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Editorial

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE BIBLE?

An intelligent reader of the *Biblical World* moves the previous question. Having read some of the recent editorials in this journal concerning the effects of the historical study of the Bible, he expresses a wish that we should state clearly what the phrase itself signifies. Though we had supposed that any such statement was unnecessary for our readers, we willingly comply with this request.

The fundamental principle of the historical method is that the thought of the writer of Scripture is the meaning of Scripture. The allegorical interpreter, finding a double meaning, or, as Origen did, a threefold sense, in Scripture, regards as the chief sense that spiritual meaning which is wholly distinct from the thought of the writer as established by the historical evidence. The mystical interpreter, scorning the use of such mundane instruments as lexicon and grammar, closes his eyes that the Spirit may tell him, not what the language of the Scripture meant to the prophet that uttered it, but what it means to him, the mystic. The dogmatic interpreter, assured already by creed or tradition of what is true in the realm of religion, interprets according to the analogy of his faith—that is, in effect in harmony with his system of doctrine—rather than in accordance with the evidence that would enable him to discover the original writer's thought. All these—and there is abundant evidence of it; it is reflected even in the tenses of the verbs which they use—seek the meaning of Scripture as something largely or wholly independent of the thought that was in the mind of the writer when he wrote. Over against all these, the historical method seeks the meaning of Scripture in the thought of the writer. It does not question that a prophet

TRACES OF HUMOR IN THE SAYINGS OF JESUS

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Professor F. G. Peabody in his *Jesus Christ and the Social Question* makes an interesting remark about a certain neglected aspect of the Master's nature. "It is only here and there in the gospels," he says, "that the sense of the beautiful finds expression in the somber and strenuous life of Jesus, as slanting sunbeams strike through a clouded and threatening day; but when these rare flashes of aesthetic pleasure slant thus through his teaching, they illuminate a side of his character which has been from many devout Christians almost concealed."

The same causes that have contributed to this concealment have almost kept the subject of the present paper from being discussed at all. It is safe to say that to the great mass of Christians it has not even occurred to ask whether Jesus had a sense of humor or not. By many the question, even if raised, would be at once dismissed as trifling or perhaps irreverent; but to others it may seem not only a proper but an interesting inquiry. There are some of us who think that a sense of humor is a very marked addition to a human character, and who would feel that the life of Jesus was unhappily limited and incomplete if it was all "somber and strenuous." The assurance that he joined in men's innocent laughter would be welcomed by us for some of the same reasons that make us treasure the assurance of his sympathy in human sorrow. The lives of some of the most Christlike men whom we ourselves have known have helped to convince us that a Christ who seldom or never smiled, and who was a stranger to the instincts of human mirth, would have lacked a power that was greatly needed by him in his work of winning and redeeming men.

Our *evidence* of the existence of this genial quality in Jesus is naturally scanty. It is not strange that the gospels should emphasize the serious side of his message almost to the exclusion of every other

aspect of it. The message was, of course, a serious one. If there were touches of humor in it here or there, they were incidental. Commonly they could be forgotten without an irreparable loss to the truth with which they were connected. The very process by which a large part of the teaching of Jesus was preserved and finally recorded, the necessary compacting of it in oral transmission, the gradual selection of the salient points to be expressed, and the rejection of all that was non-essential—this process, of which the effects appear on almost every page of the Synoptic Gospels, would naturally tend to eliminate many lighter turns of thought or expression, such as we at present have it in mind to look for; or if, on the other hand, the words of the Master were thoroughly recast, rewritten from a special point of view and according to a definite literary plan, this elimination might of course be still more complete; and, as a matter of fact, in the words of Jesus reported in the Fourth Gospel there does not seem to be a single trace of humor or anything that even remotely suggests its presence. It is to be remembered, moreover, that at the time when the gospels took their present shape the Christian disciples were surrounded by anxieties, temptations, troubles, dangers, creating an atmosphere of seriousness which would naturally color the whole body of Christian literature in that period. Jesus himself had foreseen such a condition and had described it as a change from that of his own lifetime. "Can the sons of the bride-chamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they fast" (Matt. 9:15).

Even supposing that sayings of Jesus, which were originally brightened by sidelights of humor, were preserved for us absolutely intact, literal quotations of his precise words, the presence of the humor in them would not necessarily be certain to us. For it is a well-known fact that often humor which was unmistakable in the spoken word seems to evaporate in the process of recording. The speaker's tone and the expression of his face are needed as commentary, and without them the spirit of the utterance becomes indeterminate. Probably all of us have experienced the misfortune of writing a humorous letter which, on arriving at its destination,

was read in perfect seriousness, and by this fact caused all manner of misunderstanding. But this illustration, if it helps to make plain the difficulty of tracing the presence of a sense of humor in the words of Jesus, suggests also the possible usefulness of such an undertaking. In some instances the readiness to perceive a lurking smile behind the impersonality of the text might even contribute something to serious exegesis.

Let us, then, examine the sayings of Jesus with a view to determine which of them, if any, will admit an element of humor in their interpretation; and in so doing let it be understood that the word "humor" is used in a very general sense, including any expression of amusement, any form of pleasantry, any apparent perception of the ludicrous in action or situation or idea; in short, any genial exercise of the imagination. Nor need we exclude the less sympathetic keenness of wit, if that should appear to be present.

But before proceeding to canvass the evidence, notice one or two characteristics of Jesus' recorded words that make his possession of a sense of humor seem more or less probable. In the first place, it is evident that in him *imagination*, a chief essential of humor, was highly developed. He speaks habitually in figures. Parables, metaphors, similes, come so close together and in such abundance that his collected sayings are like a sort of moving picture.

In the second place, there is often a kind of *homeliness* in his imaginative expressions that would provide excellent raw material for humor when needed. "I will make you *fishers of men*" (Matt. 4:19) is an instance, especially considering the commonplace associations of the phrase in the minds of those Galilean fishermen to whom it was addressed. A similar example, though as actually spoken the words are very far removed from pleasantry, is found in one of Christ's woes pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees: "Ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones" (Matt. 23:27). There is a sort of unvarnished directness in this striking word-picture that, under other conditions, would easily lend itself to the uses of humor. And it may be observed, by the way, that one who was so keen in detecting and exposing an incongruity as Jesus here proves

himself to have been,¹ certainly possessed an important essential of the humorous point of view.

Another trait of Jesus that would lend itself to the expression of humor is a sort of *cleverness*, if I may use the word without offense. I mean a quickness and aptness in conversation; for instance, in reply to entangling questions. An example of this is found in his instant use of the image and superscription on a penny, when asked about the lawfulness of giving tribute (Matt. 22:17-21). And something of the same sort, though in a more artificial form, appears in the apt quotations from Scripture used both as question and as answer in that little allegory known commonly as the Temptation in the Wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11), in which the speeches put into the mouth of Satan are as significant for our purpose as those spoken by the Master, since we must suppose that to Jesus the whole passage owes its form.

Coming now to a direct examination of the passages upon which must mainly depend the success or failure of the attempt to show that humor is a real element in Christ's sayings, we should observe that the humor may appear in two different forms. On the one hand, it may be *literary* in character, dependent on the contrast of ideas put forth by the speaker, or on his manner of describing persons or events. On the other hand, it may be *humor of situation*, depending upon a relation between the words spoken and that which is going on at the time of their utterance, especially in the minds of the listeners.

Of the literary humor the clearest examples in Christ's words appear perhaps in the form of exaggeration. The parable of the Mote and the Beam (Matt. 7:4) is a famous instance. The absurdity of the contrast is so great—an infinitesimal speck in the one eye, and a log of wood in the other—that it could hardly have been spoken for the first time without raising a laugh, if it was spoken with any vigor at all; and, indeed, even today, if you take pains to think what the parable says, you cannot help smiling when you hear it. An exactly parallel illustration is found in the picture of the Pharisees, "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (Matt. 23:24).

¹ Cf. also Matt. 23:23; Mark 10:25; 12:40; and notice his special sensitiveness to hypocrisy.

A more elaborate instance of literary humor is the delightful little glimpse that Jesus gives us of children at their games in the market-place: "We piped unto you and ye did not dance; we wailed and ye did not mourn" (Matt. 11:17). It is the last clause that causes or ought to cause a smile: "We wailed and ye did not mourn" or, more literally, "did not beat your breasts." Read this *seriously*, and you have before you an inexplicable group of people, manifestly grown up—not children at all—who solemnly charge one another with lack of sympathy. But the scene that Jesus really drew was what a modern child would call "playing funeral;" only in the Palestine of Jesus' day the customs of mourning offered a much more fertile field for the heartless imitation of children than is the case with us. "Don't you know," says one child to the other, "that unless you beat your breast when I begin to wail, you spoil the whole game?" I think this passage alone would assure us that Jesus was not ignorant of the manner in which humor may be put to use.

The one remaining instance of this literary humor that I shall produce is also an illustration of the fact that the humor in Christ's sayings is sometimes so plain as barely to need to be pointed out. In the parable of the Excuses (Luke 14:16-23) I suppose that the pleas offered by the three men for not attending the great supper to which they had been invited, and especially that of the last one, have often struck many of us as distinctly funny; they seem so much like the modern attempts to get out of an inconvenient engagement: "I have bought a field and must needs go and see it;" "I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to prove them;" "I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come." All this we should be sure was humorous if it was not in the gospel. But it *is* humorous, whether in the gospel or out of it. For my part, I have at least little doubt that, when Jesus first made this graphic reference to the much-married man, some one among the auditors, who was known to walk in matrimonial leading-strings, was nudged or clapped on the back by his companions.

This interpretation of the passage, by which the humor is distinctly increased through a special adaptation to the audience, intro-

duces naturally our second group of illustrations—the instances of humorous *situation* arising from Christ's words.

If, when we read the little parables of the Patched Garment and the New Wine in Old Wine-Skins (Mark 2:21 f.), we remember that the persons to whom Jesus spoke, representatives of the old régime of formalism, were in these parables represented by old clothes and worn-out wine-skins, we cannot help wondering whether Jesus, besides the serious truth he was expressing, was not indulging in a smile at their expense. If he was not, he might surely have expressed his truth without twice over using terms so uncomplimentary to his hearers.

A similar, and perhaps more clearly intentional, instance is found in the discourse at the chief Pharisee's table (Luke 14:7-24). It would seem that both Christ's host and his fellow-guests were prompted by idle curiosity, and that Jesus had been invited to eat with them in order that they might in the most comfortable manner have an opportunity of seeing and hearing him. He was to be exploited for their entertainment. But, as a matter of fact, it is rather we who are entertained by observing that, when he begins to speak—although apparently he speaks in general terms ("If you have been invited to a wedding," he begins), and although to his hearers his purpose is apparently not clear at first—he is really, in every word he speaks about the manner in which hospitality should be given and received, and in his parable of the great supper and the reluctant guests, exposing the mean spirit of those who sit at table with him, their unpardonable ill-breeding, their wretched insincerity. It may be noted that throughout the passage single phrases and turns of expression betray a humorous vein, as when he says: "In giving a dinner or a supper do not invite your friends or your brethren or your rich neighbors, *lest haply they bid you again*" (Luke 14:12). The humorous excuses in the parable have already been referred to in another connection. But the special humor of the occasion lay in the fact that many of those who heard, and who at the time were chiefly impressed by the fact that they were listening to one who was considered something of a celebrity, would realize afterward (as Jesus all the time had in mind) that all his stories had been told at their expense. It may be added that this

touch of amusement, in neatly pricking the bubble of their assumed superiority at the same time that he was pointing out their more serious faults, is perhaps needed to save Christ's discourse on this occasion from partaking more of the spirit of Diogenes, the cynical exposure of mean motives in all sorts and conditions of men, than seems quite in harmony with Jesus' usual habit.

It would perhaps be tedious to point out further instances; and it is enough to say that, were it desirable, the illustrations of Christ's use of humor could be considerably extended. Indeed, it is probable that, when once the possibility of humor in the Master's words has been conceived, those who re-read the gospels with this subject in their thought will be surprised at the frequency with which they detect the vestige of a smile; and probably they will be not only surprised but pleased at the freshness and lifelikeness which seem to be restored to many of the incidents and sayings by the recognition in them of the touch of humor.

There is, moreover, a still deeper reason for pleasure in such a result. The Christians of our time are trying to show by word and deed that all the narrowness of gloom and heavy solemnity, the long faces, and the prosiness, sometimes associated with Christianity, are an unwarranted importation into it; are trying to make it plain, not only that the Christian may tolerate laughter and a merry heart, but that the Christian ought to pray God for a full share of these good gifts and to use them as among the means of making earth more like heaven.

There is therefore a genuine satisfaction in the belief, not only that this point of view is not at variance with the essential spirit of Christian teaching, but that it had its original illustration in the mind and in the method of the Master himself.