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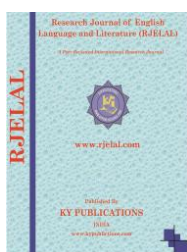
HUMOR IN DEPICTING APOSTLES OF JESUS AND DISCIPLES OF PARAMARTHA GURU

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ABSTRACT

This article, in the first step, endeavors to highlight the idea of humor in a scriptural-literary work like the Bible. Exploiting the existing fund of knowledge on comic instances in the Old and the New Testaments, the paper seeks to analyze humor in depiction of the apostles of Jesus in the New Testament. Delving into these characters that serve as a source of hilarity in the Gospels: Matthean, Markan, Lukan and Johannine, the study tries out the possibility of comparing the Jewish teacher's apostles to Guru Paramartha's disciples, whose proverbial obtuseness, as presented by Fr. Constanzo Beschi in *Paramartha Guru Kadhaikal* 'Stories of Paramartha Guru', has added humor to the 18th century Tamil Literature.

Key Words: Bible humor, apostles, Paramartha Guru

Introduction

It is heartening that students in the Indian classrooms easily acknowledge the gentle humor in Chaucer, satire in Pope; irony in Addison, self-deprecating wit in Leacock, and denunciatory stroke in Huxley. I have also found that those learners who can appreciate the subtle humor that lays embedded in the predominantly serious writings of Edward Gibbon, Bertrand Russell and Will Durant are able to recognize and appreciate the simple humor in the Gospels as well. This may be of surprise to those of us who generally think that religion and religious texts are beyond the ambit of humor due to the profound moralizing they do in a grave and authoritarian manner.

We tend to think that any scripture or religious discourse exuding deep piety, but not articulated with a characteristic tonal severity, may not be doing justice to the presence of the Divine it claims to contain in itself. However, it is not unnatural if someone finds humor even in a scripture, as many

have found it in the long tradition of Bible-humor research. This paper that seeks to bring out humor in the depiction of the apostles, who make us laugh through their child-like mindset and childish behavior, also attempts, perhaps in a limited sense, a comparison between them and the disciples of Guru Paramartha found in the 18th century Tamil literature. This Paramartha is an imaginary character not to be confused with Paramartha (499-569 CE), the Buddhist monk from Ujjain.

Bible Humor:

The Bible, as a scripture, is dense, intense, grave and solemn in its task of proclaiming the Christian faith. It does the same by relating to us the story of man as interwoven with that of God (Old Testament) followed by the life of Christ and the ensuing events (New Testament). Many theologians, scholars and preachers, in the various "Quest periods" (Bednarz 06), have found humor in the Bible—both in the Old Testament and the New; the Hebrew as well as the English. Terri Bednarz, in her

magisterial work *Humor in the Gospels*, traces how Christians were very reluctant to associate humor with the scripture, as the attempt itself was considered insolent and almost sacrilegious—thanks to the “agelastic” (232-33) medieval influence. And yet, she adds, how they gradually overcame such taboo and how Bible humor eventually evolved into an area for scholarly research post Renaissance.

Scholars such as Henri Clavier, Edward J. Oliver, Gary Webster, John M. Bullard, Elton Trueblood, Henri Cormier, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, T.W. Manson, Frederick Beuchner and Robert H. Stein have approached Bible humor from different angles such as: humor in the teachings of Jesus, humor in the events and happenings presented in the scripture and also in the gospel narratives. Steven D. Bennett in his *Humor of the Gospels* seems to find humor in almost everything in the Gospels: even in the supposedly most serious episodes such as the Last Supper and the passion of Christ. When Jesus tells at the dining table that he goes where the disciples cannot follow him, Bennett writes, “Some assumed he meant the bathroom...” (116).

Besides the works mentioned above, the following are from some of the other contributions to the subject of Bible humor. Gallaher Branch cites 2 Chronicles 21:20 that reads: “Jehoram was thirty two years old when he became king, and reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He passed away, to no one’s regret, and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings.” It makes him laugh and declare that humor is a “fundamental sub-theme in both the testaments.” JoHannah Reardon is provoked into laughter by the Proverb: “If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse” (27:14).

Judges 5:30 makes Leonard Greenspoon chuckle as he finds therein a mother who imagines that the return of her son from the battlefield is delayed, as he, after victory, may be having fun with a woman or two. Mentioning the types of humor such as puns, wordplays, riddles, jokes, satires, lampoons, sarcasm, irony, wit, black humor, comedy, slapstick, farce, burlesque, caricatures, parody and travesty, Hershey H Friedman draws our attention to God’s own laughter as mentioned in Psalms 2:4,

37:13 and 59:9. For James and Dave, there is humor in the Proverb that says: “Lazy people take food in their hand but don’t even lift it to their mouth” (19:24). Equally amusing to them is another Proverb that reads: “The Lazy person claims, ‘There is a lion out there! If I go outside I might be killed!’ ” (22:13) And, coming to the New Testament, Randy Alcorn points out how Jesus “did make hypocrites in positions of power the brunt of his wit.”

Apostles of Jesus:

Apart from these, there are instances of humor provoked by incongruities of various kinds and ludicrous “typologies” (Bednarz 104) of characters, particularly the apostles who are largely presented like dullards and clowns resembling the disciples of the Paramartha Guru, thanks to their consistent incompetency and supposedly child-like reasoning and behavior at large. The apostles often find it hard to understand Jesus and his precepts and repeatedly prove their incapacity to rise up to the expectations of their master. L.M.Hussey, while actually commenting on Jesus’ humor, says the apostles could not grasp their master’s wit due to their being obtuse and Jewish. He describes them as “dimwitted fishermen whose simplemindedness provided them no facility for wit, irony, or sarcasm”. The second reason, according to him, for their inability to understand the subtle humor of Jesus was their Jewishness. Although this is apparently controversial, Hussey holds Jews as so serious in religious matters that they can find nothing in that to laugh (qtd. in Bednarz 46-7). William Phipps, hinting at the apostles’ ignorance as opposed to the intelligence of Jesus, simply declares: “None [of them] were selected because of their outstanding aptitude, and all were slow in catching on to his new ideas” (Wisdom 61).

Disciples of Paramartha Guru:

Besides, the varying levels of comprehension between Jesus and his students, and also the ‘little faith’ (Mat 6:30) that the latter frequently demonstrate, turn out to be sources of this perceived humor. Intending no irreverence to the presentation of the Apostles in the Biblical tradition, I fancy that, they, with their obtuseness, look like the funny disciples of Paramartha as found in

Paramartha Guru Kadhaikal (The Adventures of Paramartha Guru), an acclaimed collection of humorous short stories authored by Rev. Fr. Constanzo Beschi (1680-1747), alias Veeramamunivar, a Jesuit missionary who came from Italy to South India and contributed to Tamil literature.

The five disciples of the guru: *Moodan* [Fool], *Matti* [Dimwit], *Madayan* [Dumbass] *Paedhai* [Idiot] and *Milaechan* [Imbecile] in the tales of *Paramartha Guru* contrive a farcical world for themselves and make us giggle with their consistently absurd reasoning and incongruous doings. For instance, in the story *Kaanaamal PonathuYaar?* 'Who went missing?', the entire team of the Guru believes that the river that they have to cross is 'awake' and waits for the same to sleep so that they can cross it without harm. They have the same notion about the sea also, in *Kaal Mulaitha Meengal* 'Fish with Legs', and plan to go fishing only during night, that is, when the sea is asleep and not in a condition to hurt the crew!

Two Teams—A Comparison:

In my view, regarding the similarities between Guru Paramartha and Jesus, both are presented as teachers loved and respected by their students. The focus is not on the issue that one is fictional and the other is regarded as historical. Both are found to be involved in healing the sick. However, Paramartha and his disciples in the story *Marutuvath Tholil* 'Medical Profession' badly flounder in their effort to cure the ailing. Because, they are neither competent nor genuinely interested in helping anyone but money making is their intent. They perform stupid things in the name of healing and as a result are driven away by the villagers. What happens to Jesus and his apostles is not very different. Although Jesus is famously successful in his healing ministry, he finds himself unwanted when the villagers who see him drive unclean spirits into pigs get scared and ask him to leave the place at once (Mat 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-33).

Northrop Frye's idea of the 'U shaped plot', in which the main character's fortune comes down to a catastrophic level but goes up again to the state of well being (Great 156), is found to be at work in the

cases of both Paramartha and Jesus. Paramartha, in the story *Narahalohathil Paramarthar* 'Paramarthar in Hell', reaches hell and experiences the bites of venomous snakes and scorpions there but comes back to his happy original self and regains his status as the master of the group once he wakes up and realizes that his suffering in hell was nothing more than a bad dream. We find the same with Jesus Christ also who suffers on the cross in real, dies a miserable death, remains in a tomb for two days but resurrects the third day for his glorious ascension.

However, the striking difference between these two teams of men is that the not-so-bright apostles are led by Jesus who is regarded as an intelligent teacher whereas the other set is taught by Paramartha who is himself a farcical character like his own followers. If the apostles of Jesus are afraid of the raging sea, Paramartha and his disciples are afraid of sea in general. In my view, Jakob Jonson, who tells that the physician who needed cure was none other than Jesus himself, makes him resemble Paramartha. Of course, the scholar makes it clear that it was only Jesus who humorously made such reference to himself in Luke 4:23 (qtd. in Bednarz 97).

Concerning the disciples of Jesus, one can easily note that they often behave like they do not know or cannot believe that their teacher is actually the son of God. Doris Myers attributes this inability on the part of the apostles to the archetypal and ironic motif of *failing to see* which prevented Oedipus from recognizing his own mother and father in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (qtd. in Bednarz 235). As stated before, the imperfect or little faith of the apostles of Jesus is also a feature that causes humor on several occasions including when the apostles, who are alarmed at the sea storm, wake up their teacher who is sleeping peacefully and tell him they are "perishing" (Mat 8: 24-27; Luke 8:23-25).

The way the incident is reported by Mark is humorous in which the apostles are so upset with their slumbering Savior, who is perhaps mistaken for being indifferent to his followers' perceived doom, that they ask him: "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" But, Jesus who rebukes the wind rebukes his students also by calling them people "of little faith". This makes it known that the situation is

trivial and their fear a kind of trust deficit. Although it is edifying that Jesus declares himself as “the Lord even of the Sabbath”, the occasion on which he says it can make one giggle. The problem arises when Jesus is walking through the grain fields and his hungry apostles, relatively in an innocent way, pluck the heads of grain and eat the same which invites the Pharisees to comment that those disciples have violated the Sabbath (Mat 12:1-8; Mark 3:23-28; Luke 6:1-10).

Equally interesting is how Jesus makes an elaborate argument against the practices of the elders as well as the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Scribes who criticize the apostles who are [happily] eating with unwashed hands. The critics ask Jesus, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread” (Mat 15:2). The latter manages the situation by saying: “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man” (10). This wisdom that Jesus displays to save his disciples from embarrassment may remind one of Paramartha’s sagacity on display in the story *Olaichuvadi Patirikai ‘Palmleaf Daily’*. In this, Paramartha and his disciples launch a daily by name *Dinappuluhu ‘Daily Lies’* in which they are very censorious of the government. They simply accuse the king and his ministers of various wrong doings. However, when they are arrested and produced before the king for trial, the teacher cleverly defends his team saying that they had actually committed no offense as whatsoever was told of the rulers in the daily could not be considered true as the very name of the newspaper was ‘Daily Lies’.

When Jesus feels somewhat relieved that he has somehow managed to silence those people who were finding fault with his men, he is apparently annoyed with the apostles who ask him for meaning of the very statement that he used for defending them. Jesus, perhaps impatiently, asks them “Are you thus without understanding also?” (Mark 7:18) The disciples who were watching Jesus speak to people through parables naively ask him why he spoke in parables. It is comical that Jesus who tells them that the common people did not have the capacity to understand his messages unless through parables (Mat: 13) is impelled to repeat the same rhetorical

device to his own disciples without which, probably, they are not going to understand anything either.

One may burst into laughter when the apostles mistake Jesus for “a ghost” (Mat 14:26). Mark says they were afraid and “cried out” (Mark 6:49; John 6:19). This happens when Jesus walks on the sea when the boat of the apostles is caught in storm once again. One may continue to laugh when Peter, the leader of the crew saved by their teacher, expresses—in a childlike manner—his desire to walk on the water too but soon starts sinking after making partial success in his attempt. The incident ends with a reprimand from the teacher to the student for his lack of faith (Mat 14:26-30). The laughter increases as Jesus asks the students to beware of the “leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”. Once there is a mention of the leaven from the preacher the followers stupidly think their master only insinuates about the fact that they have not brought any food. Their foolishness promptly attracts the teacher’s admonition once again (Mat 16: 5-12), and Jesus directly condemns the same (Mark: 13-21).

And again, Peter, who with his characteristic over-enthusiasm and ruggedness offers to erect three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:3-6) on the mountain top where Jesus confers with the other two, simply feels intimidated and falls on his face, along with two others, the moment he hears a voice from above. Jesus who often asks his students not to be afraid has to repeat the same now as well (Mat 17:4-6). And also when Jesus offers to wash the feet of his students Peter firmly objects to it saying “You shall never wash my feet...” However, when Jesus points out that it is a must for the consummation of their fellowship, Peter at once goes to the other extreme of asking Jesus not to stop with the latter’s feet. James Martin hardly overlooks Peter’s excessive enthusiasm or “too much enthusiasm” (qtd. in Bednarz 275-6) that prompts him to ask Jesus to wash not only the former’s feet but hands and head as well which simply forces the latter to say that is all not necessary (John:9-10).

This may remind one how the stupid and over-enthusiastic disciples of Paramartha simply bother their master either by underdoing or overdoing things. It is the disciples who are all out to

get a horse for the guru to ride on even though the guru was not very particular about traveling by horse. And even when the guru who is riding the sick horse drops down his head gear, the disciples fail to collect it as they claim there was no specific instruction from the guru to that effect. And again, when the irritated guru orders them to collect anything that fell down from him they collect not only the guru's turban but also the horse's dung. They even drown him to death while washing him in the tub thanks to the same and stupidly excessive enthusiasm.

The apostles cut a sorry figure when they are unable to cure an epileptic (Mat 17:14-18; Mark 9:14-19); they are also incompetent to cast out an unclean spirit (Luke 9:40-41) and this prompts the teacher to reproach them—as usual. Unable to perform miracles by themselves they are perceptibly jealous of the stranger who is capable of casting out demons in the name of Jesus. They sound miserable while telling Jesus that they forbade that stranger from using the name of their teacher (Mark 10:38; Luke 10:49-50). Jesus, by asking them not to do that, should have made them feel more miserable. They are all probably alike, in being child-like, when they ask Jesus who of the twelve will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus diffuses their puffed-up ego by saying that they won't enter the kingdom at all unless they are converted and become like little children (Mat 18: 1-4; Mark 9:33-37).

However, this does not deter the apostles, who are almost over-caring about their master's wellbeing, from being rude with those who try to bring their children to him (Mat 18:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15). Students of Paramartha also exhibit such excessive attachment to their teacher when they are worried about his pot belly and take steps to reduce it [in the story *Dhoppai Karaichan Lehiam* 'Potion to Reduce Belly']. They also put him on a sick-stray-blind-horse [in *Kuthirail Oorukkuth Thirumbiyathu* 'Returning on Horse's Back'] and then a hired bull [in *Vadakai Matil Payanam* 'Travelling by Hired Bull'] in order that he may travel without strain. They even make him get down from the bull and lie down on the bed spread in the shadow of the animal so that the Guru can evade the scorching sun.

On a different occasion, when Jesus tells the apostles about the intricacies regarding marriage and divorce, they, like a timid single who is scared of marriage and its ensuing commitments, simply declare in one voice: "If such is the case of a man with his wife [and not the other way around], it is better not to marry" (Mat 18:3-10). Probably they so guessed that their teacher remained unmarried too due to similar reasoning about man-woman-relationship that they are astonished to see him talking with a lone woman (John 4: 27) by the well. Here, when Jesus mentions food which is nothing but a figurative reference to his ministry the apostles do not understand it. They rather think that someone had got him some food and he was talking only about that (John 4:31-34).

Even Peter, the chief-apostle, is not embarrassed to ask Jesus about their possible reward for being his supporters. He queries, with a rustic bluntness, "See, we have left all and followed you. Therefore, what shall we have?" (Mat 19:27; Luke 19: 28) Although he was supposedly not expecting to get any material benefit from his mentor, he was apparently trying to confirm his place, position or rank in the just mentioned Kingdom of Heaven.

The plain human nature of the apostles is manifest in the way they were "displeased" with the sons of Zebedee whose mother asked Jesus to accommodate her sons on his right and left in His Kingdom (Mat 20:24). The same plea is made directly to Jesus by James and John, the sons of Zebedee with no mention of the mother in Mark's version of the incident. Jesus tells them they do not know what they are asking for and asks them if they can drink in the cup that he drinks and be baptized the way he is. Humor emanates from their incapacity to understand the hidden meanings of what Jesus had asked and their subsequent reply in the affirmative to that question. The two brothers—thanks to their blithe ignorance, overconfidence, stupidity and brazenness—shoot back that they *can* (Mark 10:38-39). Of course, Mark does not fail to observe how the other ten were swiftly displeased with these two apostles. The two apostles, in their ignorance, are similar to the disciples of the Guru who try to catch a horse with fishing angle whereas in reality there was

no horse in the water but only a shadow (*Kuthirai Pidikath Thoondil Pottadu* 'Fishing the Horse').

The same duo attracts their teacher's reprimand when they, with their own pride and imagined power, ask Jesus if they should call down fire upon the village of the Samaritans who did not receive Jesus among them (Luke 9:54). Although Jesus doesn't authorize them to do that, as Kestermeier assumes, the teacher who is tickled by their zeal gives them the nick name *Boanerges* or "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17) in a lighter vein. Humor abounds when the apostles who are unable to understand the meaning of various situations at different times react rather naively. The apostles are surprised by the act of a woman pouring fragrant oil on their teacher's head; the disciples are equally disturbed and ask: "Why this waste"? (Mat 26:7-8). The argument as to who of them should be considered the greatest—probably to be their next leader—recurs when Jesus is actually indicating his imminent departure (Luke 22:22-24). The apostles do not even realize it is not the appropriate time to be discussing all that.

During the last supper, when Jesus asks Judas to expedite what he had to do, the apostles prove themselves to be so dull-witted that they only think the teacher asks Judas to go and buy things necessary for the upcoming festival or give some money to the poor (John 13:29). The apostles are unable to stay awake in the garden of Gethsemane even as their teacher, who is to be soon arrested and crucified, repeatedly insists that they pray. In stark contrast to this situation we find the disciples of Paramartha dutifully staying awake beside their master who is asleep on the way to a certain place (*Vaatagai Maatil Payanam* 'Riding the Hired Bull'). Jesus exclaims, "What! Could you not watch with Me one hour?" (Mat 26:39) Mark describes: "their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer him" (14:40) and this on the part of the apostles seems hardly in tune with the gravity of the context. As Jesus is taken by the soldiers into custody, these simple men, with all their association with "the son of God" succumb to their natural impulse of self preservation by simply fleeing the scene (Mat 26:56).

It also includes the one who hurts the soldier who laid hands on Jesus. There is particular reference to a certain young man who probably thought it was his turn to demonstrate his unwavering support to the leader in trouble and to show courage and conviction not to abandon him but to follow. However, it is hard for us to keep a solemn calm when we read how the soldiers tried to catch a certain young man, who had wrapped his body just with a linen cloth, and how he, apparently driven by a bare survival instinct simply "left the linen cloth and fled from them naked" (Mark 14:50-52). Stephen Hatton, who considers this as a "parody on discipleship", observes that this is not to be seen as a historical event but a literary device employed to ridicule the fleeing apostles. He also adds, "By describing the young man as a follower, Mark semiotically portrays him as a disciple" (qtd. in Bednarz 211). Nevertheless, what we see in the story *Kuthirailiruntu Viluntatu* 'Falling from the Horse' is perhaps a 'parody on teacherhood' in which the stupid disciples of Paramartha strip their guru naked as they think they simply obey the guru's command by taking [off] his clothes whereas the master, who was nervously riding a miserable horse, had only asked them to "take" (Read: collect) his dress pieces that were dropping down.

The apostles of Christ with their often immature reasoning and childlike behavior offset or juxtapose an otherwise grave narrative that we find in the gospels. It is not farfetched to surmise that these individuals, with their aforesaid traits, act as a kind of comic relief in the Bible. Without this element, the story of Jesus might be chokingly serious for any reader of the gospels which relate his life and teachings, his death by crucifixion followed by resurrection. *Paramartha Guru* dies in the story *Guruvai Adakkam Seitatu* 'Burial of the Guru' mainly because of the stupidity of his own students who mistakenly drown him in a tub of water. Of course the Guru is buried by his disciples with due honor and without consequence.

Conclusion

However child-like and dull-witted the apostles may present themselves to be in the Bible, it is hard to consider them simply stupid or eccentric

like the disciples of Paramartha Guru who only concoct a comical universe for them to live in and others to laugh at. The apostles of Jesus evolve themselves into very serious characters with a specific mission. Even when they acted like dimwits, it happened only as long as they were in the pampering care and protection of their master. It needs no mention that the very same men rise up to the occasion most spectacularly after the time of their teacher. They eventually become well known for their wisdom, courage, and commitment to the cause of spreading the Christian faith. As belief goes, if Jesus healed the sick [mostly] by touching them physically, the Apostles did much more even without touching. In the Acts of the Apostles (5:13-16), one can read that the sick and the possessed on the streets got healed when just the shadow of the passing Peter fell on them. The same apostles, who mistook their master for an apparition and cried like terrified children, passionately embraced gruesome kinds of martyrdom just to bear witness for Christ.

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