

The Use of the Biblical Languages in Systematic Theology

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Rodney J. Decker, ThD

Professor of NT, Baptist Bible Seminary

Those of us who spend most of our time teaching and writing about the languages are painfully aware of how badly they are sometimes abused by well-intentioned, but poorly prepared teachers, preachers, and writers. It was that concern that prompted Don Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*—a book you should all re-read again “for the first time”!² If we were to pull down a variety of systematic theologies from the shelf and browse the sections on Christology, we would find a number of appeals to the biblical languages. We would also discover a range of language proficiency in those theologies, but even those theologians who are not comfortable (or capable of) working with the languages directly typically do so via the commentaries or other tools.³

I recently surveyed a handful of systematic theologies to see what might be discovered regarding their use of the languages as part of their theological method. My selection is limited so a different selection might yield different results, though I suspect the variations would not be very great. The half dozen volumes that I chose were all conservative works from the 20th century: Berkhof, Chafer, Erickson, Grudem, Reymond, and McCune.⁴ For each one I browsed the

¹ The full paper was titled “The Grammar of Christology.”

² Baker, 1984, 2d expanded ed., 1996. The 2d ed. is to be preferred.

³ Not all theologians have the requisite training in the languages. I am thankful to work for a dean who is both a systematist and a capable NT student. Mike Stallard is somewhat of an exception among theologians for his ThM in NT and his PhD in theology—and his language skills have been adequate to garner an invitation to write the volume in the Evangelical *Exegetical* Commentary series on the book of Revelation, a project that he began this past year. Another of my theology colleagues, Ken Gardoski, has a ThM in OT and a PhD in theology. At BBS we take the languages seriously, even in theology.

⁴ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941); L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), v. 5, *Christology*; M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85); W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

first 100 pages of the section on Christology looking specifically for instances in which the author explicitly appealed to the biblical languages.

All six used Greek and most used some Hebrew, though the Hebrew was most conspicuous by its rarity, most theologies having only one or two instances.⁵ Greek was more plentiful, sometimes in a Greek font, other times transliterated.

The most obvious observation regarding the use of the languages in all six was that the vast majority of language references were strictly vocabulary items, most of which added little or nothing to the author's argument. That is, most were single words appended in parentheses to a theological term or a key word in a proof-text. In itself this need not be a problem and it may slake the curiosity of some who want to know what word is involved in a text being cited, but the facile inclusion of such terms, especially a large number of them, may give an impression of authority despite the fact that their omission would not affect the meaning of the text in the least. At that point I question whether it is legitimate to use Greek simply as an artificial rhetorical device.

Sometimes these vocabulary citations are extended a bit further in that the writer comments on the meaning of the word. This varies from a simplistic gloss (as if a one word equivalent tells us much about semantics) to brief comments, most of which are based on the translation of the term into English. In no case did I observe an actual definition employed and rarely was there a substantive discussion of semantics or synchronic usage.

One suspects that in some instances these statements reflect an invalid diachronic emphasis. Using Greek vocabulary in a theology in these ways raises the issue of attempting to do theology on the basis of words. I will not engage that problem here at length since it has received adequate treatment in other works.⁶ In brief, theology must be based on

1994); R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998); and Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009—).

⁵ Since I'm a NT prof I will not critique the details of Hebrew usage that I found. It is worth noting that the theology with by far the largest quantity of explicit Hebrew (transliterated), is McCune's work.

⁶ See especially James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Literature* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), a book which Moisés Silva described as “a trumpet blast against the monstrous regiment of shoddy linguistics” (*Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 18). Silva's

propositional statements, not isolated word studies. Words in and of themselves do not communicate truth since words carry only potential meaning. Only as words are combined into statements (and ultimately statements into paragraphs and discourses) can we understand particular meaning.

Unfortunately, much conservative theology of the past century focused on word studies, probably due to a truncated understanding of verbal inspiration. Yes, the words are inspired—the exact words God wanted used and all the words of the original texts (i.e., verbal plenary inspiration)—but those words are only the building blocks for the syntax and the larger literary structure—which are equally inspired. Words, syntax, and structure are essential to communicate propositional truth.⁷ Yet theology is too often done by discussing individual words.⁸ This methodological error is perpetuated and encouraged by the frequent citation in the theologies of individual Greek words, usually parenthetically and seldom with comment. Doing so contributes to the perception that theology is based on the individual words.

Not all five theologies surveyed are limited to these strategies, but the exceptions are few, both in the number of writers who move beyond simple vocabulary citations and in the number of instances in which they themselves engage the text at a more substantive level. Grudem uses Greek less frequently than the others in my sample, but when he does, it is usually more substantive than the others. He not only discusses various translation options and suggests the theological implications of the differences, but also addresses relevant grammatical issues. He also employs data from TLG to illustrate word usage and meaning.⁹ Raymond

may have one of the larger quantities of Greek text in my selected set; although much of it consists only of vocabulary citations, he is more inclined than most to cite phrases and clauses from the Greek text. He also engages the text more substantively at key points with some limited discussions of grammar and syntax. Both of these writers reflect better sensitivity to the issues of language than the others surveyed (so long as Raymond's excess vocabulary citations are excluded).

In a category of its own is McCune's recent (and still ongoing¹⁰) work. I have ambivalent thoughts about the use of the biblical languages here. He has by far the largest quantity of both Greek and Hebrew text, all of which is presented in transliterated form.¹¹ More so than the other theologies he has some comment beyond simple vocabulary citation, often including limited grammatical argumentation (or at least citation) in support of theological statements. On the other hand I find it very uneven, both in when and where the languages are used and in the quality and accuracy of the statements made. Some sections are peppered with Greek, but one can then read for many pages with none at all, leaving the impression that Greek (and Hebrew) is used only selectively for support of certain areas, not as part of a conscious theological method. The content is both good and bad. Sometimes it is appropriate, accurate, and helpful. Most of the discussion is related to individual words; I did not observe significant discussion of larger units (i.e., such matters as syntax or semantic collocations) Other sections that offer somewhat more sustained exegesis are not always satisfactory.¹² I also observe at least some outright factual errors.¹³ Major recent work in the languages that is directly relevant to the theological task is missing altogether; there is little evidence of any of the

book is perhaps the most accessible treatment of the technical issues and it also provides substantive bibliography for future study; for a more accessible introduction, see Silva's *God, Language and Scripture*, FCI 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁷ For a discussion of propositional truth, see my article "Revisioning the Nature of Biblical Revelation: A Critique of Stanley Grenz's Proposals," *JMAT* 8 (Spring 2004): 5-36. I presented a version of this paper at an earlier Summit (2002 at Pillsbury).

⁸ As but one example, how often is the doctrine of prayer taught on the basis of a list of all the words for prayer in the Bible (or at least the NT!)?

⁹ TLG is *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, a highly specialized database of all known Greek literature from Homer to AD 1453 (the fall of Byzantium), containing over 105 million words from 10,000+ works of 4,000 authors. It is accessible at <<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>>, though only a small subset is searchable without a subscription (which is expensive).

¹⁰ Vols. 1 and 2 were published in 2009; vol. 3 is due in 2010.

¹¹ The limitation of transliteration as used by McCune is that it is not obvious to students (and others) whether a word is Greek or Hebrew. E.g., on p. 184 we are told that *lutron* is equivalent to *kopher*—and nothing in the context will help the untrained reader understand that two different languages are in view.

¹² I would offer the discussion of Isa 7:14 as one such example (pp. 115-17). Even if one were to agree with McCune on this passage (and many at this conference would, though I do not), the arguments offered are unsatisfactory.

¹³ E.g., on p. 160 we are told that a Synoptic passage uses the verb *deo* (i.e., δέω), but that is not the case; the verb is δέϊ—a derived form that has its own peculiar meaning and usage for which the meaning of δέω cannot be claimed, at least in any direct way.

discussions of the past fifty years in grammar or lexical semantics.¹⁴ As a result of these observations I conclude that the intentions and efforts were probably better than some of the other theologies in my test group, but the implementation suffers. The result is not better overall than the more limited (but more substantive) use of the languages by Grudem or Reymond.¹⁵

Another issue in the theological use of the biblical languages relates to the use of non-justified grammatical conclusions as premises for theological arguments, thus, “since this verb is [an inceptive imperfect], therefore this text means....”¹⁶ Though one

¹⁴ As examples, there is no mention of the major study of καταλλάσσω by Porter, though the conclusions of that study would have been directly relevant to the sort of arguments that McCune offers (pp. 191–98; see Stanley E. Porter, *Καταλλάσσω in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings*, Estudios de Filología Neotestamentaria 5 [Cordoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 1994]). The tenses are handled as they would have been in the mid-20th C. with no reflection of the major advances in relation to verbal aspect and *Aktionsart* (cf. the major work by McKay, Fanning, Porter, Evans, Campbell, and others). Wallace’s *Grammar* is cited just once, but only as a cross reference that reflects no use of the data provided there, even though it would have provided substantial support for the discussion of John 1:1 (where it is mentioned, p. 128 n10; cf. Wallace, pp. 266–69) or for the discussion of the prepositions related to substitution (McCune, pp. x; Wallace, pp. 364–68 for ἀντί, 383–89 for ὑπέρ). Although the 3d ed. of the Bauer/Danker lexicon is cited (BDAG, 2000), all the references in the section I checked were simple page reference citations for a Greek word cited in the text (usually without comment or with only translation glosses cited); I did not observe any interaction with the actual definitions of the words or the other discussion offered by Danker.

¹⁵ Please note that this is only an evaluation of the way the languages are used in the process of doing systematic theology. I am not evaluating the work as a whole on the basis of systematic theology method. Any of the theologies in my test group will have their strengths and weaknesses in other areas, but I have not attempted to assess any of them.

¹⁶ I will not discuss the obvious problem of invoking invalid grammar in the service of theology. Far too many examples exist in this area. The tenses have been exploited more than most grammatical categories, especially the esoteric-sounding (to English-only readers!) *aorist* tense—which most certainly does not mean completed, once-for-all action in past time. Abuse of the aorist in this way is second only to the battered perfect which so many people still insist means completed action in past time with continuing results. (I once read a defense of eternal security based on that misperception in which “once saved, always saved” was “proved” by the perfect tense of σωζω!) In these regards see

should not require that a systematic theology encompass a grammar, methodologically the question of warrant remains. Just as a theology should not make bare claims apart from warrant at the logical level, so too must warrant be supplied for theological claims that impinge on grammatical matters. If a grammatical basis is claimed for a doctrinal statement, then it must be justified, if only briefly. I cannot claim that “since Jesus is fully divine, therefore he cannot sin” unless I justify my premise regarding Jesus’ deity. Such a failure would make my claim for Jesus’ impeccability “peccable” at the logical level. Likewise I dare not drop a bare grammatical claim into the premise as proof of my thesis.¹⁷ It may be true that if a particular statement in the text is properly evaluated as an instance of a certain grammatical usage, then the conclusion follows. The question is, *why* must it be *that* particular usage and not an alternative analysis which might yield a differing theological conclusion?

I am not referring to objective classifications such as aorist tense or singular number or genitive case, but those taxonomies which are contingent on exegetical decisions which are subjective in nature. These include descriptions such as the use of adverbial participles, various *Aktionsart* values, or classification of case usage. Whether a particular verb form is an aorist or present is not debatable, but whether an aorist is used in a gnomic or ingressive statement is another matter altogether. Such decisions must be justified; they may not be declared.

Such argumentation should not, in most cases, occupy space in the text; the footnotes are the more appropriate place for such warrant, and they need only be sufficiently detailed to point the reader in the direction of one’s reasoning, perhaps by reference to the discussion of the point at hand in a grammar or journal article which defends the same conclusion.¹⁸ It is *not* adequate or legitimate to simply cite a grammar which discusses the particular category without

Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 222–31, and Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, ch. 2.

¹⁷ I once studied theology at the masters level under a professor who was notorious for this sort of “argument.” His students were mostly too naïve at the time to catch the fallacy. He would constantly make statements along the line, “The verb x in [verse] is a [tendential imperfect], therefore....” He *never* addressed the question, *why* it was a [tendential imperfect] as opposed to some other use, and what theological difference that would make.

¹⁸ As a good example of this, see Grudem, *Theology*, 531 n2.

discussing the passage in question. The question is, once again, warrant. *Why* is this passage to be analyzed this way? A discussion of the category is not a reason why any particular passage fits that category.

Now at some points this discussion *needs* to be elevated to the level of the main text (or to the classroom lecture/discussion); it all depends on the relative significance of the grammatical argument.¹⁹ The same is true of classroom discussions. I grant that the semester would be over long before the content was covered if every point were evaluated grammatically, but that is what class notes are for. They can include the same statements of warrant that I think appropriate for a textbook. Such statements are important for students so that they understand the methodological issue and do not accept appeals to the text apart from warrant.

I would make one final appeal to my friends in the theology department: stay reasonably current in discussion of the languages. Don't rely on your seminary training from many years ago. If you get the impression somewhere that you missed a relatively recent grammatical revolution, be advised that there have been no revolutions in the understanding of the languages in the last 50 years,²⁰ but progress is steady, if slow. But progress it is. We do understand the languages better than did the generation before us, for by standing on their shoulders, we can see just a bit farther—enough farther in some cases to avoid some mistakes and misconceptions of our fathers. We are also a bit more modest these days (or at least ought to be) in what we can “prove” with the biblical languages. In a sincere effort to reflect an inspired, inerrant text, our predecessors sometimes overstated their case with a maximalist approach to grammar and word studies. Though grammar and lexicon are indispensable, we must be cautious not to push them beyond what their

¹⁹ E.g., discussions of the deity of Christ in John 1:1 that do not engage the grammatical issues are not responsible in an academic setting—not even if it is an undergrad course for students without Greek. These issues can and must be explained to them in terms they can understand, if for no other reason than to equip them to debunk the facile claims of the JW's.

²⁰ There was a grammatical revolution just over a hundred years ago with the discovery and study of the papyri, but no comparable breakthrough has occurred since. That does not mean, however, that nothing has changed in our understanding of Greek grammar in the intervening century. Though more gradual, the cumulative result has been significant, even in the past 20 years.

weight will bear. As A. T. Robertson wrote several generations ago,

After all is said and done, instances remain where syntax cannot say the last word, where theological bias will inevitably determine how one interprets the Greek idiom.... When the grammarian has finished, the theologian steps in, and sometimes before the grammarian is through.²¹

Theologians need grammar; it is the handmaiden of theology.²² To attempt to do theology apart from grammar is an attempt to sail without wind, earning Robertson's gentle rebuke just cited in regard to the theologian “stepping in” too soon. Not only does the theological construction process require grammar, but so too does the finished product—a published systematic theology or class notes. The first should use it heavily in the study; the second will extract the most crucial portions in defense of key theses. But use it we must if our theology is to be credible.

²¹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1923), 389.

²² The analogy “handmaiden of theology” is often used, most commonly of philosophy serving theology, the Queen of the sciences. Winfried Corduan uses this analogy in his attempt (following Geisler) to adapt Thomism to evangelical theology. See his *Handmaid to Theology: An Essay in Philosophical Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981). If “handmaiden” is understood to refer to a supporting discipline, then I would argue that grammar is even more crucial as a handmaiden to theology than is philosophy since it is the means by which we understand the biblical text—the only authoritative, infallible source for truth and theology. (If the medieval view of philosophy as comprised of grammar, rhetoric, and logic is used, then the formulation is slightly different.) Science has also been claimed for this role; see David Lindberg, “Science as Handmaiden: Roger Bacon and the Patristic Tradition,” *Isis* 78 (1987): 518–36.