



Baxter, Benjamin J.

“In the Original Text It Says”: Word-Study Fallacies and How to Avoid Them

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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In my adult Christian life I’ve been a member of exactly two churches. Neither my old pastor nor my present pastor read the Biblical languages but I’ve heard them both appeal to them on occasion. Now I don’t really read the languages either, but I dabble, and I’m proficient with a number of tools that aid in my understanding of technical commentaries and other secondary literature. I mention this because there have been plenty of occasions when I’ve heard “the Hebrew” or “the Greek” appealed to in ways that I knew were mistaken. *“In the Original Text It Says”: Word-Study Fallacies and How to Avoid Them* is a book intended to help folks in avoiding these kinds of mistakes.

Baxter’s target audience is pastors who have a bit of Hebrew and Greek under their belts and make use of Biblical commentaries. The book is divided into two parts: Part A gives a brief introduction to lexical semantics, where Baxter discusses the various facets of *meaning* (e.g., how words have a range of *meaning*; how context determines a particular *meaning*; how *meaning* can change with time; etc.) and identifies half-a-dozen word-study fallacies. Part B gives the reader a chance to put the information gained in Part A into practice by citing examples from commentaries that say something about the meaning of words and showing where these fallacies pop up or are at least in danger of popping up.

Baxter has come up with some creative titles for the word-study fallacies he scrutinizes. If one thinks that every use of a word “can be traced back to, and its meaning derived from, one basic meaning” (14) then they think that “All Meanings Lead to Rome.” Or perhaps said person opts out of the Italian vacation and decides to travel through time in by reading earlier or later meanings into a word; they could be trapped in a “Time Warp.” But traveling is thirsty business, isn’t it? Such a person might have the urge to quench their thirst with some “Swamp Water” (a mixture of different sodas or juices), which is to say that they’ve invested a word with multiple meanings and added info found apart from the word itself.

Traveling without a reliable map might get one “Lost in Translation” because they’ve assumed more concordance between a word’s range of meaning in multiple languages than is warranted. If somehow they’ve managed to make it to the beach they could go swimming in a “Sea of Synonyms” and assume that “two (or more) Hebrew and Greek words that are translated by the same English word have the same range of meaning” (26). Or maybe they say forget it all and come down with a case of “Contextual Amnesia” by assuming that an author will always use the same word in the same way regardless of what other words surround it. So surely you can see just how whimsical his titles are.

Readers who have worked through Barr; Silva; Carson; and Turner & Cotterell will find most of what Baxter says to be old hat; intuitive even. The fact is that we live in a post-*The Semantics of Biblical Language* world and Barr’s reach extends far and wide. It’s almost unheard of to challenge these basic principles of interpretation, but challenged (to some extent) they have been, most notably by Peter Leithart in *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*. Leithart certainly doesn’t discount the validity of contextual reading, and he goes to great lengths to examine both *what* and *how* words mean; but he rightly detects what he considers a “liberal” husk/kernel dichotomy in such an approach to language (see *Deep Exegesis*, chap. 4).

The husk (the word’s form) is discarded to get to its kernel (meaning). Leithart contrasts this as a hermeneutics of the spirit versus a hermeneutics of the letter. Now whatever the merits of Leithart’s argument, I would have liked to have seen such arguments considered. I get that this is a short volume with a particular aim, but I think that these types of pre-critical challenges to contemporary hermeneutics are worthy of interaction. The validity of Barr’s program it seems is too easily accepted and then presented as *the* standard for how we’re to think about the way language works. And keep in mind that I’m not saying Barr or those who follow him are wrong; I’m just saying I’d like to see their case as its being built rather than the finished product minus the process.

But I will say this about Baxter's book: it's a quick read and certainly something that will get any pastor/preacher thinking about the next time they make a statement in their sermon about "the Hebrew" or "the Greek." It's a call for caution and that's to be appreciated. I found Baxter to be a clear communicator and certainly gracious to those whose works he used as examples of these fallacies in action, but a time or two I thought he may have been a bit nitpicky (e.g., 62n. 25). With that said, I'm glad that he's taken the time to help preachers be better preachers, may his tribe increase!