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MEANING AND EXEGESIS

by Peter R. Ackroyd

I

Ideally the meaning of any word in a given passage should be established in order that the exegesis of the whole passage can be set out without prejudice. In practice, such a counsel of perfection is rarely to be followed consistently. For while it is true that in many biblical passages the sense of an otherwise unknown word may be determined clearly—either by reference to cognate words in the same language or in closely related languages, or by the obvious sense required (and here poetic passages may provide the added assistance of a verbal parallel)—yet it is often the case that the really debatable sentence remains difficult to expound, because the precise shade of meaning cannot be readily determined either by philological research or by an examination of context. In an unpublished paper read to the Society for Old Testament Study at its Jubilee Meeting in York in July 1967, David Winton Thomas reviewed recent work on Isa. 53—work in which he himself has, over the years, played a notable part. The problems of interpretation in this particular chapter are well known, and not to be solved ultimately without full reference to the wider issues of its relationship to the other chapters of Deutero-Isaiah, though not exclusively to those which make use of the much-debated term עֶבֶד, so often isolated whether intentionally or unconsciously from their context. In the course of the paper, he expressed again, as on other occasions when discussing the exact connotation of a Hebrew word,¹ the conviction that exegesis must depend upon precise delimitation of meaning; it must not be allowed to determine the particular sense in which a word is used in the passage under discussion in order to provide support for one

¹ Cf. e.g. ‘Some Observations on the Hebrew Root עֶבֶד’, *VTS*, IV (1957), 8–16; see p. 16.

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particular line of interpretation.¹ Yet, sound though the advice undoubtedly is, the questions remain: What kind of criteria exist for the understanding of the meanings of words, and how far are these criteria adequate to the problems of biblical exegesis?

In recent years, biblical scholars have become sensitive to the dangers of philology, partly as a result of the sometimes rather negative strictures of James Barr.² The warning has been properly given that words cannot be used as counters. To establish the root meaning of a word does not establish its meaning in a given passage. In some respects the problem for Hebrew is unlike that for some modern languages. It may be reasonably postulated that a particular word in English is derivable from a particular word in Latin. Sufficient evidence of usage may be available for there to be a tracing of the semantic development of this particular word, and this may show, in some degree, the process by which that one word's meanings have changed; it may be seen that its various modern usages—often apparently very remote from the original Latin—are intelligible in the light of philology. Yet even here, when account is taken not simply of the 'correct' usage of a word—according to some standard which we may profess—but also of its popular use, we may soon observe that shades of meaning are present which are much less readily explicable, and the line between correct and colloquial use is never a completely clear one. (The word 'wild' in its varieties of modern use, both English and American, is a good example.) It is clear too that anyone who ventures to speak in a foreign language, related to one already familiar to him, will make all manner of errors if he supposes that corresponding words have the same or similar meanings. This was the error into which the German-born American immigrant Hyman Kaplan fell when he was describing 'nature' and spoke passionately of 'de trees, de boids, de grass, de bloomers' (*The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, by L. Q. Ross). To

¹ A comparison may also be made with the opening of his Ethel M. Wood lecture for 1967, *Understanding the Old Testament* (London, 1967), see pp. 3 ff., and the introduction to *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (Oxford, 1967), see pp. xxviii–xxx.

² *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961).

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one who knows German and English, Dutch may seem fairly readily intelligible, but there are many snares in the supposition that its finer nuances are appreciated. Even at a simple level, it may be clearly intelligible to the linguist that 'satt' in German should mean 'satisfied with food', and that the same word, though differently spelt, 'zat' in Dutch, should mean 'drunk'; failure to recognize this may cause embarrassment. The stories of the curious errors perpetrated by translation machines only serve to show that, while technical equivalents may be found, there may still be something wanting to the full conveying of meaning for which only a really deep understanding of both the languages involved can possibly be adequate.

A further comment may be added here on the already mentioned use of words as 'counters', interchangeable between different contexts. It has been rightly urged that we have to allow for differences of usage, dictated by context; the fact that a word in one passage bears a particular meaning does not mean that in other passages it can automatically be understood in the same way. A criticism made of the rendering of the Greek New Testament in the New English Bible has been that, for example in Romans, the Greek word δικαιοσύνη is not always rendered by the same English equivalent. (As a result, the NEB has been quite properly found to be of no very great use as a crib for the Greek text.) But the fact is that the shades of meaning expressed by δικαιοσύνη are different in range from those of the most natural English equivalents; if these shades of meaning are to be conveyed, then a choice has to be made, sometimes of one word, sometimes of another, though admittedly as soon as this is done, exegesis enters into the picture, and indeed, except in a very limited degree, translation cannot avoid a certain exegetical element.

But while this is true, there must also be a recognition of overtones in biblical material. Such overtones are present in every language which has a literature whether written or oral; among both the more sophisticated and the more simple, a particular word or phrase may evoke a well-known story. Sensitivity to such overtones will increase the richness of understanding of the individual concerned. This is likely to be true of the

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biblical material in a special degree because of its virtually universal religious content and concern, though the limitation of the literature with which we are familiar to a relatively small corpus can inevitably lead us astray into finding allusions which are not there. Later rabbinic discussion often seemed to centre upon what we should regard as the minutiae of the text; lists were made of the occurrences of the same form, and marginal notes added containing such information—the kind of information which the modern reader has available in lexicon and concordance. The fact that the same, slightly unusual, form occurs perhaps three times immediately suggests a link; much discussion in more modern commentaries of literary structure and editing has laid stress upon occurrences of the same word by which it was often thought that dependence of one passage upon another could be demonstrated. This was particularly true if the word was a rare one, perhaps occurring only in the two passages in question. In this kind of discussion far too little allowance was made for the limitations of our material, and for such a phenomenon as that aptly described as ‘hibernation’ by which in the chances of the material a word may occur once in a very early passage and then be unattested until a relatively late date.¹

But we must nevertheless allow for the possibility, and indeed the probability, that already in biblical times overtones were discernible by the sensitive reader or hearer which are not immediately apparent to us. Thus the use of the word **התִּצְבוּ** in 2 Chron. 20: 17 may appear to be neutral; it may not seem to need any explanation that the writer chose this word rather than some other.² But it is not unreasonable to hear an overtone here from Exod. 14: 13 and to realize that the ancient reader could catch an echo of the great moment of religious experience of the Exodus in this apparently simple word. Our understanding of 2 Chron. 20: 17 is therefore determined not simply by a discussion of the words used and their meanings, but also by this allusion which we may suppose to be present, by which

¹ For a comment on this, cf. Winton Thomas, *Understanding the Old Testament*, pp. 13 f.

² On the problem of discovering why a biblical writer ‘chose’ a particular word, cf. also below.

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הַתִּצְבֹּר virtually becomes a ‘counter’, inviting reminiscence of a particularly instructive kind.

If we return now to the question of philology, we may observe that its problems are different in Hebrew, because the ‘origin’ or ‘original meaning’ of a word cannot with any certainty be obtained by study of the cognate languages. It is proper to recognize that other Semitic languages, especially Accadian and Arabic with richer vocabularies, are likely to have preserved many roots unfamiliar in biblical Hebrew as it has been traditionally understood. Yet it is not necessarily possible to show a chronological linkage. An Arabic word may suggest the possibility that a corresponding root existed in Hebrew, a root now concealed by reason of the identity of its consonants with some other, much more familiar word. The root ידע, which D. Winton Thomas has shown to be divisible into ידע ן and ידע ן, is a case in point, and some further comments will be made on this subsequently. But the large number of unaccepted suggestions of this kind which have found their place in learned articles over the past half century—suggestions often made with a proper tentativeness and sometimes subsequently withdrawn by their originators—shows that unless corroborative evidence can be found elsewhere, in the ancient versions for example, there can be no more than conjecture in such proposals. Even where a corresponding root may be traced in Accadian, the problem is not necessarily any less difficult. For while it may appear *prima facie* reasonable to regard as more original a word which occurs in a text more ancient than most biblical passages, it is not necessarily justifiable to assume that the Hebrew is directly derived from the Accadian; possibly both are to be ultimately derived separately from a more ancient, hypothetical proto-semitic form, and the semantic development may be quite different. The definition of the meaning of נביא in relation to Accadian *nabū* is inevitably still debated; the nature of its meaning in Hebrew is more precisely definable only in terms of use. Accadian did not, so far as we know, use this root for the expression of the peculiarly specialized sense of נביא.¹

¹ The nearest point of contact is in the use of *nabū* in the sense ‘vocation, called (by a deity)’. I am indebted to D. J. Wiseman for confirming this point.

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Even where, as in passages in Ezekiel, the presence of a number of otherwise unknown Hebrew words which may be explained from Accadian suggests the direct influence of the vocabulary of the community in which the prophet was living—and hence this has been used as an argument to defend the traditional location of the prophet in Babylonia¹—it must be admitted that the argument is too much of a negative kind to be totally persuasive. Relatively so little is known to us of the vocabulary of earlier Hebrew that we cannot be sure that such occurrences are not due merely to the chances of the material we possess. Probability may be shown: certainty cannot be established.

To the linguist who lays emphasis on words and their forms and who treats them as units to be handled independent of context, the search for meaning in contexts only is not entirely satisfying. It may well be that, especially with the limited material at our disposal, we can only hope to say that a given word appears to be used in a given passage in a particular sense—and to relate this tentatively to other uses of the same word either in the same sense or in a readily relatable meaning. Context remains an untrustworthy guide since—especially when some vital theological question is at issue—the uncertainty about the whole will inevitably lead to uncertainty about the parts.

An example may serve to show the kind of problem which appears. The explanation of the name **באר שבע** depends upon whether the second part of the name is regarded as derivable from the word meaning 'seven' or from the word meaning 'oath, swear'. On a philological basis, a case could be made out for either meaning. On a contextual basis, the same uncertainty is found, for we have two alternative narratives offering different explanations of how the place was named. In the one case (Gen. 21), the reference to **שבע כבשת הצאן** (verses 28 ff.) provides a pointer to the former interpretation, whereas the following verse 31 explains the place-name as due to the swearing of an oath. In the other (Gen. 26), no reference to

¹ Cf. the remarks on Babylonian influence in the language of Ezekiel by G. R. Driver, 'Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision', *VT*, 1 (1951), 60–2.

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‘seven’ appears in the narrative at all, and the explanation is related solely to the swearing of an oath—שבעה (verse 31). It seems likely enough that there is in fact a further complication in that the narrative in chapter 21 is not all of one piece, and that two alternative traditions concerning the place are here combined.¹ But the fact remains that if we work from context alone, then we have to affirm that either possibility is valid. If it can be shown that the place-name could only have been derived from one or other of the roots proposed,² then we shall have to affirm that the other explanation represents a piece of popular, and in this case false, etymology. We should not, however, be any nearer then to understanding the import of the narratives. We cannot say that the story elements which are philologically unsound are necessarily historically untrue, in the sense that the events described cannot be a description of the actual events which led to the naming of the place. (In this particular example, we have in any case two narratives which use the ‘oath’ theme; and these can hardly both be historical.) If the place is named because there were seven springs, then the oath story is a piece of attached legend; but its attachment has taken place because its narrators believed that the meaning of the name was appropriately given by reference to the swearing of an oath. The alternative tradition which links the name with seven and specifically with seven lambs is equally open to question, even though its philological basis might be regarded as more sound. Context does not here provide an adequate answer. But from the point of view of exegesis, nor does correct linguistic explanation give any sort of final answer. If we are to interpret the material, then we have to take account of the way it was understood by its ancient transmitters. Meaning—in the broader sense—is more significant than mere philology. Popular etymologies may be frowned on by the purist, but they are nevertheless influential in the development of thought. The much-debated naming of שמואל in 1 Sam. 1—explained in such a way, from the root שאל, as to suggest the possibility that in reality the story was originally not connected with Samuel at

¹ Cf. e.g. the comments of G. von Rad, *Genesis* (E.T. London, Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 230 ff. ² So *KBL*, p. 105, accepts ‘seven’.

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all but with שׂאול (Saul)—shows how a question of the nature and limits of popular etymology may influence the overall interpretation of the narrative. For if this is really a Saul narrative, now interwoven with other motifs not connected with Saul at all, then some light is shed both on the recession of the Saul traditions behind those of Samuel, and also on the evolution of the Samuel narratives to give to that now so complex figure a prominence which it did not necessarily originally enjoy. But if popular etymology can stretch so far as to see an equation in שמואל-שׂאול—and popular etymology is not nice about spelling but appears to be more influenced by sound and by general similarity, and does not work according to the neat rules of vowel and consonant change—then this particular line of approach to these traditions is precluded.

II

The problem of false—popular—etymology leads on into another more obviously theological question. This concerns the influence in theological thinking and formulation of explanations which are subsequently shown to be philologically erroneous. The debate about typological exegesis in recent years not improperly begins by recognizing that typology is a characteristic of some parts of the biblical exegesis of itself. Thus not only is such exegesis to be found in early Christian writings, for example, in Paul: it is also demonstrable in such expository material as Deutero-Isaiah, with its ‘Exodus typology’.¹ To understand the biblical material, we have to enter sympathetically—as גרים, as H. Wheeler Robinson advised—into the thought world. Otherwise we may dismiss out of hand a way of approach which is strange. But the further question is less easy to resolve. How far is typological exegesis still admissible? How far are biblical theological statements determined by or limited by such a method? How far are conclusions drawn which may be suspected of being theologically invalid? How

¹ Cf. B. W. Anderson, ‘Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah’, in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage*, ed. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (Philadelphia and London, 1962), pp. 177–95.

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far is an exegetical structure built upon a misunderstanding to be allowed to stand? By what criteria can we test its theological truth?

Out of exegesis have arisen conventions of use. Traditionally the words of Gen. 3: 15 have been taken to be a promise of the Christian gospel and termed the *protevangelion*. The passage is read, therefore, as the first in the series of nativity lections. Such an understanding is remote from the original purport of the narrative; but original purport is only part of the meaning, as this material has been read. The later expositions are a legitimate part of the history of the material, and even if they are historically or philologically erroneous, they are part of what we have to handle. By what criteria do we adjudicate between a sound and an unsound development of thought? Much older Christian exegesis has tended to distinguish between 'Judaic' developments, leading on into rabbinic thought, and often believed to be antagonistic to some other development, leading on into Christian thinking and thought to be more true. But such a simplified distinction is very unsatisfactory, especially in view of the proper emphasis on the intimacy of the relationship between the thought of Jesus and the early Christians and their contemporaries in the Jewish community.

That Job 19: 25 ff. presents substantial problems of interpretation is evident. The precise definition of the לְבָרָא of verse 25 remains uncertain. While the most natural view appears to be that there is a reference here to God as the 'kinsman' who acts to protect a man's interests, and in particular to preserve his memory (cf. the book of Ruth for a typical delineation), it must be admitted that this is obliquely expressed in such a way as to leave room for doubt. And the accompanying phrases are no easier to interpret, if only because each of them can be interpreted so as to refer to experience within this life, or to experience beyond death, whether that is thought of in terms of the narrower limits of the conception of Sheol, or in terms of a dawning understanding of the nature of a real continuance of relationship with God. But for the modern Christian exegete at least, the influence of centuries of interpretation—with a reference to New Testament events and experience, and with overtones of Handel's *Messiah* 'I know that my redeemer liveth'—inevitably

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has its repercussions. To dismiss this as mere later construction is no more legitimate than to exclude from our consideration of the biblical text everything which may be remotely described as a gloss, with the intention of operating only with the original wording. Old Testament and New Testament studies have revealed the precariousness of the attempt at getting back to origins—*ipsissima verba* whether of a prophet or of Jesus; at no point can there be absolute separation between a message which was spoken on a specific occasion, sometimes identifiable, more often only to be conjectured, and the way in which that message has been incorporated into the larger presentation to which it now belongs, the subsequent understanding of that message in new contexts of which later Christian history and later Jewish history offer two related but distinct types. The development of Christian exegesis of Job 19: 25 ff. is one possible development. The recognition of totally erroneous interpretation of a particular word or phrase excludes such interpretation from modern use. But it does not undo the history of exegesis in which the modern interpreter stands at the end of a particular tradition, and from which inevitably he approaches the problems of a particular passage. The very questions which we ask about interpretation are in part conditioned by this tradition. So far as the particular example under discussion is concerned, it may be asked how far the line of interpretation, oversimply presented by Handel, conforms to the emphasis of the book of Job upon the absoluteness of divine action in redemption; and if it does so conform, how far is it not in harmony with that book, though it is clear that it represents a narrowing of the field of choice and a restricting of understanding to one particular development which does not cover all that might have come out of those words?

III

These more general comments may be clarified by a reference to a particular range of problems of meaning and exegesis, linked with various occurrences of the Hebrew root **יָדַע**. As is well known, this root has been the subject of prolonged study by D. Winton Thomas over the past thirty years and more, and