ites from Hebrews goes back to Noah, but archaeological discoveries argue for a much closer connection. Just as Greek mythology is not read today to explain the seasons, biblical myth is a starting point, not the endpoint, for Jewish wisdom.

Biblical texts also reflect the times and ideologies of their writers and editors, in ways that often do not agree with modern values and beliefs. “Love your neighbor” (Lev 19:18) still inspires; genocide of the Canaanites (Deut 7:1–6) appalls. Contemporary readers may find roots or early expressions of their own values in certain biblical legislation, but given the freedom to choose, they are the ultimate arbiters of which injunctions to obey. For example, the vast majority of contemporary Jews across all non-Orthodox denominations do not follow biblical (or derivative rabbinic) dietary laws. When biblical rules are followed, then, it is for more complex reasons than simply “the Bible tells me so.” Nevertheless, biblical stories and characters, like other mythologies and their heroes, may resonate with the human and the Jewish experience. (For Humanistic Jews, God/YHWH is a mythological character like Zeus or Aphrodite.) Whether it is the insight that “it is not good that man should be alone” (Gen 2:18) or the impulse to eradicate a flawed creation with the Flood (as one crumples up an unsatisfactory draft letter), biblical narratives reflect the all-too-human desires, fears, and needs of their authors and often of their readers as well.

A full appreciation of later Jewish literature — such as rabbinic legal texts such as the Talmud, literary midrash, ancient prayers, and medieval poetry, as well as modern Jewish novels, poetry, and drama — would be impossible without an appreciation of their biblical precursors and intertextual referents. Motifs, characters, rhetoric, and even vocabulary connect ancient and modern Jewish writing in a dialectical relationship, in which new creativity changes understandings of the old, while the old lends depth and resonance to the new. Some Humanistic Jewish congregations may put their Torah scroll in the library, others may add contemporary books to the Torah scrolls in their ark, while still others prefer to use a codex rather than a traditional scroll for any formal reading. But Humanistic Jews agree that the Bible, understood in its literary and historical context, is a foundational element of Jewish literature.


Adam Chalom

Hume, David

Despite notoriously ambiguous personal religious convictions and admitted childhood doubts, most interpreters view Scotch philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) as an agnostic or atheist who sought to dismantle traditional Christian belief.

In “Of Suicide” (published posthumously 1777), he described the Bible as “that great and infallible rule of faith and practice” (Hume: 49), but insisted that “thou shalt not kill” must be qualified by common sense (as done in legal and political contexts), a pattern followed by most of the commands of Scripture. Biblical authority derives only, if at all, from the “law of nature.”

The chapter “Of Miracles” from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748) contended that miracles contravene the natural law of the uniformity of experience and “no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle” (Hume: 70). Hume extended his dismissal of the miraculous to predictive prophecy and seemingly to revelation in general in an effort to undermine one rational basis of revealed religion that had been pursued by predecessors including John Locke and Isaac Newton. As one of the most influential philosophers in the English language, Hume’s attack on revelational grounding for faith inspired critical treatments of the Gospels by David Friedrich Strauss, alternate approaches to buttressing faith in Immanuel Kant and Johann Georg Hamann, and burgeoning social scientific approaches to religious texts, which had been pressed by Hume’s own work on the origins of religious belief.


Jason McMartin

See also →Hamann, Johann Georg; →Kant, Immanuel; →Locke, John; →Newton, Isaac; →Strauss, David Friedrich

Humility

I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
II. New Testament
III. Judaism
IV. Christianity
V. Islam
VI. Literature
VII. Film

I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Humility in the ANE and HB/OT relates both to a low position caused by force or circumstance as well as pious self-abasement before a superior or a deity.

Mesopotamian kings describe themselves as “humble” (Akk. aštru), a term suggesting submissiveness to the gods and, hence, connoting piety (see CAD A/II, 455–56). The “Babylonian Theodicy”
Humility

recommends humility before a deity in order to gain prosperity (BWL 80:22–23) and the sufferer himself is addressed as a “humble one” (BWL 80:166).

The concept of “humility” in the HB/OT is primarily described by three Hebrew roots, ‘n–h, k–n–l, and š–p–l. The first of these, which often connotes humiliation or affliction, typically refers to a force that lowers an individual. Under human hands, this oppression is terrible, and exploits the vulnerable members of society. It refers to sexual abuse (Gen 34:2), the oppression of slavery (Exod 1:11–12), and the humiliation of individuals (Judg 16:5–6).

In God’s hands, affliction serves to invoke a repentant and humble spirit. God “humbles” Israel through the wilderness wanderings (Deut 8:2–3) and the Babylonian exile (2 Kgs 17:20). A Psalmist thanks God for this affliction that produces its intended result of humility (Ps 119:75).

Penitential self-abasement (imnâ nepâ), often through fasting and other means of physical deprivation, expresses inner contrition for religious purposes (Ps 35:13). It is prescribed in preparation for the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29). Rhetorical self-abasement formulas express humility before YHWH (Exod 3:11; 1 Chr 17:16).

The adjective “humble” (ănî; ănaw) describes both low socio-economic status and spiritual humility (Kraus: 92–95). ănî occurs as a technical term in the legal literature for the disenfranchised (Deut 24:12), those who suffer abasement due to life circumstance. The righteousness of a society and its rulers is measured by their treatment of these lowly in their midst. Psalm 72:2 and the prophets condemn the maltreatment of the poor in Israelite society (e.g., Amos 8:4–6).

God demonstrates explicit concern for the humble (Isa 66:2). He hears the cry of the lowly (Ps 22:24) and sees and responds to their affliction (Exod 3:7). Indeed, God’s particular inclination to the humble leads to a pious self-designation of humility by petitioners for God’s attention (Ps 109:22). Humility is a mark of the righteous God-fearer, and becomes equated with the remnant (Zeph 3:12) and with the people of God (Isa 3:14–15).

‘ânâw also describes the humility characteristic of piety, epitomized in the figure of Moses (Num 12:3). These humble recognize their stance of need before YHWH and rejoice in his deliverance (Isa 29:19). God chastises the arrogant for their lack of humility before him (Exod 10:3).

Particular care for the humble is a mark of righteous kingship (Ps 72:2), and is eagerly awaited in the return of the Davidic Messiah (Isa 11:4). The Messiah himself assumes this stance of humility: the servant figure in Isa 61:1, anointed by God to bring good news to the poor (ânâwîm) is himself the recipient of divine affliction (Isa 53:4), and the returning king of Zech 9:9 is described as “humble” (ânî).

“Humility” (ânawâ) is a component of wisdom, placed in parallel construction with “the fear of the Lord” (Prov 22:4) to describe the proper position of the created before the Creator. The humble receive honor from the Lord, while the arrogant are humiliated (Prov 18:12).

š–p–l, “to bring low,” both indicates spatial lowering, and, metaphorically, the proper position of humility before God. God dwells alongside those who are “lowly in spirit” (şêpîl rûâh), whereas the arrogant and the guilty are forcefully humiliated (Isa 2:11). David demonstrates this pious modesty in his celebration of the return of the ark of the Lord (2 Sam 6:22).

The root k–n–l refers both to military subjection (Deut 9:3) and to spiritual submission. It describes the repentant humility of Israelite kings in their submission before God (2 Chr 7:14; 32:26). This proper stance before deity often leads to a brief reprieve in divine judgment (1 Kgs 21:29).


Aubrey E. Buster

II. New Testament

The NT teaching on humility decisively transforms the HB/OT teaching concerning God’s regard for the lowly and oppressed. With primary reference to the cross of Christ, NT authors such as Paul call Christians to emulate the humble disposition of Jesus in his life and death.

1. Background. Both James and Peter cite Prov 3:34 (LXX): “The Lord opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Sam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). Other NT authors discussing humility echo the book of Isaiah. All the evangelists, in conjunction with John the Baptist’s announcement of the Messiah’s arrival, reference the end-time expectation that every mountain will be made low and every valley be exalted (cf. Isa 40:4). John’s Gospel, while not using the word “humility,” speaks of the “lifting up” of Jesus, by way of double entendre referring both to literal lifting up in crucifixion and in a figurative sense to exaltation (3:14; 8:28; 12:32). Paul holds up Jesus as the epitome of God’s humiliation-exal- tation scheme, citing Isaiah’s prediction that “every knee will bow” and “every tongue confess” that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (45:23). Thus the NT writers ground their teaching on humility in HB/OT teaching and view Jesus, particularly his death on the cross, as the fulcrum of true humility.

Some (e.g., Dickson/Rosner; contra Dawes) have alleged that the concept of humility as a virtue is absent from the HB/OT, contending that lowness of
status in HB/OT times was always involuntary and unwelcome. Others (e.g., Evans) have recognized that in light of the background adduced above, humility does appear as a virtue in the HB/OT, though Jesus decisively developed the HB/OT notion further by calling for humility as a conscious choice. With regard to the Greco-Roman world, it is widely recognized that “humility as a social virtue is in fact conspicuous by its absence” (Dickson/Rosner: 549 n. 3). For Greeks who prized freedom, any form of subjection was viewed with contempt (Grundmann: 11–12). Anyone who was socially low or servile, with no will of their own, was therefore not free. Slaves, in particular, were the embodiment of those who were to be despised, for their will was bound by the will of another. In this context, Jesus’ teaching and practice of humility were counter-cultural.

2. Terminology. The NT teaching on humility is primarily conveyed by the ταπεινός word group. Of the total thirty-four instances, thirteen are in the Gospels and Acts, thirteen in Paul, and four each in James and 1 Peter. The verb ταπεινάω occurs fourteen times, the adjective ταπεινός eight times (τα-πειναρέων is found once), and the nouns τα-πεινός and ταπεινοφροσύνη are found four and seven times, respectively. The related term ἀφελα-ώς conveys the sense of simplicity of life (Acts 2:46). Other relevant idioms are being “poor in [one’s] spirit” (Matt 5:3) and “washing the feet” of others (1 Tim 5:10; cf. John 13:1–16). An associated quality is that of gentleness (προκάτοχος, πρόφυς), juxtaposed in passages such as Matt 11:29 where Jesus speaks of himself as “gentle and humble in heart” or Eph 4:2, where believers are enjoined to conduct themselves “with all humility and gentleness.” The notions conveyed by the NT vocabulary on humility include that of unpretentious behavior, lack of pride or arrogance, and the recognition of one’s need for God.

3. New Testament Teaching. The first significant instance of humility language in the NT is found in Matt 11:29 where Jesus describes himself as one “humble in heart” who invites the weary and burdened masses so that he, the end-time messianic shepherd, can give them rest (cf. Matt 9:36). Later, Jesus calls on his followers to humbly resemble his children (those with no status in society) in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:4). He also enunciates the spiritual principles that “the greatest among you will be your servant” (Mark 10:42–45) and that “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt 23:11b–12).

The God-induced reversal of toppling the powerful and elevating the lowly is central to the message of Luke’s Gospel. The theme is sounded already in Mary’s Magnificat (1:48, 52) and continues to resound in the reference to the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke 3:5 (cf. Isa 40:4). The parables of the wedding feast and of the Pharisee and the tax-collector both show that advancement in God’s kingdom is contrary to cultural norms (Luke 14:11; 18:14). John is less interested in the reversal of socio-economic realities and focuses primarily on the spiritual dynamic of Jesus’ “lifting up” at the cross, presenting Jesus as the obedient Son who did the will of the Father and thus brought him glory (e.g., 4:34; 17:4).

In Acts, the Ethiopian eunuch reads in Isaiah that justice was denied Jesus “in his humiliation” (8:33; cf. Isa 53:8). The scriptural narrative presents Jesus as God’s servant who is rejected by those in power, is denied justice, and is killed, but ultimately vindicated by God. In his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul maintains that he had served the Lord “with all humility” (Acts 20:19) in the context of many trials and much opposition. The four instances of “humility” language in 2 Cor (7:6; 10:1; 11:7–9; 12:21) similarly speak of Paul’s afflictions as he preaches the gospel amidst considerable persecution. This includes criticism by others and his foregoing of financial support from those to whom he ministered.

Philippians exalts the virtue of Christian humility by grounding it explicitly in the disposition of Christ, particularly at the cross (2:1–11). Paul acknowledges that the current condition of believers is lowly when compared with their future resurrection glory (3:21) and writes that he is well acquainted with all sets of circumstances (4:12). He calls believers to humility in both Eph (4:2) and Col (3:12). Finally, Peter and James similarly recall God’s opposition to the proud, citing Prov 3:34 (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). Peter enjoins Christians to love one another and to be compassionate and humble (3:8), and James affirms God’s reversal of current conditions in exalting the lowly and humbling the rich (1:9–10).

4. Summary. The NT transforms the HB/OT notion of a person who is literally low in status and develops it into a spiritual Christian virtue which involves a conscious choice to adopt an appropriately low stance toward God and others. The NT teaching on humility has as its center the cross of Christ. NT authors such as Paul or Peter call Christians to emulate the humility exemplified by Jesus during his earthly ministry and at the cross.


Andreas J. Köstenberger
III. Judaism

A. Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism

As in the biblical tradition, the application of the language of humility or self-abasement before God is common in the Judaism of the Second Temple and Hellenistic period. Expressions of humility may relate to specific “horizontal” relationships of disenfranchisement or persecution or to a generalized “vertical” relationship between the subject and God. Frequently these, as when the perspective is adopted that God is especially concerned for the weak and vulnerable (Sir 21:5; 35:16–26; Ps. Sol. 5:11–12; 15:1), but in other cases the language of humility and abasement appears to be abstracted from specific social or economic conditions or it concerns the fundamental relationship between human beings and the divine (4Q416 2 III 9–14).

A significant development in the expression of humility before God in this period occurs in the Hodayot’s “doxologies of lowliness” (Niedrigkeitssdoxologie). In these sectarian psalms a form of “self-abasement formula” centered on humanness as such combines and transforms the language of Ps 8 and the book of Job (e.g., 1QH 5 30–35; VII 34; IX 23–25; XII 30–34; XV 35–36; XXVI 35–39). The Hodayot bring together the forlorn view of the potential for human righteousness which is characteristic of Job’s friends (Job 4:17–21; 15:14–16; 25:4–6) with the sense of gratitude and wonder for God’s benevolence toward human creation that is characteristic of the psalmist (Ps 8:5–9; cf. Sir 18:8–12; 2 Bar. 48:14–18). In the Hodayot, it is the experience of being chosen that makes this union possible, but in other texts where election is absent or perceived negatively, human finitude may rather become a basis for complaint (4 Ezra 8:34; cf. Job 7:17–21). The expression of humility in the Hodayot is also marked by a distinctive overlapping of categories of moral and innate sexual impurity, which these psalms more or less relate directly to the creation of Adam (1QH 22 XX 27–31; XVIII 5–7). It may be that such extreme self-abasement emerged in the experience of election to a holy and divine heavenly worship even in the midst of heightened experiences of conflict and alienation (1QH 4 IV 33–34; VI 14–15; X 34–37; XIII 23–24; XXVI 35–39; cf. 1QS XI 6–15).


Nick Meyer

B. Rabbinic Judaism

The most important word for humility in Rabbinic Hebrew, ‘hana’ah, derives from the root ‘h-n-y, which also indicates suffering or poverty. Etymologically, and to a degree still substantively, a humble individual is one who adopts the posture of the poor. God himself, according to bMeg 31a, can express “humility” insofar as he allies himself with the poor. In a remark on Num 12:3, Sif Bem 101 connects but also distinguishes between the virtue of humility and material manifestations of lowliness:

“And the man Moses was very humble (‘hana’ah).” Humble in character (dlat). You say humble in character, but perhaps, humble in body. Hence it says, And you shall do as you did to Sihon, etc.” [Num 21:34] He fell upon Sihon and killed him, he fell upon Og and killed him. … But perhaps, humble in wealth. Hence it says, “And also the man Moses was very great.” (Exod 11:3)

Moses lacks neither strength nor wealth. Only in character he is lowly.

Rabbinic literature is more explicit about the content of certain expressions of humility. Various texts take humility to be a precondition for prophecy (Hirshman), as, for example, the following reflection on Num 12:3, in MechY Badohez 9.

“And Moses approached the cloud.” [Exod 20:17] What was the cause? His humility, as it is said, “And the man Moses was very humble.” [Num 12:3] Scripture tells that anyone who is humble will, in the end, cause the Presence to rest on human beings in the land, as it is said, “For thus says the high and exalted, ever-dwelling, whose name is holy: I dwell in the high and holy, and with the oppressed and the lowly of spirit.” [Isa 57:15]

Conversely, continues the midrash, the haughty defile the land and compel the Presence to depart.

One important aspect of humility in rabbinic sources resembles what Greco-Roman sources call gentleness, a virtue that describes the proper attitude of a master toward his subordinates (Wengst: 7). Thus Philo (Dec. 67 [LCL]) includes under the fifth commandment laws governing hierarchical relations, and among them those addressed “to servants on rendering affectionate loyalty to their masters, to masters on showing the gentleness and kindness by which inequality is equalized.” The LXX renders Num 12:3 so that it speaks of Moses’ gentleness. It evidently takes the verse as an explanation for why Moses did not respond angrily, or indeed at all, to Miriam’s words. R. Nathan, in Sif Bem 100, espouses a similar view: Moses was present, but the fact that he was ‘hana’ah explains why he “suppressed (kavash) concerning the charge.”

Lewis discerns a systematic distinction in rabbinic literature between humility of R. Nathan’s sort, a virtue specific to the social superior and expressed by the word ‘hana’ah, and “lowliness of spirit” (shifrut ru’ah). According to Lewis, ‘hana’ah is
rooted in cognizance of the image of God inherent in all human beings, and thus of the artificiality of the social hierarchy that subordinates one individual to another. The 'anaw is a social superior who nevertheless declines to exact, at the social inferior's expense, the honor due him within that hierarchy. Lowliness of spirit, by contrast, emerges from a sense of human insignificance in the face of a transcendent God, and manifests itself in fear of sin generally, in addition to devaluation of hierarchy.

Humility interfaces with the distinctive features of the rabbinic system in two noteworthy ways. First, rabbinic sources devote attention to the problem of what we may call halakhic pride, i.e., projecting piety by adopting a stringency or forgoing an available leniency. The locus classicus for this concept is mBer 2:8. The Mishnah states that a groom, though exempt from reciting the Shema on the night of his wedding, may recite it if he wishes. R. Simeon b. Gamaliel restricts this license: “Not all who wish to take up the name may take it up.” Only the genuinely pious may so presume. According to one rabbinic view (e.g., SifZBem 12:3), Miriam’s complaint against Moses in Num 12:1–2 involved precisely the charge of halakhic pride: others besides Moses speak with God, but only he deems it necessary to separate from his spouse. The proof for this interpretation lies in Num 12:3, understood, in contrast with the approach of the LXX and R. Nathan, as Scripture’s reply to Miriam’s charge: Moses’ separation from his wife could not have been an expression of pride, for he was genuinely humble.

The second noteworthy feature of humility in rabbinic Judaism, not unrelated to the first, is the tension, attested especially in Babylonian sources (Rubenstein 2003: 75–76), between recognition of humility as a virtue and the insistence that a sage should nevertheless retain some pride. Thus, e.g., a sugya in bBom 23a wavers between the position that a sage is no sage unless he avenges insults, and the celebration of one who does not respond to decrepancy. Likewise, at the end of a long sugya (bSot 4b–5b) condemning pride, one rabbi insists that it is appropriate for the sage to hold onto one sixty-fourth of the full measure of pride. Rava makes the quandary explicit: “One who has it is excommunicated, and one who does not have it is excommunicated.”

A final, curious source, also in the Talmud (bGit 55b–56a), condemns R. Zechariah b. Avqals’ “humility” (‘anwetanut): by refusing to allow either of two halakhic violations proposed by his peers, he ends up arousing the wrath of Rome, which ultimately leads to the destruction of the temple (Rubenstein 1999: 150). Here “humility” seems to entail an exaggerated sense of propriety that ironically resembles, if superficially, what we have called halakhic pride. The condemnation of Zechariah may be compared to Plutarch’s criticism of Cato the Younger for rebuffing two irregular measures that would have won him the allegiance of Pompey the Great. Plutarch credits Cato’s virtue, but, “if we are to judge by the results,” Cato was “wholly wrong” because he thereby encouraged Ptolemy to ally himself with Caesar, and thus brought about the fall of the republic. “None of these things perhaps would have happened, had not Cato been so afraid of the slightest transgression of Pompey as to allow him to commit the greatest of all” (Cat. Min., 30.4–6 [LCL]).


Tzvi Novick

C. Medieval Judaism

Medieval Jewish thinkers interpret the notion of humility (‘anawah) in different ways. In a religious sense, it is used to refer to individuals, who consider themselves humble before God. In a moral sense, it depicts individuals who regard themselves to be unimportant in relation to their fellow humans (Roth: 5, 16). Philosophical writings describe humility as a virtue. Spiritual-mystical literature addresses it as an attribute of God that should be emulated, or as an emotional quality to be perfected. It can reflect a mindset, or characterize human actions. Externally visible conduct is thus often viewed as a result, or a reflection, of a person’s inner life and vice versa.

Based on the biblical representation of Moses as the embodiment of humility (Num 12:3), medieval commentators characterize him as meek and patient (Rashi), as subordinating himself to others (Ibn Ezra), and as self-effacing ( Nahmanides).

In rabbinic literature, humility epitomizes one of the more advanced traits necessary for following a pietistic lifestyle (mSot 9:15). It is associated with “the awe of the Lord” (Prov 22:4; bAZ 20b; ySheq 3, 14b) and has been construed either as a cause or an effect of the latter (Shir 1:1; Rashi on Prov 22:4; Zohar 3:145a–b).

The great value attributed to humility had a lasting impact on Jewish moralistic writings (musar). In The Duties of the Heart, Bahya ibn Paqua (11th cent.) dedicated an entire chapter to the notion of humility (Arab. tawwadî; Heb. kenî ah). Bahya defines it as “the meekness of the soul, ... a trait [that] shows its effects on the limbs” (Bahya: 305). He further describes it as a degree that is “not far from the path that leads to the nearness and presence of God” (ibid.: 307). Bahya associates various
biblical characterizations with the humble, among those “whose eyes the wicked are despised” (Ps 15:4), who are “meek” (Prov 11:2), “contrite and humble in spirit” (Isa 57:15), and have “a broken and contrite heart” (Ps 51:17), etc. (ibid.).

Nahmanides (1194–1270), in his Iggeret ha-
Musar, emphasizes the significance of humility by naming it— with reference to Prov 22:4—“the best of all the virtues” (Nahmanides: 373). He follows Prov 18:12, depicting it as the positive counterpart of pride. Like Bahya, Nahmanides presents external and internal expressions of humility as a means to approach the divine. Thus, behavioral patterns (being ashamed of oneself, speaking quietly, etc.), bodily postures (a bowed head or lowered eyes), and continuous self-reflection serve the ultimate purpose of being granted “the spirit of the divine feminine (Shekhinhah) and the radiance of her glory during one’s lifetime” (ibid.: 375).

Medieval Jewish philosophers of the Aristotelian faction interpreted humility as a virtue of the golden mean, located between pride (gav’awah) and the “lowliness of spirit” (shiflut ha-ruch) (Maimonides and Obadiah of Bertinoro on Maf 4:4). Deviating from the general rule to pursue the moderate path, Maimonides (1138–1204) reads the superlatives “very humble” (Num 12:3) and “very, very lowly of spirit” (Maf 4:4) as indicators that call for transcending humility in order to distance oneself as far as possible from the negative perspective of pride (Maimonides, MishT, Hilkhet de’er 2:3).

In theosophical kabbalah, humility is associated with the Keter, the first sefirah (Cordova 2002: 31). Based on the idea that the human creation constitutes a microcosm of the sefirotic structure, the process of self-limitation, which enables the kabbalist to be preoccupied with contemplating the divinity’s greatness, is considered an act of imitating the supernal attribute of Keter (Cordova 1973: 195). In the Zohar, the humble and modest (tsanna’) are characterized as vessels for God (Zohar 3:9a), and as worthy of receiving esoteric lore, particularly the knowledge of divine names (ibid.: 146b; Matt: 587).

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Geoffrey Dennis

IV. Christianity

- Patristics through Reformation Times
- Modern Europe and America

A. Patristics through Reformation Times

The ideal of humility or self-humiliation was already discussed in early Christian circles. It did not originate from a classical theory of virtues but developed through the reception and interpretation of OT psalms and words of wisdom (e.g., Prov 11:2 and, predominantly, of the Jesus narratives (Jesus’ self-designation in Matt 11:29; his instructions and promises, particularly Matt 18:4; 23:12) and the religious writings, Hasidic writings and musar (ethics).

The many branches of the Hasidic movement have generated what is by far the most complex and elaborate modern Jewish literature on humility, giving it a central role in the life of the pious individual. An important Hasidic concept is bitul ha-yesh, “negation of the self.” Humility is also a critical trait in the personality of the religious virtuoso, the tsaddiq. In Hasidism, the concept of humility has cosmic import, bridging the domains of ethics and metaphysics.

In the non-mystical literature of character development, that is, musar, humility is also a cardinal virtue to be cultivated. Traditionalist works in this genre tend to reiterate the pre-modern ideals of humility articulated in works such as Mesillas yesharim by Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746). Musar writing coming out of the liberal Reform and Conservative movements mitigates the more extreme idealization of humility, in light of the contemporary mores of self-worth and the dignity of the individual (Stone; Olitzky/Sabath). All of this literature leans heavily on the biblical tradition and Jewish interpretations derived from it.

As a rationalist philosopher of ethics, Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) recast traditional biblical and rabbinic teachings on humility in Idealist terms. As it is “suffering in its moral essence” that allows the individual to “bear the whole world in his heart,” humility “defeats eudaemonism” and so prepares humanity to realize the messianic end of all suffering (Cohen: 265–68). More recently, Ronald Green has reexamined biblical teachings on humility through the prism of ethical-contractual theory.

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D. Modern Judaism

The biblical concept of humility continues to be a topic of interest in Jewish modernity. The topic appears predominantly in two types of modern Jewish

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theological interpretation of the life and death of Jesus as it is presented by Paul (Phil 2:3–11) in accordance with Matt 23:12. However these biblical traditions were only partially discussed in the medium of scriptural interpretation. Humility was irrelevant in the formation of ethical theories. Although Basil of Caesarea referred to it as the “first virtue” (PG 31:643B) and John Chrysostom called it the “mother, root, nurse, foundation, and connection of all virtues” (PG 60:225), it was not incorporated into the canon of Christian virtues alongside the trinity of faith, love, and hope (following 1Cor 13:13) that gradually evolved from earlier, more extensive catalogues of virtues. However humility has its place in dogmatics, e.g., in Augustine’s christological reflections: according to Phil 2:7, he understands the incarnation to be the self-humiliation of the Christ who welcomes those who feel weary and carry heavy burdens (Matt 11:28–30), but also looks out for the humble Christians (Sermon 127) and calls for voluntary humility modeled on his example (Sermon 117).

Humility gained great importance for the practical way of life of the Christians. Among his instructions for a righteous Christian life, 1 Clem 50:2 already emphasizes the idea that God withstands the prideful and gives his mercy to the humble. His ideal of humility also has a christological basis (13:1; 16:1–2, 17). The Shepherd of Hermas associated humility with the concepts of reward (Herm. Sim. 5:3.7) and penance (Herm. Sim. 5.7.4, 6). The above-mentioned biblical passages made the greatest impact, however, within the ascetic-monastic movement. The Egyptian desert monks already considered humility to be the most important attitude of the monk. Thus abbot John of the Kellia, referring to Matt 5:3, speaks of humility as the first commandment of the savior (PG 65:223D), and numerous Fathers and Mothers of the desert regard it as the only effective weapon in the fight against the evil enemy and the demons (e.g., Antonios 8: PG 65:77AB; Theodora 6: ibid. 203AB). In Eastern monasticism, Basil’s interpretation of the role of humility, based on the example and commandment of Jesus (e.g., the washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13:5; the self-designation of Matt 11:29; the promise of Luke 14:11) as well as on Paul’s instruction (Phil 2:3), had a long-lasting effect (Reg. fis. tract. 7.4; 10.2; 20.1; 21.43, etc.; Reg. brev. tract. 198). In his homily De humiliitate 20 (PG 31:525–40), he calls for humility following the example of the Lord who descended from heaven into utmost humility, and was then elevated for it. John Cassian, who conveyed the monastic traditions of the East to the Western church, describes humility following Matt 11:29 as the “teacher of all virtues, the most solid foundation of the heavenly construction, the personal and magnificent present of the Lord” (Coll. 15.7.2).

In Western monasticism, the representation of the ideal of humility in the Regula Benedicti had a lasting impact. Its extensive seventh chapter, mostly adopted from the Regula Magistri (ch. 10), offers a detailed presentation and elaborate biblical explanation of this ideal. The promises made by Jesus in Matt 23:12, Luke 14:11; 18:14, as well as Ps 130:1–2 are of fundamental importance. Like Cassian (Coll. 14.2), the Rule (7.6) interprets the way to the full accomplishment of elevation in heaven through humiliation in the earthly life as an ascent, symbolized in the image of Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28:12). Using biblical words and references to Cassian and other early Christian authors, it describes the twelve levels of humility in the ascent of the monk, leading to the perfect love of God (7.67). Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian friar who closely adhered to the instructions of the Regula Benedicti, gives an interpretation of ch. 7 in his treatise De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae. Following some general remarks on the concept of humility, the second part describes the twelve levels of pride in such a way that the corresponding levels of humility can easily be deduced. Drawing on words of Jesus (Matt 11:29; John 14:6; 17:3), he refers to humility as the way leading to truth (1.1); yet he also gives a didactic definition of humility as “the virtue through which man, in the most truthful form of self-awareness, becomes worthless to himself” (1.2).

Francis of Assisi established a new approach: in aiming for an exact imitation of the Christ, who humbled himself (e.g., Admon. 1.16–17), he associates humility with the ideal of voluntary, radical poverty that he deems to be of particular importance. He refers to poverty and humility as being sisters (Salutatio virtutum 2). Both in the Regula non bullata (9.1) and in the Regula bullata (6.2; 12.4) he requires his confere to try and emulate the humility and poverty of their Lord. He also makes up pairs of virtues, combining humility with love (Ep. ad fid. 2.30, 87), patience (ibid. 44; Admon. 27.2), and others. The Canticle of the Sun closes with the invitation to thank and serve God humbly. The so-called Regula Augustini also prescribes humility (Preceptum 2). It is thus recommended to the Dominicans as the “mother of virtues” (Humbert of Romans, Ep. de tribus votis 34–40). In his Liber Vitas fratrum, the Augustinian hermit Jordan of Cladinburg dedicates an entire chapter (2.7) to the topic of humility and adds to the following chapter (on patience), with reference to Matt 3:15, a list of twenty-one levels of humility (2.8). In the course of the Middle Ages, the traditional ideal of humility, commonly associated with Jesus, is retained mainly in ascetic and devotional literature and increasingly associated with the idea of merit.

Martin Luther challenged this tradition. Already in his first psalm reading he considers humiliation and the self-awareness resulting from it to be
the prerequisite of the knowledge of God (WA 55/2:137 lines 8–11). Later, following Bernard, he describes it as the judgment of one’s own sinful nature (ibid. 305 lines 7–9); as such, he believes that it is a precondition for the *justification per fidem* (ibid. 321 lines 313–14). However, he strongly rejects the meritorious character of humility, and prefers to understand it as the inner attitude that leads to penance and practical action. While modern Catholicism still adheres to the traditional idea of humility, post-Reformation Protestantism did not always adopt and follow Luther’s position. Often enough, humility is understood to be a meritorious virtue. While Christian devotional literature continues to focus on the biblical foundations of humility, the concept has become less important in theological discussions that increasingly consider extrabiblical aspects.

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Ulrich Köpf

**B. Modern Europe and America**

Humility is an attitude that easily leads to misunderstandings. Friedrich Nietzsche, who interpreted humility as a technique of cowardice or self-negation of life, might be regarded as one example of such misjudgment (Nietzsche 1922: 67; 1995 [1862]; 1993 [1887]: 339–412). Yet, humility does not only lead to misunderstandings. It also tends to change into its opposite: pride. For how could it be possible not only to exercise restraint with regard to certain dispositions, desires, or strengths, but also with regard to the respective selfishness, and not succumb to the temptation of the self to recapture such restraint and transfer it into new forms of self-assertion? The anthropological and “ontological” status of humility is, hence, unstable. It is all the more astonishing that humility entered into human history, into the history of human existence. According to Augustine, this is due to Christianity.

(1) Indeed, the Bible reveals a certain tendency towards re-evaluating values, or, to put it differently, to re-assess those values to which humans are naturally prone. In the HB/OT the description of being “humble” before God, is, thus, not interpreted as a weakness or deficiency, but as defining humankind’s position in its relation to God (cf. Judg 6:14–16; Job 22:29; Pss 8:3–5; 131:1–2; 132:1; Prov 3:34; 11:2; Isa 53; 66:1–2; Ezek 21:31; Mic 6:8, etc.). This approach becomes more radical in the NT (cf. Matt 5:3–5; 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:9–14; 2 Cor 8:9 etc.). When according to John 13:1–11(–17) the “Teacher and Lord” washes the feet of his disciples, this gesture is not presented as an isolated display of humility, but rather symbolizes the decisive factor of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The crucial dimension – or “direction of impact” – of divine self-revelation in Christ becomes particularly evident through Peter’s lack of understanding: the history of the incarnate God is directed to the cross (cf. 1 Cor 1–2; Phil 2:5–11 etc.). Rudolf Bultmann pointed out the theological implications of the footwashing episode with particular clarity and numerous commentators have since followed his lead. The disciples can only grasp the true meaning of Jesus’ action in the future, during Christ’s passion (Bultmann: 351): God’s incarnation surpasses human expectation because it demonstrates that what humans least expect from God is actually divine – God’s humiliation. This understanding, in reverse, reveals the meaning of faith, i.e., that humans accept this divine action which exceeds paradoxically what humans presume God to be and to do. (cf. Bultmann: 357)

(2) The essence of humility is implied in the above description. But how can such acceptance (“to-put-up-with-God’s-actions”) be integrated into Christian life? Can it become a virtue? In the history of theology and piety humility has been frequently interpreted in this way. In this regard, humility was put in the larger context of Christian ethics and was thus domesticated. Owing to this development, Enlightenment philosophy adopted the biblical heritage of humility by translating this peculiar attitude into its own distinct rationality. This way, humility becomes an appropriate self-evaluation, which is neither associated with false saughtness nor with artificial modesty (cf. J. G. Fichte; a different explanation referring to the moral law, which might never wholly be implemented, is offered by I. Kant: 435–36).

Beginning with Pietism, which emphasized humility as a characteristic feature of the re-born human (cf. J. Arndt, P, J. Spener), a line leads to the movement of the Mennonites, who take the duty to follow Christ as verbalised in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) especially seriously. In this regard, Christian Burkholder’s *Address to Youth Regarding True Repentance (Nützliche und erbauliche Anrede an die Jugend von der wahren Buße, 1804)* was of significant influence: Christ is “an example to us of true humility.” To follow Jesus, therefore, means to realize such humility in our own lives. Humility, as the first fruit of regeneration, testifies to the authenticity of the newly given and accepted life – all the more so, as it includes the willingness to suffer in the succession of Christ.

That this understanding of humility does not necessarily involve a legalistic dimension, has been rightly pointed out by Stanley Hauerwas in his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount: “The Je-
sus of the Sermon on the Mount is ... one whose instruction sets forth the way of life that he himself embodied, the way of life that manifests God.” This citation is reminiscent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–11). Bonhoeffer understands human existence in the footsteps of Christ as a gift of Christ and interprets Matt 5:9 (“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”) as follows:

The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When he called them they found their peace, for he is their peace.... But nowhere will that peace be more manifest than where they meet the wicked in peace and are ready to suffer at their hands. The peacemakers will carry the cross with their Lord, for it was on the cross that peace was made. (Bonhoeffer: 65; Ger. original: 107)

Thus a radical difference is established between the realm of God and the human realm. The Beatitudes lead us to recognize the difference between these two realms – moreover, they place us in the middle of this difference. In answer to the question of how it might be that the “poor in spirit, the suffering, those who are humiliated” – of all people – are blessed, Karl Barth points out: “In their misery they find themselves on the outer edge of the cosmos as it is confronted with the kingdom of God and to be renewed by the man Jesus. Through their misery the fragility of the cosmos becomes apparent, and, in a sense, transparent.” (CD 4/2:191; Ger. KD 4/2:212) – Transparent towards God, transparent towards God’s nearness. However, this very spiritual poverty, the suffering or humiliation cannot be sought for. Yet, it exists within our mundane world, into which God has entered through Christ. And it has been revealed to the world that God is especially present in this suffering and humiliation.

(3) Thus, the question arises as to whether the idea of a humility that is inseparable from the Christian faith might, as such, become the object of exhortation, i.e., a form of lifestyle. Would then humility not lose its offensive and unwieldy character, which arises from the fact that it resists all forms of appropriation and can never be acquired by humans – however pious they might be? Put pointedly, a person can be humble, but a person cannot want to be humble. Yet, again, this assessment is premature: Indeed, a person might not even be able to be humble. And still humility exists. And without humility, there would be no Christianity. It thus follows: A person can only be humble, while not being humble at the same time. While humility chooses us, it remains likewise inaccessible.

Even those theologians who, following Friedrich Schleiermacher, identified humility with the consciousness of God, could not withstand this difficulty. When Richard Rothe – in the wake of, yet also in reduction of Schleiermacher’s interpretation – understands the essence of humility as the “feeling of absolute dependence” (“schlechthiniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl”), the question emerges as to whether the sting of self-negation – itself a part of humility – has not been suspended. (cf. Schleiermacher: 616). In order to ascertain that the specific connotation of humility is lost not only by transforming it into a virtue, but also by merging it with a pious conscience, it suffices to draw on one of Blaise Pascal’s Pensées that have their own way of speaking about humility: “We must only love God and only hate ourselves” (“Il faut n’aimer que Dieu et ne hâir que soi”; Pascal: 476). This form of humility will never be instrumentalized nor neutralized by integration in a larger context.

(4) And what about monasticism? Do not monks walk right into that same trap, as mentioned above, namely to reach a higher level of self-accomplishment by dedicating their entire existence to humility? On the other hand it might be considered one of the specific features of monastic life to live in this world, while not belonging to it. Thus, monastic life includes a reservation, according to which it can never be accomplished in itself. It remains – and this is also (or especially) true for humility – oriented towards an aim that cannot be achieved. Thus, humility, which in monasticism undoubtedly serves as a main virtue, ceases to be a virtue in the stricter sense. Instead, it becomes itself an act of encountering God (which is not to be confused with consciousness of God).

The phrase Nihil sum, sed tuus sum, which has among others been attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux (cf. Virt. 92), represents a closer equivalent to the biblical attestations than any other theological and moral conception that – however prominently – involves humility. If we might believe the notion of this extreme understanding, humility includes change; in this case a change of direction regarding understanding and self-understanding. As a human being, one may by nature only understand oneself from oneself and towards oneself. Even though and while proceeding in this manner, the gift of humility opens, nevertheless, a new horizon in which the human being experiences a self-understanding that comes from somewhere else, or, more precisely: the human being experiences to be understood from somewhere else. This change through humility is not accomplished once and for all, but again and again (quasi incessantly) anew. Humility, seen from this perspective, is a perpetual changeover between two subjects: God and the human.

(5) The biblical text, in which this change of the self from self-understanding to being understood by God is developed narratively, is the announcement of Jesus’ birth in Luke 1, which is concluded by Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). In his Operaciones in Psalmos (1518–21) Martin Luther writes: Quo enim perveniet, qui sperat in deum, nisi in sui nihilum? (WA 5:168, lines 1–2: “He, who hopes in God, where does he go to, if not the nothingness of his own self?”) For Luther this does not constitute
mystical knowledge. Rather, it mirrors Mary’s experience, namely that being understood by God does not render the self nothing. Instead, it leads into the nothingness of the self, which is not withdrawal of God, but a divine gift. This is the essence of the Christian faith, which in spite of its paradox (and its countless oversimplifications) does not cease to radiate and emanate. The divine counterpart was mentioned in Luther’s Large Catechism: “...how he [sc. God] has completely given himself to us, withholding nothing” (Ger.: “...wie er [sc. Gott] sich ganz und gar ausgeschüttet hat und nichts behalten, das er nicht uns gegeben habe”; BSLK 651:13–15) — which might virtually be read as a commentary on Phil 2:5–8.

In 1 Cor 4:7 (“For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”) the configuration mentioned is recognized as perpetually dynamic. This motif is adopted by John Calvin, who understands “humility as the self-awareness and self-denial that offers to God nothing more than its own lowliness” (cf. zur Mühlen: 477; Calvin, Inst. 4.17.42; 3.7.1–2; 3.4.9.).

Ignatius of Loyola offers another interpretation of the biblical conception of humility. In his book on the “Spiritual Exercises” the complete acceptance of God’s will becomes the program of an existence that does not strive to uncover the sense of life for itself, but receives and accepts life as a gift and task that consists in living in accordance with God’s intention. This becomes possible, since the Holy Spirit inscribes the inner law of “charity and love” (“charidad y amor”; cf. von Balthasar: 287) into our hearts; in other words, since those who follow Christ imitate the theanthropic life of Christ (cf. Rahner: 1298).

This way, what was described above as a perpetual changeover between God and the human, is transferred into a permanent life form (centered, of course, entirely on Christ) that believers may assume and adopt as their own form of life. Does this conception still correspond with the idea of humility as a dynamic process of defining humankind’s relation with God? A relation, in which humility is most truly itself, when it is just not entirely itself, when it does not merge with itself?

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Hans-Christoph Axhani

V. Islam

In the Qur’an, the notion of humility is applied to a range of contexts and is used to indicate modesty, meekness, submissiveness or respect. In many cases, humility appears as something that humans demonstrate towards each other and towards God. For example, with respect to attitudes and actions towards one another, God’s commands to the Israelites are remembered in S:2:58 and, in particular, his request that they be humble (ḥitā?u) in their speech and posture (cf. S:7:161). In S:25:63, servants of God are described as walking in humility (hawwān) and offering peace to those who are antagonistic and ignorant.

With respect to humanity’s posture towards God, S:20:108 describes humbled or hushed (khāshā‘a) voices before God. In similar cases, humility is a response to the coming day of judgment, when non-Muslims must enter hell (S:88:2), or to the day of resurrection, when those who observe it respond in fear or humility (S:68:43; 70:44; 79:9). In other cases, Muslims will be humbled by God’s revealed truth (i.e., the Qur’an), lest they become like those who received revealed truth (i.e., Jews and Christians), but rejected it (S:57:16; cf. S:17:109). Indeed, true believers are described as “the humble” (al-ḥādhi‘īn) in S:2:45 (though S:3:199 suggests that there are similar ones among the People of the Book who believe in God and in all of his revelations and have, thus, humbled themselves). With this in mind, a correct posture towards God is a humble one, a posture indicated by belief in him and in his revelations. Additionally, those who humble themselves before God are also those who perform good deeds and call on him in hope and godly fear (S:2:190).

In S:26:4, God describes a sign he might send that would make necks bend in humility or remain humbled (khādī‘īn). A cognate of the same word is
also applied to the Prophet’s wives who are urged in the Qur’an to speak justly, but not softly (yakhda’an; cf. S 20:108). This is interesting in light of some medieval and modern legal contexts where the modesty (‘awwa) of a woman’s voice was considered as a prerequisite for visiting the mosque (Hsu: 404).

Most significantly, humility (bittā), according to tradition, implies submission to God, such that one’s life is given over to God’s control (Kassis: 562). In this light, even the word Islam (from s-l-m) and its cognate Muslim (or the feminine Muslima, both indicating “one who submits”) are thought to describe the character in which a life is given entirely to God. Thus, successful believers are those whose piety is marked by humility (khashṭūn; S 23:1–2), not greed or excess (S 23:7).


Charles Tieszen

VI. Literature

“Humility slays pride,” according to the legend on Caravaggio’s painting David with the Head of Goliath (ca. 1610; Galleria Borghese, Rome, with the inscription H-AS OS, interpreted as humilitas occidit superbiam on David’s sword; cf. Augustine, Ennarat. Ps. 143). But in pre-Christian Latin humilitas denotes indigence or simplicity, while its Greek equivalent ταπεινωμένη is a Christian neologism. Yet Clement of Alexandria sees the germ of it in Plato’s exhortation at Leg. 715e to be “lowly” (ταπεινός) in the train of justice (Strom. 2.132.3). Voltaire declared that the Stoics understood humility better than any capuchin (S.v. “Humilité”: 391). It remains an anemic virtue in Prudentius’ allegory Psychomachia, where “humble mind” would be crushed by pride if the latter were not waylaid by deceit (245–95). But as pride becomes the capital sin for Christians, humility becomes the foundation of monastic virtue. St. Benedict calls it Jacob’s ladder (ch. 7), the first rung being fear of God, the twelfth and last the outward mortification of the body. Thomas à Kempis adds that it cannot be achieved without Christ as a model (1). Commenting on Luke 1:48, Jacob of Serug declares that the humility of Mary was total perfection, excelling that of Abraham and Moses in God’s presence (On the Mother of God, Humbly 1.619). In a legend retold by John Gower, humility proves to be that which costs least but is of most value (93). Geoffrey Chaucer’s Pardoner distinguishes four notes of humility in the heart: to think nothing of oneself, to despise no-one else, to be deaf to common report, and not to be ashamed of one’s low estate (690). In Bianco da Siena’s hymn, it is the “inner clothing” where charity is the “outward vesture” (English Hymnal, no.152).

Humility survived the Reformation in the Roman church. Angelus Silesius avers that we rise to heaven only after drowning in the humility of God (35). Teresa of Avila argues that even dryness in prayer is a blessing when it fosters this disposition (3,1,8). The Protestant George Herbert finds an emblem of it in the black stones that checker the marble stones of patience in the church floor (60). In John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress Faithful enters the valley of humility after a struggle with discontent (83). Nevertheless, humility was now a suspect virtue: François de la Rochefoucauld condemns it as an artifice of pride (no. 254), while Erasmus laments that the friar has forgotten the rustic origins of his habit (2,110). Notwithstanding Phil 2:3, John Selden holds that no-one can be serviceable to God without a just estimate of himself (64). Adam Smith accuses those who underprice themselves of a tendency to “idiotism” (6,3.49). Where Descartes had represented humility not as a virtue but as a generous passion (section 155), Hume saw pride and humility as siblings passions, one inspired by our merits, the other by our faults (2.1.2). William Cowper states the English view of monastic austerity in a double-edged aphorism:

Pride may be pampered while the flesh grows lean;

Humility may clothe an English dean. (“Truth,” Cowper: 117–18:33)

The Whole Duty of Man commends humility only as an attitude of deference to one’s earthly superiors (new edition: 333–35). Coleridge, on the other hand, avers that true humility is to establish a “free and absolute government in our own spirits” on everlasting principles of reason (185).

In the modern world Boccacio’s Griselda, who bears in silence a catalogue of cruelties and indignities from her husband (10.10), would be pitied but not commended. Robert Browning’s lover who gathers a rose dropped by his sweetheart is a pitiful imitation of the Syrophoenician woman (“Humility”: 745). We detest the false humility of Uriah Heep (Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, 1850) and may not admire the self-imposed “putrescence” of the hero in Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel Saint Francis (93). Dostoevsky’s Christlike fools — Alyoshia in The Brothers Karamazov (1880) and the hero of The Idiot (1869), Prince Myshkin — are for many the only credible exemplars of humility in modern literature.

Humor and Wit

I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
II. Judaism
III. Christianity
IV. Literature
V. Film

Humor and Wit

Biblical humor has a prophetic dimension. It works subversively in order to constitute congruity to a former imbalanced situation, thus revealing an al-

Humor and Wit

I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

with the call of Matthew the tax collector as a response to the Pharisees (and disciples) who question Matthew’s worthiness (Matt 9:9–13). In Franco Zeffirelli’s Jesus of Nazareth (1977, IT/UK), it is Peter who is offended by Jesus calling a sinful tax collector to become a disciple. Jesus affects a change of heart in Peter by telling the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32).

Humility is the center of hagiographic films such as The Song of Bernadette (dir. Henry King, 1943, US), which tells the story of Bernadette Soubirous and her visions of “a beautiful lady” later identified as the Blessed Virgin Mary. After representations of the church verify her visions, Bernadette is taken to a convent where she becomes a novice under the supervision of her former teacher, Sister Vauzous, who doubts the veracity of Bernadette’s visions and makes her life difficult. Sister Vauzous later reveals that she is angry that God chose Bernadette to experience these visions rather than herself, who had dedicated her life to service and self-abasement. This opinion is abruptly reversed when it comes to light that Bernadette had long suffered from an intensely painful physical condition and yet had never complained. Her quiet, long-suffering humility confirms her worthiness to be blessed by God.

Robert Bresson’s Au Hasard, Balthazar (1966, FR/SE, the title translates “Randomly, Balthazar”) tells the parallel stories of a young girl, Mary, and her donkey, Balthazar. While Mary falls in love with the abusive Gérard, Balthazar transitions from beloved pet to beast of burden, ultimately carrying smuggled goods for ruffians and dying mortally wounded on a hillside amid sheep. The film transforms the donkey into a Christ-figure who, as he passes through the hands of seven masters, traverses the stations of the cross, beaten, whipped, slapped, burned, mocked, and, in the concluding crucifixion, shot and abandoned to bleed to death, the hillside on which he perishes a modern-day Golgotha. That he dies literally burdened (with contraband) suggests, in this reading, a sacrifice for humanity (Quand).


Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch

VII. Film

God’s favor toward the humble and the necessity of humility before God is a common biblical theme in both the HB/OT and the NT that often finds expression in film. Exodus films are at pains to emphasize the humble condition of the Israelites in bondage. A strapping Moses (Charlton Heston) doffs his princely garb to tread in the mud with slaves after discovering that they are his people in The Ten Commandments (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1956, US). Heston makes a similar transition from affluent Jew to slave in Ben-Hur (dir. William Wyler, 1959, US). As in The Ten Commandments, this show of humility is a necessary stage in his narrative arc toward conversion.

Other biblical characters undergo similar conversions or renewals of their religious troth. The physical humiliation of Samson leads to the redemption of his faith in Samson and Delilah (dir. DeMille, 1949, US). David is forced to confess his sins and humble himself before the Ark of the Covenant in David and Bathsheba (dir. Henry King, 1951, US), an act that allows him to recover his lost boyhood faith. Many films also depict the defeat of the armored Goliath by a humble shepherd David—his relative humility communicated visually by his smaller size, simple garb, and shepherd’s weapon (e.g., David et Goliath, dir. Henri Andréani, 1910, FR).

Jesu s films have often emphasized humility by contrasting the behavior and dress of Jesus and his followers with that of the Jewish leadership, often depicted as elaborately adorned in phylacteries, shawls, and headaddresses (Matt 23:5). The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) is quoted via intertitles in D. W. Griffith’s Intolerance (1916, US) to demonstrate a lack of humility among the Pharisees, explaining (again via intertitles) that they demanded the cessation of all activity as they prayed in the marketplace, thus making their piety the center of attention. This parable is used to similar effect in Godspell (dir. David Greene, 1973, US) and The Jesus Film (dir. John Krish/ Peter Sykes, 1979, US). In Son of God (dir. Christopher Spencer, 2014, US/UK), this Lukian parable is paired


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