"THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL"

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I

The meaning of "the knowledge of good and evil" in the Garden of Eden story remains one of the most difficult and yet intriguing problems of the Bible. If the phrase could be successfully understood, further corroboration of the ancient Israelite's ethical orientation could be gained. However, precisely because of the ethical implications of the passage, many commentators have approached it seeking biblical substantiation of their own ethical doctrine 1). The difficulty of interpreting the entire section from Gen. i 1 to xi 27 is further heightened by the fact that many of the stories are probably meant to be taken, among other things, as parables; and it is difficult to determine, except when it is clearly stated, the precise parabolical meaning of these passages for the Israelite mind.

However, one of the main reasons for the failure to grasp the meaning of this phrase is that the discussion has tended to confine itself to a philological level. But a philological analysis of such key ethical terms as "good" and "evil" cannot be separated from a philosophic discussion. For example, R. GORDIS rejects an interpretation of this phrase as referring to moral judgment. His grounds for this position are based on certain philosophic views regarding the nature of disobedience and the nature of man 2).

To analyse a text is to grasp its meaning; and the search for meaning is a search for ideas and their interrelations. But a passage in a text is related to other passages and the text as a whole. Since a given term fits into a "universe of discourse" and one's fundamental search is for meaning, it is impossible to confine oneself to a merely philo-

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2) "The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the OT and the Qumran Scrolls", JBL (June, 1957), 124-25.
logical analysis. The ideas of the text must be apprehended in terms of the idea network of that particular culture 1). But Plato pointed out long ago that ideas are related in ascending and descending chains, and that no idea could be adequately grasped until it was understood in terms of the first principles on which it logically depended. The search for these first principles and their investigation is termed a dialectical and philosophical analysis of one’s subject matter. If this procedure is required in order to understand the terms of our own culture, a fortiori it is required for terms that are products of different cultures, which have different first principles. An analysis of biblical terms cannot, then, be separated from a philosophical and theological investigation.

II

Besides occurring in Genesis the phrase is also found in Deut. i 39, Isa. vii 14 ff., 2 Sam. xix 36 and 2 Sam. xiv 17. GORDIS points out that it is used as a metaphor for sexual desire in 2 Sam. xix 36. 2) His view is based on the fact that it neatly fits the trilogy of wine, women and song, of which Barzillai has definitely named two out of the three. Bo REICKE agrees that this is most probably its meaning in this passage 3). It is, of course, possible that, as G. W. BUCHANAN points out, the phrase could refer to Barzillai’s inability to make decisions in his old age 4). However, GORDIS’ interpretation seems to fit more neatly into the text. The difficulty arises in applying GORDIS’ sexual interpretation to the Eden passages. The fact that after eating the fruit, Adam and Eve experience shame over their nudity indicates that it might have some sort of sexual connotation. But the argument that it means sexual desire in the Eden account cannot be supported by the passage and clearly contradicts fundamental biblical positions.

For precisely after Yahweh warns Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge, He decides that it is bad for man to be alone and proceeds to find him a helpmate. The passage concludes with

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