

A Big Room for Poo:

Eddie Izzard's Bible and the Literacy of Laughter

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*We are frequently told by the tweedy denizens of biblical academe, often with mournful cries and much handwringing, that biblical literacy is in terminal decline. This article looks at the interplay between biblical narratives and Eddie Izzard's 1997 stand-up tour, *Glorious*, to contend that audiences in the global North are on the contrary so familiar with biblical texts, and so disquieted by this familiarity, that they need strategies to cope, laughter chief among them. Critically engaging with Eddie Izzard's rendition of Genesis 6-9 and Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, this article calls into question the paternalistic metaphors that have underwritten discussion on the Bible's role in popular culture and posits new avenues (and attitudes) of approach.*

I also take large subjects and talk crap about them. (Izzard and Quantick 2000, 117).

INTRODUCTION

The first thing that strikes you about *Glorious*, Eddie Izzard's 1997 stand-up tour, is the set. No barstool or cold, solitary spotlight for Izzard. The stage is instead filled with the magnificent wreck of a temple. Corinthian columns crumble into the wings. Faux marble struts bleach under the fresnels. Most of the height of the proscenium is taken up with a ruined basilica roof, a huge broken circle so fractured and skeletal that at first glance one could mistake it for a naked stained glass window. The rents in this dome open out onto deep space, where an enormous apocalyptic sun threatens to engulf the whole structure. Izzard himself—in charming black Cuban heels and a shimmering magenta trouser suit—capers about in the rubble. This is where he chooses to stage his hilarity: at the death of the stable edifice, in the ruins of the ritual sphere. The overall effect is, well, glorious.

For anyone familiar with the tenor of Izzard's performances, this shattered and imposing stage space makes an awful lot of sense. Izzard's comedy is larger than life and his style eschews the fixed or the stable or the orthodox. His routines are always already fractured, sallying forth as flows of ideas, as whimsical meanderings of fantasy interspersed with mimed skits and surreal thought experiments. Rarely scripted, due in part to his dyslexia and in part to his suspicion of the formality of writing (Izzard and Quantick 2000, 135), Izzard's comedy is defined by the room he leaves for breaks in proceedings. That is to say, while Izzard's tours are always focused (they are not simply rants), his idiosyncratic additions flow from and then back into his to his pre-prepared material, adding endless variety to a carefully structured routine.¹ As an opening gambit, then, one could make the point that Izzard's comedic praxis very much resembles his 1997 staging. Izzard's delivery shatters the usual fixity of performance, or at least obviates it. The Traditional Joke (capital T, J), in all its formulaic and pseudo-liturgical glory, is subjected to an apocalypse.² Izzard capers about in its rubble.

What makes *Glorious* especially interesting, particularly with this theme of undermined orthodoxy in mind, is the character of the material itself. For while *Glorious* deals with a range of

subjects both ancient and modern (toasters, Helen of Troy, the Swiss Guard, hopscotch), the whole routine is structured around the biblical canon. Izzard's first act uses the Old Testament ('a big fuck-off beard testament') as its comedic springboard, especially the creation story of Genesis 1-3 and the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9. The second act begins with the New Testament and an account of the birth of Jesus (and the ensuing nativity play that the wise men—who are visiting from the Old Testament—put on for 'baby Jee'). *Glorious* continues with a look at the gospels, the figure of biblical Peter, and the traditions of the Roman Church. Even at the end of the set, when he is brought back on stage to rapturous applause to deliver more, Izzard continues the pattern with a look at the book of Revelation and the trope of Armageddon. Structurally, the show is a Bible transposed into comedy format: Old Testament in the first act, New Testament after intermission and apocalypse as encore.

Izzard's staging of a laughed-at Bible in the rubble of a dying monolith is designed to say something quite explicit about both the Bible and the claims made by religious spaces. But before we even get as far as Izzard's specific treatment of the biblical texts, this basic fact—the structuring of a comedy routine around the Bible—raises some general issues about biblical literacy that we would do well to think about first. After all, according to some scholarly senses of biblical literacy, basing a stand-up act on the Bible would seem to be ill advised. Who is going to get the joke?

BIBLICAL ILLITERACY: A STRANGE LOVE, OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING...

Biblical literacy is in decline apparently. And in some quarters this fact seems, at times, to represent nothing less than the end of the world as we know it.⁸ The problem in the UK was diagnosed by the CBLC, the University of Durham's Centre for Biblical Literacy and Communication, based at St. John's College, in a national survey undertaken in 2008 (CBLC 2008). The results are summed up in a fairly succinct lament of Philip Davies's, published in *Bible and Interpretation*:

As few as 10 per cent of people understood the main characters in the Bible and their relevance. Figures such as Abraham and Joseph were unknown; hardly anyone could name even a few of the Ten Commandments. Some 60 per cent were ignorant of the story of the Good Samaritan, and of these not all knew the full story. This despite 60% of those surveyed being in favor of the Church! (Davies 2009)

Hector Avalos, in another recent article for *Bible and Interpretation*, seems to agree with Davies and CBLC that biblical literacy is poor. Though Avalos is anxious to stress that biblical illiteracy is not a recent phenomenon (Avalos 2010). Various interested parties have been decrying falling standards in biblical literacy since at least the 1700s, he says, if not for centuries before that. Avalos suggests that the neglected Bible might therefore only exist as part of the self-interested rhetoric of the professorial class, who, having constructed the Bible as a cultural commodity, need to sell it on. In other words, Avalos's (admittedly) brief survey of a long and illustrious history of biblical ignorance indicates that the current concern about biblical literacy may be no more than a storm in a regus professor's tea-cup. But for Avalos a more important, and attractive, idea is the notion that biblical illiteracy might force the Bible to learn its place. Today Moses and Isaiah and Noah must compete 'in a highly diversified global textual market' alongside 'Homer and Pindar and Horace'. The Bible is not a special case, he says, and should not be treated as one. The issue of biblical illiteracy should not be considered a calamity precisely because Biblical scholars must now be content with a smaller piece of what Avalos terms the 'global textual pie'.

There is something of a contradiction amongst Avalos's diminutive tea things, however. Avalos grounds the idea that the Bible must adopt a more modest position in a global textual economy on the sea change that declining biblical literacy represents. Yet he simultaneously argues that biblical

illiteracy has been exaggerated, or else is nothing new. But either the current situation is socially unremarkable or it represents a profound literary shift of which we must take note. We cannot have our cake, or even our tiny slice of global pie, and eat it. It seems to me that if standards of biblical literacy have long been decried the implication is not that the Bible, that most pervasive and enduring of texts, has always been teetering on the brink of extinction, but rather that the Bible has always been better understood than the loudest and most interested voices would wish everybody else to believe. What is most exercising about Avalos's article is not the claim that the Bible has always been under-read, but the indication *that there have always been people ready to make the accusation that it is being under-read*. If that is so, allegations of biblical ignorance might not necessarily represent a timely warning about the dangers facing the Bible in the digital age (pitted as it now is against those other *über*-modern texts: Homer and Pinder!) Instead, we might well consider the fuss over biblical illiteracy to form part of the intellectual class's legitimizing of certain forms of cultural interaction at the expense of other forms.

We could take the CBLC report as an example. When it comes to media, televisual or staged biblical stories, the results are not nearly as depressing as Davies indicates. 51% of respondents said they had seen the blockbuster films such as *Jesus of Nazareth*; 50% said they had seen *Ten Commandments*. 48% said they had seen either the film or TV versions of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*; 41% had seen *Jesus Christ Superstar*.⁴ Despite these quite remarkable ratings the report goes on to demote their significance: 'input from films or TV shows, recorded or live, will tend to provide a one-off, particular input rather than a regular intake of Biblical knowledge' (CBLC 2008, 4-5). There are two issues here. First is the rather medical tenor of these comments (do we need a 'regular intake' of Shakespeare? Five sonnets a day, perhaps?). Second, one cannot help but infer the report's authors intend regular Bible *reading* to be the preferred nostrum for the—what they call 'perilous'—malady of biblical illiteracy (2008, 6). Tellingly, the CBLC are reluctant to endorse 'making the Bible another resource to go to when we decide to watch some entertainment or to Google an answer to a problem' (2008, 5). The Bible is not the Bible when it is entertaining it seems. Media biblical engagement has the disadvantage, the CBLC goes on to say, of 'disengaging the reader from the text itself' (2008, 4-5). But why does biblical literacy necessarily equate to the artifact of the Bible? Biblical literacy is about stories, not devotional praxis. It is the supremacy of the Bible's *textuality* in society that seems to be at stake in the CBLC's report, rather than the Bible's value or importance as a cultural driving force, and that seems to affect the way the results have been interpreted. Non textual bibles are downplayed. As not-written and not-read, they are not counted.

The nature of comedy makes the efficacy of biblical jokes quite perilous in this supposed world of biblical illiteracy, since jokes rely on a particular structural symbiosis between performer and audience. As John Limon points out in his seminal theorizing of stand-up as a literary form, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, jokes are peculiarly dependent on audiences' knowledge for their value (2000, 12). All communicative media require an audience to activate them, of course: the billboard, the written text, the stage-play. But, as Limon observes (Limon 2000, 12), 'because it is plausible to assert that an audience is wrong about, say, an opera (critics will judge) or a novel (posterity will judge), opera and literature can stake claims to seriousness. To be serious is to despise the audience—to reserve the right of appeal to a higher jurisdiction' When we come to a stand-up audience however, laughter is everything. The audience's claiming (or disavowal) of a joke through laughter (or deathly silence) is the only claim the routine can really make on meaning. Audiences are not entirely distinct from comics or their gags, since audiences must turn a stand-up's jokes into jokes.⁵ As Freud noted, an un-conveyed joke is not, structurally speaking, a joke at all (Freud 1953-74, 431; Limon 2000, 12). In order to turn a joke into a joke the audience must actively engage with the structure and content of what the comic presents them. Comics, jokes and audiences are not distinct entities but form a kind of performative continuum, where understanding (read: literacy) is

the only social currency that matters. Or, as Limon, puts it for us, ‘stand-up is all supplement’ (2000, 12).

So when encountering a mention of Daniel in the lions’ den in popular song lyrics—as in Coldplay’s 2011 track ‘Us Against the World’—one could easily let the biblical reference in the lyric pass by without so much as a thought about the gilt-edged or the leather-bound. Coldplay’s song does not cease to function if the audience is untutored in the various plights of biblical Daniel. But when Izzard, in the second act of *Glorious*, refers to God’s building of the human body and names the three little bones of the inner ear Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, he is relying on his audience having a more intimate connection with their copy of Daniel than Coldplay’s has with theirs. Without this connection, without a sense of the three names as a cultural unit, and without the sense of Izzard’s surreal co-option of them here, the phrase would be daft (very mildly amusing) but not especially funny. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego get a laugh for a full two seconds (which as anyone who has ever stood on a stage will tell you is very respectable).⁶ Naturally, it is not possible to argue that each tittering member of Izzard’s audience could have given us chapter and verse, but I am not sure the kind of biblical literacy that is often pined for necessarily involves those kinds of rigours anyway (and, if it does, biblical scholars are perhaps being unrealistic when they hope for its proliferation).⁷ Needless to say, clipboard-wielding surveyors from the CBLC found the general public less forthcoming about the book of Daniel.⁸ Is it possible that analysis of cultural engagement might work as a more effective measure of reading biblical literacy? Izzard’s stint at the Hammersmith Apollo drew biblical *recognition* out of the crowd, certainly, so reactionary and contextual responses seem worth exploration.

Izzard’s *Glorious*, with its canonical preoccupations, perhaps offers a counterpoint to the notion long whispered about in the tweedy halls of biblical academe that biblical literacy is in general decline. For not only was the biblically preoccupied *Glorious* a popular and critical hit, the show reached a record-breaking audience. After playing at New York’s PS122 for a month, and after a mini-tour of London which saw Izzard play to 56,000 people in four weeks, and after a twenty-seven date UK tour, Izzard added an extra night at the London Arena. There, on 21st December 1997, he played to the largest comedy audience ever convened in the UK at that time (eddielizzard.com 2012). Suffice it to say, everyone seemed to be getting the joke.

In a sense, then, I do not feel an urgent need to make a case for popular, if latent, biblical literacy based on mainstream comedy routines. Laughter at biblical jokes, their ongoing use, re-use and variation, and the vast ticket revenues such texts secure for artists, make that case all on their own. And they do so more spectacularly than I could hope to.⁹ Instead, what I want to argue in the rest of this essay is that comedy-going society is so familiar with biblical texts and, moreover, so subconsciously suspicious of this familiarity, that it needs strategies to cope with the disquiet that its own biblical literacy produces within itself. Laughter is, I suggest, one of those strategies. I want to make the case that the biblical texts are not rejected objects in the so-called post-Christendom, so-called ‘secular’ western world. Rather, they are sites of social abjection. The abject (a subject to which we shall devote much more attention in due course) is a term Julia Kristeva makes use of to describe those aspects of social life that we are bound into, but which threaten or otherwise impinge upon our identity: shit, spoilt food, dead bodies. In the late twentieth/early twenty first century, the Bible is the corpus/corpse that audiences like Izzard’s are unequally yoked to. The Bible is the recognisable cultural necessity that modern, mainstream society would rather forget about but is irredeemably attached to. The Bible acts within Izzard’s routine, then, as a site where association and disassociation meet, as a site of power without authority where claims to meaning breakdown. This disquiet is part of what makes the Bible funny.¹⁰

In his *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, Limon analyses American stand-up along these lines. ‘A theory of stand-up is a theory of what to do with your abjection’. Of particular relevance is chapter of Limon’s entitled ‘Inrage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-up’, which assesses the

excremental character of a particular Lenny Bruce routine, arguing that the way in which Bruce subverts symbolic (and federal) laws in his comedy is suggestive of the ways in which stand-up works more widely as a cultural operator:

what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection...[t]o 'stand up' abjection is simultaeniously to erect it and miss one's date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection, as fetishism is a way of avowing and disavowing castration. Fetishism is a way of standing up the inevitability of loss: stand-up is a way of standing up the inevitability of return (Limon 2000, 4-5).

As will become clear, my argument is, in a sense, a re-deployment of Limon's approach for Izzard's routine. It seems to me that Izzard, set unharmed in the midst of an apocalypse, is perhaps as archetypal a comic as Douglas and Freud and Limon could ever hope to find: immune and liminal, his excremental jokes expose the inadequacy of a biblical structuring of the universe and in so doing attempt to stand up the inevitability of the return of those narratives. The Bible provides a centre for the abject quality of Izzard's stand-up form.

GENESIS, WITH SHPEEDBOATS

The first portion of Izzard's flood, transcribed below, very roughly equates to Genesis 6:9-21 where God determines to destroy the earth with water and to save a representative sample of all the animals, along with Noah and his family, in an ark made to divine specifications. Despite its brevity—this section takes a little under fifty-seven seconds to deliver in real-time—there is quite a lot of ideological complexity going on in the material. Indeed, compressing ideas in such a way that the audience must unpack them for itself is, I would suggest, part of a joke's very form: ingenuity expressed with economy. So, let us begin delving into the density of the section by asking why the routine is funny, or, more specifically, why it might have succeeded as humour in its original context. In the following sketch Izzard plays all the characters (each with a different accent to help the audience follow the breakneck pace).¹¹ And, of course, as is the case in all Izzard's shows, God is James Mason:

[James Mason]: I will send a flood to wipe out all the bad things. I will save two of everything but everything else goes. And there'll be a lot of umbrellas. You! Noah, stop what you're doing and build me an ark!

[As Izzard]: And Noah, who was Sean Connery, was [laughter]...

[Noah Connery]: I'm working on a shpeedboat at the moment, er [Laughs. mimes sawing], shpeedboat's much farshter, it'll shoot acrosh the water a lot farshter [laugh]. It'll be great photosh for the Bible [big laugh, some applause].

[James Mason]: No, I appreciate your sense of publicity but er, [pause to allow laughter], I want an ark, with a big room for poo—it's going to be important [big laugh].

[Noah Connery]: Shpeedboat, let's go for a shpeedboat, and we can get all the animals with long earsh and they can sit along the shide, their ears will [mimes ears flapping in the breeze, laughter]. 'Cos I'll like that.

[James Mason]: No, you build me an ark! Put a big motor in an ark if you want compromise.

The humour here is centred on a series of incongruities. If we look at the 'dialogue', laughter punctuates it pretty much exclusively at its moments of mismatch and anachronism: turning the

ancient text *par excellence* into a movie with twentieth-century film stars; Noah Connery's purring speedboat standing-in for the ark. The notion of biblical photos gets an enormous laugh, combining as it does primordality with all the foregoing cinematography to affect a striking contrast. In this last instance, though, the joke is not simply the incongruence of having photos in the primordial age, but of Noah Connery's knowing appeals to a Bible that doubles as a publicity exercise, and the frightening corollary of that thought: that the biblical God is only in the Armageddon business because of the potential for banner headlines. We laugh because the sacred story has been profaned by PR shots, and by a kind of Hollywood sensibility, with its star studded billings, its pap snaps and its status symbols. The strange infiltration of modern life into the primordial myth are fine examples of that age old observation on the essential structure of humour, namely that humour relies on one authoritative system being subverted by another less austere one; 'one accepted pattern is confronted by something else', as Mary Douglas puts it (2000, 149-59). Izzard's sacred text is a Genesis colonized by Gratzia. That is part of its charm.

So, the structure of Izzard's comedy here is an example of the type of subversive paradigm switching that so much humour is based on, and his Bible speaks back to the structure of the stage: an austere religious edifice that crumbles in the company of laughter. The following part of the section is oddly paradigmatic in another way. If, for Freud, the joke is always a sexual/excremental transaction (1953-74, 96-98; Limon 2000, 14), Izzard's shit-centred ark is a particularly poignant offering in that it is a joke that is quite explicitly excremental, and which quite explicitly reverses expectations: the poo room is going to be important.

Indeed the ark's midden is more complicated a symbol than one might expect. First, inherent in the joke is the same kind of incongruity and mismatch that characterizes the humour in rest of the section. The divine being talks about shit in the most childish of terms, enacting a classic reversal of expectations. Excrement is raised up to the level of a divine concern, and the divine voice condescends to the level of excrement. Moreover, Yahweh talks here not as an adult but as a child, since this room is not a politely designated 'toilette', or a washroom, or a more vulgar 'shit-space'. It is rendered in kiddiewink words: 'a big room for poo'. But the issue of poo in the ark gets a bigger laugh than other parts of this section because the shit subverts the biblical narrative itself. The mention of the ark's poo-room—the only specification of the ark given by Izzard's God, which in *Glorious* takes the place of the lengthy list of cubits in Genesis 6—calls attention to a fundamental problem implied by (but not voiced by) the biblical narrative. Noah is told to take food with him into the ark (6:21) but there is no account of any of the other practicalities of living aboard ship. Where did Noah, his extended family, and a menagerie of global proportions excrete while shut up in the ark for months on end? Where did they keep it all? Did they dispose of it? How?

Working within the parameters of the mythology in Genesis 6-8, the biblical Noah, enclosed in a four hundred and fifty cubits-cubed box of gopher wood (6:14-15), does not have many options. The door is not a possibility, shut as it is from the outside by Yahweh himself in 7:16 and not touched for a year and ten days until the water subsides (7:11, 8:14). There is a window in the ark, but that is made explicitly to let daylight in (6:16) rather than anything out.¹² Even by biblical mythology's loose narrative standards, this aperture is probably not viable as a garbage chute since Noah appears to be unable to look through the window (8:6-12), let alone able to shovel shit through it. Admittedly, he is able to get a hand out of this opening in 8:9 to pull a bird in, but, again, an opening at arm's length does not necessarily make for a viable toilette of the kind required by a mobile zoo. Noah's excrement, and that of the whole animal kingdom, was shut in with them.¹³

Importantly, and going some way to vindicate Izzard's highlighting of the Noah's predicament in the biblical text, older commentators have been similarly bemused and preoccupied by the problem of excrement in the ark.¹⁴ In his second homily, for example, Origen maps out the precise functions of each of the Ark's decks, giving over the entire lower portion of the ark to excrements so that 'neither the animals themselves, nor especially the men be plagued by the stench of excrement'. It is

perhaps due to the problems of space implied by this particular ‘solution’ to the issue that Origen, in the Greek text of his second homily (Origen 1982, 72-73), argues that the ark was pyramid shaped; much more room. By far the most elaborate attempt to map the ark’s practicalities came from Alfonso Tostado in the fifteenth century, who, as Solomon Gaeon points out (1993, 98-99), posited a complex plumbing system to solve the problem of waste: a ‘vent in the habitation of the tame animals and another in that of the wild animals through which dung was conveyed’.

In invoking the ‘big room for poo’, Izzard’s retelling raises exactly these same problems. Though for obvious reasons he is less interested in creating ingenious ways of letting the text off the hook. Izzard subverts the stability of the biblical paradigm once again, not by imposing anachronism this time but by throwing light on the unsustainable details implied by the narrative itself. It is the tainting of the story with its own mundane implications that creates humour. And, of course, the fact that a grand, famous, religiously significant story is being undermined by the most everyday and puerile of concerns accentuates the effect. Izzard himself says that this technique underwrites his approach to certain key subjects, namely the serious, grand or sacred: ‘I also take large subjects and talk crap about them...and then you go on and on and on, giving more and more details about something that’s obviously bullshit. It is better if the idea can resonate...Jesus in flipflops was one.’ (Izzard and Quantick 2000, 127). What is funny in Izzard’s presentation of the flood, then, is the idea that Noah, in film star guise, has to live with his own excrement (and the faeces of quite a lot of other birds, beasts and insects), unable to get rid of it. What is also at stake here though is the unworkable nature of the story, the fact that the myth implies, or really demands, a series of everyday details that it cannot sustain. The failure of the text is comic.

Thus Noah’s problem becomes a problem for the biblical narrative itself. The story as a coherent entity is subverted by its own necessary details, its indigestible remainders, which it houses within itself and which it can neither properly assimilate nor entirely reject. Noah must take food on board with him (6:21), and must live in close quarters with his menagerie for the duration of the flood. Thus, all the creatures, the extended human family included, were presumably contributing to a mounting pile of shit. If Noah has to live with these crappy details the story too, in Izzard’s hands, is subjected to that same set of concerns, forced, that is, into contact with its own problematic remainders—the bits and pieces that the biblical corpus cannot ingest. The big room for poo can be made to serve as a synecdoche for all the unworkable implications that the story implies but which it cannot assimilate.

After all, this sense of the inescapable waste is not simply limited to the ark’s midden. The idea of the problematic remainder becomes the controlling theme in the second part of the skit.

[Izzard]: So he built a whole ark and then he went around the world getting animals, two of everything.

[Noah Connery]: Two Dogsh! Okay, two dogsh. Long earsh, along thish side pleashe [big laugh]. I’ll explain it to you later. Two sheep, along this side, balance out, quite long earsh. Okay. Two, er, catsh. Short ears. Inshide the boat. Inshide the fucking boat! Right, two ducks...

[Izzard]: Ducks going...

[Ducks]: We’re not coming!

[Noah Connery]: Well there’sh going to be a huge fuck-off fludd.

[Ducks]: So!? [Laugh] What’s the big problem? We normally swim here; we’re going to swim up here [laugh]. What is the big problem? What is all this kerfuffle about?

- [Izzard]: There is a huge hole in the whole flood theory, 'cos it was to wipe out all the animals, you know, I mean there's no point getting two of everything and getting two ducks and then there's loads of ducks swimming around...
- [Other Ducks]: What are you two up there for? [Big laugh, with applause.] What are you doing in that bloody ark?
- [Noah's Ducks]: Well, we...we're special. Errm. I don't know, why are we here? Look, Noah...
- [Noah Connery] What'sh the problem?
- [Noah's Ducks]: There's a fuck of a lot of ducks here. God?
- [James Mason]: Err, yes? [Takes long loud drag of a spliff/cigarette; sound of inhalation.] Sorry, I was... [big laugh], it's my week off. Oh, I forgot about ducks. Oh Shit. There's going to be a lot of evil...

Izzard finishes the sentence for him, their voices having now merged anyway: 'all the evil ducks! There must be a tonne of evil ducks! Ducks should rule the world now, shouldn't they!? And evil geese and evil swans [sinister voice, low register]: Quack. Quack. Quack.' Izzard breaks here into a treatise on the ontological problems of having evil animals, animals, that is, who need to be wiped out by a corrective flood. How, he asks, can you have an evil herbivore?

Izzard's use of fowl in this section seems intended as a knowing counterpoint to the other, more famous, birds of the biblical flood narrative: the raven and the dove, who each go out from the ark in search of dry land at the end of ordeal.¹⁵ The raven leaves the ark looking for land and never returns, while the dove returns to Noah with an olive branch in its beak, so signalling the receding of the waters (8:11). Here Izzard introduces of a third bird, the ungainly duck, who would have had no such problems with the water in the first place. The duck is designed to throw up the issue, first, of how unconvincing an apocalypse a flood would be from certain perspectives, and, second, the curious matter of God including animals in his ethically driven mission for purity on the earth at all.¹⁶ Incidentally, this last direct criticism of the text, "what are you two doing up there for", gets a huge laugh, with a smattering of applause, the fury of the laughter spilling over into percussion, as though laughing were not enough of a response. This reaction is not simple understanding on the part of the audience, nor is it merely unbridled laughter; it is approval. In short, the issue of the ducks is about showing up the problematic remainders in the mechanics of the story, of lampooning the implied details that call the efficacy of the narrative into question, and the audience throws itself behind the idea. At the end of the dialogue when God exclaims "Oh, I forgot about ducks. Oh Shit" the 'shit', of course, performs a kind of double service, an exclamation on the one hand and, on the other, a relabeling of the excrementality of the passage. In narrative terms, ducks are indeed yet more shit in the story insofar as they are an inassimilable trace that has nowhere else to go in the text. Like the menagerie's poo, they are a detail that builds up within the story, posing problems for its coherence.

Noah—Izzard's and the Bible's—is surrounded by waste, or, more specifically, by the troublesome remnants of all the systems that are breaking down around him. Poo is piling up inside the ark, the reminder of decay in the midst of life. Outside the ark the gopher wood is cutting through waters that are thick, presumably, with the bloated, swollen discoloured corpses of the entire human race—men, women and children (who else are we to presume is opening the umbrellas that James Mason cheerfully mentions at the outset?). These bodies, clinging to the surface of the water like the skin on old milk, represent another kind of waste: the battered remains of the old world order. Meanwhile, under the ark in the high seas, or else quacking about on their surface, are other remnants of the first creation, the wildlife that the flood cannot completely deal

with, another sort of shit, another sort of inassimilable remainder. The whole of Noah's cosmos, really, is a big room for poo.

NOAH AS ABJECT

And so we come back to abjection, literally the state of being sloughed off, which was developed into a complex critical tool by Julia Kristeva in her seminal work *Powers of Horror*. Put simply, the abject comes to denote the space between subject and object. The abject is the taboo elements of the self, those aspects of our being that disturb or upset social order and convention. Prime examples are filth, dung, urine, vomit, the cadaver, spoiled food. ('When eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly'; Kristeva 1982, 2-3.) The abject is the response, both a fascination and a revulsion, to that which is neither 'I' nor 'not-I', and which as a result of its grotesque liminality troubles the boundaries that define me.

The critical significance of Kristeva's sense of the abject is that it confronts a system—be that a communal consensus, or a the notion of the self—with what that system must reject in order to function, but which it can never quite be rid of. The abject is in Kristeva's terms 'death infecting life'. The sight of a corpse or the smell of excrement is the reminder that embedded within social order is a decay that we must survive, a decay on which social order is predicated but which that order cannot fully assimilate.

No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There [at the site of the abject], I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me, and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border had become an object...It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part...it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. (Kristeva 1982, 3)

Limon, in his own musings on the interplay of abjection and comedy (2000, 71), simplifies abjection further: 'It may be summarized', he writes, "as your failure to know what is inside of what". Abjection is an expulsion that fails to create meaningful distance. Having sloughed off shit, allowed it to drop away from the body—social or personal—we come to a realisation, however subtle and unconscious, that we are within a decaying order. We are ourselves liable at any moment to drop away from the order that defines us. The impossible, the absent, becomes recognized as an integral part of the order that rejects it. We are not reconciled to crap but attached to it only, and purely, through a politics of rejection. Kristeva writes it like so: "[T]hat subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it *is* none other than the abject...it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being" (1982, 4).

In the case of Noah's apocalypse, and in the case of Izzard's retelling of Genesis 6-9, this sense of the abject is not too difficult to detect. First, Noah in his story world must face abjection, and, second, the text itself is subject to it, drowning in its own troublesome narrative remainders, remainders that threaten its own apparent sense of itself. In the ark, biblical Noah is at the border of

his condition. Living, and a symbol of the surviving human, he is pressed by death on every side. Death is without the ark, colonizing the bloated corpses of every species, and so to find death within the ark too is overwhelming. Noah's ark is not a box full of life (as it is often construed), but a box that is slowly filling up with the remainder of death. This defilement, this shit is what Noah and every other shipboard life must withstand, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death. Noah's ark must survive the flood; Noah and co. must survive the ark (and somewhat oddly, all the faeces is the dirtiness that God's mission for purity has itself created). Thus the border of Noah's situation has become an object: a big room for poo. His shit is something rejected, but from which he does not part.¹⁷ The flood is something survived, but which defines the fact of Noah's living.

On these terms, the ark's midden becomes a fitting metaphor for the biblical text itself. The very idea of mounting excrement on the ark is as troublesome for the text-as-system as the faeces is for the fictional Noah-as-being. As in all texts, semiotic refuse shows us what the text thrusts aside in order to function, as so we can read Izzard's routine and the biblical text along with Kristeva. These bodily fluids, the defiling ducks: this shit is what textual meaning withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of incoherence. There, at the site of the interpolated poo room, the text is at the border of its condition as a functioning system. The border has become a metaphorical space of death infecting life, of unassimilable detail infecting the coherence of theological meaning. These difficult details—shit, ducks, and so on—are rejected (read: omitted) by the text, but the text does not part from them, it cannot do without them: all types of animal must board the ark, all must eat, all must survive, but the text cannot fully assimilate these details, it cannot account for the troubling they enact on the system. In Izzard's reading it is no longer Noah who expels, Noah is expelled. No, as in true theatre, stripped of makeup and masks, refuse and ducks *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to read.

In a 2009 interview with Frank Skinner for the BBC, Skinner (a professing Catholic) and Izzard (a self-designated 'spiritual atheist') engage in light-hearted debate around the problems and contradictions of religion. In that interview Izzard himself makes the point I have been drawing out of his younger self in *Glorious*, and in fittingly excremental terms.

And then: 'God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform', and I think that's a cover-all, that's a good line from the press department [laugh], isn't it? Well, in the end, just stuff happens...why do we poo and pee? If you didn't have poo and pee, you wouldn't have poo and pee diseases [long, growing laugh]. Stick that in your Catholicism [massive laugh]! (Izzard 2009)

The object, he implies here, is what must be thrust aside in order for humanity to read coherence in a theological system:

FLOOD/FLUSH: DISPOSING OF HYSTERICAL SHIT

It follows that the reasons why Izzard might tell biblical stories at all may be more intriguing still, and more intimately involved with the politics of abjection than the retellings themselves. It seems reasonably clear, the murky nature of divining motives notwithstanding, that Izzard invokes the biblical texts in *Glorious* precisely in order to dispose of them, to make them drop away—to turn the biblical corpus into a cadaver that can be thrust aside.

This imperative of Izzard's apparently stems from his longstanding suspicion of authoritative text, and of the bible in particular. This is most easy to discern in two passages from *Eddie Izzard: Dress to Kill*, a book length series of interviews put together by David Quantick at about the time of the *Glorious* tour in which Izzard speaks around a range of topics including religion and text:

But there's no humour in religion and there's very little flexibility because the ideas were written down long ago and there is a strong resistance to them being updated...[b]ut Jesus wasn't going around saying, "The meek shall inherit the earth...ooh, that's good, write that down. Peter get that down. That could be in your gospel." And Mark's going, "what about my gospel?" "All right, I'll do one for you. The socks of the world must be washed often." "That's not as good as Peter's!" "All right, I'll do you another one." It was 100 years later before they started writing these gospels. And why do the Apostles have English names? (Izzard and Quantick 2000, 129-130)

The problem of English names goes back to one of Izzard's earlier shows, *Unrepeatable* (1995), where he talks about the oddness of extrapolating ancient names from biblical texts, changing them over time, and then reinserting them back into historical contexts when we think about religious history. The humour comes from the way in which religious ideas become naturalised in society through very everyday means, though, obviously, Izzard does not put it quite so dryly in practice: "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Yes [in received pronunciation] and this our friend Jeremy, that's Sebastian, and...Kenneth; we're *all* from Galilee." (Izzard 1994). Does this sentiment link, perhaps, to that first passage of Izzard's flood narrative, where anachronism, religion and humour converge? Does the English name link to the exposing of the religious to the mundane that we get in the ark routine? Possibly. In both cases the anachronisms are put forth in such a way as to undermine abstract religious reverence by means of concrete observation, one paradigm calling time on another. In any case this same sentiment—a suspicion about the formality of writing—becomes more explicitly tied to texts in one of Izzard's later comments in the book, his last in fact:

So in conclusion, I've just re-read everything that I've said here and I really do talk a lot of crap...I've noticed that words are much more powerful when written down instead of just spoken. This may seem bloody obvious but I don't write my stand-up—I just talk it. So if you do come across a passage that you think is bollocks, just take it out and wear it as a hat. (Izzard and Quantick 2000, 135).

There are probably numerous intriguing interpretative possibilities that one could make of Izzard's suggestion that disagreeable texts should be re-appropriated as (testicular?) clothing, particularly given Izzard's own important advocacy of equal clothing rights and his experience as a proud TV. What I want to pick up on here however is a more general attitude in Izzard's comments: the idea that the formal power of the written text can, or even *should*, be re-appropriated by speech, and then put to other more amusing uses.

This same sense of disposing of texts and their claims to power emerges in parts of *Glorious*, if quite subtly. In the routine's encore, for example, during a section on his love of technology, Izzard advocates the throwing away of instruction manuals ("and the first thing you do if you have techno-joy is you get the instructions and [shouting now] *throw them out the window!*"). It is perhaps not entirely coincidence that a little over two minutes later, when Izzard has moved on to lampooning printers, the Book of Revelation doubles in passing as an instruction manual for the technology. Is the unspoken command the same—"Throw it out the window!?" Izzard is standing in front of one, of course. The huge window that opens out on to deep space begs to be fed and we could shovel the wafer thin pages of Revelation through it quite simply, grist to the apocalyptic sun's mill.

Returning to the flood routine, an altogether wetter kind of apocalypse, something similar seems to be in play, and much more obviously. By the end of the section on ducks, the biblical narrative, at least as far as Izzard has configured it, has ceased to be a story at all. The flood has become instead a theory to be debunked ('there is a huge problem with the whole flood *theory*'). It is all the foregoing details, problems and anachronisms (shit, ducks, evil geese, a flawed creation, and so forth) that come to be Izzard's primary weapons against the flood-as-theory. Izzard's rendition of the story appears to be an attempt to discard the authority of the text, to demonstrate as many holes in the

story as it takes to make it drain away like so much floodwater. The failure of ducks to take over the world, the impossibility of an evil giraffe: these are daft notions, certainly, but Izzard's work is designed to point out that they are no dafter than the biblical material itself, and indicate the failure of that material as explanatory text.

The problem is that in order to discard of the biblical text in this comic way, Izzard and his audience must acknowledge, however tacitly, that the biblical tropes are familiar—they must laugh at them. There is a fascination with the biblical texts, a cultural fluency in them and with their claims to symbolic authority, and this makes the process of Izzard satirizing them humorous. In other words, in successfully mocking the Bible (in getting a laugh), Izzard does not simply degrade the Bible's social standing, but instead demonstrates its continued cultural currency by trading laughs against it. This dynamic is described by Susan Purdie in her book *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, in which Purdie argues that joking part of the very functioning of language. Laughter, she says, serves to re-inscribe symbolic law precisely by means of violating it:

Our appreciative response [to a joke] does, of course (as Freud noted), assure the Teller that their joke works and that the often implicit transgression has been transmitted; but this response, and the transgression which it signifies, is itself received back by the Teller in a way that constitutes a further communication. In accepting the 'laugh' as a proper response to the trigger, the Teller confirms the transgressive thought as, nevertheless, constituting part of a meaningful discursive exchange, so that it is held within the bounds of the Law. That is possible because the originally understood intention to joke has produced the 'mistake' as marked; thus the proper rule which the error is agreed to breach is itself stated tacitly between Teller and audience....this [joke telling] actually constitutes an observance, and not only a breach, of the Symbolic Law. (Purdie 1993, 14)

In short, a joke may be communicative but laughter speaks too. And *what* laughter communicates is that a social law or expectation has been successfully transgressed. As Purdie writes, laughter is 'pleasurable identification with, and also fear of, power that is awarded and withdrawn' (1993, 70). The significance of this is that a successful joke marks the transgression of social law as precisely that, as a sanctioned breach of convention. Thus jokes do not only overturn symbolic laws, they re-inscribe them too. Laughing at the Bible because of its claims as an exalted text does not lay it low, structurally speaking; laughter re-enforces its supposedly exalted status, since we all know we are laughing at a self-conscious inversion of its usual status.

A double process of the kind described by Purdie is at work in Izzard's comedy. The laughed-at-text is at once pushed away by the force of derisive laughter and grounded as a cultural cannon by the fact of it. Moreover, in laughing so freely at the quirks of these texts we come face to face with our own knowledge of, our own social reliance on, the text as a cultural canon: Noah and his menagerie, the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Bible as a pseudo user's guide, and so on. This is why the Bible's comedic outing is funny at all. Audiences, whatever the individual convictions of their members, hold on to the biblical texts by means of debunkings like Izzard's; a satirized Genesis is toured round the western world for weeks on end; we pay exorbitant sums to download it on iTunes; we stack up the DVDs, we carefully label the elderly VHS. Izzard's audience, millions strong, hangs on to Genesis if only to revel in the process of trying to be rid of it. Derision of the social law re-inscribes it, albeit in sometimes surprising ways.

It might not just be Noah who has shit he cannot shift, then. And it might not just be the narrative of Genesis that is stuck with a mounting pile of implications it can neither be rid of nor fully assimilate. The Bible seems to be functioning within the routine a little like the shit in Noah's ark, or the troublesome Ducks in the biblical story. This is Bible-as-refuse. The failure (perceived or otherwise) of the biblical texts to account for human experience is a precondition of the modern secular subject to whom Izzard seems to address his routine.¹⁸ Izzard and his audience are stuck with

a text that exist as the troublesome remainder of a religious order that a modern, rational, 'spiritual atheist' sensitivity does not accept, but which it knows inside out. The Bible-as-refuse thus works in *Glorious* as an object of fascinating revulsion, as a reminder of the origins of our cultural landscape. The familiarity of the audience with this rejected text is troublesome to a degree, and threatens to undermine certain (so-called) secular sensibilities and identities (and this certainly seems true for Izzard himself). Like Noah, Izzard and his audience are stuck with the cultural shit, the corpus turned corpse. The giant temple structure that dwarfs Izzard on stage is in a sense the audience's own 'big room for poo'. Comedy has become a site where that which troubles cultural systemicity and secular identity can be safely housed.

A DRECK ENFLAMED

On the face of it, abjection and the undermining of self-identity sound none too funny.¹⁹ The problematic relationship between comedy and abjection stems from Kristeva's own uncertainty of when the abject is humorous and when it is not, and it is on this issue that Limon takes Kristeva to task.

Discussing Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Kristeva asserts that 'Verkhovensky is abject because of his clamming, cunning appeal to ideas that no longer exist, from the moment when Prohibition (call it God) is lacking. Stavrogin is perhaps less so for his immoralism admits of laughter and refusal' (*PH*, 19). This would appear to set up a disjunction: abjection or laughter. Yet when Kristeva goes on to describe the modern world, what she finds is abjection and laughter undivided: 'The worlds of illusions, now dead and buried, have given way to our dreams and deliriums if not to politics or science—the religions of modern times. Lacking illusions, lacking shelter, today's universe is divided between boredom (increasingly anguished at the prospect of losing its resources, through depletion) or (when the spark of the symbolic is maintained and desire to speak explodes) abjection and piercing laughter' (2000, 74)

'Laughter would seem to be an ambiguity within a pollution', Limon points out. But while Limon is doubtful that Kristeva has managed to get comedy and the politics of laughter quite right, he stresses that there is a way of reading Kristeva's work that allows us to be more precise about the lines of flight that run between the comedic and the abject.

The issue is the social context for abjection. Abjection is unfunny when the cosmic system that can deal with it is extant but failed, when God and the Law, enervated and atrophied, have themselves fallen away to leave only mounting sin in the world. But when only the *spark* of the symbolic is maintained, when the abject is put into a symbolic order to which we do not really aspire, things are very different. The abject dreck—sin, shit or death—is enflamed by the faux-symbol, the faux-serious and becomes funny. The chief way, Limon suggests, that we slot ourselves into a symbolic frame to which we do not seriously subscribe is by invoking the trope of the apocalyptic: an world's end where systems falter, and yet are preserved by means of the telling of their own demise. Limon writes:

Thus it become clear why laughter, disjoined from abjection generally, attaches to it when Kristeva comes to describe modernity: in our century, apocalyptic yet godless, abjection is a psychopathology that happens to be realistic. When you cannot abject your abjection, according to Kristeva, as filth or sin (the God of the Jews and Christians alike being dead)—when objectivity lingers in the world only as a measure of abjectivity—you laugh. (2000, 74)

In 'an apocalyptic yet godless age' abjection is dealt with not by means of the fires that rise from the holy alter, but from the red-hot tendrils that reach down from the apocalyptic sun, a symbol of a

cosmic order but one that entertains none of God's sobriety or fixity of meaning. An apocalypse is a beyond, a Freudian state of bliss that waits behind the strictures of social order—a laugh. In the modern age and when apocalyptic sensibilities are in play, abjection can be burnt up in ridicule just as easily as by ritual. Kristeva's confusion of the comedic and the abject can thus be explained, argues Limon, by seeing the apocalyptic as a necessary context for hilarious abjection, a context that 'maintains the spark of the symbolic without revelations....that retains symbolism without meaning—without, that is, a serious paternal metaphor' (2000, 74).

Not only does Izzard continually invoke a symbolic universe to which he does not really subscribe, he is surrounded—socially and on stage—by a peculiarly apocalyptic sensibility. Izzard creates, then, the ideal environment for burning up social abjection with hilarity. And as we have seen he seems to be rather good at it, espousing as he goes the kind of modern outlook that Kristeva describes for us ('The worlds of illusions, now dead and buried, have given way to our dreams and deliriums if not to politics or science—the religions of modern times). But, crucially, Izzard deals with the mythical shadowy sides of the modern identity in such a way that the undermining becomes funny. Izzard is an apocalyptic writer of peculiar clarity, subjecting the biblical texts to their own apocalypse, and taking our biblical affinities into the abyss along with them.

This brings us back to the issue of biblical literacy and the particular inadequacies in approach that have seemed to gained ground in some quarters. What Izzard's work shows us is that the main problem with the discourse surrounding biblical illiteracy is not only that it may value the wrong questions, or prioritize particular forms of cultural engagement over other forms, but that it works on the basis of a particular cultural identity that has changed form—the Bible is no longer a social object, but a social abject. In short, many existing discussions on biblical literacy are not *about* biblical literacy, they are about preserving a serious paternal metaphor in the midst of a decentralising of biblical knowledge. The biblical literature remains in social and cultural circulation, of course, but the metaphor is not as serious as once he was. Nowadays God is James Mason.

ENDNOTES

¹ This aspect of Izzard's work makes quoting him quite difficult, since there is no definitive version of his routines. For the sake of consistency, and to best showcase what Izzard is talking about, I exclusively quote the audio recordings, available from iTunes, in this example (Ella Communications 1997/2003).

² Izzard has, in fact, said that if he scripts material he feels like his is simply saying religious prayers (Izzard 2009).

³ Numerous news outlets, for example, have decried the so-called decline in biblical knowledge amongst the general public. An excellent catalogue and analysis of such pieces was given recently by Iona Hine (2013).

⁴ One of the main points in the report that might counter my optimistic reading of the data here is the fact that those people who had seen biblically themed stage shows or television programmes were unable to quote after the fact bits of biblical text that related to these performances. The report uses this point to suggest that encounters with the bible-as-media do not improve biblical literacy on the whole. But it is worth pointing out that this view represents a peculiarly narrow—one might even say backwards—view of biblical literacy in which people are only 'biblically literate' if they can convert biblical references in culture *back* into an abstract theology of chapter and verse. The idea of biblical knowledge enhancing the on-the-spot engagement with a particular cultural product is not valued at all by the report's format. This, surely, ignores one crucial facet of biblical literacy: the ability to see biblical allusions (and the tropes and themes such allusions suggest) within a wide range of extra canonical literature: when reading poetry, say, or looking at art. One might ask

why the ability—and willingness—to quote the Bible at will (and entirely stripped of context) is controlling what counts as legitimate knowledge. To spot biblical allusions in Milton, for example, one does not need to be able to proffer a host of biblical texts unaided, one needs merely to have enough knowledge to respond to particular triggers in the poetry. Not only does the CBLC survey make no attempt to measure these kinds of responses to the biblical literatures at work in western culture, it actively obscures them, I would suggest, by privileging in its format a certain kind of social and intellectual relationship with the Bible that relies on quiet reflective reading (and regular Sunday morning testing?).

⁵ Izzard in fact, sees himself as the ‘audience’s representative on stage’ (Izzard and Quantick 2000, 40).

⁶ Limon, indeed, points out that ‘two seconds of laughter is respectable; four seconds greets the best joke of a standard *Tonight Show* monologue’—a sobering pair of statistics (2000, 16).

⁷ Limon’s focus on the audience is methodologically crucial in assessing Izzard’s Daniel joke: an individual in the stalls, carried along by the moment, can laugh along with everyone else without necessarily understanding a joke (indeed there is focussed research on this phenomenon), but this cannot be asserted for an audience as a whole. It is only audiences, not individuals, that can be analysed as part of stand-up (Limon 2000, 12).

⁸ ‘With regards to the Old Testament...85% could say nothing correct about Daniel in the Lions [sic] Den’ (CBLC 2008, 6).

⁹ Izzard, for example, uses Biblical tropes in a number of his tours: *Unrepeatable*, *Dress to Kill*, *Circle*, *The Definite Article*, *Stripped* (the last of which involves Izzard in front of ten stone tablets with various sacred texts printed on them). Woodie Allen and Bill Crosby are perhaps the best known ‘traditional’ examples of biblical exegesis as comedy, though other additions are being made to the biblical comedy cannon all the time—Ricky Gervais’s *’s Animals* sees the comic speak from a pulpit, reading from a Bible as he works through the flood narrative.

¹⁰ That said, pinning down the nature of ‘funny’ is not especially easy. As Andrew Horton points out, ‘like language, and like “texts” in general, the comic is plural, unfinalized, disseminative, dependent on *context* and the intertextuality of creator, text and contemplator’ (Horton 1991, 9). For more on the instability of comic meaning see Kirby Olson (2001), Andrew Stott (2005), Henri Bergson, (1980) and Mary Douglas (1975).

¹¹ Hence its resemblance in transcription to a stage script, which, given the filmic qualities of this particular telling of Genesis 6, is the most fitting format I could find.

¹² Indeed, this aperture in v. 16 is dependant on one’s reading of the Hebrew, though the later details of the story (Noah’s antics with the raven and the dove in ch. 8) rather presume the window I have described here.

¹³ Noah must, after all, send birds out of this window if he is to discover whether or not the water has receded (8:6-12), and must ‘remove the covering’ of the ark in 8:13 when, for the first time in the text, he takes a look out of the ark himself.

¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, the comic dimensions of the flood narrative have been explored before. I have mentioned that other comedians use biblical texts already, but comedic accounts in novels abound too; see Timothy Findley (1984) and Jeanette Winterson (1985). Biblical scholars, as ever, are not far behind; David Rosenberg Harold Bloom (1990), Leslie Brisman (1990), and, most notably, William Whedbee (1998), all assess the humorous potential of the original text from a scholarly standpoint.

¹⁵ If Izzard is playing with the narrative by means of the birds, he is not the first; indeed, the biblical flood itself messes around with the Gilgamesh flood story, in which the dove does not return but the raven does, see Stephanie Dalley, (trans. 1998).

¹⁶ Here Izzard takes his cue not from Gilgamesh or Atrahasis, but from Philo’s machinations in *De animalibus*; see David Clough (2009, 145-162).

¹⁷ And if Noah is at the border of his condition, so too is God’s first creation: not obliterated, but pressed on every side by the threat of the waters. Noah’s ark represents the border of that first

creation's condition: a border that has become an object, a remnant of the judged 'shit' of that condemned world order. As a set of women, men and beasts, the ark represents the remainder dropped away from that first civilization. The ark-as-midden is thrust aside by the raging waters but not parted from them, not assimilated into their depth with every other woman, child, man and beast.

¹⁸ Not all Izzard's audience can be modern secular subjects of course. Some (presumably) have faith but laugh along anyway, content in the knowledge that the *type* of Bible that Izzard lampoons holds no resemblance to theirs. My point is not whether or not the Bible is rejected (or not) by religious members of the audience laughing at Izzard's jokes, nor is it my argument that the Bible is incapable of coming out of the routine unscathed. Rather the issue is that a particular *mode* of biblical reading is being sent up with which everyone can identify; a particular *mode* of venerated cultural interaction with the Bible cannot come out of the routine unscathed. My point, then, is that Izzard's motivations seem very much geared to manipulating that biblical veneration and our often unspoken fear of it.

¹⁹ Though as Limon goes on to point out the 'presence of signification without meaning seems comic in general', and the ahistorical, comic Bible reverberates around this sentiment Limon (2000, 73).

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