogatory epithets and barbed

⁷⁰ Demetrius discusses clarity (# 191–192, 196–198, 201–203) and vividness (# 208–209, 211, 214–217, 219–220) (*Eloc.*191–220).

⁷¹ Demetrius discusses the following figures characteristic of plain style: repetition (# 196–197, 211–212); *onomatopoeia* (# 220); and alliteration of harsh sounds (# 219) (*Eloc.*192–220).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 192–195.

⁷³ Cf. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 10–11, 24–25, 29–31, 48–49, 208–09. Freud discusses the critical functions of brevity and economic condensation in humor. In Freud's view, these elements make humor possible. Demetrius notes that short clauses make the plain style suitable for comedy while lengthy clauses and expressions are suitable for the tragic or heroic epics (Demetrius, *Eloc.* 204). He uses quotes from the works of Menander and Euripides to explain the brevity and conciseness of the plain style (*Eloc.*193–194, 195).

wit, the Markan Jesus follows his riposte with a straightforward description of a scatological image (v. 15, 18–20). The vividness conveyed through the plain style, and the familiarity of a comic subject turns the words, “...καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται—passes on into the latrine (v. 19)” into a shocking bit of humor.

The use of repetition in plain style rhetoric adds bite to derisive forms of humor. According to Demetrius, the reiteration of a word with harsh-sounding letters such as occurs in the word, κακῶς, intensifies insult (lit. βλασφημία) and gives it punch.⁷⁴ Harsh sounding letters include κ, γ, ρ, φ, τ, and π as well as letters marked with rough breathing.⁷⁵ The repetitious use of these letters generates effects that are more dramatic and helps to convey emotional vigor. There are two ways to create a cacophony of harsh sounds, either by repeating the same word or by repeating similar sounding letters—alliteration.⁷⁶ Regarding the former, Demetrius offers the following example, “you spoke badly (κακῶς) on account of him when he was living, and now that he has died, you write badly (κακῶς) [about him].”⁷⁷ For an example of

⁷⁴ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 211, 219.

⁷⁵ See uses of harsh-sounding letters in Demetrius’ examples in *Eloc.*, 219. For discussion on the quality of the sounds of Greek letters, see Stanford, “Sound, Sense and Music in Greek Poetry.”

⁷⁶ Russell describes alliterative examples in the New Testament (cf. *Paronomasia and Kindred Phenomena in the New Testament*, 8–9). Aune illustrates the following example of alliteration, “Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις (Hebrews 1:1).” See David Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament & Early Christian Literature & Rhetoric* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 33.

⁷⁷ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 211.

alliteration, we recall the following derogatory slight by the Markan Jesus, “καλῶς ἐπροφήτευσεν Ἡσαΐας περὶ ὑμῶν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν, ὡς γέγραπται—Isaiah prophesied exceedingly well about you hypocrites, just as it has been written...(Mark 7:6).”

Mark uses a series of harsh-sounding letters (κ, γ, ρ, φ, τ, π and the letters marked with rough breathing) to emphasize the severe tone of Jesus’ insult. The alliteration of the insult is linked grammatically and aurally by καλῶς and ὡς, and by the genitive ending -ῶν in the clause, περὶ ὑμῶν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν.⁷⁸ The rough breathing signaled in ὑποκριτῶν also carries the harshness of the insult.

The use of *onomatopoeia*, that is, the mimicking of sounds, is another figure commonly associated with plain style and comic behavior.⁷⁹ A Markan example of *onomatopoeia* comes at the end of Jesus’ tirade against the hypocritical practices of the Pharisees and scribes (7:6–12). We can observe the successive repetition of the lip-spitting π (along with the use of μ and ὑμῶν) in Jesus’ final barb (7:13). The intensity of his barb builds up in a crescendo of *onomatopoeic*-like spitting, “ἀκυροῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ παραδόσει ὑμῶν ἣ παρεδώκατε καὶ παρόμοια τοιαῦτα πολλὰ ποιεῖτε—You do away with the Word of God through your tradition which you hand on and you do a lot of things like this (v. 13).”

⁷⁸ Compare Matthew 15:7 where Jesus says, “ὑποκριταί, καλῶς ἐπροφήτευσεν περὶ ὑμῶν Ἡσαΐας λέγων.” The force of the Matthean insult is carried by the vocative position of ὑποκριτής. Matthew does not use alliteration, because the nominative form of *Isaiah* breaks up the succession of similar sounds produced in the genitive phrase.

⁷⁹ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 220.

While the figures of plain style discussed so far tend to be conducive to humor, the preference for connectives in plain style presents a major difficulty. Connectives are not usually conducive to humor, because they undermine the condensation pertinent to humor.⁸⁰ Demetrius discusses how connectives detract from the punch of humor. In his example, he uses a line from Menander's comedy, "I conceived, I gave birth, I nurse, my dear."⁸¹ In performances, Demetrius notes that connectives dissipate the intensity of emotions and reduce dramatic effect.⁸² He explains that the connective *καί* in "I conceived and I gave birth and I nurse, my dear" lessens the impact of the riposte.⁸³ In other words, asyndeton (i.e., the omission of connectives) helps the performer deliver punch and vividness. Note that punch and vividness and condensation are critical for most forms of humor. Demetrius does distinguish between the use of connectives in performances and the use of connectives in texts. He believes that connectives in texts are necessary for clarity. So a critical question surfaces, in oral performances of plain style texts: did ancient performers drop the detracting connectives in their renditions of texts?⁸⁴ If so, would

⁸⁰ Cf. Freud's discussion on economic condensation in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 10–11, 29, 24–25, 29–31, 48–49, and 208–9.

⁸¹ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 194. D. Innes notes that Demetrius' quote comes from Menander *fr.* 685 (Innes, LCL, 465).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 193–194.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸⁴ Scholars continue to explore how ancient performers lifted units (such as stories, parables, etc.) from texts and performed them. Cf. Horsley, ed. *Oral*

performers of the Gospel of Mark have dropped the excessive use of *καὶ* in their performances of Mark? Consider how the potentially comic episode of demon-possessed pigs rushing off a cliff might sound without the thirty-four intrusive repetitions of *καὶ* (Mark 5:3–17).

In summary, the plain style is conducive to certain kinds of humor. In plain style texts where sentences are short and simple, where words are familiar, concise and not metaphoric, and where dialogue eliminates unnecessary connectives, the plain style becomes ideal for pithy barbs, ridiculing epithets, witty invectives, and shocking comic behavior. The role of repetition in plain style adds dramatic effect and intensifies the punch of these tendentious forms of humor. In performances of plain style texts, where performers are free to eliminate excessive connectives, otherwise mundane stories have the potential to become rather lively and humorous.

Humor in Forceful Style Rhetoric

Demetrius discusses the figures, elements and characteristics associated with the forceful style (*δελνός*).⁸⁵ He emphasizes the use of short phrases rather than the

Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q; Richard Horsley et al., *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006); and *Jesus in Context: Power, People and Performances*; David Rhoads et al., *Mark as Story* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996); Rhoads, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004); and Tom Thatcher, ed. *Jesus, the Voice and the Text: Beyond the Oral and Written Gospel* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

⁸⁵ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 240–304. The forceful style typically conveys anger, but it can also convey some other passionate tone. The forceful style characteristically suggests a biting tone (*Eloc.* 240, 247, 255 and 260).

use of longer clauses, primarily because wordiness drains intensity.⁸⁶ Brevity and abruptness create more force and leave less opportunity for denial or rebuttal.⁸⁷

Unlike the emphasis on clarity in plain style, Demetrius encourages inference in the forceful style.⁸⁸ He notes that short allegorical statements can carry more force than describing a situation in detail.⁸⁹ Other types of analogies such as metaphors (e.g., “Python grew bold and was a rushing torrent...against you.”) and similes (e.g., “This decree made the danger which then threatened the city pass by like a cloud”) also tend to convey short sharp blows.⁹⁰ The forceful style is epitomized by the invective and other kinds of speech that produce shock (ἐκπλήσσω).⁹¹ Shock induces fear in one’s opponent.⁹² Demetrius also lists the use of hyperbole as a device of

⁸⁶ Ibid., 241.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 242–241.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 243.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 241–243, 282–283. Demetrius provides the following two helpful examples. He recalls the short phrase, “Dionysius in Corinth,” which was actually a dire Spartan message sent to Philip. Demetrius explains that this compact warning carried more force as an insult than if the message had said, “Dionysius was deposed from rule, and is now a poverty-stricken schoolteacher in Corinth (Demetrius, *Eloc.* [Innes, LCL, 491]).” In an example of a short allegory, Demetrius recalls the following dictum, “The cicadas will sing to you from the ground.” He notes that this allegorical dictum carries more force than a literal rendering of “your trees will be cut down (Demetrius, *Eloc.* [Innes, LCL, 491]).”

⁹⁰ Ibid. See English translations, Innes, LCL, 505, 507.

⁹¹ Demetrius, *Eloc.*, 283.

⁹² Ibid.

forcefulness.⁹³ Hyperbole is an ideal figure for leveling an insult.⁹⁴ Another element of forceful style is cacophony.⁹⁵ Cacophony of harsh sounds can heighten the intensity of an epithet. Another characteristic of the forceful style is the excessive use of the period, which serves to portray the rhythm of speech in short, compact bursts.⁹⁶ Periods provide abruptness and punch. Essentially, all of the figures employed in the forceful style should convey anger.

Demetrius discusses several techniques in delivering forceful style rhetoric. Regarding one technique, he notes that well-placed silence adds force.⁹⁷ In another technique, asking questions rather than making bold statements is an effective way to promote confusion in opponents, which in turn, forces opponents into implicating themselves.⁹⁸ Finally, the use of figures in forceful style should produce the analogous effect of “κατάβασεις τρέχοντες—running downhill.”⁹⁹ The imagery of running downhill illustrates how forceful style should draw hearers along at an

⁹³ Ibid., 282–283.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 241.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 255.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 251–252.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 253.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 279.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 248.

increasing rate of speed until the most potent figure abruptly ends the descent.¹⁰⁰ In other words, force occurs when the most striking element is placed at the end.¹⁰¹

The forceful style is especially conducive to pithy and barbed forms of tendentious humor. We often find these forms of humor in situations where forceful style rhetoric emerges such as in the forensic speeches of judicial proceedings or in other agonistic exchanges between opponents. Obviously, the primary aim of tendentious forms of humor in forceful style rhetoric is to publicly disparage the virtuous character and honorable reputation of an opponent. Derogatory epithets, shocking invectives, abrupt derisive ripostes, discombobulating innuendo, contemptuous hyperbole, fear-provoking or derisive analogies (in the forms of similes, metaphors, fable, allegory, etc.), witty trickery (in the form of entrapment), and unsettling uses of cacophony are among the kinds of humor that serve the forceful style.

The Gospel of Matthew provides some examples of humor, which epitomize the tendentious forms of humor indicative of the forceful style. An example of an abrupt derisive riposte, typical of the forceful style, occurs when Jesus belittles the chief priests and scribes by saying, “ναί οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε—Come now (lit. indeed), you must have read... (21:16)?” Jesus proceeds to quote the first part of a psalm, “ἐκ στόματος νηπίων καὶ θηλαζόντων κατηρτίσω αἶνον—Out of the mouth of little

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 248–249.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 249.

children and nursing infants, you prepared praise... (Matt 21:16; LXX, Ps 8:3).” His opponents might well have picked up the innuendo, a figure common to the forceful style, when they realized the remainder of the verse, “...ἕνεκα τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου τοῦ καταλῦσαι ἐχθρὸν καὶ ἐκδικητήν—for the sake of your enemies and to destroy the hostile ones and seek vindication (LXX, Ps 8:3).”¹⁰² Jesus’ riposte implicitly tells the chief priests and the scribes that he considers their confrontation to be hostile. His allusion suggests that God will seek vengeance for their hostility. The chief priests and scribes make no rebuttal. The absence of their riposte seems to imply shock or some other disconcerting response.

Derisive figures, which are common in forceful style rhetoric, occur frequently in the forensic rhetoric of Matthew 23:13–33.¹⁰³ The Matthean Jesus directs the following contemptuous hyperbole at the scribes and the Pharisees, “οἱ διυλίζοντες τὸν κώνωπα, τὴν δὲ κάμηλον καταπίνοντες—You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel (Matt 23:24)!” An example of derisive analogy occurs when Jesus adds an epithet, “παρομοιάζετε τάφοις κεκοιναμένοις, οἳτινες ἔξωθεν μὲν φαίνονται ὡραῖοι, ἔσωθεν δὲ γέμουσιν ὀστέων νεκρῶν καὶ πάσης ἀκαθαρσίας—You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead

¹⁰² Demetrius advises that innuendo serves as a subtle device of forcefulness. He explains that innuendo is a prudent way of pointing out the offenses of persons of considerable power, because it does so in an implied and subtle manner (*Eloc.* 292–293).

¹⁰³ Cf. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 86. Kennedy discusses the judicial rhetoric found in Matthew 21:23–23:39.

men's bones and every kind of filth (Matt 23:27).” Jesus utters another form of derision in the derogatory epithet, “ὄφεις, γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν—You serpents, you brood of vipers (23:33).”¹⁰⁴

In Matthew 21:28–32, Jesus uses discombobulating innuendo, which is indicative of forceful style rhetoric. He poses the straightforward supposedly non-threatening question, “Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ—What do you think (21:28a)?” He then proceeds to present a case involving two sons, in which the sons give different responses to a command issued by their father (21:28b–30). Jesus concludes by asking his opponents another question, “τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς—Which of the two [sons] did the will of his father (vs. 31)?” While his opponents answer correctly, Jesus does not proceed to commend them; rather he proceeds to insult them by associating them with the unrepentant son (v. 32).

In three successive interactions with his opponents, Jesus delivers rhetoric that mimics the forceful style techniques of short abrupt jabs and the sense of “rushing

¹⁰⁴ Quintilian writes a good deal on the role of laughter in the forceful style. He cites numerous examples of invectives and other kinds of humor, particularly useful in judicial rhetoric (cf. *Inst.* 6.3). Kennedy notes the use of invectives in forensic speeches (cf. *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 86). The most repeated invective in the Matthean tradition is “You, hypocrite (hypocrites)—ὕποκριτα, (ὕποκριταί)!” These epithets attack the integrity and reputation of Jesus’ opponents. The Matthean Jesus uses ὑποκριτής nine times in the vocative as compared to Luke, who uses the vocative form of the epithet three times, and Mark, who uses it once (cf. Matthew 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; Mark 7:6; Luke 6:42; 12:56; and 13:15).

down the slopes” as described by Demetrius (Matt 21:23–27; 28–32; and 33–44).¹⁰⁵ With each encounter, Jesus successfully utters a barbed riposte. His ripostes repeatedly silence his opponents, and their anger increases exponentially. The public setting of these antagonistic exchanges exacerbates the effect of Jesus’ forceful style rhetoric. In the first interaction, the chief priests and elders of the people challenge Jesus’ authority (21:23).¹⁰⁶ Jesus effectively entraps them between a rock and a hard place (21:25–27). The pace of the exchange begins somewhat slowly as a deliberation occurs between the opponents, who try to figure a way out of their predicament. Finally, the opponents decide to give a non-flattering response, that is, a response of ignorance. Their response makes them appear ridiculous. In the second interaction, the pace begins to quicken as Jesus asks the opinion of his opponents in a case that he explains to them (21:28–32).¹⁰⁷ Their answer opens the way for Jesus to lambaste their actions. In the third interaction, Jesus tells a parable that he aims to use as an analogy against his opponents (21:33–44). At the conclusion of the parable, he again asks the opponents a question, which they answer saying, “κακούς κακῶς ἀπολέσει αὐτούς—[the landowner] will destroy those wickedly evil ones (vs. 41).” Then Jesus moves rapidly to a dictum and onward to a severe reprimand. The strong reaction

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 241–242, 248 and 274.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew places a condition on whether he will respond to his opponents. He says, “...which if you can tell me, then I will tell you—ὄν ἐὰν εἴπητέ μοι κἀγὼ ὑμῖν ἐρωῶ...(vs. 24).” This conditional requirement does not explicitly occur in Mark 11:27–33 and Luke 20:1–8.

¹⁰⁷ The parable of the two sons is absent from Luke or Mark.

from the chief priests and the Pharisees demonstrates the temerity of Jesus' accusations (vss. 45–46). By the end of his forceful-style speech in 21:23–44, Jesus' opponents are left speechless and powerless before the crowd. From verses 23 to 44, we see that Jesus' challenges and ripostes have escalated into what Demetrius calls the sense of rushing downhill.

In summary, the forceful style is quite conducive to tendentious forms of humor and we see much of this kind of humor in forensic rhetoric and in agonistic exchanges between opponents. Epithets, invectives, derisive ripostes, innuendo, hyperbole, humorous analogies (in the forms of similes, metaphors, fable, allegory, etc.), trickery are among the kinds of humor that surface in the forceful style.

Humor in Elegant Style Rhetoric

Demetrius describes the elegant style (*γλαφυρός*) as characteristically one of charm (*χαρίεις*).¹⁰⁸ Charm ranges in kind from refined types of charm (e.g., witty dicta) to derisive types (e.g., sarcasm).¹⁰⁹ Depending on the kind of charm used, it can produce varied reactions ranging from lighthearted pleasure (*ίλαρός*) to terror-provoking fear (which in elegant style often produces comic reaction).¹¹⁰ Demetrius

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 128–129.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 128, and 130–131. Throughout his discussion on the use of charm in the elegant style, Demetrius cites examples of comic types of charm found in the works of Aristophanes and Menander (cf. *Eloc.* 150, 152–153, 156, 160, and 161). He also cites examples of derisive or fear-provoking types of charm found in Homer's *Od.* (cf. *Eloc.* 130, 147, 152, and 163).

notes that one can express charm in the ordinary everyday speech (thus the elegant style can incorporate the plain style), and one can express charm in intense expressions (thus the elegant style can incorporate the forceful style).¹¹¹

The figures of elegant speech are quite conducive to humor. Several of these figures are similar to the ones found in forceful style such as repetition, analogy (e.g., metaphor, simile, and allegories), hyperbole, and innuendo.¹¹² Figures distinctive to the elegant style include assonance, *παροιμία* (i.e., a pithy saying, maxim, proverb or parable) and comic hyperbole (as distinct from barbed hyperbole).¹¹³ Another distinctive figure of elegant style is the element of surprise. When something occurs unexpectedly or when someone experiences a release from fear, this creates a kind of charm.¹¹⁴ One form of surprise is a sudden change of mind.¹¹⁵ This element also produces a kind of charm.

Demetrius notes that assonance produces charm.¹¹⁶ Assonance includes words that share similarities in the sounds of vowel and consonants. In the Gospel of Luke, assonance occurs distinctively in the clause, “...περὶ πάντων ὧν ἐποίησεν ποιηρῶν ὁ

¹¹¹ Ibid., 128–131.

¹¹² Ibid., 140–142, 146, 151, 155, and 161.

¹¹³ Ibid., 154, 156, and 161.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 152 and 159.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 148.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 154.

Ἡρώδης, προσέθηκεν καὶ τοῦτο ἐπὶ πᾶσιν—concerning all the evil [things] which he did, he added *even another* to these...(3:19–20).¹¹⁷ Luke’s harsh reference to Herod’s despicable reputation is quite derogatory. The use of assonance conveys the uncomplimentary Lukan authorial commentary with sarcastic charm.¹¹⁸ Assonance occurs again when Jesus poses the disparaging question, “λέγετε ἐν Βεελζεβούλ ἐκβάλλειν με τὰ δαιμόνια. εἰ δὲ ἐγὼ ἐν Βεελζεβούλ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια—You say [it is] by Beelzebul that I cast out the demons. Now if by Beezebul, I cast out demons... (Luke 11:18–19a)!¹¹⁹ Note the assonance in the repetition of the clause, “Βεελζεβούλ ἐκβάλλειν τὰ δαιμόνια” and the recurrence of the sounds in the various forms of “ἐκβάλλω.”¹²⁰ Assonance also occurs in the barb, “οἱ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν ἐν τίνι ἐκβάλλουσιν; διὰ τοῦτο αὐτοὶ ὑμῶν κριταὶ ἔσονται—then by whom does your sons cast them out? With this reasoning, these [i.e., your sons] will be your judges (i.e.,

¹¹⁷ Russell notes assonance in this Lukan Jesus’ dictum (3:19–20) (cf. *Paronomasia and Kindred Phenomena in the New Testament*, 10). Mark 6:17–18 and Matthew 14:3–4 lack this particular commentary on Herod.

¹¹⁸ Recall that Demetrius argued against the use of assonance in forceful speech, because assonance tended to dissipate anger. Essentially, he believed assonance in invectives did not create enough intensity and bite. Invectives, he noted, worked best when they were spontaneous and uncomplicated (*Eloc.* 27).

¹¹⁹ The Lukan Jesus turns the reasoning of his opponents back upon them. Matthew’s version does not use repetition and, therefore, keeps his use of assonance here very succinct, which befits the anger of the forceful style (12:26–27). The Matthean Jesus’ barbed insult is terse, while the Lukan Jesus relies on charm in making his barb. While assonance dissipates the anger of the barb, it produces the pleasure of a good comeback.

¹²⁰ Cf. Russell. *Paronomasia and Kindred Phenomena in the New Testament*, 10.

their exorcisms prove you to be Beelzebul) (Luke 11:19b).”¹²¹ Assonance adds charm to the Lukan Jesus’ riposte when the opponents realize their argument has recoiled back upon them, and they have unwittingly identified themselves to be Beelzebul!

Demetrius briefly discusses the charm of παροιμία (i.e., a pithy saying, maxim, proverb or a veiled saying).¹²² He particularly relishes the charm produced through a rapid succession of two or three παροιμία.¹²³ An example of a rapid succession of three humorous proverbial sayings occur in Luke 6:39–41. In the first saying, the Lukan Jesus says, “μήτι δύναται τυφλὸς τυφλὸν ὀδηγεῖν; οὐχὶ ἀμφοτέρου εἰς βόθυνον ἐμπεσοῦνται—A blind man can’t guide a blind man, can he? Won’t they both fall into a pit (Luke 6:39)?” The second saying follows with “οὐκ ἔστιν μαθητῆς ὑπὲρ τὸν διδάσκαλον· κατηρτισμένος δὲ πᾶς ἔσται ὡς ὁ διδάσκαλος αὐτοῦ—A pupil is not above his teacher; but properly formed, every disciple will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40).” The third saying adds, “Τί δὲ βλέπεις τὸ κάρφος τὸ ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, τὴν δὲ δοκὸν τὴν ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ ὀφθαλμῷ οὐ κατανοεῖς—And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not see the log that in your own eye (Luke 6:41)?” These παροιμία of the Lukan Jesus convey charm in that they note comic behavior (i.e., the blind leading the blind, the student who perceives himself

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Demetrius, *Eloc.* 156. See the definition of παροιμία in BDAG.

¹²³ Ibid., 156.

better than the teacher, and the critic who sees the faults of others, but not his own faults) through lofty and elegantly expressed dicta.

Demetrius notes that comic hyperbolic expressions create charm.¹²⁴ He cites the following example of hyperbole from a comic play of Aristophanes, “ὤπτησιν βοῦς κριβανίτας ἀντὶ ἄρτων—they baked bulls in their ovens instead of bread.”¹²⁵ The hyperbole, Demetrius notes, emphasizes the insatiable appetite (ἀπληστία) of the Persians.¹²⁶ A comic hyperbole occurs when the Lukan Jesus asks “Τί δὲ βλέπεις τὸ κάρφος τὸ ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, τὴν δὲ δοκὸν τὴν ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ ὀφθαλμῷ οὐ κατανοεῖς—Why do you see the speck [of sawdust] in your brother’s eye, but you do not see the [wooden] beam in your own eye (6:41)?¹²⁷ In Luke 11:42, we see the following exaggeration, “...ἀποδεκατοῦτε τὸ ἡδύοσμον καὶ τὸ πήγανον καὶ πᾶν λάχανον—you tithe mint and rue and every [kind of] herb.” Tithing every kind of herb is quite hyperbolic. Another Lukan exaggeration contains a unique adaptation of

¹²⁴ Ibid., 161–162.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 161. According to Innes, this quote is from Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* (85–87) (cf. Innes, LCL, 449).

¹²⁶ Ibid., 161.

¹²⁷ Other scholars have noted the humor in this hyperbole: Culpepper, “Humor,” 333; Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 104; Kealy, “Humour and Jesus,” 135; and Webster, *Laughter in the Bible*, 111.

a *Q* saying, “...ἢ καὶ αἰτήσῃ ῥόν, ἐπιδώσει αὐτῷ σκορπίον—or if he would ask for a fish, he would give him a scorpion (Luke 11:12; cf. Matt 7:9–10)?”¹²⁸

Demetrius discusses the comic charm produced when something occurs unexpectedly or when someone experiences a release from fear.¹²⁹ An example of charm that plays on something unexpected occurs when hearers realize that the Cyclops’ gibe, “ὑστάτον ἔδομαιν Οὔτιν—*Nobody* will I eat last” means that he intends to consume Odysseus and his comrades.¹³⁰ Demetrius notes that this is not the kind of hospitality that the hearers expected.¹³¹ An example of charm that plays on a release of fear occurs when a frightened person suddenly realizes he fears a strip of leather, rather than a snake.¹³² In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus presents unexpected and absurd twists in the following dictum, “...τίνα δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν τὸν πατέρα αἰτήσῃ ὁ υἱὸς ἰχθύν, καὶ ἀντὶ ἰχθύος ὄφιν αὐτῷ ἐπιδώσει; ἢ καὶ αἰτήσῃ ῥόν, ἐπιδώσει αὐτῷ σκορπίον—what father among you, if his son would ask for a fish, instead of a fish, would give him a serpent? Or if he would ask for a fish, he would give him a scorpion

¹²⁸ Jónsson notes that this dictum is humorous and dicta of this type commonly surface in rabbinic literature (cf. *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 105–6).

¹²⁹ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 152, 159.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 152. Innes notes that Demetrius’ quotes Homer’s *Odyssey* 9.369–70.

¹³¹ Homer apparently makes a pun on a fake name used by Odysseus (i.e., “Nobody”) (cf. Homer, *Od.* 9.369–370). See note in Innes, LCL, 443. See the BDAG entry for οὔτις.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 159.

(11:11–12)?” The Lukan Jesus uses shocking analogies (as I noted above, this is also a comic hyperbolic expression) to make a didactic point. He contrasts the life-giving food of a fish and an egg with the deadly venom of a snake and a scorpion. Luke’s dictum is shocking, yet vividly elegant in its Greek rendering.¹³³

Demetrius notes that a change of mind also produces charm.¹³⁴ An example of *μετάνοια* occurs in the Lukan parable of the widow and the judge (Luke 18:2–5).¹³⁵

First, the Lukan Jesus repeats that the judge neither feared God nor cared what others thought (vss. 2, 4).¹³⁶ Note, the use of repetition is a figure of the elegant style.¹³⁷ In

¹³³ Both the repetition of words (i.e., αἰτήσει and ἐπιδώσει) as well as the repetitive sounds (υἱὸς/ἰχθύος; ἰχθύς/ὄφιν; and ὦν/σκορπίον) produced in this dictum are characteristic of elegant speech.

¹³⁴ Demetrius uses both μεταβολή—change of direction and μετανοέω—to change one’s mind (*Eloc.* 148).

¹³⁵ The Lukan Jesus tells the following parable, “κριτῆς τις ἦν ἐν τινι πόλει τὸν θεὸν μὴ φοβούμενος καὶ ἄνθρωπον μὴ ἐντρέπόμενος. χήρα δὲ ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐκείνῃ καὶ ἤρχετο πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσα· ἐκδίκησόν με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου. καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν ἐπὶ χρόνον. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα εἶπεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ· εἰ καὶ τὸν θεὸν οὐ φοβοῦμαι οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπον ἐντρέπομαι, διὰ γε τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον τὴν χήραν ταύτην ἐκδικήσω αὐτήν, ἵνα μὴ εἰς τέλος ἐρχομένη ὑπωπιάζῃ με—There was a certain judge in a certain city who neither feared God, nor displayed any sense of shame in his dealings with people; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give a judgment against my accuser (or adversary)!’ For some time, he did not grant her request, but then after a while, he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor am I concerned with shame in my dealings with people, yet on account that this troublesome widow keeps bothering me, I will render a judgment for her, or else, she will finally come and give me a beating (Luke 18:2–5).’”

¹³⁶ The use of μὴ ἐντρέπόμενος (vs. 2) and οὐδὲ...ἐντρέπομαι (vs. 4) can be translated as “he displayed no sense of shame in his dealings with people” or “he had no regard for people.”

¹³⁷ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 140.

spite of the judge's lack of concern about public opinion, he apparently does care what people think. He expresses that the widow might get mad enough to give him a black eye (ὄπωπιάζω) (18:5). If the widow gave the judge a black eye, he would become a laughingstock, and would lose face.¹³⁸

In summary, the elegant style expresses various types of humor and does so with more linguistic and rhetorical finesse and charm. This does not mean that the types of humor found in elegant rhetoric will be limited to those types that convey light-heartedness or pleasantry. Humor expressed with charm can include humor that provokes terror or humor that unsettles and surprises. In other words, humor can surface forcefully via such figures as repetition, analogy (e.g., metaphor, simile, and allegories), hyperbole, and innuendo. Humor can also arise in figures distinctive to the elegant style such as assonance, παροιμία (i.e., a pithy saying, maxim, proverb or parable) and comic hyperbole. The elegant style can include humor evoked by the unexpected.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing humor within the social context of oral performances. I noted that humor served several critical functions. Humor helped performers of texts connect with their hearers; thereby it helped them to secure the

¹³⁸ Other scholars have noted the humor in this parable. Cf. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 127–8; Phipps, *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 74; Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 51; Webster, *Laughter in the Bible*, 113.

concordatio of their hearers. Performers also used humor to revive and engage their audiences. I discussed how expressions of in-group humor in oral performances also served several critical sociological functions. Humor helped to foster and reinforce in-group solidarity and loyalty. Laughing or taking pleasure in the downfall of despised opponents was a common way of strengthening in-group solidarity and loyalty in Roman-era antiquity. As a powerful device of socialization, humor also served as a form of social pressure. Derision of outsiders helped convey in-group values and socialize in-group members.

After situating in-group texts within the social context of oral performances, I discussed the function of humor in biographical encomium. Essentially, humor helped the in-group to claim a favored person's honorable reputation and virtuous character. In a battle of wits, the favored person used tendentious forms of humor to defeat adversaries and rivals by making them appear ridiculous. Humor also helped an in-group in another critical way: it helped members salvage the honor of a disparaged folk hero. Furthermore, through a favored person's or folk hero's successful uses of humor, in-group members vicariously triumphed over their opponents and strengthened their own claims of legitimacy.

I noted that the Synoptic authors in their renditions of biographical encomium included humorous authorial commentary. This oft-derogatory commentary surfaced in addition to the barbed exchanges between Jesus and his opponents. I gave some examples of how the Matthean and Lukan authors aimed their own humorous slurs at

the opponents of Jesus. Of course, the barbs served as insider jabs at the rivals of the Matthean and the Lukan in-groups.

In the rest of the chapter, I focused on other content cues that point to the possible presence of humor in the Synoptic texts. In a brief discussion on comic typologies, I described some common stock characters and social types that audiences in Roman antiquity would have associated with comic performances or humorous didactic analogies. In my discussion on humor in rhetorical styles, I emphasized that certain rhetorical styles (specifically the plain, forceful and elegant styles) provide us with cues to the kinds of humor that might surface in Synoptic texts. In short, derogatory epithets and barbed wit were characteristic forms of humor expressed in the conciseness of the plain style. Shock-producing analogies, discombobulating innuendo, pithy barbs and intensifying assaults of derisive ripostes and challenges were characteristic of the forceful style with its anger-laden or passionate tones. I noted that the stunned silence of opponents is not an uncommon response to forceful style rhetoric. Sarcasm, witty dicta, reversal of expectations, and comic hyperbole were characteristic of the elegant style. Through this style, humor initially appeared softened through charm, but it was known to pack just as explosive a punch.

CONCLUSION

Ancient emic sources have provided us with insights into the power of ancient humor and the gravity of its use. As we have seen, tendentious forms of humor such as derisive laughter and public mockery were typically used by powerful entities to reinforce hierarchical order and to maintain existing social structures. We observed these forceful forms of humor in agonistic exchanges between opponents. These kinds of tendentious humor included satirical barbs and derogatory epithets, which evoked fear in opponents, angered them and left them exposed to public ridicule. The use of derisive humor also made opponents appear to be fools and helped favored persons to win the *conciliatio* of the public. We also observed these forceful forms of humor in the public humiliations of condemned persons and defeated captives. With regard to the chastisement and the punishment of socially unacceptable or deviant behavior, we have seen disparaging forms of humor such as those that occurred in fatal charades and other kinds of public mockery. In antiquity, these tendentious forms of humor exacted humiliating shame upon defeated rivals such examples included celebratory triumphs over enemies and the *vituperatio* of Roman judicial proceedings.

According to various ancient emic sources, tendentious forms of humor served beneficial purposes for ancient humorists and their in-groups, although the

repercussions of its use were usually quite serious for the humorist. A folk-hero's skillful use of witty dicta and barbed ripostes helped to convey his or her wisdom, courage and virtuous reputation, but ancient hearers knew that insulted opponents held power to exact revenge. As we have seen, satirists, prophets and other types of social critics used humor as a medium to target hypocrisy and other social ills, but they did so often to their own demise. When humorists aimed their criticisms at powerful persons, public ridicule and fear of public ridicule induced severe repercussions, which often included violent and deadly responses.

When we considered the forms, functions and effects of Synoptic humor through the lens of the humor model that I proposed, we found examples of humor quite reminiscent of the forceful uses of humor in Roman antiquity. In particular, the Matthean and the Lukan authors' depictions of Jesus' skillful use of tendentious humor were consistent with the use of forceful types of humor found in ancient biographic encomium and in forensic style rhetoric. They nuanced the humor of Jesus in their own distinctive ways, but always with the aim of displaying his courage, wisdom and virtuous reputation. In the agonistic exchanges between Jesus and his opponents in the Temple precinct, the Matthean author illustrated Jesus' use of witty dicta, stinging barbs and derisive epithets (Matt 21:12–23:36). The opponents of the Matthean Jesus persistently tried to entrap him; instead, they repeatedly failed. As a result, they were made to appear as fools in a very public forum. Even in a final confrontation with the Sanhedrin, the Matthean Jesus offered an unsettling riposte (26:64) that left them shaken and fearful, while the Lukan Jesus offered a derisively

biting riposte that prompted the Sanhedrin to haul him before Pilate without hesitation (22:67–23:1).

Reminiscent of the Roman satirists, who ridiculed the judicial proceedings of Rome, the Lukan and Matthean authors offered their own ridicule of the Sanhedrin trial (Luke 22:67–68; Matt 26:59–60). The Matthean author belittled the Sanhedrin with humorous dicta (26:59–60); while the Lukan author had Jesus explicitly denounce the Sanhedrin's neglect of a just defense (22:67–70). While the Matthean and Lukan depictions of the Sanhedrin trial were narrative constructions that served the particular needs of their Christian communities, the authors' nuanced humor also communicated powerful insights to in-group members about Jesus' character.

The barbed ripostes, shock-producing speech, and derogatory epithets aimed at despised authorities had deadly consequences for Jesus. While the tendentious humor of the Matthean Jesus helped him to win public favor, at least from the perspective of the Matthean community, it did little to safeguard him from angry authorities. With their honor disparaged in the public forum of the Temple precinct, the authorities sought deadly reprisal. According to the Matthean and Lukan authors, after the Sanhedrin convicted Jesus in a sham court, they proceeded to mock him in ways reminiscent of the fatal charades of Roman executions. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Sanhedrin trial handed down its conviction and then its members proceeded to mock Jesus as a sham prophet (Matt 26:67–68). Following the Roman trial of Jesus, Pilate's soldiers carried out Jesus' punishment in very Roman-like fashion when they dressed him up as a sham king (Matt 27:28–30). In the only

depiction of a Herodian trial of Jesus, the Lukan author described Herod's mockery of Jesus as yet another pretender to the throne (23:11). Both the Matthean and Lukan authors went on to recount Jesus' crucifixion as a spectacle of public mockery (Matt 27:39, 41; Luke 23: 35).

In summary, the Synoptic examples of humor, which I primarily discussed in chapters five and six, stood out as quite reminiscent of the types of humor that one finds in ancient biographical encomium and in comic and oratory performances. These types of ancient emic sources revealed much in the way of humor cues such as humorous authorial commentary, comic typologies, humor mediums (e.g., hyperbole and paronomasia) and humor devices (associated with specific rhetorical styles). In addition, several forms of humor surface repeatedly in these emic sources such as derogatory epithets, humorous barbs, witty dicta, and public mockery.

Through a humor model, I have provided some discussions and insights, not only on the recognition of humor cues, but also on understanding the social effects of ancient humor. I noted the importance of recognizing the cultural presuppositions we bring to the Synoptic Gospels. I argued that our study of Synoptic humor must be supplemented by etic perspectives in order for us to understand how humor affected ancient social constructs, especially honor, reputation and status. I have conveyed that humor played no frivolous role in the Synoptic literature, precisely because it had serious effects on social constructs, which in turn affected social relationships. For targeted persons, disassociation from one's in-group, the loss of honor, and violent reprisals were only a few of the dire effects of tendentious humor. For humorists,

commendable virtues and public favor were some of the principal benefits of humor use, but reprisals always threatened their well-being.

In some respects, the forms, functions and effects of humor have changed little over time. The ancient collections of jokes such as those found in *Philogelos* and the numerous Ciceronian examples of sardonic humor would strike a familiar chord among modern readers.¹ Cultural differences, however, determine how one receives humor and what kinds of humor one would appreciate. In the honor society of Roman antiquity, tendentious forms of humor were no laughing matter. While humor could build a person's honor and even leave them with a lasting legacy, it could also have serious and deadly repercussions. Ironically, in Roman antiquity, the successful defense of one's honor in the face of hostile adversaries often required the kind of humor that eventually led to one's demise.

¹ Baldwin. *The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover*.

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