BOOK REVIEWS

The Semantics of Biblical Language, by James Barr. London: Oxford University Press, 1961; 37s. 6d. [1]

In November 1960, a professor in Linguistics at Hartford Seminary, U.S.A., Dr. H. A. Gleason Jr. criticized in his inaugural lecture the study of Hebrew as current in theological colleges and pleaded for "a thorough restudy of the facts of the Hebrew language ... in the light of what linguists tell". [2] A few months later a professor in Old Testament Literature and Theology in the University of Edinburgh (now at Princeton) offers the same plea, as the result of a critical examination of what he believes to be an unsound method of using linguistic evidence in theological thinking. His criticisms, corroborated by a wealth of material, form the larger part of the study, the general trend of which might, perhaps, have been better characterized by the title 'On Unsound Semantics of the Biblical Languages'.

The author's principal quarrel is with theories that attempt to find the distinctiveness of Biblical thought in lexical and morphological peculiarities of Hebrew in the Old Testament, and of Hebrew-influenced Greek in the New Testament. These attempts are built, he is convinced, on erroneous views of the relationship between the language and the thought of a people and on a mistaken, or at least exaggerated, idea of a thought-contrast between Hebrews and Greeks, reflected in their respective languages (chapter 2). As to method (discussed in chapter 3), these theories lack "a strict and systematic discussion of the correlation between grammatical structures and lexical phenomena on the one hand and the Hebrew or Greek mind or any other national or cultural mind on the other", "a systematic examination of the language as a whole" and "a semantic method ... integrated with general linguistics as a whole (p. 24f), and they are characterized by the scholastic "idea of a logico-grammatical parallelism ... with Hebrew instead of Latin taking the central place as the language which really fits the ultimate realities" (p. 43).

The next two chapters criticize the views of several scholars of this school, for instance, Boman's notion that Hebrew verbs are always dynamic, so that even a 'stative' one such as *zaqēn* would mean something like 'to act old', 'to show oneself old', or that the nominal sentence would indicate indentity, not predication, which is in fact confusing a logical and a grammatical predicate, a confusion that is also detected by the author in Gesenius-Kautzsch' *Hebrew Grammar* § 141. Or, again, the theory that the formal combination of two nouns in construct state, like "house—man", "means that the two pictures form

[1] The following review of this important book is reprinted from the *International Review of Missions,* April 1962, by kind permission. Ed.

[2] 'Linguistics in the Service of the Church', in the *Hartford Quarterly,* 1961, p. 16.

a unity, but the house belongs to the totality of the man", which could be postulated with equal validity of the Latin form and is not in accordance with the reconstructed earlier Hebrew form (pp. 89ff).

The last part of chapter 5 discusses what the author styles 'the root-fallacy', the idea that roots have a meaning which is effective throughout all the variations of the root, and especially so in the Semitic languages, which has brought one Hebraist to the astonishing statement that "there is no sharp distinction between the various classes of words; this is one of the fundamental characteristics of the Semitic languages".[3] Contrast with this the view of a well-known linguist, Bloomfield, who takes the root to be only an abstraction and finds three distinct word-classes in Semitic, and six in Indo-European, languages. This leads to a discussion of etymologizing practices. Etymology, which investigates the derivation of words from previous forms, can often serve as an introduction to the history of known usage, but it should not be taken as a statement about its meaning, neglecting a thorough investigation of semantic usage. Several etymologizing statements are reviewed, such as the evaluation of Hebrew *'ašre,* 'happy', in Psalm 1 from the meaning of its cognates in other Semitic languages; [4] or the interpretation of the 'real meaning' of *dabar,* 'word', from 'backside', 'hinterground', and its supposed etymological connexion with *d^{e}bīr,* 'the backside' (of Tabernacle or Temple), the Holy of Holies, which leads to the construction that the Tabernacle, or Temple, was built around the significance of *dabar:* the ten *d^{e}barīm,* 'words, commandments', in the *d^{e}bir* [5] — all this in spite of the fact that the etymology is uncertain and that the connexion is nowhere made in the Old Testament and appears to have been unknown to the LXX.

After a detailed examination of " 'Faith' and 'Truth' — Some Linguistic Arguments" (ch. 7), Dr. Barr voices his objections to "Some Principles of Kittel's Theological Dictionary" or TWNT (ch. 8), principles that — though not followed in practice by all contributors — seem to influence a wider group than the actual readers of TWNT. Here are some of his objections: many contributors tend to confuse 'concept' with the linguistic entity called 'word', to waver between talking about words and talking about theological realities, to neglect the social acceptation of words. There can often be detected an "illegitimate identity transfer", the idea, that is, that two words signifying the same object or event are identical in meaning; an "illegitimate totality transfer", the tendency to read into a particular passage the sum total of a word's shades-of-meaning; the error of interpreting a word primarily from its most pregnant use, for instance *agathos,* 'good', from Matthew 19:17, *logos,* 'word', from John 1:1, or connecting *muthos* even with the modern concept "Myth" that is

[3] Pedersen, quoted on pp. 89ff, 101.

[4] Snaith, quoted on p. 116.

[5] Torrance, quoted on pp. 130f.

unknown to the New Testament; insufficient attention to the question whether, and how far, a word has become a technical, or nearly technical, term. In the author's opinion the organization of words in groups of cognates, such as *metanoeô,* 'to repent' under *nous,* 'mind', should be discarded, as it encourages etymologizing interpretations. A better procedure would be to organize "the words in groups each representing a related semantic field, e.g. the 'holy' group with its chief representatives in *hagios, hagnos* and *hieros",* or *metanoeô,* 'to repent', with *metamelomai,* 'to regret'. In some cases this is done, or envisaged, even in TWNT, as for the article on *psuchê,* 'soul', but not systematically. A dictionary so organized would enable the user better to delimit the meanings of words that are wholly, or partly, synonymous in certain contexts and to gauge the contrasts between semantic oppositions (pp. 235f). (Bible translators have come to the same conclusion, as is shown by the plans for a New Testament Word-book along these lines, cp. T.B.T. 12.2, April 1961, p. 50.)

Summarizing his opinion on TWNT, Dr. Barr states that it often fails "to get to grips with the semantic value of words in their contexts" and that the erroneous "belief that the distribution of the lexical stock of the New Testament may be directly correlated with the theological realities of God is both assumed in the method and fostered in the product" (p. 231).

The importance of the book under review is proportionate to the extent to which the methods and ideas criticized in it are current in theological circles.

At first sight one is inclined to regard these methods merely as homiletic tricks. Yet, in this reviewer's limited experience, they seem to be fundamental in the thinking of many theologians, including those outside the groups mentioned in this book. Such ideas form a danger, especially where churches use languages that have not acquired some assimilation of Hebrew phrases and metaphors, as has been the case in many western languages through a kind of peaceful co-existence and cultural interpenetration. Those churches must reach a thorough and genuine understanding of the Word of God as it is expressed in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, but they must be free so to express it in their own language that it speaks to the intellect and to the heart of their members. Such expression will usually not be in accordance with the lexical, or morphological, patterns and categories of Hebrew and Greek; if it were, there would be strong reason to suspect its correctness. This necessary freedom of linguistic transformation might be seriously hampered if the maxim "If God chose Israel, then he chose to use the Hebrew language" [6] were interpreted to mean that God cannot use any other language so well.

[6] Knight, quoted on p. 19.

To this subject Dr. Barr makes an interesting and positive contribution by proposing another approach. He holds that the distinctiveness of Biblical religion should not be sought primarily in words, from the lexical, morphological or etymological side, but in sentences. Thus, the pronoun *ego*, 'I', does not acquire in New Testament Greek a semantic value that is new and specific as compared with Hellenistic Greek — what is new is the sentence 'I am the way'; *alêtheia*, 'truth', and *alêthinos*, 'true', do not have in the New Testament a sense that is completely different from that in spoken Greek of the first century [7] — the new vision is given by Jesus's combination of the words 'I' and 'truth'. Or, to add another example, the fact that Jesus made human misery His own, and that His compassion always entailed His active help [8] is not conveyed by the word *splagchnizomai*, 'to have pity' and its etymology from *splagchna*, 'insides', in itself, but by the sentences and whole parables in which it is combined with other verbs or phrases (as in Mark 9:22, Luke 10:33f). Applied to problems of the Greek translation of the Old Testament this principle means that the Hellenistic shades of meaning of the Greek words were counterbalanced by the typical sentences in which they were used. This counterbalancing influence was strengthened by the fact that the Old Testament was translated because it was already a sacred book with which a community wanted to identify itself. This entails the willingness to interpret the words in accordance with the premises of that book, for instance, *ho theos*, 'God', not from its use in heathen cults, but from Israel's faith (pp. 266f).

Thus the distinctiveness of the Bible is not to be sought at the lexical and morphological level (which would bind it strongly to the Biblical languages), but at the stylistic level. There is a recognizable Biblical style, or series of Biblical styles, research into which is a rewarding field — as is demonstrated also (I add) by studies like those of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. [9] This "Biblical style is to a fairly large degree preservable in translation" (p. 272).

All this is important for problems of translating the Bible into languages that are structurally far removed from the Biblical languages. Dr Barr's view may be summarized in the following (long, but last) quotation:

> The real bearer of the theological statement is the large complex like the sentence, in which are used words having a certain semantic function and various morphological and syntactic mechanisms (such as case, construct state, verb tense, word order). The theological statement can be restated in

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[7] As Hoskyns and Davey hold, quoted on p. 195.

[8] Barth, K. D. III/2, 252, and cp. Barr, p. 156f.

[9] Cp. their book *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1936), pp. 55-75. *(Die Sprache der Botschaft)*, pp. 211-38 *(Leitwortstil in der Erzählung des Pentateuchs)*, pp. 239-61 *(Das Formgeheimnis der Biblischen Erzählungen)*.

> another language, even though the mechanisms are not the same in the new language and even though the words used in the new language may have certain other significances elsewhere which the original words did not have (that is, a certain degree of lexical overlap or non-coincidence exists); provided that the semantic value of the words within the new (i.e. the translated) sentence when taken as a whole does not misrepresent the semantic value of the original sentence taken as a whole. There is likely to be some loss in translation..... (but) 'the losses which occur in translation from Hebrew to Greek or to English are losses simply because the Hebrew is the original linguistically and not because its structure reflects the theological reality of the Biblical message' (pp. 265f).

Dr Barr is surely right to stress the need for a book on the methods of general linguistics, especially written for, and addressed to, theologians (p. 293). May he "gird up the loins of his mind" and write that book: 'On Sound Semantics of the Biblical Languages'!

J. L. Swellengrebel

The Twentieth Century New Testament. Chicago: Moody Press, 1961. 449 pp.; paper-back, $ 1.29; cloth, $ 3.50.

This reissue of the 1904 "translation into Modern English" (as the sub-title reads) is more than welcome, and we are grateful to Moody Press for also making a paper-back edition available at such a modest price. For *The Twentieth Century New Testament* is one of the best translations of the New Testament into vernacular English. Even though it is now over fifty years old, its simple vocabulary, crisp diction and straightforward style combine to make it as good as, and in some instances better than, the more famous modern English translations of the early twentieth century.

The fascinating account of the genesis of this translation was told in full for the first time by Dr. Kenneth W. Clark, in a lecture at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, on December 8, 1954 (printed in the Library *Bulletin* of September 1955). Dr. Clark characterized the work of this unknown group of some thirty-three men and two women as "a common objective, sought by common men, in the interest of common people." None of the group was a recognized authority (save for the three prominent scholars who acted as advisers: G. G. Findlay, J. R. Harvis, and R. F. Weymouth), but the work they produced was so excellently done as to win from Dr. Clark this appraisal: "We are forced to conclude that the devotion to their task has made of them better scholars than they were at first... It is amazing to find that the finest scholars of later years paid tribute to their work by adopting many of the same phrases and perceptive insights... It shares with Weymouth's New Testament the honour of inaugurating the truly modern-speech versions." And Dr. E. H. Robertson pays the translation high praise, indeed, when he says that, in using the *Twentieth Century New Testament,* along with many