Are We Amused: Humour about Women in the Biblical World, edited by Athalya Brenner, is the second volume in Continuum/T&T Clark’s The Bible in the Twenty-First Century series. The series goal is “to problematize the contemporary authoritative and cultural meanings of bibles by focusing upon the processes of transmission and actualization of biblical texts up to the twenty-first century” (vii). In keeping with this objective, Are We Amused “problematizes humour as applied to female figures, in the bible and related literatures as well as in the history of their reception” (vii).

Are We Amused is divided into seven essays (7–118) and two responses (120–36), with an introduction (1–5) and an appendix (137–42), a bibliography (143–51), an index of references (152–55) and of authors (156–58). Five of the essays are papers delivered at the SBL Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado (2001), with the two responses and two of the essays (by Mary E. Shields and Kathleen M. O’Connor) commissioned for the volume. The appendix—limericks that add a humorous finishing touch to the book’s analyses of humor—were composed by Gale Yee’s students and others.

In her introduction to the book, Athalya Brenner quickly identifies some of the key questions the book’s authors must confront as they tackle the topic of humor about women in the biblical worlds: (1) What is humor? (2) What is its function? (3) What is its
function within scripture? None of these questions is easily answered, and all resurface
time and again in the book’s essays. As a starting point for the discussion, however,
Brenner offers several general observations about biblical humor: (1) biblical humor is a
didactic tool; (2) biblical humor is not limited to pleasure and enjoyment, but can be
tendentious and “non-innocent”; (3) viewing humor as social critique is significant for
understanding the biblical worlds; and 4) writing about women is writing about men (2–3).

Genealogy (F. Scott Spencer [7-30]). After quoting Raymond Brown’s question
concerning Matthew’s genealogy—“Why bring on the ladies?”—Spencer provides a
quick overview of scholarly answers that concludes with a statement of his own purpose:
“to explore the comic features of these women’s stories, and the link between comedy
and piety in Matthew’s Gospels which they portend” (8–9). After identifying seven
elements that characterize “funny stories”—incongruity, festivity, spontaneity, ingenuity,
inferiority, inelasticity, and imperceptibility (10-12)—Spencer then proceeds to find these
characteristics in the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (13–23). Thus,
according to Spencer, Matthew’s genealogy “starts us off laughing” (23) and functions as
a precursor to the writer’s larger task of presenting the entire infancy narrative in a comic
fashion. In Spencer’s subsequent analysis, passive Mary (the mother of Jesus) emerges as
the antithesis of the other proactive women in the genealogy (25), Herod is a fool (albeit
a ruthless and maniacal one [26–28]), the magi are rather dimwitted (27–28), while
Joseph plays the role of “female savior” by acting in a rather “un-masculine fashion”
(26). Spencer concludes his essay with the provocative question: “Do we have then in
Matthew’s Gospel an early Christian feminist manifesto where all the good men act like
women?” (29) and speculates about Jesus’ characterization in the rest of the Gospel (29–
30).

2. “ ‘More Righteous than I’: The Comeuppance of the Trickster in Genesis 38” (Mary E.
Shields [31–51]). Shields describes the story of Judah and Tamar as a “delightfully funny
story” that provides “comic relief” as well as heightened narrative tension of the Joseph
story (31). That the humor in this “hilarious story in Genesis” has not been widely
recognized can be attributed to generations of readers who take “all too somberly” the
exegesis of sacred texts (32) as well as to scholars who erroneously identify Tamar’s
actions as that of a prostitute and who have problems seeing a woman as a vehicle of
divine will (33). Using the “lenses of humor and feminist interpretation,” Shields presents
her readers with a close reading of Gen 38 intent on showing that the “humor of the story
relies on Judah’s ability to see only what he wants to see, on the literary strategy of
narrative irony, and on the timeless folk tale form of the comeuppance of the hero” (33).
Understanding the folkloric elements of the story undermines contemporary assumptions
that “deception is bad” (and that “those who use deceptive techniques morally reprehensible”) and that using “female sexuality to further one’s ends is negative” (49). The result of such understanding is a more positive reading of Tamar—a “woman, childless widow, victim of deception, Canaanite”—who takes upon herself the continuance of Judah’s line (50–51).

3. “Humor, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther” (Kathleen M. O’Connor [52–64]). O’Connor describes the book of Esther as “downright hilarious.” The problem lies not so much in recognizing Esther’s humorous elements, however, as in noticing “the subversive nature of that comedy” (52). O’Connor insists that the “brilliant humor” of the book is “of the highest seriousness” and that it functions as “political satire” (against the Persians), a “survival tactic” (of the Jewish community), and an “act of hope” (in the face of the postexilic Diaspora experience of exclusion and genocide [53–55]). The primary literary tools with which this is accomplished, according to O’Connor, are irony, exaggeration, and turnabouts (53–56). Moreover, the book’s characterization of the Persian king and his allies “are as farcical as a set of Keystone Kops in a slapstick movie” (56), as can be seen by the book’s presentation and critique of government communication, royalty, the king, and law (56–62). According to O’Connor, this critique is an “act of resistance,” while the humor in which it is delivered evokes “laughter at every inflated, pompous system of domination in the world” (63).

4. “Is That Fearfully Funny? Some Instances from the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books” (Toni Craven [65–78]). Discerning humor in the eighteen books or parts of books that make up the apocryphal/deuterocanonical corpus is complicated by both the variety of forms of humor and the diversity of writings in the corpus. Nevertheless, Craven finds “fearfully funny” those texts that reflect “the pervasiveness of suffering or struggle” (69). Using J. W. Whedbee’s analysis of selected comedy features—“(1) plot line; (2) characterization of basic types; (3) linguistic and stylistic strategies; (4) functions and intentions” (71)—Craven identifies comic instances in the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books. (1) Plot: For Whedbee, comedy plots often follow a “‘U-shaped plot, with action sinking into deep and often potential tragic complications, and then suddenly turning upward into a happy ending’” (71). Craven’s examples are found in all eighteen books (72). (2) Characterization: Conventional comedy character types, according to Whedbee, are “buffoons, clowns, fools, simpletons, rogues, and tricksters, human or animal form.” Craven’s examples include Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and the dog, fish, and target-seeking birds from the book of Tobit (72). (3) Linguistic and stylistic strategies: For Whedbee, these strategies include “verbal artifice such as punning or word play, parody, hyperbole, redundancy and repetitiousness.” Craven offers as examples irony at the expense of a major character’s dignity (Tobit, Antiochus) or other gods (Wisd 13:1–15:7; Bel and the Dragon; Ep Jer 6:8–40) (72). (4)
Functions and intention: Whedbee argues that “paradoxically comedy throughout the ages has oscillated between conservation and subversive tendencies, being used both to maintain the status quo and to undercut prevailing ideologies in the name of revolution and utopian goals.” Craven’s examples include women who lie for the faith, Judith, Susanna (73). In the end, Craven observes that “Those who stand with each other, those who ‘stand before God unprotected’, triumph. Those who hear such stories can take courage, weep and laugh. The joke is that those who seemingly have nothing have it all” (77). The reader’s task is “to look for and to speak of such humor,” for a new commandment is given: “You shall not forbidd yourself to laugh” (77).

5. “At the Expense of Women” Humor (?) in Acts 16:14–40” (Kathy Williams [79–89]). Williams begins her essay with the observation that “The Acts of the Apostles typically depicts women of the early Church as inept and ridiculously so” (79). This prepares the reader for Williams’s thesis that “comparative literary studies suggest that Luke’s Hellenized audience would have found these women’s depictions conventionally amusing” because “they would have recognized the comedic tropes underlying the representations” (79). Williams argues that such “conventions associated with Menander and other New Comedy playwrights” functioned to “denigrate women,” thus evoking laughter from their male audience. Using Acts 16:14–40 as a test case, Williams analyzes the story’s humor, a humor that “from our own perspective and perhaps from Lydia’s as well [is] no laughing matter” (89).

6. “Are We Amused? Small and Big Differences in Josephus’ Re-Presentations of Biblical Female Figures in the Jewish Antiquities 1–8 (Athalya Brenner [90–106]). Observing that “humour is not necessarily funny,” Brenner suggests that sometimes when jokes are made about the “other” it is the jokester who is unmasked instead of the targeted victim (90). Unlike other types of humor, this type is “tendentious and disrespectful.” While the exposure and reflection it evokes may not produce laughter or enjoyment, it may indeed function as humor often does—educationally (90). Thus Brenner begins her examination of humor not only in Josephus but also about Josephus.

Josephus’s treatment of women in his Ant. 1–8 both maximalizes some of their roles and minimalizes others. In spite of this, Josephus “manages to transform some female figures into stereotypically feminine creatures, to be laughed at by his implied (presumably male) audiences” (95). Brenner identifies a variety of thematic stereotypes through which Josephus achieves this transformation: (1) women and fashion, a motif linked to the women-as-competitors and women-as-enjoying-flattery stereotypes; (2) female curiosity; (3) female untrustworthiness and light-headed sexuality; (4) female physical beauty as her source of attraction; (5) women as childlike, if not outright childish, too; (6) independence in women? (as an undesirable quality); (7) female wisdom (only as it is
found in the aged); (7) breathless admiration (of male characters); (8) virginity; (9) male jealousy as applied to female behavior; (10) sanitation of female figures—for the sake of males (96–103).

Brenner, however, does not stop with analyzing the humor in Josephus’s work; she also suggests that his work evokes humor about him as well, that Josephus “deconstructs himself as a Judeo-Hellenistic male by doing exactly what he’s doing: diminishing some biblical female roles, expanding others, and in general letting his gender and culture notions inform his rewritings of biblical stories” (95). Since Josephus was married four times by the time he was in his mid-thirties, Brenner questions as to whether Josephus’s married life was “inauspicious” because “he was unfortunate, or because he was a difficult man who didn’t appreciate women, which is expressed in his writings indirectly but unmistakably” (104–5). For Brenner, Josephus’s writings expose his biases about women and in the end raise the question: “Do we find his own efforts comical?” If one can equate “comical” with “enjoyment,” Brenner’s readerly reaction is that she is “not amused” (106).

7. “Ooooh, Onan! Geschlechtsgeschichte and Women in the Biblical World” (Gale A. Yee [107–18]). Yee’s tongue-in-check essay provides a surprising but funny conclusion to the essay section of the volume. Although this is presented in the format of a serious essay concerning the history of interpretation of Onan’s actions in Gen 38, the reader soon discovers that all is not what it seems! Sprinkled throughout a discussion of “real” information (i.e., books, dates, authors) are spurious facts (i.e., Herr Professor Jack Offenhandler [106–7]) as well as hilarious remarks. Added to this is a discussion of a variety of online materials about Onan/masturbation that can only be described as of the more bizarre and laughable type. Yee’s treatment brings us to a logical (illogical?) conclusion to the essays in this book. After all, after reading analyses about humor, Yee’s essay provides a wonderful example of humor in the Bible as performance. In the conclusion of her essay, Yee explains how the writing (and the presentation) of this material originated. She concludes with the observation that “At present, carnival, where power relations in the guild would be inverted and satirized, has no place at annual meetings of the SBL” but somewhat whimsically hopes that “such a carnivalesque session may one day” find its niche in the SBL’s Annual Meeting (117).

Part 2, “Responses,” is made up of two critical responses to the above essays. In Amy-Jill Levine’s “Women’s Humor and Other Creative Juices” (120–26), Levine argues that biblical humor about women contains the seeds of its own undoing, that it “permits a reactionary reading” that makes fun not only of the men involved (both the characters and their creators) but of the cultural assumptions about women the stories try to reinforce (121). While this observation is foundational to Brenner’s essay on Josephus, Levine
finds it true explicitly or implicitly of the book’s other essays as well. Levine leaves her readers, however, with some parting rhetorical questions that strike at the strength and weakness of this methodological approach: Do such readings seek to equalize the objectification? “Is the placing of a woman as the object of humor ‘worse’ than placing a man in that role, since women are more likely to be maligned and since the stereotypes employed are more likely to be taken as mirroring reality?” (126) If humor can be used as a weapon, then are reactionary readings simply ways of turning the weapon in another direction? These are difficult questions to answer, for sometimes the phrase “it’s only a joke” can be taken literally (it is just a joke) or antithetically (it is anything but a joke). Levine concludes with this admonition for readers: “We can decide when to laugh, and when to warn. And in many cases, we can decide to do both (126).”

In “Laughing with/at/as Women: How Should We Read Biblical Humor?” (127–36), Esther Fuchs argues that the book’s essays vary in their approach to the relationship between women and laughter. All but one essay (Brenner’s) focus on authorial intent rather than on “woman-as-reader response” (128). Fuchs begins her essay with a set of rhetorical questions that sound much like those with which Levine concluded hers: “When reading biblical humor, are we to laugh with the women in the text, or at the narrator who pokes fun at biblical women? Do we laugh at some texts but not at others, or should we leave the question of laughing or refraining from laughter up to the individual reader? Finally, what kind of laughter are we talking about? Is it the laughter of aggression . . . or can we theorize a different kind of laughter, women’s laughter? (128) Concentrating on one issue—does the Bible laugh with women or at them—Fuchs proceeds to respond to each of the book’s essays. According to Fuchs, three essays—those of Spencer, Shields, and O’Connor—suggest that the Bible laughs with women, while other essays—those of Williams, Craven and Brenner—focus on texts (both biblical and nonbiblical) that laugh at women. Yee’s essay stands apart as a joke not at readers as “feminist humorists” but at readers “as scholars and academicians” (135). While Fuchs critiques each of the seven essays on various points, her overall critique is that laughter at or with women lacks the liberating release provided by laughter by women. Unfortunately, Fuchs concludes her response shortly after making this declaration without really clarifying what she really means by this (although she does include some quotes from Cixous’s theory of women’s laughter).

Readers will find Are We Amused? an interesting and at times provocative foray into the arena of biblical humor—a much neglected area of academic study!