

Jest divine: Typographical humor

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

Scholar Paula Fredriksen wrote provocatively on “Gods and the One God” in last February’s *Bible Review*. About the Exodus account of Moses and the burning bush she stated that “when the translators of the Septuagint rendered Moses’ dialogue with God into Greek, they availed themselves of [a] philosophical sobriquet. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*—‘I am who I am’ (Exodus 3:14 RSV)—became *ho ho*—‘I am the Being’—exactly what anyone, Jew or Greek, with a decent liberal education would expect the High God to say.”

This non-Jew, non-Greek possessor of a decent liberal education stopped in his tracks as he read of God identifying God’s self as “ho ho.” What will we do with that term and the concept it connotes? he wondered. In the ’60s Jesus People and liberal theologians sometimes promoted images of the “Laughing Christ.” That image fits many Gospel accounts. But does the great Exodus shock-and-awe story really reveal God as “ho ho”? I don’t know how the Greeks indicated laughter. Did they, like us, say “ho ho”? It is onomatopoeic enough to suggest it could have meant among them what it means among us. To be safe, I checked the Greek, looking for this ho ho in my Septuagint. To my great disappointment, I found Fredriksen had suffered a typographical error.

Stop! In the above paragraph I have done nothing but bluff and prevaricate. Though I truly did read the column in February, there is no way I could be writing this had I not also read *Bible Review*’s June issue, wherein the editors inserted a correction: “God, in Greek, did not say *ho ho*. He said, *ho on*, the present participle masculine singular of the verb ‘to be.’ I didn’t check my Septuagint, since the Septuagintal Greek imposed on me back in my decent liberal arts days has long faded.

But never one to let a typographical error just lie there, I started thinking: had I been too dismissive in picturing a “laughing Christ” but not a “laughing *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, a.k.a. Yahweh? Yes. Of course there can be a laughing God. There is, as Psalm 2 makes clear.

This spring in Iraq our soldiers created a permanent icon by toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein while liberated Iraqi millions cheered and we Americans sneered at all who were not co-toppling with us. America celebrated a most triumphantly triumphal moment. But some of us reread and applied to the situation some biblical texts Reinhold Niebuhr liked to quote to put nations and rulers, including ours, in ironic perspective. Thus Isaiah 40: “Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, / and are accounted as dust on the scales; . . . All the nations are as nothing before him; / They are accounted by him as less than nothing . . . and emptiness [15; 17]. . . It is he who . . . brings princes to naught, / and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing [22f.].”

Niebuhr also applied the following passage from Psalm 2 to nations and rulers: “The kings of the earth set themselves, / And the rulers take counsel together, . . . / He who sits in the heavens laughs; / the Lord has them in derision [3-4].”

Some readers will chide me for ripping this quote out of context, as did Niebuhr, since the psalm refers to princes taking counsel against the monarch of Israel, not the political and military leaders of this nation and its enemies. Point well taken. But Isaiah, the psalmist and St. Reinhold establish that God is positioned and motivated to be a nondiscriminating judge and laughter, a divine emitter of “ho ho.”

Fortunately, Isaiah, the psalmist and Niebuhr also go on to speak of the divine mercy. That mercy will also extend to the *Bible Review* author or editor who produced the creative typographical error. And to columnists like this one, who hears the ho ho when he gets confused or overreaches.