LINGUISTICS AND BIBLICAL LANGUAGE: A WIDE-OPEN FIELD

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I. ISOLATION

"I can scarcely imagine another example of such a lack of communication between related scientific disciplines," remarks Erhardt Güttgemanns.[1] Outlining what he thinks is a deplorable state of affairs, he declares in a remarkable passage that

> the exegete who turns from theological hermeneutics to the reading of international linguistics and literary criticism encounters an absolutely puzzling and completely incomprehensible situation: Protestant theology, since Luther's discovery of the correlation of *promissio* and *fides* and above all since the rise of dialectical theology, has understood itself decidedly as a "theology of the Word of God"; but still, right up to today, it has had no adequate understanding of the science of language and linguistic processes, that is, of general linguistics.[2]

The rhetorical effect is heightened as the passage continues with no fewer than nine more such "right-up-to-today" exclamations, all lamenting the tardiness and reluctance of theologians—especially German theologians[3]—to avail themselves of the advantages of modern linguistic science. Güttgemanns himself has not been slack in doing more than his share to bring modern linguistics and semantics into the theological arena—and not only in Germany. His prolific writing has become well known in Europe, in Britain, and in America as well.[4]

Nor is it only in theological studies that adequate linguistic methodology is often ignored. Berthe Siertsema has pointed out such shortcomings in the works

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[1]E. Güttgemanns, "Sprache des Glaubens—Sprache der Menschen: Probleme einer theologischen Linguistik," *VF* 14 (1969) 98.

[2]Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[3]"Wenn die deutsche Theologie weiterhin uninteressiert bleibt, dann wird ihr in Kurze die amerikanische in dieser Hinsicht um Jahrzehnte voraus sein" (p. 90); and regarding the "literarische Aufarbeitung der Methodologie der philologischen Analysen": "Dafür stehen nicht-deutsche Alttestamentler, amerikanische Neutestamentler, katholischen Exegeten, praktische Theologen und Publizisten an vorderster Front—ein beunruhigender Befund!" (p. 91).

[4]E.g. E. Güttgemanns, *Offene Fragen zür Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (BEvT 54; Munich: Kaiser, 1970; 2d ed. 1971); *Studia linguistica neotestamentica: Gesammelte Aufsätze zür linguistischen Grundlage einer neutestamentlichen Theologie* (BEvT 60; Munich: Kaiser, 1971); and the Bonn-based, interdisciplinary periodical *Linguistica Biblica*, of which he is an editor and to which he is a frequent contributor. Most of Güttgemanns' work has pertained to structural exegesis or, as it is also known, "structuralism," or "generative poetics," which is something different from what is the central concern of this present article.

of numerous European philosophers who, rightly, reinterpret data they have not themselves observed. But too often they do so on the basis of nonfacts, a situation that among other things produces certain "a-linguistic" (i.e., nonlinguistic) views of language.[5] These a-linguistic views of philosophers remarkably parallel similar views found in the works of certain Biblical theologians and criticized by James Barr.[6] By Siertsema's analysis, such a-linguistic views include failure to distinguish between (1) thinking and speaking (i.e., concept and word), (2) thinking and "naming" (i.e., concept and word-meaning), (3) ways of thinking (or mentality, world view) and the morphemic makeup of a language—that is to say, between what is said and how it is said, (4) word-meaning and the thing meant, and (5) meaning and meaningfulness (i.e., between what a given linguistic unit means and the fact that it has meaning). All these distinctions, except perhaps the fifth, figure importantly in Barr's critique.[7]

II. REEVALUATION

Writers such as Güttgemanns, Barr and Siertsema are contributing to what is an ongoing process in any science. For theology in its various branches, as well as philosophy, is certainly a science, a *Bibelwissenschaft*: It has its own material and its own various procedures and methodologies for carrying out research on it. That process—now halting, now proceeding, now suppressed, now encouraged—is the reexamination, reevaluation and reformulation of those procedures and methodologies, together with the conceptions and presuppositions—"categories," as James Robinson has put it[8]—that lie behind them. Methodology is necessary in a science in order to afford the scientist control not only over the accumulation of data but also over their interpretation. Reasonable theories about the character of the material being examined by the science will arise from applying the investigative methods in a strict and regular way. And if the theories are somehow faulty, this too will become apparent as more data are consistently and methodically fed into the analytical system. Eventually, however, accumulated data and insights may even call into question the very methodology by which they are gathered and interpreted, and the outcome then will be a "crisis

[5]B. Siertsema, "A-linguistic Views on Language in European Philosophy," *To Honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, 11 October 1966* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1967), 3. 1818-26. Cf. also similar criticisms of M. Heidegger's views of language by A. C. Thiselton in "The New Hermeneutic," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977) 308-333, esp. 318-329; S. Ullmann, *Language and Style: Collected Papers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964) 47, 240. Thiselton's treatment has been expanded and incorporated into his major book, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

[6]J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford, 1961).

[7]For a detailed review of Barr's linguistic criticisms of Biblical studies and the long debate they triggered, see the author's dissertation (cited below, n. 30) 12-65.

[8]J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 2-8 and passim.

of categories" where, "caught in the web of its own inadequate generalizations, a science flounders . . . intellectual achievement gives way to busy work," if the situation is not remedied.[9]

Three things are worth noting, however, when it is a matter of methodology in Biblical studies, or at least not in "pure" sciences like mathematics or logic. First, it must be remembered that it is not necessarily principles taken directly from Scripture that are to be reconsidered, but previously held opinions about Scripture and its characteristics (e.g., its characteristic as linguistic datum) and the categories developed to handle them.[10] Second, since it is a matter of a human, historical science, it must be recognized that the scientist is not lord over history and therefore does not know beforehand what its laws of operations are, but it is possible for him to discover the key to them provided he does not bind himself to a given methodology as the only permissible one.[11] Third, the process of ever-changing methodology does not necessarily imply a value judgment on previous methods with regard to new ones. Because Scripture (in one respect) is a human phenomenon being investigated by human minds for human needs, one cannot categorically denounce "old" ways of investigating it as inadequate in an absolute sense. If they become inadequate, it is with respect to the needs of the current civilization. And the newer, more adequate methods will doubtless also, once they have had their day, become inadequate as did their predecessors. Thus what is needed in theology as in all sciences, and what authors like Güttgemanns, Barr and Robinson are calling for, is an openness and willingness among theologians to submit their stock questions, their preconceptions and presuppositions, their categories of investigation—in short, their accustomed methods of operation—to periodic scrutiny and, whenever necessary, to reformulation.[12]

Robinson's and Koester's *Trajectories* is concerned to suggest a reformulation of "categories" within which to understand and interpret the history of early Christianity. Similar suggestions have also been made, for example, for the hermeneutics of Biblical texts by Güttgemanns and other proponents of so-called structural exegesis.[13] Naturally, only repeated attempts to put these various new categories of understanding into practice will prove or disprove their worth.

At a much more fundamental level is the call for more adequate categories of understanding the Biblical languages themselves, of reevaluating certain methods of Biblical research along the lines of contemporary linguistic and semantic theory. Of course any such proposal presupposes the usefulness of linguistics and

[9]Ibid., p.3.

[10]Ibid., pp. 6-8; B. Salomonsen, "Lingvistik og bibelsk teologie: En praesentation af James Barr," *DTT* 31 (1968) 56.

[11]Salomonsen, "Lingvistik" 56.

[12]See also the important little book by R. Kieffer, *Essais de méthodologie néo-testamentaire* (ConB, NT Ser. 4; Lund: Gleerup, 1972).

[13]See useful evaluations by A. C. Thiselton, "Keeping up with Recent Studies II. Structuralism and Biblical Studies: Method or Ideology?", *ExpTim* 89 (1978) 329-335; V. S. Poythress, "Structuralism and Biblical Studies," *JETS* 21 (1978) 221-237; C. E. Armerding, "Structural Analysis," *Themelios* 4 n.s. (1979) 96-104.

semantics—as they are discussed today—for Biblical studies. In addition to James Barr's well-known and widely discussed criticisms, from a linguistic standpoint, of theological methods and practices current in the early 1960s, there have appeared numerous publications devoted to describing this usefulness.[14]

On the other hand, it has been objected (to Barr's claims) that what linguistics is alleged to contribute to theology is only what philology has been doing all along, but that linguistics merely makes a renewed effort at doing it cautiously and carefully.[15] Linguistics and philology must be kept distinct, however, for each has its own role to play: The latter is concerned chiefly with particular texts and documents of literary value and with their content, whereas the former deals with language generally as a structured, social phenomenon. They are interrelated and overlap in a complementary way in the determination of semantic value for linguistic units (especially for words), in the analysis of texts as larger structures of language, and in attempts at determining the relation of language to thought.[16] Linguistic analysis functions not so much as a philosophical approach to Biblical texts (though in certain ways it does since there is not a universally held linguistic theory), but rather it operates as an instrument of observation whose "chief advantage in this respect is its absolute readiness to understand," thus providing a kind of cathartic effect for the theologian who has difficulty breaking loose from certain inherited but faulty views of language.[17] It affords Biblical theology and exegesis the needed sobriety—that is, a means of obtaining clarity, precision, and verification in the treatment of linguistic data, qualities otherwise more elusive.[18] As a scientific analysis of language and language meaning (fundamental characteristics of the "Word of God"), linguistics and semantics and the results of the application of their methods to the Biblical texts can form the basis both of exegetical and hermeneutical "rules" and of the

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[14]E.g. H. A. Gleason, "Linguistics in the Service of the Church" and "Some Contributions of Linguistics to Biblical Studies," *Hartford Quarterly* 1 (1961) 7-27 and 4/1 (1963) 47-56; E. A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 91 (1972) 73-89; R. Kieffer, "Die Bedeutung der modernen Linguistik für die Auslegung biblischer Texte," *TZ* 30 (1974) 223-233; A. C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* 75-104; idem, "The Semantics of Biblical Language as an Aspect of Hermeneutics," *Faith and Thought* 103/2 (1976) 108-120; J. F. A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research: New Methods of Defining Hebrew Words for Salvation* (SBT 2/24; Naperville: Allenson, 1972); and now, especially, M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

[15]E. Dinkler, "Die ökumenische Bewegung und die Hermeneutik," *TLZ* 94 (1969) 487.

[16]Nida, "Implications" 73-74. Cf. H. A. Gleason, "Linguistics and Philology," in *On Language, Culture, and Religion: In Honor of Eugene A. Nida* (ed. M. Black and W. A. Smalley; The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1974) 199-212, esp. 199-206.

[17]D. Ritschl, "Gefährdet die neue Sprachphilosophie die klassische Homiletik?", in *Wort und Gemeinde: Probleme und Aufgaben der praktischen Theologie* (Zurich: EVA, 1968) 221-222.

[18]K. A. Tångberg, "Lingvistikk og teologi: Forsök på analyse og vurdering av James Barrs anliggende i 'The Semantics of Biblical Language' og 'Biblical Words for Time,'" *TTKi* 42 (1971) 168. Cf. the complaint of G. C. Neal ("In the Original Greek," *TB* 12 [April 1963] 12-16), in which theologians are accused of "murdering language" in their dubious treatments of *koine.*

raw material on which these rules operate.[19] Though linguistic semantics has important limitations and must not be used in isolation from other methods of Biblical study,[20] it can cooperate with hermeneutics, for example, "firstly by providing a more precise tool for questions of exegesis and lexicography, secondly by distancing the interpreter from the text and allowing it to speak in its particularity, and thirdly by enabling the interpreter to view the text from a fresh angle of vision."[21]

What is actually being claimed then is not simply that semantics and linguistics are useful for Biblical scholarship but that an integration of many disciplines is useful whereby, to as great an extent as possible, attention is paid to the methods and results of all manner of sciences, in the interest of recognizing the implications for any particular one of them. This becomes especially important in Biblical studies where, as in other historical sciences, it is vital to be as well informed as possible about the multifaceted "context of situation" in which Biblical texts are to be interpreted. One facet of this context of situation, and one only, is that of the linguistic character of the texts, their character as samples of language as language. And as to this character it should not be surprising if there is nowadays a renewed interest in finding and using more adequate means of accounting for it. In the words of Danish theologian Børge Salomonsen, "theology must not isolate itself either scientifically or culturally; on the contrary, a great openness is required with regard to new methods and points of view, whether these have biblical warrant or not. Exclusivity probably preserves, but it hardly renews."[22]

III. RELUCTANCE

If it is true that the traditional linguistic methods of Biblical scholarship have been in need of reformulation, and if modern linguistics and semantics offer useful and helpful lines along which to do so, at least for the present, the question arises why theologians have not been quicker to take up the task. In a recent work, Ralph P. Martin, for instance, asserts rightly enough that "as students of Gospel history, we are responsible first to inquire about the revelation of God in the context of the past event. That exercise in historical inquiry demands a full knowledge of all we can ascertain about the literary, stylistic, cultural, and religious setting of a Gospel passage."[23] But conspicuous for its absence is any mention of the linguistic concerns that have been under discussion here. The language of the gospels and its interpretation as language are taken for granted, in spite of the profusion of literature on the subject, even within the theological

[19]Salomonsen, "Lingvistik" 31; Tångberg, "Lingvistikk" 162.

[20]Kieffer, "Bedeutung" 232-233; *Essais*, chap. 3, 51-78.

[21]Thiselton, "Semantics of Biblical Language" 118.

[22]Salomonsen, "Lingvistik" 57.

[23]R. P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975-8), 1. 45.

realm, that has been appearing ever since Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* was published in 1961. To what can this apparent reluctance to recognize the claims of linguistics on Biblical studies be attributed?

John Sawyer has called attention to the strange state of affairs that H. Gunkel's contribution (in 1906) of the concept of *Sitz im Leben* to Biblical studies was remarkably parallelled in linguistics some thirty years later by the development of the notion of "context of situation," but that although the two ideas are *mutatis mutandis* essentially the same the resemblance had never been pointed out.[24] It is Sawyer's contention that this mutual ignorance has been due to the radically different purposes for which the concepts were developed in their respective fields, but that it has also put both disciplines—Biblical studies and linguistics—some fifty years or so behind where they might have been had there been more interdisciplinary exchange.

Sawyer may well be correct in suggesting that the root of this mutual ignorance lay in the different purposes pursued by Biblical studies and linguistics respectively: the former pursuing the goal of reconstructing and interpreting an historical situation for distinctively religious purposes,[25] the latter being interested meanwhile in the task of describing a human phenomenon. But the problems for ready interchange have been compounded in the meantime by the independent development of each discipline.[26] Perhaps for Biblical scholars the most disquieting side of modern linguistics and of the recent theological works making use of it is the strange, esoteric terminology, and perhaps even more so the unfamiliar procedures. But of course the basic terminology and procedures are no more strange and esoteric to the nonlinguist than traditional theological terminology and procedures are to the nontheologian. It is a matter of learning them. In 1956 Harris Birkeland had called upon linguists to popularize and propagandize their methods for the benefit of Semitic scholars,[27] but by 1971 K. Arvid Tångberg felt that "since few linguists [had] shown interest in Biblical languages, it [was] no less than imperative that theologians should lay hold of the tools of linguistics with their *own* hands, and should take it upon themselves to follow the developments in the discipline."[28]

[24]J. F. A. Sawyer, "Context of Situation and Sitz im Leben: Some Questions Concerning Meaning in Classical Hebrew," *Proceedings of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne Philosophical Society* 1 (1967) 137-138.

[25]This had already been hinted at by H. Birkeland, "Some Reflexions on Semitic and Structural Linguistics," in *For Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday, 11 October 1956* (ed. M. Halle et al.; The Hague: Mouton, 1956) 49-50.

[26]Cf. the list of "inhibiting effects" of traditional assumptions about language in Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation" 76.

[27]Birkeland, "Some Reflexions" 50.

[28]Tångberg, "Lingvistikk" 180.

IV. REVEILLE

This last quotation should be softened somewhat in that numerous linguists from the ranks of Bible translators have interested themselves precisely in Biblical languages, as Tångberg himself is doubtless well aware. Periodicals like *The Bible Translator* (United Bible Societies) and *Notes on Translation* (Summer Institute of Linguistics) are by themselves ample proof of that. A casual browsing through the last dozen or so volumes of *NTA* (since Tångberg's article) will, moreover, demonstrate that interest in this interdisciplinary territory has definitely been aroused.

Nevertheless the field is wide open. An enormous amount of work needs to be done in reevaluating and reanalyzing the Biblical languages and literature from points of view informed by modern linguistic theory. Transformational-generative grammar, case grammar, syntactic distribution, co-occurrence data, semantic fields, meaning relations, componential analysis, and many other theories, concepts and techniques from linguistics can be and are being fruitfully applied in Biblical studies. An immense variety of problems in Biblical grammar, lexicography, stylistics, exegesis and translation are open to the fresh approaches these tools afford. This present opportunity is an ideal one for evangelicals to answer G. W. Bromiley's timely call to "theological creativity"[29] by making significant, positive contributions on a cutting edge of the scholarly study of the Scriptures. Any pre-theology student, any seminarian, any graduate student casting about for a thesis topic—indeed, any Biblical scholar who has the inclination—ought to be encouraged to take up this awesome task. We are poor stewards if we make so little use of the vast amount of knowledge now pouring forth from the disciplines of structural linguistics and semantics.[30]

[29]G. W. Bromiley, "Evangelicals and Theological Creativity, *Themelios* 5 n.s. (1979) 4-8.

[30]This article is a slightly altered form of the introductory chapter of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, "Biblical Semantics, Semantic Structure, and Biblical Lexicology: A Study of Methods, with Special Reference to the Pauline Lexical Field of 'Cognition'" (Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980; University Microfilms no. 80-20940).