

Too Proud to Dig? Peasant Humor in the Parables of Jesus? (Luke 16:1-14)

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Introduction

When I first started studying humor in the Synoptic gospels, I would encounter people who were generally surprised, pretty excited and eager to hear that there is humor in the Bible. Frequently, folks would come up to me and tell me about a passage that they said has always struck them as *funny*. And I enjoyed this window into their worlds and I still enjoy hearing how biblical texts make people *laugh*.

But what I learned from these exchanges is that we tend to expect humor in the Bible to be the kind of humor that is uplifting and pleasurable—and that we tend to view biblical humor through our own cultural lens. We tend not to associate humor in the Bible with tendentious types of humor—the types of humor commonly used in agonistic exchanges in Roman antiquity. Granted there are *lighter* forms of humor in the Synoptic Gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles, and even in some of the letters of Paul. For the most part, there are an overwhelming number of *harsher* forms of humor in the Bible.

The Elusiveness of Humor in the Synoptic Gospels

Why is it difficult for us to recognize and appreciate humor in the Synoptic texts? There are several reasons, of which I will briefly discuss five.¹

First, the way we define humor can prevent us from recognizing humor.² We tend to associate humor with frivolity, silliness, joking, bantering, and amusement—the lighter forms of humor. We tend to define humor as that which causes us to smile or laugh, and we associate it with that which suddenly surprises us. But humor can include sarcasm, stinging barbs, name-calling, derision, and mockery. Humor can surface when we are shocked or suddenly discomfited. It can surface in the most inappropriate times. We can try to muffle our laughter, while another stands horrified that we find humor in some grotesque or dastardly situation.

Secondly, we fail to recognize Synoptic humor, because the Synoptic stories have been passed down to us as serious and somber texts.³ We carry the presupposition that Jesus always spoke in a serious and somewhat sober tone, and that such a tone was devoid of humor, even tendentious humor. The Synoptic Jesus relates very serious teachings about conversion, repentance, and the cataclysmic end of days. We assume Jesus would be humorless, because he addresses deadly serious matters!

¹ Teresa Bednarz, "Humor-neutics: Analyzing Humor and Humor Functions in the Synoptic Gospels" (Ph.D., Texas Christian University, 2009), 21-33.

² Willie Van Heerden, "Why the Humour in the Bible Plays Hide and Seek with Us," *Social Identities* 7, no. 1 (2001): 75-96.

³ Athalya Brenner, *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 Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1990), 40. See also Van Heerden, 76.

Our images of Jesus have been heavily influenced by the images of the soft spoken saints in the movies, or from medieval and modern artwork that has rendered Jesus with a glowing aura, or from pulpit preaching. The bells of St. Mary are still ringing in our heads! It is hard for us to think of Jesus as a first century eastern Mediterranean prophet—a Galilean catalyst for social and political change, who would have used satirical barbs to attack injustice and oppression.

Influential early Christian writers reinforced the image of a humorless Jesus in the second through the fourth centuries.⁴ In those centuries, troubling trends developed to eliminate humor and laughter from orthodox Christian communities. This trend, in part, might have been the result of theatrical performances, street mimes, parodies, comic impersonations, satire and other forms of humor that sharpened attacks on Roman-era Christians and their beliefs. Early church writers such as Clement of Alexandria disparaged laughter and its effects.⁵ Clement seemed to view “anything over a smile as vilely shameful.”⁶ John Chrysostom, an early church official, condemned εὐτραπέλία (i.e., wittiness or factiousness) as despicable (*Hom. Eph.*). In his sermon on Ephesians 5:4, he seems to ask rather harshly, “What good does it do to say something amusing (ἀστεῖος)? Laughter is all you get.”⁷ Chrysostom utters a dire message by saying that Christians are essentially soldiers at war in the devil’s world, and they should bear grim faces, serious faces, somber faces concentrated in readiness for battle.⁸

Thirdly, we fail to recognize or appreciate humor in the Synoptic Gospels, because English translations prevent us from seeing humorous wordplays and puns.⁹ For example, there’s Greek wordplay (on the words ἀφανίζω and φαίνω) in the Matthean Jesus’ dictum in which those who fast are told not to look like the hypocrites. Jesus says, “...do not become like those who muddy up their faces so that they can shine in public (Matt 6:16).”¹⁰ In another example, the Matthean Jesus aims a witty and barbed hyperbole at particular Pharisees who have given him a hard time about *washing dishes*.... he replies to his critics, “You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel (Matt 23:24)!” This dictum may well revert back to an Aramaic pun involving a play on the words, *kalma* and *gema gamla*.¹¹ The ancients found pleasurable humor in the cleverness of wordplays.

In addition, translations of Greek words often obscure comic cues, such as our Lukan translation of ἐκμυκτηρίζω, which means “to crinkle one’s nose up” or “to sneer” (Luke 16:14). Humor can surface when someone becomes shocked, unsettled or discombobulated. In the Synoptic texts, we find the word, ἐξίστημι translated in the Synoptic texts as the softer “astounded” or the toned-down “they were amazed.” Such translations lose the thrust of being

⁴ Ingvild S. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 61-62.

⁵ *Paedagogus* 2.5.249-50.

⁶ Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (New York: Cambridge, 2008), 495-512.

⁷ I have translated Chrysostom’s words with a more colloquial rendering. For an alternative translation, see Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 495-512.

⁸ Halliwell discusses at length Chrysostom’s homilies on laughter (*Greek Laughter*, 497). For a history on the desecralization of laughter in early Christianity, see Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 61-62; and Bednarz, *Humor-neutics*, 27-28.

⁹ Van Heerden: 80.

¹⁰ R. Alan Culpepper, “Humor,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 333. See also Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 127.

¹¹ “You strain out a gnat (*kalma*) and but you gulp down a camel (*gema gamla*).” Quoted from William E. Phipps, *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 87.

“utterly beside oneself.” *Freaking out* is a frequent antic in ancient Roman comedies. Today *freaking out* scenes in television comedy continue to draw laughter.

Fourthly, many of us, who have been born and raised in the dominant cultures of the United States, fail to recognize or appreciate humor in the Synoptic Gospels, because we have a huge cultural barrier. We tend not to understand the values and cultural expressions of modern honor/shame societies much less those of Roman antiquity. When we consider what Jesus says or does in the Gospels, we bring all sorts of cultural presuppositions. Our cultural presuppositions skew how we interpret Biblical texts.

PowerPoint Presentation: Images from *Jesus of Nazareth* and the *Gospel of John*

Recall the blue-eyed Jesus in the movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*—a 1977 release. There is a scene in which Jesus preaches to a spell-bound, completely silent crowd. They are depicted in rapt attention. Throughout the movie, Jesus never cracks a smile....and yet, there were protests against this movie when it first came out, because it depicted Jesus as being *too human*. The *Gospel of John* was released in 2003. In this movie, the crowd interacts with Jesus as he tells stories and heals people. He laughs and smiles.

Cultural presuppositions that Jesus never interacted with humor in his agonistic exchanges with opponents are short-sighted. In order to gain honor, or to be seen as an honorable teacher in Roman antiquity, Jesus had to demonstrate wit in exchanges with his opponents. The aim of such wit was to bring public ridicule upon opponents. Public ridicule was a common rhetorical device, which served to “de-legitimize” the status of opponents, while simultaneously legitimizing the status of the humorist. The Gospel authors depict Jesus using the rhetoric of his day, that is, the antagonistic rhetoric needed for him to gain honor and status in the eyes of their communities. Their constructions of Jesus and his rhetoric tend to *unsettle* our modern Western images of Jesus.

For those of us in dominant U.S. cultures, the effects of humor seem to be anything, but harmful. Even those occasional, well-place sarcastic barbs are pleasurable, because one can always laugh off such barbs, or dissipate them with a hearty chuckle, or dismiss them as the rambling of some dysfunctional family member. In the U.S. German-American culture of West Texas, where I grew up, we always had the choice not to take sarcastic barbs with too much seriousness. But humor in Roman antiquity tended to be a quite serious, even a deadly matter. The successful defense of honor in the face of hostile adversaries often required the kind of humor that eventually led to the person’s demise. One needed to display quick wit, which often elicited reactions of laughter and derision from the public, in order to build one’s honor or maintain one’s honor in the agonistic setting of the ancient Roman society. Ironically, the Synoptic Jesus would not have been taken seriously, if he had not used humor to build and maintain his honor.

The fifth reason we fail to recognize humor in the Synoptic gospels—most of us lack a familiarity with the humor typologies that made ancient comedies laughable. We do not have the repertoire of images that would help us make comic associations in Roman-era literature. This is rather like watching the monologues of the *Daily Show* or *Jay Leno*, or *David Letterman* without having ever seen the news of the day. If we do not know what is going on in the world of politics or popular culture, we will miss the jokes, innuendos and satire. When we do become aware of Roman era typologies, we often come face to face with ancient stereotypes that make us with our modern sensibilities *cringe*.

The Lukan Context of Humor in the Wealthy Roman Households

Let take a look at the social context in which humor takes place in the Gospel of Luke. Luke wrote his gospel with the support of a wealthy patron sometime in the late 70's and 80's of the first century, at a time in which Christianity had shifted from a peasant movement to an urban movement. The relatively large number of references to “wealthy persons” and to “houses” in Luke-Acts suggests that the Gospel of Luke speaks to persons in wealthy households. In the Lukan stories, we hear about slaves, hired workers, patrons, masters or widowed mistresses of households, slave children, and children of heads of households—every one of these typologies would likely be present within a household church of the first century.

[PowerPoint Presentation: Images of Humor in Ancient Roman Households](#)

The Gospel of Luke was read, and probably performed in some degree, in urban household churches, where incidentally, banquets by their very nature have long provided a forum amendable to humor exchanges. What we need to imagine is not our own cultural presuppositions that the Gospel of Luke was read/performed before a completely spellbound audience, but in the lively exchanges of a triclinium—where food, drink, and laughter, and commentary on the readings created a lively event.

It is probable that the Christians gathered in these household settings would have recognized the comic typologies and the exaggerated behaviors that we find in Luke-Acts. For these are antics familiar to any audience of Roman comedies.

Lukan Humor

Now, before I relate some examples of humor in the Gospel of Luke—note this, humor tends to succeed primarily, because it relies on stereotypes. A word of warning, several typologies appear in the Gospels that will likely make us cringe rather than laugh—these are biased stereotypes of frantic and flighty slaves, slaves as tricksters, stereotypes of lazy workers, and narcissistic wealthy folks. We must keep in mind that we are encountering the humor and laughter of Greco-Roman antiquity.

Lukan humor ranges from lighter comic forms to harsher tendentious forms of humor.

An example of comic Lukan humor occurs in Acts 12 where we are told that Peter has been imprisoned by King Herod and an angel comes secretly in the night to steal Peter out of his prison cell. We are told Peter tags along behind the angel in a somewhat discombobulated state. He follows the angel out into the street, passing through a series of gates, which mysteriously happen to open one after another...and then we hear that the angel suddenly disappears and Peter realizes that he is standing in the street by himself. Peter comes to his senses, and engages in soliloquy (a favorite Lukan comic device)—that is, he talks to himself.¹² Colloquially, Peter says, “Okay, certainly that was an angel... none of the Judeans are going to believe this

¹² Soliloquy occurs in the parables of *The Rich Fool* (Luke 12:16-19) and *The Dishonest Manager* (Luke 16:1-8a).

(12:11)!”¹³ Then Peter decides to go to Mary’s house. Now a group of disciples are all praying in Mary’s house. Perhaps, they are praying for Peter’s release as it seems quite certain that Herod will have him put to death in the morning. Then Peter knocks on the door and Rhoda, the household slave, goes to answer it. Apparently without opening the door, she asks, “who is it?” Peter answers. She recognizes his voice, but gets so overjoyed and frantic that she forgets to let him in, she leaves him standing outside.¹⁴ She runs back to tell everyone. The gathered disciples tell her that she is nuts, but she keeps emphatically insisting that it is Peter. The disciples then riposte, “It must be his angel” since they all *expected* him to be dead at the hand of Herod. All the while, the disciples continue to bicker with Rhoda, Peter keeps knocking on the door, trying to get someone to let him in. We are told that they finally come to the door and when they see Peter standing there, they “utterly freak out (ἐξίσταμι)!” In this vivid Lukan narrative, Rhoda—the flighty, overjoyed, frantically running slave—is a comic typology found in the comedies of Plautus and Terence. The response of the disciples is also comic—the hysterical reaction to the unexpected.

Another humorous narrative appears in the story of the demoniac from Gerasene, perhaps a remnant of Galilee peasant folk humor (Matt 8:28-34 // Mark 5:1-9 // Luke 8:26-37).¹⁵ At one time this story may well have been a laughable one told around a Galilean campfire—perhaps, a mockery aimed at Roman soldiers. The Greek term, λεγιών is the name of the demon. This term is a transliteration of the Latin, *legion*—a reference generally associated with Roman soldiers. Perhaps, the Roman soldiers stationed in Galilee had a superstitious fear of demons coming out of tombs, who knows, but rebellious Galilean peasants would have relished such a story.

Luke relates a version of this early demoniac story with the usual dramatic flair of Lukan story-telling. The author tells us that Jesus has just stepped out of the boat when this naked and crazed man appears and yells at him, “τί ἔμοι καὶ σοί—we have nothing to do with each other! Do not bother me (8:28)!” Jesus asks the demon, “What is your name?” The demon replies, “Legion,” and states that there is more than one demon at play here.¹⁶ The demons know they are in trouble and they do not want to go into *the abyss—a deep down below place*—a particularly Lukan expression in this demoniac story (8:31).¹⁷ The demons find, what they think, is an agreeable solution. They beg to be sent into a herd of pigs, and so Jesus proceeds to send the demons into the pigs. The whole lot of some 2,000 pigs then rushes off a cliff. Where do they go? They fall into a *deep down place below* and drown (8:33). The very fate the demons wanted to avoid was ironically the very fate into which they fell. The swine herders (probably foreigners align with the Romans) watch the whole scene with horror and their reactions are no less comic—they flee in panic (8:34). These swine herders *run about everywhere*—into the city and about the countryside—telling folks what has happened. We are told that those hearing the story are *terrified out of their minds* (φόβῳ μεγάλῳ συνείχοντο), and they ask Jesus to leave (8:37).

¹³ One has to wonder if Peter’s comment about the Judeans refers also to the disciples gathered in Mary’s (John Mark’s mother) house since it seems to be located in Judea.

¹⁴ For the description of the comic flighty slave and the humorous account of Peter and Rhoda, see Kathy C. Williams, “At the Expense of Women: Humor (?) in Acts 16:14-40,” in *Are We Amused? Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2003). Williams explains the connection between Rhoda and the comedies of Plautus and Terence.

¹⁵ The appearance of this story in all three of the Synoptic texts suggests it may date back to the Galilean Jesus or, at least to an earlier tradition.

¹⁶ Matthew 8:28-34 does not recount this detail, but we do find it in Mark 5:9.

¹⁷ In Mark, the demons do not want to be sent out of the country—5:10.

The story of the demoniac may well be a remnant of peasant humor, but Luke has constructed it with his own brand of humor.

In another humorous narrative, we find the Lukan Jesus within a household, where a crowd has gathered and blocked the doors and walkways (5:17-26).¹⁸ Some men, quite possibly slaves, decide to lower a man, who has some kind of lameness, down through the roof after they remove the roofing tiles (κέραμος—clay tiles). Here again Luke relates a Synoptic narrative with a distinctly Lukan twist of humor. In Luke's version, the narrative involves a couch (κλίνη and κλινίδιον—Luke 5:18, 19, 24) unlike Mark's account, which involves a pallet or a mat (κράβαττος in Mark 2:4, 9, 11). The men lower the man with lameness on a *couch* through a hole in the roof (5:18). It is not improbable that this man with lameness is a rich householder—who has directed his slaves to carry him to Jesus on a *reclining couch*! After his healing, Jesus tells the man, “take up your “*little*” couch and go back to your house (5:24).” There's a tongue-in-cheek diminutive here. Luke adds a unique ending to the event by describing that the onlookers are suspended in disbelief. Luke uses the word, ἔκστασις to convey that the people are frozen in a trancelike state. So we might well have a comic scene of folks staring in disbelief that a rich man was lowered down the roof on a couch! How do the onlookers respond? They utter, “We have seen *exceedingly* strange things today—εἶδομεν παράδοξα σήμερον (5:26).”

Tendentious Forms of Humor

Tendentious forms of humor occur with great frequency in the agonistic exchanges recounted in ancient Greek, Roman and Jewish literature.¹⁹ These biting kinds of humor took shape as barbed wit, mockery, derisive laughter, sneers, smirks, name-calling, and quick wit.

Writers from Roman antiquity tell us a great deal about tendentious forms of humor and their effects.²⁰ Plutarch notes that “it is dangerous to raise a laugh at a person's greed [and at other such vices].²¹ The Cynics had a reputation for severe derisive denunciations of ethical breaches.²² They gained notoriety for mocking the excesses and the pretensions of the wealthy.²³ We find that Cicero advocated the use of humor to confuse, shock, and surprise his adversaries.²⁴ He tells us that witty barbs aimed at opponents had an unsettling effect on them.²⁵ For Cicero, humor was essential in building and in shoring up public honor.²⁶ In his work entitled, *Institutio oratoria*, the Roman-trained rhetorician, Quintilian warned that ridicule carried with it deadly repercussions. He writes that humorous provocations aimed at persons of power and prestige could well result in serious hostility.²⁷ Orators used humor to ridicule opponents by encouraging the hearers to laugh at them. Directing laughter at the opponent served the purpose of alienating

¹⁸ Luke places the account of the lame person within the context of a wealthy household (cf. Mark 2:2-12; Matt. 9:2-8)

¹⁹ See Bednarz, *Humor-neutics*, 59-98, 104-121.

²⁰ See Bednarz, *Humor-neutics*, 69-87.

²¹ *Quaest. Conv.*, 2.1.8.633-10.634.

²² Demetrius, *Eloc.*, 170 and 259.27n.65.

²³ Cf. B. Baldwin, "Lucian as Social Satirist," *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 11, no. 2 (1961): 199-208. Cf. Lucian, *Fug.* 12-17; and Abraham J. Malherbe, "'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to I Thess II," *Novum Testamentum* 12, no. 2 (1970): 206-209.

²⁴ Cicero, *De or.* 2.58, 236.

²⁵ Cicero, *De or.* 2.236, 246, 255, 263, 276-77.

²⁶ Cicero, *Or.* 128; *De or.* 2.178-216, 236

²⁷ *Inst.* 6.3.7, 34-35.

the opponent from the support of the hearers. Public ridicule, beatings or even death were common outcomes of barbed wit.

We find barbed kinds of humor in all its common forms in the Bible.²⁸ Humor in agnostic exchanges occurred quite frequently between the Synoptic Jesus and his opponents. Within the function of humor in Roman era rhetoric, Jesus' barbs should come as no surprise. The Gospel authors needed to depict Jesus' wit in order to demonstrate his honor and status to their respective communities. The shock and anger expressed by Jesus' opponents in the Synoptic gospels do provide us with cues that Jesus succeeded at their expense.²⁹ As a result of public ridicule, Jesus' opponents wanted him dead.

There are harsher forms of humor of the Gospel of Luke.

We will note that Luke tends, like Matthew, to ridicule the practices of Jesus' opponents, especially the Pharisees. But it is important to remember that this is ancient rhetoric at work. Lukan humor, which capitalized on derogatory stereotypes of opponents, served to build the status and honor of Jesus. We cannot presume that Pharisees in the days of Jesus and Luke were any more hypocritical than other religious adherents in the pre-formative period of Judaism. In addition, the barbs aimed at the Pharisees might well indicate a tension between specific local Pharisees and Luke's community—we cannot presume these barbs are not aimed at *all* Pharisees.

Humorous barbs occur during a dinner banquet in which the Lukan Jesus repeatedly insults a group of Pharisees and their friends (Luke 11:37-44). Incidentally, the banquet is being hosted by a Pharisee. This is not *exactly* how we expect Jesus to treat his host! One of these barbs is a particularly low blow. We hear Jesus say, "Woe to you [Pharisees]! You are like memorial stones that people walk over without realizing it (11:44)." In a previous barb, the Lukan Jesus has already told the Pharisees that they love honor. Here, he proceeds to tell them that people do not see them honorable. To understand the full brunt of this barb, we must understand that *memorial stones* are a reference to epigraphs that wealthy persons in Rome times had commissioned to commemorate their *great and honorable* deeds after their death so that those who pass by these stones can read *how honorably* they lived. The Lukan Jesus refers to the stone memorials that get re-used as paving stones for walk ways and roads. The Lukan Jesus might as well have told the Pharisees, *You know, epigraphs make nice paver stones.* With these barbs, the Lukan Jesus repeatedly insults the Pharisee, who invited him to dinner, and all his friends!

Humorous Parables in Luke

Now it seems a good time to pose the question, did Luke convey peasant humor in the parables, or perhaps I should frame the question in this way, did Luke convey humor that might have appealed to first century peasants in Galilee and Judea? Remnants of peasant humor may well be found in Luke's rendition of older Synoptic parables as seems to be the case in the parable of the demon and the pigs, and the man with lameness, and perhaps, even in the parable

²⁸ See Bednarz, *Humor-neutics*, 122-134, 188-295.

²⁹ See the agonistic exchanges in Matt. 21:12-23:36; Luke 11:37-54

of the tenants, where the vineyard owner appears exceedingly inept at running his vineyard.³⁰ However, it is difficult to claim with any certainty that Luke's parables relate peasant humor. Instead, it seems that Luke wrote his parables with the target audience of a wealthy household in mind. The Galilean and Judean crowds in the Gospel of Luke, who listen to the Lukan Jesus tell his parables, are arguably a Lukan literary construct. It is doubtful that there were any such crowds of peasants, who might have even heard Luke's parables much less enjoyed the distinctly Lukan humor portrayed in them.

However, if Galilean and Judean peasants had heard the Lukan parables, they probably would have enjoyed them. They might have found delight in the comic parables about the arrogant judge, who feared being punched by a nagging widow (18:2-5); or the rich man, whose hoarded for a lifetime, but loses the time of his life (12:16-20); or the lovers of money, who are factiously praised for their cunning, then exposed for their greed (16:1-14). Let us take a brief look at the humor displayed in these three renowned Lukan parables.

Luke has a propensity to depict characters in a comic quandary, often signaled by the use of soliloquy (i.e., self-talk) (Luke 12:16-20; 16:1-8a; 18:2-5). There are particular Greek phrases that cue us to this humorous predicament. They are the phrases, "he says to himself—εἶπεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ" and "I have it—ἔγνων τί ποιήσω!" We find such a comic quandary in a parable about an *arrogant* judge and a *nagging* widow (18:2-5). In this parable, we are told *twice* that a certain judge in a certain town does *not care what others think of him*, but he finds himself in a sticky situation. Either he must persist to deny the widow her demand for justice, or he must put up with her persistent nagging. Ultimately, the judge gives in because he fears she will give him a *black eye*—an euphemism for *ruining his reputation* (ὕπωπιάζω) (18:5). It seems he *is concerned* about his reputation after all.

Another comic quandary occurs in the parable of the rich man whose barns were too small for his greed. In Luke 12:16-20, we hear Jesus say, "There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. The rich man *says to himself*, 'What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?'" Then we hear the rich man say, "*I have it!* I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I will store all my grain and other goods, and then *I will say to myself*, 'Self, now for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, and be merry!'" Jesus then adds, "But God said to the rich man, 'You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom they will belong now?'"

A third comic quandary occurs in the parable of the dishonest household manager (Luke 16:1-8a).³¹ In this Lukan parable, a household slave, who is responsible for business transactions for a wealthy householder, seemed to have been praised by his master for *cooking the books*.³² Does this parable provide scriptural support for Enron? Why does the master praise his manager for being conniving (16:8a)? There is, no doubt, something fishy about the actions

³⁰ The parable of the tenants is found in Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; and Luke 20:9-19. In the parable of the tenants, Luke distinctly conveys *shock*—a comic reaction, albeit on the darker side—produced by Jesus' pronouncement of the fate of the tenants (20:16).

³¹ Dan Otto Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 145-176.

³² See Fabian Udoh, "The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave (Luke 16:1-8 [13])," *JBL* 128, no. 2 (2009); and Mary Ann Beavis, "Ancient Slavery as an Interpretative Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)," *JBL* 111, no. 1 (1992).

of the household manager, and something not so innocent about the master of the household either.

In wealthy households, it was not unusual for a specialized slave to be given the task of managing the accounting books of the head of a household. There seem to have been a general disposition among Roman elites that slaves could not be trusted, so that the heads of households needed to keep a close eye on their slaves to be sure they were not stealing from them (a biased stereotype). The typology of the untrustworthy and trickster slave was also a common character of New Comedy. Here in this parable, it seems we have a slave doing his master's dirty work—squeezing interest at an exorbitant rate out of clients. But it also seems that he was caught taking a cut for himself (16:2).

As the parable of the dishonest manager progresses, we hear that the householder has threatened to remove the slave from his position. The slave begins the comic self-talk—“What’ll I do (εἴπειν δὲ ἐν ἑαυτῷ)? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg (16:3)?” And then the slave utters that classic comic line, “I have it (16:4)!” Now why would the Lukan Jesus tell a parable in which a slave is praised for being dishonest? The tongue-in-check barbs that follow (16:8b-13) put it all in perspective. The Lukan Jesus makes a stinging commentary on the accumulation of dishonest wealth by particular *money-loving* Pharisees (16:14). The reaction of the Lukan Pharisees themselves is also comical. When they heard the parable of the dishonest manager and the stinging barbs that followed—they *crinkled their noses up*—ἐκμυκτηρίζω at Jesus.

Conclusion

So what have we learned about the use of humor in the Synoptic gospels? How does our understanding of Roman-era humor shape our image of Jesus? Does the tendentious humor of the Lukan Jesus disturb us? How do we wrestle with our evolving understanding of Jesus within the culture of his day?

What about peasant humor in the parables of the Galilean Jesus? Perhaps, remnants of the Synoptic parables may well go back to the days of the Galilean Jesus and his peasant audiences as well as any humor that may be contained in them, but the Lukan versions almost certainly do not. Luke has usurped the early parables, has given them a distinct twist of humor, and has added other comic parables from some unknown repertoire. Regarding the Lukan Jesus, the parables and some of their barbed commentary might well have generated laughter and smirking smiles during the lively events of a gathering in the Lukan household church(es)—but again, we will never know. Regarding the Galilean and Judean peasants, if they ever enjoyed the humor of the Lukan Jesus' parables, they did so only as literary characters.

Endnotes

- Baldwin, B. "Lucian as Social Satirist." *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 11, no. 2 (1961): 199-208.
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