

WORDPLAY IN GENESIS 2:25-3:1

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The Bible contains numerous examples of wordplay where the same word is used multiple times in close proximity to convey different meanings. For example, when Samson fought the Philistines using the jawbone of an ass, he proclaimed *'With the jawbone of an ass (hamor), heaps upon heaps (hamor hamortayim), with the jawbone of an ass have I smitten a thousand men'* (Judg. 15:16). In Hebrew, the word for both "ass" and "heap" is hamor, leading *Metzudat David* to note that this is an example of wordplay (*lashon nofel al lashon*). It is no surprise to find an amusing turn of phrase coming from Samson, who, we know, was fond of riddles (Judg. 14:12). This type of wordplay is also found in the narration of Judges. In the brief description of Jair the Gileadite we find, *And he had thirty sons that rode on thirty ass colts (ayarim), and they had thirty cities (ayarim), which are called Havvoth-jair unto this day, which are in the land of Gilead* (Judg. 10:4). Here, too, is an example of wordplay, based on the fact that the Hebrew word *ayarim* can mean both "ass colts" and "cities." Radak (Kimhi) and *Metzudat David* both note that this is an example of eloquence (*tzahut lashon*).

Both of these examples are noted by Ibn Ezra in his discussion of Genesis 2:25-3:1. There we read that Adam and Eve were living in the Garden of Eden, *And they were both naked (arummim), the man and his wife, and were not ashamed* (Gen. 2:25). Immediately after that we are told, *Now the serpent was more cunning (arum) than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made* (Gen. 3:1). Ibn Ezra notes that in one verse the term *arum* is used to mean "naked" and in the next verse the same basic root denotes "cunning" or "subtle." He explains: "Do not be astonished that *arum* is used right after *arummim*, having two different meanings, for this is the way of eloquence (*tzahut lashon*)." He then cites Judges 15:16 and 10:4 as examples of this style. Modern Bible scholars also take this to be an example of wordplay. Cassuto notes that the word for "naked" is generally vowelized to read *eirom*

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throughout Genesis (3:7, 3:10, 3:11), and only in 2:25 is it vowelized *arum*, in order to make the similarity between *arummim* (naked) in 2:25 and *arum* (cunning) in 3:1 more blatant.¹ Robert Alter explains that this is "the kind of pun in which the ancient Hebrew writers delighted."²

Other than Ibn Ezra, we might expect Radak here to note this interesting use of language, as he did in Judges 10:4, but he does not. Instead, he notes how the two words are in fact different grammatically. It may be that while Radak is comfortable explaining that the narrator of Judges and Samson engaged in wordplay, it is another thing entirely to ascribe such literary behavior to the narration of the Torah, the actual word of God. This would explain why other traditional Bible commentaries do not note the wordplay here either. Ibn Ezra, however, seems to understand that this is an example of how "the Torah speaks in the language of men",³ and that even the divine Torah can use wordplay, just as human authors do.

Even though it is generally understood that the Hebrew words for "naked" and "cunning" are based on different roots, they clearly have a strong similarity, bordering on homophony. There may be a semantic connection between these two terms.⁴ Leon Kass affirms that "the root sense of *erum*, 'naked,' is 'smooth': someone who is naked is hairless, clothesless, smooth of skin. But as the pun suggests, someone who is clever is also smooth, a facile thinker and talker whose surface speech is beguiling and flawless, hiding well his rough ulterior purposes."⁵

Ibn Ezra does not indicate what the purpose of this wordplay is, and seems to imply that it has no purpose apart from being a nice turn of phrase. Some modern Bible scholars, particularly religious Christians, have tried to find some meaning behind this wordplay. It has been suggested that the function of the wordplay is to establish a connection between the two verses, teaching that nakedness causes temptation;⁶ to emphasize that Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness because of the serpent's cunning;⁷ or to indicate that because Adam and Eve were naked, innocent and oblivious of evil, the serpent was able to use his cunning to mislead them.⁸ None of these lessons are particularly profound, and it may well be that the primary motivation for using similar sounding words for both "naked" and "cunning" was to fashion an interesting and pleasant narrative, with the possibility of some additional message or lesson as a welcome side effect.⁹ However, many contemporary

Bible scholars explain that the wordplay serves a purely narrative function, providing a transition and linkage between the story of the creation of Adam and Eve and the episode of the serpent.¹⁰ This linkage is important, since often in the Bible the introduction of a new character by means of a circumstantial clause, as is done here with the serpent, marks the beginning of a new episode.¹¹

Translations of the Bible, from Onkelos, the Septuagint and the Vulgate¹² down to modern English translations,¹³ generally ignore this wordplay. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* has a unique way of translating this verse, defusing any alleged wordplay. He translates the word *arum* as "wise" in Genesis 2:25 and 3:1. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Genesis 2:25 thus reads, *And they were both wise, the man and his wife, but they did not remain in their glory.*¹⁴ The second clause of the verse had to be changed, since the verse is not discussing nakedness and there is no reason to bring up any feeling of shame or lack thereof. Rather than being understood to mean "ashamed", the word *yitbosheshu* is translated as "remain", as in *The people saw that Moses had delayed (boshesh) in descending the mountain* (Ex. 32:1). The interpretation of *Pseudo-Jonathan* teaches that Adam and Eve were wise and glorious; this state of glory was not to persist, however, due to the cunning of the serpent.¹⁵ Whereas this translation understands the words *arummim* and *arum* to be clearly related, it interprets them both as referring to wisdom, so this is not an example of wordplay. The *Pseudo-Jonathan* translation is very hard to accept in light of the fact that in Genesis 3:11 God asks Adam, *'Who told you that you are naked (eirom)?'* – which cannot be interpreted as meaning "wise."¹⁶ His interpretation of Genesis 2:25 and 3:1 is forced and unnecessary, functioning only to circumvent the possible wordplay.

We have seen that the wordplay in Genesis 2:25-3:1 has been ignored by most classical Jewish commentaries, Ibn Ezra being the notable exception. His approach, that this wordplay is simply an eloquent use of Hebrew with no great theological message, is echoed by many contemporary scholars who regard it as a narrative device providing a transition from the episode of the creation of Adam and Eve to the episode of the serpent.

NOTES

1. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1996) p. 95 (Hebrew).

2. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996) p. 11. See also Gary A. Rendsberg, "Alliteration in the Exodus Narrative", in *Birkat Shalom – Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), vol. 1, p. 83.
3. See, for example, TB *Bava Metzia* 31b, 94b; *Berakhot* 31b; *Gittin* 41b; *Makkot* 12a; and *Nedarim* 3a.
4. Dirk Delabastita, *Traductio: Essays on Punning and Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997) p. 78.
5. Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) p. 82. Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz similarly explains: "Seeming simplicity is often the most dangerous weapon of cunning," in Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965) p. 10. This interpretation puts *erum* in the company of other Hebrew words referring to items of dress that also imply treachery, such as *begged* (garment, treason) and *me'il* (cloak, embezzle).
6. Hershey H. Friedman, "Humor in the Hebrew Bible", *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 13:3 (September, 2000) pp. 258-285. See also Naomi H. Rosenblatt, *Wrestling With Angels* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995) p. 30, who suggests that the wordplay hints that the serpent "represents the sexual stirrings within the woman."
7. G. Johannes Botterweck, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. XI (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001) p. 352; Dianne Bergant, ed., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary – Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992) p. 43.
8. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 1983) p. 32.
9. See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Seven Mysteries of Knowledge", in Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, eds., *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004) p. 202.
10. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 23; Yehuda Kiel, *Da'at Mikra – Bereshit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1997) p. 69; A. S. Hartom, *Sifrei Ha-Mikra – Bereshit* (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh, 1969) p. 21.
11. Francis I. Anderson, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) p. 79. See also Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1994) p. 104.
12. Delabastita, *Traductio*, p. 79.
13. See Phylis Trible, "The Bible in Bloom", *The Iowa Review*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Fall, 1991) p. 26.
14. Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992) p. 25. See also Alter Wein, *Yayin ha-Tov al ha-Targumim* (Rehovot: Kest-Lebovits, 1976) p. 10.
15. See also R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin in his commentaries *Ha'amek Davar* and *Harhe'v Davar* to these verses, where he discusses at length the correct translation of *yitbosheshu*. According to *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, Adam and Eve possessed wisdom even before eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. On this, see R. Hayyim of Volozhin's *Nefesh ha-*

Hayyim, 1:6 in the notes, where he explains that eating from the tree did not impart wisdom, but rather caused good and evil to be mixed together in the world.

16. So, too, in Genesis 3:7 and 3:11, where *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* translates the word as "naked."



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