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PARONOMASIA

“Par-o-no-ma-sia” is a fancy term for a literary style that is better-known as a *play on words*. Examples abound in scripture—obvious in the Hebrew and Greek in which the Bible was written—even though they do not carry over into an English translation. A good example may be seen in Isaiah 5:7:

“He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.” In English we would be unable to realize the word play, but in Hebrew it is obvious: “He looked for *mishpat* [judgment], but behold *mishpach* [oppression]; for *tsedakah* [righteousness], but behold *tseakah* [a cry].”

Another example is found in Jeremiah 1:11,12: “I see a branch of an almond tree. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well: for I will *hasten* my word to perform it.” The almond tree, because it blossoms early and can bear fruit by the time other trees are only beginning to bud, is called a *hastening* tree. And so, the play on words is this: I see a *shaged* [almond tree]; I will *shagad* [hasten] my word to perform it.

In this case, what the Lord said would happen soon. God would hasten his word to perform it. Other times, a message might pertain to the distant future. We all like quick answers when we pray—and sometimes God says GO! But other times, in his sovereignty, he says SLOW.

A play on words was common in the naming of children. “And Joseph called the name of the firstborn *Manasseh* [Making Forgetful]: For God...has made me *forget* all my toil....And the name of the second he called *Ephraim* [Fruitfulness]: For God has caused me to be *fruitful* in the land of my affliction” (Gen. 41:51,52).

When Jacob’s wife Leah gave birth to a son, she said, “Now will I *praise* the Lord: therefore she called his name Judah [Praise]” (Gen. 29:35). Later, in his dying

moments, Jacob gathered his sons. Using a play on words, he said to Judah: “*Judah* [Praise], you are he whom your brothers shall *praise*; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies” (Gen. 49:8).

Understanding that the word “Judah” (and consequently “Jew”) means *praise*, we note Paul’s play on words as he defines a true Jew: “But he is a Jew [Praise], which is one inwardly...of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose *praise* is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:29).

As the Israelites fled from Egypt into the wilderness, the water they found in a certain place was bitter, unfit to drink. “Therefore the name of it was called *Marah* [bitter]” (Exod. 15:23). We find this used again in a play on words by Naomi. Her name meant beautiful or pleasant, but in her distress she said: “Call me not *Naomi* [pleasant], call me *Mara* [bitter]: for the Almighty has dealt very *bitterly* with me” (Ruth 1:20). Some have noted that Naomi, in English, spelled backwards, is: “I moan”!

Paul used a play on words concerning the name of the runaway slave Onesimus. The name Onesimus means *profitable*. Writing to Philemon, Paul said: “I beseech you for my son *Onesimus* [profitable]...which in time past was to you *unprofitable* [the opposite of what his name meant], but now *profitable* [what his name meant] to you and to me” (Philemon 10,11). The runaway slave, having been converted, could now truly live up to his name.

Just days before his crucifixion, Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your *peace*! But now they are *hidden from your eyes*...” (Luke 19:41,42). Because the word Jerusalem is based on *yereh* [“he shall see”] and *shalom* [“peace”], a play on words seems evident. In their rejection of Christ, they would *not see* and would *not have peace*—the opposite of the meaning of Jerusalem.

“For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (verses 43,44). All of this came to pass in A.D. 70, the details of which are recorded by Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 5:12:1,2,3.

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” They gave the various opinions. Then he asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter’s response was: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” To this Jesus replied: “You are *Peter* [Petros], and upon this *rock* [petra] I will build my church” (Matt. 16:13-18). “Petra” in its various forms means *rock* (cf. petrified, etc.)

There are three different interpretations concerning this passage, but our purpose here is only to notice the play on words. If we did not know the name Peter meant rock, we could easily miss the play on words involved.

Jesus sometimes illustrated his messages by such things as placing a child in their midst (“unless you become as little children”) or referring to a net full of fish (“I will make you fishers of men”). Here—at Caesarea Philippi—was a massive wall of rock, over 100 feet straight up and about 500 feet wide. *What an awesome, striking, meaningful setting in which to talk about a rock!*

Visiting this part of Israel in 1983, it was interesting for me to stand before this huge rock, considering the very significant words that were spoken here!

It is significant also that here is one of the three sources of what is probably the most famous river in the Bible, the Jordan. It was the Jordan River the Israelites miraculously crossed on dry ground, as did also Elijah and Elisha (Josh. 3:15,16; 2 Kings 2:8). At another time, a ferry boat carried the exiled King David across the Jordan as he returned to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 19:18). Centuries later, huge crowds gathered at the Jordan River to be baptized by John and here it was that Jesus, also, was baptized (Matt. 3:5,6, 13).

Caesarea Philippi, with its massive rock formation, is to be distinguished from Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast (Acts 10:1). Caesarea Philippi was so named to honor the then-reigning Caesar and Philip, who was the tetrarch of the region. Thus: Caesarea Philippi. Similar customs about naming places have extended on down

through the centuries. Those 7,000 islands we know as the Philippine Islands, for example, were named in honor of another Philip, King Philip II of Spain.

Prior to being called Caesarea Philippi, the massive rock site was known as Paneas because it was considered sacred to Pan. With his horned head, a leery and lustful smile, and the prancing legs of a goat, he was regarded as god of shepherds and flocks, responsible for their fertility. Because he was believed to cause sudden, inexplicable fear, his name has provided the basis for a word still used today: “panic.”

Needless to say, there are striking *contrasts* between the mythological god Pan and the one to whom Peter referred: Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God!

Pagans regarded Pan as the god of shepherds; Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:1-14).

Pagans regarded Pan as a fertility god; Jesus is the true “Author of Life,” even life eternal (Acts 3:15; John 3:16).

Pagans regarded Pan as a god who caused fear; Jesus says “fear not,” takes away our fear, and gives us peace (Heb. 2:14,15; 2 Tim. 1:7).

In this short study, we have only scratched the surface. Robert Young, noted for his scholarly *Young’s Analytical Concordance of the Bible*, has listed nearly 200 biblical verses that use paronomasia, a play on words!—far more than commonly realized.

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