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Caught Laughing

William Paul Haas

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International Society for Humor Studies

Over the years I have become familiar with various humor theories that have helped me unravel some old knots that have been tied too tightly, among which is the story of Abraham in the Hebrew scriptures, Genesis, 12-26. The elements of incongruity, self-doubt, superiority and inferiority, surprise, paradox, ridicule, sarcasm, irony, word manipulation and role reversals abound. But I am not suggesting that anyone read Genesis for laughs, but that one read the narrative for hints of what humankind finds funny or odd about itself. Abraham can be imagined as jedermann, as each one of us on a journey to nowhere certain. It is not the written narrative that is particularly humorous, but the way it has been read and applied over the last 3,000 years is quite funny. Indeed my interpretation of the narrative this morning may be as humorous as anything in the story, yet it may also be as close to the evolving truth as I will ever get. In other words, I prefer to examine the words of Genesis as aimed at me, personally, not as static objects of empirical research. I try to see myself seeing myself in the unfolding tale.

Genesis may be the most ancient written statement of humankind about where we were and are and where we think we are going. The earliest written form of the narrative appears somewhere between 1200 BCE and 800 BCE after centuries of oral tradition. The Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh is probably older and reflects a very different focus which has never draw the ridicule heaped on Abraham. The story of Abraham begins with a call from God, sometimes called Yahweh and sometimes called Elohim, to Abraham living in

Ur of the Chaldees to abandon his family and take his wife, Sarah, to a place as yet unknown. Moses Maimonides (1204) reflects that Abraham in the beginning, “had no one to teach or inform him but was immersed among idolaters and fools... and he was one of them.”

Throughout the journey Abraham engages God in a lively dialogue, if not argument in which Abraham tries to outsmart and out maneuver God from time to time. He goes from one misadventure to another, grows impatient with God’s promises, has a son, Ishmael, by Sarah’s slave girl, Hagar, and 13 years later has Isaac, his son by Sarah when he was 100 years old and she, 90. When all seemed finally settled, God demanded that Abraham sacrifice Isaac as proof of his fear, faith and obedience.

Since the Enlightenment, the story of Abraham’s trial has seemed to many, starting with Immanuel Kant, to be irrational. Since then, Abraham has been called, asinine and gullible, mentally unbalanced and unethical, stupid, a cheater and bluffer: one current anthropologist suggesting that every evil in our Western civilization, with its violence and malice, is traceable back to the pernicious influence of the Abraham myth because it is so ancient, so formative and so challenging. The scathing ridicule of the Abraham narrative is worthy of careful study by humor scholars. Woody Allen, no minor theologian, suggests that Abraham should have responded to the divine command: “You’ve got to be kidding.” To this I dare to suggest, just for the fun of it, that we suppose that God was indeed kidding, but not as Woody imagined. Suppose God was actually, or only appeared to be playing hide and seek, peek a boo, in order to lead

Abraham to discover what a fool he was for trying to invent a God as good as the Canaanite God, Molech Maybe God was kidding, not to make a fool of Abraham, but to help him discover what a fool he was making of himself. In the spirit of In Praise of Folly by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1536) I had hoped to discover for myself what I think Abraham discovered for himself, perhaps even in spite of himself, that there is wisdom in realizing one's own folly. Yes, Abraham's heroic act of faith might have been his admission to himself that he had badly misunderstood how generous a real God might be.

I suggest that for the moment you let the idea of God float between firm faith and fanciful myth, between the creator of the universe "once upon a time" and the concurrent cause of all causes causing, as an infinitely merciful, generous and loving person and as the ineffable being beyond language and comprehension.

If I were trying to be funny and needed an alternative title for my presentation today, I might have called it Peek-a-boo Exegesis, suggesting that someone is playing a game of drawing out the innate curiosity of a child who is having fun being led into the unknown. I can't figure out whether a child has a genuine sense of humor, but I detect the genuine humor of the one making the child laugh while it discovers new surprises. Incidentally, during decades of teaching, I always enjoyed leading students to discover for themselves that there is more to understanding than meets the eye.

Since I have no way of knowing how familiar any of you are with the text of Genesis 12-26 I will offer a quick summary of a few key events that are connected to my thesis. You

can call up on your lap top all of the text in many different languages. The story of Abraham's journey begins with a promise from God that he and his wife, Sarah, will enjoy great progeny and prosperity despite the fact that they are quite old and well beyond child bearing.

Early on they are forced by famine to go to Egypt, where Abraham fears that he might be killed if the Pharaoh discovers how beautiful Sarah is. The local moral code would consider it more indelicate to take a man's wife than to kill him first and then take his wife. Smartly Abraham asked Sarah to lie and tell Pharaoh that Abraham was her brother. Delighted to hear this the ruler bestowed many gifts on Abraham, including some female slaves, one of which was most likely Hagar who appears later on. To save himself, Abraham considered Sarah and the promises from God to be quite expendable. God punished Pharaoh and his family with a plague even though later on he was forgiven because he was the victim of Abraham's deception and he never touched Sarah. All ended well, for the moment – Abraham survived and so did his marriage, and he left Egypt a rich man.

I must jump ahead in the story because an event surprisingly similar to the Egyptian adventure occurred again in Gerar in the Negev in the kingdom of Abimelech, where the king was also impressed by Sarah's beauty even though by now Sarah was 90 years old. In a dream, God threatened Abimelech with death for taking Abraham's wife, but the king protested that he was the innocent victim of a lie and he put to God a question that reverberates throughout the narrative: "Would you kill innocent people, too?" God answered, "Yes, I know that you did this with a clear conscience, and it was I who

prevented you from sinning against me.” Reflect for a moment on the situation that Abraham’s lie put God into for the second time. A few lines later the narrator tells us readers, not God or Abimelech, that Abraham was actually Sarah’s half-brother because they had the same father but different mothers. God apparently was not aware of this. The two versions of the story leave the readers over the millennia with more questions than answers, but that may be the purpose of the narrative.

In the course of his journey Abraham was promised many children despite his age and Sarah’s age. The wait grew too long for Sarah so she took the bold initiative to offer Abraham her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to bear him a son. Sarah reflected at the time “Since Yahweh has kept me from having children.” When Hagar became pregnant she offended Sarah by her disdainful attitude, so Sarah had her expelled into the wilderness where, in the nick of time, she was rescued by God and promised “ I will make your descendants too numerous to be counted. You will name your son Ishmael (God has heard). Hagar’s parting comment to God was to give him a new name, El Roi, “Surely, this is the place where I in my turn, have seen the one who sees me.” To me there is a hint here of the sense of peek-a-boo, now I see you seeing me and now I don’t. Indeed Hagar and Ishmael would see God again on and off, but their troubles were far from over. Chastened by the ordeal Hagar returned to Sarah and Abraham. Thirteen years later, before Isaac was born, Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised on the same day to confirm the covenant with God.

Again God promised to Abraham that Sarah would bear children: “Nations will come out

of her”. When he heard this Abraham fell on his face and laughed, thinking to himself, Is a child to be born to a man 100 years old and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?” Walter Brueggman calls this “ a mocking laugh” and Gerhard van Rad speaks of falling on his face as the “pathetic gesture of reverence” and the “almost horrible laugh, deadly earnest, not in fun, bringing belief and disbelief close together.” Immediately Abraham begged God not to forget Ishmael. God seemed to brush him off, but he did promise yet again that Ishmael would be abundantly fruitful and be protected. Then God added “ but my covenant will be with Sarah’s child, and his name will be Isaac. (He laughs)

In short order God appeared to Abraham along with two mysterious companions at Mamre to announce at last that in a year Sarah would finally bear a son. Sarah overheard the news and laughed to herself, thinking, “Now that I am passed the age of childbearing and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again?” God asked Abraham, not Sarah, if she laughed because she was too old to bear a child, not mentioning that she thought Abraham was also too old. Sarah inserted herself into the conversation with “ I did not laugh, lying”, the bible says, “ because she was afraid.” God retorted “Oh yes, you did laugh”. How little God cared about her petty denial. Sarah may well have feared what might come next, now that her impatience left her with two sons, and double trouble to come. The counterpoint of who laughs when and why comes close again to hide and seek.

Yet the emphasis on laughter continues after Isaac was born, when Sarah reflected “God

has given me cause to laugh: all those who hear it will laugh with me.” Domestic life carried on until Sarah saw Ishmael laughing with or at Isaac and was so infuriated that she demanded that Abraham drive Hagar and Ishmael away. “ This greatly distressed Abraham” but God, siding with Sarah, told him to do what she told him to do. Yet, seeming to reverse himself, God promised for a third time “ the slave girl’s son, Ishmael, will also make a great nation. When Hagar and Ishmael were near death in the desert God rescued them again. Thus far one must say of God’s plan, “Now I see it, now I don’t.” The word laugh is used throughout this passage in a tantalizing way, suggesting the taunting prospect of something promised but never finally delivered – the ultimate incongruity.

Now let me focus attention on a very different scene, not directly related to the promises of offspring, when God was angered by bad news from Sodom but was reluctant to tell Abraham, who was on his way there, that he planned to destroy the city. Somehow Abraham figured it out for himself and confronted God with the challenge, “ Are you really going to destroy the just man with the sinner?” He began to bargain with God: suppose there are fifty just men there “ Would you kill the just man with the sinner?” Immediately one thinks of the same question from Abimelec. Then, in the boldest line in the whole bible Abraham said to God, “Do not think of it. Will the judge of the whole earth not administer justice.” Here Abraham presumes to lecture God on how a real God ought to think and behave. At this point in his emerging moral autonomy, he is not reluctant to put God in his place, admitting that it is bold for mere “dust and ashes “ to be so pushy. God finally agreed to spare the city if only ten just men could be found, yet he

destroyed the city anyway after Lot and his family escaped. To me the confrontation between what Abraham thinks justice might be and his scolding of a deficient God is the aboriginal beginning of rational ethics: something Kierkegaard neglects to recognize.

As if out of nowhere God commanded Abraham, “Take your son, your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.” Without a word of argument in defense of his innocent son or a reminder of how the judge of the whole earth ought to administer justice, and without a word to Sarah who just might have an opinion on the matter and without a reminder that Ishmael was also a much-loved son whom God rescued some time ago, Abraham obeyed, surrendered, acquiesced in overwhelming, deafening silence. When Abraham arrived at Moriah, bound Isaac and raised the sacrificial knife God’s angel stopped him. “Do not raise your hand against the boy. Do not harm him, for now I know that you fear God.” Abraham stopped and took a ram he found in the bushes to use as a substitute victim.

At this critical moment in the drama, God seems to have found out something he did not know about Abraham. This point has been argued for thousands of years: was God really ignorant of Abraham’s character after all these years, or did Abraham finally discover for himself what God led him to realize? Was Abraham’s initial fear of God, real or imaginary God, a servile fear of punishment or retribution, or was it at that moment transformed, through the confrontation with Isaac bound helpless, to a filial or benign fear of failing to recognize God’s generosity for what it was, without price or condition.

In this later sense, the filial or benign fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: in the former sense, servile fear is the beginning of degradation and enslavement. I cannot imagine how Freud could comprehend the possibility that Abraham discovered his own moral autonomy with the help of a benevolent and playful father.

Remember my earlier reference to the judgment of Moses Maimonides that Abraham was raised among idolaters and fools and that he was one of them. Abraham spent much time among the Canaanites who worshipped the god Molech, which accepted the sacrifice of the first born as a burnt offering to assure more children and to guarantee prosperity. Some in later generations of Hebrews were not unaffected by this custom. (Leviticus, 18, 21 and Jeremiah, 32-35) So it seems reasonable that Abraham, while he waited for Yahweh to fulfill his promises, was well aware that his neighbors had an easy answer to his anxiety: if you want children there is a price, a quid pro quo, offer the first born and many more will follow. It is understandable that Abraham would conclude, as some later Hebrews did, when all else had failed, that he owed no less to his God than his friends and neighbors owed to their gods And were not his children his to dispose of? In the last moment, as he bound Isaac and put the knife to his throat he realized what a fool he was to let his idea of God off the hook. No God, especially one who administered justice for the whole earth, could conceivably demand such foolishness. Saying NO to the imagined demand of a misconstrued God, Abraham said YES to the God he seemed to suspect was there all along, at least since Sodom, and yes to himself and to both his sons - which was what God was looking for all along. Like the laughter at a joke, Abraham's YES meant, "I finally get it. I think the God I was trying to outsmart was kidding me teasing me to

discover what a fool I was”.

I will conclude with a telling comparison between the Hasidic insight into Abraham’s folly as researched by Jerome Gellman and the ridicule of Abraham by Franz Kafka in his Parable. Kafka imagines Abraham turning into another Don Quixote who is afraid that “the world would laugh itself to death at the sight of him...afraid that this ridiculousness would make him even older and uglier... even more unworthy of being called by God” to participate in this momentous sacrifice. The Hasidic master Reb. Nachman of Breslav (1810) suggest that “For the love of God, one must be willing to make one’s self a comic fool.” When Abraham offers the ram in place of Isaac, he expresses the “comic seriousness “ of the trial. It was a joke played on him to let him think it mattered to God whether he offered Isaac or the ram. Getting the joke, the comic character of the act, was, in Gellman’s interpretation, “ the highest worship possible of God; it is to acknowledge God’s unfathomable infinity.” I suppose that an unfathomably infinite God is entitled to kid any human being willing to hang on till the end. Joke’s being really funny at the end.

So here is how the story ends for Abraham. After the trial he never heard another word from God. After Sarah died, Abraham at about age 130 married again to Ketura who bore him six sons and a venerable tradition holds that Ketura was actually Hagar When he died, both Ishmael and Isaac together buried him. And we are left, some still laughing at Abraham, and others, like fools, laughing at themselves. The question remains, What shall we do if it turns out that there is a God who is a better comedian than Woody Allen.