

Review – Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* – Justin Allison

This book is written from the perspective of General Linguistics. From this perspective, he attempts to provide guidance to the use of Biblical languages for exegesis. The book is not overly academic, which makes it a quick read – something useful for pastors and beginning students. He includes transliterations of original languages only.

The book begins by describing “Biblical Perspectives on Language.” He discusses creation as his main example. He explains that Genesis portrayal of God speaking is a way of setting up the proposition that humans (who speak also) have the image of God. The image of God, as he sees it, is use of language for carrying out plans and dominion. He acknowledges that after the fall, as evidenced by the Tower of Babel, language has become corrupt – corrupting the image of God. Yet, he holds that this image is not completely corrupted. God still uses language to speak to humans in the form of the written word of scripture. This revelation takes fuller form in the incarnate word. Eschatologically speaking, speech will be redeemed at the end of days.

Then he delves into a description of the study of language. He begins with the scientific study. Synchronic study is what he considers to be the best method, since it looks at language in context – as it was used at that time – for making interpretive judgments. Diachronic study on the other hand attempts to explain the whole historical picture of the language, something which he considers superfluous and overly technical. Silva acknowledges his reliance upon Saussure's literary theory for making the choice of Synchronic study. Then he goes on to describe how language study can be interdisciplinary in the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences. Each of these branches contributes some to the study of language, but none of them provide a fully comprehensive framework for studying linguistics.

He describes the “Historical Dimension” as the “old way of studying languages.” One would study language families and the development of each particular language. Then one would locate biblical Hebrew and Greek within this framework for interpretive aid. While he finds this somewhat helpful, he also contends that the knowledge of language families and diachronic development is not completely necessary for ascertaining the proper interpretation of Hebrew and Greek. Instead, one ought to be familiar with how Hebrew and Greek are used, and their particular idiosyncrasies.

Silva has two chapters on describing the biblical languages. In them, he illustrates how one describes sounds, types of words (cases. Etc), forms and meanings from words. Then he describes how one works to extrapolate meaning from sentences by studying their form, meaning (case-relationships), and verbs. Then he gives a brief discussion to paragraphs and larger units (such as books). These larger units display certain forms of argumentation, and from those we find meaning.

The final part, the epilogue, gives a simplistic overview of textual transmission. He gives a cursory discussion to types of errors in textual transmission as well as the general process. He notes that translations are usually done in one of two ways, literal or dynamic equivalence. He notes the strengths and weaknesses of each method, and when it would make sense to use each method. He concludes by noting that many individual pastors and ministers do not need a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, because the translators have done the work for them. These ministers only need a competence in reading the Bible in English. Yet, there will be difficulty in answering questions about translations, etc., if one does not have a knowledge of Biblical Languages. Obviously, he contends that the professional interpreter needs knowledge of the original languages.

Overall this book is quite useful. One might benefit from reading this before taking courses in Hebrew and Greek so as not to go into those courses with unrealistic expectations. At the same time, his argument for the Synchronic method of study would make one a bit depressed when they discover many textbooks work from a diachronic point of view. The book is also useful because he encourages readers to avoid certain types of exegetical fallacies based upon diachronic study of language, and

exegesis of parts of words, etc. Overall this book made me feel like the total mastery of every aspect of the biblical languages was not worth my time, since my purpose is not to explain every detail of the language, but to interpret the books as a whole for theological purposes. Still, Silva's opening chapter gives valid examples as to how synchronic study of the language and the interpretive process work together to provide a solid exegetical method.