
Some Observations concerning Comments on Biblical Words in Sermons

by Brian Daines

Last time Mr. Daines wrote for us he warned us against the over-facile pressing of a biblical analogy beyond the intention of the biblical writer. In this paper he warns us against playing games with biblical words. To emphasize the interrelation of the English terms holiness, wholeness and health can make a popular and effective homiletic point, but one which must be renounced by the expository preacher. The implications of semantics for biblical study have been set forth at a high academic level by such writers as Professor Barr and Dr. Thiselton, but Mr. Daines applies them to the work of general practitioners.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

PREACHERS fall into many pitfalls when they try to explain the meaning of individual words in the Bible to their congregations. These mistakes arise in the main out of two assumptions which are false, but none the less, it seems, commonly held. The first is that the more and closer attention we pay to individual words, the closer we will arrive to the 'deep' or 'real' meaning of the text. The second is that the saying "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" can be ignored in biblical exposition, and that therefore a smattering of Greek and the ability to find one's way around the *Englishman's Hebrew Concordance* entitles one to speak dogmatically concerning such things as the significance of the use of a particular tense in a verse in John or the connotations of a theological term used in Isaiah.

The assumption that a closer examination of minute fragments of the biblical text is the only way forward to a greater appreciation of that text is an illusion. More would be gained from an hour's study of the whole book of Ephesians than from the same time devoted to a study of, for example, the meaning of *pistoi* (faithful) as used in chapter 1 v. 1. It has become increasingly recognized that the context in which a word is used is extremely important and that we would be wise to look upon the clause or sentence as the building-block of the meaning of language rather than the word. The meaning that a word conveys to us does not depend so much on what it is in itself, but on its relation to other words which form its context. For example, taking a verb from English, what does "to put on" mean? It all depends on the context. Consider the following sentences

in each of which "put on" carries a different sense. Some of the meanings are closer to each other than others. For instance the meaning in the first sentence is closer to the second than to the fourth.

1. Put the cup on the table.
2. Put some more coal on the fire.
3. Put on the television.
4. Do not put on that silly expression.
5. Do not put him on this case.

It is meaningless to ask which one of them is the 'real' or 'correct' meaning—it all depends on the context in which it is being used. On this kind of view a dictionary does not give us the essential or correct meanings of words but generalizations about meanings based on the way in which the words are generally used.

The importance of context in showing us the meaning of words can be further illustrated by the sentence: "He went streaking across the field". Because of the modern colloquial use of "streaking" the context is not sufficient for the meaning of these words to be unambiguous. A further context is needed for us to understand the sentences. For example:

1. He went streaking across the field taking the ball closer to the other team's goal.
2. He went streaking across the field and outraged public modesty.

Alternatively we can write nonsense sentences such as:

1. Can you policeman by stretching your hands?
2. He was standing still as he eagerly ran along.

In the first sentence it is impossible for us to understand what "policeman" could mean. Because it is used in a totally wrong context the word has no real meaning in the sentence. Similarly in the second case we cannot make sense of both "standing still" and "ran along". Accepting either one makes the other meaningless.

All this concerning the importance of context means that if we indulge in minute word study we are in danger of casting ourselves in the role of Tantalus. In the same way as the waters receded from him each time he stooped to drink, so the meaning of a text can recede from us as we lose sight of the context in looking closely at a particular word.

This is not to say that word study is not possible or even that it is unimportant. Obviously words have some stable core of meaning or else dictionaries could not be written and probably understandable language would be impossible. It does mean, though, that word study does not have more value in helping us to understand the Bible than looking at a verse, a chapter or even a whole book at a time.

II. COMMON MISTAKES

Having cleared the ground on this all-important matter of context we are now in a position to examine some of the mistakes often made by expositors in this area.

(a) *That we can get the meaning of a word by examining its Hebrew or Greek root or even the root of the English translation.*

It is a popular view that the 'true' or 'correct' meaning of a word is in some sense the original one, the oldest that can be traced. In fact the present uses of words often bears little relation to older ones. The original meaning of "history" was "investigation" and the English word "nice" originates from a Latin word (*nescius*) meaning "ignorant". The same applies to the biblical languages. Even if the Hebrew word for "holy" came from a Semitic root meaning "to be separated" (which in itself is open to dispute) this does not imply that the Hebrew word as used in the Old Testament means this any more than if I say you are nice I mean that you are ignorant.

The meaning of a word can only be found by studying its contemporary use. Looking at an older state of the language simply sets up ideas that have to be modified or disregarded. An even worse error is to try to understand the meaning of Greek or Hebrew words by referring to the root meaning of words in the English translation. Therefore "holy" is claimed to mean "clean" in the Bible because that was an early meaning of the English word. Such turns of argument fall into double error. The older meaning has nothing necessarily to do with present usage of "holy" in English let alone the way words were used in another language thousands of years ago.

A variation of this faulty reasoning is found in the use of the meaning of English words which are derived from Greek to fill out the meaning of Greek words. Therefore the fact that the English word "dynamite" is derived from the Greek *dunamis* (power) is used sometimes to carry over the connotations of the English word into the Greek. Then the "power of God" in 1 Cor. 1: 24 becomes the "dynamite of God". Such devices are illogical because how we have used and modified Greek words for incorporation into our language has no bearing on the meaning of Greek words in the Bible to their contemporaries.

(b) *That when a word is used all possible meanings of that word can be seen in that verse.¹*

In word study, cross-references can be misleading as well as helpful unless they are carefully used. When preaching on, say, "faith" with Gal. 3: 12 as his text, an expositor often feels justified in examining many or all of the other occurrences of the word in the New Testament with the implication that they all have an immediate relevance

¹ [This is the fallacy which James Barr has designated "illegitimate totality transfer" (*The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 1961, p. 218). Ed.]

to the word as used in this verse. In these sorts of cases what is often happening is that the preacher is trying to deal with a concept as presented in the whole Testament or Bible, and that the choice of a particular verse is incidental. In such instances strictly speaking no genuine exposition of that verse in its context is being given.

This means that, when a word occurs in the Bible, we cannot assume that all possible meanings of that word are present—or even that more than one possible meaning is relevant in understanding the verse. The mistake is compounded when the meanings and overtones of an English word are used to explain the text. All translations are to a greater or lesser extent imperfect and a *detailed* study of how we use an English word in everyday speech is likely to carry us into areas of meaning which do not correspond to the Greek or Hebrew word which it translates.

(c) *That grammar is always a good guide to interpretation*

To examine the grammar of a word or sentence can sometimes mislead us as to the meaning of the sentence. A sentence which is grammatically a statement, such as "This is poison", may not be so. This sentence could be:

1. a descriptive statement about something I am pointing to.
2. carrying the meaning "Quick, fetch a doctor!"
3. implying "Look out—don't drink that!"
4. equivalent to "You forgot to put sugar in my tea."²

In English "How do you do?" is grammatically a question requiring an answer but the appropriate response is not "Actually I have a corn on my left foot", but "How do you do?" In the same way *chairete* (rejoice) in Greek is frequently a form of greeting and, although it is an imperative in form, it is no more a command than "How do you do?" is a question (see Matt. 26: 19). Therefore it would seem that we could be wrong in interpreting Phil. 3: 1 and 4: 4 as an exhortation to rejoice. In the same way 1 John 2: 26 does not *describe* the act of writing but shows that John has come to the end of a topic (cf. NEB). This shows that the language context is not the only one—there is also a social context. Part of understanding the meaning of some words in some verses is understanding the social customs and conventions of biblical times.

III. POINTS TO REMEMBER

We now turn to consider the other assumption that preachers quite often seem to make—that a smattering of Greek and Hebrew is sufficient to make conclusive points from the pulpit concerning the meaning of certain words. However, the situation is rather that the more one learns, the more problems there seem to arise if one wants to make detailed dogmatic points:

² I am indebted to Dr. A. C. Thiselton for this illustration.

(a) Writers use different styles.

There is a great deal of contrast within the New Testament in the kind of Greek that is used. John writes a fairly simple Greek in his Gospel whereas Peter's Greek in his first letter is much more complex and is more like classical Greek. Many such contrasts could be shown. This means that when we come to compare the ways in which different writers in the Bible use the same word, this is by no means an easy task. Within the Old Testament the problem is compounded by the fact that the books were written over such a long period of time. All the books of the New Testament were written within about fifty years of each other. The corresponding figure for the Old Testament is about a thousand years.

(b) The meaning of the use of certain tenses of verbs, cases of words, etc., is not automatic.

For example, just because a certain tense is used in Greek it does not follow that the conclusions that can be drawn from this are obvious. John in his Gospel often uses the present tense not, as one might expect, to describe something that is happening in the present, but to bring a vividness to the events of the past. In our English translations these present verbs are translated as if they were past tense. Therefore the use, for instance, of a perfect or pluperfect may have great theological significance or it may not. It is more likely to carry an importance in one of Paul's letters, say, than in one of the Gospels, but this will not necessarily be the case.

(c) The significance of the use in the early church of the Septuagint for the way the writers of the New Testament used words is a subject of much controversy.

The scriptures for the New Testament writers were the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. It is difficult to estimate how much they were influenced by the use there of words which they also wanted to use in their writings such as sin, hope, salvation, etc. This is a subject on which scholars disagree and the study of words common to both Testaments is made a very complicated affair by the existence of the Septuagint and the part it played in the apostolic church.

(d) Commentaries and study-books cannot be relied upon blindly to make up for the preacher's lack of knowledge.

This is the case for the following reasons:-

1. Commentaries which are old (as a rough guideline, say, written more than thirty years ago) are very suspect in the area of word study because of the advances in knowledge which have taken place since they were written.

2. Many popular evangelical writers do not have an adequate knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and yet make fine points concerning words in these languages.

3. Many writers and scholars who know Greek and Hebrew are not familiar with modern linguistics and therefore fall into the sort of traps discussed in the first section.

4. To use commentaries and study books with discernment requires the kind of knowledge most preachers do not have when it comes to detailed word study.

IV. CONCLUSION

Those who are not equipped for it should not embark upon detailed word study. This does not mean, though, that the preacher need feel too constricted or confined. Usually little is to be gained by going into a particular word in great detail for the intellectual level we are aiming at in our preaching and teaching. It is much safer to look at themes (such as salvation, hope or love) taking a number of texts and looking at the meaning of the whole sentence. In doing this it is a good idea to be sensitive to the different writers in the Bible. For example a look at the theme of salvation in Paul's letters will not produce identical results to looking at the same theme in John's writings. They will be complementary rather than contradictory, of course, but by reading one into the other and producing a sort of hotch-potch we would not only do an injustice to the individuality of Paul or John, but also lose some of the richness of the New Testament.

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