

Introduction

Excerpt from the Introduction

... The rich, variegated history of the Bible's multiple roles in Western culture shows at best ambiguous encounters between the Bible and comedy — encounters often strained and hostile, sometimes subtle and nuanced, almost always ambivalent, and occasionally even volatile. ...

As I observed earlier, biblical scholars have not totally ignored the possibilities of comic forms, but observations have been few and far among the commentaries. ...

In this book I intend to develop a more adequate anatomy of biblical comedy, an anatomy that is grounded in contemporary literary criticism. As an epigraph for my presentation I cite Baudelaire's provocative assertion, "Holy books never laugh ..." — an assertion that I have chosen ironically as a backdrop against which to argue a contradictory thesis: the Holy Book we call the Bible revels in a profoundly ambivalent laughter, a divine and human laughter that by turns is both mocking and joyous, subversive and celebrative, and finally a laughter that results in an exuberant and transformative comic vision.

I wish further to argue that what gives this comic vision its passion and vital depth is precisely its recognition of the place and power of tragedy, of that vision of the dark, jagged side of human existence which unveils the stark presence of unredeemed death, of unjustified disaster, of unmitigated despair. But tragedy is generally episodic in the overarching movement of the Bible, though no less terrifying in its effects. The comic vision, I submit, can embrace the tragic dimension without eliminating or negating it — let alone explaining or totally healing its destructive effects. Yet comedy cannot be felt in its full force apart from tragedy, nor can comedy be delineated and fully appreciated without tragedy. So it is in general, and so it is, I contend, in the concrete forms of the biblical heritage. ...