

A GUIDE TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND EXEGESIS

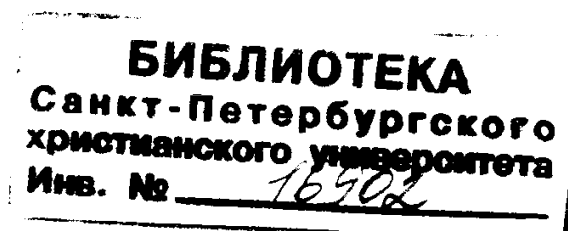
The Introductory Articles from the
*New International Dictionary of
Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*

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Zondervan Publishing House
Grand Rapids, Michigan

A Division of HarperCollins Publishers



PART IV: SEMANTICS, INTERPRETATION, AND THEOLOGY

There has been much abuse in the interpretation of the Bible. Interpreters rival one another in setting forth their distinctive, and relative, understanding of the text. How can interpreters and readers of the text develop a common set of ground rules for interpretation? What is the nature of language and of human communication? What are the principles of understanding human speech, and how do these principles extend to understanding written communication? The authors of these next two articles (Cotterell and Walton) investigate the problems in communication and set forth clear and precise steps in determining basic steps of interpretation. Insofar as there have been so many bad interpretations, and, to our chagrin, some have abused theological dictionaries, we must develop a basic set of rules of engaging with the text and of resisting inferior approaches.

The essay by Peter Cotterell is groundbreaking work, covering the whole range of linguistics, semantics, and discourse analysis. Readers with a more pragmatic bend may want to scan this article and study carefully John Walton's article on principles for productive word study. The title of this article is a little deceiving, because it could suggest that the author favors the older word-study approach. Instead, you will find that he, too, favors the discourse meaning of a word. (VanGemeran)

7. LINGUISTICS, MEANING, SEMANTICS, AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A. Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation

1. *The nature of language.* Human language is a highly sophisticated, complex, but ultimately imprecise communication system or semiotic. It has its origins in a desire, an intention, to communicate. It originates inaccessibly in a human mind. The sociolinguist H. P. Grice would insist that text originates not in a *mind* but in a *person*, reacting against the concept of a psychological other. Spoken language is primary, an attempt to express the inaccessible intention in sound. Written language is secondary, conforming to the primary spoken form in ways specific to each particular language. Written language makes use of a **more-or-less** arbitrary analysis of spoken language to produce a second level system of symbols, more-or-less accurately representing the features of the primary form. A speaker produces a sequence of sounds, which is then analyzed phonetically and phonemically to identify the essential sound system, grammatically to identify what are arbitrarily labeled words, roots, and affixes, and syntactically to identify complete sequences and their constituent elements.

Minimal units may then be systematically identified. Minimal units of sound are termed phonemes, minimal units of grammatical form are termed morphemes. Rather than speak of a minimal word form we speak of a *lexeme*, the arbitrary unit underlying, for example, such word forms as *sang*, *sing*, *singer*, *singing*. In this example, the lexeme is "sing" (see John Lyons, 101). Minimal syntactical units are syntagmemes. At these lower levels of analysis the process can claim a certain measure of objectivity. At the next, and arguably most significant level, however, the level of semantics, the identification of the minimal unit, the sememe, proves to be more

difficult (Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressier, 20). Even more difficult is the process of identifying spoken text meaning through the summation of the contributions of phonemes, morphemes, syntagmemes, and sememes present in the text.

More difficult again is the task of interpreting the corresponding written text. The text now is clearly largely robbed of its phonetic component, represented by arbitrary visual symbols but still in measure corresponding to the original spoken text. Written language, in practice, involves language with two absences: the absence of the speaker and the absence of the referents. The interpretation of a written text involves some measure of dialogue with the speaker and some attempt to identify the referents.

It is precisely these absences that precipitate the problem of **polysemy**—the range of possible meanings of the words **used**—in the written text. With the presence of the speaker there is experienced what has been termed a metaphysics of presence, but what might better be termed a metalinguistic of presence, providing its own bounds to polysemy. With the speaker and author removed, that is to say with a written text, a plurality of text meaning may be identified by the deprived, or, arguably, by the liberated, reader (see Anthony C. Thiselton, 83).

This process of interpreting written language is ultimately an art rather than a science, still less an exact science. We are dealing with a semiotic that we employ without, in general, being overtly aware of the code that lies behind it. We learn to employ hyperbole, litotes, and metaphor, to use rhetoric as individual devices or as sequential schemes: We learn to identify implicature, and even to create for a text an appropriate context, without consciously identifying the devices we employ. The meaning of what we receive or of what we transmit is encoded in a highly complex manner and is interpreted by reference to an intuitive awareness of the code, and not by a labored but precise evaluation of the speech units and the aggregation of units of meaning.

For example, a speaker generated a sequence (or an author supposed a character to have generated a sequence) that could be represented by *I am Esau your firstborn* (Gen 27:19) (or rather the Heb. equivalent, a further problem). The information recorded in this transcript is heavily edited. We do not know anything (from this text alone, although the surrounding text, the cotext, as we shall see, tells us a good deal) about the setting in which the sequence was generated, we do not know what time of day it was, and we do not know what the person addressed was wearing; we are not told whether or not the speaker bowed, held out his hand in **paralinguistic** gesture, or made some other gesture, nor what his facial expression was. And yet we know from our own use of language that any of this information might be important in interpreting the sequence.

Thus, in Prov 6:12-14 the worthless person is described as one who goes about "with a corrupt speech, who winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, and motions with his finger, who plots evil with deceit in his heart." Here are three gestures, and yet we cannot be sure of the meaning of any one of them. Prov 10:10 comments: "He who winks maliciously causes trouble, but he who boldly reproves makes peace." The parallel and semantically determinative phrase "he who boldly reproves" has the Septuagint as its source since the corresponding Heb. text "and a chattering fool comes to ruin" appears to be unrelated to any conceivable antithesis to the significance of winking. But this uncertainty leaves us without any sure guide to the significance of winking.

The psalmist prays, "Let not those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause; let not those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye" (Ps 35:19). In contrast to the significance of contemporary Western gesture, winking in the OT culture was never mere facetiousness. It is "always associated with sin"; in Semitic Ethiopian culture to wink at a woman is to invite her to have sex.

Not only are we without information on gesture in the Jacob text, but we also lack information regarding the intonation pattern employed for the sequence, the medial *loudness* of the speech, the pitch of the speaker's voice, or the place of stress within the sequence. This is, of course, typical of written text, typical of the two absences, of speaker and of referent.

We may go further: Although the import of the sequence is quite clear, that the name of the speaker is Esau, in fact we know (either from general knowledge or from reading the cotext) that his name was not Esau. We conclude, then, that the meaning of a sequence is not, after all, merely some kind of summation of the meanings of the constituent elements that comprise the sequence. We need also to know the cotext, the total text of which the sequence is a part. That in turn requires that we identify the boundaries of the text, those limits within which we may expect to locate the clues that might serve to resolve our inescapable exegetical uncertainties, before proceeding to an analysis of any part of it. In the present example, expanding the analysis of the text into its immediate cotext shows that the speaker's name was Jacob, and that he was presenting himself to his father as Esau, his elder brother.

We are confronted here by the essential difference between a *sentence* and an *utterance*, a useful distinction that will generally be maintained in this article. A sentence has no immediate cotext and no sociological context. The *sentence* rendered as "I am Esau your firstborn" does mean what it appears to mean: that the speaker is someone's firstborn son and is named Esau. The sentence may be generated by a speaker or may be written down, but there is no cotext that could bring into question the information being communicated within the limits of that sentence. An *utterance* has both **context—the social milieu in which it is generated—and cotext**, and the meaning of an utterance must be determined in the light of text, cotext, and context. That is to say, *the meaning of an utterance cannot be determined merely by reference to dictionary, lexicon, thesaurus, and grammar*. The possible range of meanings and the probable meaning of an ancient utterance may be ascertained through dictionary, grammar, thesaurus, lexicon, context, cotext, encyclopedia, history, geography, and a knowledge of linguistics and especially of sociolinguistics and discourse structure.

Moreover, we note that each utterance, even though it may use "the same" words as another utterance, will nonetheless have a unique singular meaning because it necessarily has a unique singular context. To make the point quite clearly, if a speaker generates the utterance "That is a horse," and someone else repeats "That is a horse," the time context of the latter utterance is different from that of the former and that will be so even if *the same speaker* repeats "the same" utterance. The meaning of the second utterance must be different from that of the first utterance precisely because it follows that first utterance. The meaning of each utterance is determined from an assessment of the linguistic elements it contains, the cotext of which it is a part, and the context within which it was generated.

Perhaps it should be added here, that this view of the process of the interpretation of a text is very different from Schleiermacher's concept of a psychological absorption into the text. We are now reasonably confident that because of our prereading of texts an objective and existential re-creation of any ancient context is denied to us. However, this does not deny to us the attempt *objectively* to re-create that context, without attempting *existentially* to experience it.

2. *Language: Barr's critique.* Biblical exegesis has suffered until comparatively recently from the manner in which academic disciplines tended to be isolated from one another. In particular theologians were largely unaware of new insights into the interpretation of texts commonplace amongst secular linguists. The end of this *jahiliya* age of ignorance was arguably signaled to theologians by the appearance of the seminal work by James Barr, later Regius Professor of Hebrew in the University of Oxford, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 1961. In this work Barr began by acknowledging two particular features of theological language as contrasted with the language of everyday speech. First, theological language exhibits special semantic developments; words are assigned particular and technical meanings. But at the same time Barr was aware of the danger of supposing that theological language represents a unique strand of language, exempt from those generalities observed elsewhere in language. Thus, observations made of the general phenomenon of human language can with confidence be applied also to theological language. Of course, there are those semantic specializations that have parallels in such disciplines as law and philosophy, medicine, and physics.

Second, Barr recognized that the interpretation of theological language and especially of biblical language must have a significant datum in the past. The process of exegesis involves not merely the interpretation of a text but the transculturation of meanings. This observation bears particularly on the fact that theological texts, far more than legal texts, are subject to attempts at exegesis by individuals who lack those skills that lay open to them the datum in the past and so supply the only reliable key to responsible exegesis.

It has to be said that although the Bible may well be understandable in the main by the reasonably educated individual, there can be no expectation that any *translation* can be produced that makes the meaning of the original text transparent to the ploughman. Barr went further by insisting that the study of grammar, and, more particularly, the study of words, their meanings, their etymologies, their cognates in related languages, could not lead even the best of scholars into reliable exegesis *without a profound understanding of the way in which language itself functions to communicate meaning*.

Takamitsu Muraoka, in his seminal work *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew*, published in 1985 but based on his doctoral thesis of 1969-70, warns that "versional evidence and comparative Semitic parallels possess only secondary value" in determining the meaning of a particular text, and goes on to state that

. . . before pronouncing a final judgment about the emphasizing function ascribable to a certain form or structure in a given place, the text and the wider context in which it is found must be closely examined (XVII).

The welcome caution displayed here may owe something to the earlier (p. vii) acknowledgment made to the critical reading of the manuscript by Barr. Certainly Barr

would approve of the principle of cotext and context representing the primary evidence for any particular interpretation of a text, with versional evidence and the evidence of cognate languages taking a secondary place.

3. *Reading strategies.* I lived in Ethiopia for many years and was struck by the beauty of the oleander bush. It is hardy, surviving in almost waterless conditions. It is beautiful, with a brilliant waxy red flower. It is one of the few plants that is not eaten by animals, domestic or wild. However, every part of it is highly toxic. I was warned of the danger posed to my children by having this plant growing in our gardens, and to be sure of my facts I obtained a letter from the Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens in London on the dangers of the oleander. The chemical concerned was named hydrocyanic acid, and its use in some gas chambers in the USA was noted. Examples of past incidents, going back to Hannibal, in which people died from sucking a leaf or stem, were quoted. The advice was clear (to me): The plant should not be in our gardens. My neighbor was a keen gardener, with plenty of those plants in his garden. He read the letter: "It's not so bad after all, is it?" The "objective text" depends for its interpretation on the reader: He was anxious to preserve his garden while I was anxious to preserve my children, and our respective reading strategies enabled us to perceive "the same" text as we wished.

Until the second half of the twentieth century scientists were content to allow the myth of scientific objectivity to remain as the distinctive characteristic of their researches. A similar mythological epistemology could be seen in the humanities, with both ideals arguably going back to Descartes and his concept of the human observer impacting on an essentially passive and objective world. In biblical studies the supposed scientific ideal has until recently been that pursued by scholars, so that the text has only rarely been related to the real but subjectively perceived world, either the real ancient world (except in its sterilized scholarly form) or the contemporary world into which, at least for the church, it is supposed to speak. The consequences for the church have been tragic: The discoveries of the scholars have been perceived to be irrelevant, the questions asked by the scholars have not been the questions asked by the church, and the church has turned in despair away from scholarship to charismatic but often **unscholarly** preachers.

In Christian Bible conventions it has been customary to make use of the massacre of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) for the sake of **Samuel's** apophthegm "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (v. 22), with no reference at all to the moral problem posed by the massacre apparently commanded by **Yahweh** (vv. 1-3). Similarly the Esther narrative has been expounded without any real consideration of the exploitation of women, whether of Vashti or of the young women, gathered together like so many cattle, for the king's approval. As far back as 1973 Wink called for the combining of critical textual scholarship with a recognition of biblical text as that which stands over against us and questions our beliefs and practices rather than merely reinforcing them (see Walter Wink, 32).

In reading we necessarily adopt a strategy that is designed to enable us to understand the text. We make assumptions about the **text**—its structure and the intention of its author or editor. But these assumptions are not infrequently self-serving, aimed at ensuring that the text should confirm existing prejudices rather than challenge them. We then have a conflict between *intentio operis*, the intention of the discourse, and

intentio lectoris, the intention of the discourse as determined by the reader's strategy. The contrast is readily seen in the oleander illustration above, but also from the account of the massacre of the Amalekites: In the interests of piety the text is not interrogated at certain points. Perhaps even more obvious is the insistence by some readers, in the interests of a teetotal conviction, that the wine produced by Jesus at Cana was unfermented wine (cf. John 2:10!).

4. *Meaning*. Semantics subsumes a subsidiary science concerned with text-meaning. In normal usage it would be expected that we could ask what the meaning of a text was and expect to find a generally acceptable answer. A little thought will show that this is an assumption and that in some literary forms there is explicitly nothing corresponding to a text-meaning. Anthony Thiselton (I think uniquely) has drawn attention to the Zen *koan*, a text-form that observes the usual grammatical and linguistic regularities but that explicitly has no text-meaning (119). The *koan* may be an apparently normal text, "Who is it that recites the name of the Buddha?" or it may be an apparently nonsensical but grammatical string, "The sound of one hand clapping." The Zen master is concerned to bring the **student** to the point where the *koan* is resolved not by analysis of any kind, but by intuition. The student takes the *koan* and "slowly recites the words of the question and watches it as a cat watches a mouse, trying to bore deeper and deeper into it, till he reaches the point from which it comes and intuitively its meaning" (Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 1990, 274).

The postmodernist **deconstructionist** approach to text has clear affinities with the Zen perception of the role of language. Strings of words have apparent superficial "meanings" which, however, cloak the true function of language, which is not to communicate any intended meaning but to activate intuitive meaning. The meaning for one intuiter need have no relation whatever to that of another. In other words, the process of deconstruction as exemplified in J. D. Crossan (see *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, 1975), for example, starts from the denial of embodied meaning and replaces the traditional emphasis on cognitive content with a concern for *the form* of the linguistic vehicle.

This approach certainly serves to remedy the traditional concern with text as though it were no more (and no less) than a shopping list. It emphasizes the emotive force of text and the role of intuition in perceiving text as more than a mere summation of lexicon and grammar. But epistemologically the approach offers serious problems to those who assume that a text not only has cognitive content, but also has ethical imperatives and, still more, objective prophetic significance.

Deconstruction, then, serves a positive function, liberating text from a deterministic framework of abstract theory and returning it to its free function of a limited and yet indeterminate subjectivism. The problem, well perceived by many linguists, is that deconstruction linguistics tends towards nihilism, and its more radical expression in such writers as Stanley Fish and Jacques **Derrida** must be tempered so as to leave the reader with a text that has a real and knowable embodied meaning.

At the present time we are confronted by some measure of polarization amongst linguists, with E. D. Hirsch, H. P. **Grice**, and Wayne Booth defending the more traditional understanding of text-meaning, and with Jacques Derrida, Paul De Man, and Stanley Fish promoting what has been described as **deconstructive** nihilism or (more objectively!) as Reader-Response theory. Somewhere between the two we may place

Wolfgang Iser's Reception theory. For an introduction to this complex and fluid debate see Anthony Thiselton's magisterial *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, ch. 2, "What Is a Text?"

With these preliminary reflections we move to the more traditional questioning of the locus of text-meaning.

B. The Source of Meaning

Amongst linguists there continues to be debate on the question of the locus of meaning in a text. There are broadly three options: that meaning lies in the text alone, that meaning lies in the intention of the author of the text, or that meaning lies in the reader of the text. It is intuitively apparent that there is a measure of truth in all three possibilities, and that alone is sufficient to warn us against any uncritical and exclusive adoption of one or other of them.

1. *The objective text.* The text is, of course, the objective reality, whether it is a written text or a spoken text. *This* is what was said or written. However, when the phrase *objective reality* is used, it applies solely and exclusively to the sounds used or the symbols written, and not at all to whatever *meaning* or *intention* might be supposed to lie behind the sounds or the symbols. Meaning and intention are always subjectively derived from objective text. And even here we must further modify our position since we never process the whole of any aurally perceived message, but subjectively filter out such elements as we assume to be irrelevant or unimportant.

It then appears that in using a term such as *objective* to describe any aspect of a text, we must disassociate it from the human interpretive sequence. But it is then arguable that we do not have a text at all, nor any communication. We have only a complex pattern of air pressures or a set of written symbols but with no receiver to decode them. However, for the present we may assume, with a mental note of caution, that a written text consists of a set of coded symbols and exists unchallenged as such. Is such a text of itself susceptible to interpretation as having a single, agreed, and identifiable meaning?

If the text includes the utterance "I am Esau your firstborn," it must certainly be distinguished from a nearby utterance, "My son ... Who is it?" But since we have already seen that the meaning of the utterance "I am Esau your firstborn" is significantly different from its apparent meaning, it is clear that reference to an utterance in isolation will not in all cases lead to a correct understanding of its meaning. Indeed the situation is sometimes made complex by the rhetorical device of ambiguity. Modern **Amharic**, and before it classical Ethiopic, developed an entire literary genre known as *sem inna werq*, "wax and gold," in which each word, each phrase, each sequence might be seen either as (relatively valueless) wax, an external dressing, or as significant (but indelicate or potentially politically compromising) gold, the concealed essence of word, phrase, sequence. In the cafes of Addis Ababa in the early 1960s the apparently unexceptionable "wax" toast, "Government! The government!" **Mengist! Mengistu!** was regularly heard. The "gold" was rather different: *Mengistu* Neway was recently hanged, a popular revolutionary leader of the 1960 attempt to overthrow Haile Sellassie (Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold*, 1965).

This at once raises a further point still vigorously debated by linguists: Is there such a thing as *the correct meaning* of a text? Granted that we must accept that some

supposed interpretations of a text are simply crass, obtuse, absurd, or even impenetrable, is it possible to assert that there is a uniquely correct meaning to be assigned to it?

Traditionally literary scholars have debated the *meanings* of their texts, separating out the "scientific," or "standard" or "normal" use of language from the "poetic" or "emotive" use of language, classifying the poetic forms, developing principles for their interpretation, and assuming that texts using "normal" language "are in no need of such interpretive tools." (See Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader," in his *Is There a Text in This Class?* 1980, especially his comments on Riffaterre's distinction between ordinary and poetic language, 59ff.) But the very concept of "scientific" or "normal" or even "normative" language must be challenged, first because there is no taxonomy that can delimit the normal, but second because the category "poetry" does not represent a **boundaried** class. All language, written or spoken, has a context, that context always involves individual speakers, and every **speaker's** use of language, whether sending or receiving, is idiosyncratic, always consisting of an undefined and unknowable mixture of denotation and connotation. In other words, all language may be represented as a poetical or rhetorical continuum with every particular expression of language having a place somewhere along that continuum.

It has to be said that no *extended* text (and there is no generalized means of defining the minimum level of extension required) has a single objective meaning defined by the text **itself**. And the reason for this is the essential imprecision of the language semiotic and its connotations, and of its function as necessarily involving multiple persons.

2. *Authorial intention*. If, surrendering the concept of the autonomy of the objective text, we locate meaning in the intention of the author, requiring the multiplicity of receivers to abandon their warring perceptions and submit to the **author's** intention, we are confronted by a different set of problems. Perhaps the most obvious of these, in the case of biblical text, is the fact that the authors are long since dead, and their intentions are usually not available to us. And even where the intentions *are* stated, they are stated as part of the text, not as a mind printout (cf. the prefaces to Luke and Acts, and 1 John 2:1, "I write this to you so that you will not sin").

Second, we have the problem of linguistic competence to face. The readily demonstrable fact is that we may, because of linguistic incompetence, both say and write not merely what we do not intend, but the very opposite of what we intend. Lessing's slip has become the classic example, in which Emilia's mother is made to say, "My God! If your father knew that! How angry he was already to learn that the prince had seen you *not without displeasure*" (Cotterell and Turner, 58). The cotext makes it perfectly clear that what was *intended* was that the prince had seen Emilia and been pleased by her, but a vigorous litotes has defeated the linguistic competence of the author. The celebrated statement in 1 Cor 14:22 may have a similar explanation: "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers." The immediate cotext, however, states unequivocally that the unbeliever hearing tongues would think the speakers mad, but that unbelievers hearing prophecy would be convicted and would be led to worship God. There are too many negatives in the crucial statement, and J. B. Phillips in his paraphrase supplies what he considers to be the *discourse meaning* of the text, that glossolalia provides *a sign* for believers and prophecy *a sign* for unbelievers." (For a discussion of the

significance of the omission of the second "sign for" in connection with prophecy, see D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 1987, ch. 4.) But already the reader has intruded into the text and has made an assumption about the intention of the author.

3. *Reader-Response theory* (see Jane Tompkins [ed.], 1980). Consider the narrative relating to Mephibosheth in 2 Sam 9-19. The story is part of the longer court narrative of David and Saul. Saul has died, and David asks: "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (9:1). By the end of the chapter Mephibosheth has been found and is established at David's court: "He always ate at the king's table." In ch. 15 David is forced to flee from Jerusalem because of a coup mounted by Absalom. He is met by Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, who tells David that Mephibosheth has elected to stay in Jerusalem, hoping that the revolt will mean the restoration of the kingdom to Saul's successors. David believes Ziba and rewards him with the grant of all **Mephibosheth's** lands. In ch. 19 David returns to Jerusalem after the revolt. Mephibosheth meets him, and we now are told that since David left Jerusalem, he had not cared either for his person or his clothes. Ziba, he insists, had deceived him. David now decides that **Mephibosheth's** lands should be equally shared between the two men.

So much for the text. But how is it to be understood? What does it mean? A multitude of questions have to be considered: Was Mephibosheth being honored, or merely put into protective custody when David brought him to Jerusalem? Did Mephibosheth understand the situation? Why did he remain in Jerusalem rather than accompany David? Had he accompanied David, surely his lameness would have been a hindrance, possibly a fatal hindrance, to David. As a fellow fugitive would he, in fact, have been more of a threat to David than as a potential rival in Jerusalem? Did Ziba tell the truth, half of the truth, or a total lie? Did David believe him . . . after all, David sequestered **Mephibosheth's** land? During David's absence had Mephibosheth really neglected himself as the narrative says, or was this a quickly adopted subterfuge to allow him to escape from a dangerous situation? Whom did David believe? Why did he divide the land between them? Was it to save face after his earlier unjust decision? Was it because he really did not know whom to believe?

Throughout the story we are given no clue at all as to the characters of Ziba or Mephibosheth. The reader today might well be inclined to take the side of the old man Mephibosheth, to see him as a man of integrity, his infirmity exploited by Ziba, and so to assign to Ziba a sneaking, sycophantic, grasping role. But there is no more evidence in support of the one view than of the other. In other words, even given an *objective* text, the reader must *subjectively* interrogate it for its meaning, at each point in the development of the story modifying any views previously held and projecting forwards to anticipated future developments. No reader who had read as far as ch. 15 could fail to anticipate a further encounter between the three protagonists, David, Ziba, and Mephibosheth, and yet there is nothing in the *objective* text to announce such a development.

In some measure we have already brought into question the more traditional assumption that any text has a foundational meaning. Jacques **Derrida's** celebrated statement that a text has no meaning represents the extreme expression of antifoundational theory. Defending his own fiercely held but perhaps less extreme antifoundationalist position, Stanley Fish (1989, 29) insists that its essence

is not that there are no foundations, but whatever foundations there are (and there are always some) have been established by persuasion, that is, in the course of argument and counter-argument on the basis of examples and evidence that are themselves cultural and contextual.

In other words, any conclusions we may draw with respect to the **Mephibosheth** narratives will be consensus conclusions, not conclusions forced upon us by the text, and the consensus will be determined by cultural factors and by the context within which the consensus is reached.

In the same compendium of his essays, Fish discusses the effect of *authority* on interpretation by reference to C. S. Lewis's well-known and, in 1942, plainly stated disapproval of the concluding books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Such was the scholarly stature of C. S. Lewis that for some years his view of that part of Milton's work was obediently echoed by other scholars. Today, arguably at a safe and sufficient distance from 1942, scholars are divided on the question of the literary merit of the chapters. Of course the text itself has not changed. The cultural factors and the context within which the text is discussed have changed, and it is these that have determined the interpretation of the text, not the text itself.

To take a more immediately relevant example, it has been a commonplace of NT scholarship to assign late dates to most of the books of the NT and to question their traditional authorship. In 1976 John Robinson published *Redating the New Testament*, in which he dated the whole of the NT before AD 70, and to drive home the lesson appended a letter from no less a scholar than C. H. Dodd affirming:

You are certainly justified in questioning the whole structure of the accepted "critical" chronology of the NT writings, which avoids putting anything earlier than 70, so that none of them are available for anything like first-generation testimony. I should agree with you that much of this late dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the off-spring not of any argument that can be presented, but rather of the critic's prejudice that if he appears to assent to the traditional position of the early church he will be thought no better than a stick-in-the-mud. The whole business is due for radical re-examination (360).

Contemporary scholarship has yet to come to terms either with John Robinson, whose views could be dismissed, or with C. H. Dodd, whose views could not. The point is, however, that the interpretation of text is not in fact determined by an objective text alone, nor by author intention alone or with text, cotext and context, but by all of this moderated through the subjectivity of the reader and the reader's culture and context.

4. *Discourse meaning.* With the debate amongst the linguists unresolved, we must still come to some conclusions about the locus of meaning in biblical text. First of all it seems that the distinction between *meaning* and a multiplicity of *significances* is still valuable. Behind the text stands an author, an editor, a redactor, with some intention lying behind the production of the text. We have no access to that intention, although an understanding of contemporary and cognate languages and cultures, of related texts, of grammar, syntax, lexicography, and possibly some knowledge of the

author might at least indicate what the intention was *not*, and might even indicate what it was.

The clear overtones of a humanistic nihilism apparent in the more radical forms of Reader-Response theory are to be resisted. They appear to be designed not so much to explain texts as to dissolve significant meaning and to enthrone relativity in the person of the reader. As Thiselton (56) quotes Paul Ricoeur:

Writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text *signifies* no longer coincides with what the author meant.

The difficulty here is first that Ricoeur does not, in fact, distinguish between meaning and significance, so that he asserts a distinction between authorial intention and meaning, and second, he appears to assert that the meaning intended by an author is *necessarily* different from the meaning perceived by the reader. That the intention of an author *might* not be perceived by a reader is admitted; to suggest that it *cannot* be perceived by a reader is simply perverse. To take an entirely trite example, when the author of 2 Sam 11:17 writes: "Uriah the Hittite died" or "When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him" (11:26), the reader does not have the meanings "Uriah died" or "Uriah's widow mourned" excluded from the interpretive process.

A text is a communicative occurrence that meets seven standards of *textuality* (Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressier, 1981), and of these seven standards the first three have particular importance: They are grammatical and syntactical cohesion, semantic coherence, and intentionality. That is to say, an author produces a communicative text consisting of related strings across which there are certain constants (pro-forms having identifiable antecedents, for example) and with the meanings of the strings related so as to produce a topic or theme or thematic net. The reader seeks to identify the *discourse meaning* of the text.

The term *discourse meaning* is particularly important. On the one hand, we seek to avoid the notion of the semantic autonomy of the text. A text cannot carry *any* meaning, but it does carry a meaning *intended* by the original speaker or author, related to the context within which it was generated and the cotext of which it is a part. On the other hand, we avoid also the complete relativity of meaning inevitable when meaning is no more than that meaning perceived by the reader, however much that meaning might appear to others to be inimical to the objective text. In approaching a text, then, we are searching first for the *discourse meaning* and not for the *significance* of the text for us. It is certainly true that in some instances we may be forever unsure of what the intended meaning was, and we may have to admit to the possibility of several distinct meanings. But again it must be emphasized that the range of possible meanings is not infinite: Uriah was *dead*, not attending a banquet in Jerusalem.

The issue of the locus of meaning is particularly important in the case of biblical text. Rightly or wrongly, biblical text, along with other sacred texts and most didactic and historical material, is perceived as having an external, forensic, hortatory role in relation to the reader. It is expected that the text will challenge assumptions, mores, expectations, and value systems by placing them alongside an alternative system. If the

relativization of Reader-Response theory is accepted then, as Thiselton has pointed out (531):

the text can never transform us and correct us "*from outside*." There can be no prophetic address from beyond. This may still leave room for a measure of *creativity and surprise* in *literary* reading for *in such cases it does not profoundly matter whether it is ultimately the self* who brings about its own creative discoveries. But in the case of many biblical texts, theological truth claims constitute more than triggers to set self-discovery in motion (even if they are not less than this). If such concepts as "grace" or "revelation" have any currency, texts of this kind speak *not from the self, but from beyond the self*.

The process of seeking both meaning and significance should be expected to involve some form of hermeneutical circle. See, for example, the concise description of Gadamer's hermeneutical circle in Donald McKim (ed., 90). There is the naive approach to the text, informed by the **reader's** own preunderstanding of it. This should be expected to be followed by a dialogue with the text, in which the questions brought to the text and the presuppositions brought to the text are interrogated, modified, and reformed by the text, leading to a new approach to the same text. As with Zen Buddhism the text is first of all a text, then as the hermeneutical circle operates it is anything but a text, until finally if the circle is followed with perseverance, it becomes a text again. It is, in a term we have already employed, *intuited*. The process may be compared with the mathematical process of iteration, in which the solution to a problem is adduced, but with some admitted measure of imprecision, and the solution is then fed back into the problem so that a more precise solution may be found, which in its turn can be fed into the equation. The recognition of the hermeneutical circle ought not to be seen as necessarily committing the linguist to accepting the essential subjectivity of all text, but rather to an awareness of a process by which probable interpretations of text may become more probable.

5. *Speech-act theory*. Language is used to send and receive information; it is *propositional*. But the philosopher J. L. Austin has noted in a series of important books and articles (especially *How to Do Things With Words*, 1962) that while an utterance might be propositional, or *constative*, it might also be *performative*. To take the most obvious **example**, when ministers say, "I pronounce you man and wife," they do more than "pronounce"; new relationships are created by the utterance. The uttering of the words is clearly an *act*, and the act is termed a *locution*. But the uttering of the particular words has consequences, it is an *act* performed by the speaker in virtue of the locution, and this speech-act is termed an illocution. **Illocutionary** acts include promising, a judge sentencing a criminal, a jury announcing its verdict, and apologizing. Austin proposed a third category of **utterances**, *perlocutionary* utterances, which produce an existential response such as anger or repentance in the auditor.

From the above it is clear that speech-act theory is relevant for utterances but not for sentences, since in many cases the identification of a locution as being **illocutionary** depends on its context. The string, "I pronounce you man and wife" occurring in a grammar ("The words 'I pronounce you man and wife' is a sentence") is not **illocutionary** and only becomes so when used in an appropriate context.

The identification of **illocutionary** utterances is by no means easy, and the classification of such utterances is still more difficult because such utterances do not necessarily include a performative vb. (e.g., "I pronounce"; the utterance, "I'll see you tomorrow morning" is a promise, it commits me to being in a certain place at a certain time and is therefore illocutionary although it contains no performative vb.). Conversely, the presence of such a performative vb. is not necessarily an indication of illocution. Further, as M. Stubbs has shown, there need be no *illocutionary force indicating device* (**IFID**) present in the utterance at all (*Discourse Analysis*, 1983, especially ch. 8; see J. Lyons, *Semantics*, 1977, 16.1). The most readily recognized illocutionary utterances are those containing a first person, present, performative vb.

When Yahweh says to Abraham, "I will bless you; I will make your name great" (Gen 12:2), the utterance is illocutionary: An act is performed that produces a changed situation for Abraham and his descendants. Similarly, the informative statement made by Yahweh to **Rebekah** is illocutionary although it contains no IFID: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (25:23). In analytical terms it is the failure first of Rebekah and subsequently of Jacob to recognize the illocutionary force of these words that provides the topic holding together the subsequent Jacob discourse.

Anthony **Thiselton** was in the forefront of theologians who recognized the significance of speech-act theory in general and the work of J. L. Austin in particular for certain aspects of biblical exegesis (see esp. ch. 8). On the one hand was the problem posed by the covenant language of the OT, and on the other was the question of the proper understanding of the NT parables. Many utterances assigned in Scripture to God or attributed to Jesus are clearly illocutionary in form or are presented as having performed irrevocable acts (see the pathetic cry of Jacob to his son Esau: "I have blessed **him**—**and** indeed he will be blessed" (Gen 27:33). Jacob was blessed not because of some "magic" that was irreversible, not because of **Isaac's** superstitions, but because Isaac had no means to "**unbless**" Jacob (18). Thiselton also rightly recognized the importance of distinguishing between what any given speech-act necessarily produced, and what a speech-act could be shown **ontologically** to have produced. And again Thiselton recognized that formal illocutionary acts depend for their validity on the *authority* of their author, at the same time refuting the thesis that the "power language" of the OT merely reflected the primitive animistic worldview of the Hebrew writers.

Austin had himself identified what he **termed** *felicity conditions*, which must be satisfied if an illocution is to be nondefective. Felicity conditions includes sincerity in the locution, that is to say, the **speaker's** intention is sincere. Insincerity, while not necessarily invalidating the illocution, at least makes it defective. The same is true of commitment to the illocution from within the **speaker's** more general set of beliefs and practices. However, the most important of these felicity conditions is the authority condition: An illocution may be defective or even ineffective if the speaker lacks the authority required for it. The utterance "I pronounce you man and wife" has no illocutionary effect when pronounced by a child to children.

The illocutionary force of the wide range of covenant language in the OT and the *kyrios* language of the NT depends for its validity on the authority of God. This is

expressed first in the **illocutionary** language of creation: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:3), second in the *exercitive* or *directive* illocution: "And the LORD God commanded the man ..." (2:16), third in the promissory **Noahic** illocution, precursor of the **Abrahamic** and Mosaic covenants, and fourth in the declaratory locution reported by Paul: Jesus was "declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). We note also Phil 2:9. It is a consequence of this fundamental illocution that "the Lord" can now judge (1 Cor 4:4) or commend (2 Cor 10:18) or save (Rom 10:9). In the OT the authority of **Yahweh** over his people is inculcated in them by reference to his authority over nature expressed in illocutionary language: "He spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.... He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed" (Ps 107:25-29).

Thiselton demonstrates that the illocutions ascribed to Jesus by Matthew are systematically integrated with illustrations of Matthew's **Christology**. In one sense this is restrained since the ultimate illocution is the resurrection, and yet within the time span of the Incarnation some assertion of authority for Jesus must be given if his illocutions are to be accorded validity by the reader. Thiselton asks:

Why should the reader be involved? The answer concerns the **Christological** presuppositions on the basis of which the series of illocutionary acts depicted by Matthew operate: language which brings forgiveness; language which stills the storm; language which authorizes and assigns a role. If the implicit Christology is false, the entire performative and exercitive dimension collapses and falls to the ground as nothing more than a construct of pious human imagination (288-89).

C. Lexical Semantics

Words are symbols available to an author to be given significance by being attached to a referent, an object, or an event. Of itself a word has no meaning at all. The father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, formalized the principle that the units of a **language—sounds**, words, or longer **sequences—gained** their meaning through their relationship to and particularly their contrast with other units in the same language system. Within this general principle de Saussure identified a word as *signe* and its referent as *signifiee*, directing attention to the primacy of *signifiee* over word and the importance of the human act of relating the two.

In fact the relation of the word stock of a language to meanings is for the most part not iconic, or physiologically or psychologically necessary, but arbitrary and conventional. Nothing about the form or sound of the word "tree" makes it particularly appropriate as a word form to denote a large woody-stemmed perennial. The G uses *dendron* or *xylon* (Rev 2:7) and Heb. uses 'êš for the same entity.

Since a dictionary is concerned with words, the secondary symbols, and the possible meanings with which those words might be associated by various individuals and across long periods of time, it is clearly important to understand their status as symbols only, to be given their significances by the respective language users. As we have seen, the task of the exegete is to determine the discourse meaning of an utterance, to which the constituent elements of the utterance make their cumulative contribution.

To take an example, Peter is represented in Acts 5:30 as saying that his hearers had hanged Jesus "on a tree," where he might perfectly well instead have employed a *stauros*-related word to express the same event. The reference to a tree, however—using G *xylon* which, unlike *dendron*, denotes both tree and gibbet—may be taken as directing the attention of a Jewish audience to Deut 21:22-23 and the assertion there that death on a tree represented the curse of God on the malefactor: Heb. 'êš also signifies both tree and gallows (Esth 5:14). Unfortunately the modern trend towards rendering denotation without connotation (hanging him on a gibbet, NEB; nailing him to a cross, GNB) serves at least to conceal the reason for Peter's (or more precisely Luke's) *not* using the terminology suggested by NEB. It is significant that here we have to hand one word in G and one in Heb. that share an element of polysemy, apparently exploited by an author, as is done with the similarly shared polysemy of the Heb. and G words for *wind/spirit*.

Lexemes are given meaning not only by their location within a particular syntactic structure, but also by their collocations. Thus, Heb. *zkr* (see # 2349 in the Appendix) when **collocationally** related to Yahweh carries a connotative meaning of encouragement (remembering past mercy) or of repentance (remembering past judgment). Indeed, the semantic domain of *zkr* is extensive, involving reflection, reasoning, meditating, submitting, committing. Remembering **Yahweh's** name at night means turning to him in prayerful meditation (Ps 119:55). On the negative side a time would come when it will no longer be appropriate to "remember" past events that will be transcended by new acts of Yahweh. The word may also involve perlocution, **action-induced-by-word**: When the butler was asked to *zkr* Joseph, the expectation was that his "remembering" would lead to action to release Joseph. Indeed, as Alien says,

So closely is remembering associated with action that at times it functions as a synonym for action of various kinds. In Amos 1:9 Tyre's not remembering its treaty with Israel means to disregard or break it. In Ps 109:16 not to remember to show kindness to the needy connotes neglect to do so. To forget God as Savior in Isa 17:10 is to forsake him for alien gods.

Words are more than monofunctional discrete linguistic units. The incorporation of any word into an utterance and the utterance into a discourse introduces a highly subjective domain of meaning into the interpretive process, and it is from within that ill-defined domain that the exegete must **find** the meaning appropriate to each unique occurrence of the word.

1. *Five myths about words.* The exegetical task is made difficult by the persistence of **five** myths or misconceptions.

(a) *The myth of point meaning.* The first is *the myth of point meaning*—the supposition that even if a word has a range of possible meanings attested in the dictionary, there lies behind them all a single "basic" meaning.

James **Barr** (115) quotes Norman **Snaith's** formulation on this point:

While it must be recognized that words can change their meaning in strange and unexpected ways through the centuries, yet in all languages there is a fundamental motif in a word which tends to endure, whatever other changes the years may bring. This fundamental "theme"

of a word is often curiously determinative of later meanings (quoting from Norman Snaith, "The language of the Old Testament," *The Interpreter's Bible*, 224).

A little thought will show that this thesis would be difficult to defend. In a long pericope covering twelve pages **Barr** deals with the vagaries attached to the elucidation of **Heb. *dabar***. T. F. **Torrance** is quoted as finding a fundamental meaning "**hinter-ground**" in this root and goes on to write extensively of *dabar* that "on the one hand it refers to the hinterground of meaning, the inner reality of the word, but on the other hand, it refers to the dynamic event in which that inner reality becomes manifest" (Barr, 130). In other words, "every event has its *dabar* or word, so that he who understands the *dabar* of an event, understands its real meaning." The fact is that words do not function in this way in language. They are more or less effective symbols attached to referents, and each such attachment is in some sense a unique use of the word; there is no "central" or "fundamental" or "basic" meaning of a word that lies behind every usage of it.

Of course it is true that within the semantic field of any particular lexeme there will be meanings that can be related to a common theme, and the recognition of that common theme might be helpful in elucidating the meaning of a particular usage of the lexeme. The nature of the common theme, however, must not be allowed to conceal the possibility of some quite unpredictable departure from it, into a quite different and unrelated semantic field.

(b) *The etymological fallacy*. The myth of point meaning is closely related to *the etymological fallacy*. Words represent dynamic phenomena, their possible range of associated referents constantly changing, and changing unpredictably. In contemporary English the word "gay" has taken on a new meaning that is not recoverable from its etymology, and the word "presently" in most dialects of English no longer means "at once," "in the present," "now," but its logical opposite, "**not-at-once**," "**not-now**," "not-in-the-present," but "in-the-future." Although it is true that the meanings of some compound lexemes may be deduced from their constituents (**G *anthrōpareskos*, man-pleaser**), it is less evident why *probaton*, whose constituents suggest something that goes forward, should denote a sheep (!) (David Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek*, 1988, 72, on a page that contains several ingenuous etymological notations).

We have already made reference to the problem posed by paralinguistic gesture and the particular problem of winking. The relevant vb. **qrš** is associated with the eye in Ps 35:19; **Prov** 10:10; 6:13, with the lips in Prov 16:30, and in Job 33:6 with clay. Its cognates carry the meaning "to cut." In Eth., for example, **qārāše** means incise, shear, cut, while a derived nominal is used for shears (**Wolf Leslau, Concise Dictionary of Ge'ez**, 1989, 84). We note particularly the hapleg. nominal form in Jer 46:20 is identified as some kind of stinging fly, gadfly (**RSV**), arguably "cutting" or "incising" creatures. The concept of "cutting" is appropriate to the passage in Job 33, and it is then tempting to interpret the association with winking in terms of a "sharp" flicker of the eyelid. But even if this process were correct, it Could yield no clue at all to the meaning of the gesture, and the sharp flicker of the eyelid has no correlate in the compression of the lips. Semantic change is arbitrary, and the attempt to relate meanings to etymolo-

gies must give way to the process of relation to usage and such clues as may be provided by cotext.

Reference to the Preface to the Revised Standard Version makes this arbitrary process of change clear:

Thus, the King James version uses the word "let" in the sense of "hinder," "prevent" to mean "precede," "allow" in the sense of "approve," "communicate" for "share," "conversation" for "conduct," "comprehend" for "overcome," "ghost" for "spirit," "wealth" for "well-being," "allege" for "prove," "demand" for "ask," "take no thought" for "be not anxious," etc.

These changes in Eng. language usage (and they are merely a few of many such changes) have taken place in some three hundred years. The process is a universally observed phenomenon and must relate to the Heb. vocabulary as well. Thus, the meaning of a word will not be revealed by consideration of its etymology but by a consideration of all possible meanings of that word known to have been available at the time the word was used (thus avoiding the diachronic fallacy), and of the text, cotext, and context within which it appears. Even then it is necessary to be aware that an individual source may make use of any available symbol in any arbitrary manner provided only that the meaning would be reasonably transparent *to the intended receivers*.

Barr makes particular reference to the supposed origin of Heb. *qahal* in the *nom.* form *qol*, so that the *qahal* becomes the people of Israel, "called out" by the voice of God. And the process is further confounded by associating *qahal* with G *ekklesia*, etymologically "called-out," so that the church is the "called-out-people-of-God" (Cotterell and Turner, 113f.). In **fact**, the meaning of the term *qahal* must be determined at each occurrence without any necessary reference to etymology (cf. Ps 26:5, where the *qahal* is quite clearly *not* called out by God). Of course, this is not to deny the value of etymological study as such. The fact is that the etymology of a word *may* help to suggest a possible meaning in a particular text. But it is the context that is determinative and not the etymology.

(c) *The myth of aggregated meaning.* Third, there is *the myth of aggregated meaning*. Meaning is not determined by assigning meanings independently to the constituents of a text and then aggregating the constituent meanings. An example from the NT may be allowed to illustrate the point. The words used by Jesus to his mother, represented in the G as *ti emoi kai soi gynai?* (John 2:4) may be rendered as "What-to-me-and-to-you-woman." There is no particular difficulty in these individual constituents of the string, but representing the *meaning* of the string has proved to be difficult, as may be seen by reference to the various translations.

Sentences may be categorized in many ways, but may generally be divided into two classes: favorite-pattern sentences and minority-pattern sentences. The former are those within which substitutions may be allowed, and each substitution may produce a meaningful string, the meaning of which may be related to the meanings of the rest. Minority-pattern sentences cannot be modified in the same way. For example the sentence *Not on your life, boy* means something like—*Absolutely not!* but the substitution of "bed" for "life" yields a perfectly good favorite-pattern sentence *Not on your bed, boy!* the meaning of which bears no relationship to *Absolutely not!* But further substitu-

tions in this sentence might yield *Not on my bed, boy!* or, *Not in his house, boy!* the meanings of the three favorite-pattern sentences being clearly related to one another. The string in John 2:4 is a minority pattern string, to be understood as a phrase-whole. D. A. Cruse refers to these minority patterns as *idioms* and defines them as "complex lexemes acting as a single semantic constituent" (2.7 and 2.9.).

(d) *The myth of unique denotation.* A fourth myth is *the myth of the uniqueness of denotation*, that the meaning of a word is determined once the object it denotes has been identified. But words carry also *connotations* that are primarily culturally determined, but within a culture may further be modified by individual perceptions, or *ideolects*. Considering the string in Ps 22:6, "I am a worm, and not a man," the *denotation* may readily be determined by reference to the lexicon, but it alone does not yield the meaning of the string, since no one is disputing the fact that the writer was not a worm. In some sense he *resembled* a worm, and it is assumed that it is in the sense of the worm's weakness, its *connotation*. However, this cannot simply be assumed to be the connotation; surprisingly, the connotation of *worm* in **Amharic**, a Semitic language, is *strong, powerful*. To the culturally determined connotation we might then add the ideolectal connotation of those individuals who suffer from a phobia, an actual terror, of worms, yielding a whole domain of connotation to the denotation.

Clearly a similar problem arises with the connotational meaning of **the fox** with which Jesus compares Herod. *The connotative meaning of a word is the subjective meaning it may carry for an individual or group through an agreed perception of the nature or character or function of the referent.* But, of course, that connotation holds for that individual or for that group, but not necessarily for any other individual or group.

Biblical interpretation has, in some measure, been impoverished as a consequence of the fact that the majority of exegetes have been male. Although this could probably be illustrated from any book of the Bible, it is, perhaps, most readily demonstrated from the S of Songs and here most particularly in the unusual *wasf* of 5:10-16, unusual in that it relates to the male form. Falk ("The *wasf*" in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*), quotes Richard Soulen, "The *wasfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic":

The poetic imagination at work in 5:10-16 where the maiden speaks of her lover is less sensuous and imaginative than in the *wasfs* of chs. 4 and 7. This is due in part to the limited subject matter and may even be due to the difference in erotic imagination between poet and poetess" (Falk, 231).

Falk, a feminist writer, has no difficulty in demonstrating the falsity of Soulen's judgment and tracing the fault to the reading strategy (see sec. A.3) of the author, who finds what *he* expects and intends to find.

But quite apart from the problem of gender discriminatory reading strategies we have the problem of a kind of cultural imperialism. Quoting Falk again, she notes that even Maurice Segal can dismiss the imagery of the female *wasf* in 7:1-5 as either grotesque or as comical:

Only as playful banter can be rationally explained the grotesque description by the lover to the damsel of her neck as "like the tower of

David built for an armoury," of her nose "as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus," and of her head like Mount **Carmel** . . . and similar comical comparisons of her other limbs" (Falk, 227).

Segal does indeed recognize subsequently the possibility that "our perspective radically differs from the poet's," and this is precisely the problem with all connotation: There can be no confidence that the connotative meaning *intended* by the author is even available to the reader, most especially if that reader is separated from the original location by thousands of miles and chronologically by thousands of years.

A word of caution must be **added** to the potential semantic anarchy invited by the concept of connotative meaning. The remarkable account in Judg 4:17-21 of the murder of the Canaanite army commander Sisera by **Jael**, wife of Heber, encouraged much speculation on the true nature of the event. We have a lone married woman assassinating a prominent warrior at a period of history that had thrown up a female *sopet*. It is not difficult to suppose that sexual intercourse preceded the assassination or that Jael might well have been, or at least might have temporarily adopted, the role of prostitute. However, the suggestion that the extraordinary nature of the murder was "a grim parody of the sexual act, in which the roles are reversed and Jael acts the part of the man" expects a great deal of the reader. As Barnabas **Lindars** comments, "Of course we cannot be sure that the people of the **narrator's** age would have seen it that way" (Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 1995, 201). Indeed, while the ingenuity of the suggested interpretation is to be admired, the phallic connotation ascribed to a tent peg is highly improbable.

(e) *The myth of totality transfer*. There is, fifth, *the myth of totality transfer*, the recognition of the polysemy of a particular word and the importation of some element of each possible meaning, the total domain of meaning, into a single occurrence of the word. Clearly a word may be employed precisely because of its particular polysemous nature, so that two or more of the potential meanings of the word may be simultaneously accessed: Heb. *rûah* and G *pneuma* are obvious examples. But that is quite a different matter and within the compass of discourse meaning, in contrast to the gratuitous importation of a multiplicity of meanings not identifiable as comprising discourse meaning.

We must now ask how we are objectively to determine meaning conveyed by a string, when each symbol employed in the semiotic is potentially polysemous. At least part of the answer must lie in a determination of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships of the elements of the string. The importance of the syntagmatic relationships of words flows from the recognition that the use of any one element of a string necessarily affects the subsequent generation of other units. Similarly, the importance of the paradigmatic relationships of words flows from the recognition that possible or impossible substitutions serve to identify such matters as literary genre, metaphor, and minority-pattern sentences. The fact that in the string *Not on your life, boy* the word "life" does not share paradigmatically with such words as "boat," "bed," "table" (each of which is, in terms of formal grammar, of the same word class), marks the string as not representing a favorite-pattern sequence.

Totality transfer may be seen E. Jacob's *Theology of the Old Testament*, referred to by **Barr** (144-47). Jacob considers the etymologies of 'adam, 'iš, "noš, and *geber* and combines his results to produce a characterization of "man": "Added

together they indicate that man according to the OT is a perishable creature, who lives only as the member of a group, but that he is also a powerful being capable of choice and dominion." But as **Barr** points out, while *geber* is clearly related to the root *gbr*, that by no means validates the assumption that since the root carries a meaning be strong, be powerful, the nom. must carry that same meaning. And even if it once did, that is again no reason to suppose that subsequently it did not simply denote man, with no particular overtone of power.

2. *Diachrony*. To the five myths we must add the problem of diachrony. All living language is in a constant process of change; not only are new forms being created, but old forms are both gaining new meanings and losing old meanings. The Eng. word "nice" before the thirteenth century meant "simple" or "ignorant," in the thirteenth century added the meaning "foolish," "stupid," in the fourteenth century "wanton," and in the fifteenth century "coy" or "shy." Each of these is now obsolete, and even some of the sixteenth-century senses, "subtle," "precise," "minutely accurate" are only preserved in such constructions as "a nice distinction." It would thus be inappropriate to insist that when a speaker refers to a "nice" doctor, the doctor is being accused of being ignorant. This is the diachronic error.

Language may be studied either diachronically or synchronically. In a **synchronic** study the process of change in a language is notionally halted and the language then described in terms of its condition at that time. To demonstrate the process of change a number of synchronic studies may be compared to give a diachronic view of the language.

Changes in the semantic values of the lexical stock of a language fall into three principal categories, *shift*, *metaphoric*, and *metonymic*. In *shift* changes there are relatively small and even logical movements in the sense of the **word**—on the one hand—generalization, where "manuscript" moves from being a hand-written document to being an original document of any kind, or restriction, where "meat" moves from a general reference to food to a specific reference to flesh. Any form may become the basis for *metaphorical* extension: "spine" being applied to the back of a book, or "leaf" to an extension to a table. *Metonymy* may similarly generalize, so that a **door**, the element closing a doorway, becomes the doorway, or may conversely produce restriction, such as "gate," originally the gap, becoming instead the means of closing the gap. (See especially S. Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*, 1962, ch. 9; see also G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 1980, 62-84.) Of particular importance here are certain proper names: Moses, David, Solomon. David is at one point in Israel's history no more (and no less) than a name, but David becomes not merely king, but a king focally associated with divine covenant, founder not merely of a dynasty, but of a dynasty that expressed the eschatological expectations of a nation. Thus, "David" no longer signifies merely David, but metonymically signifies anyone of the promised ideal Davidic line.

The nominal *mal'ak* presents the exegete with particular problems since its semantic domain covers not merely the purely secular sense of "messenger" but also the sense of a divine messenger, and more than that there is reference to the *mal'ak yhwh* (see # 4855 in the Appendix). The same distinct usages occur with respect to *G angelos*, but the Eng. "angel" is almost invariably reserved for the divine messenger.

D. Discourse Analysis

This article has dealt first with an indication of some developments in general linguistic and **hermeneutical** theory relevant to the exegesis of text, and then with the role of words in determining text meaning. Some reference must now be made to one further level of interpretation, the role of *discourse*. The meaning of a text is determined by the words from which it is constructed and the manner of their incorporation into the text syntactically and **paradigmatically**. But the meaning of any **pericope** is determined also by the larger text of which it is a part.

The Jacob discourse, which occupies some twenty-five chapters of Gen, provides an indicative model to illustrate the point. It is itself set into the larger text of Gen and the still larger pentateuchal text. It is preceded by the creation discourse, Gen 1-11, which acts as Stage, as that part of the text that states the issue addressed by the text as a whole, and then by the Abraham narrative (12:1-25:18). Gen 25:19 economically concludes the Abraham discourse and opens the new Jacob discourse. These first twenty-five chapters are given coherence through the formulaic *toledot*, introduced at 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10 and 27; 25:12 and 19. These formulae may be anaphoric (as in 2:4 and 5:1), but may also be cataphoric (as in 10:1 and 11:10), with the distinction determined by the cotext.

The Jacob discourse itself is introduced by the "generations" statement at 25:19 (lit., "these are the descendants of Abraham's son Isaac"), and is punctuated by the Esau genealogy of ch. 36, itself introduced by the *toledot* formula at 36:1 (see Genealogy in the Old Testament in the Appendix). However there is no "generations" statement for Jacob himself. The discourse is concluded at 49:33, although followed by a sequence of **post-Peak** episodes recording the magnificent closure account of the burial of Jacob, one final act of deception (deception having been a major coherency theme throughout the Jacob discourse), practiced on Joseph by his brothers, and finally the death of Joseph.

While the Joseph story has its importance first in carrying forward the deception motif of the Jacob narrative and second in its broader *Heilsgeschichte* role in moving Jacob-Israel from Canaan to Egypt, it has its peak in his self-revelation to his brothers in 45:1-4, while his biography whispers to a close, the matter-of-fact account of his death and embalming in 50:26 clearly leaving that story unclosed. In Exod 13:19 Moses is depicted taking the bones of Joseph out of Egypt, while only in Josh 24:32 is the story finally concluded, with the burial of his bones at Shechem.

Gen 25-50, then, represent a coherent discourse, and we turn now briefly to a consideration of the nature of textuality and to the relevance of the identification of a text to the process of interpreting its constituent parts, illustrating the process from the Jacob discourse.

1. *The seven standards of textuality*. We have already alluded (see sec. B.4) to the fact that textuality is indicated by seven standards. There is firstly *cohesion* of grammar and syntax. Referents remain constant: **Proforms** in one part of the text relate to co-referring expressions elsewhere. **Proforms** are significant, cataphoric reference introducing a suspense feature into the semantic structure, and this in turn has the effect of transferring emphasis from one part of a text to another. In **exegetical** terms this means that cataphoric proforms underline a select portion of text making it more likely to be recalled. (On the use of cataphora and anaphora and their effect on learning

and recall see R. de **Beaugrande** and W. Dressier, 60-68.) As a general principle it may be said that any shift of emphasis produced by the reordering of words increases learning and recall at one point, but at the expense of some other point in the communicative process.

The second standard of textuality is *coherence* at the semantic level. The constituent themes of the text are meaningfully related so as to produce a thematic net. In the case of the Jacob narrative, this net is woven out of the constituent themes of divine promise and providence, human deception and human frailty.

The third standard of textuality is *intention*: There is an author who purposes a communication. The traditional monkeys, hammering randomly on typewriter, could never, in this sense, produce a text, since there could be no communicative intention behind the text. It should, perhaps, be noted that there may in any culture be specialized texts, the interpretation of which explicitly does not take account of authorial intention. In such texts it is the wording alone that carries meaning, and the possible intention of any author or drafting committee is disregarded. Legal texts frequently fall into this category.

Fourth is the standard of *acceptability*. The reader of the text accepts that the text is meaningful, that is to say, not so ungrammatical as to be incomprehensible, that it offers the possibility of a genuine dialogue leading to an intended goal, and that the special circumstances that gave rise to the text are relevant to the interpretive process. In H.P. **Grice's** terms a text creates cooperation.

A text is not wholly redundant, so that the fifth standard is *informativity*. This requirement of a text may be realized even where the denotative content is already familiar to the reader. Thus *Hamlet* or the account of **Jacob's** deception of Isaac remain texts even when denotative content has been exhausted, since their respective connotative content is in some measure determined by the unique moment of each existential dialogue with them.

Texts are more than a presentation of facts to be assimilated, and biblical texts had a didactic function in which existing ethical imperatives were either challenged or reenforced. A text is directed to a situation, and *situationality* is the sixth standard of textuality: The interpretation of the text is in some measure related to the situation which gave rise to it. The absence of an identifiable situation may be remedied in Eng. by a phrase such as "let us suppose that," or in Heb. by the employment of some term such as *māšāl* or, ambiguously in most languages, by a fictitious context, "There were two men in a certain town" (2 Sam 12:1), providing an apparent social context later revealed as *māšāl*. In this particular example, the interpretation of the text is shown to depend precisely on its situationality.

Finally is the seventh standard, *intertextuality*, the existence of a body of texts in some sense analogous to the text under consideration. The interpretation of apocalyptic literature is given some measure of credibility by the existence of an entire apocalyptic textual genre, and this may be of particular importance when interpreting apocalyptic embedded in some different text type (see Thiselton, 80-81).

The Jacob narrative clearly satisfies these seven standards of textuality.

2. *Narrative structure*. Discourse considerations suggest that the exegesis of any narrative depends not only on questions of grammar and syntax, but also on questions of textuality, and particularly on the identification of text structure and thematic

net. In any extended text, such as the Jacob narrative, the narrative consists of a sequence of contributing *topics*, which together create a network of relationships, events, and propositions. The net, which is being continuously woven as the text progresses, carries the text forward from Stage to Peak, the point at which the staged problem is resolved, the staged question answered, through a series of related Episodes. The Peak is followed by Closure, the **more-or-less** artistic conclusion of the text. In the Jacob narrative Stage is provided by Gen 25:23, Peak by 48:20, and Closure quite magnificently by 50:14. The verse is preceded by the spectacle of the great mass of mourners processing from Egypt into Canaan, the splendid "grievous mourning" at Abel Mizraim, and is succeeded by dispersal: Joseph and his brothers and the great company return to Egypt, leaving the central character in his lonely tomb at Machpelah.

Between Stage and Closure the narrative passes through a number of contributing pericopes (the angels at Bethel, the marriage of Jacob, Laban's household gods, the encounter with Esau), each of which must be understood not merely in its own terms but also in terms of its relationship to the total text. Even the Joseph **pericope** (Gen 37:2-45:28) is ultimately significant because of its contribution to the Jacob narrative. Joseph is given preeminence over his brothers and provides the two grandsons who appear in the Peak, evoking the two brothers of Stage. Within the linguistic subdiscipline of Poetics, both Jacob and Joseph are full-fledged *characters* while Joseph's brothers are *agents*, whose personalities are developed only insofar as they contribute to the narrative. **Joseph's** sons are mere *types*, of whom we are allowed to know very little. Development of a type into an agent, or of an agent into a character would serve only to confuse the thrust of the narrative (see Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 1983, ch. 2; of course, a *type* from a larger text may be presented as a *character* in a constituent pericope, as is Benjamin in 42:1-45:15).

Focal to the entire narrative is the onomastic element of the encounter between Jacob and the *mal'akyhwh* at Peniel. The renaming of Jacob as Israel is itself significant, but it is arguably of greater significance that immediately afterwards (Gen 33:1) he is identified still as "Jacob," and even at Peak and Closure both names are still being used, selectively, and sometimes in typical Heb. parallelism (49:2, 24). The dual name is taken up with great linguistic skill by the so-called Second Isaiah.

3. *Peak*. Narrative moves from the staged problem or question to its resolution, the Peak. The correct identification of Peak is clearly of enormous importance, affecting the interpretation of all included pericopes. There are, in fact, generally recognized and objectively identifiable features that contribute to the identification of Peak: *concentration of participants*, *rhetorical underlining*, *locus underlining*, and *grammatical underlining*.

(a) The first of these is deliberately so placed: It appears to be the case that the bringing together of all of the *characters* and *agents* or, alternatively, the isolation of the main characters from all others, appear to be an almost universal literary device for signaling Peak. The two contrasting devices appear in the two principal Peaks of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the court scene, where the resemblance of Carton and Darnay is first noted, we have a concentration of participants. But at the ultimate Peak, the execution of Sydney Carton, he is left with an entirely new *type* as his only

companion on the journey to the guillotine, while the rest of the cast is not merely omitted from the scene, but is actually depicted as driving rapidly away from it.

In the New Testament we note on the one hand Jesus' absence from the Peak of the Cana miracle in John 2:10, when the water is found to have become wine, and on the other hand, in Matt 28 the assembling of the eleven on the unnamed mountain in Galilee, where they are joined by Jesus so that his Great Commission may form the Peak of the Gospel. We note also the confirmatory locus underlining, mountains being given a particular connotational value in the structure of the Gospel (see T. L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, JSNTSup 8, 1985), and the rhetorical underlining of the commission itself, with its *pasa ... panta ... panta ... pasas*. It is striking that after the account of Peter's denial of Christ the disciples are denied any further role in the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection events; they are not intended as Peak events.

(b) For *rhetorical effect* the onset of Peak may be delayed, and delayed peaking is typical of Job and Revelation. The structure of Job may well be tedious to the contemporary scholarly mind, but not at all to Semitic culture. We are warned from Job 2:11, following Stage, that we must expect speeches from Job's three friends before we are given Yahweh's explanation of Job's suffering. These three speeches take us to 11:20, with an inconclusive response from Job moving us on to 14:22, at which point Peak is further delayed by Eliphaz (ch. 15), Bildad (ch. 18) and Zophar (ch. 20). But then there is a *third* cycle involving Eliphaz (ch. 22) and Bildad (a mere six verses in ch. 25). There follows the long impassioned response of Job, taking the reader to the end of ch. 31, and precisely when we are led to suppose that we *must* now get the answer and that it must come from Yahweh, a new *agent* is introduced, Elihu, whose speech occupies no fewer than six chapters. Only then is Peak reached: The supporting cast of agents is dismissed, and Job is left confronting Yahweh.

The Peak itself is introduced by a devastating series of rhetorical questions (a device that occurs **also** in 1 Cor 9:1-12, signaling the episodic Peak), but the Peak is not after all provided by Yahweh, but by Job. This unexpected development forces the reader to recognize that Stage has been misunderstood. The Staged question is not "Why do the innocent suffer?" but "Can faith survive calamity?"

Rhetorical underlining may be effected in other ways. For example in repetition, as in the ten occurrences of *r'h*, see, in Ezek 1, which precede the episodic Peak "I fell facedown" (1:28c).

(c) *Change of locus* frequently signals Peak, where the new locus (as in Matt 28) has particular connotative value. We note particularly how in Exod 19:1 the change of locus to Sinai is solemnly recorded ("On the third month after the people of Israel left Egypt—on that very day—they came into the Desert of Sinai"), but then Peak is delayed as Moses repeatedly ascends Sinai and then is sent back down again by Yahweh with some warning message to the people. Only at Exod 20:1 do we reach the anticipated Peak: "God spoke."

(d) *Grammatical underlining* to mark Peak may be seen in John 2, where as the Peak approaches the present tense used for verbal acts and the aorist for nonverbal acts give way to the perfect tense, so that events now described are given particular emphasis (B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel*, 1974, 182). Similarly, in the Flood narrative a great deal of paraphrase is used, and, as Longacre has pointed out, what is striking is that

much of this paraphrase is presented in clauses whose verbs have the characteristic narrative tense and the word order of event-line clauses. Elsewhere event-line verbs are not used in a paraphrase of an event. Here, however, at the Peak of the story, the characteristic event-line tense is extended to supportive materials (R. E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse*, 27).

4. *Deixis*. The analysis of discourse as extended text takes seriously the distinction between mere sentences and utterances. Unlike a sentence an utterance has a context and that context contributes to the meaning of the text. Within texts we find linguistic elements included that are intended by the author or redactor to enable the reader the better to visualize the events being described. These are the so-called deictic elements of language. Texts are normally speaker-oriented, so that the words used by the writers of a text or by speakers within the text place any action in spatial and temporal relationship to themselves rather than absolutely.

Deixis, then, is the encoding within an utterance of the spatio-temporal context and of the subjective experience of the encoder. Or, as John Lyons expresses it more explicitly.

the location and identification of persons, objects, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatio-temporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and at least one addressee (*Semantics*, 1977, 637).

Five categories of deixis are usually identified.

(a) *Personal deixis*, elements of the text that identify author, redactor, or speaker, include personal names or titles, and particularly proforms, is significant in the so-called "we" passages in Acts ("they" in Acts 16:8, "we" in 16:10 and subsequently). The change of pronoun signals the presence of the writer in the events described.

(b) *Social deixis*, which may include the use of honorifics or self-deprecating indirect modes of address, establishes the social standing of speaker and the one addressed. Thus addressing the pharaoh Joseph says: "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires" (Gen 41:16), and "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same: God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do" (41:25), and "the reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided" (41:32).

(c) *Temporal deixis* establishes the timeline of discourse, sometimes employing nominal forms, "the third day," sometimes conjunctions, "later," "before," sometimes verbal forms, especially verbs of intention or expectation.

(d) The fourth category of deixis is *locational*: "here," "there," "at Socoh." As an example of the role of deictic elements we may note those elements that set the scene for **Esther's** appeal to the king in Esth 5:1:

On the third day [pointing back to 4:16 and the requirement that the Jews of Susa fast for three days on her behalf] Esther put on her royal robes [she would be in the harem; she puts on royal robes both to

indicate her status and in recognition of the occasion, a formal audience] and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the **king's** hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne [not as though, naively, the writer supposed that he sat there each day, but because this was an audience day, and Esther knew so] in the hall, facing the entrance.

The richness of the locational deixis provided here is paralleled in the rape of **Tamar pericope** (2 Sam 13). The **pericope** is marked off by a new location, Jerusalem rather than Rabbah, by new actors, **Amnon**, Tamar, and Jonadab. David is reduced to a mere *type*, where he had been a full *character* in the preceding chapter. The new Stage represents a microcosm instead of the preceding macrocosm, and the literary genre changes from an epic to a classical tragedy.

The limitation of employing only grammar, lexicon, and dictionary to determine meaning is evident. Absalom is named as "David's son" (personal and social deixis), and so is Amnon, while Jonadab is identified as "son of Shimeah, David's brother" (2 Sam 13:3). These are all deictic indications that while we now have a **microcosmic** tragedy rather than a macrocosmic epic, the tragedy is primarily an episode within the epic.

The locational deixis is skillfully worked between the respective residences of Amnon, Tamar, and David, climaxing in the pathetic picture of the ravaged Tamar walking back to her home, ashes on her head, her torn robes clutched to her, Amnon's love turned to hate, and his door bolted behind her. No interpretation of the text that excluded the deictically determined connotational elements could possibly do justice to it.

However, for all the pathos of the Tamar tragedy, its principal purpose is to contribute to the Royal Chronicle, and to remove it from its larger cotext would provide it with a different meaning from that intended by its author or redactor.

(e) *Logical or discourse deixis* relates to those markers within a discourse that signal to the reader that a new phase in the developing text has been reached, or that some past phase must now be invoked to facilitate the correct understanding of the new phase. Such obviously logical lexemes as "therefore" (cf. G *oun*) may be deictic, and so also may **interrogatives**. Heb. *lammâ* in Eccl 2:15 is rendered unsatisfactorily in NIV by the bland "Why?" and yet the particular usage and connotative meanings of this form are far from clear (see James **Barr**, "'Why?' in Biblical Hebrew," *JTS* [new series] 36, 1985, 1-33). At the end of this exhaustive article Barr indicates one of the many possible connotations of *lammâ*: "A 'Why?' question may be a joyful acknowledgment, tinged with a slight reproach at the excessive kindness or consideration of another" (33). In other words, this simple lexeme cannot be so much translated as paraphrased within the larger syntactic and semantic unit. The Eccl 2 example may well represent **Barr's** class of *hypothetical deprecations* (19).

And so we come back to the starting point of the essay. Primary language is spoken language, an imprecise communications semiotic, demonstrating both denotations and connotations, involving text, cotext, and context, a speaker and, normally, at least one listener. The imprecision of connotation is moderated by the presence of the speaker and listener and by the existing relationship between them. Written language is secondary, an attempt to capture spoken language through an arbitrary system of signs,

but compelled to do so in the absence both of the speaker and of the referents of the resultant text.

To interpret a text it is necessary to have an understanding of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicography. However, the imprecision of language permeates the entire semiotic: Words are polysemous, chronology brings change in the lexical stock and its usage, and even small changes in the sequencing of words may produce significant, and yet not readily definable changes in meaning. Meaning itself is distributed between denotations and connotations, these latter to be identified only with probability, never with certainty, the probability level falling steadily as the age of the text increases. We must always be aware **that** lexical and grammatical studies of the constituents of a text can never be simply aggregated to produce text meaning. What such studies *can* do is responsibly to contribute to what must be seen as the *art* rather than the *science* of exegesis.

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8. PRINCIPLES FOR PRODUCTIVE WORD STUDY

Often when studying a biblical text we understand that the meaning of a passage may be heavily dependent on the meaning of a particular word or phrase. Still, all the tools in the world will avail nothing if we do not know how to use them. Any tool, instrument, weapon, or equipment is subject to the limitations of those who use them. In order to put this tool to good use, the reader needs to have an acquaintance with some of the principles of lexical and semantic analysis. These principles may be presented within the context of the science of linguistics (see the preceding article by Cotterell), or may be discussed in terms of our common, everyday use of language. This latter approach may not satisfy the linguist, but it may serve the purposes of a less technically trained student.

A. Understanding Authors' Choices

In order to understand what an author invests in the meaning of a word, we must think about what goes into the choice of a word. Biblical authors did not use some special heavenly language with mystical meanings. Like any other author, a biblical author chose a particular word because it carried precisely the meaning that he wanted to communicate. That sounds too obvious to mention, but it must be realized that there are other alternatives, and we will consider some of those others first.

1. *Considerations of form.* If an author is working within the limitations imposed by a certain form, he may choose a word not for its precision of meaning, but for its conformity to the requirements. In English a good example of this would be the choice of a word to complete a rhyme or to represent the third point in an alliterated series (persecution, penalty, **p**...). If form is imposing some requirements on word choice, precision of meaning may not be possible. In Hebrew this may become relevant in acrostic poems or even in parallelism. Thus, in Ps 119:105 one would not make too much of the word lamp (*nēṛ*; see # 5944 in the Appendix). Since all the verses between 105-12 begin with *nun*, this word was chosen to suit the form.

2. *Poetic expression.* Most languages have words available for use in poetry that would not typically be used in other types of writing. Often such expressions operate through the use of metaphor and therefore lack technical precision in terms of meaning. So when we read that "the mountains skipped like rams" (Ps 114:4), we understand that precision of meaning did not guide word choice. Likewise, when poetic terms like *tēbēl*, world, are chosen, we can credit poetic style. In these cases, we need to evaluate word choice in light of the type of literature we are dealing with.

3. *Conventional combinations.* There are some words that we choose to use in set phrases where the phrase has meaning to us even if the individual parts do not. Sometimes we use the parts always and only in the context of that phrase. In English the word "diametrically" would rarely, if ever, be used except in the phrase "diametrically opposed." Most users do not know what "diametrically" means, but the phrase has meaning. Likewise "ulterior" would not be used with anything besides "motives" and has meaning to most users only in that phrase. A third example is the word "brunt," which we would only use in the expression "to bear the brunt of . . ." and which has no independent meaning to most of its users. In BH the word *bōhû*, empty, is used only with *tōhû*, nothing, as in Gen 1:2. As interpreters, then, we must be aware

that authors at times use stock phrases, and we must learn to recognize them as such. The author is not choosing the word as much as he is choosing the phrase.

Though we can recognize the above situations as offering exceptions, the rule is that most word choices are made on the basis of the meaning of that word as the author and his intended audience understand it. The following observations can provide principles for interpretation.

(a) *Synonyms and antonyms.* In many cases the process of communication takes place as the listener/reader hears the words that the author has chosen in light of other words that could have been used. For instance, think of the different aspects that might be communicated if an author chose to use "charger" instead of "horse." What if he chose mustang, or bronco, or steed? What about stallion, mare, palfrey, or pony? In some instances he might have chosen stud or gelding. This is an example from a **whole** series of words in the general category of "horse." At other times the choices might involve words that refer to the same object, but raise different feelings about the object. In English one can speak of a fetus (and preserve a certain amount of objective formality) or of an unborn child (to incorporate or express one's belief of personhood). Whenever words with overlapping meaning exist, we have a right to ask: Why did the author choose this one instead of another? In the articles in these books the authors and editors have made every attempt to alert the reader to the choices that would have been available to the biblical author and to suggest what situations might lead to the choice of one alternative over another. Sometimes even if words mean nearly the same thing and can often be interchanged, there are some contexts where one would be appropriate and the other would not. For instance, in English one can almost always interchange "earth" and "**ground**"—**but** not if electricity is being discussed. Likewise, if the word were paired with heaven, ground would not be chosen.

In a similar fashion, the choice of a word is better understood by comparing words with similar meaning (synonyms) and with words of contrasting meaning (antonyms). Thus, someone who is described as running cannot be sitting, standing, or walking. Sometimes, then, words are chosen so as to differentiate between synonyms, and other times so as to contrast to antonyms.

(b) *The pans that make up a word.* When we choose to use a particular word, we are often not conscious of the parts that make up that word. For instance, we use the word "awful" without even noticing that it is a combination of awe + full. English is full of compound words, some easily recognizable, such as "understand," others not as readily noticed, such as "syllabus." Our usage of these words does not imply knowledge of the parts, nor does it intend to convey what the parts meant in their individual forms. Therefore, when we analyze the word choices of the authors of Scripture, we should not assume that the use of a compound word assumes knowledge of or carries the meaning of the parts. In Greek, where compound words are common, it is a constant temptation to the interpreter to analyze the meanings of words by their constituent parts. But a moment's thought about English usage should warn us against placing confidence in that type of approach. Our use of a word like "understand" is not at all influenced or informed by viewing it as a combination of "under" and "stand"; one cannot arrive at an interpretation of the meaning of that word by evaluating the parts.

In Hebrew the problem is not so much compound words as it is the relationship of words that share the same root. In English we understand that words that share the

same root may be related and may not. The verb "exist" certainly is closely related in meaning to the noun "existence" and not many steps away from the adjective "existential." Knowing the meaning of the root, exist, can help the reader deduce the meaning of the other related parts of speech. Other examples, however, do not work so well. For instance, recognition of the root "adult" in "adultery" will not be of any use. More subtly, one can easily associate "company" and "companion," but when one gets to the verb "accompany," only partial success can be achieved. If the verb is being used to speak of joining someone on a walk, there is no problem; but if the speaker is using the more technical idiomatic sense of accompanying a soloist on the piano, the root relationship provides little assistance. Likewise in Hebrew the interpreter cannot have confidence that the words that share a common root will also share a common meaning. We must be aware, therefore, that we cannot use one to shed light on the other unless the relationship can be independently established.

Likewise the BH for angel or messenger (*mal'āk*, see # 4855 in the Appendix) certainly shares a root with the nom. work, occupation (*malā'kā*), yet it would be a mistake to try to interpret one in light of the other. On a more popular level, it used to be common to see the Philistine god Dagon portrayed in the form of a fish. This reflected the analysis of well-meaning interpreters that *dag* meant fish, while *on* was a typical nom. ending. Further discoveries have clarified that the WestSem. deity Dagon, adopted by the Philistines, was a grain deity. We cannot expect that reducing a word to its constituent parts will give reliable guidance to establishing meaning.

(c) *The history of the word.* We do not choose to employ a word based on an understanding of its history. A **word's** origin is called its etymology. Most speakers are entirely unaware of the etymology of the words they are using. More importantly, many words have evolved over time in such a way that their current meaning is only vaguely related to their original meaning. For example, though the English word "sinister" originally referred to being left-handed, those who use the word today are rarely aware of that history. Even if they are aware of it, they do not use the word in that connection. Linguists refer to the study of the historical development of a word as a *diachronic* approach. The alternative is to study the current usage of the word in all its possible contexts. Linguists call this a *synchronic* approach. The diachronic study of a word may help the interpreter to understand by what route a word came to mean what it does mean. A synchronic study of a word will help the interpreter know what the word means to the person who has just used it.

Though etymology or other **diachronic** approaches can at times provide information concerning meaning, the problem is that one cannot rely on them to do so. Since we are aware of so many cases where meaning has shifted over time, we should be uncomfortable establishing the meaning of a word on the basis of our knowledge of its history (diachronic) rather than on its usage (synchronic). An author will choose his word based on his presupposition about what his audience will understand when they hear or read that word.

A well-meaning teacher dealing with **Prov 22:6** was trying to explain to his class what the text meant when it said that the properly trained child would not depart from the parent's teaching "when he was old." He informed the class that since the verb "to be old" (*zāqēn*) also contributed its root to the nom. "beard" (*zāqān*), we could understand the text to be saying that when the son was old enough to grow a beard he

would not depart from the teaching. Such analysis can only mislead and **distort**—it contributes nothing to sound exegesis.

Given these observations concerning related words, parts of a word, and the history of a word, we can recognize that as interpreters we need to understand words in the light of what choices authors are making when they use their words. The principles that emerge are:

- A word should be understood in recognition of other related words that were not selected by the author.

- A word should not necessarily be broken down into its constituent parts or analyzed in light of its root unless it can be established independently that a relationship of meaning exists.

- Synchronic methods are to be preferred over diachronic methods.

B. Determining Meaning by the Synchronic Approach

The synchronic approach depends on the concept that the meaning of a word is established by the usage made of it by speakers and writers. Most words have a range of possible meanings, called the *semantic range*, which the interpreter should seek to define when investigating the meaning of the word in a particular context. With the help of a concordance, all of the occurrences of the word in its various forms may be located. These become the raw data of the *lexical base*. The next step, and arguably the most important, is classification of the data. In the synchronic approach one must attempt to differentiate all of the various defining aspects of how a word may be used. The following categories will provide an idea of the issues that must be considered.

1. *Author*. Different authors may use the same word in different ways. On the other hand, there are many words that may be used in the same way by many different authors. The synchronic method does not require that only usages by the same author be considered. It only requires that the interpreter be sensitive to idiosyncratic or distinctive meanings attached to certain words by certain authors. In NT studies it has long been recognized that Paul and James do not use the term *justification* with precisely the same meanings. In OT studies we are aware that the "Redeemer" motif takes on a unique role in **Isa**, or that the "enemy" has a distinctive sense in the Ps. In such cases the synchronic method asks us to isolate the usage of the author who has demonstrated an inclination to individualize the meaning.

2. *Genre*. The interpreter must be aware that some words may be used with distinctive meanings in certain types of literature that they would not have in other types. For instance, legal literature may use various words for law in technical ways, whereas Psalms may use the same words as virtual synonyms. It is important when classifying the data from the lexical base to be aware of the genre categories, for though the usage across the genres may be undifferentiated, the interpreter must be aware that change of meaning is possible.

In BH the term *minhâ* refers to a particular type of sacrifice in ritual literature (Pentateuch laws) and in ritual contexts in narrative literature (e.g. Dan 9:27), but in nonritual contexts it refers to a gift in general (1 Sam 10:27; 2 Kgs 8:8) or, more technically, to tribute (2 Sam 8:2).

3. *Part of speech*. We have already discussed the fact that **noms.** and **vbs.** that share a common history at times develop very different meanings. As a result, the synchronic method must be cautious in relating various **byforms** to one another. In

Hebrew the **noms.** *mind*, bed, and *maṭṭeh*, tribe, staff, cannot be evaluated in relation to the verbal root *nth*, stretch, nor in relation to one another. Verbs must be classified independent of noms. and the various **nom.** forms must be kept distinct unless: (a) A relationship can be established by applying the synchronic method to each form; or (b) insufficient numbers of occurrences make independent investigation impossible and contextual factors suggest a relationship.

A related distinction concerns the verbal stems. Though it is often the case that there is a level of semantic interrelation among the stems (e.g., the *ni.* as the passive of the *q.*; or the *hi.* as the causative of the *q.*), there are sufficient examples of deviation to urge us to caution. There are examples where the stems have radically departed from one another. One only has to look at the variations in the lexical listings in vbs. such as '*tq* or *pg*' to see the diffusion of meaning that is possible. More subtle are the cases where relationship between the stems remains visible but certain nuances pertain in one but not in the other. So, for instance, for the root *ṣhq* the *q.* and the *pi.* both concern joy, laughter, and fun, but the *pi.* contains a more negative nuance (making fun of someone) as well as a sexual nuance (Gen 26:8, caress).

Again, then, the extent of relatedness between the verbal stems should be established by applying the synchronic method to each stem individually before the interpreter would feel free to classify all the verbal occurrences together in the semantic range.

4. *Time period.* When sorting out the lexical base it is essential to consider whether occurrences in late literature use the word in the same way as in earlier literature. We are all aware of the way in which words can shift meaning over time. It is well recognized that there was the development of what is termed late biblical Hebrew that is evident from Ezek through the postexilic books (e.g., Ezra-Neh and Chron). For example, the verb *lqh* develops the meaning "buy" in later times, but one would not expect that usage in earlier literature. As a result, the synchronic method cannot indiscriminately group various time periods together. Each time period should be considered independently until similarity of usage is established.

5. *Technical or idiomatic usage.* There will often be certain occurrences within the database that have a more technical sense, and these must be separated out lest they unduly influence our understanding of the meaning of the whole. The usage of the *'ēpōdas* a cult object from which oracles were obtained and as part of the linen clothing of the priest may have little to do with each other. In the theological realm, the adoption of *māšîah*, *semah*, or *'ebed* as terms to describe a future, ideal Davidic king must be kept distinct from other **nontechnical** occurrences. Likewise, *sātān* as a general nom. must be distinguished from any technical reference to Satan.

In the idiomatic realm the interpreter must distinguish specialized uses from the other categories and deal with them separately. The fact that Hebrew uses the vb. *yd'*, know, for sexual intercourse does not suggest that such a nuance could be applied for all occurrences. A meaning that a word has in an idiomatic context cannot be applied to other occurrences of that word outside the idiomatic usage. In English it could be claimed that the word "minute" does not always apply to a period of sixty seconds, for when someone says "I'll be there in a minute," it can refer to a rather inexact and sometimes extended period of time. This would not suggest, however, that a professor could decide that the class period, consisting of 50 minutes, could be understood to last

for 50 extended periods of time. The imprecise, extended aspect of the word "minute" is present only in idiomatic phrases, such as "in a minute." The synchronic approach recognizes this distinction and insists on idiomatic usages being isolated in classification of the occurrences.

Additionally, the meaning of the idiomatic phrases must be established synchronically just as individual words are. This requires that other occurrences of the idiomatic phrase be found. So the phrase *lqh nāšîm* in Gen 6:1 must be understood as marrying, not just having a sexual encounter. The phrase *ʾîš kil^e bābôin* 1 Sam 13:14 must be understood as referring not to David's devotion, but to the fact that David conforms to God's criteria. The phrase *lqh nepes* in Prov 11:30 must be understood as taking life, as in all other occurrences, rather than the traditional "saving souls" (though the interpreter must then work at **figuring** out why such a person would be considered wise; see the helpful discussion by D. A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 1993, 129). R. B. Y. Scott renders the verse: "But crime takes away life" (*Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, AB, 1985, 87).

6. *Accompanying circumstances.* When establishing categories for the lexical base the interpreter must also observe common associations for the word under study. It is of importance, for instance, to recognize that the vb. *br'*, create, has only deity as its subject, but takes a wide range of objects, including trees, humans, cities, cosmic phenomena, and abstractions (e.g., righteousness, praise); that the vb. *nîh*, stretch out, is going to vary in meaning depending on its object (often tent, but occasionally hand, heart, peace, etc.); that the vb. *kpr*, cover, takes only items as its direct object (e.g., ark, altar) rather than people.

We will also find variations of meaning depending on the collocations in which a word is used. One common distinguishing factor in collocations is represented in the various prepositions that may accompany a vb. In English we are well aware that there is a distinct difference in meaning between saying someone "believes the President" and saying that he "believes in the **President**"—the collocation "believe in" has a nuance that goes far beyond the uncollocated usage. Likewise in Heb. and G, the presence of certain prepositions with the vb. can make a good deal of difference in the meaning of the vb. A synchronic study will categorize each collocation separately until it can be determined what unique nuances, if any, each one carries.

All of these factors become the basis on which the interpreter must establish categories within the lexical base. Having set up categories of author, genre, pan of speech, time period, specialized usage, and accompanying circumstances, one can disregard those distinctions that show no sign of introducing different nuances. The resulting categories may then each be studied to determine from their usage what meanings they carry. Unfortunately this second step is often treacherous or seemingly impossible because of the following pitfalls.

(a) *Lack of synchronic data.* In order to establish meaning from context, as the synchronic approach seeks to do, it is necessary to have a number of clear and precise contexts. This is often a problem in BH. If occurrences are few or contexts do not provide the information necessary for nuancing, the synchronic method cannot produce reliable results. For the former consider the plight of the interpreter trying to determine the meaning of the "desire" of woman in Gen 3:16. There are only two other occurrences of this word (Gen 4:7; S of Songs 7:10), and the three together simply do not

provide the necessary information to arrive confidently at an understanding of meaning. As an example of lack of contextual information consider the difficulty in arriving at the meaning of the *kappōret*, mercy seat(?). Its twenty-six occurrences (all in Exod, Lev, and Num + 1 in Chron) are all so much the same that they give little information and no explanation sufficient to understand it.

In these sorts of cases, since the synchronic approach is incapable of providing reliable solutions, interpreters are often forced into the shoals of the diachronic method in the hope of improving our understanding of the word. Resorts would include many of those aspects that we have previously separated out: A nom. may find help from its verbal root; etymology may suggest some possibilities. Additionally, Heb. can at times turn to comparative Semitics to supply hints. We must understand, however, that comparative Semitics must usually be identified as a diachronic approach. That a particular word has a certain meaning in Arab., Ugar., Akk., Sumerian, or Aram. does not mean that it will have the same meaning or nuance in Heb. Nonetheless, when synchronic information is lacking or when context gives some reason to suspect the value of comparative Semitics, it can be a valuable tool.

Examples of comparative Semitic assistance can be found in the following situations:

kpr occurs in the q. only in the Flood story (Gen 6:14) and means to cover with pitch. It is known from Akk. *kupru* and the context makes the connection clear.

mkr occurs only in 2 Kgs 12:6, 8 in the account of Joash's financing of the temple restoration. Again, context suggests the connection with Akk. *makkuru*, which refers to temple or palace assets or estate (cf. CAD M1:133-37) or to Ugar. *mkr*, merchant (cf. NIV and HALAT 551). Here the guesses of translators have tried to make connection to supposed verbal roots (e.g., *nkr*, thus, "acquaintances," NASB).

melek Yareb occurs in Hos 5:13 and, rather than a proper name, has now been understood as *malki rab*, the Hebrew equivalent of the well-known Assyrian title, *sarru rābū*, the great king. Here the cognate relationship can easily be accepted because Hosea is referring specifically to the Assyrian king, so it is appropriate that he use the native title.

(b) *Determining the degree of unity in the semantic range.* A second pitfall is that interpreters are left to their lexical art and dexterity to determine when categories share a relationship in a base meaning and when they do not. As the synchronic approach proceeds to delineating the **semantic** range of a word (that is, all the possible meanings and the conditions under which each meaning applies), there is the temptation to establish relatedness to all the parts. It is often assumed that there is some individual core meaning to which all aspects of meaning and nuance can be connected. Again, however, this can easily reflect a diachronic mentality. The history that exists in the background of the word should not dictate our nuancing of the word, because it is an element that the users are only subconsciously aware of at best.

As an example we might consider the Heb. vb. *hgh*. The q. occurs 24x with a variety of meanings, differentiated by collocations with prepositions. In combination with *b* it takes God or his law as object and means to meditate; with *k* it refers to animal sounds; with */* it means desire or yearning; and with no preposition it refers to pondered

action, either positive or **negative**. Each of these meanings can be established with confidence by the synchronic approach. While the interpreter might be inclined to seek out some common denominator to these collocations, such as "private articulation of base instincts," such an endeavor is diachronic in nature and is unnecessary, unhelpful, and potentially damaging to semantic study if we allow it to regulate **nuancing**. Since this proposed core meaning is not a level of semantics of which the users of the collocations would have been consciously aware, it should be considered tangential to the interpreter's task.

But here we have a fine line. Though we desire to avoid diachronic influence, it is also true that attention to the patterns of meaning may help the interpreter to nuance the aspects of the semantic range in a more accurate way. The best way to decide whether to seek common ground or not is on the basis of the amount of data available. Where various aspects of the semantic range are well established on synchronic grounds, there is no need to seek out common ground in order to establish nuance. If, however, the synchronic data are limited, one might use the assumption of cohesiveness within the semantic range as a guide to possible nuances.

For an example we might return to the case of *šûqâ*, desire, in Gen 3:16. Interpreters who opt for a sexually oriented interpretation tend to emphasize the usage of S of Songs 7:10 to the neglect of Gen 4:7. Those who favor the domineering interpretation exalt Gen 4:7 (contextually nearer) to the neglect of S of Songs 7:10. In this situation where synchronic data is so limited, it is preferable to try to find resolution assuming semantic cohesiveness: that all three occurrences should be able to be accounted for in the nuance suggested. Such a search would commend consideration of a more general nuance (necessary to encompass all three) along the lines of "desire to fulfill one's most basic instincts" (whatever they may be). Thus, among the woman's most basic instincts would be reproduction (a topic under discussion in the context of 3:16); in 4:7 the basic instinct would be to deprave; and in S of Songs 7:10 the male sexual drive would be aptly defined as a basic instinct. This approach seeks to use the concept of core meaning as a means of establishing nuances of individual occurrences only when synchronic and contextual data are so limited or ambiguous. While such a conclusion would not offer the confidence that synchronic data would provide, its ability to account for each item in the lexical base could be offered as support.

Even when there are more extensive occurrences to deal with, there are times when an assumption of cohesiveness might offer a slightly different nuance than purely synchronic investigation has suggested. An example can be seen in the vb. *nth*. As mentioned earlier it most often occurs with "tent" as its object and is usually translated as "stretch." But several other direct objects also occur. With most of these other objects, the translation "extend" works much better (e.g., extending the hand, the heart, or peace). Working with the principle of semantic cohesiveness might suggest considering the concept of extending the tent, in the sense of extending the space under the tent, i.e., raising the tent (a more appropriate description of how tents are pitched). This would appear to be a trivial distinction until we get to the passage where the distinction is necessary for proper interpretation. In Ps 18:9[10] the NIV translates "He parted (*nth*) the heavens and came down." In other passages **Yahweh** is portrayed as pitching the heavens as a tent (e.g., Job 9:8), but here that is not the metaphor. Instead, with the

newly established nuance, we can understand **Yahweh** as raising up the tent of heaven (i.e., lifting the canopy) and slipping under it.

Another function of the assumption of cohesiveness is in accommodating all of the necessary elements in the lexical base. For instance, as one examines the **nom. *b^etûlâ*** (see # 1435 in the **Appendix**). one must seek a nuance that accounts for all of the contexts, unless some can be set aside on the basis of criteria such as we have previously discussed. That not being the case, it is the assumption of cohesiveness that protects us from arbitrarily discounting any occurrence that undermines our preconceived notions of the meaning. We cannot just say that it means something different in those passages. In the case of this word, the hypothesis that the meaning is "virgin" is severely damaged by usage in Esth 2:17-19; Job 31:1; and Joel 1:8, and another meaning must be sought that will account for all the occurrences.

Our conclusion then is that while we cannot assume a common core meaning to exist across the semantic range, there are situations when an assumption of cohesiveness is preferable, profitable, or even necessary.

(c) *Lack of synchronic and diachronic data.* If the synchronic data are insufficient to achieve confident nuancing, and if diachronic approaches are likewise unable to resolve the ambiguity, the interpreter must be content to accept a vague translation and avoid building any exegetical or theological case on that translation. There are a number of places where it must be concluded that data are simply too sparse. For example, Zech 12:3 uses the adj. *ma* "māsâ to describe a stone that metaphorically represents Jerusalem. Though this is the only occurrence of the substantive, the vb. 'ms occurs 9x with the meaning of load or carry. Since synchronic information is limited to what can be derived from the context of Zech 12, we can only resort to the vb. to help establish meaning. We find, however, that even then we are left without a definitive nuance. Thus, the traditional translation, heavy, is only a creative suggestion. Other equally creative (and equally **unverifiable**) suggestions could be offered (e.g., a loaded stone, such as one used for leverage or ballast). Nevertheless the interpreter must conclude that even though guesses can be proffered, we do not know the precise nuance of the word and must settle for something vague. For another good example see the root *srṭ* in the same verse.

C. Applying the Semantic Range to Individual Occurrences

Once the interpreter has categorized the lexical base and established the semantic range, he is now faced with the task of deciding where any particular occurrence fits within the semantic range. Many occurrences will be already placed by their circumstances (e.g., their collocations, vb. stems, idiomatic phrases), but there will still be many decisions to be made. Whenever there are decisions to be made, there are errors to be avoided.

1. *Avoid the "cafeteria" approach.* In a cafeteria the diner moves through the line choosing whatever food he likes. In a similar fashion some interpreters feel that it is their free choice to decide which aspect of the semantic range to associate with a particular occurrence of a word. Sometimes this is done to the neglect of categories established in the semantic range. For instance, the claim is often made that the word *yom*, day, can mean a period of undetermined length. However, most, if not all, of the occurrences where such flexibility can be demonstrated are related to idiomatic phrases. The

aspects of the semantic range connected to idiomatic phrases cannot be extended to nonidiomatic occurrences.

At other times the cafeteria approach may involve the issue of a theological meaning as opposed to a general or secular meaning. Words like "redeem" and "salvation" are capable of carrying theological baggage. When we encounter these words, however, we must ask: (a) whether a synchronic study would include the theological meaning in the semantic range (e.g., does the OT ever **demonstrably** use *yš'* or its derivatives for salvation from sin?); and (b) whether the author intended to use the word with that meaning in the particular context under investigation.

Another variation of this problem occurs when an element from the semantic range of an Eng. word is applied to the corresponding Hebrew word that itself has a more limited semantic range. In a classic example the Eng. word "glory" has in its semantic range the meaning "heaven" (e.g., "**gloryland**"). The Heb. word *kābôd*, though properly translated "glory," does not have "heaven" in its semantic range. The lay Eng. reader then might be excused for making the mistake of interpreting Ps 73:24 as a reference to heaven, but linguistically informed interpreters are without excuse. Likewise the understanding of the "circle of the earth" in Isa 40:22 is often understood in light of the semantic range of Eng. (circle can include sphere) rather than in Heb., where *hug* is used to describe the curvature of the horizon (see Prov 8:27). These are cases of Eng. semantic ranges being imposed on Heb. semantic ranges.

In all of these cases the way to avoid the arbitrary subjectivity of the cafeteria method is to appeal to the **author's** intention. The fact that a word can have a particular meaning does not prove that it does have that meaning. What was the author trying to communicate? What aspect of the semantic range was he making use of? Though these questions cannot always be answered with absolute confidence, the very asking of them will help the interpreter retain balance in the exegetical and lexical process. The Amplified Bible approach, where all the choices are before us and we are free to choose the one we like, can easily lead to distortion and misunderstanding.

2. *Individual occurrences of a word generally do not carry all of the different elements found in the semantic range.* Just as we are not free to choose the one meaning that appeals to us most, we are not free to assume that multiple meanings can be associated with the choice of a word. In Heb. the word *ruah* has both wind and spirit in its semantic range. It would not be acceptable to try to incorporate two distinct concepts of wind and spirit into a context using this noun. At a more sophisticated level, however, one could also question whether a cultural difference might be revealed in this lexical information. Is it possible that the use of *ruah* for both wind and spirit suggests that in the Heb. mind the two were more closely associated and perhaps less distinguishable than we are inclined to consider them? These are the sorts of issues that emerge from thoughtful and careful word study.

3. *We must distinguish carefully between the lexical sense and the contextual sense.* The lexical sense refers to those elements of meaning that the word will automatically carry into any of the contexts in which it is used. If there is even one occurrence (in the same category of the semantic range) that does not carry that element of meaning, then that element must be excluded from the lexical sense. So, for instance, one could not include "creation out of nothing" in the lexical sense of *br* because there are a number of occurrences that clearly do not involve creation out of nothing (e.g.,

Gen 5:1-2). On the other hand, there is no reason why this verb could not express creation out of nothing, but it is up to the context to establish that nuance. Such a restricted meaning could be part of the contextual sense of the verb, but it is not a meaning inherent in the very nature of the word.

D. Conclusion

We will be better interpreters when we understand words and their usage. Authors make choices in the communication process, and it is our task to understand the choices they have made. Our goal is to be on their wavelength. We need to learn about words, including the lexical base and the categories they can be divided into. It is also important to know the delineation of semantic ranges and the application of semantic ranges to individual passages. Though all of this information is important and necessary to the **exegetical** task, it must be understood that it is only the beginning. Word study is a step in the process of exegesis; it does not comprise the whole of the process. The authority of the Scriptures is not found in the words, though each word has an important role to play; rather, the authority is embodied in the **message**—that tapestry for which words serve but as threads that derive their significance from being viewed within the tapestry rather than being explored on the skein.

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