

hearing week by week the Scriptures read in the Greek version we know as the Septuagint.²⁴ Early in the third century B.C., less than fifty years after Greek became the official language of Egypt, the Jews of Alexandria began translating their Hebrew Scriptures into Greek: first came the Pentateuch, then other books followed, until by New Testament times the process was almost complete. Many hands were involved in the work, with many different styles of translation. But all of these are what we should call literal, i.e. translated word by word and retaining a good deal of the syntax, idiom and general flavour of the Hebrew original. Many of the Greek words used were not exact equivalents of the Hebrew, and so came to acquire new shades of meaning; and of this we shall examine a number of examples later in this book.²⁵ The existence of translation Greek in a sacred book does not of course in itself prove the existence of a corresponding Greek dialect. It might be a purely literary phenomenon. But the Greek of the New Testament strongly suggests that this was not so. It contains Semitic turns of phrase (Semitisms) which are of three kinds: those showing the influence of Aramaic (Aramaisms); those showing the direct influence of Hebrew (Hebraisms); and those showing the indirect influence of Hebrew through the Septuagint (Septuagintisms). If these occurred in isolation from one another, we should suspect them to be the results of translation from documentary sources. But since they regularly occur in close juxtaposition, the only reasonable explanation is that the authors spoke Greek exactly as they wrote it.²⁶

²⁴ G. la Piana (Foreign groups in Rome during the first centuries of the Empire, in *The Harvard Theological Review* xx (1927)) has shown that immigrants in the capital tended, as we might have guessed, to live in tightly knit social groups according to the country of their origin. Such groups are usually tenacious of their language and culture. Dr C. P. Thompson tells me that the Spanish Jewish community in Istanbul still retains the forms of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Spanish (the time when their ancestors left Spain), long since obsolete in the peninsula.

²⁵ See also C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*.

²⁶ See N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: IV Style*.

G. B. Caird, *The Language + Imagery of the Bible*
Chapter Two
Wormwater, 1980.

The Meaning of Meaning

Before we ask what the Bible means, it is essential that we ask ourselves what we mean by the word 'means'. For meaning is a highly ambiguous term, and the only safe way of handling it is to identify by indexing the various senses in which it is commonly used. We have already made a good start in the previous chapter by the vital distinction between meaning^R (referent) and meaning^S (sense), i.e. between what is being spoken about and what is being said about it. To these we must shortly add a third legitimate partner. But first we must set about the exclusion of a pair of intruders.

Let us begin with meaning^V (value). Consider the statement: 'the Fourth Gospel means more to me than all the letters of Paul.' This does not necessarily imply a greater understanding of the one than of the other; it is an expression of preference, which might even be made by someone who in fact understood Paul better than John. Meaning^V threatens to usurp the throne which belongs by right to meaning^S, and its spurious claims attract two ill-assorted classes of adherent: the very devout, whom it encourages to concentrate on what moves them deeply, instead of listening to what the Bible actually has to say; and the mildly religious who rise up in defence of familiar cadences whenever a modern translation of the Bible is brought to their notice.

A more subtle hazard is presented by meaning^F (entailment). If I say that nationalism means war, I am not asking anybody to believe that the two words are interchangeable synonyms, but that the one phenomenon leads inexorably to the other. When the author of Hebrews says of Jesus that 'he learned obedience in the school of suffering' (5:8), he is not telling us that Jesus learned how to obey, and certainly not that he learned the dictionary definition of the word 'obedience'; but rather that he learned what obedience entails: the world being what it is, obedience for him meant suffering.

Meaning^e sets a trap into which theologians are prone to fall. Many volumes have been written, for example, about justification by faith, whose authors, ignoring the fact that 'justify' (whether in Hebrew, Greek or English) means 'to declare or prove somebody to be in the right', have tried to pack into the meanings^s of the word all that is entailed for faith and conduct in being justified by God. Some of them then compound their error by claiming that Paul has broken free of the forensic metaphor with which he began.¹

After this cautionary digression, we return to the main highway opened up by F. de Saussure with his distinction between *la langue* (language) and *la parole* (speech), which marked the birth of the modern science of linguistics.² By language Saussure meant the whole stock of words, idioms and syntax available, the potential, the common property of all users. By speech he meant any particular and actual use of language by a speaker or writer.³ Some scholars have since suggested that there is need for an intermediate term, idiolect or lexis, to designate the range of language within the competence and command of each individual user; but this is a refinement we shall not require. What we do need to note is that each user has complete control over speech but very little control over language.

Before Saussure this point had already been made less scientifically but more imaginatively by Lewis Carroll.

'There's glory for you!' 'I don't know what you mean by "glory";' Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knockdown argument for you!' But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knockdown argument";' Alice objected. 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can *make* words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

¹ For a noble example, see J. Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament*, p. 64: 'Although it is quite certain that justification is and remains a forensic notion, God's amnesty, nevertheless the forensic image is shattered.' If a word 'is and remains' a forensic metaphor, then the imagery of the lawcourt from which the metaphor is drawn must be intact. See Chapter Eight, below, on metaphor.

² *Cours de linguistique générale*, pp. 25 ff.

³ From now on I shall use 'speak' and 'speaker' to cover both the spoken and the written word, except where a distinction between the two is necessary.

Then, having explained the meaning of 'impenetrability', Humpty Dumpty goes on: 'When I make a word do a lot of work like that . . . I always pay it extra.' Our sympathies are enlisted on both sides, since each is standing for a valid principle, (Alice), somewhat pedantically, maintaining the intractability of language, and Humpty Dumpty, somewhat cavalierly, asserting his mastery over speech.

In our attempt to analyse the meaning of meaning, we shall have to discriminate between the public meaning which is characteristic of language and the user's meaning which is characteristic of speech. One of the obvious differences between language and speech is that language consists of words (along with the syntax which holds them together), whereas speech consists of sentences. We need, therefore, one definition of meanings^s for words and another for sentences. The meanings^s of a word is the contribution it is capable of making to any sentence in which it stands. The meanings^s of a sentence is what the speaker intends to convey by it.

Here then is the promised third partner, meaning¹ (intention). In the firm this partner has three functions, two of which very nearly coincide with those of the other partners: the sense and the referent of any act of speech are those which the speaker intends. The third function is connected with the uses of language enumerated in the last chapter. Does the speaker intend what he says to be referential, commissive or merely social? The answer to 'What did he mean?' might be 'He meant you to go', or 'He meant to make you angry'; but neither answer would necessarily give any clue to what the speaker in fact said. To understand why a speaker says what he does is not the same thing as understanding what he is saying.⁴

This emphasis on intention raises a question whether there is not yet a further type of meaning which we have overlooked—hearer's meaning. We are not at this point concerned with the obvious fact that in speaking each of us involuntarily gives away information, as the Ephraimites gave themselves away to the enemy by their inability to pronounce 'shibboleth' (Judg. 12:6), and as Peter's accent betrayed his Galilean origin (Matt. 26:73). Nor are we concerned with the equally obvious and important fact that there are qualifications for accurate hearing: the hearer must know the speaker's language, both literally and figuratively, and he must in

⁴ On the intentional fallacy, see below, p. 61.

many instances have that commitment to self-involvement without which most commissive utterances are unintelligible. What does concern us is that words have associations of memory and experience which differ for different people; everybody knows how hard it is to be sure that what is received is exactly what is transmitted, without interference or distortion. That people habitually attach a meaning of their own to what they hear or read is beyond doubt, but it does not follow that this kind of hearer's meaning is in any sense a part of the meaning of what is spoken or written. The purpose of speech is communication; and when user's meaning and hearer's meaning do not coincide, this is nothing more or less than a failure of understanding, a breakdown of communication. This has an obvious importance for our reading of the Bible. It is possible to read the Bible, or indeed any other book, in a meditative fashion so that it becomes a stimulus to our own thinking. But when that happens, the thoughts are our own and are not to be confused with the meaning of what we have read. The most we are entitled to say is that any speaker who wishes to be intelligible will take account of the capacity of his audience, so that our judgment about what they are likely to have made of his words provides one possible clue to his intention.

If however we re-draft our question and ask whether an utterance cannot have more meaning in it than the original speaker or writer intended or understood at the time, that is another matter. We shall return to this at the end of the chapter when we have acquired more tools to deal with it.

1. *Public meaning*

Language as a means of communication depends on what Otto Jespersen has called a 'attitude of correctness'. Humpty Dumpty is justified in insisting that a user is free to do what he likes with words, including paying them overtime. But if we do not know what 'glory' or 'impenetrability' mean until he explains, how can we be sure that we know the meaning of the words he uses in his explanations? Within broad limits, there is such a thing as correct speech. Otherwise we should all be shut up in the prisons of our private languages.

The public meaning of words is the business of the lexicographer,

and it is compounded of most of the types of information which a good dictionary supplies: definition, etymology, sound and feeling. The rest of the information given in a dictionary relates to changes of meaning which are the subject of the next chapter.

(a) *Definition*

Even a casual glance at a dictionary ought to disclose two facts about the words it contains: that most of them have more than one meaning, and that their range of meaning is defined, wherever possible, by a list of words of similar or overlapping meaning (synonyms). The simplest test to show whether we have understood a word is the substitution of a synonym, the test we have already been using in the indexing of the word 'meaning'; and one excellent form of it is translation.

Polysemy (multiple meaning) and synonymy are the co-ordinates which enable us to tabulate the entire word-stock of a language as a series of words grids. The Greek word *kosmos* will serve well as an example. Except in places where it means adornment or beauty (e.g. 1 Pet. 3:3), the normal English translation of *kosmos* is 'world'. But 'world' in English is a word of notorious ambiguity, and some of this ambiguity is derived from its Greek counterpart.⁵ In the New Testament *kosmos* (world) has five clearly distinguishable senses, though a good many finer distinctions might no doubt be drawn. It can mean the created universe (John 17:5; 1 Cor. 2:7). More often it is the world of mankind: in some contexts it simply means everyone, usually with some degree of hyperbole (John 12:19; cf. Acts 19:27); in others it means this present life (Rom. 5:12; 1 Tim. 6:7; Tit. 2:12); and in others again the existing world order, past or present (2 Pet. 2:5; 3:6). But in the great majority of passages, and especially where it is qualified as 'this world', it has a pejorative tone: it means the existing world order, organised in ignorance of God and in resistance to him, the object both of God's judgment and of his redemptive love, all that is signified by the adjective 'worldly' (Gal. 6:14; Eph. 6:12; 1 John 2:15; 5:19).

Each of these five senses has a different set of synonyms, a small illustrative selection of which is shown in the following table.

⁵ See C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, pp. 214-68.

1. Creation *gē* (earth), *oikoumenē* (world), *krisis* (creation), *ta panta* (universe)
2. Everyone *pantes* (all), *ethnē* (nations)
3. Life *bios*, *zōē*, *psychē* (all meaning life)
4. World order *aion* (age), *genēa* (generation)
5. This world *sarr* (flesh), *phthora* (corruption), *kakia* (wickedness)

The five senses are not wholly unconnected, and both Paul and John find it possible to move freely from one to another. John can even use three of them in a single verse (1:10). But there are some contexts in which it is important to decide which is intended. What, for example, does Paul mean when he says: 'the form of this world is passing away' (1 Cor. 7:31)? In such cases the substitution test is indispensable. Does he mean that the physical universe is coming to an end (world^o), that this life is transitory (world^l), or that the old world order, rendered obsolete by the coming of Christ, is tottering to its fall (world^{tw})? The AV opted for world^l: 'the fashion of this world passeth away'. The modern tendency has been to assume, almost without argument, that world^c is what Paul had in mind, or that Paul did not distinguish between the end of world^c and the end of world^{tw}. Yet apart from passages which refer to the foundation or beginning of the world, Paul never uses *cosmos* of the physical universe, but rather *krisis* or *ta panta*. There is no serious reason to suppose that in the passage under discussion he means more than 'the world as it now is'.

The first conclusion to be drawn from any word grid is that words and concepts only rarely coincide. Most words cover a variety of concepts, and all concepts are expressed by a complex assortment of synonyms and antonyms. The dangers of the word-concept fallacy are well illustrated by a study of the term 'heaven'. Many readers of the Bible have, I suspect, a unitary concept of heaven as the place where God lives (Ps. 11:4; Eccl. 5:2) and to which the righteous go when they die (Luke 6:35; Col. 1:5; Rev. 11:12). But this takes no account of the first sentence in the Bible, which tells us that heaven, as well as earth, was created by God; or of the penultimate scene, in which the old heaven and earth disappear, to make room for a new creation. Often heaven is no more than the sky (Gen. 27:28; Zech. 2:6); and the first mistake we can make is to

imagine the people of biblical times naive enough to believe that God lived in the sky. There are always some naive people in any age, our own as well as theirs. But the writers of the Bible and its leading figures were not among them. They might, to be sure, look up to heaven in token of looking up to God (Mark 7:34). They might imagine the stars as angels, and the host of heaven as a privy council around the throne of God (1 Kings 22:19). But they knew that this was only a picture: 'heaven itself, the highest heaven, cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built' (1 Kings 8:27).

But there is a worse trap to come in Matthew's phrase 'the kingdom of heaven'. Here the temptation is to assume that the kingdom of heaven is the same thing as heaven, and that to enter the kingdom is the same as going to heaven. Grammatically this is possible, since the genitive could be a genitive of apposition or definition, as in the City of Oxford. But in fact it is a subjective genitive, and the proof of this is that, where Matthew has 'kingdom of heaven', the other evangelists have 'kingdom of God'.⁶ The kingdom of God exists wherever God reigns, and the kingdom of heaven exists wherever Heaven reigns. 'Heaven' is simply a title for God, as it is also in Luke 15:18 ('I have sinned against Heaven'). But because of the word-concept fallacy, and because Matthew's Gospel comes first and is the one from which lectionary readings are taken, the idea that the kingdom of heaven is an otherworldly sphere of existence is still prevalent, notwithstanding the central affirmation of the teaching of Jesus that the kingdom of God had arrived (Matt. 12:28) and was already being entered by the most unexpected people (Matt. 21:31).

For the biblical translator the counterpart of the word-concept fallacy is the notion that the same word in English (or French or German) ought to be used for every occurrence of any given word in Hebrew or Greek. A word in one language rarely covers exactly the same territory as its nearest equivalent in another. The French 'esprit' and the German 'Geist' overlap with the English 'spirit' for a large part of its range, but neither of them can be used of alcohol. None of these three can do all that is done with *ruah* in Hebrew or *pneuma* in Greek, both of which can mean 'spirit', 'breath' and

⁶ On the ambiguities of the genitive see below, pp. 97-100.

'wind'; and this poses insoluble problems for the translator of Ezek. 37:1-14, where all three senses occur, with 'point of the compass' thrown in for good measure.

In the AV the Hebrew *basar* and the Greek *sarx* were uniformly translated by the English 'flesh'. This might indeed be justified by the plea that the ambiguities of the English fairly reproduce the ambiguities of the original, and perceptive and studious readers have no doubt always been able to cope with the resultant complexities. Cruden's *Concordance*, for example, remarks that 'flesh is understood in different ways', and proceeds to list eleven of them. But for the popular understanding of Christian ethics, and of the teaching of Paul in particular, this indiscriminate rendering has proved disastrous, since it has given the impression that Christians ought to adopt a negative and disapproving attitude to the body and its passions. When Paul uses *sarx* pejoratively, he is not talking about the body, but about the whole sinful nature of unredeemed mankind. His works of the flesh include many that we should call sins of the spirit, such as envy and selfish ambition (Gal. 5:20). To be 'in the flesh' is the same thing as to be 'in Adam', in the old humanity, enslaved to sin and death. Christians are not, in this sense, 'in the flesh' (Rom. 8:9); and by this Paul does not mean that they are already disembodied spirits or that they have sloughed off their essential human nature.⁷

(b) *Eymology*

Eymology is the study of the derivation of words. The name enshrines one of the classical errors of linguistics, for it is derived from a Greek adjective which means 'true' or 'genuine', and its implication is that words have a 'proper meaning', which can be ascertained by tracing them to their source. In fact words continually change their meaning, in ways which we shall discuss in the next chapter, sometimes moving out of any recognisable contact with their origin. The English 'nice', which today means 'pleasant' and in the eighteenth century meant 'precise', is derived from the Latin *nescius* (ignorant). It is nowadays generally agreed that only current usage determines meaning; and one instance of

⁷ I leave the biologists and psychologists to argue whether these remarks ought to be modified in the light of such works as *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins.

this is that we continue to use the word 'etymology', even though we no longer believe in what it etymologically stands for.

Eymology is an indispensable tool for deciphering unknown words, and also for tracing the historical development by which words have acquired the meanings they have at the time of use; though both these exercises are beset with pitfalls for the unwary. But in what sense may we claim that etymology is itself an ingredient of meaning? Only to this limited extent, that there are occasions when a speaker may make conscious use of a word's origin and rely on a corresponding awareness in his audience.

It is not difficult to find evidence in the Old and New Testaments that ancient writers had an interest in etymology, though much of it has to do with the (frequently spurious) derivations of proper names. Strictly speaking, a proper name is a word with denotation but no connotation, reference but no sense; and etymology is an attempt to provide it with connotation also. Thus Jacob's name is derived from the word for 'heel' and explained by the curious circumstance of his birth (Gen. 25:26); in modern terms, he was Heel by name and spent most of his life living up to it. In the midst of a sea of names in 1 Chronicles, we come across the pathetic little life story of Jabez, which appears to have been generated from the supposition that his name meant Sorrowful (4:9-10). The author of Hebrews makes some theological capital out of the name Melchizedek, which means king of righteousness (7:2). And Paul puns on the name of Onesimus, once Useless but now Useful (Phn. 11). There are also stories which offer etymological explanations of the names of places, such as Bethel and Peniel (Gen. 28:19; 32:30); and it is still a matter of debate among anthropologists whether the story is more likely to have given rise to the name or the name to the story.

Of all these many excursions into etymology by far the most important is the derivation of the divine name YHWH from the verb 'to be': 'I AM; that is who I am. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them' (Exod. 3:14). It is possible that the original narrator meant the verbs to be taken as futures, and that 'I will be as I will be' was a promise of the presence of God as and when he chose to be present; for the same verb occurs two verses earlier in the form 'I will be with you'. This line of thought leads us directly to the child whose name is Immanuel (Isa. 7:14), to the application of

that name to Jesus (Matt. 1:23), and to the promise with which Matthew's Gospel ends, 'I am with you always, to the end of time' (28:20). But that is not the way in which the translators of the Septuagint understood the revelation of the divine name. They translated it by δ ὄν, 'he who exists', and so made it possible for later writers, beginning with the author of the Wisdom of Solomon (13:1), to make a synthesis between the theology of the Old Testament and the philosophy of the Greeks. Yet a third line of development is the elaboration of the name in the Revelation of John: 'Grace to you and peace from him who is and was and is coming' (1:4).

The Septuagint translators regularly resorted to etymology when they were defeated by the Hebrew text, and some of the results they produced proved to be influential. We have already seen that the significance of the Urim and Thummim had been lost by the time the Priestly Code was compiled. The translators derived the one from the word for 'light' and the other from the word for 'truth', so that in their version what the high priest carried in his breastpiece were the tokens of revelation and truth (Ecclus. 45:10). In the prophecies of Jeremiah (23:5; 33:15) and Zechariah (3:8; 6:12) we find the title 'the Branch' used of the king who is expected to restore the dynasty of David. This puzzled the translators, perhaps because it is not the same word as is used in Isa. 11:1, and they rendered it by the Greek *anaktolē*, which normally means sunrise; and it is this oddity which lies behind the promise in the song of the other Zechariah that 'the morning sun from heaven will rise upon us' (Luke 1:78).

(c) *Sound*

The sound of words is clearly more important to their meaning when they are spoken than when they are written, but it has to be remembered that unvoiced reading is comparatively modern and that ancient authors wrote for reading aloud. The contribution of sound to sense is most obvious in onomatopoeic words like buzz and boom, and both Hebrew and Greek have their fair share of them. Most students of poetry would claim that there is a certain element of onomatopoeia in all consonants and vowel sounds, or at least in the reiteration of them, but it is doubtful whether this applies to prose. Repeated sibilants are supposed to produce 'a

universal hiss', yet it can hardly be significant that there are six of them in the Greek form of 'your faith has saved you' (Mark 5:34). In any case such points as these can be studied only in the original language.

For our purpose it is more important that the sound of words frequently establishes associations of thought which the speaker will expect his hearers to be able to follow. Let us take as an example two versions of a familiar verse from John's Gospel (14:2): 'in my Father's house are many mansions' (AV); 'there are many dwelling-places in my Father's house' (NEB). Anyone who attempts to see this as visual imagery in either version will be in trouble, with a mental picture of heaven either as a garden suburb or as a block of luxury flats. John is not here dealing in pictures, but in an association of sound. The word for mansions or dwelling-places is *monai*, the cognate noun of the verb *meno*, for which the AV uses four English words (abide, dwell, continue, remain) and the NEB nine (stay, rest, find home, dwell, have permanent standing, belong, remain, continue, last). This is one of the many word-themes which John weaves like gold threads into his rich tapestry. It begins when two disciples ask Jesus, 'Where are you staying?' (1:38). Superficially this is a question about his address in Bethany, and the following verse picks it up at this level. But John is never content with the surface meaning of anything. At a deeper level he intends us to hear this as a question about Jesus' permanent home, a question which is not answered until the questioner understands that Jesus is the only Son, who dwells in the Father's house (8:35), in the Father (14:10), in the Father's love (15:10), and that in dying he is preparing a place for others, so that they may be where he is, where there is room for many to dwell. The AV with 'mansions' has abandoned all links of sound or sense between the noun and the verb (though it used 'abode' for the noun at 14:23). No translator can hope to do equal justice to all John's intentions, but the NEB has retained the link of sound with some of the other passages and a conceptual link with all of them.

One association of sound which appears on the face of it to have nothing to do with sense is the pun. Yet this form of assonance regularly provided the mental mechanism or stimulus for the oracles of the prophets. A basket of summer fruit (*qas*) becomes a portent of Israel's end (*qes*) (Amos 8:2). An almond tree (*shaged*) is

a reminder that God is keeping watch (*shaged*) over his word (Jer. 1:11). 'He looked for justice (*mishpat*) and found oppression (*mishpah*), for righteousness (*ṣ'adaqah*) and heard cries of distress (*ṣ'eqah*)' (Isa. 5:7). 'God is able from these stones (*'ebnayya*) to make children (*b'nayya*) for Abraham' (Matt. 3:9). A pun can also be made on two senses of a single word. David, for example, is told by Nathan that he is not to build a house (temple) for God; rather, God is to build a house (dynasty) for him (2 Sam. 7).⁸

(d) *Feeling*

Besides their definition, all words (and not just the obviously expressive or evocative ones) have to a greater or lesser degree an aura of feeling about them, which can properly be regarded as part of their public meaning. It provides one of the most important criteria for discriminating between words which are otherwise synonymous.⁹ The Greek words *laos* and *ethnos* both mean 'people' or 'nation', and in many contexts could be used interchangeably (e.g. Rev. 7:9). But in the New Testament they generally have a different feeling, inasmuch as the one is associated with Israel and the other with the Gentiles. Even a single word may evoke two different sorts of feeling in two different contexts. Ullmann has pointed out that the English word 'home' has one kind of feeling in 'Home, Sweet Home' and another in 'Home Office' (op. cit., p. 52). To call something 'new' may be to approve (Ps. 98:1; Heb. 8:13; Rev. 21:1) or to disapprove of it (Luke 5:39; Acts 17:21). A rock may give us a feeling of security (Isa. 32:2; Matt. 7:24), futility (Amos 6:12; Luke 8:6), or menace (Isa. 8:14; Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:8; Acts 27:29). A cloud impresses us differently according as it is a token of long-awaited rain (1 Kings 18:44), of misery and disaster (Ezek. 34:12), of mystery (Exod. 19:9), or of triumph (Rev. 1:7).

The feeling of a word is not always easy to reproduce in translation. When Paul and Silas were at Thessalonica, they were accused of 'acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus' (Acts 17:7 RSV). Now the Roman emperor was never called 'king' in Latin. Since the expulsion of the Tarquins in the sixth century B.C. the word *rex* had been loaded with unacceptable

⁸ According to A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination*, p. 121, the pun was a feature of prophecy among the Arabs also. For the more general use of puns see Sus. 54, 59.

⁹ For this method of distinguishing synonyms see S. Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 142-3.

feeling, beyond the possibility of rehabilitation. In Italy the emperor was called *princeps*, first citizen. But in those parts of the empire where Greek was spoken he was known as *basileus*, which ought therefore to be translated 'emperor'. The accusation against the apostles was that they were setting up a rival emperor. But to translate the sentence in this way would be to miss the point that the charge was not a total fabrication, but had some basis of fact. Paul and Silas did believe that Jesus was in some sense king, the fulfilment of all the Old Testament promises of a messianic king to sit on the throne of David. It almost seems as if we have to choose between the Jewish associations and the Roman ones. But the NEB has found an ingenious way round the difficulty by putting the word 'emperor' back into the previous clause: 'they flout all the Emperor's laws, and assert that there is a rival king, Jesus.'

According to Paul the chief cause of moral depravity among the Gentiles was the futility of their thinking (Rom. 1:21; cf. Eph. 4:17). The general sense of the Greek word he uses is well enough represented by the English 'futility'. But we miss its overtones unless we recognise that this was a word used in the Septuagint in passages which inveigh against the unreality of pagan deities (Deut. 32:21; Jer. 14:22), and that for Paul therefore it carried all the revision against idolatry inherited from his Jewish past.

2. *User's meaning*

When we turn from language and what words are capable of meaning to what they actually do mean in any given item of speech, then, as we have already seen, the user is in control. Within the latitude of correctness marked out by public usage, or even slightly beyond it, he determines the sense of the words he uses, largely by the context in which he uses them, but partly also by his tone of voice, and to some extent by his choice of referent. These three clues ought to be enough to enable the listener to understand what the speaker has in mind, what he intends to convey; and in this sense intention is integral to meaning.

(a) *Context*

The first and weightiest rule of speech is that context determines meaning. But what do we mean by context? The words we use

have at least four types of setting, verbal, situational, traditional and cultural, all of which have an influence on their sense. The verbal context may be narrow or broad; the sentence in which a word is used, the paragraph, the chapter or even the book. The situational context includes such factors as the occasion of the utterance and the occupation of the speaker. If we wish to understand the sentence 'There is something wrong with the table', we need to know whether the speaker is a housewife in the dining-room, a mason on a building site, a statistician in a computing laboratory or an official of the Water Board. The words 'catholic', 'orthodox' and 'priest' may be used by two speakers in very much the same situation, and yet with a difference of sense because the speakers stand in different traditions. The context of culture is important, for example, to a Frenchman attempting to translate into his own language the sentence, 'I'm mad about my flat', he needs to know whether the speaker is an Englishman enthusiastic about his living-quarters or an American furious about his puncture. Proper attention to verbal context eliminates some of the apparent inconsistencies of the Bible. There is a familiar contradiction, which has caused a great deal of unnecessary trouble, between the following two texts, here given in the literal translation of the AV.

To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by his faith (Jas. 2:14).

The contexts show that the two writers are using 'faith' in different senses and are not in any substantial disagreement. To Paul faith is a confident commitment to the belief that God keeps his promises, and indeed has kept all the promises of the Old Testament in the sending of his Son (Rom. 4:20). The faith which James is attacking is a mere intellectual assent to propositions about God, in which even devils may share (2:19). A modern philosopher would query whether such a faith can in fact ever exist, since even the sentence, 'I believe in the existence of one God', is a commissive statement which entails creaturely dependence on the God in whom the speaker professes to believe. James after his own fashion is making exactly the same point: faith divorced from the commitment which

issues in conduct is a corpse (2:26). Similarly Paul, notwithstanding his vehement repudiation of 'works', i.e. deeds done in order to achieve a credit balance in the heavenly ledgers, thanks God 'that your faith has shown itself in action, your love in labour, and your hope of our Lord Jesus in fortitude' (1 Thess. 1:3).

The principle of contextual determination also delivers us from the worst excesses of the word-concept fallacy. The Greek *sôzô*, for example, regularly means 'save', but that is not to say that every time it or one of its cognates occurs in the New Testament we are dealing with the doctrine of salvation. In 1 Pet. 3:20 we are told, according to the AV, that in the ark 'eight souls were saved by water', which gives the misleading impression that the flood, the instrument of divine judgment, was the means of salvation for Noah and his family. What the Greek actually says is that they 'were brought to safety through the water' (NEB).

The story of the death of Ahab contains an interesting illustration of the importance of situation (1 Kings 22:10-17). Four hundred prophets have said, 'Attack Ramoth-Gilead and win the day; the Lord will deliver it into your hands.' Then comes a solitary prophet, Micaiah ben Imlah, who says exactly the same. Ahab, whatever his other faults, is no fool, and he recognises that, with the change of speaker, the words can no longer be taken at their face value. He therefore adjures Micaiah to drop the irony and to deliver his message in unambiguous terms.

A whole theology of the New Testament might well be written under this heading, since it is the contention of its contributors that with the coming of Jesus the whole situation of mankind has so altered as to change the semantic content of the word 'God'. God becomes 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). The Day of the Lord becomes 'the Day of our Lord Jesus' (2 Cor. 1:14). Against a schismatic group who have been claiming to share God's life, to know him and to love him after some esoteric fashion (1 John 1:6; 2:4; 4:20), the John of the First Epistle insists that we do not even know the meaning of the word 'love' and fill it with its true ethical content until we believe that the love of God took human form in Jesus and that God imparts that same love to others through his indwelling Spirit (1 John 4:7-16). The other John who wrote the Revelation is fond of a resonant title for God, 'the Omnipotent', which he uses nine

times. But he repeatedly makes it clear that in using it he is recasting the concept of omnipotence, which he understands not as unlimited coercion but as unlimited persuasion. He hears a voice proclaim the victory of the Lion of Judah, but what he sees is a lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him' (Rev. 5:5-6); and it is by the blood of the sacrificed Lamb that the conquering martyrs win their victory, which is the only victory of God (12:11).

What appears to be a difference of meaning within two parallel traditions often turns out to be a difference only of reference, not of sense. The Jews and the Samaritans agreed about the sense of the words in Deut. 12:11, 'the place which the Lord your God shall choose as a dwelling for his name'; but the Jews took it to refer to Mount Zion and the Samaritans to Mount Gerizim (John 4:20). The Pharisees and the Sadducees would have defined 'Scripture' in identical terms; but the Pharisees regarded Law, Prophets and Writings as Scripture, and the Sadducees only the Law. But there are occasions when tradition can make a difference to the sense of words as well. The author of Hebrews begins his epistle: 'When in former times God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets.' Yet in the argument which follows he quotes frequently from the Pentateuch and the Psalms and only rarely from the prophetic books. He does not restrict the term 'prophets' to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve. For him the whole of the Old Testament is prophecy. Nor is this merely an extension of reference. The Old Testament is prophecy partly because through it God spoke to the forefathers and still speaks to the present generation, partly because it looks forward in all its parts to the better things which God has kept in store for 'these last days'.

The question of cultural context confronts us in an acute form when we try to translate the opening verse of the Fourth Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Logos.' The question 'What did John mean by Logos?' is a question about the cultural background to which he and his readers belonged. Was he writing to comment the gospel to educated Greeks, well schooled in the popular philosophy of the day, in which the Logos or Reason was at one and the same time the immanent rationality which gives order to the universe and also the rational quality in man which is capable of grasping the cosmic Logos and living in harmony with it? Was he a traditional

Christian with his roots in the Old Testament, looking back to the word of God which inspired the prophets and which was subsequently identified with the personified Wisdom? Or was he one of those who stood at the confluence of the Jewish and Greek worlds, trying to expound a teaching which was fundamentally Jewish in terms which would capture the imagination and respect of the educated Greek? The danger here is that we should think of culture in fixed and exclusive terms. It used to be held that Palestinian Judaism and the Hellenistic Judaism of the Dispersion were two homogeneous and contrasting systems. Now it is very generally held that neither was ever homogeneous, and that the contrasts existed as much within the two types as between them. Greek influence was felt not only in Alexandria but in Jerusalem, and strict Pharisees in Palestine had more in common with the strict Jews of Cyrene or Ephesus than any of them had with their more liberal neighbours.

This has important implications for the study of Hebrews. It was long held, almost without a dissentient voice, that the background to this epistle was the philosophical Judaism of Alexandria typified in the works of the learned Jew, Philo, who had expounded the Jewish scriptures in the light of the teachings of Plato and the Stoics. Did not the author believe that the earthly temple was a copy of the true temple in heaven and call the law a shadow of the things that were to come (8:5; 9:23; 10:1)? Since the author explicitly tells us that he derived the first of these ideas from the Old Testament (Exod. 25:40), this widely accepted theory was from the start precariously founded, and it has now undergone a total eclipse. The most that can be claimed is that the word 'shadow' may be a Platonic term picked up from popular vocabulary, much as a modern writer might make a reference to evolution without having read Darwin, or to relativity without being able to understand anything of Einstein.

(b) *Tone*

Anyone who attempts to read the Bible in public knows what a change of meaning can be effected by changing the inflexions of the voice, and how hard it is to be sure that the inflexions are correct. Let us consider by way of example Matthew's parable of the talents (25:14-30). We have no difficulty with the tone of the

third servant's reply: 'I knew you to be a hard man: you reap where you have not sown, you gather where you have not scattered.' But what tone are we to use when the master picks up his words and repeats them? A flat, factual tone will suggest that the master accepts this description of his character and agrees with it. But it is possible, and surely correct, to read the words with a note of question rather than acceptance; 'I am not what you think me, but even if I had been all that, your conduct would still have been inexcusable!' Part of our difficulty is that the written word has no tone. Nowadays we attempt to supply this lack by punctuation, and so the NEB has added a question mark to the end of the sentence.

Paul, for all the eloquence of his pen, knew what a poor substitute a letter can be for the warmth and intimacy of the spoken word. 'I wish I could be with you now; then I could modify my tone; as it is, I am at my wits' end about you' (Gal. 4:20). He does not mean that he would alter what he has to say about their aberrations if he were face to face with them, but simply that it would all sound very different if they could hear the changing inflexions of his voice.

Some of the recorded sayings of Jesus need to be read with this point in mind. His words to the Syro-Phoenician woman, 'it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (Mark 7:27), which seem so austere in cold print, must have been spoken with a smile and in a tone of voice which invited the woman's witty reply. His answer to his mother at the wedding in Cana is in the AV version downright rude: 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' (John 2:4). Among modern versions the most successful attempt to strike the right note is that of the Translator's New Testament: 'Mother, why are you interfering with me?'

(c) *Referent*

The distinction between sense and referent is so indispensable to any discussion of meaning, and so self-evident once it has been pointed out, that it is a shock to find learned writers ignoring it. Among the arguments put forward to prove that Paul could not have written Ephesians there is one which states that *mysterion* has a meaning in Ephesians different from that which it has in Colossians. In fact the sense of the word is identical in both letters: it means 'a secret';

and it is only the referent, the nature or content of the secret, that is different. Yet there is no reason why one writer should not have detected in the person of Christ two different, though related, secrets.

Nevertheless, sense and referent are so intimately linked that failure to identify the referent is bound to diminish our understanding of the sense, which is then left hanging in the air. When someone speaks about a person or a thing we do not know, the words go over our heads. Some readers of the Bible are content to read it in this way, but the reader who wants to understand will ask, with the Ethiopian civil servant, 'Who is it that the prophet is speaking about here: himself or someone else?' (Acts 8:34).

The prophet John describes a war in heaven in which Michael and his angels were victorious over the Devil and his angels. Later Christian tradition, by the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, treated this as a precosmic event in its own right, quite failing to recognise that John's imagery had an earthly referent, as he makes inescapably plain in the sequel: 'This is the hour of victory for our God... the accuser of our brothers is overthrown... by the sacrifice of the Lamb they have conquered him' (Rev. 12:7-11). In other words, the victory in heaven is the symbolic counterpart of Christ's victory on the cross, which carries with it the guarantee of victory for his martyred followers.

There is another sort of problem in identifying the referent in John 6:53: 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood you can have no life in you.' Most commentators have held that here John is talking about the Eucharist; he does not record the act of institution in the upper room, but has transferred what he wanted to say about the sacrament to the sermon which expounds the significance of the feeding of the five thousand. Now there can be little doubt that his language here is eucharistic, since the main argument of the sermon is a contrast between the manna which Moses gave (i.e. the Torah) and the bread from heaven which is the incarnate Jesus, and the transition from eating bread to drinking blood must be occasioned by eucharistic memories. But the Eucharist is the source of John's language, not the theme or referent of the discourse. 'Flesh' in this Gospel is the symbol of incarnation (1:14), and what the hearers are being told is that they cannot come to full belief in the incarnation except through the

ensuing death of Christ. 'You do not understand now what I am doing, but one day you will' (13:7). By the principle of ambiguity of predication (see pp. 9-10), the use of eucharistic language to talk about something more fundamental will reflect back on our understanding of the Eucharist, but only if we have first clearly understood where John is putting the central emphasis.

The last two chapters of this book will be devoted to the problem of identifying the referent where the language used is the cosmic language of myth and eschatology, and we shall find overwhelming reasons for being dissatisfied with the conventional notion that biblical writers took such language literally to refer to the beginning and end of the world.

(d) *Intention*

In the brief discussion of intention at the beginning of this chapter we noted that intention affects meaning in three ways, and we must now look more closely at each in turn. In the first place, words have the sense the speaker intends them to have. The most important corollary of this is that the speaker's intention determines whether his words are to be taken literally or figuratively. This enormous subject will occupy the whole of Part Two, and here a single illustration must suffice.

When Jeremiah reports his own answer to God, 'I see the stem of an almond tree' (1:11), how does he intend us to understand the word 'see'? Did he literally see an almond tree in the vicinity of Anathoth and think to himself that it was a good sermon illustration? Did the experience present itself to his mind's eye in a vision without any external stimulus? Or does the truth lie somewhere between the two: the sight of an actual almond tree induced the prophetic france?

Secondly, the speaker's intention determines the type of language use. Readers of the Book of Jonah have commonly been too pre-occupied with problems of marine biology to pay attention to the much more important theological difficulty that Jonah is ordered to prophesy something that does not happen: 'in forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown' (3:4). As McCurdy has put it, 'many things were foretold precisely that they might not come to pass'.¹⁰ What

¹⁰ Quoted by John Paterson, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets*, p. 6.

we have to decide is whether the prophecy was intended as a prediction or as a warning. If it was a prediction, a plain statement of fact about the future, then it was absolute, and it was falsified by the event. If it was a warning, it carried an unexpressed conditional clause, 'unless they repent'. In a later chapter we shall see that it is characteristic of Semitic style to express ideas absolutely and to leave the listener to fill in for himself the implicit qualifications. In the story of Jonah, being a bigotted nationalist, hoped that his prophecy was a prediction and was bitterly disappointed when it turned out to be only a warning, though all along he had suspected that God would act as he did (4:1-2).

Thirdly, a word has the referent a speaker intends it to have. Here at last we have reached a point at which we can revert to the question raised earlier, whether an utterance can have a meaning beyond what the original speaker intended. Provided that we restrict ourselves to meaning^a, we can give a clear affirmative answer. For a referent may be of five different kinds. (1) At one extreme there are statements about particular persons or things which are clearly not transferable: 'In the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberias... the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness' (Luke 3:1-2). (2) At the other extreme there are general statements which can properly be applied to any member of a class: 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:25). But in between there are three other kinds of referent which merit closer attention. (3) Sometimes a speaker makes a statement about a particular referent which contains enough general truth to make it readily transferable to another. When, for example, Jesus says, 'How well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites' (Mark 7:6), he is not suggesting that Isaiah was gazing into the future across eight centuries, but rather that in speaking of his own generation Isaiah might equally have been speaking about the contemporaries of Jesus: 'Isaiah might well have been prophesying about you.' (4) The fourth type is like a Situation Vacant advertisement: it describes in some detail a person whose identity is not yet known to the writer. In this category we must place the description of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53. The context makes it clear that the prophet believed Israel to be God's servant (e.g. 49:3), and that he was inviting Israel to see her national sufferings in the light of his

prophecy. But he was very unsure of any response. Was the servant to be the whole nation or only a remnant, to be many, few or one? The reason why modern scholars have endlessly debated these questions is that the prophet himself did not know the answers. It is as though he had published an advertisement, 'Wanted, a servant of the Lord', accompanied by a job description. He was undoubtedly aware that many famous men, such as Moses and Jeremiah, had sat for the composite portrait he was drawing. What he could not know was that in the end there would be only one applicant for the post.

(5) Closely allied to the Situation Vacant advertisement is the use of what Ogden and Richards (p. 131) called 'mendicants', words thrown out at a not fully grasped object. The Old Testament is full of such words, and a part of its inexhaustible usefulness to us lies in its 'majestic mendicancy'. Let us take as an illustration the word 'atonement', which occurs most frequently in the Priestly Code and gives a characteristic flavour to its sacrificial regulations. The priests who drew up the Code had no very clear idea of what they meant by atonement or how it worked. The nearest they ever came to a definition was: 'it is the blood, that is the life, that makes expiation' (Lev. 17:11). They were heirs to three centuries of criticism from prophets who had protested that sacrifice does not atone, and that it was not what God required,¹¹ yet they maintained and elaborated the ritual because they felt the need for atonement. Thus when the author of Hebrews says that the law, with its temple, priesthood and sacrifices, had 'a shadow of the good things to come', he is not sending us back to the Old Testament to find there light to throw on the mystery of the death of Christ, but is claiming that, once we see the fulness of sacrifice in the cross, we understand what the sacrificial worship of the Old Testament was groping after.

These last three types of reference together provide the linguistic justification for most of the instances in which the Old Testament is said to be fulfilled in the New. In all such cases it is legitimate to transfer an utterance to a fresh referent without violence to the principle that its sense is determined by the intention of the original speaker.

¹¹ Amos 5:21-25; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:10-17; Mic. 6:6-8; Jer. 7:21-23; cf. Ps. 40:6-8; 50:7-14; 51:16-17.

Some sayings, then, can properly acquire a new referent. But can they also properly be said to acquire a new sense? To a limited degree it would appear that we are already committed to assent to this as well. By the ambiguity of predication we have seen that every act of reference casts some reflexion back on the sense. Thus, when we apply Isaiah 53 to Jesus, this is bound to have some effect on the way in which we read the chapter; it has a new depth of meaning for the person who so applies it (beware meaning^v). But ought we to attribute such additional meaning to the original? I am inclined to think that it is wiser not to do so. This is admittedly not a question to which there is a right and a wrong answer, it is a matter of terminology; yet the terminology we choose influences the clarity of our thinking. My own choice, therefore, is to speak of the legitimate use of Scripture and not of finding new meanings in it. For this I have good scriptural precedent. When Paul tells us that there is a hidden meaning in Gen. 2:24, he is quick to add: 'I for my part take it to refer to Christ and the church' (Eph. 5:32). This is Pauline theology, not the theology of Genesis.

When we come in the next chapter to consider language historically, we shall see the full benefit of this distinction. Much of the material in the Bible has gone through a process of repeated editing, and the reason for the process is that each succeeding editor has wished to impose a meaning of his own on the tradition. The intentions of the Chronicler are very different from those of the sources on which he drew. So too in the Gospels we must always be ready to discriminate between what a saying meant on the lips of Jesus and what it came to mean to the evangelist who recorded it. The parable of the Lost Sheep is recorded by both Luke and Matthew. But in Luke (15:3-7) it has a setting in the life of Jesus as a defence against the accusation that he kept bad company, while in Matthew (18:12-14) it has a setting in the life of the church as an instruction to pastors on the treatment of the straying member of their flock. Matthew has made a legitimate use of the parable, but it would be confusing to say that this was part of its original sense.

There remains one final question. We have insisted that meaning is determined by the intention of the speaker. But who in the Bible is the speaker? This question requires an answer at no fewer than three levels: the characters in the narrative, the author and God. We rapidly learn to distinguish the first two levels, and not to assume

that the authors of the Old Testament approve of all that is said or done by the characters in their story, or that the point of view of Jesus is that of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). But is there such a thing as God's meaning to be distinguished from the intention of the human author? That this is an entirely proper question is demonstrated by the case of Jonah cited above, where the intention of God proved to be different from that of his spokesman. The Bible contains many instances in which the intention of God differs from that of his agent or messenger. 'You meant to do me harm, but God meant to bring good out of it' (Gen. 50:20). God uses the Assyrian as a punitive rod, though the Assyrian has other designs (Isa. 10:5-11), and he uses Cyrus as his anointed servant though Cyrus has not known him (Isa. 45:1-4). In the story of Job, what Satan intends as temptation God intends as test, and the same may be said of the temptations of Jesus.¹²

It is reasonable, then, to question whether the messengers of God have always correctly understood his intentions. We may doubt, either because we are squeamish or because we are Christian, whether God really ordered Saul to slaughter all the Amalekites (not that that would absolve Saul from a charge of disobedience to what he thought was a divine command). What we may not do is to invent something to put in the place of what we reject. There is an analogy here with those sceptics who find that they cannot believe the biblical account of the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus and undertake to tell us instead 'what actually happened': Caiaphas was *really* trying to save Jesus, it was all *really* part of a Zealot plot, Joseph of Arimathaea *actually* took Jesus down alive from the cross, etc. There is no harm in such conceits as long as they are recognised for what they are, sheer fiction. But anyone who takes them seriously is more credulous than the most naive believer in the biblical text. After all, there is evidence, some of it almost contemporary (1 Cor. 15:3-8), for the resurrection. We can respect the genuine agnostic who is content to live in doubt because he considers the evidence inadequate for belief, but not the spurious

¹² This helps to elucidate, though not to solve, the difficulty we have with the clause about temptation in the Lord's Prayer. God does not tempt us, and we ought not to ask him not to test us. 'Do not bring us to the time of trial' is an outrageous evasion of the problem. The prayer is a request that in the time of trial we may be tested without being tempted; but it is hard to light on an adequate way of putting this.

agnostic who prefers fantasy to evidence. Similarly in dealing with the words of the Bible we are bound by evidence. Literary critics have wisely warned us against the intentional fallacy, the error of supposing that a writer meant something other than he has actually written. We have no access to the mind of Jeremiah or Paul except through their recorded words. A fortiori, we have no access to the word of God in the Bible except through the words and the minds of those who claim to speak in his name. We may disbelieve them, that is our right; but if we try, without evidence, to penetrate to a meaning more ultimate than the one the writers intended, that is our meaning, not theirs or God's.