

JESUS, THE PUNSTER

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As a Sunday School teacher I am frequently asked by my pupils whether Jesus had a sense of humor. There is, naturally, no real proof one way or the other, but I usually fall back on citing one or two well-known instances when Jesus apparently intentionally made a pun.

There are, of course, passages in our English translations of the New Testament which come out as puns. Such a one might be Jesus' statement to Simon and Andrew whom he found as fishermen and to whom he said "I will make you fishers of men." I do not know the Aramaic for the underlined words and this probably was not a genuine double entendre but some kind of humor may have been implied in Jesus' original statement.

Then there is the famous saying of Jesus "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God (Matt. 19:24)." As it stands, the image is so absurd as to detract from the teaching involved, and scholars have attempted to deduce what was really meant. It has been suggested that Jesus was referring to a gate (perhaps in Damascus) so narrow that it was called the Needle's Eye and even camels had difficulty passing through. More plausibly, it has been pointed out that the Greek (Aramaic?) words for rope and camel are similar, and that the translators confused one for the other, thus destroying a more sensible metaphor. If we could believe that both explanations are correct, then Jesus has constructed a double pun.

The foregoing examples point up the difficulty in establishing Jesus the punster. We must go back to Aramaic which was the language he used, and avoid being sidetracked by the numerous mistranslations which have subsequently become a part of the record.

The most famous pun whose authenticity is generally unquestioned is Jesus' statement to Peter "Thou art Peter and on this rock I will build my church (Matt. 16:18)." This has the unique distinction of being a pun in two languages -- the Aramaic of Jesus and the Greek

of the early Scriptures. We are told that Peter was originally named Simon, and that Jesus gave the name Cephas to him (John 1:42). Cephas, an alternate rendering of the Aramaic word Kepha = rock, becomes in Greek Petra (feminine) or Petros (masculine), and of course Peter in English. Petra is also the Greek word for rock, and Petros is the Greek word for stone.

Martin Gardner, in his notes for the Dover reprint of C. C. Bombaugh's Oddities and Curiosities (p. 355), points out another Aramaic pun in Jesus' castigation of the Pharisees: "Ye blind guides which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel (Matt. 23:24)." Noting that the Aramaic word for gnat is galma and that the Aramaic word for camel is gamla, he suspects that Jesus was here intentionally playing on words.

C. G. Montefiore (The Synoptic Gospels, Vol. II, p. 105f.) remarks that Matthew 6:16 contains a pun in Greek which is untranslatable into English. The English version reads "Moreover when ye fast, look not gloomy like the hypocrites, for they make their faces unsightly, that they may appear unto men to be fasting." In Greek, two similar words are used, a phanizonsin and phanosin, which make the statement read approximately "They make their faces unsightly that men may have sight of them."

Joseph Klausner (Jesus of Nazareth) attributes a fine Aramaic pun to Jesus' relative, John the Baptist. Matthew 3:9 in English reads "Think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father, for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." The two underlined words are respectively abanim and banim in Aramaic, producing a classic double entendre.

It should be obvious by now that I know neither Aramaic nor classical Greek. However, some of our clerical readers do, and I invite them to offer more examples to prove that Jesus not only had a sense of humor but was the world's most famous punster.