

Excerpt from Laughing Pilgrims
By Howard R. Macy

From Chapter 9, "Humor and the Old Testament"

Of course seeing humor in the Bible is not simply an exercise in frivolity. It influences our faith and understanding in several important ways – one of the most important being that, by including humor, the Bible points to a faith that engages our whole humanity, including our funny bone. Frankly, a humorless faith is not very inviting – not just as a matter of style, but because it fractures essential parts of our ordinary lives and tries to cram our bursts of joy into respectable containers.

While keeping an eye out for humor can help us enjoy the Bible all the more, more importantly, seeing its humor can help us better understand the Bible's intended message. Biblical writers used humor not just to engage readers, but also to reveal and emphasize truth, to make it stick. When we fail to see the humor we can actually end up with an obscured, even distorted, idea about what the writers wanted to convey. Jesus, for example, told his followers that they should gouge out their eyes and cut off their hands if these threatened their place in the kingdom of heaven. We can rightly relish both this saying's comic exaggeration and its serious point. But emergency room workers can often tell tales of patients who, understanding neither humor nor hyperbole, are eager to have offending body parts reattached. How much better if humor, not literalism, had kept them in stitches.

Actually I am urging a certain kind of literalism here; I believe we should understand the Bible as its authors intended it to be understood. So the point is not to take the Bible lightly, but to actually get the humor its writers used. In this search, it helps to distinguish between found humor and created humor. Found humor is when we discover humor the authors themselves intended. Created humor is when we introduce humor of our own as we read and reflect on the biblical text. One of the great examples of this is Bill Cosby's classic comedy routine about Noah. A lot of us have played with this text, too, wondering about termites or who had to shovel out the bottom of the boat. Both found humor and created humor are legitimate and fun, in my view, but, as with all biblical texts, we need to know the difference between what the Bible actually says and what we've added.