

**Mary Phil Korsak**

## God's Laughter

### Introduction

I have an artificial red nose because I am a clown. It is a bit like my wedding ring. When I put it on it says something about me, about the way I am, about my choices in life. My red nose declares that I will be truly myself. Not only laughter but tears come freely. Indignation, anger, frustration, despair, misunderstandings ... all these are laid on the table and because they are exaggerated they easily provoke the release of laughter.

Humour is important for me. Happy laughter restores a sense of proportion, it reconciles and heals. It lightens a heavy load. My love of laughter has led me to translate books with a humorous dimension.<sup>1</sup>

So much for personal laughter. Turning now to laughter in the Hebrew Bible three questions are raised by the present paper. The first is addressed to you. Are you, when and if you open the Bible, ready to laugh? Or are you one of those who assume a poker face when the Bible is mentioned? Nothing will make the reader laugh if s/he is not ready to do so. The second question is: Does the Hebrew Bible say anything about God laughing? And (third question) if so, what about Bible translators? How do they perceive and transmit laughter?

The paper proposes, first, to illustrate different responses on the part of the reader and, second, to search for divine laughter in the psalms and those episodes of the life of Isaac in the Book of Genesis where laughter may be found (Gen 17. 18. 21. 26. 27). It further analyses the contributions of translators, setting Hebrew verses side by side with three vernacular versions: *The Revised Standard Version*<sup>2</sup>, *La Sainte Bible*<sup>3</sup> by Louis Segond, and

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Phil Korsak, *Prières d'en rire*. A translation of Michael Leunig's, *A Common Prayer* (Ed de l'Atelier: Paris 2003) and *Les Racines du Soleil*, Michael Leunig's, *The Prayer Tree* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* (Collins: New York, Glasgow, Toronto 1973; originally the *Authorised Version* or *King James Bible*, 1611).

<sup>3</sup> *La Sainte Bible*, Louis Segond (Alliance Biblique Universelle: Paris / Brussels 1956).

*Genesis*<sup>4</sup> by Ronald Knox, from now on referred to as the RSV, Second and Knox.

### Reader Response

The first chapter of the Book of Genesis does not actually say that the Creator laughs but it does say, six times, that he finds what he makes *tov*, one of those rare Hebrew words that has passed into English to produce the old-fashioned, slangy expression, *toff*, as in *he's a toff / a swell*. The Creator God of the Hebrews does not even need a conjuror's hat. He speaks and here come *Day* and *Night*, *Skies*, *Earth* and *Seas*, *plants*, *sun*, *moon* and *stars*, creatures that swim, fly and walk the earth, and last of all the human being, a male-and-female version. And God enjoys and exclaims with satisfaction that it is *toff*, and again *toff*, *toff*, *toff*, *toff*, *toff*, crescendo-ing to *very toff* on the sixth day before he knocks off work on the seventh.

Before I looked for laughter in the Bible, I read this first chapter as a great poem, solemn and beautiful (which it is), or as a piece of encyclopaedic knowledge pinched from Mesopotamia (which it is), or as a political and religious manifesto intended to put heart into those Jews who had been deported to Babylon (and I am ready to argue that it is this also). But with laughter comes a fresh perception of joy and wonder at creation, of celebration now. Think of an ant, think of an elephant, a mouse, a giraffe, a kangaroo, a hedgehog ... The gaze of a child or clown perceives God as an archetypal happy clown who goes all out for six days and then stops on the seventh and awaits events. Reader Michael Moynahan says that "God laughed so hard when he was finished that he *had* to rest up on the seventh day!"<sup>5</sup>

Reading the Bible with humour is not new, witness an episode evoked in the Talmud (100 C.E.). To settle disagreement among the Rabbis about a controversial point of law a voice resounds in the heavens but one Rabbi refuses to be impressed. He quotes the Torah (Deuteronomy 30,12) saying that the Torah (or Law) is *not in heaven*, having been given to Israel on Mount Sinai and that heaven is not to meddle in the discussion and they (the Rabbis) need not consider heavenly interference! In the version told by Yehuda Radday<sup>6</sup>, the story

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<sup>4</sup> *Genesis in The Holy Bible*, John Knox (Burns & Oates: London <sup>3</sup>1959).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Moynahan, "Discovering God's Gift of Humor through Liturgical Mime", in: *Modern Liturgy* 6/8 (1979), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Yehuda Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible", in: Yehuda Radday / Athalya Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (The Almond Press: Sheffield 1990), 36.

continues, "Rabbi Nathan met the prophet Elijah (who had died a few hundred years earlier) and asked him, 'What did the Holy One, be he praised, do at that time?' Elijah replied, 'He laughed and said, They overruled me, these sons of mine!'"

Free of speech, familiar to the point of irreverence, these ancient Rabbis esteem that God can take a joke. Humour is the "sauce" that adds flavour to their teaching. It is no obstacle to holiness.

### Divine Laughter in the Hebrew Bible<sup>7</sup>

Turning now from the Bible reader to the narrator, what about the singers of songs and the tellers of tales who make such a large contribution to the Bible? How do they perceive God's laughter? Generally speaking, the Bible is a form of divine (or is it human?) comedy (All's well that ends well) and biblical humour runs the range of parody (sometimes cruel), irony, ribaldry, trickery and farce. Moreover, the Hebrew language itself is given to wordplay and punning. To narrow down the field of research Hebrew *sahaq* or *tsahaq*, an earlier form or variant of *sahaq*, which means *laugh*, is here taken as a guide.<sup>8</sup> Note that the explosive consonants of *sahaq/tsahaq* are onomatopoeic as in English *laughter* or *chuckle*. (French *rire* is smooth but French also has *s'esclaffer* and *pouffer*). You immediately recognise *sahaq/tsahaq* when listening to the Hebrew.

The psalms say three times that God laughs. (*Qal* form of the Hebrew root *sahaq*). Here are the three examples with the RSV translations:

*Yoshev ba-shamayim yis'haq* (Ps 2,4)  
He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
(the Lord has them in derision) (RSV 2,4)

*Adonay yis'haq-lo* (37,13).  
But the Lord laughs at the wicked (RSV 37,13).

*Ve-atta adonay tis'haq-lamo* (59,9)  
But thou, O Lord, dost laugh at them:  
(thou dost hold all nations in derision) (RSV 59,9).

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<sup>7</sup> *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Deutsche Bibelstiftung: Stuttgart 1967-77).

<sup>8</sup> Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament", in: Yehuda Radday / Athalya Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, 35-58, here 48.

God's laughter in the psalms is mocking. God laughs *at* the kings and rulers of the earth, *at* the wicked, and *at* the nations (non-Jews). God rallies and leads his chosen people and so much the worse for the others! This is alright with the psalmist because he and God are on the same side but it cannot be said that God's laughter in the psalms connects up with the joy and wonder of creation described above.

Pursuing the search for happy laughter, the article now looks for examples of *sahaq/tsahaq* in the story of Isaac in the Book of Genesis. The Hebrew name *yits'haq*/Isaac is formed from the root *tsahaq*. The aspect of the verb is imperfect: *yits'haq*/Isaac means *He shall laugh* or *Let him laugh*. The name leads the reader to expect something funny and s/he does not have to wait long. Laughter breaks out at the very idea of Isaac's conception. This is because the future father, Abraham, is a hundred years old and his wife, Sarah, is ninety! When God tells Abraham that Sarah is to bear a son, Abraham cracks out laughing at the news:

*Va-yipol avraham al-panav va-yits'haq* (Gen 17,17)

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed (and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety years old bear a child?" – RSV 17,17).

You can see where the Rabbis get it from! And the translators? Are they ready to laugh? The RSV reflects Abraham's clown-like reaction (He bursts out laughing and falls flat on his face) but smooths over a little hiatus in the Hebrew. A literal rendering of the second sentence reads: *And if Sarah... shall a ninety year old bear a child?* I propose to read this hiatus as a splutter of laughter. Abraham chokes over the idea that Sarah might be pregnant at the age of ninety and finds it hard to finish his sentence. A case of slapstick humour!

Abraham tomba sur sa face; il rit; et dit en son cœur: Naîtrait-il un fils à un homme de cent ans? Et Sara, âgée de quatre-vingt-dix ans, enfanterait-elle? (Segond 17,17)

In this translation, the laughter is downplayed by an additional detail: a semicolon separates *tomba sur sa face* and *il rit*. The semicolon, which replaces the co-ordinating conjunction *vav/and* indicates that to fall on one's face is one thing, to laugh is another. Abraham's falling to the ground, when dissociated from laughter, suggests an act of reverence.

At this Abraham fell prostrate before him; but in his heart he said, laughing at the thought ... (Knox 17,17)

Knox emphasises, exaggerates the reverence: *Abraham fell prostrate before him ...* Several comments can be made here. First, prostration suggests awe and submission. Second, there is no *before him* in the Hebrew. Third, the co-ordinating conjunction *but* introduces an opposition between reverence and laughter. Fourth, Abraham's laughter appears here as a totally private matter: *in his heart he said, laughing at the thought ...* When Abraham's laughter is hidden from God in this way, laughter and God are separated.

In summary, what I interpreted as Abraham's mind-boggling, body-toppling laughter in the Hebrew text is rendered without the spluttering choke in the RSV, it is moderated by reverence in Segond (Is there a sobering Protestant influence here?) and it is ousted by awe in Knox (Knox is a Roman Catholic clergyman). What is more, in Knox a demarcation line is drawn between laughter and God. It is argued here that the translator's perception of Abraham's laughter is influenced by his God-image: he readily associates or does not associate laughter with God and translates accordingly.

Returning now to the God character in the Hebrew text, how does he respond to Abraham's laughter? Two verses later God says:

*Ve-qarata et-shmo yits'haq* (17,19).

You shall call his name Let-him-laugh (literal translation)

God sees Abraham's laughter (pace Knox) and joins in the joke by recording laughter in the child's name. His sympathetic reaction recalls the humorous God of the Rabbis. How does this come across in the translations?

You shall call his name Isaac (RSV 17,19).<sup>9</sup>

Tu l'appelleras du nom d'Isaac (Segond 17,19).

Thou shalt give him the name of Isaac (Knox 17,19).

The translations are sober: apart from the RSV footnote, there is no sign of laughter in this naming verse. By ignoring the wordplay *yits'haq/tsahaq*, the translators edit God's participation in laughter out of the text.

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<sup>9</sup> A footnote reads: "that is he laughs".

After this first round of laughter a second bout explodes in chapter 18. Again Abraham is told that Sarah will have a son and this time Sarah overhears.

*Va-ttits'haq sara be-qirbah* (18,12)

Sarah laughed in her innards (literal translation)

The translations of this verse are introduced with a preliminary comment. In the Hebrew Bible the emotions are seated in the innards and thinking in the heart, whereas modern Western conceptions situate the emotions in the heart and thinking in the head. In fact, so much goes on in the Hebrew belly and there are so many words for this part of the anatomy that, as a translator of the Book of Genesis, I was constantly at a loss for suitable terms in English.<sup>10</sup> There are not enough English words to go round and, given the puritanical streak in the English language, some words are felt to be vulgar e.g. *belly*, while other vocabulary available has a scientific ring e.g. *abdomen*. How do the translators solve this problem?

Sarah laughed to herself (RSV 18,12).

Elle rit en elle-même (Segond 18,12).

Sara ... laughed (Knox 18,12).

Sarah's laugh has lost its earthiness. The translators fail to present the physicality of Sarah's laugh: *Sarah laughed in her innards*. I suggest that hers is a belly laugh, a laugh, as someone remarked, that has given birth to us all (Jews and Christians). Indeed Sarah's following words show how down to earth she really is. Her thoughts run on remarkably pragmatic lines:

Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (RSV 18,12).

It is tempting here to record the commentary of Frederick Buechner, a reader receptive to laughter.<sup>11</sup> Buechner writes, "Why did the two old crocks laugh?"

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Phil Korsak, *At the start...Genesis made new. A translation of the Hebrew text* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. European Association for the Promotion of Poetry, Louvain 1992; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Doubleday: New York, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Buechner (quoted on internet: access Mary Phil Korsak; then Homilies – 8/1/99 – Laughter).

They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half-believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meantime it helped keep them going. 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11,1). Faith is laughter at the promise of a child called 'Laughter'".

Returning to the analysis of the biblical text, Sarah laughs but God does not join in her laughter (perhaps he has laughed enough!). An impertinent reader such as myself understands that God is in a huff because he feels his powers are challenged by Sarah's laughter: God and Sarah squabble. The gist of their altercation goes as follows:

God: *lamma zeh tsahaqah sara?*

Sarah: *lo tsahaqti.*

God: *lo ki tsahaqt* (18,13-15).

God: Why did Sarah laugh...? (Is anything too hard for the Lord?)

Sarah: I did not laugh, (for she was afraid).

God: No, but you did laugh (RSV 18,13-15).

Pourquoi donc Sara a-t-elle ri? (Y a t-il rien qui soit étonnant de la part de l'Eternel?)

Je n'ai pas ri, (car elle avait peur).

Au contraire, tu as ri (Segond 18,13-15).

Why does Sara laugh? (Can any task be too difficult for the Lord?)

Sara denied the charge of laughing, (for she was overcome with terror).

Ah, he said, but thou didst laugh (Knox 18,13-15).

The RSV translation is straightforward. Segond's elegant French (see *donc* and the subjunctive and *Au contraire*) does not communicate the down-to-earth tones of the Hebrew. Knox is literary and heavy. What is more, in Knox, Sarah is made to switch from direct speech to indirect speech: she has no personal voice. What inspires the translator to introduce this change? Does he feel deep down that it is unsuitable for the woman Sarah to dispute directly with God? Whatever the explanation, Sarah stands diminished. Note also that Knox further accentuates the distance between God and Sarah by giving as a

reason for her denial that she was *overcome with terror*, where the RSV has the more accurate *for she was afraid* and Segond, *car elle avait peur*. All in all, however, it is argued here that this scene confirms the biblical, anthropomorphic image of a God who, although he is ready to share in human laughter, does not like to be laughed at.

To continue the analysis, a third round of laughter is heard, when Isaac is born. First, Abraham gives his son the name *yits'haq/Let him laugh* (21,3). Second, Sarah reacts with words of laughter. She says:

*Ts'hoq asah li elohim kol-shomea yits'haq-li* (21,6).

God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me (RSV 21,6).

It is not clear from the translation whether Sarah enjoys the laughter around her or whether she feels in danger of being laughed at. Grammatically, the Hebrew also is ambiguous.

Dieu a fait de moi un objet de risée; quiconque l'apprendra rira de moi (Segond 21,6).

Segond favours a negative interpretation. Sarah's laugh is sour.

God has made me laugh for joy; whoever hears of this will laugh (Isaac) with me (Knox 21,6).

Knox opts for a positive interpretation and communicates Sarah's delight. Although the grammar of the Hebrew verse lends itself to different interpretations, the context favours Knox: Sarah is full of the joys of motherhood and the sense of her achievement (Il y a de quoi!). This is made clear by Sarah's words in the next verse when she adds:

Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children. Yet I have borne him a son in his old age (RSV 21,7).

(Womanlike, she seems to have forgotten her old age!).

Moreover, contextual evidence in the Book of Genesis in chapters 29 and 30 shows that a successful birth inspires women with pride and joy. These chapters describe how Lea provides Jacob with eight sons, those she bears herself and those she legally claims as her own, born of her maid Zilpah, Isaac's concubine. The names Lea chooses express her triumphant delight



at each birth: *Reuben/See, a Son!*; *Judah/Praise*; *Gad/Luck*; *Asher/Success*; *Zebulun/Gratification*.

To summarise the argument so far, these scenes in the life of Isaac show how laughter bubbles up around human conception and birth and how an anthropopathic God shares in human laughter and is rankled when he feels laughed at.

There are two more occurrences of laughter in the Isaac tales. In both cases, the Piel form of the verb suggests intensive or repetitive laughter with possible sexual connotations. The first laugh need not retain our attention long. In chapter 21,8-10 Sarah, on hearing Isaac's half-brother laughing, decides to drive the boy and his mother away. I note in passing that the name *yits'haq/Isaac* occurs twice in this passage and that of the three translations only Segond translates *tsahaq* literally by *rire* (RSV: *playing*, Segond: *rire*, Knox: *mocking*).

The second laugh is in verse 26,8. Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looks out of the window and sees Isaac laughing with his wife Rebekah. He concludes that they are a married couple. What he sees is anybody's guess! Are they laughing intensively, repeatedly? Maybe he is tickling her? Here is the Hebrew verse with the three translations:

*Avimelekh melekh pelishttim beadh ha-hallon va-yar ve-hinneh yits'haq mtsaheq et rivqa ishto* (26,8).

Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac fondling Rebekah his wife (RSV 26,8).

Abimelec, roi des Philistins, regardant par la fenêtre, vit Isaac qui plaisantait avec Rebecca, sa femme (Segond 26,8).

The Philistine king, Abimelech looked out of the window and saw Isaac and his wife (no name!) in dalliance together (Knox 26,8).

The RSV, with *fondling* makes the situation clear as best it may. Segond with *plaisantait* hardly improves on possible *riait*. Knox unearths an old-fashioned phrase with amorous undercurrents: *in dalliance together*. Sadly, the Hebrew wordplay *yits'haq/mtsaheq* is lost in all three translations.

To summarise findings about laughter in the Isaac stories, there are five occurrences of the name *yits'haq/Let him laugh* and nine derivations of the verb *tsahaq/laugh* in the Hebrew text. The texts quoted ring with laughter. In the translations, however, of these fourteen evocations of laughter, only

seven find their way into the RSV. Second records eight laughs but tends to downplay the laughter. Knox has seven laughs and indicates a connection between laughter and the name Isaac in verse 21,6. Knox, however, overemphasises the distance between God, God's laughter and the other characters in the text. In two verses he downplays the woman's role: in verse 18,14 he transforms Sarah's direct speech into indirect speech; in verse 26,8, he refers to Rebekah as *his wife* omitting her name.

One last comment on the name *yits'haq*/Isaac: three French Bibles<sup>12</sup> state that *yits'haq* is a shortened version of *yits'haq-el*. Ephraim Avigdor Speiser further suggests that *yits'haq-el* is an ancient form which had probably dropped out of memory when the Isaac stories were recorded.<sup>13</sup> (cf. *mi-kha-el/Who (is) like God* or *immanu-el/With us God*). As *el* means *God*, *yits'haq-el* can be rendered as *God shall laugh* or *Let God laugh*.

### Conclusion

The article has argued that the perception of God's laughter in the Bible is greatly dependent on the attitude of the reader. It has, however, shown that the God of the Hebrews is an anthropopathic figure: he does indeed laugh *at* in the psalms and *with* in the Isaac tales. The article has quoted examples of laughter in the Hebrew version of the Isaac stories and demonstrated how the translators, who are primary readers, fail to transmit half the laughter recorded there and how they tend to downplay the laughs that remain. The Isaac episodes connect laughter and a moment of human conception, laughter and birth, laughter and sexual play. They connect God, laughter and human life! The article ends with a cry: *yits'haq-el*, Let God laugh! And (remembering my nose) a rhetorical question: How can a fool like me speak about God?

L'article ci-dessus soutient la thèse que la perception du rire de Dieu dans la Bible, dépend d'abord de la disposition du lecteur. Il vise à montrer, cependant, que le Dieu des Hébreux est représenté de façon anthropomorphique, un Dieu relationnel en dialogue avec l'humain, un Dieu qui partage les sentiments humains, un Dieu qui rit vraiment, *à* (certaines choses) dans les psaumes, et *avec* (certaines personnes) dans les histoires concernant Isaac. L'article cite des exemples de rire dans la version hébraïque des histoires d'Isaac et démontre que les traducteurs (qui étaient les

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<sup>12</sup> *La Bible (TOB)*, (Les Editions du Cerf: Paris 1995); *La Bible*, Emile Osty & Joseph Trinquet (Ed du Seuil: Paris 1973); *La Bible de Jérusalem* (Desclée de Brouwer: Paris 1975).

<sup>13</sup> Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, *Genesis* (Doubleday: New York 1962), 125.

premiers lecteurs), ont omis de transmettre la moitié des «rires» et qu'ils ont eu tendance à minimiser ceux qu'ils ont conservés. Les passages concernant Isaac relient le rire à un moment de la conception humaine, le rire à la naissance, le rire au jeu sexuel. Ils relient Dieu, le rire et la vie humaine! L'article se termine par un appel: «*yits'haq-el*» - que Dieu rie!

Der Artikel legt dar, dass die Wahrnehmung von Gottes Lachen in der Bibel in hohem Maße von der Haltung des Lesers / der Leserin abhängt. Er zielt jedoch darauf, dass der Gott der Hebräer und Hebräerinnen als anthropomorphe Figur vorgestellt wird, in Dialog mit den Menschen und ihre Gefühle teilend, eine Figur, die in der Tat lacht, *über* in den Psalmen, und *mit* in den Isaak-Erzählungen. Der Artikel zitiert Beispiele von Lachen in der hebräischen Fassung der Isaak-Erzählungen und zeigt, wie die Übersetzenden, die die Erstlesenden sind, die Hälfte des Lachens, von dem hier erzählt wird, überhaupt nicht wiedergeben, und das verbleibende Lachen möglichst herunterspielen. Die Isaak-Episoden verbinden Lachen und den Moment menschlicher Empfängnis, Lachen und Geburt, Lachen und sexuelles/erotisches Spiel. Im Wesentlichen aber verbinden sie Gott, Lachen und menschliches Leben! Der Artikel endet mit einem Ruf: *yits'haq-el* – Lass(t) Gott lachen!

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