

John Goldingay

Are They Comic Acts?

Dr Goldingay, the Principal of St John's College, Nottingham, is better known for his major contributions to Old Testament scholarship and to the doctrine of Scripture. His venture into the New Testament is therefore all the more welcome.

In the story of Peter's release from prison in Acts 12 there is a charming vignette in which a girl called Rhoda is so overjoyed when Peter arrives at Mary's house where the Christians are praying (presumably for Peter himself, among other things) that she leaves him at the gate while she goes to tell everyone else of his arrival. The congregation has a discussion about whether she can have correctly identified the person at the gate; meanwhile 'Peter continued knocking'. F. F. Bruce calls the scene 'full of vivid humour'.¹

The identification of humour is of course a tricky matter, especially cross-culturally—and all our biblical study is cross-cultural. Some people may now be amused when the same Peter is described as 'standing up with the eleven' in Acts 2.14, because in certain cultures this can sound like the beginning of a cricket match. If it does, we know that the humour lies in our reading. It is not intrinsic to the story or to the author's intention. In Acts 12 the humour seems to be there in the story itself. It manifests a feature of one standard form of humour, what one might call sharp but harmless incongruity, a situation in which someone 'makes a fool' of himself or herself. But if a literary work contains one joke, it is at least a plausible possibility that it may contain more than one; conversely, if it lacks more, this may cast doubt on such a reading of the one.

The story of Peter and Rhoda seems to be the only one where Bruce finds humour. I have found no recognition of humour in

¹ *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (London: Marshall/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 251. Cf. R. N. Longenecker, 'The Acts of the Apostles', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan/London: Pickering, 1981) 410; L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992) 218.

other standard commentaries.² A recent reading of Acts made me inclined to wonder whether actually it is the most humorous book in the New Testament. W. H. Willimon refers to humour or the comic in connection with six passages,³ noted elsewhere in the article. R. L. Pervo in the context of a literary study of Acts spots a larger number.⁴ He links this with the unnecessary conclusion (or premiss) that Acts is a historical novel, though he also notes (6) that Acts has been compared with ancient monographs which can be history or fiction or something in between. The most systematic treatment appears in a survey by J. Jónsson.⁵ Originally published in Iceland and then reprinted in Europe at the initiative of a Swedish bishop, it has comically remained little-known. A mirror-image for Pervo, the chapter on Acts begins (208) with the statement 'the Acts is a historical work'.

The fact that humour is a powerful educational tool might make one expect that New Testament writers would use it, not least where they wanted to convey a message whose historicity was vital. Admittedly Acts happens to be part of a biblical narrative which, unusually, gives us an account of its (implied) author's intention in writing (see Luke 1.1–5; cf Acts 1.1). The solemnity of this statement, which hints at no intentional irony, gives no encouragement to our understanding him as a humorist. On the other hand, in literature of the period such prefaces were a matter of convention, and might even appear in fictional works as an aid to verisimilitude (see Pervo 5), as is the case today:

² C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Black, 1957); J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971; ET from *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 14th ed., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1965); W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Marshall, 1973); I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: IVP, 1980); D. J. Williams, *Acts* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985); H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987; ET from *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 2nd ed., Tübingen: Mohr, 1972); C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994).

³ See Acts (Atlanta: Knox, 1988).

⁴ See R. Pervo, *Profit With Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), esp. 58–66. I am grateful to my colleague Steve Walton for drawing my attention to this book.

⁵ *Humour and Irony in the New Testament* (Reykjavík: Bókauútgáfa, Menningarsjóðs, 1965; reprinted Leiden: Brill, 1985); see 208–22. I am grateful to I. H. Marshall for drawing my attention to the references to this work in E. M. Embry's article on 'Laugh' in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 2:429–36.

consider, for example, R. J. Waller's novel *The Bridges of Madison County*. Indeed, there are a number of ways in which Acts follows conventions which are known from other writings from the Greek and Roman world and which are discussed by the rhetoricians.⁶ These conventions include the use of humour as a means of persuasion. This consideration adds circumstantial support to the possibility that the author consciously incorporated humour in Acts. The same conclusion emerges from Jónsson's comparison of New Testament humour with rabbinic material.

Yet one does not need to assume that the points where we might find humour (not points where we introduce humour, as in my sporting example above) need all to have been points where an author intended it. People can write in prose or poetry without realizing it, and even construct chiasms unintentionally. So they can be humorous without intending or realizing it; this is especially true of irony, where an author may well be unaware of telling tensions or links in a narrative. If interpretation moves between attention to authors, texts, and ancient and modern audiences/readers, I focus here on text as ancient reader might have been able to read it, trying always to remember that as writer I am reader. I do not mind seeing things in the text that the author was not aware were there, but I want to preserve the distinction between things that are there and things that are not.

Not only is the identification of humour a tricky matter; the definition of humour is of course also a tricky matter, along with that of terms such as wit, comedy, mockery, parody, satire, and irony. Here I work backwards from some things I think I have seen in Acts. Centrally, there is a sequence of tales or speeches (mostly the former) which bring a smile to my face, a particular form of emotional and physical response to certain sorts of words or acts or events. They involve acts or words such as we are in a position to recognize (if we are prepared to share the narrative's world) to be unwise or unintelligent or unperceptive or inappropriate or larger than life, usually without being grossly wicked (if they are, the humour becomes black). In other words, people behave or speak, or things happen, in a funny-peculiar way, and that strikes us as funny-ha-ha; the homonymity reflects an inner link between the two meanings of the word. The smile which responds to something 'funny' may be friendly and loving or a touch inimical and un pitying; it can imply affection or contempt.

The fact that the New Testament is a response to 'funny' things may provide another reason why it would be funny if there were

no humour in the New Testament, and perhaps especially in the history of the early church, for the Bible presupposes the conviction that human beings speak and behave in unwise ways, and it is often concerned to expose these. The motif of reversal is important in it, and humour involves rejoicing at such reversal, whether those who get their come-uppance are silly unbelievers or silly believers. Like metaphor, humour will not be a way of merely decorating a point which stands independently of it, as in many a preacher's dispensable joke, but a way whereby the point itself comes into being. A book's humour will thus be as serious as the book as a whole, and not incompatible with the solemnity of some of the sections or contexts in which humour comes (e.g. 2.14-36; 4.1-12; 7; 12.2). Like metaphor, it may probably also be at times intelligent, subtle, and easily missed or misinterpreted.

The nature of humour as I have just described it is illustrated by God's smile at the pretensions of the nations (Ps 2.4) or by Sarah's smile at the idea that at her age she is going to have a baby (Gen 18.12). Both these smilers find humour where the speaker intended none and thus become respectively patron God and patron saint of interpreters who do that, though of course God interpreted the 'text' correctly (well, so we may believe, though if so, we do it by faith) while Sarah did not and ironically initiates the scholarly guild of interpreters who have made themselves a smiling-stock among the angels.

1 Humour at the expense of outsiders

Humour can take the form of mockery of outsiders. It suggests that they are making fools of themselves and need not be taken seriously. It thus invites the reader to dismiss them and rather to follow the perspective of the author and the author's group.

First, the Jewish leadership makes itself a laughing-stock. Among the devout Jews confronted by strange events at Pentecost, some think that these indicate that people have been drinking too much (2.13). Jewish leaders see the facts of Peter and John's healing and articulate speaking, but cannot find a way of either acknowledging its implications or of stopping their activity (4.13-22). The Sadducees imprison the apostles but an angel opens the doors and sends them back to the temple, evidently also locking the doors again behind them (5.17-26), 'with the comic speed of an old "Keystone Cops" movie' and 'an even more comic shuttling back and forth' between council, jail, and temple preaching (Willimon 56) as the officers thus cannot

find them in the locked prison; the motif recurs in 12.6–11. One of their own number therefore warns the Council to beware of opposing God (5.33–39). Much later the Pharisees' and Sadducees' disagreement over the resurrection is made to contribute to the frustration of the desires of both (23.6–10).

With some irony, the means of this was one of the witnesses at Stephen's earlier lynching, another Pharisee, a young man named Saul, whose energetic opposition to Jesus was then turned upside down. The lynching itself had ironically been the fulfilment of Stephen's own warnings regarding how his audience could follow in the way of their forebears (7.51–58). Saul who had become more and more incensed at the Christians' behaviour is soon led into Damascus whereas he had planned to bring people bound to Jerusalem (9.2, 8) (Pervo 60). Subsequently unbelieving Jewish people in Damascus plot to catch Saul but he evades them by escaping in a basket (9.24–25). Then their counterparts in Antioch and Iconium think they have stoned Paul to death but he gets up and goes back into their city (14.19–20). Further counterparts in Corinth again attack him but end up with their own leader beaten (18.12–17). Yet more plotters follow a pious vow of Paul's with an impious one of their own which leaves them with the choice between death on hunger-strike or a humiliating climb-down (23.12–35) (Pervo 60).

Similar ironies overtake Jewish miracle-workers. Simon the magus 'that power of God which is called great' tries to buy power from the apostles and has to beg Peter to pray that judgment be averted from him (8.9–19). Elymas the magus who was supposed to be a prophet is the victim of Saul's being filled with the Holy Spirit and ends up blinded (13.6–11). Sceva's sons who are exorcists are overcome by evil spirits who ask of unbelievers exorcising in Jesus's name, 'We know Jesus and Paul, but who are you?' These exorcists are overcome and flee naked (19.13–16). Johnson (341) notes that the verb used of the man jumping on the exorcists is that used of the spirit of Yhwh in e.g. 1 Sam 10.6. 'While Luke considers magic to be a serious issue, he is not above treating it in a comical way' (Willimon 147).

Pagans also make fools of themselves. Even the good Cornelius worships Peter (10.25). In 14.18 Paul and Barnabas have difficulty in persuading people not to worship them; 'the humor of all this pagan commotion is selfevident' (Willimon 126). Intellectuals are not exempt from such humour. Marshall notes an irony in his comment on 17.22. In general in that chapter, whereas Paul seemed laughable to the Athenian philosophers, the story is told in such a way as to suggest that 'it is the

aristocratic élite of Athens that have become worthy of a smile' (Jónsson 216). In 19.34 Ephesians cry out for two whole hours, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians'; the apostles' opponents are portrayed as 'ridiculous' (Satterthwaite 377; Jónsson [218] sees 19.23–41 as one of the most amusing stories in Acts). In 28.1–6 the Maltese think Paul is a murderer, then a god.

Imperial powers are also made fun of. This begins with the freeing of Paul from prison in Philippi, where he stops the jailer from killing himself (16.27–34). Subsequently the magistrates are compelled to apologize to Paul for his imprisonment (16.39). Back in Jerusalem a tribune wistfully acknowledges how much he paid for the Roman citizenship with which Paul was born (22.22–29; see Willimon 171). Near the end of the book Felix takes fright at Paul's preaching (24.25), Festus thinks Paul is mad (26.24), Agrippa nearly gets converted (26.28–29), and the authorities become the means of Paul's reaching Rome itself with his gospel (28.31). Luke thus uses humour to encourage us to delight in the incongruity between Caesar's power and God's power the latter turning out to be more powerful (Willimon 171).

2 Humour at the expense of insiders

More surprisingly, perhaps, humour also gently mocks insiders. It notes that they can also make fools of themselves and implies that this can be accepted and rejoiced in, if the fulfilment of God's purpose is no more dependent on them than it is on enemies in their apparent power. This humour points to the important human capacity not to take oneself too seriously. It reflects the feebleness of the church, which does not prevent God from working. It also reflects the freedom of God (see esp. 6.8–15).

From its very beginning the book makes it impossible to take the apostles too seriously. Challenged to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, they ignore all that and want to know whether this is the moment for the restoring of the kingdom to Israel; Jesus gently rebukes that question in order to return to his own agenda (1.6–8). On the other hand, when the apostles are asked after Jesus' departure, 'Why do you stand looking into heaven?' (1.11), one feels that what precedes and what follows makes this an entirely reasonable stance. They have just watched Jesus disappearing in a cloud; watching for a moment or two seems

reasonable. The men in white then tell them that this is the way Jesus will return; so they are looking in the right direction.

While waiting for the Spirit, however, they decide they had better do something about replacing Judas in the Twelve. This sounds a doubtful human initiative (one recalls Old Testament initiatives like the plan to appoint a king or build a temple); to underline the point, the believers themselves identify two possible successors and then only let God choose which of the two (1.24–26). When Pentecost comes and the suggestion is made that the apostles are drunk, Peter produces as contrary evidence the consideration that it is only nine o'clock in the morning (2.15), which seems a feeble argument.

Later (6.1–6) the church similarly chooses men 'to serve tables' without asking God at all, and prays for them. Then Stephen does wonders and signs and preaches, despite having been appointed not to do this but to look after the daily distribution in order to free the apostles for such preaching (6.815). Asked about his preaching, Stephen delivers a gargantuan summary of Old Testament history which must have left its audience puzzled over its relevance (7.1–53; the skill of exegetes in finding hidden significance in this speech is then a further humour). The sermon does, however, provoke a persecution and scattering of the church. The apostles, who were commissioned to spread the gospel through the world beginning with Judea and Samaria, are the only ones among the believers who escape a scattering through Judea and Samaria (8.1). Another of the men commissioned to look after the daily distribution so that the apostles can concentrate on preaching the gospel has great success preaching the gospel in a town in Samaria instead (8.4–8). Eventually finding himself on the Mediterranean coast, Peter goes into a trance while people are making his dinner (10.10) then resists doing as he is told when the Lord tells him to abandon his distinctive Jewish food rules in order to identify with gentiles (10.14). His self-imposed or author-imposed humiliation is complemented by the humiliation at the hands of Rhoda and her church from which we began (12.12–17).

When Paul comes to prominence, he too becomes open to being a fool for Christ. First the great apostle to the gentiles is making his escape from Damascus in a basket (9.24–25). Later Eutychus falls out of the window while Paul preaches a long sermon (20.9). Then Paul has to apologize for not recognizing the high priest (23.1–5: and/or is the story making fun of the high priest?). Nor are ordinary people exempt from the foolishness

which characterizes their leaders. The Damascus disciple Ananias questions the Lord as to whether he is really to go to see Saul (9.13–14). People would be satisfied if Peter's mere shadow fell on someone who was ill or if Paul's handkerchiefs could be applied to their hurts (5.15; 19.12). Disciples in Ephesus have not even heard that there is such a thing as the Holy Spirit' (19.2), a statement so 'difficult to take seriously' that one must suspect humorous exaggeration and a twinkle in the eye (Jónsson 217).

3 Humour to mediate joy and gloom

Humour can buttress the message by suggesting a happy incongruity between what one might have expected and what actually happens. It can mirror the joy of the events that are related—or rather, as we have noted, it can mediate or convey or engender that joy, as metaphor facilitates understanding rather than merely communicating it. So in 3.2–8 the disabled beggar gets healing and joy instead of mere alms; in 8.26–40 the puzzled Ethiopian gets good news and joy instead of merely the solution to an exegetical problem.

More often in Acts the story offers macabre or black humour, another form of incongruity. In 1.18 Judas dies by falling over so that his bowels gush out. In 5.1–11 Ananias and Sapphira collapse dead after seeking to deceive the church, Sapphira falling at Peter's feet where other people's gifts had fallen (Pervo 60). In 12.19 Peter's prison guards are executed for failing to stop an angel from releasing Peter. In 12.23 their executor, Herod, is eaten by worms and dies, struck by an angel as Peter had been just before, but to different effect (Pervo 60). Humour takes the edge off talk of judgment and death by portraying these in such grotesque terms that we are distanced from them. In this form, at least, what happens could not happen to me. Yet the humour functions like parable, freeing us to miss the significance of the event if we wish, but making it possible for the smile to die on our lips if we allow ourselves to see the true awfulness of what is portrayed.

Humour is an important human means of understanding and persuasion. It is hardly surprising that the New Testament makes such extensive use of it. Funny we have not noticed.

Abstract

Some commentators note individual humorous notes in Acts but the possibility that the book is systematically humorous has been

little examined. Humour is actually used throughout the book as a means of insight and of rhetorical effectiveness; it is doubtful whether this either makes it more likely or less likely that the book is historical in intent and nature. Its humour makes fools of outsiders (unbelieving Jews, pagans, and imperial authorities), gently mocks insiders (great leaders and ordinary believers), and both adds to the portrayal of joy and tempers the portrayal of gloom.

By John Goldingay

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