THE USE OF LANGUAGE AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
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"And if 'god' is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists. For to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance."

Whatever departures A. J. Ayer may later have made from his position in the Language, Truth and Logic of 1935, the above statement still presses home the need for Biblical theology to take into account the recent developments in linguistic philosophy. For if such a notion is correct, the entire uniqueness of the Bible's message as at least a partial revelation of "the nature of a transcendent god" is lost. And granted that such theological expressions do have some significance, the contributions of logico-interpretabonal analysis are not only valuable but indispensable for exegesis and existential application of Biblical truth (if there such be) which is adequate and faithful to what was intended by the author(s).

Ayer's extreme suggestions concerning the place of metaphysics, ethics, and theology have already been thoroughly and repeatedly criticized, and Ayer himself has somewhat modified his earlier thought. Rather than whip again a dying horse, let us assume that the logical positivist school has offered no sufficient grounds for holding that theological statements are "meaningless". Yet assuming that the Biblical statements concerning God have some significance for men, we are still left with the problem of determining how these statements are to be taken. If Christian theism is to reap the full benefit of its supernatural revelation, a safe course must be steered between the Scylla of complete literalism and the Charybdis of a literal intention, but also denies the possibility of any direct knowledge concerning God. It is in the plotting of such a course that an analysis of the way in which that revelation uses language is needed.

Reacting against the early extremes of the Vienna Circle and its following, the ordinary language school of philosophy insisted that words to be interpreted according to their usual meaning in ordinary usage. ("Ordinary" here is used not in the sense of "lay" as opposed to "technical", but as "stock", standard, as opposed to "non-stock"). In its most radical form some principles of this type of philosophical method could be pushed to conclude that such words, for instance as "grasp", "place", "show" must always be taken in a "primary" spatial sense. Aside from the fact that it is rather difficult to find any scholar holding such an extreme position today, this view is also in such discord with the frequent intention of the users of such words that we can dismiss it here.

An opinion held by a number of evangelicals (or at least which many think they hold until presented with some of the more obvious difficulties), and which they, usually as "fundamentalists", are accused of propounding, is that Scriptural language is always used in an "ordinary", literal way. While variety of the use in different contexts is recognized, the possibility of a similar single word within different contexts is recognized, the possibility of a similar single word within different contexts is recognized, the possibility of in such a use of contexts is overlooked. The implications of an anthropomorphic theology in the Old Testament, and the absurdity, for example, of Paul's writing of a word, "cause" or "good", are used in conjunction with special qualifiers such as, in these cases, "first" and "infinitely". Knowledge of God is thus communicated through such language by analogy.

Austin Farrer is another recent thinker sharing belief in the possibility of some theological knowledge through analogical predication. This way is in fact necessary because "If God exists, He is unique, and if other beings are related to Him, that relation is also unique . . . that which shares no identical characteristic ability of a non-literal "symbolic" function of language is acknowledged, the way is open for a number of currents of thought, of varying depths, on the role of language, particularly Biblical language. One form of such thought conceives of the non-literal language of the Bible, that is, its religious language, as expression of a moral commitment. For E. B. Braithwaite, for example, the logical function of statements of religious belief is not to talk about or assert facts about God, but to give voice to such commitment. One's religious experience, convictions, valuations are stated in theological language, but there is no need for assuming that such language refers to some God.

W. F. Zuurdeeg's emphasis on the convictional situation of homo loquens (man speaking), and his insistence that it is homo convictus (man with conviction) as against homo sapiens (man with intelligence) who hopes, prays, swears, and theologizes, resembles Braithwaite's position somewhat. Language expressive of conviction of a generally religious nature played for Zuurdeeg an integral role in the composition of the Bible.

"(a) In biblical times convictional language and indicative language were not distinguished as they are now. (b) When twentieth-century scholars look back upon the language of biblical times, they can distinguish between a convictional and an indicative aspect. (c) It appears to us that what biblical people were really interested in was what we would call the convictional element; the indicative element was held in the convictional framework."

Yet despite this similar recognition of the role of religious language as expressive of a kind of commitment, Zuurdeeg assigns an appreciative power to such statements than does Braithwaite. There is for him a further metaphorical sense in which religious language expresses through a mythical form truth about God, truth unknowable directly because of the gap between infinite God and finite man.

I. T. Ramsey's philosophy of the religious attitude as a discernment-commitment combining the depth of personal commitment and the universality of mathematical commitment has much in common with Zuurdeeg's. For him religious language is logically odd: it uses ordinary object language with very special qualifications or combinations of words, and contains meaningful tautologies which commend the ultimates of explanation. He concludes that "for the religious man 'God' is a key word, an indissoluble poset, an ultimate of explanation expressive of the kind of commitment he professes." Because the Bible is so laden with odd uses of word and statements the problem of Christian doctrine is seen as "systematizing . . . the riotous mixture of phrases which had characterized the Kerygma."
with anything else." Therefore, he concludes, direct reasoning is of no use for knowledge of God, and analogy must be used. Thus the primary function of religious language is to analogically state ideas about God.

It has particularly been in Thomism, of course, that the doctrine of *via analogia* has flourished in Christian theology. E. L. Mascall, for example, in his *Via Media* and to some degree in his *Words and Images*, argues for the use of religious language as giving direct knowledge of God through analogy.

Yet there are still many theologians who deny the possibility of theological knowledge by analogy, and hence deny such a role to religious language. Frederick Ferré, for instance, concludes that the analogy of attribution tells us nothing, for "the assumption that God possesses abstractable characteristics identical to some also possessed by men is radically questionable." If Ferré intends that though there may be divine characteristics similar to human, they are not identical, he misses the whole point of analogy. If he would say that there is no resemblance between the finite and the infinite, then here the view of religious language tends to completely forsake the part religious language can play in at least giving "literal" ideas concerning the deity, though perhaps couched in figurative terms. In its extreme form, whether expressed in terms of logical positivism's meaninglessness, mysticism's transcendent logical ineffability, or some of Neo-Orthodoxy's insistence on the impossibility of rational knowledge of a wholly other God, religious language is in this sense impossible, and Biblical language is nothing more than a record of psychological ("religious") experiences which many find, for cultural reasons, to be helpful in giving them "similar" experiences.

If orthodox Christianity is to avoid the charge of failure to deal with the present life and its needs and to maintain its claim for some sort of empirical, historical basis, it must find some means of drawing a line, though perhaps a dotted one, between naive literalism and theological skepticism in interpreting the Biblical message. At the same time the valuable contributions of the various thinkers mentioned may, for much of their neglect, be extremely pertinent to the work of hermeneutics. Let us look back at these ideas we have touched upon and see what can be gained therefrom and what must be discarded.

Brathwicte's insistence on the convic-tional nature of religious language is undeniably important; the element of commitment in a passage such as Isaiah 6 is unavoidably present, and essential to the thrust of the chapter. On the other hand, the committal nature of the language used need not imply that it is entirely non-Aristotelian, that Isaiah, in this case, had no apprehension of characteristics of the Deity, or that he had no intention of conveying, not only that particular experience, but thoughts concerning the nature of God to the reader. It is entirely possible to conceive of Isaiah's words as meaning to describe a transcendent God and still have, if one wishes, "an empiricist's view of religious belief".

What has been said concerning Brathwicte's position applies equally to Zuurdeeg de's conception of the convic-tional situation (and Ramsey's discernment-commitment). And, indeed, Zuurdeeg de recognizes the place for an objective factor in this convic-tional situation in his postulating of the "convictor" as a part of the total scheme. To follow his suggestion of the convictor, witnesses, "goods" at stake, through these goods by hostile forces, and promise of new life to the sharer of certain convictions through the overall Biblical message is not only interesting, but also provides a new appreciation of God's redemptive work. Yet in his treatise of Biblical history as Bultmannian *mythos* there is a basic denial of the historicity of Judaeo-Christianity which if taken to its logical conclusion is fatal to the Christian faith. To continue the passage from Zuurdeeg de quoted above: "(d)
of the Bible is to be taken as “religious language”, some as “ordinary language”. It is also apparent that within either of these there is a variety of possibilities as to the type of reference to truth involved. The Biblical student is still left with the titanic task of determining if possible what kind of language is used in various parts of the Bible. It is here that Bultmann’s insistence on a study of the thought-forms of the Biblical writers, and some aspects of Dibelius’ Formgeschichte approach, are invaluable. While there is naturally a certain danger involved in bringing to one’s attempt to discover those thought-forms enough theological presuppositions to distort the information gathered to illegitimate conclusions, the pursuit of the historical and cultural background of the Bible is necessary to a correct assessment of its message today. Such study must include an attempt to discover both the general Zeitgeist of that time, and the features of the particular situation in which Biblical statements were made (e.g., Isaiah 7).

An interesting and valuable way in which such an approach bears fruit is in regard to passages which at the time they were written apparently could have been taken in a more literal sense than now. Not only is attention to this question necessary for most useful application of Biblical concepts to modern times, but it is vital to the work of setting the message of God’s word within the context of another language and culture. The Old Testament sacrifices, for example, or Christ’s washing of His disciples’ feet during the week of His passion illustrate this need for the ability to discriminate between the elements of the Biblical teaching which are dependent on the cultural context within which they were given and those which are of a more universal nature.

In addition, of course, more and more careful study of the nature of the original languages of the Bible must continue to bear fruit toward a better understanding of what God would say to man.

Linguistic analysis in philosophy, whether from the side of extreme logical positivism or from that of the Oxford movement, is to be welcomed by modern Biblical scholarship as a needed tool and corrective for receiving God’s redemptive revelation. What further potential for the enhancement of men’s lives lies within God’s word and still remains to be uncovered will to a great degree be revealed by a critical approach to the Bible in terms of the nature and function of language.

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FOOTNOTES
2. See C. E. M. Joad, A Critique of Logical Positivism, for an example.
5. Ibid., p. 55.
7. Ibid., pp. 38 ff.
8. Ibid., p. 40.
9. Ibid., p. 47.
10. Ibid., p. 156.
14. Loé, cit.
15. Supra, p. 4.
17. Ramsey, op. cit., p. 103.