Scriptural semantics

By David Crystal

G. B. CAIRD:
The Language and Imagy of the Bible

320pp. Duckworth. £18. 0 7156 1444 4

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 an 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 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—it’s strength lies in its analysis of individual passages and parallels 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 commentary is always learned and illuminating, and never dull.

He also characterizes his book as “a textbook of elementary semantics with illustrations from the Old and New Testaments”, and it is this which governs his organization. The book is in three parts. Part One begins with a classification of types of language function (informative, cognitive, performative, causative, expressive/evocative, com-), 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 language of the Septuagint.

Part Two deals with the characteristics of various types of biblical language. Caird distinguishes between literal and non-literal language, giving a general classification of types of metaphor and other forms of compactive language. There is a separate chapter on anthropomorphic language, and another on the awareness the Bible 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 major historical, mythological and eschatological traditions as 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 a claim being to a textbook in elementary semantics? In this respect, The Language and Imagery of the Bible has some serious problems because of a certain arbitrariness in its classifications; partly because of the way in which he uses some of 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 has made a particular choice. For example, he cannot tell us why ambiguity may be unresolved are of three kinds, accidental, artificial, and deliberate (page 102). Later, he may classify as oracular, ironic, parabolic, exploratory and associative (page 103). Similarly, there are five uses of language (cf. above), and “tenor”, “mood” and “tenor” a matter of language, whereas development “of elements” and “tense” a matter of time (page 104). There are also some other terminologies, but Caird does not go into them. As a consequence, when he makes use of this distinction later in the book, it is not so clear-cut, I cannot see what status he would give to these terms. It is not so clear-cut, I cannot see clearly what the ordinary reader might make of, for example, whether the terms are meant to refer to historical or to non-linguistic events. Caird’s book, I find quite unclear: it just is not as clear as one might wish it to be.

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