

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

AN APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT
WORD-STUDY

The studies presented in this work are directed towards ascertaining the meaning with which certain important words were used by the writers of the New Testament documents. Absolute certainty on this is admittedly impossible to obtain, but nevertheless the attempt to determine this meaning must be continued if we are to begin to understand the message of Scripture, and that attempt must proceed in accordance with sound linguistic and exegetical methods. Now it has to be admitted that there has been a conspicuous lack of serious interest in the problems and discussions of linguistic meaning on the part of those who seek to interpret what is expressed in the ancient languages of Scripture.¹ Recently the attention of biblical scholars has been drawn to this situation by Professor James Barr in his book *The Semantics of Biblical Language*,² a volume which courageously reveals the misleading methods and erroneous conclusions in exegesis which ignorance or neglect of the basic principles of linguistic semantics has allowed to gain acceptance within the movement for biblical theology.³ It must be emphasised that

¹ The blame for this state of affairs does not lie solely with the theologians, although their education in biblical languages and approach to biblical texts is directed towards the assessing of literary content rather than towards systematic description of a language and analysis of its structure: the linguists, on their part, have failed to inform the theologians, in any appropriate way, of the methods and findings of their science, and seem to neglect discussion of the special character of the language of a religious tradition.

² Oxford University Press, 1961. See also his 'Hypostatization of Linguistic Phenomena in Modern Theological Interpretation', *JSS*, vii (1962), 85-94, which carries further the author's criticism of the practice of extracting linguistic phenomena from the syntactical environment in which their linguistic functioning takes place. In his more cautious study *Biblical Words for Time* (London, SCM, 1962) Barr treats of the interpretation of these words in the writings of John Marsh, J. A. T. Robinson and Oscar Cullmann.

³ 'Biblical theology' may be understood either as a solely descriptive discipline revealing the theology (or theologies) contained in the Bible, or as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

Barr is not concerned to criticise the prevailing conclusions of this 'school' of theology, but the insecure, if not definitely unsound, linguistic methods and assumptions which characterise the writings of some of its most outstanding exponents. One of the basic presuppositions of this biblical theology is that a vast difference in views of reality existed between the biblical and Greek worlds, the one characterised by 'Hebraic' modes of conception, the other by 'Graeco-Hellenistic'. The major differences between these are thought to consist of the contrast between dynamic and static ways of thinking and expression, the contrast between abstract and concrete, and the contrast in the conceptions of time and of man. Barr claims that the purpose of his book is not to question the validity of these contrasts, but rather to expose the faulty linguistic basis on which they are established, especially by Th. Boman.¹ He and other writers claim that these particular features of Hebrew thinking are built into the Hebrew language and that the examination of Hebrew as a linguistic phenomenon will therefore point directly to the mental patterns behind it. Now it is clear that this kind of argument has been developed with a complete disregard of the discipline of linguistic semantics, and Barr is not slow to point out its many weaknesses.²

a kind of dogmatics with the Bible as its only source of authority. See G. Ebeling, 'The Meaning of Biblical Theology', *JTS* (n.s.), vi (1955), 210–25, and P. S. Watson, 'The Nature and Function of Biblical Theology' *ET*, LXXIII (1962), 195–200. But much that may be included under the name tries to unite both understandings, and to be descriptive and dogmatic at the same time. In attempting to do this, it proceeds from a contrast drawn between Hebrew and Greek thinking to a synthetic view of the biblical material in terms of dominant Hebraic thought-patterns. It is of the methods of this intermediate kind of biblical theology that Barr is most critical. See also in this connection, 'Biblical Theology: Past and Future', by D. H. Wallace, *TZ*, xix (1963), 88–105.

¹ *Hebrew Thought compared with Greek* (SCM, London, 1960). See also his contribution to *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (SCM, London, 1962), pp. 1–22, entitled, 'Hebrew and Greek Thought-Forms in the New Testament'. Barr is aware of the value of this contrast, but observes that its existence and use are not dependent on its extension into a contrast of linguistic phenomena. Boman's article (just mentioned) would tend to bear this out: he there discusses thought-forms without recourse to argument from linguistic facts.

² The failure to engage in a comprehensive study of the Hebrew verb-system has permitted the claim that Hebrew thinking is 'dynamic' because

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

Professor Barr observes that the idea of a correlation between language and thought has led to a number of abuses at the level of vocabulary studies. There is what he calls *the adding of significances*. This means that where several Hebrew words are found translating one English term the significance of each of these words is regarded as an aspect of the total reality in the thought-structure, and then these various aspects are brought together to form, as it were, the reality for theological interpretation.¹ This kind of procedure ignores the existence of synonyms and the theory behind it ignores the phenomenon of polysemy, that is, the fact that one word can have more than one sense. Linguistic material is being subjected to a systematising method. Then Barr discusses *the dependence on etymologies*, where the original meaning of a word is regarded as an authoritative guide to its meaning in subsequent usage and as necessarily present in all proper usage. Moreover, it is often assumed that an appeal to etymology will lead to the right sense in the interpretation of difficult or ambiguous words. In opposition to this view, Barr emphasises that etymology is no sure guide to the semantic value of words in their current usage, but that such value has to be determined from the current usage itself and not from derivation. The etymology of a word, he maintains, is not a statement about its meaning, but about its history, and the historical past of a word is not a reliable guide to its present meaning. No reasonable person will question this claim; yet no reasonable person will wish to maintain that

the verb in Hebrew always expresses movement and activity: whereas, in fact, there are many stative, intransitive verbs in Hebrew which do not express action, and the forms ישׁ ('there is') and אין or אין ('there is not') may come near to possessing the significance of absolute existence or non-existence in certain contexts. The domination of assumed modes of thinking over the investigation of linguistic peculiarities has caused a sharp distinction to be drawn between the 'aspectual' system of the Hebrew verb (as an index to the Hebrew understanding of time) and the 'tense' system of the Indo-European verb: yet, in Greek, for example, an 'aspect' system for verbs is strongly represented. Furthermore, can it be seriously maintained that the Hebrew language discloses the distinctiveness of Israelite theological thinking when it is recalled that, structurally, Hebrew is no more than a Semitic language and shares many of its features with the whole Semitic family of languages?

¹ See Barr's strictures (in *Semantics*, pp. 144 ff.) on E. Jacob's statement on the nature of man, which is based and built on the meaning of the four Hebrew words which may be roughly translated into English as 'man'.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

the original or etymological meaning of a word (when it is discoverable) cannot, in any circumstances, assist our understanding of its present semantic value.¹ The past history of a word (and etymological study involves historical study)² *may* be valuable in helping us to grasp the fulness of its present meaning, and, on occasion, etymology may enable us to understand why an author selected certain words in preference to others in order to express his thoughts. Bad examples of etymologising—and there are many³—do not vitiate its careful and correct use. In short, there is a scientific use of etymology, helpful in the recognition of homonyms and in elucidation of the problems of change, loss and addition of meaning.⁴

The underlying cause of these errors in vocabulary studies is the failure to interpret words in their contexts. The semantics of words in their actual usages is not investigated; their interpretation is taken directly from the dictionary and not from the texts in which they appear, and the question of what the writer meant when he used a particular word is not raised. In contrast to this type of procedure, Barr maintains, in what is the only really positive solution to the problem which his book offers, that

¹ Barr himself says of the identification of cognates for some Hebrew words in Arabic and Accadian, ‘the etymological recognition may be used in conjunction with the context of the Hebrew word to give a good semantic indication for its occurrence’ (*Semantics*, p. 158).

² On this, see Y. Malkiel, ‘The Place of Etymology in Linguistic Research’, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, xxxi (1954), 78–90.

³ One may mention here what Barr calls ‘the root fallacy’—the assumption that the ‘root meaning’ (which is supposed to provide the original meaning and to express the concept or idea) is a basic part of the actual semantic value of any word or form which can be assigned to an identifiable root, and that any word may be presumed to contain some suggestion of other words formed from the same root. But, as Barr points out, the ‘meaning’ of a root is not necessarily part of the meaning of a derived form, and two words having the same root need not suggest one another, e.g. **לֶחֶם** = ‘bread’, and **מִלְחָמָה** = ‘war’. The distinction between grammatical variations of a root form and fresh word-formation must be kept in mind.

⁴ On the scientific approach to etymology, see S. Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (Oxford, 1962), chs. 4 and 8: also Y. Malkiel, *loc. cit.* This article contrasts modern etymological study with the bizarre conjecturing—based on sound resemblances or on some seductive affinity of meaning—that it was during the pre-scientific era of language study.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

a 'better way to approach biblical language in its relation to theology' will be 'at the level of the larger linguistic complexes, such as the sentences'. And he continues, 'it is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex, such as the complete speech or poem) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit) or the morphological and syntactical connection'.¹ The uniqueness of the religious structure (either of ancient Israel or of the Christian preaching) did not consist primarily (if at all) in the issuing of new words, new word-concepts or of new conceptual content for old words: rather, its newness, says Barr, 'consisted in new combinations of words, in which it was often possible for the semantic value of the words to be changed only slightly or not at all, and for the new or distinctive concept to be indicated by the word-combination'.²

The failure to realise that distinctive (theological) meaning belongs to the word-combination or sentence (treated in context) rather than to individual words is, in Barr's opinion, the basic misconception underlying the construction of the monumental *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. This work purports to be a dictionary of Greek words, but in it 'external lexicography', that is, the listing of word-occurrences with word-substitutes in another language which provide guidance on the semantic contribution of the word to the sentences in which it is used—this is presupposed or given the briefest treatment, whereas 'inner lexicography', which attempts to penetrate the field of thought with which the words are related and which therefore stresses religious, philosophical and theological usage, is emphasised. This, according to Barr, is an improper methodology. Lexicography, if it is to be true to its name, cannot pass from linguistic material to the inner world of thought, without making the false assumption that the *word*, rather than the word-combination, indicates the concept. Moreover, according to Barr, the study of the varied semantic value of words in their contexts tends to be subordinated in the *Wörterbuch* to the attempt to build up 'general concepts', especially those associated with the *Heilsgeschichte*, or history of salvation. These 'general concepts' may be valid and useful categories for theological systematisation, but seldom do all

¹ *Semantics*, p. 263.² Barr, *loc. cit.*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

instances of a word's usage fit into them, and consequently those which can be connected with such categories are assumed to be the important and regulative ones. In this way, interest in theological themes is permitted to assume dominance over adequate semantic description and investigation. While Barr commends some of the articles in the Kittel *Wörterbuch* and observes that it may be better (even as a whole) than the principles on which it was planned, he nevertheless feels that the general conception of the work must be criticised.

It cannot be doubted that Professor Barr has rendered a valuable service to biblical scholarship by exposing the careless linguistic methods upon which imposing theological statements have been content to rest: nevertheless, his zeal to warn students of the Bible of the errors into which they may fall has allowed him to be over-critical of some authors and to over-simplify some of the issues.¹

As pointed out earlier, Barr insists that it is at the level of the sentence or larger linguistic complex, and not the word, that semantic distinctiveness is clarified and theological thought communicated. This affirmation gives rise to two questions: one concerning the adequacy of the context suggested for interpretation; the other concerning the autonomy of the word in linguistic study. It is true that the contextual analysis of meaning is possibly the most influential single fact in the growth of twentieth-century semantics, but the context of interpretation is not regarded as being simply verbal: it is now increasingly realised that the non-verbal elements of a situation and the wider influence of social setting and cultural background are also of direct relevance to the complete understanding of a communication event.² Indeed, the context must be regarded as comprehending all the conventions and presuppositions accepted in a society in which the participants live, in so far as these are relevant to the understanding of what is said, or written, in

¹ Of the published reviews of *Semantics* the following are the most valuable: B. S. Childs in *JBL*, LXXX (Dec. 1961), 374-7; Th. Boman in *TLZ*, LXXXVII (April 1962), 262-5 and in *SJT*, xv (1962), 319ff.; R. McL. Wilson in *NTS*, VIII (1962), 282-3; G. E. Wright in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, xvii (May 1962), 350-3; and L. Alonso-Schökel in *Biblica*, XLIII (1962), 217-23.

² See J. R. Firth, *Papers in Linguistics* (Oxford, 1957), ch. 3, and esp. p. 32.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

communication.¹ Part of what is then involved in ‘context’ is covered by W. M. Urban’s conception of the ‘universe of discourse’.² Urban developed this theme in order to provide theoretical foundation for his conviction that propositions other than those containing terms denoting entities in the physical world may yet have meaning—propositions such as those concerning the supernatural and ethics; and in any linguistic theory of meaning it seems right and important to incorporate this notion of context as ‘universe of discourse’. The cultural context builds up from this ‘universe of discourse’, taking into itself all that is relevant from what is said or written and what is happening. Now this understanding of the context for interpretation is very much wider than Barr seems to allow,³ and carries with it the necessity of treating themes and ideas from a historical standpoint in order to place statements and words in the appropriate ‘universe of discourse’. A historical perspective is needed to provide an adequate context of meaning. The importance of this point is clarified through discussion of the second matter which Barr’s affirmation raises. His affirmation implies that *words* are not the bearers of meaning and are therefore not a proper object of semantic analysis. It is obvious that the contextual theory of meaning constitutes a direct threat to the relative independence of the word as a unit of meaning. Nevertheless the exponents of the theory do not think that it is incompatible with a certain measure of word-autonomy,⁴ and even Barr himself, at two points in his book, is prepared to concede to the lexical unit such autonomy. ‘It is true. . . that a word may be used in such a way as to suggest *some wide area of recognised thought* which can be somehow connected with the word but which goes beyond its normal signification.’⁵ Barr goes on to claim (and rightly) that we cannot assume that this is always happening,

¹ A particular instance of this is that the context of a sentence in a written work must be understood to include the conventions governing the literary genre of which the work is an example.

² Urban, *Language and Reality* (London, 1939), pp. 128 ff., 195 ff., 203.

³ But see note 1 on p. 217 of *Semantics*.

⁴ Cf. S. Ullmann, *Principles of Semantics* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1957), pp. 60 ff. Lexicography demonstrates the existence of a measure of word-autonomy: ‘no dictionary could exist without an element of permanence, a core or inner fortress within the area of meaning’ (Ullmann, *op. cit.* p. 67).

⁵ *Semantics*, p. 217 (italics mine).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

but it is important to notice his preparedness to admit that a word may be used to suggest an *idea*, for what can ‘some wide area of recognised thought’ mean, if not an ‘idea’? Again, when Barr modifies his statement that the semantic value of the words in a new word-combination may be changed only slightly or not at all, his words imply the rightfulness of investigating the lexical unit as a unit of meaning.

It is true of course that the use of a word might come in due course to be specially stamped by its frequent *recurrence in sentences of a particular kind*, and so to undergo semantic change. . . . But . . . such semantic change is not at all to be related in its extent proportionately to the degree of newness or originality of the statements in which it occurs. And it has to be related to other factors, such as the degree of *specialization of the word in earlier usage*, and the degree to which it becomes completely *technical in its use* in the new statements.¹

To what kind of word in biblical usage can the phrases—earlier specialised usage, technical use, recurrent use in sentences of a particular kind (left undefined!)—be applied? It is surely very reasonable to suggest that many of those words which are items in the theological vocabulary of the Bible are such. On the basis of these two observations we may say that words which were, or were to become significant theologically came to the biblical authors with their own particular content and associations, and as semantic markers of a concept: therefore the investigation of their historical and traditional usage is a necessary preliminary to discovering the extent of indebtedness or uniqueness in their use by a writer within a specific context. In this connection, the elucidation of the original, or earliest discoverable, context of meaning (within the life of ancient Israel, or of the early Church) will provide valuable assistance in understanding the choice of a word by a writer and the nature of its development up to the time of and within his use. Knowledge of the scope and the change of meaning depends on a broad historical perspective.

Throughout Barr’s book one is constantly aware of his rejection of the theory that the basic lineaments of a culture are traceable in the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of a language—a theory which underlies many attempts to draw distinctions and parallels between Greek and Hebrew views of life, and which strongly

¹ *Semantics*, p. 263 (italics mine).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

influences Boman's work. Barr expresses his own attitude to this theory in these words:

In this view [i.e. that linguistic structure reflects or corresponds to the thought structure] there are very great difficulties, and though it may be possible to maintain it in some greatly modified sense, the way in which it is at present used in theology may well be regarded as wholly outmoded and a survival from the time before the scientific study of language began.¹

But criticism of the current use made of a theory is not a substitute for the discussion of the validity of the theory itself: and Barr does not adequately deal with the Humboldtian theory. Whatever dangers the view that linguistic structure reflects thought structure may have for linguistics and for theologians who embrace it (and these dangers are real), it nevertheless forms (as Barr knows) the basis of a significant school of language study in Europe and in America. Humboldt's ideas underlie the work of such distinguished linguists as J. Trier and L. Weisgerber in their exposition of the fruitful theory of 'semantic fields'.² In America, they are basic to the well-known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on the influence of language on thought.³ This hypothesis has been developed in the main by anthropologists on the basis of research into American-Indian languages, and has been subjected to searching debate.⁴ Linguists are critical of many of the details of the hypothesis and of the generalisations built upon it, and they observe that it lays too great emphasis on languages which have no historical dimension and give no scope for studying the role of language in the higher reaches of culture and thought: nevertheless, they are appreciative of its main principle. For instance, S. Ullmann can say:

It is becoming increasingly clear that there is some kind of reciprocity between language and thought: language not only expresses our

¹ *Semantics*, p. 33; see also pp. 294-5.

² See H. Basilius, 'Neo-Humboldtian Ethnolinguistics', *Word*, viii (1952), 95-105, and S. Öhman, 'Theories of the "Linguistic Field"', *Word*, ix (1953), 123-34.

³ See B. L. Whorf, *Four Articles on Metalinguistics* (Washington, 1952) and *Language, Thought and Reality*, ed. J. B. Carroll (New York, 1956).

⁴ Cf. *Language in Culture*, ed. H. Hoijer (Chicago, 1954) and *Language, Thought and Culture*, ed. P. Henle (Ann Arbor, 1958).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10886-7 - Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms

David Hill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT WORD-STUDY

thoughts, but, to some extent, conditions and predetermines them: it furnishes the speaker with a ready-made system of categories and scale of values and directs his thinking into certain channels.¹

This might appear to some as a too rigid statement of the relation, and it may well be that some modification might be made in the direction of suggesting that language predisposes to, rather than determines, a way of thinking.² But within the framework of this general approach, most linguists agree that vocabulary provides some kind of index to cultural emphases and reflects environment and mental set as well: but there is not the same general agreement with reference to grammar and sentence construction.³

Sufficient has been said on this topic of language structure and thought structure to indicate its importance and the need for testing the hypothesis, especially on the level of semantic study. Barr's negative attitude to the Humboldtian position reflects his attitude both to language and to philosophy in general. In his definition of 'linguistics' (on page 2, note 1) and throughout his entire discussion, Barr excludes almost entirely the psychological and sociological viewpoints in the science of language. The result is that a mechanistic approach dominates which is concerned with the laws of language and usage, not with the processes of the mind. But this formalistic branch of semantics (with which Barr identifies himself) is not the only one which merits the name of science.⁴ In the second place, Barr is sceptical of the Humboldtian theory because it rests on an idealist type of philosophy: indeed, all exponents of the mechanistic approach to language

¹ From Ullmann's review of the Hoijer volume (mentioned in preceding note) in *Romance Philology*, x (1956-7), 225.

² For this approach, see J. W. Swanson, 'Linguistic Relativity and Translation', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, xxii (Dec. 1961), 185-92.

³ Cf. Henle's own contribution to *Language, Thought and Culture*, pp. 1-24.

⁴ Cf. Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction*, pp. 58ff. H. Kronasser's conception of semantics in the *Handbuch der Semasiologie* (Heidelberg, 1952) to which Barr often refers, has a broader extension than Barr's, including the psychological aspects of meaning, and even criticising the formalistic branch of semantics to which Barr belongs: page 61, sect. 34. W. Porzig, *Das Wunder der Sprache* (Bern, 1950, pp. 93-108) assesses the advantages and limitations of all the major schools of linguistic thought, and declares that no one of them, by itself, is entirely or uniquely valid and right.