

CHAPTER 3

RULES OF LANGUAGE

Since God gave us the Bible in particular language contexts, its meaning must be determined by careful study of the general rules of language and of the particular languages of Scripture. Preparation for this careful study is properly undertaken in the seminary's language courses. This chapter will survey some general rules of the biblical languages that bear on the interpretation of a passage. For illustrative purposes particular attention will be given to Greek syntax, but many of the same principles will apply to the interpretation of Hebrew or Aramaic texts.

Literal or normal exegesis

It is a general rule of language that statements are to be accepted at face value unless there exist adequate reasons for doing otherwise. Most language is intended to be understood "literally" or "normally."

Cf. David Cooper: "If the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense."

This principle is based on the perspicuity of Scripture, and on the normal principles that apply to all languages.

Figures of speech

As with other literature, the Bible abounds with figures of speech. The Bible was written as popular literature; it was designed to motivate and inspire as well as to educate. This type of writing requires such figures; here are some major types of figures of speech found in the Bible:

[For discussion, see Berkhof, *PBI*, pp. 82-91, and the very extensive work of E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*.]

Simile

- Stated comparison (uses such terms as *like* or *as*)

Matt 23:37, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

Luke 10:18, He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

Metaphor

- Implied comparison (no term as *like* or *as*)

Luke 13:32, He replied, “Go tell that fox [Herod Antipas], ‘I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’”

Matt 23:33, You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?

Parable

- Extended simile

Matt 13:24, 31, 33, Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.” . . . He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.” . . . He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Allegory

- Extended metaphor

Judg 9:7-20

⁷When Jotham [son of Gideon] was told about this [how Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem murdered his seventy brothers], he climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, “Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. ⁸One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Be our king.’”

⁹“But the olive tree answered, ‘Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?’

¹⁰“Next, the trees said to the fig tree, ‘Come and be our king.’

¹¹“But the fig tree replied, ‘Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?’

¹²“Then the trees said to the vine, ‘Come and be our king.’

¹³“But the vine answered, ‘Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?’

¹⁴“Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘Come and be our king.’

¹⁵“The thornbush said to the trees, ‘If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’”

2 Sam 12:1-7

“The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, ‘There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.’

“David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.’

“Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: “I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. . . .”’”

Ezek 16 [extended allegory of God and Israel as husband and wife]

John 10:1-18

¹“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech (*παροιμία* *paroimia*), but they did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He

will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me -- ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father -- and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life -- only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Metonymy

- One thing or person called by the name of another

Hos 3:5, Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king [actually, the Messiah]. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.

Matt 22:17, Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? (cf. “Uncle Sam”)

1 Pet 5:13, She who is in Babylon [probably Rome], chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.

Rev 2:20, Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

Synecdoche

- Whole for a part, or part for the whole

Matth 23:23-24, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Ps 40:6 ⁶ Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. (NIV)

Notice how this was understood as a synecdoche by the LXX and thus quoted in the NT: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.’” (Heb 10:5)

Euphemism

- Polite expression for something crude or harsh

Judges 3:24, After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, “He must be relieving himself [Heb. and KJV, “covering his feet”] in the inner room of the house.” Here the NIV has replaced the Hebrew euphemism with a more literal translation.

This is a cultural matter; in another case the NIV uses a euphemism to replace a Hebrew figure of speech which we would consider crude—1 Sam 25:22, “May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male [literally, as in KJV, “one who pisses against the wall”] of all who belong to him!” (same figure is repeated in v. 34).

John 11:11, After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

Acts 7:60, Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. (a remarkable statement for such a violent death!)

Litotes

- Calculated understatement

Acts 20:12, The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted (Greek, “were not a little comforted”).

2 Cor 9:4, For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident.

Hyperbole

- Calculated exaggeration

Num 13:33, We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

Josh 11:4 ⁴They came out with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots—a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

1 Sam 15:7-8, Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. ⁸ He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword.

Actually, this is a typical ANE exaggeration; many Amalekites remained (1 Sam 27:8). See an excellent discussion of this OT phenomenon in Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (2011). This type of hyperbole is frequently found in battle accounts in the contemporary literature and monuments.

Ezek 28:1-16

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “In the pride of your heart you say, “I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.” But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god. . . .

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹²“Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. ¹³ You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. ¹⁴ You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. ¹⁵ You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. ¹⁶ Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones.”

[Note that this passage is speaking in highly figurative language of the human king of Tyre. Biblical laments often include an exaggerated description of the former glory contrasted with the later state of ruin. A lack of understanding figurative language in Ezekiel has led some to interpret this passage as referring to Satan before his fall; see the standard commentaries.]

Obad 4, “Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the LORD.”

Luke 10:15, And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths.

Irony

- Critical, humorous sarcasm

Job 12:2, Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!

Job 12:7-8, But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you.

Zech 11:13, And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter—the handsome price at which they priced me!” So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter.

1 Cor 4:8, Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!

Recognizing figures of speech

We should note that these figures of speech still point to literal truth, which can be determined from the context, not to some esoteric meaning requiring a second revelation to understand. The figures can be recognized as such from the nature of the statement (which would be impossible to interpret literally, as Jesus’ saying he was a door) or from the immediate context (as Jesus’ saying he was a shepherd). To be useful a figure needs to be recognized as such; hence it would be expected for the author to make it clear a figure is intended. That being the case, figures of speech are recognized in each passage by almost all interpreters. We should be doubtful that a statement of Scripture is figurative when it is regarded as a figure of speech by only a portion of interpreters.

The meaning of words

The meaning of individual words in the text can be determined to a greater or lesser extent in these ways (in their order of importance):

The word's context

This is the most important single indicator of a word's meaning. If the meaning of the sentence is fairly clear, the word's meaning normally fits in that sentence, making as little semantic contribution to the total meaning as possible. This is a general linguistic principle. To all appearances the Bible language follows this principle.

Occasionally a writer will use a word in an unexpected manner to grab attention or make a play on words. This literary "shock value" is unusual or rare, giving it its strength. Normally there will be indicators in the context that this is what is going on. However, it is wrong to assume in most contexts that words mean as much as possible.

The word's usage

The usage of a particular word or word group in other contexts often sheds light on its usage in the particular context. This is its *usus loquendi* ("local usage").

A problem with this method is that often words have different meanings in different contexts. For example, the English word *set* can have many meanings, depending on the sentence. In Scripture the word *law* is used differently by Paul from one usage to another, even in the same book. Paul and James use *faith* with different meanings.

To be helpful, it is best to study the word's usage in the closer context, if found there. Then, look in the same book; then, in the same author; then, in the same testament; then, in the entire Bible; finally, in other literature. Often this total usage of a word will help to reveal its meaning in the passage under concern. An example is the word for sexual sin found in Jesus' statement on divorce in Matt 5 and 19 (πορνεία *porneia*, translated "fornication" in the KJV).

Several sources and helps are available for such studies. These include printed lexicons and concordances, and now computer databases.

The word's meaning in similar languages

Sometimes there are very few usages of the word in question in that language, but the same root is found in cognate languages. This happens most frequently in Hebrew. Certain questionable Hebrew words can be given fairly clear definitions by similar terms in Ugaritic, found in contexts that give a definition to the term. The study of other Semitic languages does help with the lexicography of Hebrew.

The word's etymology

Note that this is the least desirable way to define a word. In certain rare instances there is little other evidence, and guessing at a word by its etymology is feasible, especially if the meaning would fit the immediate context.

The problem with this method is that words often in meaning do not equal the sum of their parts. This is particularly true since words change in meaning over the years. For example, in English we would be hard put to explain how *hoodwink* could be derived from *hood* and *wink*. The false conclusions of this method could be illustrated by *butterfly* and *manufacture*.

It is a pitfall commonly fallen into by preachers and Bible teachers to explain a Greek or Hebrew word by its etymology. However, it is possible to use etymology in teaching for purposes of illustration or as an aid to memory, as long as the meaning demonstrably is derived from context and usage.

Conducting word studies

Frequently it is profitable to study how a word is used by a particular author, or in the Bible as a whole. A thorough study of a word's usage in its contexts is called a word study.

Two cautions when undertaking word studies:

- Be sure the meaning in each example is clear from the context, not imposed from other contexts.
- Be sure the conclusions are not too dogmatic, remembering that words can be used in different places with different meanings.

Contexts to be searched if studying a word in the Greek NT would be these:

- Biblical usage (OT, LXX, NT)—BDAG, *TDNT*, Moulton & Geden concordance of the Greek NT, Hatch & Redpath concordance of the LXX, Englishman's Greek concordance

For a good article comparing BDAG (3rd ed.) to Louw-Nida's lexicon with its semantic domains, see Vern S. Poythress, "Greek Lexicography and Translation: Comparing Bauer's and Louw-Nida's Lexicons," *JETS* 44:2 (June 2001) 285-96.

- Inscriptional or papyri usage—Moulton & Milligan NT lexicon based on the papyri and early inscriptions

- Classical and LXX usage—Lidell & Scott lexicon (3 sizes)
- Patristic usage—much in BDAG, *TDNT*
- Cognate usage—much in BDAG, *TDNT*

Such words as these make fruitful word studies: baptize, body/flesh, church, gospel, hell, justify, love, mystery, soul, wine, Zion

Several Bible software and Internet programs make these searches much easier and more complete.

[For a brief overview of Greek grammar see Appendix 2]

A similar set of resources would be used for studying words in the Hebrew OT.