

## 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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-interpretational analysis are not only valuable but indispensable for exegesis and existential application of Biblical truth (if such there 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<sup>2</sup>, 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 symbolism which not only divests all Biblical statements of any precise, 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 were 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”<sup>3</sup>). 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 uses of a single word within different contexts is recognized, the possibility of a similar variety in the use of statements is overlooked. The implications of an anthropomorphic theology in the Old Testament, and the absurdity, for example, of Paul’s writing of being literally crucified with Christ in the New Testament are patent and straightforward enough so that this position is now more often used as a travesty of one’s theological opponents than as anything else.

As we leave these primal conceptions of the use of language and steer a little closer to Charybdis, the situation grows continuously more complex. Once the pos-

sibility 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 over against *homo sapiens* (man with intelligence) who hopes, prays, swears, and theologizes,<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite this similar recognition of the role of religious language as expressive of personal conviction, Zuurdeeg assigns a more descriptive 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<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> and contains meaningful tautologies which commend the ultimates of explanation.<sup>8</sup> He concludes that "for the religious man 'God' is a key word, an irreducible posit, an ultimate of explanation expressive of the kind of *commitment* he professes."<sup>9</sup> 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*."<sup>10</sup>

But as Zuurdeeg exceeded Braithwaite in insisting on the pictorial function of religious language as descriptive of God, so Ramsey moves farther toward a fully symbolic view in asserting the possibility of more mediate knowledge of God by direct analogy. The language of the Bible is appropriately odd logically in its use of ordinary object language in unusual ways to bring the reader a new flash of insight in which "the penny drops, the ice breaks". And in the language of Christian theology this same function is found; Ramsey talks of it in terms of "models and qualifiers". Models of everyday speech, such as "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

with anything else.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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 knowledge 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 line, between naive literalism and theological skepticism in interpreting the Biblical message. At the same time the valuable contributions of the various thinkers mentioned must not be neglected, for much of what they suggest is 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.

Braithwaite’s insistence on the convictional 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-cognitive, 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 Braithwaite’s position applies equally to Zuurdeeg’s conception of the convictional situation (and Ramsey’s discernment-commitment). And, indeed, Zuurdeeg recognizes the place for an objective factor in this convictional situation in his positing of the “convictor” as a part of the total scheme.<sup>13</sup> To follow his suggestion of the convictor, witnesses, “goods” at stake, threat to these goods by hostile forces, and promise of new life to the sharer of certain convictions<sup>14</sup> through the overall Biblical message is not only interesting, but also provides a new appreciation of God’s redemptive work. Yet in his treatment 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 quoted above<sup>15</sup> “(d)

The convictional language of biblical man had a specific form: it was a narrative."<sup>16</sup> If the narrative of the resurrection of Christ is but an expression of some convictions about God and life, a symbol of the newness of life which is to come to a man through some relation to God, the final basis for the orthodox position and its belief in the deity of Christ (which includes with it certain views of the Scripture) is lost. Zuurdeeg is forced to such a metaphorical extreme only by his view of the impossibility of direct communication from the finite to the infinite, as in Ferré. Fundamentally involved here is the question of the nature of the creation of man as in the *imago Dei*, and the purpose of such creation by God. Assuming a correlation between man as a part of a God-created universe and God's own self, and assuming a purpose of fellowship in God's creation of man, we cannot conclude that the transcendent God is in no way immanent and dealing with man in terms of man's ways of thinking.

Ramsey's conclusion about Biblical narrative language appears at first to be quite similar to Zuurdeeg's: "the claim that the Bible is 'history' is only substantiated if 'history' refers to situations as odd as those which are referred to by that paradigm of the Fourth Gosepl: 'the Word became flesh'."<sup>17</sup> Taken as a denial of the literal historical intent of any Biblical narrative, it is open to the same criticism we have just noted. Taken as an illustration of the logical oddity of Biblical language, it still suggests a dichotomy of thought between Biblical, redemptive history and "secular" history which is unwholesome in its implication that much of history is without divine direction or purpose. And it is naturally difficult to show the logical oddity of the many passages, especially in the Old Testament, which purport to be historical with little possibility of doctrinal interpretation.

Approaching the issue from a different angle, there is the problem of treating the entire bulk of Biblical language as "religious language" as opposed to so-called "ordinary language", assuming such a strict division desirable. Whether or not Zuurdeeg or Ramsey extend their concept of religious language to the whole Bible (and both appear definitely to do so), there is the danger of following their thought to that conclusion. To do this is to sacrifice usual literary discernment for the sake of parsimony. Interpreting all Scriptural language according to one criterion, as representative of one type of language, betrays the same astigmatism which would attribute the same epistemological function to Pascal's writings on fluid statics as to his account of his converting vision.

Yet Ramsey's description of analogical predication as a system of models and qualifiers is a helpful one, even if the question raised by G. H. Clark as to whether the analogy is from religious language to object language or the reverse<sup>18</sup> is ignored. His analysis of the theological parallel as an odd use of ordinary words or combinations of words seems to correspond fairly well with the way in which not only religious analogies but any analogies present unfamiliar ideas to the mind, and this analysis can be put to much fruitful use by the Christian teacher, whether educator, theologian, pastor, or layman.

Mascall's work continues a part of Aquinas' contribution here. Farrer's thought is interesting in its demonstration of the need for an analogical function for religious language, but Ferré, denying the informative worth of such analogy, points this out as well. For him a complete univocity of theological language implies anthropomorphism in God, while complete equivocity yields agnosticism;<sup>19</sup> so there must be, to use Mascall's term, a *via media*. As for Ferré's doubts about God's possessing any characteristics at all in common with man (or vice-versa), we have already seen the same difficulty in Zuurdeeg.

It is apparent, then, in keeping with the orthodox view of the deity of Christ and authority of the Bible, as well as with consistent thinking, that some language

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

1. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936) p. 174.
2. See C. E. M. Joad, *A Critique of Logical Positivism*, for an example.
3. Gilbert Ryle, *Philosophical Review*, LXII, p. 168.
4. W. F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958) p. 61.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
6. I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, (London: SCM Press, 1957) p. 35.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 38 ff.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
11. Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1943) p. 7.
12. Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961) p. 75.
13. Zuurdeeg, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
14. *Loc. cit.*
15. *Supra*, p. 4.
16. Zuurdeeg, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
17. Ramsey, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
18. G. H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, part III, especially pp. 134 ff.
19. Ferre, *op. cit.*, p. 69.