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The Language and Imagery of George Caird

D. R. De Lacey

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One of the most stimulating books on the interpretation of the Bible to have been produced in recent years must surely be G. B. Caird's *Language and Imagery of the Bible*.¹ The argument is carefully structured in order to develop a powerful thesis about the use of the language of myth and eschatology in the New Testament, but the 'prolegomena' are as valuable as the thesis itself.

This paper will not attempt a comprehensive review of the book² but will rather concentrate on certain aspects which appear to be most significant for our discussion of interpretations of biblical material, and which ought to stimulate us to further work in this area. I shall first outline Caird's material on these aspects before offering a critique and suggestions as to the way ahead.

Outline

The book begins with a general discussion of what Caird calls linguistic principles, but what most people would class under semantics. His concern is to investigate what the original authors meant in what they said.

He begins by distinguishing five categories of statement:³

Category	Example
1. Informative	'This paper is printed in <i>Vox Evangelica</i> '
2. Cognitive	'I'm not sure I understand this point'
3. Performative	'I promise I'll be brief'
4. Expressive	'You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!'
5. Cohesive	'How do you do?'

Caird is well aware, that there is some overlap in this schema; for instance cognitive language is the language we use in thinking, and thinking is largely self-information. But Caird argues that each of these needs understanding at a different level from the others,⁴ so that it is imperative we understand which is being used. Caird provides some discussion on the uses of each category.

He then turns to the problem of the meaning of meaning: in Caird's example⁵ 'What did he mean?' might properly be answered by 'He meant you to go away' or 'He meant to make you angry', while neither of these

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¹ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London 1980).

² In particular, we shall deal only incidentally with the central thesis of the book. For more details see my forthcoming review in *JSNT*.

³ Caird, *Language* 7-36. The examples are my own.

⁴ It is arguable that there is no difference in such level between his categories of 'informative' and 'cognitive'.

⁵ p. 39.

is in any sense an exegesis of his words. We are normally concerned with that exegesis; and indeed, even if we decide that in Philippians 3:1 by 'Beware of dogs' Paul 'meant' to prejudice his readers against his opponents, we can only decide that subsequent to such exegesis. Caird's concern is to give criteria for establishing the intention of the original authors. As he himself points out and adequately illustrates⁶ this is by no means a transparently easy task.

The chapter on 'Opacity, Vagueness and Ambiguity' notes that words vary in their degree of precision. Caird uses the example of *gnōsis* becoming all things to all men in the first century, and we could add many similar examples from the religious language of our own time. Other words or expressions may be simply ambiguous, either because the ambiguity was not noticed by the author⁷ or because he actually intended it.

Under the general title of 'Metaphor', part two begins by discussing literal and non-literal use of words. Caird attacks the conceits of those who seem to think that 'if once they admitted a word to be a metaphor, they would forfeit the right to believe in the reality of that which it signified'.⁸ 'Metaphor' is not actually the best term, as Caird himself acknowledges, since other non-metaphorical forms of speech are equally nonliteral: hyperbole, irony and so on. In the rest of this paper all such uses will be subsumed under the general description 'word-pictures' or simply 'pictures'. More important than identifying the particular form of speech⁹ is to see what correspondence is intended between picture and reality: 'When Paul warns his readers "no longer to be children, tossed by the waves and whirled about by every fresh gust of teaching, dupes of human craftiness (lit. dice-playing)" (Ephesians 4:14), we may, if we are so disposed, form a mental picture of a group of children playing dice in an open boat. But the point is that the readers are offered three mutually interpretative metaphors for caprice or arbitrariness.'¹⁰ It is therefore of crucial importance to discover the degree of correspondence: Caird offers some criteria for this to which we shall return below.

He then turns to the special case of parable and allegory, rescuing the parables of Jesus from the clutches of both Augustine and Jülicher. It is impossible to produce hard and fast criteria to distinguish parable from allegory: more important is to be able to distinguish later allegorising embellishments from the 'original parabolic statement'.¹¹

Part two finishes with a chapter on linguistic awareness. Caird argues that 'the biblical writers were not only skilful handlers of words... but were also well aware of the nature of their tools'.¹² Caird well illustrates the ways in which the biblical authors draw attention to their use of language. Sometimes they explicitly state that they are using pictorial language: by calling a story a parable or by using similes. Sometimes the thing is just impossible when taken literally, or so improbable that we are forced to see it as a picture. Sometimes the picture is highly developed, or

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⁶ With reference both to the biblical texts and to the works of contemporary scholars, the writings of too many of whom rest upon very basic semantic errors.

⁷ It is worth noting that many things ambiguous to us may have been crystal-clear to a first-century reader.

⁸ Caird, *Language* 132.

⁹ Though that itself may be an important aid to understanding.

¹⁰ Caird, *Language* 150.

¹¹ However, it seems difficult to know how this can be done unless the reader already has in his mind a valid (albeit intuitive) distinction between the two.

¹² Caird, *Language* 193.

sharply juxtaposed with another. Caird argues that linguistic awareness is always a better working hypothesis than primitive mentality for understanding the sacred texts.

In the final section, Caird argues that all historiography involves interpretation, so that the interpretative element in the biblical narrative does not necessarily invalidate its claim to be a narrative of historical events. He then develops the thesis that the authors of the New Testament (already anticipated in the Old) consciously used the language of myth and of eschatology to interpret the events of their own time. While they firmly believed in a literal *eschaton*, they also used this concept metaphorically to explain the events of their own time. In other words, while not denying the original referent of the language of the End of the World, they also saw a correspondence between that future hope and what had happened in Jesus. Weiss and Schweitzer were quite correct to stress the centrality of eschatology to New Testament authors: where they went wrong was to attribute to those authors 'minds as pedestrian as their own'.¹³ The important thing is to see the degree of correspondence; not to carp because the end of the world did not literally arrive.

Critique

Inevitably, every reader will have a number of minor quibbles over points of interpretation: too much dependence, perhaps, on J. D. M. Derrett and too hasty rejection of alternative exegeses. To discuss these, however, would be to direct our attention away from the methodological issues on which I wish us to concentrate, for the book's major value is for our approach to the interpretation of any part of the biblical message, rather than as a text for detailed exegesis.

Caird's point that we need to know what sort of language we are dealing with before we can fully understand it is, I think, well made.¹⁴ His criteria for making such decisions, however, are more open to question; and it is indicative of the problems which abound here that his own assessment of where certain pieces of speech-act fit is likely to be challenged. For instance, he asserts (without debate) that Paul's language of 'the cross' is to be classified under 'phatic communion';¹⁵ and a more serious problem still, perhaps, is highlighted in the discussion of the uses of *kosmos* on pages 41f. Five different senses are distinguished, and the discussion is then applied to the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:31: 'The AV opted for world^L: "the fashion of this world passeth away".¹⁶ The modern tendency is to assume, almost without argument, that world^C is what Paul had in mind... yet... There is no serious reason to suppose that in the passage under discussion he means more than "the world as it now is".' It is not clear, however, how this fits any of his five carefully-developed categories.

One could generalize this complaint. We are given the impression that neat criteria are being presented by which we can judge what sort of

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language is being used; yet time and again the criteria are either not applied or simply inapplicable. When discussing the degree of correspondence between picture and reality in a metaphor, Caird asserts that 'Among anthropomorphic metaphors there is a lower

¹³ Caird, *Language* 271.

¹⁴ But on the particular analysis adopted by Caird, see the third point below.

¹⁵ p. 33.

¹⁶ It is not clear that this translation removes the ambiguity at all.

correspondence when the metaphor is drawn from man's dealings with the sub-human world (potter, woodsman, shepherd) and a higher correspondence with those drawn from human relationships (judge, king, father).¹⁷ Yet surely in the Lucan parables of the Unjust Judge, or the Unjust Steward, God is to be identified with the Judge or Employer with a considerably lower degree of correspondence than in, for instance, the picture of God as Shepherd?¹⁸ Again, we seem to be given no help at all, in the otherwise extremely helpful section on myth, to enable us actually to *identify* a myth when we see one.

My second major complaint is that we are not really shown how to make use of the materials so ably presented to us. In the discussion of metaphor Caird acknowledges a real danger in what, following Farrer, he styles the 'problem of transcendence'.¹⁹ By this he means the situation where a metaphor applied to a transcendent reality seems to be in danger of having no clear interpretation at all: the symbol seems not after all to refer to anything. The transcendent reality turns out to be vacuous: it can only be referred to by the (groundless) metaphor. Since this is an accusation often levelled against the language of the Bible, we read on with eager anticipation to discover how properly to unpack this sort of language; only to discover that Caird thinks 'A book on linguistics is not the place in which to wrestle with these difficulties'.²⁰ But if linguistics (as Caird calls them) cannot help us make sense of these statements, what can? This seems a real *petitio principii*.

Thirdly, I am saddened that, as a self-confessed 'amateur' in the field of linguistics, Caird was unable to provide a greater spectrum of approaches to semantics. In particular, I have found the work of Bühler²¹ as developed by Popper²² very valuable. Popper develops a fourfold use of language²³ with the significant addition that these form a hierarchy of language: each of the higher ones depends on the existence of those below. This hierarchical nature of language is very important: I would therefore say, against Caird, that we not only need to know which one of the various speech-categories is being used, but rather which ones; and work up the hierarchy. Thus, to return to Paul's 'dogs' of Philippians 3, the language may well be 'expressive' but it is also informative, or in Popper's terms 'descriptive'²⁴ and even 'argumentative'; and it is precisely at this last level that we are most concerned with its 'meaning'.²⁵

¹⁷ Caird, *Language* 154.

¹⁸ On p. 163 Caird denies that any identification is intended between God and the Judge or Employer in these two parables, though without justifying this claim. Is this the result of an over-zealous application of his own criteria?

¹⁹ Caird, *Language* 132, citing A. M. Farrar, 'An English Appreciation', in H. W. Bartch (ed.) *Kerygma and Myth* 216-217.

²⁰ Caird, *Language* 132.

²¹ K. Bühler, *Sprachtheorie* (Jena 1934).

²² K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London 1972).

²³ (1) Expressive or symptomatic (as when I hurt myself and say 'Ow!') (2) Stimulative or signal (as when I warn of danger with a shout) (3) Descriptive (as when I convey concepts by word) (4) Argumentative (as when I use (3) to debate with another).

²⁴ Note that Popper's 'descriptive' is in fact broader than Caird's 'informative', since it allows also for the poetic use of language. Perhaps we need to add a category such as 'evocative'.

²⁵ Even on the 'argumentative' level, language can be used in a variety of ways. In some places, Paul is clearly out to demonstrate that his opponents are wrong and that he is right; but may it not be that in others he is simply offering suggestions, as he works out the implications of his theology in new areas (as though he were saying, 'What do you think of this? Will it work?')?

Indeed, the whole current debate on theories of meaning is virtually swept under the carpet: Ogden and Richards²⁶ are uncritically accepted, and Caird's own initial categorisation of speech-acts²⁷ with its emphasis on the *informative* element of language, could itself limit our understanding of the metaphorical or evocative uses of language.²⁸ Hence the

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schema of Popper is to be preferred. J. Lyons²⁹ draws attention to the work of R. Jakobson, who adds two other relevant factors to the analysis developed by Bühler: the limits imposed (or liberties allowed) by the specific language being used; and the poetic function of language, in which medium and message are consciously and deliberately fused. These, too, affect our understanding of 'meaning'.

It is worth noting that even on the level of what I called exegesis, questions of the form 'What does X mean?' may need answers of a variety of different types; even when X is a single word³⁰: how much more when it is a phrase, a verse, or a whole pericope!

My fourth major criticism concerns Caird's handling of 'idiom'.³¹ He defines idiom in a rather idiosyncratic way as 'normal usage... characteristic of native speakers of the language', and immediately proceeds to a discussion of hyperbole and parataxis. Yet surely idiom is primarily³² to be defined as the linguistically *abnormal* usage, judged at least by the syntax of the language? Weinreich³³ defines it as 'a complex expression, A+ B, the meaning of which is not expressible as the meaning of A plus the meaning of B'. If this is at all right, it is evidently of crucial significance for our exegesis, since recognition of idiom must *precede* our exegesis and not, like most other semantically significant factors, follow it.

The task ahead

Whatever our criticisms, Caird certainly both clarifies and illuminates the task of the exegete, and raises acutely questions which cannot be avoided. It would be nonsense to suggest that we must have watertight criteria for measurement before we can begin to measure;³⁴ so our primary task is perhaps less a search for *criteria* than a search for metaphors and idioms. Following on that we need to discover the extent of correspondence between picture and reality; and firmly to grasp Caird's nettle of the problem of transcendence. I am not suggesting that we can develop a theological language which is totally free from all pictures; but others have a right to challenge us if we are simply unable to interpret the imagery we use.

There are of course many other problems of exegesis. The New Hermeneutic, the Two Horizons and many other topics *could* be dealt with, but they are outside our scope. Caird

²⁶ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London⁸ 1946) 27.

²⁷ see above.

²⁸ In fact, the schema is not much used by Caird in his later discussion.

²⁹ J. Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge 1977) 52-54.

³⁰ To see this one need only substitute for 'X' the words 'cat'; 'of'; 'Rome'; 'good'; &c.

³¹ Caird, *Language* 109ff.

³² Or certainly most usefully.

³³ Cited in A. Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic*, (Oxford 1981) 110.

³⁴ Popper emphasizes the invalidity of questions of the form 'Is this accurate or not?', pointing out that in truly scientific work the question is much more of the form 'How accurate is this?' Our search is not for total unambiguity or accuracy, but for the degree of precision; for the total semantic field of the piece of speech under investigation.

already gives enough, and more than enough, to encourage us back to the task of ensuring that we amplify, and do not muffle, the authentic voice of God in the Word of God.³⁵

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³⁵ A first draft of this paper was first read to the faculty of London Bible College at a meeting on 2 March 1982. I am most grateful to the principal and lecturers for their hospitality on that occasion, and for their helpful and constructive discussion which ensued.

The paper was subsequently read, in an abbreviated form, to a gathering of ministers at Westminster College, Cambridge, on 21 June 1982. Again, I am grateful for many constructive comments received on that occasion.