This Book and Biblical Scholarship

In the first half of the twentieth century, many biblical scholars perceived a fundamental connection between biblical Hebrew and biblical theology.

Unfortunately, they sometimes did sloppy work that later received criticism. In 1961, in his book *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, James Barr vigorously attacked previous work.

For several decades, his ideas held sway. However, more recent scholars have realized that while many insights can be gained from Barr, one can also go too far and fail to see the important links between language and thought. This book is part of this more recent stream, heeding Barr where necessary but also moving beyond his limitations.

As Enio Mueller puts it, "Barr's work represented a major development in modern Biblical interpretation, one from which nobody can safely turn back. His criticisms were in order. . . . Nevertheless, the main tenet of Barr's view, the absence of correlation between thought and language, has itself proved inadequate."[8]

My specialties as a scholar pertain to the Bible's first five books, so you're likely to see a fair amount of them here. A book by a specialist in Obadiah would look quite different.

To help as broad an audience as I can, I've minimized technical jargon. However, I recognize that some readers might use this book as a springboard to deeper studies. So, I've included various textboxes that provide important quotes, explain more academic work, and define technical terms for those who are interested. When you see a parenthetical remark like the one at the end of this paragraph, feel free to check the textbox if it interests you. (See **This Book and Biblical Scholarship**.)

This book isn't an introduction to biblical Hebrew vocabulary. Such an introduction would include Hebrew words for "the", "on", and the like. On a related note, this book doesn't treat Hebrew grammar at all. Naturally, more can be unlocked from the Bible by learning how sentences are put together. However, grammar is too big a topic to cover here.[9] (See **Sentence Versus Word**.)

Sentence Versus Word

Many people working with languages have argued that studying words alone isn't worthwhile, that meaning truly resides on the level of sentences. A more balanced position is advocated by John C. Poirier:

> The claim that meaning resides in the sentence rather than in the word is naïve and simplistic. . . . To say meaning resides in the sentence rather than the word is like saying flavor resides in the recipe rather than in the ingredients. In short, it is [a] hasty and unjust exclusion of a middle position.
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> It is far better to think of meaning—that is, the codified aspect of transcribed meaning—as a bifocal field, mapped through the give-and-take between words and the sentences they comprise. Meaning resides in the sentences, but it also resides in both larger and smaller loci.[10]