SEMANTICS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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In dealing with a subject which includes the word "semantic" there is a double reason for beginning with the defining of terms; because semantic itself needs defining, and because semantics has to do with the meaning of words, or definition.

The word "semantic" is used in two senses; (1) as a technical term in the science of linguistics, and (2) a more general sense of linguistic and grammatical studies into the meaning of words. The latter is the sense to be used in this paper.

My topic deals with the components of the sentence, that is, words and word relationships. Its goal is to discover the meanings of these words as they contribute to the meaning of the whole sentence. For example, in order to properly interpret the meaning of a sentence such as, "The Church is the Body of Christ," we must understand the meaning of each of its components. What does the word "Church" mean? and similarly, "body," "Christ," the copula "is," the genitive relationship "of"? These are the materials of semantics.

The semantic problem, in turn, may be considered as comprised of two parts; (1) the meaning of the words in themselves, the lexical study of words, and (2) the meaning of words in their grammatical relationships, the syntactical study of words. Perhaps the first of these might by some be considered the specific field of semantics, but the second seems to be equally involved in the meaning of words.

LEXICAL STUDY OF WORDS

Etymology

By this I am dealing with the study of the meaning of a word as it might stand alone, apart from any context. What meaning is born to our understanding by the word itself? Such study naturally takes two directions.

First, let us define what we mean by Etymology. The dictionary says it is "that branch of philology which treats of the derivation of words." It usually is thought of as the ascertaining of the original meaning, or the meaning of the primitive basic root from which a word is derived, in the parental language. Basically it is an historical pursuit; practically it is a very complex, technical scientific investigation of comparative philology, one which is safe only in the hands of experts.

Often, however, the term is used in a less precise sense to include various kinds of "appeals to the original." In this broader use it includes the study of compound words, word formation, and appeals by expositors to the meaning of the Greek word, or the Hebrew original. For example, the word "synagogue" might be explained as "derived from the Greek, from the two words, sun - together, plus agō - to gather, therefore a gathering together of people. In the strict sense this is not etymology, or at least only a very elementary part of it.

We may illustrate the etymological approach to the study of words by two examples.

The Greek word "church" in the New Testament is ekklēsia. This word is formed of two parts, the preposition ek, meaning "out of," and the root connected with the verb kaleō, "to call." Therefore, the etymology of the word suggests "a called-out assembly." From this point on the process

of rationalization and imagination may go as far as the interpreter's sense of good judgment will let him. It is a select group, called out from among the rest of the world. Therefore also it is a separatist group. It is composed of those who are called, so it is involved in the doctrine of election. Since the calling involved a caller, and an actual call issued, therefore the church is an officially constituted body rather than a heterogenous mass of separatists. Perhaps you can go on further.

The Bible word "atonement" most frequently is the translation of the Hebrew word kapar which means "to cover." Atonement, then, is the "covering" of sin. This covering, however, must be understood in the light of the whole Old Testament concept of God and of sin, and points primarily toward the removal of the defilement and guilt of sin from the sinner rather than the placating of an angry God, the idea which seems primary in the Greek words later used. Also, this meaning of the word is very useful in the explanation of the symbolism of the Old Testamental sacrificial system and in the Christian explanation of the significance of the cross of Christ.

It seems obvious that there are dangers in this type of word-study, so let me suggest next some warnings against its wrong use.

First, there is the danger of settling on a mistaken or false etymology. In the hands of anyone except a trained specialist there is a natural tendency to look for similarities of sound or meaning to identify derivations. Thus "God" and "good" are often thought to be etymologically related, also "sorrow" and "sorry," "bless" and "bliss." Of a similar fallacy is the supposition that the English word "call" and the Greek word kaleō, even the Hebrew qol, because of similarity of sound and sense, are derived from the same basic root. Another example is the explanation of the word "deacon" (Gr. diakonos) as coming from dia, "through," and konos, "dust," therefore "to raise a dust by passing through," or "to serve energetically." Actually all of these supposed etymologies have been proven false by scientific etymological studies, except perhaps the last one, and the experts will not even guess at its true derivation.

I have suggested earlier that discovering the etymology of a word is a complex, technical process to be undertaken only by experts. Let me explain this further by reference to one of the basic principles of that science, namely, Grimm's Law.[1] By study of actual words in a situation where the processes of change can be traced step by step in comparative literature it has been shown that certain sounds in one language are regularly changed to certain other sounds when the root passes into another group of languages, and to still another sound when it passes into a third group of languages, and that these changes are consistent. For example, a root which occurs in Greek as beginning with a voiced stop, b, d, g, will appear in English words as beginning with p, t, k. Thus, bursa, purse, duo, two, genos, kin, ginōskō, know. Also, words in Greek beginning with a voiceless stop, p, t, k, will appear in English as f, th, and h. Thus, patēr, father, pous, foot, pur, fire, treis, three, kardia, heart, kuōn, hound. Words beginning with the aspirated stops ph, th, ch, are represented in English by b, d, g, thus pherō, bear, phratēr, brother, thura, door, chortos, garden. This process becomes exceedingly complicated, as can be imagined. Thus, Voltaire was speaking more truly than he knew when he defined etymology as "a science in which vowels signify nothing at all, and consonants very little."[2] At least it should warn us against guessing at etymologies on the basis of external similarities.

A second warning concerning the use of etymology is the obvious fact that words change their meanings and often lose any distinguishable connection in meaning with the roots from which they

were derived. We who use the King James Version do not need to belabor this point, I am sure, but perhaps a few illustrations outside the Scripture language might be helpful. The man today who uses the word "sincere" probably is hardly aware of the etymological source of the word, as coming from the Latin sine, "without," plus cera, "wax," or of its original meaning as an object that has not been doctored up to look pretty by using wax to cover imperfections. Especially would it be questionable exegesis to explain the "sincere milk of the word" as milk from glass bottles rather than waxed paper cartons. Our word "book" comes from a German word meaning "beech-tree," therefore a wooden tablet, but we normally do not conjure up mental pictures of wooden tablets when we go to the library. The word "musket" had its derivation from a kind of hawk used in hunting when, after the invention of firearms, men decided to name their various types of guns after the hawks previously used in hunting. However, we do still use the expression, "let fly at." Our word "silly" will probably be no better understood if we are aware that it came from an Anglo-Saxon root meaning "to bless." We use the English word "court" in three senses, (1) a royal court, (2) a law court, and (3) to court, or woo the affection of a fair lady. Will the meaning of any of these be better understood if we are told that the word is derived from a Latin word cohors, or cors which meant an enclosure, a pen, or a cattleyard? Similarly we might deal with these words: oxygen, provide, dilapidated, nice, palace, presbyterian. Even the word "etymology" illustrates this change of meaning, for etumos in Greek means "true," therefore the study of the true meaning of a word. Yet it is invariably used for the study of the origin, the derivation, the original meaning, a sense which the Greek word never had.

A third warning with regard to the use of etymology must deal with the danger of its misuse and misapplication. An uncritical over-zealousness for a homiletical application, or a more serious misconception of the nature of language may lead to humorous and sometimes serious errors. A pastor-friend once argued that the apostle Paul had never been married, because the Greek word used to describe his state in I Cor. 7:8 was agamos from a-privative, meaning "not," plus gamos, "married," therefore "not married, un-married." He forgot to read verse 11 where Paul tells those married folks whose partners had left them, "Let them remain un-married, agamos." And I am sure we all are familiar with the completely unjustifiable practice of transliterating the original into a cognate English form to clarify the meaning, as "The Lord loveth a hilarious giver." True, the Greek word used here is hilaros, but there is absolutely no evidence that hilaros ever meant "hilarious." As a matter of fact, the idea of boisterous mirth contained in the English word is certainly a cheapening of the very clear and correct and meaningful translation "cheerful" of our English version.

More serious is the harm sometimes done when one overemphasizes the meaning of the root (which may not even exist) by assuming that the root meaning is dominant in all the derived forms, thereby neglecting the particular semantic values of the separate words. Norman H. Snaith, in the Interpreter's Bible, says:

> 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.[3]

For illustration he uses the first word in the first psalm, 'ashrē, "blessed," pointing out that it is related by root to words meaning "foot-step," "go straight ahead," "advance," and also the

Hebrew relative pronoun. Then he draws this conclusion:

> All this shows how apt is the use of the first word. This Psalm tells of the true way as distinct from the false. The happy man is the man who goes straight ahead, because, as the last verse says, "The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, while the way of the wicked shall perish."

James Barr, in Semantics in Biblical Language[4] criticizes this "root-fallacy," as he calls it, saying that there is no evidence that such an association could have been present to the mind of the writer. He goes on to another illustration. The word for "worship" 'abodah and the word for "servant," 'ebed, are from the same root. Once commentator makes application as follows:

> Latreuein which came in later theology to be the normal technical word for worship, means to serve, with the service of a hired labourer or slave. Significantly there lies behind it the Hebrew word 'abodah, which is the same root as the noun 'ebed: the Suffering Servant of the Lord, whose part Jesus assumed, is called in Hebrew the 'ebed Yahweh. The obedience of the Son of God, as the Suffering Servant of the Lord, is thus precisely the offering of latreuein, or worship.

Barr comments:

> Precisely nothing of value is contributed by the fact that the word for worship and that for slave are from the same root in Hebrew. Though the Suffering Servant no doubt worshipped God, he was not so named because of this; his name does not mean 'worshipper' but 'servant', just as 'the servants of David' were not worshippers of that monarch but his officials and slaves. The connection made in the passage is a quite general association based neither on a semantic relation of the words, nor on any passage where conscious association takes place, nor on historical derivation of one word from the other, but purely on the possession of a common root.

Having called attention to some of the dangers of etymologizing, let us now attempt to evaluate its usefulness.

First, when properly handled and supported by known usage, etymology can furnish valuable illustrative material. For examples, a steward is the manager of a household, a trustee responsible for the handling of another's goods. A bishop is an over-seer, one with the oversight of the church entrusted to him. The word "Gehenna" as a name for hell gains some illustrative value from its association with the valley of Hinnom where the fires of the city dump never went out.

Second, etymology may sometimes give a clue to a special shade of meaning, not otherwise noticed. I offer an example of my own. While studying Rom. 12, I read verse 9, "Abhor that which is evil" and became interested in the word translated "abhor," apostugeō. The lexicon offered an additional meaning, "hate," but there is another word meaning "hate," miseō, much more common. What was the difference? I traced the word stugeō through various related forms, all with the general meaning "abhor, hate, loathe, abominate." Then I discovered the word styx, the name of the river that separated the land of the living from hades, the river of death. The idea dawned

on me that stugeō, means "to abhor, hate, shrink back from," like men dread the river of death. "Abhor that which is evil, like men shrink back from death." This passage is richer to me now as a result of an etymological study.

A third beneficial result of etymological study has been the help it has given in discovering the meaning of rare and obscure words. Particularly has this been true in Hebrew, because of the relative meagerness of the literature and the resulting large number of words which occur only once, or so few times that inductive study of usage is not possible. If we can study a word in enough different contexts the sense of these contexts will help to make clear the meaning. But if we see it only in one context it is extremely precarious to fix upon its meaning with ony certainty. Here comparative etymology can help by suggesting root meanings and meanings of related words. This, used along with the study of the context, is often the only source of information there is. So, even though we recognize the dangers of such a method, when it is our only means we are grateful for it. Actually this method has been extremely fruitful in Old Testament studies.

Usage

The second, and the more important, general approach to the study of the meaning of words, is usage. Everyone seems to agree in principle that usage determines the meaning of words. Thus, Rollin T. Chafer, in his Science of Bible Hermeneutics, lists eight axioms, the third being, "Usage determines the meaning of words."[5] In Terry's Biblical Hermeneutics there is a quote from a Mr. Whitney:[6]

> Language has, in fact, no existence save in the minds ond mouths of those who use it; it is made up of separate articulated signs of thought...and has its value and currency only by the agreement of speakers and hearers. It is in their power, subject to their will.

So the ultimate goal of word study must always be the meaning intended by the speoker and understood by the hearer, the meaning as actually used.

Sources for the study of usoge. There is actually only one ultimate source for the study of usage in any language: that is the body of literature available in that language. To know how the Greeks used the word pistis or ginōskō or any other word it is necessary to read and study all the places where such words occur. Practically, of course, this is not possible, at least not in a language like Greek. But it must be recognized that, other things being equal, the broader one's knowledge of the literature the better qualified he is to be an interpreter of it.

Since we cannot inductively examine every usage we must be content then to depend on secondary sources, which may be called our tools for the study of usage. These are primarily two.

First, and most immediately useful, is the lexicon, or dictionary. Actually, the lexicon is a concentrated gathering together of the results of many experts who are qualified and have had the opportunity to do the study of literature which we cannot do. It brings together and classifies the usages of words as actually found in the literature, making it available to all in usable form. Dictionaries vary greatly in their size, scope and format, and it seems an absolute essential that a serious interpreter of the Scriptures have at hand the best lexicons available, and understand how to use them.

Perhaps the second most important tool for the study of usage is a good concordance, preferably in the original language. While we cannot hope to study every occurrence of a word in the whole language, we can at least do so with the body of literature which makes up our Bible. It is well enough to depend on the labors of others by using a dictionary, but no definition in a dictionary will give the insight into the usage of a word like a personal study of every passage in the Bible where that word occurs.

Principles for the study of usage. I submit next a few suggestions to guide in the study of the usage of words.

(1) List and study every place where the word occurs in Scripture and outside, to the widest extent possible with your facilities.

(2) Try to find a common denominator which will link all the various occurrences around a general thought concept. This will be the general frame of reference for that word. Here the etymological study may be of help, for the word might not have changed its basic meaning. At least it will suggest a place to start. Be ready, however, to ignore the derivation if it doesn't fit naturally into the actual usage. Also, it must be recognized that there may not be any one common denominator. The usage may demand several general thought concepts. This is not at all strange, as a look at English will readily show. The word 'top', for example, in different contexts, is a verb, an adjective, and a noun, with several completely distinct general thought concepts (compare a house-top with a spinning top). The word "board" needs at least four frames of reference: (1) a piece of wood, (2) a panel of directors, (3) to provide food, and (4) to get on a ship.

(3) Apply this general word reference to the context of the passage in question, allowing the nature of the subject and any qualifying ideas to sharpen and narrow the general reference to a specific meaning for this place.

(4) Look for side indications which may help to delimit its meaning. For example, the author may have included in the context his own definition or explanation of his meaning. Thus, in 2 Tim. 3:17 Paul explains his use of the word artios, "perfect", by adding, "completely equipped unto every good work." And in Heb. 5:15 the teleioi, "perfect" are described as those who by use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil. The use of contrasts, antitheses or opposition may give a clue to the meaning. So "grace" in Eph. 2:8 is clarified by the added phrase, "not of works." Often the parallelism of Hebrew poetry will suggest the specific idea conveyed by a word, likewise the study of parallel passages in the Gospels.

(5) Give attention to the study of synonyms. The multiplying of words which have nearly the same general meaning, but each with its own particular shade or nuance to contribute to the general thought pattern, greatly enrich a language, and make it capable of expressing thought more precisely. Both Greek and English are rich in this respect and we should expect therefore to be able to interpret very precisely. Unfortunately, little work has been done in this field recently, and in my judgment this represents one of the most needed areas of study today.

(6) Keep in mind that part of the background of words in the Christian Scriptures is the historical and theological content of the Scriptures themselves. Look for the usage in the language of the day; for example, the way the koine Greek used the word. But also remember that the Old Testament Scripture with its Semitic background must have had its influence on the usage of the

New Testament writers who lived in that background. Also, the Christian faith necessarily must have had some effect on words, both in adding new meaning and in changing the meaning of words.[7] All these factors must be taken into account in studying the usage.

GRAMMATICAL STUDY OF WORDS

The second part of this subject of semantics deals with the contribution which grammatical or syntactical relationships make to the meaning of words. These relationships include such factors as gender, case, tense, voice, mood, state, order of words, modifiers, etc. In an illustration given just above we saw how the word "spinning" affected the meaning of the word "top." So in Greek, it is impossible to talk about the meaning of the verb balein without dealing with its tense stem, for the punctiliar nature of the aorist stem is a part of the meaning of that word. How this same principle applies to Hebrew may be seen in this comment by Barr:

> I would think it safer, for example, to take the formation of the hiphil in a Hebrew verb as a new formation semantically rather than as a variation within a paradigm. This means that it may have its own semantic history; and hence its semantic value has to be determined for itself and not by a process of schematic reasoning from the qal.[8]

Of course, it is not my purpose to re-teach Hebrew and Greek grammar at this point, or even to attempt to illustrate the importance and significance of this aspect of word study. Perhaps it will be sufficient to pick out a few of the places where grammatical study has been weak. I shall use the Greek only.

The Use of the Article.

At first it seems very convenient to the beginning Greek student that Greek has a definite article just like English has, and uses it in much the same way. But unfortunately many never get beyond the elements, and never discover that there are very important differences as well. So very commonly we hear men arguing, "The Greek has the article; therefore it should be translated 'the faith,' 'the Christ.'" But who would want to insist on "the Jesus"? Or, "There is no article in the Greek, therefore it should be translated a life, a son." In John 1:1 we read, "and the Word was God." "God" does not have the definite article. So Jehovah's Witnesses read it "a god," and make Christ something far less than God Himself. And many students with only a slight exposure to Greek do not know how to answer them. Actually, the Greek expression as it stands without the article is the strongest possible way that John could insist on the deity of Christ, for the absence of the article characterizes and describes and emphasizes the nature of the noun. To insert the article here would make this passage teach the heresy of Sabellianism, that Christ and the Father are identical. Similarly, the proper understanding of the article clears up the difficulty in Heb. 1:2 where the KJV has "his Son" (with "his" in italics) and the ASV reads in the margin, "Gr. a son." Actually the meaning is "a person whose nature may be described by the term "Son." It is merely naming God's new spokesman; it is giving his rank and pedigree, and the passage is stronger for that grammatical insight. "The faith" in Greek may rightly be in one place insisted upon to mean "the body of truth which we call the Christian faith." In another context it may mean "the faith which was mentioned in the preceding verse." Both are valid uses of the article. The point to be made here is that the study of the word theos in John 1:1 or huiōi in Heb. 1:2 is not complete without a study of the grammatical relations of these words, even to the significance of a word that is not there.

The Aorist Tense

Perhaps one of the commonest misconceptions in Greek grammar is in the meaning of the aorist tense. The grammars call it the tense of punctiliar or point action, simple occurrence, as opposed to continuing or repeated action, with the idea of past time added for the indicative mood. But often the simple occurrence is understood to mean single occurrence, point action is taken to mean instantaneous action, and non-repetition is construed to mean once-for-all, never-to-be-repeated action. So we commonly hear the aorist described as indicating once for all, instantaneous action, never to be repeated.

How far this interpretation is from the truth may be seen by trying to impress this meaning on the tense every time it occurs. Let me offer some examples.

John 2:20: "During forty and six years this temple was built in an instantaneous, once for all, single act of construction, never to be repeated."

Mt. 23:2: "The scribes and Pharisees once and for all sat down on Moses' seat. All things therefore whatsoever they say to you once and for all, never to be repeated, you do that instantly, once for all, never to be repeated, and then keep on doing it."

Mt. 27:8: "Therefore that field was once and for all called 'The field of blood,' never to be repeated, until this day."

Nor are these examples unusual. They can be repeated on practically every page of the New Testament. While I was preparing this paper I opened my Greek Testament at random to Luke 4. Verse 13 might be read, "and the Devil having completed once and for all every temptation, never to be repeated, he instantly went away from him once and for all, never to come back, for a season." Skipping over dozens of illustrations I came to verse 29, "And all who were in the synagogue were once and for all filled with wrath when they heard these things once and for all and having risen up once and for all they immediately in one single act of throwing, in one great big heave, they threw him clear out of the city, and they brought him once and for all unto the brow of the mountain where their village was built, so as to cast him headlong once and for all. But he having once and for all passed through their midst was going on."

The fallacy behind this popular misunderstanding of the aorist tense is the failure to distinguish between the event being described and the statement about that event. "I went to town"--that is a statement about a fact. It simply says, "I did it, it happened." Of course the event itself was a long series of events, a process that took half the day. But when I said, "I went to town," I was not interested in calling attention to these details. This is precisely the aorist tense in Greek; simple occurrence; a whole series perhaps of details and processes, but all concentrated in the thought of the speaker into a point-concept and the simple statement made, "it happened." Thus the aorist is the most colorless, the least distinctive of all the tenses in Greek. It is the catch-all tense which was used whenever there was no particular reason to emphasize duration or abiding result. From the viewpoint of exegesis a safe rule, perhaps slightly exaggerated, might be: When you come to a present, or imperfect, or perfect tense, dig into it and squeeze out of it its full significance. But when you come to an aorist tense, translate it as simply as possible and forget it.

Nineteen hundred years ago "Christ came into the world" (I Tim. 1:15). That is an aorist statement, simple occurrence, it happened. But if I say it was an instantaneous once for all coming never to be repeated, I am misrepresenting the fact, for his coming was actually a long series of events involving many prolonged processes covering many years of time, and it is going to happen again.

The Conditional Sentence.

A third illustration of a common grammatical fallacy is the treatment of conditional sentences. Kenneth Wuest, in his works which are so commendable in so many ways, occasionally falls into this error. In dealing with Rom. 6:5 (KJV, "for if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death") he says, "The word 'if' in the Greek is not the conditional particle of an unfulfilled condition. It is a fulfilled condition here, its meaning being 'in view of the fact."[9] What does he mean by a fulfilled condition? I think the natural meaning would be that here the form of the Greek expression makes it clear that there is really no 'if' involved at all. The Greek says "in view of the fact that such and such is actually so." In John 10:35 he uses the word 'since' to translate this type of condition. Two verses later however, vs. 37, 38, the same type of condition occurs twice. Here he translates "assuming that..."[10] Why the change? Obviously because his "in view of the fact," or "since" won't fit here. "In view of the fact that I am not doing the works of my Father" cannot be what Jesus said, so he resorts to "assuming that." But it is still a condition determined as fulfilled, exactly like the others. Therefore, the fulfilled conditions of vs. 35 and of Rom. 6:5 do not mean what he made them mean by his translation and comment.

Again the problem is a careless misapplication of the grammatical point. A condition determined as fulfilled has nothing whatever to do with the truth or reality of the supposition, only with the way the author is looking at it. For the sake of argument he assumes it as fact and draws a conclusion from it. As in John 10:37 already used, Jesus states two opposite assumptions and draws conclusions from them. He uses exactly the same form of conditional sentence for both, knowing well that only one could possibly be the actual truth. Thus to translate this simple condition of ei with the indicative by "in view of the fact" or "since" is a very serious mistranslation.

In conclusion, the best preparation for proper Biblical exegesis, particularly in matters of semantics, the meaning of words, including both lexical and grammatical study, is the widest possible experience with and constant practice in the use of the original languages. One dare not look up a word in the analytical lexicon, discover it is a verb in the aorist tense, turn to the aorist tense section of Dana and Mantey, then say, "The original Greek says so and so."

DOCUMENTATION

1. For fuller treatment of this law, see Muller, Max, The Science of Languages (New York: Scribner & Co., 1871), pages 274–298, and Metzger, Bruce M., Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek (Princeton, N.J.: 1935), pages 98–101.
2. Quoted in Muller, op. cit., p. 254.
3. Snaith, Norman H., "The Language of the Old Testament." The Interpreter's Bible, 1, p. 224, 225.
4. Barr, James, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 116, 103.
5. Chafer, Rollin T., The Science of Biblical Hermeneutics (Dallas, Texas: Bibliotheca Sacra, n.d.), p. 28.

6. Terry, Milton S., Biblical Hermeneutics (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1890), p. 73.
7. Metzger, Bruce M., "The Language of the New Testament." The Interpreter's Bible, VII, pp. 53-58.
8. Barr, op. cit., p. 102.
9. Wuest, Kenneth S., Treasures from the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 89.
10. Wuest, Kenneth S., Expanded Translation of the Greek New Testament, Vol I: The Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 283.