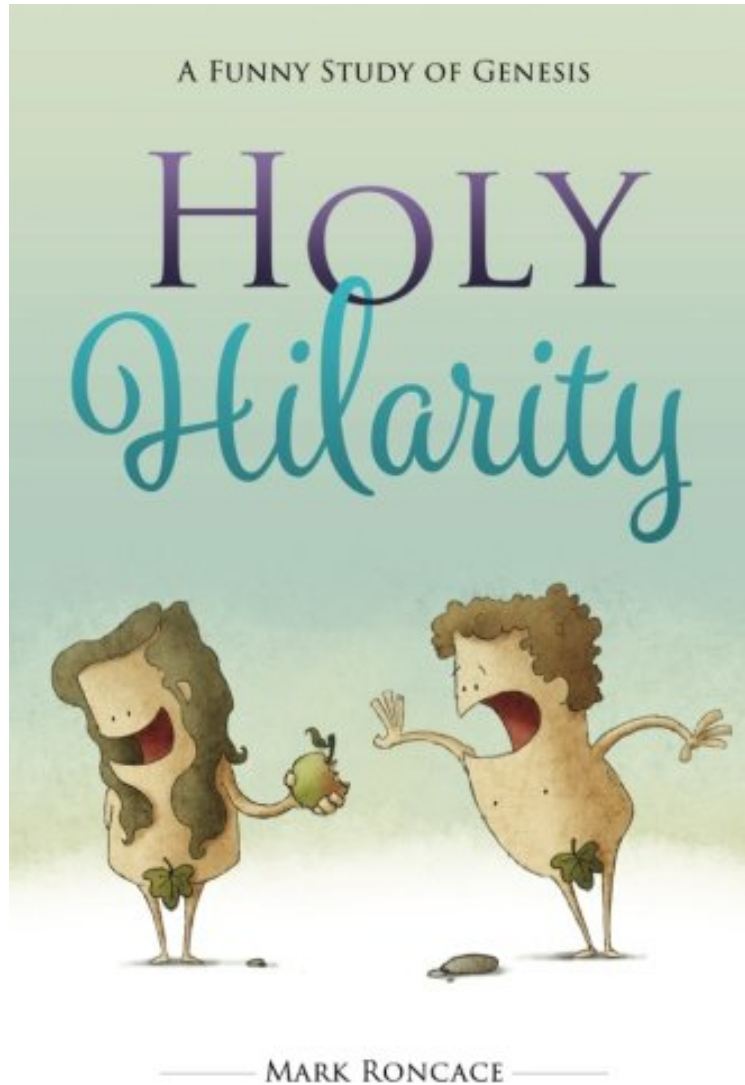


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Holy Hilarity: A Funny Study of Genesis

Mark Roncace

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Mark Roncace : Holy Hilarity: A Funny Study of Genesis before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Holy Hilarity: A Funny Study of Genesis:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An enjoyable, challenging, and flawed bookBy Randal RauserI was a big fan of Mark Roncace's previous book "God's Story." I also very much enjoyed "Raw Revelation" (albeit with some reservations). So when he offered to send me a review copy of his latest popular study, "Holy Hilarity," I welcomed the opportunity.As the subtitle stipulates, "Holy" Hilarity aims to be a "funny study of Genesis," one that consists of 53 short chapters and 220 pages. At the outset we should be clear that the primary aim of the book is not to

provide a study of the humor in Genesis (thought it occasionally does so). Rather, it is to provide a humorous study of Genesis. As Roncace puts it, "That's the aim of this book, plain and simple: to help you meaningfully engage the Bible with merriment. I want you to laugh out loud and have a rockin' good time as you contemplate the rich stories of Genesis." (vii)*"Who is the audience?" Part 1: The Millennial?*It's a noble goal: everybody loves to laugh, right? (Make that everybody except Grumpy Cat.) But that doesn't mean everybody is automatically going to be interested in a funny study of Genesis. In short, every author must contend with this question: who is the intended audience of your book? In the case of *Holy Hilarity* one of the endorsements on the back commends the book as "an entry into the biblical texts for a generation raised on Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Samantha Bee..." Yeah, I don't see that for a couple reasons. First, I don't think a savvy and cynical millennial who relishes the progressive, sardonic social commentary of Samantha Bee or Jon Stewart is going to be attracted to a cover that looks straight out of flannel-graphs and vacation Bible school. (In my opinion, the cover of "Holy Hilarity" is a major misfire.) And it's going to take more than a promise of jokes to attract the millennial to a study of Genesis. Second, I don't think much of the humor within the book is going to land with a millennial audience. The fact is that a significant portion of Roncace's material would be classified as dad jokes. And dad jokes are a dicey matter. The best of them are good because they're so bad. The worst of them are just bad. (I know this well because I myself am an endless repository of lame dad jokes and I have a merciless teenage daughter to separate the wheat from the chaff. And it's mostly chaff.) Here is one of Roncace's lamer attempts at humor, this one commenting on the impact of the fall on Eve: "The woman's punishment is nothing to scoff at either: pain in childbirth and, even worse, 'your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.' If only God had said 'drool over you,' how different our world might've been—if a little slobbery." (15) The danger with dad jokes is that if they are poorly executed they can quickly alienate an audience, especially a cynical millennial audience. So I don't think *Holy Hilarity* will find its primary readership here.*"Who is the audience?" Part 2: The Conservative?*Christian conservatives are much more welcoming of bad dad jokes ... and covers reminiscent of flannel-graphs and vacation Bible school. (As a case in point, consider the other book called *Holy Hilarity* with its satisfying mix of benign jokes fit to tickle the funny bone of Christian conservatives.) So might the Christian conservative be a better audience for Roncace's book? I don't think so. And the reason is that Roncace's humor is often too risqué for a conservative Christian audience. Consider the following examples. To begin with, Roncace offers the following lighthearted rumination about God's rainbow promise not to flood the earth again: "The rainbow reminds me personally of gay pride, which makes me think God's multi-colored sign might have something to do with the diversity of life on our planet." (37) Believe me, the suggestion that the rainbow of the Noahic covenant could be linked to LGBT diversity is not the way to get a group of conservative Christians to bust a gut. Next, "Holy Hilarity" highlights the many awkward sexual situations in Genesis. But Roncace's humor here is likely to further alienate conservative readers. For example, he offers the following jovial take on the plagues of Egypt: "God then intervenes by afflicting Pharaoh and his household with 'great plagues.' Probably gonorrhea." (52) Ouch! Once again, that is not the way to get a group of conservative Christians to laugh. (It does remind me, however, of Larry Norman's reference to "Gonorrhea on Valentine's Day" from his hard-hitting 1972 song "Why Don't You Look Into Jesus?") Even worse, when it comes to the destruction of Sodom, Roncace cracks an erection joke, opining that "it's never good to 'pitch your tent' near a place called Sodom." (56) Oh dear. And then there's the passing reference to "twerking" (24) and the phallic interpretation of the Tower of Babel (44), and the allusion to Viagra (72). In short, I don't see Roncace's take on "Holy Hilarity" being welcomed by a conservative Christian readership. And I definitely don't see it appealing to the millennial. Thus, whatever other virtues the book may have, it seems to lack a ready audience.*The Deeper Virtues*Let's turn now from the question of audience to highlight some of the admirable virtues of the book. Roncace is at his best when he uses humor to offer wry commentary or highlight difficulties within the text. For example, when he recounts how God provided verbal instructions to avoid the Tree of Good and Evil, he observes "God should've put the command in writing. After all, people never misinterpret the written word of God." (14) That's a fine use of sarcasm. And without ever explicitly challenging a simple literal hermeneutic of all the stories in the text, Roncace gently prods at the plausibility of such an approach. Consider his comments regarding life on Noah's Ark: "I bet he [Noah] was really worried about the woodpeckers and termites, and he probably wasn't sure what to feed the carnivores. Nor did God mention taking beverages. Maybe they were supposed to catch the rainwater? But the two elephants alone would kill that idea—drinking sixty-five gallons a day." (25) Roncace wisely offers no resolution here, instead simply allowing the reader to sit with the incongruity. One of the many difficulties with the narrative consists of the great age of many of the characters. Roncace provides this take on Sarah's advanced age (i.e. in her early nineties) when she finally gives birth to Isaac: "Nursing is inevitably taxing on the mother, especially if you are as old as Sarah, and hence buying Huggies and Depends at the same time." (94)*Admirably honest, challenging, and subversive*This leads me to what is perhaps the greatest virtue of "Holy Hilarity." It's an honest take on the difficulties of the text. What is more, it is based on the recognition that the difficulties in the text are providential, that we as readers benefit by wrestling with those difficulties. This is hugely important. As I've lamented in the past, Christians have some common ways of dealing with various difficulties (in particular moral and cultural) within the text. I've identified four in particular: omission (we simply ignore problematic details), distraction (we change the

topic, often by focusing on some incidental general principle), misrepresentation (we subtly distort details), and blunted affect (we recount troubling details with a flat emotional disposition unbecoming to the content). While these various reading strategies follow a path of least resistance, they thereby inoculate the reader from the full force and challenge of the text. When Roncace highlights violence, misogyny, favoritism, selfishness, and other ignoble aspects of the characters and their conduct, he is aiming to push readers beyond these various strategies to confronting the difficult realities of the text. For example, when it comes to Jacob, the most complex human character in Genesis, Roncace does not shy away from highlighting his tendency toward selfish concern (155), his penchant throughout his life to show favoritism (206) and even his final apparent descent into dementia (210). The resulting portrait of Jacob fits poorly with the popular conservative Christian tendency to reduce the Old Testament to a collection of character studies that highlight various virtues of the Christian life. Instead, we get a complicated, challenging, and morally difficult character which invites us to examine our own lives to find similar flaws ... and God's work despite those flaws.

Humor: The Best Way into the Text? While I would commend "Holy Hilarity" for the aforementioned virtues, this does bring me back to Roncace's use of humor as a way to frame a somewhat subversive devotional study of Genesis for a lay audience. In short, I find that while humor sometimes effectively serves the task, at other times it becomes a distraction. Case in point: the bad dad jokes and gratuitous allusions to erections and Viagra. The focus on levity works best in those moments when Roncace is highlighting ambiguity, irony, or morally troubling aspects from within the text and allowing us to draw the connection to our own lives. Nonetheless, overall I think the book would have worked better if it had refocused on conveying an honest and challenging study of Genesis while allowing humor to be one of many tools to engage the reader with the text.

It turns out that God has a sense of humor too Finally, we can conclude with a surprising and unintended example from the text of God's own penchant for mirthful irony. When recounting the Noahic narrative, Roncace appeals to some cutting illustrations at the expense of the long-suffering Chicago Cubs. (Infamously, the Cubs last won the World Series in 1908.) And so when recounting that Noah and the animals spent approximately seven months in the ark after the floodwaters had receded, he opines, "The probably felt longer than Cubs fans waiting for a World Series." (32) Ouch! A couple paragraphs later, Roncace twists the knife by noting that Noah's sacrifice of animals who had just survived the flood is like "betting on the Cubs at the beginning of the season to win the World Series, only to watch them blow a 22-0 lead in the ninth inning of game seven." (32-33) Wow, that hurts. I trust you know where this is going: the Cubs went on to win the World Series in November 2016, a few weeks before Holy Hilarity was published, and long after any changes could be made to the galleys of the text. Yes, it turns out that God has a sense of humor too.

of 0 people found the following review helpful. Humor is necessary to understand the Bible. By Jeremy Myers - Writing at Redeeming God. I am convinced that you must read the Bible with a half smile on your lips and a glint of humor in your eyes if you are going to properly understand some texts. So I was thrilled to recently read Holy Hilarity: A Funny Story of Genesis by Mark Roncace. Mark Roncace provides great insight into some of the humorous elements of the stories in Genesis. People didn't television in the days these stories were written, and so they told stories. And these stories in Genesis (like most stories in the Bible, those in Judges, Esther, Jonah, etc.) contain drama, romance, and even humor. If Genesis was a Twitter feed or a series of Facebook posts, it would generate a lot of people commenting with "LOL" and "SMH." Roncace shows that we need to stop taking the Bible so seriously, and sometimes just laugh at the hilarity and absurdity of the stories it contains. This is not to mock the Bible, but to read it as it was intended. Life is funny, and life with God is even more funny. Yes, there is much pain and hardship, but humor helps us cope with the hurt. The sooner we learn to see humor in the Bible, the better. Laughter is not only the best medicine, it also is a good hermeneutical tool. Holy Hilarity by Roncace is like a commentary on Genesis, but with an emphasis on showing the humor in the stories. Some of the humor is "imported" into the text by Roncace, so that he provides a modern-day humorous retelling of the story (e.g., saying that Noah didn't have power tools to build the ark, p. 24), but it is still a creative way of telling the stories of Genesis. One of my Seminary professors (Howard Hendricks) used to say that it is sin to bore people with the Bible. I agree. The Bible is endlessly fascinating, and full of intrigue, insight, and humor. Books like Holy Hilarity help us break out of the box of reading the Bible with straight faces, so that we can see the truth in the text. If you want to look at Genesis in a new light, get a copy of this book so that you can laugh and learn.

of 0 people found the following review helpful. and observations that you would like to discuss with your local rabbi. By Gordon. This book lands somewhere between Stephen Colbert, and Dave Barry read The Book of Genesis. Holy Hilarity brings up some of the questions, and observations that you would like to discuss with your local rabbi, pastor, or priest, but would probably only be comfortable doing after a few adult beverages. Gen-Xers will be familiar with the pop-culture references that present the classic biblical characters and situations in a hilarious new light. Roncace also offers questions to examine the traditional biblical issues, after they are viewed through a more relaxed lens than typically associated with The Old Testament. This is a fun and easy read to reacquaint yourself with The Book of Genesis, and reflect in a possibly non-traditional manner.

In this fun, meaningful, and practical study of Genesis, Mark Roncace brings readers fifty-three short chapters of wit and amusing observations about the biblical stories, followed by five thought-provoking questions for individual

reflection or group discussion. Readers won't find predictable commentary, scholarly platitudes, or banal life-application questions here. But beware: don't let the levity fool you. This is a genuine and thought-provoking examination of the complex accounts in Genesis. Humorous, yet reverent, this refreshing approach to Bible study invites us, whatever our background, to wrestle with the issues in the text and discover the ways those issues intersect our own messy lives. It's seriously entertaining.

About the Author Mark Roncace is Professor of Religion at Wingate University in Wingate, North Carolina. He has written a variety of scholarly articles and co-edited five academic books. But his real passion is making the Bible accessible and enjoyable for broader audiences. Because that's where the money is. *Holy Hilarity* is his third book aimed at general readers. He is a Bible scholar, not a comedian.