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PESHAT AND DERASH IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN¹

D.R.G. Beattie

The two terms *peshat* and *derash* are properly at home in Jewish Bible exegesis, where *peshat* signifies the ordinary, plain, straightforward meaning of a text while *derash* signifies homiletic exposition. In the mediaeval rabbinic commentaries the distinction between the two principles is frequently drawn clearly. To take a simple example from the book of Ruth, the sudden (and, presumably, untimely) death of Elimelech was interpreted in ancient times as a divine punishment for his selfishness in emigrating from Judah at a time of famine and thereby evading his responsibility, as a wealthy man and a leader of the community, towards the poor, who were more seriously affected by the famine than he. This view is recorded in the talmud and in the midrashim Ruth Rabbah and Ruth Zuta, and it was taken up from these sources by the great 11th-century commentator Rashi. A generation or so after Rashi, an anonymous commentator, who may have been a pupil of Rashi's son-in-law Rashbam, having cited Rashi's comment to this effect in his own commentary, continues,

"but this is not commonsense (*peshat*). It was not out of selfishness that Elimelech emigrated but because of the famine. It says (of Naomi) that she returned from the field of Moab when she heard in the field of Moab that God had visited his people to give them bread, and from this we see that it was on account of the famine that he (Elimelech) emigrated".²

In other words, if I may presume to have the mind of this commentator, to turn the briefly noticed death of Elimelech into a homily against selfishness is all very well, but the assertion that this man died in consequence of divine retribution is not in accord with the plain statements of the biblical text.

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Rashi, although he may appear to have been caught on the hop in this particular instance, has often been eulogized for his devotion to the principle of *peshat* in his biblical commentaries taken as a whole. At the head of his commentary on the Song of Songs he enunciates an important principle of exegesis:

"A text may have many meanings, but in the final analysis 'the text does not lose its ordinary meaning'".

And so he proceeds, in commenting on that book, to distinguish clearly between the literal meaning of individual texts and the allegorical meanings they had been given in Jewish tradition. When he cites the latter they are clearly marked "allegorical interpretation".

The statement used by Rashi, "the text does not lose its ordinary meaning", is a maxim which appears in several places in the Talmud and which, I feel, might with profit be heard more frequently on the lips of contemporary exegetes. Perhaps in to-day's world we might cast it in a more positive form, and I would propose, "the text means what it says".³

In one of the places where this maxim is used in the Talmud, *b. Shab. 63a*, there is an interesting situation. It occurs in the course of a discussion as to whether or not a sword, or other weapon, is a proper accoutrement for a man. Majority opinion thought not, since all weapons are to disappear in the Messianic age, beaten into ploughshares and pruning-hooks, but in support of the contrary point of view Ps 45:4 was quoted:

"Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and your majesty",

whereupon R. Kahana protested that "sword" in this verse does not mean "sword" but is a reference to the words of the Torah.

"A verse cannot depart from its plain meaning", he

was told, and to this he responded, "By the time I was 18 years old I had studied the whole *Shas*,⁴ yet I did not know until today that a verse cannot depart from its literal meaning".

I cite this passage because it seems to me that there are still today many in the position of R. Kahana, who have never considered the elementary point that a text of scripture should be understood to mean what it says. Why it should be so I do not know. Perhaps, as with R. Kahana, no-one has ever made the point explicitly to them, but sometimes it would appear that disregard of *peshat* follows in consequence of a presupposition that the Bible ought to say certain things, ought not to say certain other things, and therefore, in certain cases, cannot possibly be taken seriously as meaning what it says.

One place in particular where one frequently encounters a blinkered outlook on the part of bible exegetes is the narrative of the Garden of Eden, Gen 2-3 (which brings me back to the title of my paper). If I may trace briefly the line of thought which led me to produce this paper, I must begin by referring to another paper read to this Group a couple of years ago by my colleague, Dr Wenham. That paper was called "Faith in the Pentateuch", and I quote from it.

"If we look ... to Genesis 2, we find another situation in which God spoke to man but did not find a response of faith. God gave a command and a warning. 'You shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for the day you eat of it you shall die'. The serpent questions God's statement: 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'. Though everything the serpent said came true in one sense, it had the effect of making the woman prefer her opinion to her creator's and disobey him."

I have no wish to controvert the main tenor of this passage, though perhaps I may suggest that Dr Wenham was dealing, for his main theme, in *derash* - the homiletic application of the narrative - rather than in *peshat* - the exegesis of its primary sense. On hearing this read I was struck by, and prompted to reflect upon, the statement that "what the serpent said came true in one sense". I wondered, in particular, about the qualification "in one sense", for I was, and still am, at a loss to know in what sense it did not "come true". It seems to me that what the serpent said was true, full stop.

A brief look at three or four verses from the story should suffice to establish this point. First there is 2:17, in which God told Adam, "Don't eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge good and bad (or, knowledge of all sorts), because, as soon as you ate it you would die".⁵ Then there is 3:4,5, in which the snake refutes this statement, "You would not die at all. God knows that as soon as you ate this fruit your eyes would be opened and you would become like God (or, gods), knowing good and bad (or, all sorts of things)". The veracity of this statement is borne out in two stages. First, in verse 7, where we read "the eyes of both of them were opened", and then later, in verse 22, where God acknowledges, "The man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad".

From reflecting on Dr Wenham's statement I proceeded to dip into half a dozen commentaries on Genesis, and I was quite astonished at some of the things I found there. Von Rad⁶ came first to hand. On Gen 3:4,5 he tells us,

"... the serpent can now drop the mask behind which it had pretended earnest concern for God's direction. No longer does it ask, but asserts with unusual stylistic emphasis that what God said was not true at all, and it gives reasons too ... It imputes grudging intentions to God. It uses the ancient and

widespread idea of the god's envy to cast suspicion on God's good command".

So far so good (aside from minor quibbles which might be raised about the mask at the beginning and the value judgement on God's command at the end of the quotation) but then von Rad asserts,

"The serpent neither lied nor told the truth. One has always seen in the half-truth the cunning of its statement".

This assertion is not further explained and what von Rad meant by it is a mystery to me. Certainly I am unable to see where the half-truth (or, for that matter, the half-untruth) lies.

Next I looked at Kidner's commentary⁷ and found that he, in contrast to von Rad's equivocation, is positive in his opinion about the serpent's speech. Commenting on 3:4 he says,

"After the query, the flat contradiction: *Ye shall not surely die* (AV,RV). It is the serpent's word against God's and the first doctrine to be denied is judgement."

I am not at all sure what he is trying to say here, but he apparently chooses to favour God rather than the serpent for he continues, commenting on 3:5,

"The climax is a lie big enough to re-interpret life (this breadth is the power of a false system) and dynamic enough to redirect the flow of affection and ambition".

I am perplexed by the metaphysics of this passage but the first five words seem clear enough. Kidner is asserting that the serpent's statement "you will not die" is a great big lie. Yet he later admits, albeit grudgingly, that "the serpent's promise of eyes ...

opened came true in its fashion", and refers to verse 22. He never explains what the asserted lie consists of. Instead, in his comment on 3:7, he observes,

"The opening of this verse, utterly unexpected after 2:17, forces the reader to examine the meaning of the death that was threatened therein",

and he cites Augustine,

"If it be asked what death God threatened man with ... whether ... bodily or spiritual or that second death, we answer: It was all ... He comprehends therein, not only the first part of the first death, wheresoever the soul loses God, nor the latter only, wherein the soul leaves the body ... but also ... the second which is the last of deaths, eternal, and following after all".

Now, I know nothing of gradations in death (and am not a little puzzled by Augustine's arithmetical reckoning) but if this is being offered as an exegesis of Gen 2:17 it is putting far more weight on the narrator's words than they can reasonably be expected to bear. But whatever Augustine may have meant, Kidner, in citing him, has quite simply put up a smokescreen and run away.

Still hoping to find a satisfactory treatment of Gen 2-3, I roamed further afield amongst the commentaries. Commenting on Gen 3, as a unit, Speiser⁸ says,

"On the evidence of vs. 22 the serpent was right in saying that God meant to withhold from man the benefits of the tree of knowledge (vs. 5); the same purpose is now attributed to Yahweh".

However, he (Speiser) seems unwilling to admit that the serpent was speaking the truth, and God lying, in their

statements about the effects of eating the forbidden fruit. At 2:17 he translates,

"For the moment you eat of it you shall be doomed to die",

and he notes, in support of this rendering,

"Death did not result in this instance. The point of the whole narrative is apparently man's ultimate punishment rather than instantaneous death",

but his translation, although it may allow both Yahweh and the serpent to speak truthfully, is not tenable in view of other elements in the story. In the first place, the expression "in the day" surely implies an immediate consequence. Secondly, if the man became mortal only in consequence of his action in eating the forbidden fruit, what is the tree of life all about? 3:22 implies that Adam is, and has been all along, mortal; he may become immortal by eating the fruit of the tree of life and this is what Yahweh must guard against by expelling him from the garden. It may, incidentally, be noted here that the expulsion from the garden is not part of the punishment; it is explicitly stated that this was a precaution on God's part. The man's punishment for eating the fruit is described in his condemnation to scratching a living from the soil.

Skinner⁹ had a radical treatment for the problem: a combination of haggadah and textual surgery. He explains the non-fulfilment of God's threat of instantaneous death on the supposition "that God, having regard to the circumstances of the temptation, changed his purpose and modified the penalty". This is pure haggadah, having no basis in the biblical narrative. He refers to the serpent's speech of 3:4,5 as a "lying insinuation" and when he comes to 3:22 he refuses to accept that the writer of verse 5 "would have justified the serpent's insinuation, even in form, by a divine utterance". He proposes to attribute this verse (22) to a "secondary

recension" which "represents a cruder form of the legend than does the main narrative". His presupposition is showing, and it is not a pretty sight.

Cassuto's¹⁰ presuppositions are even more evident than those of Skinner. He is determined to uphold the veracity of God's statement, "In the day that you eat of it you shall die", because, as he says (yes, he actually says), "[it is not] conceivable that the Bible attributed to the Lord God an extravagant utterance that did not correspond to his true intention". Yet, he recognizes that there is a problem inherent in the wording "when you eat it you shall die", because Adam did not die at that time. He opposes six explanations proposed by others (including that of Skinner mentioned above that God changed his mind in view of the circumstances) and suggests that

"the natural meaning of the words ... [is]: when you eat of the tree of knowledge it shall be decreed against you never to be able to eat of the tree of life, that is, you will be unable to achieve eternal life and you will be compelled one day to succumb to death; *you shall die*, in actual fact. It was necessary to use simple words like *you shall die*, because prior to his eating of the tree of knowledge man was as unsophisticated as a child who knows nothing, and he could not have comprehended a more elaborate warning".

Mental and verbal gymnastics of this kind are totally unnecessary. It is much more reasonable to say that "you shall die" means "you shall die" and that this statement was a lie, was recognized as such by the snake (which means a snake - Cassuto understands it rather as "an allegorical allusion to the craftiness to be found in *man himself*") and as good as admitted to be such by God later on.

On turning to Gunkel's commentary¹¹ I thought at

first that I had at last encountered commonsense, but, alas, I find my idol in danger of toppling off his pedestal. Gunkel tells us that the main point of Gen 2:17 is that

"the man must not eat of the tree of knowledge; he would certainly die in the day that (as soon as) he ate it. The words could be understood as meaning that the fruit itself is poisonous, but also as meaning - and this lies further behind the words but was indeed intended by the narrator - that God wishes to punish transgression with death. This threat is not subsequently carried out: they do not die immediately: this state of affairs is not to be explained away but simply to be recognized. The difficulty which modern exegetes find in this non-fulfilment of the divine words was not felt so strongly by the ancient narrator; rather would he answer, 'God is and remains master of his word, later he "repented" of the word; indeed he is seen therein to have a particular compassion in that he allows the word to go without fulfilment' ... Nevertheless it remains noteworthy that the serpent, in 3:4, can flatly give the lie to God and that the narrator allows no word to be said in explanation of the whole sequence ... Why God forbade the eating of this tree under so terrible a penalty the narrator does not say but he puts it forward as self-evident".

Now, there are one or two good points in all of this; the recognition that the words of 2:17 can mean that the fruit is poisonous, and his advocating simple acceptance of the fact that death does not follow immediately and automatically on the eating of the fruit. Yet Gunkel creates for himself problems - of the reason for God's making so terrible a threat, and of the threat's not being carried out - which may be solved

simply by a judicious stroke of Ockham's razor. No problem arises in connection with God's threat of death as a punishment because there was no such threat. The words of 2:17 should be taken simply and solely in the first sense suggested by Gunkel - the fruit is poisonous, to eat it means death.

Finally, I came to the commentary of Westermann.¹² He opposes the translations of 2:17 offered by Speiser and Cassuto, which attempted to make *moth tamuth* mean something other than "you will/would die", and he agrees with Gunkel that the problem found by modern exegetes in the non-fulfilment of the threat of death is a problem which would not have been recognized by the narrator. Indeed, he takes a step closer to commonsense when he disputes that there was any *threat* of death at all.

"The death penalty", he says, "has no intrinsically threatening sense. In the context it has rather the sense of a warning. It makes the people guard against eating from the tree. After the people have eaten from the tree a new situation arises. In this situation God behaves differently than he had earlier announced.¹³ This 'inconsistency' of God is important for the story; it points out that God's dealings with his creatures cannot be determined, not even through previously spoken words of God".

The two points in this passage - that the "death penalty" is a warning, not a threat, and that God is unpredictable - are the most sensible statements I have yet read in my combings through commentaries on Genesis. Yet, on the precise point of the truth or untruth of the two statements, by God and the snake respectively, that if the man and his wife ate the fruit of the tree they would die or they would not die, Westermann is as loath as any of the other commentators to grasp the nettle which I hold out to them.

Commenting on 3:4-5, he tells us that

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"commentators are of different opinions as to whether God indeed told a lie or not; one thinks no exegete could vindicate God for this lie, another is enraged that anyone at all should entertain the idea that God could have told a lie".

This I find interesting. I have not yet encountered a member of the former group. All the commentators I have encountered seem to belong to the second camp. Westermann does not name representatives of either party, nor does he side with one faction or the other. He continues,

"But to assert, as well as to deny, that God lied is to fail to recognize the meaning of the text ... The stories which wish to present the origin of death are concerned with an intangible phenomenon; death does not allow itself clearly to be determined. God intends with his warning a connection between knowledge and death, which is deeply hidden".

I do not understand what Westermann is trying to say in this last sentence, but it seems to me that he is going astray in a desperate attempt to sit on a non-existent fence. In the first place it does not seem possible to argue that it is a misconstruction of the story to point to the truth of the snake's statement and the falsity of God's. Indeed, Westermann has already observed that the non-fulfilment of Yahweh's word is an important element in the story. In the second place I do not think that the story sets out to explain the origin of death. In a story saturated with aetiology, death is one thing that is not explained. The condition of mortality, as has already been observed, is presupposed by the motif of the tree of life.

* * *

I retire, discouraged, from the search for peshat

in contemporary commentaries, at least on this particular point, and I forbear, for the present, to investigate other areas, although two or three examples of places where one suspects that *peshat* may be equally disregarded come readily to mind. In the seven commentaries I have consulted I have encountered equivocation, flat assertions that black is white, and prodigious feats of intellectual gymnastics (I say nothing of the inconsistencies produced, within individual commentaries, in the process), all, as it seems, on account of a presupposition that God cannot tell a lie. I do not presume to know whether or not God is capable of lying, or whether or not, if he is capable, he is disposed to do so, but I do know that in this story he is represented as making a statement which was not true.

I think I have made a case for saying that something fundamental is lacking in contemporary bible exegesis. I have hinted already that the remedy for the faults I find lies in a return to the standards of the mediaeval rabbis in distinguishing clearly between exegesis of what is actually present in a text - *peshat* - and the use of that text for purposes other than exegetical - *derash*. I would like to go further, though I doubt whether it would be practicable. I would hope that it might be possible eventually to return to the standards of the Tannaim who drew up formal lists of principles of exegesis. We cannot, of course, simply resurrect the 13 principles of R. Ishmael or the 32 of R. Eliezer, because I, for one, would refuse to subscribe to such principles as *gematria* or *athbash* and have doubts even about the validity in scientific terms of some of the more sober principles. But if a comparable list of principles for scientific exegesis were to be drawn up, I would nominate for the first place on that list the rabbinic maxim *'eyn miqra' yotse' miy'de p'shuto*, "the scripture cannot lose its plain meaning", or "the bible means what it says". I do not know what further principles might follow this one. It may be that this one, like Hillel's Golden Rule, would be sufficient in itself and render others unnecessary.

NOTES

- 1 A revised version of a paper read to the Biblical Theology Group on 29th September 1977. The original version had a coda "On Gen 2-3", which became the basis for a paper read to the Society for Old Testament Study on 20th July 1978 and published in *The Expository Times* 92/1 (1980) pp. 8-10, under the title "What is Gen 2-3 About?" The main part of the original paper is here published for the first time.
- 2 See "Commentary of an Anonymous Rabbi", in D.R.G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, JSOT Supplement Series 2, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1977, pp. 33-35, 114-134.
- 3 It must be admitted, in proposing this as a serious principle of exegesis, that there are, of course, places where it cannot be strictly applied: there are cases of metaphorical and other figurative expressions, poetic descriptions, and so on, of which we should not argue "the text means what it says"; but these are covered by another rabbinic dictum, "Scripture speaks in human language".
- 4 An acronym from *shishah sedarim*, "six orders" (*scil.* of the Mishnah).
- 5 If my translation of this verse seems novel it is, I suggest, because those responsible for the various English versions seem to have forgotten that English has a subjunctive mood.
- 6 G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Old Testament Library), London: SCM Press, 21963.
- 7 D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries), London: Tyndale Press, 1967.
- 8 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible, 1), New York: Doubleday, 1964.

- 9 J. Skinner, *Genesis* (International Critical Commentary), Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910.
- 10 U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the book of Genesis*, 2 vols, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961-64.
- 11 H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, (31910) 1966.
- 12 C. Westermann, *Genesis* (Biblischer Kommentar 1), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974.
- 13 I offer my apologies to the reader for this Germanicism. My translations from German have tended to be rather literal, partly because of the difficulty which I experience in grasping the commentators' meanings, although this difficulty, as I have indicated in various places, is by no means confined to the German commentaries.