

## Syllabus

(Avram) Naom Chomsky, the founder of transformational or generative grammar, revolutionized the study of linguistics. In his view, language is the performance of a universal innate ability possessed by humans. Though human language is a highly complex and abstract manipulation of symbols, by the age of three most children are able to use it successfully for the purposes of ordinary communication. This profound ability is somewhat deceptive, in that few individuals come to recognize the ambiguities and preconceptions that are part of all communication.

The complexity of communication increases when dealing with historical documents, such as the Bible, or abstract ideas, such as theology. For this reason there is much disagreement over "what the Bible says," and over our concepts of the person of God and his relationship to the world.

The work of James Barr (*Semantics of Biblical Language*, 1961) transformed the study of Biblical theology, as it called attention to the complexity of linguistic developments within the Bible itself. Society of Biblical Literature in 2011 had a session on reviewing the impact of James Barr 50 years later, including stimulating papers such as Jan Joosten (Strasbourg) "Hebrew Thought and Greek Thought in the Septuagint Fifty Years After Barr." Understanding of Biblical Theology is necessarily limited without some knowledge of such linguistic matters.

The non specialist can be greatly assisted in deepening an understanding of Biblical Theology through the judicious use of Theological Dictionaries and other linguistic tools. Computer Bibles have become a great resource in this regard as they can in a few key strokes bring together various versions, ancient and modern, and a vast diversity of lexical and other aids. Providence Seminary recommends Bibleworks 9 as generally the most cost effective for the resources useful to a seminary student.

### Course Goals

#### 1. Biblical Semantics

The student will come to learn certain essentials of how words function to convey meaning, which provides a greater awareness of how meaning can be either ambiguous or misconstrued. In particular, attention will be given to linguistic developments within the Biblical languages, many of which are concealed completely in translation. The student will learn how to use translations judiciously.

#### 2. Literary Analysis

Language communicates in modes shaped within a culture referred to as genres or forms. Misinterpretation is inevitable when insufficient allowance is made for the reality that there is no exact equivalent of ancient genres to modern genres, just as there is no exact equivalent between words in different languages. The student will learn to inductively analyse ancient texts to appreciate more carefully how the great diversity of literary material in the Scriptures each communicated truth in their own way.

#### 3. Theoretical Analysis

Modernist concepts of meaning and understanding have been rigorously challenged as the many failures and gratuitous assumptions of modernist thinking has become evident. While elements of modernism

continue to be virulent, it is no longer a predominating paradigm. The demise of modernism puts to rest many of the attacks against Biblical revelation, but the theories that have taken their place also have dangers of their own. The student will learn to understand the premises of thinkers such as Fish and Derrida (deconstruction), so their observations can be used constructively in understanding divine revelation.

### **Texts**

Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Downer's Grove: InVerVarsity Press, 1991.

Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Zondervan, 1994.

James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Post Modernism?* Baker Academic, 2006.

### **Course Schedule**

Classes begin on Monday Thursday Jan. 12; there will not be class on Feb. 2 (Missio Dei), 9 (Hermissillo course) Feb. 28, and Mar. 7 (spring break). The last class is April 11.

### **Course Requirements**

1. Lexical Semantics (25%; due Feb. 16)

1.1 Required Readings

- (1) Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, Part 2, Descriptive Semantics.
- (2) Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Semantics (chapter 3).

1.2 Class Exercises

- (1) A study of *nomos* in Romans and Galations.
- (2) A study of the Hebrew and Greek words translated righteous / righteousness in Genesis, Isaiah (*sedeq/saddiq/sedeqah*) and Romans (*dikaioi/dikaioisune*).
- (3) Review of study on prison in Scripture.

1.3 Written Assignment

Do a study of a semantic domain of your choice in which you select a cluster of words related to a concept, whether theological (e.g. righteousness) or referential (e.g. prison). For the New Testament the student should consult Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies) 1988. For the Old Testament the student should consult Willem A. VanGemeren, general editor, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Zondervan Publishing house) 1997, vol. 5, pp. 1-216. Topics should be limited so they can be satisfactorily covered in about 1500 words.

2. Formal Analysis (25%; due March 15)

2.1 Required Readings

- (1) Tremper Longman III, "Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory and the Evangelical," *WTJ* 47 (1985) 46-67.
- (2) Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Part 2.

2.2 Class Exercises

- (1) Poems: Analysis of Proverbs 23:29-35; Ps. 74.
- (2) Palistrophe: Analysis of Amos 5:1-17.
- (3) Parables: Matthew 13.

2.3 Written Assignment

Choose a unit of scripture (from a poem to a book) and analyze it for its contexts (historical, social and literary), genre, semantics, and meaning. Show the goals of the author and his method in conveying his message to his audience in his time. Topics should be limited so they can be comprehensibly addressed in about 1500 words.

3. Determining Meaning (15%; due March 29)

3.1 Required Readings

- (1) Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Appendix 1
- (2) James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Post Modernism?*

3.2 Class Exercises

- (1) Review of author, text, reader, and ideological approaches to interpretation.
- (2) The Ten Commandments for today.

3.3 Written Assignment

Explain how Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault have responded to modernism and how the demise of modernism is a positive development in Scripture interpretation. Evaluate the contributions that literary criticism and deconstruction have made to understanding texts, and the dangers they may pose.

4. Determining Significance (35%; due April 19)

4.1 Required Readings

- (1) Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Appendix 2.
- (2) Kevin Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics," *JETS* 48 (2005) 89-114.

## 4.2 Written Requirement

Take a difference of doctrine or interpretation that is distinct to your church denomination or some significant person in your life in comparison to other viewpoints (e.g. eschatology of Israel, baptism, gifts of Spirit, women in ministry, etc.). Show how hermeneutical questions are critical to establishing different positions. Explain what prevents this issue from being resolved, and what would be necessary to move the issues to resolution.

This paper is due at the end of the semester, but the choosing of the topic should take place in the first half of the semester. Each student will be asked to give a brief presentation on their choice on February 16, and the class will collectively reflect on the kinds of issues to be addressed.

### **Bibliography**

An annotated bibliography of aids for Biblical interpretation is found in Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Hendrikson Publishers, 2001), 147-193 (chapter eleven). This includes nine sections, the last being a section of bibliographic entries, which can be consulted for further references on particular topics. Section six has a subdivision of "Handbooks and Other Works on Detailed Textual Analysis," which includes several texts particularly germane to the subject matter of this syllabus.

For a review of interpretive developments in the Roman Catholic tradition, and the effect of the Second Vatican Council to Scripture studies, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (New York: Paulist, 2008).

A comprehensive collection of the work of Anthony C. Thiselton is available in *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works with New Essays* (Eerdmans, 2006) 827 pages. The book is divided into seven parts. The first situates the subject of hermeneutics in the field of theological study; part two studies the relationship between hermeneutics and speech-act theory; part three deals with semantics and conceptual grammar; part four deals with lexicography; part five discusses narrative worlds; part six engages philosophy, language and post-modernity; and part seven treats hermeneutics, history and theology. This book is a type of encyclopedic reference work on the subject of hermeneutics.