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A Humorous Jesus? Orality, Structure and Characterisation in Luke 14:15-24, and Beyond

Bruce W. Longenecker
University of St Andrews

Abstract

If humour is uncharacteristic of the texts of the early Christian movement, sensitivity to rhetorical patterning in oral/aural contexts permits the recognition of innocuous sexual humour in one of the parables attributed to Jesus. Whether or not the humour originates with Jesus, it is suggestive of the way that Jesus was remembered by some of his earliest followers, and lays down a guidepost as to how he might profitably be rendered in modern portraiture or characterised in modern narrative. To that end, this study closes with an assessment of four Jesus novels of the past decade in relation to their depiction of Jesus and humour.

Keywords

humour, orality, structure, Jesus, characterisation, novel

Anthologies of classic humour unanimously by-pass Jesus of Nazareth and his first followers, and with good reason; humour is not usually associated with the texts about them, which claim to deal with serious matters of life and death. So Reinhold Niebuhr's assertion that the Bible is virtually devoid of humour might coincide with the common-sense view.[1]

Of course, some evidence might cause us to question whether the character of the historical Jesus is best captured by the solemn texts of

[1] 'Humour and Faith', in R. Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (London: SCM, 1946), pp. 111-131 (111).

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the New Testament Gospels. The newly discovered *Gospel of Judas*, for instance, depicts a laughing Jesus. When that apocryphal gospel was recently (re)published, some argued that laughter makes the Jesus of the *Gospel of Judas* much more approachable than the hard-nosed Jesus of the canonical Gospels. So Herbert Krosney claimed that the Jesus of the *Gospel of Judas* 'is not a tormented figure who will die in agony on the cross. Instead, he is a friendly and benevolent teacher with a sense of humour.'[2] For instance, in Scene 1 we read:

> One day he was with his disciples in Judea, and he found them gathered together and seated in pious observance. When he [approached] his disciples, gathered together and seated and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread, [he] laughed. The disciples said to [him], 'Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving? We have done what is right.' He answered and said to them, 'I am not laughing at you. [You] are not doing this because of your own will but because it is through this that your god [will be] praised.'

Although there is laughter in this scene, it is unlikely to qualify as humour. The scene's purpose is to demonstrate that Jesus' disciples have simply been duped by their observance of traditional Jewish (later Judaeo-Christian) piety—a piety founded on the belief that the creator God has blessed the earth with provisions and thereby is deserving of thanks and praise. How preposterously foolish, laughs the Jesus of the *Gospel of Judas*.[3] He is not laughing in mutual delight along with his disciples, but in demeaning condescension at the ignorance that has hoodwinked this world, and even his own disciples. It is little wonder, then, that the disciples themselves take offence at this laughing Jesus,

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2) Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2006), p. 286.

3) A similar derisory laughter is evident in scene 2: 'The next morning, after this happened, Jesus [appeared] to his disciples again. They said to him, "Master, where did you go and what did you do when you left us?" Jesus said to them, "I went to another great and holy generation." His disciples said to him, "Lord, what is the great generation that is superior to us and holier than us, that is not now in these realms?" When Jesus heard this, he laughed and said to them, "Why are you thinking in your hearts about the strong and holy generation? Truly [I] say to you, no one born [of] this aeon will see that [generation]".'

'blaspheming against him in their hearts'.[4] Despite sensational claims to the contrary, apocryphal gospels such as the *Gospel of Judas* have not much to offer in relation to a humorous Jesus.

But perhaps a Jesus of wit is not wholly foreign to the canonical Gospels. Although the spurious charge has sometimes been made that the Jews of Jesus' day had no appreciation for humour,[5] scholars sometimes suggest that the canonical Gospels themselves depict Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, as having an aptitude for employing 'amusingly pithy turns-of-phrase'.[6] For instance, in Matthew, Jesus is remembered as likening the Pharisees to one who strenuously cleans the outside of his drinking cup but fails to notice the filth on the inside (23:25); or to one who is so concerned with the small fly in his cup that he fails to see the camel that he is ingesting (23:24). According to Dorothy Sayers's 1946 estimate, '[i]f we did not know all His retorts by heart, if we had not taken the sting out of them by incessant repetition in the accents of the pulpit,… we should reckon Him among the greatest

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4) Comparable is the Nag Hammadi *Apocalypse of Peter* 81, with Jesus being glad and laughing during his crucifixion. But that characterisation is based on a differentiation between the Jesus of the flesh, who died a miserable death, and the Jesus of the spirit, who despises the material world to the point of laughing at it. So Jesus explains to Peter: 'He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame' (James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1978], p. 344).

5) J.H. Charlesworth (*How Barisat Bellowed* [North Richmond Hills: BIBAL Press, 1998], p. 52 n. 19) notes that this position has been held by E. Berggrav (*Humor og alvor* [Copenhagen: Berlingske Forlage, 1954], p. 71). I suspect the charge against Judaism arose as a product of Christian characterisations of Judaism as arid, vacuous legalism and self-righteousness. In that frame of reference, the old adage that 'righteousness has a sense of humour, but self-righteousness never does' takes on almost injurious import. A harmless variation on this dangerous view might be evident in the only attempt at humorous 'historical fiction' with Jesus as its main character: Christopher Moore's *Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ's Childhood Friend* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 42. There Jesus' [or Joshua's] friend says to him: 'I don't know the Torah as well as you, Joshua, but I don't remember God having a sense of humour.' Contrast Voltaire: 'God is a comedian playing to an audience that is afraid to laugh.'

6) R.A. Horsley and N.A. Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 47.

wits of all time.'[7] And nearly forty-five years later the pop group King Missile suggested that, if he wanted to, 'Jesus could have been funnier than any comedian you could think of', the reason being that 'Jesus was way cool'.[8] Granted, the sayings attributed to Jesus in dispute with the Pharisees (and similar sayings; e.g., Matt. 7:3; Mark 4:21; 10:25 and parallels) might be somewhat amusing quips to those without much sympathy for the Pharisees whom Jesus has in his sights. But it is clear that they are not classics of comedy from one of the greatest wits of all time. They simply embody biting criticism by way of ridicule (not a world away from the laughing Jesus of *The Gospel of Judas*).

Jesus' figures of speech of this sort are well documented by others,[9] along with studies of irony, parody, or satire within the Gospels. Only on rare occasions, however, do scholars speak of Jesus' teachings having inspired heartfelt laughter among his listeners, and even when they do, their claims are frequently overstated. The claims are usually made in relation to Jesus' parable stories. For instance, Joel Wohlgemut believes that, when listening to the parable of the talents/pounds in which servants are entrusted with money to invest on behalf of their master (Luke 19:11-27; Matt. 25:14-30), Jesus' audience 'would have laughed at the third servant for missing out on such an apparently glorious opportunity'.[10]

Similar claims of humour have been lodged by Humphrey Palmer with regard to Luke's version of the parable of the dinner (Luke 14:15-24). Palmer proposes a subtle interpretation in which the three excuses offered by the invited guests are seen to be wholly comical. In Palmer's view, the situations that the invited guests appeal to in order to absent themselves from the dinner are the situations permitted by law in order to be absented from active military service, so that there is a stinging jibe at the host in the excuses of the invited guests: 'To plead an excuse

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7) D. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), p. 26.

8) 'Jesus was Way Cool', by King Missile, *Mystical Shit* (Instinct Records, 1990).

9) E.g., R. Buckner, *The Joy of Jesus: Humor in the Gospels* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1993).

10) J.R. Wohlgemut, 'Entrusted Money (Matthew 25:14-28): The Parable of the Talents/Pounds', in V.G. Shillington (ed.), *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 103-18 (117).

that would exempt you from battle implies that the catering is more exciting than reliable.'[11]

Similarly, in his study of the parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35),[12] Douglas Oakman postulates that the peasants who first heard this parable 'would have laughed all the way through Jesus' story'.[13] According to Oakman, the acute humour lies in the Samaritan's oblivion to the fact that he, an exploitative trader, is himself the unwitting object of exploitation in providing care for the needy man. For Oakman, however, this interpretation of the parable 'is not entirely satisfying' as an interpretation of Jesus' own intention, since 'it does not bear the surprising or radical stamp of other parables of Jesus'.[14] When attempting to reconstruct Jesus' original intention for speaking, all talk of 'humour' disappears from Oakman's analysis.

Occasionally scholars write in ways that suggest that the comic lies at the heart of Jesus' ministry. This is the case, for instance, with Robert Funk, who depicts Jesus as 'a comic savant'. According to Funk, Jesus

> mixed humor with subversive and troubling knowledge born of direct insight... A comic savant is an intellectual...who is redefining what it means to be wise. That is the real role of the court jester: tell the king the truth but tell it as a joke. Jesters consequently enjoyed a limited immunity for their jokes. New truth is easier to embrace if it comes wrapped in humor.[15]

But Funk's own failure to provide any real instances of 'Jesus humour' is a telling omission, reinforcing the common-sense impression that the New Testament is not the place to go looking for elements of good clean fun, let alone good 'dirty' fun (by which I mean humour involv-

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11) H. Palmer, 'Just Married, Cannot Come', *NovT* 18 (1976), pp. 241-57 (248). On p. 256 he notes that '[t]he allusion may be humorous'.

12) Or better, the parable of 'the Samaritan and the Innkeeper', as I argue in a forthcoming publication.

13) D.A. Oakman, 'Was Jesus a Peasant? Implications for Reading the Samaritan Story (Luke 10:30-35)', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1993), pp. 117-25 (123).

14) Oakman, 'Was Jesus a Peasant?', p. 123.

15) Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 158.

ing sexual relations). Along somewhat similar lines, Tom Thatcher depicts Jesus as 'a riddler' who brokers an 'empire of wit', as the final chapter of his book announces. But by 'wit', Thatcher seems to envisage the way in which Jesus 'often reversed the current social order' in ways that were perceived as 'shocking', 'absurd', and 'utter nonsense'.[16] At no point does Thatcher's discussion of 'wit' include what most would think of as straight-forward, simple humour.

If the rather sombre tone of New Testament texts makes their dearth of whimsical humour unsurprising, what is surprising is the fact that interpreters have generally neglected the wit contained within what is perhaps the one truly jocular tale within the New Testament: that is, Jesus' parable of the dinner, as recounted in Luke's Gospel (14:15-24).[17] This oversight is probably due to a combination of factors, not least the fact that few expect whimsicality from Jesus' words. More to the point, however, is the fact that the humorous note is not explicitly stated within the tale itself but arises out of its rhetorical structure, which incorporates a moment of knowing silence during which the humour is intended to emerge. A failure to perceive the silent but rhetorically-charged moment within the tale's structure leaves the unstated humour invisible.

In what follows, then, I am in the unenviable position of explaining a simple little joke, an exercise that runs against the very grain of what humour is all about. One either gets the joke or does not. Explaining her comic material is not an option for the comedienne, just as it is virtually impossible to tickle one's way into a fit of laughter. And perhaps the very fact that one has to explain humour might suggest that the humour was not there to begin with. But the reason that the witty feature of Luke's version of this parable needs to be explicated is that, in our predominantly print cultures, we have lost our sensitivity to the kinds of structural patterning and rhetorical delivery that was elementary to discourse in the predominantly oral cultures of antiquity.

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16) Tom Thatcher, *Jesus the Riddler: The Power of Ambiguity in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 140.

17) As noted above, Palmer also proposed that this parable contained humour, although for reasons other than the ones proposed here.

Of late, we have frequently been reminded of the importance of orality for the interpretation of ancient texts, since '[c]onventions of orality undergirded all composition, performance and reception of texts'.[18] In a predominantly oral/aural culture, oral techniques 'play much of the part which punctuation, highlighting, headings, and paragraphs play in a graphic text'.[19] And in this regard, Walter Ong writes:

> In a primarily oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses,…so that they come to mind readily and… are patterned for retention and ready recall.[20]

Similarly, John Harvey notes how the 'predominantly oral nature of a rhetorical culture requires speakers to arrange their material in ways that can be followed easily by a listener. Clues to the organization of thought are, of necessity, based on sound rather than on sight.'[21] That is, in the words of Joanna Dewey, all ancient rhetors 'wrote for the ear'.[22] So we read of Seneca's criticism of a colleague's writing style on the basis that 'he was writing those words for the mind rather than for the ear' (*Ep.Mor.* 100.2).

The Lukan version of the dinner parable is animated by structuring techniques that would have contributed to its reception in cultures entrenched in techniques of oral/aural patterning. And from precisely

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18) J. Dewey, 'The Gospel of John in Its Oral-Written Media World', in R.T. Fortna and T. Thatcher (eds.), *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 239-52 (243).

19) C. Bryan, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel in Its Literary and Cultural Settings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 78. Cf. his comments on p. 80: 'Oral techniques perform…the tasks of punctuation, clarifying and emphasizing.'

20) W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 34. Further on orality, see B.W. Longenecker, *Rhetoric at the Boundaries: The Art and Theology of New Testament Chain-Link Transitions* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), pp. 49-55.

21) J.D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. xv.

22) Dewey, 'The Gospel of John in Its Oral-Written Media World', p. 249.

those rhetorically prudent structures arises a somewhat humorous feature within the Lukan version—a feature which the 'ear' is more attentive to than the 'eye'. This is not to suggest that interpretation of the parable is complete once its simple humour is recognised. It needs to be emphasised that the purpose of the parable is not to make people laugh; its primary purpose is to set up a challenging view of the practicalities of God's reign. So observing the parable's subtle humour involves appreciating its 'packaging'; it does not exhaust its theological content. Nonetheless, as will be suggested later in this essay, theological content is not the only feature of this parable that deserves consideration in any attempt to understand the historical Jesus. In this case, the parable's packaging has similar significance, primarily because it has a foothold in the very structures of Jesus' ministry and also because it reveals something of the character of the one whom the earliest members of the Jesus movement praised as their Lord.

The Structure and Delivery of Luke 14:15-24

The basic plot of the parable's narrative is clear enough. In the Lukan version, a man giving a dinner sends his servant to instruct the previously invited guests that the dinner is now ready, but the invitation is repeatedly spurned. Three of the invitees offer their excuses—these three serving as examples of a widespread rejection of the invitation. The man putting on the dinner is angered by the non-attendance of the invitees and instructs his servant to extend an invitation to others who were not originally invited to the dinner.

Equally clear is the '3+1' pattern that serves as the primary structure for this parable. In this pattern, three different but comparable situations initially impede the resolution of the parable's plot (14:18-20), with this impediment being resolved in a fourth situation (14:21-24).[23] Along with its variants,[24] the '3+1' pattern is a time-honoured princi-

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[23] In this parable, the fourth situation is itself comprised of two parts, with two supplementary invitations being offered (14:21 and 14:22-24 respectively).

[24] For instance, occasionally a plot operates on a '2 + 1' basis, as in the parable of the Samaritan and the parable of the talents.

ple of oral story-telling, not least in Jewish folklore.[25] It makes a similar appearance in other parables attributed to Jesus, such as the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-8, 13-20; Matt. 13:3-8, Luke 8:4-8, 11-15).[26]

In structural repetition of this kind, the three situations that initially impede the narrative's resolution are all of a kind (despite differences in their particulars). In the parable of the great dinner, this is clear from the responses offered by the first two invitees, which are structurally identical, even if they differ in content. The responses of the first two invitees (4:18-19) share a three-fold pattern:

1. The invitees' situation is described (i.e., the purchase of a field, the purchase of oxen);
2. The invitee explains his need to be involved elsewhere (i.e., to inspect the field, to examine the oxen);
3. The invitation is declined.

This pattern, having been established in the responses of the first two invitees, is expected to carry over to the response of the third invitee. At first glance, however, the pattern seems to have been broken in the third instance, since the third invitee's articulated response consists of only two of the three elements of the pattern (14:20): the first (i.e., his situation is described) and the third (i.e., the invitation is declined). The second element (i.e., the need to be elsewhere) is not stated. But despite being unstated, the second element is not altogether absent from the third response. Instead, the structural pattern already established in the first two responses leads the hearer of this parable to import the second element into the third response, even it if is not explicitly articulated there. In oral/aural contexts, the one delivering the parable would have assisted this process, intentionally pausing at the critical moment in order to allow the charged silence to be particu-

25) See, for instance, H. Schwartz (ed.), *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Folktales* (New York: Penguin, 1987), a collection of folktales from a wide variety of locations over a significant time scale, in which the basic pattern is repeated with an almost predictable regularity.

26) Unless one accepts the view of J.D. Crossan (*In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1992], pp. 39-44) that this parable is structured according to a 3 + 3 pattern, a view to which I do not subscribe.

larly noticeable. In this delivery, the response of the third invitee has a pregnant silence as its second element, and it is during that silence that the humour of the parable emerges.

To make the point, I will paraphrase the three responses according to the three-fold pattern explicit within the first two responses:

First Invitee's Response:
1. I have just bought a field.
2. I must go try it out.
3. Therefore I decline the invitation.

Second Invitee's Response:
1. I have just bought five pair of oxen.
2. I must go try them out.
3. Therefore I decline the invitation.

Third Invitee's Response:
1. I have just married a woman.
2. [Unstated: 'I must go try her out.']
3. Therefore I decline the invitation.

The one delivering the parable in an oral/aural context need not state the second element of the third invitee's response; it is simply obvious. The implied second phrase is not: 'I have just come from my own wedding banquet and I don't want to overdo it by attending yet another big banquet.'[27] The 'try it out' feature of the first two responses is to be carried over into the third response. A pregnant pause would have been included in the oral presentation of the parable, permitting the humorous penny to drop. Regardless of whether the humour is politically correct in our day, and unless a puritanical streak pervades our reasoning, we should not think that the muted 'try her out' aspect of the third invitee's response involves an eagerness to taste the wife's cooking or assess her cleaning skills (duties that normally fell to women in Jesus' day). Nor even to discover her intellectual acumen by discussing current events with her. Clearly the third invitee is eager simply to enjoy

27) This seems to be what D. Wallace intends (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], p. 333) when he estimates that 'for this reason' (διὰ τοῦτο) in 14:20 'must refer to the marriage event, not the woman!'

the sexual delights of married life with his new wife,[28] and he considers this to be a higher priority than attending the dinner. We can imagine a series of chuckles, wry smiles, nudges and winks to have circulated among the hearers prior to the final clause, 'therefore I cannot come'. The pregnant pause that is not included in the written text of the parable would have been virtually self-evident to those who, in passing on folklore of this kind, treasured its structural features as mnemonic aides for relating its content in an oral/aural culture. Only in predominately print-based cultures does the one delivering this parable move from one word to the next without properly noticing the critical structural lacuna, thereby missing the subtle witticism of the Lukan parable.[29]

The Humour of Jesus of Nazareth?

Is Jesus of Nazareth to be credited with the jocund note of the Lukan parable, or is it the product of one of those early Christians who passed on Jesus' sayings while leaving their own fingerprints on the tradition? Since similar parables are recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 22:1-14 and the Gospel of Thomas 64, Jesus might well have told a parable of this kind in a variety of ways, with perhaps two or three Gospels recording versions that all of them should be credited to Jesus of Nazareth in their details. Since this scenario can never be disproved, there is obviously a possibility that the humour of this parable originates with Jesus of Nazareth, with Luke alone incorporating the light-hearted version.

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28) The fact that she is a new wife is another carry-over of the pattern established in the first two responses, since both the field and the oxen were newly acquired. Cf. Gregory Nazianzen, 'Oration 3' of his *Orations*: 'one to his field, another to his newly bought yoke of oxen, another to his just-married wife'.

29) The parable of the Samaritan offers an interesting point of comparison with the parable of the dinner. The Samaritan parable is structured according to a '2 + 1' instead of a '3 + 1' pattern, and it does not utilise the strategy of a charged lacuna to make its point. But like the parable of the dinner, its third component is bolstered in its effect by a structural differentiation. In the Samaritan parable, the first two characters to come along the road are said to 'see…and pass by' (ὁράω…ἀντιπαρέρχομαι) the man in need. With that pattern established, it is then broken in relation to the Samaritan. The audience is told that the Samaritan 'saw' (ὁράω) but, instead of 'passing by' like the others, he 'has compassion' (σπλαγχνίζομαι).

Alternatively, the three versions might have emerged from a single prototype, each version developing according to the needs of its Christian handlers in the course of their respective *Sitze im Leben*.[30] Along with the majority of scholars, this is the view that I subscribe to, seeing the three versions as developments of an underlying prototype.[31] Might, then, the humour of the Lukan version derive from that prototype? The data are not wholly transparent. On the one hand, since the humorous note is not apparent in the Matthean or Thomas versions, the jocular feature within the Lukan version is not a good candidate for inclusion within the early stratum of the parable's tradition history. Had the humour been present at the earliest stage, we might expect it to have influenced any 'derivative' versions of the parable. For this reason, the origins of the humour in Luke 14:20 might be seen as lying in a tradition history somewhat distinct from the histories of the versions in Matthew and Thomas.

On the other hand, it is telling that a marriage motif is evident in all of the three extant versions. In Matthew, the occasion for the parable is a marriage feast, and in Luke and Thomas a marriage provides one of the invitees with an excuse for not attending the dinner (Thomas, the second invitee; Luke, the third invitee). The marriage motif, then, has multiple attestation across all of the relevant sources, and as such has good claim to derive from the prototype.

The *use* of the marriage motif in the Matthean version probably does not derive from the prototype, however. Instead, in Matthew the motif has been linked to a post-70 purpose, with the narrative moving towards the climax of the destruction of 'their city'—an allegorical reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.[32] In order for the para-

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30) That this has happened to Jesus material is clear from some traditions relating single, non-repeated situations and in which two or more versions of the single event have survived within Christian literature.

31) Cf. W.M. Swartley ('The Unexpected Banquet People (Luke 14:16-24)', in Shillington [ed.], *Jesus and His Parables*, pp. 177-90 [177]): 'The parable in its present three extant versions… demonstrates well the pliability of the Jesus tradition in the service of different writers and communities of faith.'

32) That this is an allegorical feature is likely, since the narrative logic of the parable is unbearable otherwise. First, the destruction of the city takes place in an incredibly short period of time—after the meal has been prepared and before the meal begins.

ble's narrative to move towards that event, the host's stature needed to be up-graded, so that in Matthew's version the host is not simply a well-off 'man' (as in Luke and Thomas) but a 'king', and consequently one who commands troops, through whom the city is destroyed. Joining the allegorical matrix of king (i.e. God) and city (i.e., Jerusalem) is the son—obviously, Jesus. Perhaps because Jesus could be envisaged as the bridegroom of the church (cf. Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; Rev. 19:7, 9), the occasion of the parable shifted from a dinner (as in the versions preserved by Luke and Thomas) to a marriage banquet.[33] In this way, if the marriage motif goes back to the parable prototype that was passed on within the early Christian movement, the Matthean version of the parable seems to make use of that motif in a derivative manner that is best explained as a post-70 development.

Since the marriage motif in Matthew seems to have little claim to belong within the prototype, the convergence of the marriage motif in the excuse sections of both Thomas and Luke makes it likely that the prototype incorporated the marriage motif at that point in its structure. And of the two, it would seem more likely that the version in Thomas is more authentic on this score, where the marriage motif has no humorous dimension. Assuming that the humour would have been appreciated,[34] it is unlikely that an early Christian would have reworked the parable so as to remove the humour.

Consequently, although the matter involves an obvious degree of speculation, it would appear that attributing the humour directly to Jesus is not the most obvious historical reconstruction of the composi-

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Second, the city that is destroyed is said to be 'theirs' (i.e., the invitees' rather than the king's). In a strict application of the parable's logic, the city would have been that of both the invitees and the king. In that case, the burning of the city would have disadvantaged the king himself. Without an appreciation of the version's allegorical purposes, the narrative logic of the Matthean version unravels.

33) The servants are likely to carry allegorical significance as well, representing the prophets (the first servants) and the apostles (the second servants who are martyred). In all, the Matthean version of the parable offers an allegorical overview of salvation history with the events of 70 CE as the climax of the overview.

34) This can be demonstrated by Tatian's handling of the parable, which is likely to demonstrate his cognisance of the humour, although that cannot be demonstrated here.

tion history of the parable's three extant versions. It is more likely that the humour arose at some point in the retelling of the parable within the life of Christian communities.[35] In one such retelling, an early Christian seems to have told the parable in a manner that kept its basic structure intact but altered slightly the placement of the marriage motif, so that it appeared as the excuse for not the second invitee (as in Thomas) but the third. Immediately the potential for light-hearted humour was realised, and a new version was established, one that was treasured enough to make its way to Luke in the course of its circulation among Christian communities.

On Remembering the Character of Jesus

The Lukan parable of the dinner embodies what might be considered an early Christian experiment in christological portraiture. Its depiction of the invitee who has just married is likely to represent a fingerprint left by one member of a Christian community that proclaimed Jesus to be the Lord of kingdom realities. In passing on this parable, early Christians attributed to their Lord a saying that shows the hallmark of whimsical humour. While the Lukan version of the parable may not go back to the historical Jesus in this particular detail, its pre-Lukan handlers considered the whimsical feature to be in keeping with the character of the exalted Nazarene.

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35) I am not confident enough to attribute the humour to Luke. J. Jeremias (*Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums: Redaktion und Tradition im Nicht-Markusstoff des dritten Evangeliums* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980], pp. 239-240) argues that Luke 14:18-20 shows the hallmarks of non-Lukan style. But some Lukan features are probably evident: the enumeration ὁ πρῶτος … καὶ ἕτερος … καὶ ἕτερος in 14:18-20, and the double ἐρωτῶ σε of 14:18-19. W. Braun calls these two Lukanisms 'an abundance of Lukan vocabulary' (*Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], p. 70), which they are not. Another Lukan feature is the mention of bringing in 'the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame' in 14:21, which corresponds exactly (except for the arrangement of the last two entries) with the list of those whom Jesus says are to be invited to a dinner in 14:13: the 'poor, maimed, lame and blind'; cf. a similar list in Luke 7:22. So the evidence seems to be mixed, and consequently I make no claims about Lukan origins for the humour.

This should not be surprising. One of the strongest features of Jesus' public profile was his eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.[36] Whatever else might be said of Jesus' motivations for doing so, it is not too much to imagine that he enjoyed such gatherings, during which there would surely have been numerous moments of frivolity and fun. Presumably the same agreeable ethos would have transpired on similar occasions as Jesus ate with others, and in other contexts beyond the dining table as well. Even the sombre author of the Johannine Gospel depicts Jesus as having supplied an inordinate amount of fine wine in order to maintain a festive spirit at a party (John 2).[37] So while Luke's version of the parable may not be attributable to Jesus of Nazareth, it was deemed to qualify as an appropriate 'speech in character', capturing something significant about Jesus' gregarious demeanour as envisaged (and possibly remembered) by some of his earliest followers.

The point was already made in its own way by Jerome in the fifth century (*Against Jovinianus*, 1.5): 'The Lord himself was called by the Pharisees a wine-bibber and a glutton, the friend of publicans and sinners, because he did not decline the invitation of Zacchaeus to dinner, and went to the marriage-feast. But it is a different matter if, as you may foolishly contend, he went to the dinner intending to fast.' And just as he did not attend dinners in order to fast, so too Jesus might well on occasion have recounted rather humorous quips not unlike the one contained in the Lukan version of the parable of the dinner.

As such, the Lukan parable might be significant not only for its depiction of the poor at the centre of the eschatological banquet,[38] but

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36) In her article 'Jesus: Glutton and Drunkard?' (*JSHJ* 3.1 [2005], pp. 47-60), M.J. Marshall postulates that Jesus was the broker for 'sinners' at parties of toll-collectors and others, first gaining entry by gate-crashing the party and then being joined by sinners, whom he sponsored. The theory is intriguing, although it might build too much on the view that 'sinners' were poor. At the other end of the spectrum, James G. Crossley postulates that 'sinners' were the rich (*Why Christianity Happened* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006], pp. 87-89). In my view, it is most likely that 'sinners' cannot be contained within a single socio-economic category.

37) If this account does not have a historical basis, for our purposes it is no less significant for that reason.

38) On this, see B.W. Longenecker, 'Good News to the Poor: Jesus, Paul and Jerusa-

also, as a secondary feature, for its simple depiction of the personality of Jesus of Nazareth. While the exercise of reconstructing the life of the Nazarene has rightly focussed on determining the meaning of his teachings and actions, another component of biographical significance is personal demeanour, manner, disposition, or constitution. And in this regard, conveying one's character is sometimes best done through artistic depiction or portraiture, something that the Lukan version contributes to in a refreshing manner.

In the history of Christianity, however, portraits of Jesus in a lighthearted moment are few and far between. My own internet search of Jesus images revealed only a handful of smiling Jesus figures. Portraits of Jesus are usually overwhelmed by the sombre aspects of his ministry. Jesus' moments of gaiety that are occasionally mentioned in the canonical Gospels have not been the focus of much artistic interest. Even when those moments are transferred to the artistic media, traditional portraiture tends to err on the side of the serious. So, for instance, when depicting 'The Little Children Being Brought to Jesus' ('The 100 Guilder Print'), Rembrandt chose to depict a caring, respectful, and soulful Jesus, one to whom parents could entrust their children without hesitation. But one might be hard-pressed to imagine Rembrandt's Jesus playing with the children in a moment of merriment, gaiety, and delight. If we trust Rembrandt's view of things, the one who invited the little children to come to him might not have been one to whom the little children would have run eagerly and expectantly.

A more recent attempt at depicting Jesus illustrates the extent to which matters of ethos and character are an indispensable component of christological portraiture. In the 1964 film *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jesus is depicted as brooding, intense, and austere. Overcome by the urgency of his counter-cultural ministry, this angered Jesus frequently walks alone a few paces ahead of his disciples and the crowds who follow him, spouting truths like a messianic automaton. He is one so outraged by the atrocious conditions of his day that he barely allows a trace of a smile to appear on his face. Pasolini's Jesus may have spoken the actual words of the Matthean

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lem', in Todd Still (ed.), *Jesus and Paul Reconnected: Fresh Pathways to an Old Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 37-65.

Jesus and may have done the deeds attributed to him in that Gospel. But he is a Jesus who fails to capture the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, at least the spirit testified to by (some?) early Christians who remembered him as one who, despite being angered by injustice, nonetheless enjoyed moments of delight with others as part of his ministry to 'sinners' (cf. Matt. 9:10-17; 11:16-19), and who could on occasion appreciate a good little 'dirty' joke.

The Pasolini film is not an exception within the Jesus-film genre. Most of the Jesus films suffer from the same characterisation deficit—with their central protagonist being characterised primarily as one of grave austerity and sombre piety.[39] It might be arguable that, more than Jesus films, Jesus novels have greater potential to depict the affable character of Jesus that Luke 14:15-24 testifies to. Generally speaking, most Jesus films have been targeted at audiences who would appreciate seeing the story they know and love from their Bibles depicted on the silver screen.[40] While interpretative elements pervade those Jesus films, the plotline is largely constrained by the canonical plotlines. But the same is not true to the same extent in relation to Jesus novels. Their target audiences can vary enormously, from the conservative Christian to the radically anti-Christian. Common throughout the target audiences, however, is an interest in seeing more of Jesus than what is depicted of him in the canonical Gospels (with 'more' sometimes being in line with those Gospels and sometime at odds with them). All else being equal, the more a novel can offer that kind of expansion, the more intriguing and successful it will be. For that reason, to date, the Jesus novel offers more potential for developing a humorous Jesus than the Jesus film.

But even there, with perhaps a single exception, the potential is largely unrealised. To make the point, five of the most popular Jesus novels from the last decade will be considered, assessing their contribution to the humorous dimension of the 'remembered' Jesus.

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39) One notable exception is the film *The Miracle Maker*, in which the audience is shown a Jesus who smiles frequently and sincerely, who has an enjoyable presence, is approachable, and is sought out for his friendship. Of course, the Jesus of this film is made of clay and putty, being part of a 'claymation' film.

40) The exceptions are obvious, not least Martin Scorcese's *Last Temptation of Christ*.

Scripting Jesus Humour

In his novel *Testament*, Nino Ricci depicts a Jesus who is frequently emotionally disturbed, caught in the grip of a dark funk of inner turmoil and depressive phases.[41] But Ricci does include moments of laughter arising around Jesus, especially when people misunderstand what is really happening. For instance, when a rich man from Hippus asks what it would take for him to become a follower of Jesus, Ricci's account reads: 'And Jesus said back, "Go home and sell everything you've got and give the money to the poor, then you'll be ready." Everyone in the crowd broke out laughing at that.'[42] In another episode, after Jesus has done something extraordinary with Lazarus (or 'Elazar'), we read:

> 'Do you know who I am?' [Jesus] said to Elazar, to see if he had his senses back. And Elazar got a big grin and said, 'You must be the son of God himself, if you brought me back from the dead.' And there was a pause and then everyone laughed, even Jesus.

Like the Jesus of *The Gospel of Judas,* Ricci's Jesus laughs at misperception (since Jesus is clearly not the son of God in Ricci's novel). Unlike the Jesus of *The Gospel of Judas,* Ricci's Jesus does not laugh maliciously at others. But although Ricci engineers laughter around Jesus, the Jesus of his novel is not one who engages in and encourages a kind of lighthearted playfulness in the midst of a dire context and a serious intent.

Norman Mailer's *The Gospel according to the Son* combines the seriousness of Jesus' ministry precisely with Jesus' attempt to undermine the sombreness of institutional religion.[43] That is, Jesus is driven to tear down the de-humanising piety that had engulfed the religious structures of second-temple Judaism, especially in the region of Jerusalem, with its heavy concentration of the Jewish religio-political powerbase.

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41) Nino Ricci, *Testament: A Novel* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

42) Ricci, *Testament,* p. 326. Later the character narrating the incident reflects further on it as says, 'I got to thinking about Jesus…and what he'd said to the rich man from Hippus, and it didn't seem such a joke any more' (p. 327).

43) Norman Mailer, *The Gospel according to the Son* (London: Little, Brown & Co, 1997; London: Abacus, 1998).

So, when Jesus approaches the city, he himself is overcome by the sight of it, and for a brief moment, before he corrects himself, he too speaks words that 'were too pious (for my heart had leaped at the sight of these riches)'. And as he enters the city, many of the people there join his entourage, the common denominator between them all being the pursuit of light-heartedess or joyfulness.

> Some of these new followers were solemn. So in their eyes shone the hope that I might provide a new piety that weighted upon them less than their old piety, which had turned drab in their hearts from too much repetition of the same prayers. And there were children who looked on all the sights and laughed at the wonder of God's bounty when it came to the faces of people; they were the closest to joy. There were also men with the fearful dissatisfaction of boredom on their brow. And there were the poor. In their eyes I saw great need, and new hope, and much depth of sorrow; they had been disappointed many times.

For Mailer, Jesus opposed sombre piety. He did so precisely because it lay within an interconnecting matrix of hypocrisy and affluence, with the well-off seeking to impress others and, consequently, establishing impressive institutions and showcasing their own piety as superior to that of the poor.[44] Mailer offers a Jesus whose primary purpose is the eradication of the sombre, sullen piety that he imagines to go hand in hand with institutionalism and the erection of structures that benefit the affluent. So the novel closes with the exalted Jesus offering a salute to the poor and an affirmation of life and joy: 'I often think of the hope that is hidden in the faces of the poor. Then from the depth of my sorrow wells up an immutable compassion, and I find the will to live again and rejoice.' The theory is all there. But what's missing from Mailer's novel (like the Pasolini film) is any sense of Jesus' own joyful-

44) Mailer's subtext is that this very matrix of affluence, hypocrisy, and institutional piety would overtake the Christian church that would follow in Jesus' wake. So the exalted Jesus speaks at the close of the novel: 'many of those who now call themselves Christian are rich and pious themselves, and are no better, I fear, than the Pharisees. Indeed, they are often greater in their hypocrisy than those who condemned me then. There are many churches in my name and in the name of my apostles. The greatest and holiest is named after Peter; it is a place of great splendor in Rome. Nowhere can be found more gold' (p. 239). See also his chapter 33.

ness, any sense of witty banter or light-hearted pleasure and enjoyment.[45]

It is rare for a novelist to use humour as the backbone of a Jesus novel, but a few have made forays into this sub-genre.[46] The best of them is so far, without doubt, Christopher Moore's *Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ's Childhood Friend*, with humour appearing on almost every page. And, as in the parable of Luke 14, sexual relations are often at the heart of the humour. For some, this is silly schoolboy humour from start to finish, while for others it is side-splitting stuff. Perhaps both viewpoints have validity.

Yet throughout Moore's clever novel, the best lines of humour are given to Biff, not Jesus. Funny things happen near to Jesus, but he himself does not perpetuate them purposefully, or seek them out. And in fact, in a final authorial note in the appendix to the novel, Moore writes the following:

> [T]his story was set in a dire time, a deadly serious time, and the world of the first-century Jew under the rule of the Romans would not have been one that easily inspired mirth. It's more than a small anachronism that I portray Joshua [i.e., Jesus] having and making fun, yet somehow, I like to think that while he carried out his sacred mission, Jesus of Nazareth might have enjoyed a sense of irony and the company of a wisecracking buddy.[47]

Moore is absolutely right to speak of first-century Palestine as having been 'a deadly serious time', but this is no reason to conclude that portraying Jesus as 'having and making fun' in such a context is 'more than a small anachronism'. In light of the parable of the dinner in Luke 14,

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45) The closest that Mailer gets to a light-hearted moment is in relation to the character of God himself, rather than Jesus. So, when Jesus feeds the 500 (not the 5000), Mailer depicts it as having transpired through the bread being enlarged within the imagination, not in reality. The point is then made that God does not need extravagance: that is not the way he works (chapter 27). But in the next episode (chapter 28), Jesus finds himself walking on water, with God laughing at Jesus' misunderstanding, since sometimes God does indeed enjoy extravagance.

46) Robert Harrison, *Oriel's Diary: An Archangel's Account of the Life of Jesus* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2002); John Farman, *Jesus: The Teenage Years* (London: Red Fox, 1996).

47) Moore, *Lamb*, p. 408.

Moore is on better ground when he notes that even while carrying out 'his sacred mission', Jesus might well have enjoyed humour.

The novel with the most potential to develop humour in relation to Jesus is Steven Fortney's 2000 novel *The Thomas Jesus*.[48] Fortney introduces Jesus as 'lazy but gregarious', and his gregariousness is explained in this way:

> There was something happy about his presence that made us feel good. He had retained much of the lore of Israel and amused himself and the others with outrageous stories and commentaries and jokes. He didn't follow the ordinary way of thinking; he was a very funny fellow.[49]

Jesus' sense of humour permeated Jesus' message of 'God's Domain' (i.e., the kingdom of God): Jesus 'described God's Domain by telling jokes and ridiculous stories about it'.[50] And this matrix of humour and proclamation lay at the warp and woof of Jesus' attractiveness, power and influence. In one of Fortney's episodes, Jesus humour is shown to keep demons at bay (although, in Fortney's narrative world, demons do not exist but represent psychological dysfunction). So, having been exorcised of seven demons (Luke 8:2), Mary Magdalene says of Jesus:

> He is my sunshine. He makes me laugh. He tells me stories. He keeps the evil ones away. And I have grown strong enough to be away from him and keep in the light of the Domain. The health of it. He heals me. He heals others.'[51]

But in Fortney's novel, funniness is not just an incidental personality trait for Jesus; humour sits right at the very heart of Jesus' constitution because of a formidable socio-religious reason: that is, he was known to have had 'irregular' parentage and, consequently, humour emerged to compensate for the social ostracism that he experienced. Fortney is building here on the charge against Jesus found in two second- and third-century texts, in which Jesus is said to have been fathered by a

48) Steven Fortney, *The Thomas Jesus* (Oregon: Waubesa Press, 2000).
49) Fortney, *The Thomas Jesus*, 13.
50) Fortney, *The Thomas Jesus*, 123.
51) Fortney, *The Thomas Jesus*, 115.

Roman soldier by the name of Panthera.[52] According to Fortney's narrative, Mary (whom he depicts as 'a sharp-tongued shrew who possessed her many children ferociously')[53] had been a promiscuous youth. So Jesus' humour offsets the discriminatory bias of his culture about questionable parentage.

Interestingly, Fortney incorporates the fact that Jesus' disciple Thomas is remembered as 'Thomas the Twin' in the Johannine Gospel (John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2). The twin of whom? Of Jesus! And this feeds into the depiction of Jesus' humour in relation to his dubious parentage:

> Some of the village folk spread rather vicious rumors that because he [Jesus] stood straight and without cringing and looked almost like a Roman, his was an irregular birth…He didn't look like the rest of his family. He was decidedly odd. A misfit in many ways. So the rumours… We [i.e., Thomas and Jesus] looked alike. My father was dead also. My mother, like Miriam [i.e., Jesus' mother Mary] in her youth had been both forward and pretty and hard to handle. I had a large family that I didn't conform to either—but my mother was never called a whore, nor I a bastard. But I didn't draw so much attention to myself as he did. Well, the fact that we were both outcast made us solitaries. Mine took the form of a facile and critical rationality; his, humor. But aren't logic and satire connected?

Whatever one thinks of its historical reconstruction, Fortney's novel offers the most developed scaffolding for developing a portrait of Jesus as deeply imbibed with humour. And Fortney even takes a gibe at mainstream Christianity and its humourless Jesus. According to Fortney's novel, after Jesus' death his followers turned him into a god, making up stories about his miracles and his resurrection. Worst in this was Peter, a 'great-hearted oaf' who 'never could get anything right'. He proclaimed Jesus rather than the message of Jesus, and transformed him into 'a divine being, rather than that earthy, serious, funny man' who had 'ate good food and drank wine,…hugged women, made jokes

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52) Celsus (as recounted by Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.69): 'when she [Mary] was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera.' Cf. Tosefta, *Chullin* 2:22-24.

53) Fortney, *The Thomas Jesus*, 17.

at parties, and laughed'.[54] Fortney's reconstruction of early Christianity is highly debated, but his point about Jesus' humour coincides with our consideration of Luke 14:15-24. Data from across the extant Jesus tradition testifies to the very likelihood that humour was not foreign to Jesus.

Unfortunately, despite grand claims to the contrary in Fortney's novel, the development of humorous portrait is lacking. What Fortney is able to offer with regard to Jesus' humour is pretty lame. We are told that Jesus enjoyed humour, 'even some pretty rough jokes' (114), but we aren't given much of an inventory of Jesus' own humour. It is funny, we are told, that Jesus told a demon to 'shut up' (184), and that he asked whether John the Baptist was 'a reed shaking in the wind' (181). Since it is not the case that the mustard seed grows up to be the tallest of all shrubs, this is listed as another funny moment in Jesus' career (49). But can a deeply-imbedded character of humour be built on such examples? Slightly more successful might be the incident in which Jesus first wonders what pork tastes like, then excuses himself in order to relieve himself, and begins to laugh, saying 'It ain't the pig that goes in…but the pig that comes out that's dirty'. The proposed jovial situation informs the saying of Mark 7:18-20, where Jesus is said to have declared all foods clean in contrast to the filth that comes out into a latrine. Fortney also notes, rightly, that a similar light-hearted note can be heard in Jesus' parable of Matthew 13:33, in which a woman is said to have hidden yeast in fifty pounds of dough, with it spreading all the way through the dough. The woman, Fortney tells us, had made 'some mistake in the course of her baking' (118), a feature unknown from the Matthean text. The consequence of her mistake is, with leaven added to fifty pounds of dough, loaves of bread would have come 'popping crazily out of the ovens, madly spraying the countryside like the hot rocks out of a volcano' (119). Jesus clearly 'was making a joke', Fortney says, although perhaps it would be better to say that Jesus' 'humour' was an attempt to showcase the abundance of joy in the kingdom of God.

54) Fortney, *The Thomas Jesus*, 210-211.

If Fortney provides the scaffolding for a Jesus of joy and humour but fails to offer much content, a more successful 'novel' portrait of a gregarious Jesus comes from the pen of Walter Wangerin. His novel *Jesus* combines serious literary flaws with moments of literary brilliance.[55] On the whole, the novel is disappointing on a number of scores, despite its peaks of interest. But on the matter of Jesus' own merriment, Wangerin flawed novel is deserving of praise.

At times Jesus and his disciples are narrated in a scene of utter exuberance. As his disciples return from their mission to preach and heal, Simon Peter is the first to meet Jesus, and he wraps his arms around his master and picks him up with glee. At this, Jesus' own 'eyes flashed merriment', and then Peter discovered a secret about Jesus: 'He was ticklish! This is how Jesus laughed: by turning down the corners of his lips. By opening his mouth just a crack. By arching his eyebrows, by shedding tears, and by coughing! He cough-laughed. He choke-laughed. He laughed weeping.' As the scene develops, more merriment is enjoyed all around as more disciples get into the action, with infectious laughter overtaking almost everyone in the scene, including 'Maryam from Magdala… I'd never seen her completely happy before.'[56]

But Wangerin's Jesus does not have to be tickled in order to enjoy himself. Everywhere he goes, he spends time with ordinary people in ordinary ways. In that context, we read a conversation between him and one who showed him hospitality, in which Jesus rejoices with the joy of the head of the household:

> 'Do you dance, sir?'
> 'Dance? [asked Jesus.] When there's good reason for dancing.'
> 'My wife says that our little boy laughed today.'
> 'That's a reason.'
> 'Well, and six days ago he…was circumcised.'
> 'A wonderful reason!'
> And so Jesus dances.[57]

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55) W. Wangerin, *Jesus: A Novel* (Oxford: Lion, 2005).

56) Wangerin, *Jesus*, pp. 170-71.

57) Compare the Oxyrhynchus *Acts of John*, with its depiction of Jesus praising God and then dancing, instructing his disciples in this way: 'The whole universe takes part

Similarly, on the night before his last meal with his disciples, Jesus and his followers enjoy a meal that includes moments of the 'heights of hilarity' (so Wangerin). The occasion for their amusement is a little joke about sexual relations spoken by Joanna in mixed company. In a brief speech in which the metaphor of a man ploughing a field is likened to a man having sexual intercourse with a woman, Joanna concludes her audacious speech with this point: 'who [is it that] knows the point of a busy ploughshare better than a woman?' The focus is first on the women's reaction to the sexual wittiness: Their 'gaiety…had been growing in them all day long. They laughed. They covered their faces at the raw pleasure of their laughter. They sniggered and cackled and wiped their eyes.' The scene then focuses on the men's reaction to all this: 'The men stared at the women, bewildered smiles upon their faces. The men: they looked like boys in a swimming hole, stripped bare and caught by their mothers.' Then the reader is told about Jesus, from the perspective of Mary his mother:

> And then Jesus was laughing too. *Oh, Yeshi! Yeshi!* Her son delivered himself wholly to joy, arching his eyebrows, turning his narrow mouth down, snorting. He cough-laughed, producing a strangled sound, like a fawn's dam sneezing. Mary's laughter died in a dear and perfect delight.

Then Simon Peter enters the frame: 'Simon Peter, a bull ox collapsing in mirth. It was predictable. Whenever he heard the ridiculous choke-laughing of his Master, the big man was knocked over by the anomaly. He roared. He beat his thigh.' The scene needs little commentary. Jesus and his whole entourage split their sides over a gently humorous sexual innuendo.

But it is important to notice too the way that Wangerin allows the scene to conclude:

> The other men joined in, abandoning themselves to the moment, until both men and women, the young and the old, high-born and low-born, Jews and the lone Nabatean, *all* were united, and the entire family knew a pure and sacred communion for the last time.

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in the dancing… He who does not dance, does not know what is being done' (J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993], p. 318).

The scene concludes so that it serves as a prefigurement of the eschatological kingdom of God, with unity among the sexes, the generations, the 'classes', and the nations. This is a unity of fictive kinship enhanced to the level of 'a pure and sacred communion'.

Of course, Wangerin has no intention of suggesting that little jokes with sexual innuendoes lie at the heart of the unity that transpires within the kingdom of God; in this instance, Joanna's joke was almost incidental to the corporate unity that transpired in the moment. But nonetheless, although it is wholly fictional, the moment of pure corporate glee that Wangerin seeks to narrate would not seem out of bounds with the character of Jesus' ministry and his engagement with others, at least if remnants of reminiscences about Jesus are anything to go by, not least in Luke 14:15-24. Granted, Jesus himself has not told the joke in this scene. But if the message of the kingdom of God in Luke 14 is encased in a package of gentle humour, so too in Wangerin's scene it is humour that triggers a prefigured embodiment of the kingdom.

Perhaps this is a case in which a modern novelist has effectively enriched a strand of biblical characterisation. Even if the humour of Luke 14 did not originate with 'the historical Jesus', contemporary portraitures of Jesus of Nazareth might nonetheless be attracted to that version's depiction of the natural cheerfulness and 'down to earth-ness' of the one whom the early Christians began to proclaim as the Lord of the structures of kingdom reality.