

Scriptural semantics

By David Crystal

G. B. CAIRD:

The Language and Imagery of the Bible

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"This is a book by an amateur, written for amateurs", writes Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis of Holy Scripture in his preface. What G. B. Caird means is that no one can be master of all the professions which together define the world of biblical language studies. He is therefore content to borrow from all of them, in his concern to "set out systematically for the ordinary reader the questions he needs to ask if he is to enhance his understanding of the Bible", and in this respect he considers himself amateurish. But it is not fair of Professor Caird to use the term in this way, for if this book is the work of an amateur, it is difficult to know how to describe the efforts of those who will learn so much from it—not least, the present reviewer.

In this, its main aim, the book is undoubtedly a success, and it is the author's professionalism which makes it so. For the ordinary reader—presumably, one with no formal or systematic training in biblical studies—its strength lies in its analysis of individual passages and cruxes in the Bible. Well over a thousand passages are cited, taken from the whole span of the biblical texts, and many are made the focus of detailed theoretical discussion. Caird has a genius for selecting the apposite example, and for drawing parallels between texts. His com-

mentary is always learned and illuminating, and never dull.

He also characterizes his book as "a text-book of elementary semantics with illustrations from the Old and New Testaments", and it is this which governs the logic of his exposition. The book is in three parts. Part One begins with a classification of types of language function (informative, cognitive, performative/causative, expressive/evocative, cohesive), and of the uses and abuses of these notions. There follow chapters on the meaning of meaning, on changes of meaning, and on some central semantic problems (opacity, vagueness and ambiguity). This perspective is then used for a discussion of Hebrew idiom and thought. Somewhat unexpectedly, this part of the book ends with a separate chapter on the historical background to the translations of the Septuagint.

Part Two deals with the characteristics of various types of biblical language. Caird distinguishes between literal and non-literal language, and gives a detailed classification of types of metaphor and other forms of comparative language. There is a separate chapter on anthropomorphic language, and another on the awareness the Biblical writers show of the nature of the figurative language they employed. Part Three then uses this frame of reference to make an analysis of the meanings of historical, mythological and eschatological language—myth and eschatology being seen as metaphor systems for the theological interpretation of historical events.

The various linguistic themes Caird has selected provide a convenient framework for integrating his textual observations, and they are introduced in a sufficiently general way to provide the reader with a point of departure for further

reflections of his own. But to what extent do they constitute a coherent linguistic account of biblical language as a whole, such as one might expect from a book claiming to be a textbook in elementary semantics? In this respect, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* is less convincing, partly because of a certain arbitrariness in its classifications; partly because of serious limitations in Caird's conception of semantics.

The arbitrariness is perhaps an effect of Caird's own style. He likes to start each section with an organizational summary; these have the merit of telling the reader exactly which road the author proposes to travel, but the demerit of not allowing him to ask why he must travel it. An example: "the reasons why ambiguity may be unresolved are of three kinds, accidental, historical and deliberate" (page 102); the latter "we may classify as oracular, ironic, parabolic, exploratory and associative" (page 103). Similarly, there are five uses of language (cf. above), three kinds of transparency (phonetic, morphological and analogical), three kinds of vagueness (generalization, indeterminacy and economy), four possible points of comparison (perceptual, synaesthetic, affective and pragmatic), and so on. Such classifications are introduced early on in their respective sections, with little or no discussion or qualification, and no reference to the relevant literature. The problem is not that these terms are intrinsically unclear—Caird's illustrative method always makes it easy to see what he means by a category; rather it is the suspicion that other things have not been said—that there are other distinctions to be drawn, other categories to be recognized, and points of overlap between the listed categories to be noted.

This suspicion comes, essentially,

from knowing the way things have gone recently in semantics, stylistics and sociolinguistics. There are so many more factors to be taken into account now than earlier studies of meaning suggested. It just is not possible, for example, without proper defence, to reduce the enormous range of language uses to five; and several of the uses Caird recognizes pose major theoretical problems of their own. Similarly, one could point to recent discussion of ambiguity and vagueness in semantics, or to attempts to make empirical sense out of speech-act theory. There is also much potential in such notions as structural sense relations, presupposition and collocation, for the analysis of biblical language. But Caird makes no mention of any of this recent thinking. Indeed, his framework is grounded in the era of Ogden and Richards, and there are no contemporary references at all. Several of his classifications thus seem over-simple.

A similar problem arises when he uses more general linguistic notions. Caird sometimes refers to the approach of the "modern linguist", but his occasional references to recent linguistic ideas are shaky: e.g. the apparent equation of idiolect and lexis, or his characterization of structuralist linguists as being those who believe in a universal deep structure. These are minor points, which do not affect the substance of his argument. Rather more serious is his persistent use of a distinction between language and speech which I find quite unclear: "the public meaning which is characteristic of language... [and] consists of words (along with the syntax which holds them together)" is opposed to "the user's meaning which is characteristic of speech... [which] consists of sentences". Apart from the cases where the distinction between public and private

is not so clear-cut, I cannot see what is meant by divorcing sentences from syntax in this way. All sorts of interpretations are possible, and other terminologies, but Caird does not go into them. As a consequence, when he makes use of this distinction later in the book it poses serious problems of comprehension—for example, when he talks about ambiguity as belonging to speech not language, or makes correspondence (between "vehicle" and "tenor") a matter of language, whereas development (of elements of the vehicle) is a matter of speech.

What Caird does do well is to bring out the limitations of traditional biblical criticism. He has sharp and convincing points to make about those who confuse literal and metaphorical interpretation, or who make premature decisions about provenance and authorship on supposedly linguistic grounds (this applies as much to the ordinary reader as to the scholar). Unfortunately, as the book proceeds a certain tension arises between the demands of these two audiences. Part Three focuses increasingly on the metalanguage of myth and eschatology, and enters a world of higher-order issues which leave the ordinary reader some way behind. I frequently found it unclear, in this section, what status many of Caird's comments have. How idiosyncratic or controversial are his views? When he talks of "my proposal" (for providing an acceptable interpretation of eschatology), is this old Caird, recent Caird, or this-book Caird? When he refers to "two passages... which have been thought fatal to my argument", what is being referred to (for no footnote is given)? I have the impression that here he has lost sight of the ordinary reader, and is thinking more of his colleagues. Professionalism, it seems, will out.