

A Review of D. Brent Sandy, Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002 and “Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” Evangelical Theological Society, 59th Annual Meeting, 2007 (Dispensational Study Group)¹

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“We must remember that prophecy may become translucent when we go hunting for details. This is an essential issue for a developing hermeneutic for prophecy. How do we know how much information a prophet intends to reveal, given a message that primarily focuses on transformation? What imagery did he employ simply in the service of affecting change in his audience? We must remember that if anything we conservatives tend to err on the side of futurism.”²

Introduction

D. Brent Sandy, a professor at Grace College in Winona Lake, Indiana and professing dispensationalist has become a major voice within evangelical academia calling for a paradigm shift in the interpretation of prophecy. He proposes to de-emphasize the search for meaning in the details of prophetic literature. This approach, he hopes, will minimize eschatological disagreements among Christians and lead to more unity in the Body of Christ. Citing results of modern language study that emphasizes the *use* of speech and text over their *literal assertions*, he argues that traditional dispensational emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic too often misses the point that biblical prophets intended to make to their audiences, leads to unnecessary sensationalism, and distorts the primary aim of prophetic literature.

In this paper I will review his argument based upon his book published in 2002 and his paper delivered to the Dispensational Study Group at ETS in 2007 [Slide #1]. Since he employs terms such as “speech act” and “illocutionary” discourse--terms used by language researchers in recent decades—I will begin by surveying some basic concepts involved in such terminology. It behooves those of us who seek to exegete God’s Word in a biblically submissive manner to examine critically each tool we bring to our task. Whether we employ results of historical science, archeology, linguistics, semantics or any other discipline, we ought to control these interpretations of God’s creation by the special revelation he has given us in the Bible.

I will follow my description of modern philosophies of language with a summary description of Sandy’s proposal and my response to it. Finally, I will conclude with some practical suggestions for pastor-teachers to benefit from the issues raised by this discussion.

¹ See other reviews of *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*: Richard P. Belcher, Jr., *JETS* 47.1 (March 2004) 152; William D. Barrick, *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 16.1 (Spring 2005) 182; Elliott E. Johnson, *BibSac* 165 (Jan – Mar 2005) 119; and Timothy E. Saleska, *Concordia Journal* 31.2 (2005) 201.

² D. Brent Sandy, “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*” (Evangelical Theological Society-Dispensational Study Group, 2007), 20f. Hereinafter *HD*.

Modern Philosophy of Language

Sandy's appropriation of some aspects of language philosophy.

In his preface to *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* (hereinafter *PPH*), Sandy recounts his journey through academia as a philologist and historian. He describes how his studies made him “wonder whether a careful look at prophecy might even mean a paradigm shift in the interpretation of prophecy.”³ Although referring to his book as “a simple book for simple people honestly asking simple questions about prophecy,” Sandy seems well aware that it “may affect future introductions, commentaries and theologies.”⁴ His simple questions about interpreting prophetic language turn out to be not quite so simple.

To gain a sense of his hermeneutic paradigm shift let's look at some of his exegetical conclusions. While discussing prophetic passages that utilize what he calls “extreme language” to describe contemporary crises, he writes:

“Does the language of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 apply to the kings of Babylon and Tyre or to the fallen angel? With recognition of the freedom of prophetic language to be boldly metaphoric, a consensus is forming that the authors' intent had nothing to do with the fallen angel. So it is with most prophecy. There is limited evidence that the Old Testament prophets generally saw the distant future and predicted it.”⁵

In his ETS paper, Sandy comments on the identities of the locusts and armies in Joel 1 and 2. With commentators in wide disagreement he concludes that it is inappropriate for a hermeneutic to ask for identification of such details.

“My hermeneutic leads me to ask about another way. Perhaps the horde of locusts and the invading army are stereotypical descriptions of God's wrath. . . .It is entirely possible, if not likely, that Joel's prophecy was not announcing a specific form God's wrath would take. . . .The locusts and army are extended metaphors for God's wrath. God's judgment could certainly come in these ways, but Joel does not intend to inform his readers that it will necessarily be exactly in this form. . . . The referent for the locusts and army is then comprehensive: the judgment of an angry God.”⁶

Undergirding his hermeneutic of prophecy is an admitted reliance upon several assertions of modern language philosophy. Sandy traces the subject of modern language philosophy known as “speech act theory” from Wittgenstein and Austin to evangelical scholars, Thiselton, Wolterstorff, and Vanhoozer, who have applied it to the biblical text.⁷

³ *PPH*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13,12, respectively.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁶ *HD*, 21.

⁷ *HD*, 10f.

Anthony Thiselton, we all need to know, is the scholar who is primarily responsible for the radical change in evangelical hermeneutics over the past two decades. Following modern language philosophy, Thiselton emphasizes the unavoidable subjectivity of the interpreter. Here are some quotes from his major book published in 1980 cited by Thomas⁸ [Slide #2]:

“Absolute scientific objectivity in interpreting scripture. . .[is] an illusion. . . .The biblical scholar therefore needs the help of someone who has made it his life’s work to wrestle with the problem of how these two sides [i.e., the ideal of a ‘pure’ description of the text’s meaning and the inability of the interpreter to escape the confines of his finite or ‘historical’ existence] of the situation can be held together, without either being lost to view.”

“We cannot put the clock back to the era before Kant. Objectivity is not the same as objectivism, and the relevance to hermeneutics of the Cartesian model of knowledge must not be assumed without question and accorded a privileged position.”

“Traditional hermeneutics. . .limits the horizon to which understanding belongs, and pays insufficient attention to human facticity. . .[It is] naïve objectivity.”⁹

(Note how Thiselton uses the “straw man argument” that traditional hermeneutics is fundamentally rationalist.)

Thus Sandy relies upon a perspective imported into evangelical hermeneutics by Thiselton and others—a perspective that demands an overthrow of the traditional grammatical-historical approach that has so shaped dispensational understanding of prophetic literature.

Tracing the development of language philosophy back to its roots.

When someone introduces a new tool for the exegetical task, we need to critically examine it lest we unintentionally import a Trojan horse into our camp. This is especially true when a claim is made that the new tool is “revolutionary”, “indispensable,” and a “paradigm shift.” What follows is my attempt to briefly trace the development of the fruit now being harvested by Thiselton, Sandy, and other evangelical scholars. Hopefully, it will be “critical” in the philosophical sense by seeking to expose the root concepts that have nourished the fruit of modern language philosophy. Such a critical approach does not mean that every detail of the new tool is unworthy of use; only that as exegetes we must know a tool’s limitations and capabilities.¹⁰ Perhaps by submitting the tool to the authority of scripture we will discover some truths we may not have fully appreciated previously and which turn out to be helpful for our exegesis—when used properly. Throughout the following discussion I am relying upon a number of sources regarding language philosophy, chiefly the succinct article in the electronic reference software

⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980.

⁹ Robert L Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel. 2002, 50, 420.

¹⁰ The term “critical” came into philosophical use largely through the work of Immanuel Kant. It refers to analyzing aspects of existence (metaphysics), knowing (epistemology), and morality (ethics) that are taken for granted. For the Bible-believing Christian the counterpart should be analyzing such aspects from the standpoint of special revelation: what evidences exist of hostility to the authority of special revelation and of ignorance of biblically-revealed information pertaining to the subject at hand.

published by the Encyclopedia Britannica.¹¹ Such information is therefore readily available to any pastor-teacher or seminary student.

Back to Kant.

Thisleton and many others have pointed back to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) as the intellectual revolutionary who largely shaped much of subsequent philosophy. Kant was originally interested in science and in cosmology in particular. He worked out one of the first modern naturalistic cosmologies, the Nebula Hypothesis.¹² Later, however, he became more and more concerned with preserving a sense of human dignity and moral responsibility against what seemed to be an ever increasing confusion over the place of man in nature. The apparent triggering event in his life was learning about the challenge of empiricist thinking brought by David Hume (1711-1776). Hume raised the question of how we can assume that causality exists in the world when all we have are a finite set of sequential sensations in our mind.

Kant's philosophical response is very intricate but for the purposes of the present discussion it can be summed up in pointing to his separation of all knowledge into two realms.[Slide #3] The *phenomenal* realm is what we experience through sensation. We can't know about the world as it really is—whether, for example, causality actually exists “out there.” Whatever we know is the organization our minds place on the stream of sensations so that we can live as though causality exists. The real origin of truth, then, for knowing what we perceive is our mind, not the external world of nature itself and not the God of revealed truth.

So much for our empirical experiences of history as direct sources of knowledge. What about God, ethics, and religion? They are all part of Kant's second realm of knowledge, the *noumenal*. That realm is what is “really out there” but not knowable in any empirical way. We only have an inner sense that something must be out there to account for our sensations of it. In Van Til's careful analysis of Kant he writes:

“The field of science seemed to require the idea of necessity while the field of ethics is based upon the notion of freedom. These are exclusive of one another. Yet man is involved in both of them. . . .What Kant is saying is that the scientific principles of necessity are valid. . . .but that this validity at the same time implies the limitation of science to the I-it dimension. This validation and limitation of science brings great relief to the modern theologian. He can now commit himself without reserve to the principles of modern science. When he brings the message of Christianity he does not have to enter the realm of science. He does not have to engage in any such debates as have been carried on in the past. . . .It is precisely at this point that we have the origin of much of modern theology. . . .From the Christian point of view we have here *the deepest possible rejection of the triune God of Scripture as the self-sufficient subject in relation to whom alone all facts*

¹¹“language, philosophy of”, *Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.

¹² Kant, therefore, manifests the spirit of denial of biblical cosmology. The biblical story of origins has already at this point been dismissed as a source of valid information on natural history and, as we shall see, on the origin and function of language.

in any realm, lower or higher, have their meaning. In short, in Kant's position, we have a complete reversal of the covenantal relation in which man, the creature, stands to God. . . . Man instead of God is now the one who ordains its ordinances."¹³ [Emphasis supplied]

Kant argued that although man cannot know God as a Person who reveals himself in space-time history, man needs to have the *idea* of God to provide a basis for the sense of "oughtness." Kant's idea of God is an ethical Ideal or a limiting concept that

"is the projection of the autonomous man. [It and his idea of moral law] are means by which the free personality is seeking to accomplish its great aim of realizing its own ideal of perfect control over nature and perfect happiness in this perfect control. . . . If Kant's God is to be spoken of as revealing himself, then it must be added that he reveals only what the free man wants this God to reveal."¹⁴

One logical result of Kant's influence on the practical level is that the ideal of God from the noumenal realm can only give "a certainty of faith and not of knowledge."¹⁵ The biblical text no longer can be what it claims to be: communication of information from the mind of God to the mind of man. There can only be a vague sense of existence so that when we seek to apply biblical doctrine to a practical situation *we* will find that *we* are in a position to decide that what is right is exactly *what we want to be right*.

So if Kant has fundamentally altered the landscape in which language philosophy has sprouted and if his thinking is "the deepest possible rejection of the triune God of Scripture," we surely need to look carefully at his impact on understanding human language. If man instead of God is now the legislator of his relationship to reality, how does this alter one's view of interpreting language such as that in a text?

Relation between language, language users, and reality.[Slide #4]

Sandy dwells on the necessity of seeing the big picture of how language works—how senders (speakers, writers) affect receivers (listeners, readers). This is a popular emphasis in language philosophy over the narrower, more traditional approach which emphasizes ascertainment of meaning. For the former—what the speaker or writer wants his recipients to do—we use the word *pragmatics*. For the latter—the meaning the speaker or writer wants his recipients to understand—we use the word *semantics*.

For all of its appeal to the big picture approach pragmatics cannot escape the matter of semantics. It must eventually deal with how words or sentences are connected to reality (whether the reality is that of the speaker's mental state or is that of the world external to the speaker). After centuries of speculation this question still remains unanswered by the philosophers of language. In ancient Greece the Sophists became so exasperated by this matter that they viewed the connection between words and things as purely arbitrary.

¹³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 222-224. Van Til coined the term "legislative logic" to label unbeliever's definition of the "rational".

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 249, 250.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 221. .

Language to the Sophists was just a tool for influencing people. They therefore opposed the philosophic searches of Plato and Aristotle and focused on the “practical” use of language and taught rhetoric as a tool to persuade audiences. Language in their view was related pragmatically to its users but not metaphysically and epistemologically to reality. The Sophist position anticipated by centuries the failure of autonomous man to legislate the relationship of his thoughts and language to reality in any successful and satisfying way. Think of the preacher who tries to make up for his lack of study by pulpit theatrics.

Post-Kantian thinkers like the German existentialist Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) gave up trying to seek ultimate truth in words and sentences. For him it was only the mere presence of a language-speaking ability in man that offered hope of finding any meaning whatsoever in life. Francis Schaeffer perceptively called this attitude toward language “semantic mysticism”;

“[Heidegger] says that in our modern day this use of language is found particularly in the poet. So the conclusion of this view is that we are to listen to the poet. This does not mean we are to listen to the *content* of what the poet says, but to listen to the fact that *there is a speaking which exists*. That is all. . . . Heidegger. . . has become the father of a new form of the new theology. . . . There is no difference between Heidegger’s secular mysticism and the mysticism of the new theology.”¹⁶ [emphasis original]

Significantly Thiselton’s 1980 book was entitled “The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein.”¹⁷ Schaeffer’s discussion preceded Thiselton by well over a decade. Mentors like Heidegger who operate with the Kantian notion of autonomous man living in denial of authoritative verbal revelation aren’t quite the folks from whom you want to learn how to interpret the language of scripture! Perhaps advocates of the new hermeneutic paradigm ought to have taken Schaeffer’s discussion more seriously. In any case with Heidegger language as a capacity to know reality is severely limited. The God who reveals himself through language continues to be as hidden from sight as he was in Kant’s noumenal domain.

The century of Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein saw the rise of language philosophy as a specialized academic discipline within general philosophy. Let’s look at some aspects of its development with particular attention to the semantic underpinning of pragmatics. From increasing exposure to different languages in the 18th and 19th centuries scholars had learned of the problem of translating across widely divergent linguistic communities (e.g., from European to non-European). They asked a question: can a translation effectively convey meaning, i.e., that is semantically successful? The central concern here was whether *a common conceptual scheme exists among mankind*. If so, then language can be shaped by ideas (the traditional view) and effective translation is possible. If not, then ideas are shaped by language and effective translation may not be possible. In this view (linguistic relativism) people are so affected by their native language that their descriptions and experiences of this world are

¹⁶ Francis A Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*. Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968. 68f.

¹⁷ Published by Eerdmans.

fundamentally different from other socio-linguistic groups. Without solving the semantic problem of how language is related to reality, translations become problematic.

Besides being influenced by linguistics, language philosophy was heavily influenced by mathematicians who sought an ideal language which would express truth unambiguously. From Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) to Kurt Gödel (1906–78) and Alfred Tarski (1902–83) mathematicians discovered many features of language although they worked with highly formalized and simple languages compared to ordinary street language. Crudely speaking, put they sought meaning and truth within *syntax*, i.e., within agreed upon rules for expressing propositions. If matters were expressed in a correct and powerful enough syntax, then they hoped that truth could be elucidated.¹⁸

However, just as pragmatics can't solve the problem of semantics, syntax can't either. If language isn't related to reality, no amount of grammatical rules however applied can reveal truth about reality. Ironically, mathematics has been extraordinarily successful in modeling certain parts of physical nature. How can this be? How does a completely mental product correspond, even approximately, with parts of reality? Mathematicians have sometimes expressed their wonderment:

“What makes mathematics so effective when it enters science is a mystery of mysteries.”

“How can the manipulation of symbols which *we* have invented, according to rules which *we* alone make (and sometimes break), reveal that which lies beyond our senses?”¹⁹ [emphasis original]

Clearly something besides proper syntax makes mathematical descriptions of parts of nature fit. A professor of mathematics explained why the semantic question of the relationship of mathematical language to physical nature is avoided: “Fearing to introduce into mathematics arguments of a metaphysical nature, the philosophically minded mathematician will avoid as much as possible reference to mathematical existence independent of human thought.”²⁰ Such scholars are simply content to define an interpretation and study its logical connections with other propositions--i.e., deal with syntax and avoid semantics.

Another notable event in the development of language philosophy was the contribution of Noam Chomsky (1928-). I remember him making the point over and over in class that the way we learn a natural language proves that it has a set of rules of syntax and semantics built in. How else can we, from an early age with little experience and with an acquaintance with only a tiny subset of all possible sentences in that language, gain a sense of what is grammatically correct? We can't unless there is embedded within our

¹⁸ Their mathematical success in studying the formal languages used to express mathematics inspired an entire generation of philosophers to change their approach and create the particular focus of the Anglo-American or “analytic” school. Instead of studying metaphysics or epistemology, they would now study the language in which philosophical claims were made. These philosophers could have saved themselves a lot of effort if they had realized the implications of the mathematical study of language.

¹⁹ Quotes, respectively, from Norman Campbell, *What is Science?* New York: Dover Publications, 1952, 71 and Oliver Graham Sutton, *Mathematics in Action*. New York: Dover Publications, 1984. 3. Both cited in James Nickel, *Mathematics: Is God Silent?* Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2001 rev. ed., 206, 221.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

minds a syntax machine.²¹ How can we gain the skill to assign meaning to an utterance whether we make the utterance or receive it? We can't unless there is embedded within our minds a semantic machine.

The Roots and the Fruits. [Slide #5]

The roots: What, then, can modern language philosophy provide evangelicals? It certainly can't provide any foundation for semantics. The relationship of language to reality is as vague now as it was to the ancient Sophists. The only new insight is the root notion emphasized by Kant, viz., whatever meaning there is must emanate solely from the human knower. But to say this is to say that meaning cannot emanate from the verbally revealing God of the Bible. Thus lacking transcendent meaning, all meaning must be relative to man—either individually or corporately within a socio-linguistic community. The 200 years of reflection since Kant have not improved the situation. Translations across linguistic boundaries have become problematical along with interpreting texts. The day of hermeneutic indeterminacy has arrived. All the efforts of mathematicians to construct an ideal language, while discovering significant insights into syntax, avoided the real semantics of how such a language relates to reality even when it appeared to correctly describe parts of the natural world. *Modern language philosophy, therefore, leaves us in the area of semantics as subjective knowers who come to language with only the controlling bias or “preunderstanding” of our socio-linguistic community.*

The fruit of understanding “speech acts.” If we pick over the fruit produced by the last century of language philosophy about the only nourishment we can find is a nibble here and there of pragmatics. Just as the ancient Sophists reverted to so-called “practical” uses of language—how to persuade people rhetorically regardless of whether the message was true or false, good or evil—so language philosophy has more and more concentrated on how language can be used. One of Wittgenstein's followers, J. L. Austin (1911–60) lectured on language activity and categorized three kinds of “speech acts”: (1) the act of uttering a sentence (a “locutionary” act); (2) the act performed in or by the act of uttering a sentence (an “illocutionary” act); and (3) the resulting effects of uttering a sentence (a “perlocutionary” act). A biblical example is Exodus 32:10 where God expresses his anger over the quick defection of Israel while Moses has been on Mt. Sinai receiving the law: “*Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.*”²² God uttered this message—that is the locutionary act. But the message challenged Moses to function as a priest for the nation—would he yield to the proposal to start a new nation, or would he intercede for the existing nation—that is the illocutionary act. And we read in 32:11-13 Moses chose to intercede—that is the result of the challenge, the perlocutionary act.

²¹ I was surprised years ago to hear my young son who was just learning to talk describe to me the days' activities with my wife: “Mommy go-ed to the store today.” It then struck me how without any formal training in grammatical rules, he had mastered the rule that most English verbs need the “ed” ending to denote the past tense. We could get an insightful education in language by merely observing how our children learn their native tongue.

²² All scripture citations in this paper are from the New King James Version.

The fruit of understanding figurative language (metaphor). Another related fruit of modern language philosophy comes from its struggle to understand figurative language—which for the purpose of this paper I will adopt Sandy's precedent of referring to all its varied forms as *metaphor*. Metaphor has important pragmatic functions. It communicates mood, emotions, and moral judgments as every poet well knows. It, therefore, is important in illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. In the example of Exodus 32 God revealed his displeasure in the emotional language of a fire metaphor. But beyond poetic metaphor lies a serious problem. A central interest in recent language study is how metaphor communicates abstractions that cannot be directly experienced. Trapped, however, in the Kantian notion of the absolute subjectivity of human thought, some pretty wild views of metaphor have emerged. If human language so profoundly affects how we think, some 20th century "pure poets" reasoned that they could create meaning from nonsensical word combinations like "Toasted Susie is my ice cream." Mimicking the supposed evolutionary concept that random processes once generated ordered chemical elements, these poets thought that random juxtaposition of words and images might generate new meanings.²³ How much this new attention on the function of metaphor helps exegesis is debatable since practitioners of the grammatical historical hermeneutic have long had access to the work of E.W. Bullinger.²⁴

To sum up this discussion of modern language philosophy, two centuries of its development, while perhaps clarifying matters of syntax and pragmatics, has not produced any solid basis for semantics. If anything, it has aggravated the problem of finding meaning in texts written by one socio-linguistic community for readers outside of that community. And the primary cause of this problem is the Kantian root in the absolute subjectivity of human knowers.

An Introduction to a Biblical Philosophy of Language

If modern language philosophy has useful fruit for evangelical picking as Thiselton and others like Sandy think, why hasn't that fruit been explicitly grafted back onto a biblical root that supports semantics? One reason may be that many evangelical scholars appear intimidated by peer pressure to take seriously the *cosmological* implications of the biblical worldview. For the sake of argument, let's reject the two centuries' old accommodationist trend in evangelical theology in the interpretation of early Genesis.²⁵ Following the lead of Whitcomb and Morris let's participate in what evangelicals like Mark Noll call "the scandal of the evangelical mind."²⁶ I take a prima facie view of

²³ Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967. 79,85-86.

²⁴ *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1898] 1968. Note that Bullinger as a strong advocate of literal interpretation shows that the traditional hermeneutic was very much aware of metaphor well before modern language philosophy.

²⁵ Enlightenment thinkers like Kant rejected the Bible as an information source on origins. To observe the evangelical retreat back toward a similar stance in the 19th century see John D. Hannah, "Bibliotheca Sacra and Darwinism: An Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Conflict Between Science and Theology," *Grace Theological Journal* 4 (Spring 1983): 37-58.

²⁶ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 188-20. Noll tries to attribute modern creationism to Seventh-Day Adventism, thus making it a cultic import like anti-dispensationalists try to attribute dispensationalism to supposedly cultic influences on Darby.

Genesis 1-11 along with other scripture to obtain information necessary to construct a preliminary counterpart to modern language philosophy. At least ten major concepts define a biblical philosophy of language. [Slide #6]

#1: Intra-Trinity Language.

The Bible makes it clear that there is intra-Trinity language (see the speech in Gen. 1:26 and John 17 with the comment by John in 1 John 1:1-3). This archetype of human language denies all notions of language being sourced in the human mind such as the absolute subjectivity of the human knower in the Kant.²⁷ Absolute subjectivity exists, not in man, but in his Creator who possesses the archetype of all language.

#2: The Language-Laid Structure of All Creation.

In Genesis 1 (cf. Psalm 33:6,9; John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3) God linguistically creates by a sequence of declarations the components of the physical universe in the fully-functioning form that we humans will later perceive and name.²⁸ Talk about “speech acts”—here are some whoppers! Every component of the universe—impersonal and personal, spiritual and material—indeed *all created reality came into existence as perlocutionary acts of the Word of God*. Even chaos, so dreaded in pagan thought, can be viewed as a rationally controlled perlocutionary act.²⁹ For creation to have come about by God’s language-speaking, means that the universe is left with a structure laid down by that language and, therefore, is describable in that same language. The biblical concept of wisdom seems a particularly appropriate description for this language-laid structure (Proverbs 8). It reminds us that rationality and meaning reside everywhere in the world prior to man thinking about it. Of course, as creatures we can only “read” the parts of this language-laid structure where our human language approximates God’s creation-language. That God’s language for at least some parts of nature is remarkably like our language explains the success of mathematical modeling that so mystifies the mathematicians cited above. Perhaps we can view the relationship of God’s creation language to our human language as a sort of divine “meta-language” that

²⁷ Christian students of information theory point out that information must be distinguished from its material carriers—whether ink marks, electronic bits, or sound and light waves—and can only arise in a mind. See Werner Gitt, *In the Beginning was Information* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2006). In this regard note Proverbs 1:23 where word meaning is parallel to spirit transfer (also note the connection between spirit and doctrine in 2 Cor. 11:4 and 1 John 4:1-3). *All ideas are productions of minds whether human or otherwise.*

²⁸ In the narrative literally interpreted God doesn’t create the entire heavens and earth in one step but step by step, component by component, revealing that human language will be able to distinguish them through its noun structure. Moreover, we observe that his creative acts necessarily involve fully-functional components (which avoids the foolishness of modern cosmology in trying to explain how functioning systems come into existence through gradual chance-generation of their constituent pieces).

²⁹ Christian mathematics professor Robert A. Herrmann cites the illustration of looking through what one thinks is a window and observing leaves blowing in the wind and smoke rising from a campfire. Surely one would not think of such random chaotic phenomena as the product of intelligent design. Yet suppose one later discovered that the “window” was actually a computer screen playing an ingenious piece of software designed by an intelligent programmer using a computer language in *Science Declares Our Universe is Intelligently Designed*. Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2002. 19f.

supports human “object languages” much like ordinary language manuals support lower level computer languages.³⁰

#3: Human Language Initialized.

After each of the first few creative speech acts, God named the result in human language. Why did he bother? By naming each resultant component God initialized human language with a basic vocabulary. This initialization was required because no human can autonomously begin speaking a language; language can only begin in conversation.³¹ It seems that we humans require another language speaker to activate our syntax and semantic rule-executing capabilities (cf. discussion above concerning Chomsky's work). That God himself initialized human language by talking with Adam has important implications for a biblical philosophy of language. It means that *human language originated in the very act of communicating information from God's mind to man's about man's relationship to God and to the rest of creation around him*. Human language is therefore capable of sufficiently describing the created structure in which we find ourselves. It is sufficient, that is, for us to fulfill our created destiny of dominion over nature that includes naming other created objects around us (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:19-20). It is sufficient to convey God's will to us (Deut. 30:11-14). Said another way, since we are made in God's image, we correspond to him as a finite replica. Our language as a finite replica of his language exists, not as the independent creation of autonomous man (either individually or in community), but in dependency upon God's language-laid structure in our minds and in the objects of our thought. Unlike modern language philosophy that has failed to explain the semantics of human language by evolutionary development, a biblical philosophy of language easily provides the required semantic base. And this semantic base answers two troubling questions. First, it answers how human language relates to reality through its likeness to the creation language God used to create reality. Second, it answers how translations are possible, not necessarily because a common conceptual scheme exists among mankind, but because all men created in God's image share the same syntax and semantic rule-making capabilities. They also share the same language-created reality. Since their common rule-making capabilities interact with a common created reality, we should not be surprised at the possibility of translation, albeit difficult in many cases.

#4: Human Language Extended.

³⁰ Herrmann develops this insight from Tarski with much rigor, *Ibid*. An important corollary to this approach is that apparently indescribable items in an object language are completely describable in the meta-language—a useful way of thinking about so-called paradoxes in theology.

³¹ Observation of ‘feral’ children experimentally confirm this truth. See the fascinating discussion of research that concludes “It is not until a child discovers what is the meaning of his *own* sound to *others*, and then deliberately makes that sound with this meaning attached to it, that the child speaks” in Arthur C. Custance, “Who Taught Adam to Speak?” Doorway Papers No. 1, page 3 available at <http://www.custance.org>. Custance also recounts the story of how the blind, deaf-mutes, Helen Keller and Laura Bridgeman, learned nouns like “water” and immediately “knew” that these names applied to the general class of varied and yet-to-be-experienced instances (abstraction). This is another example of why a “naïve” literal reading of the Genesis narrative provides much more information about reality than a figurative approach.

Thus armed with a basic vocabulary of his environment given to him in conversation with God, Adam could immediately begin the extension of human language as he sought to understand his world. As Genesis 2:19-20 shows, once Adam's language had been initialized and once his innate syntactical and semantic rule-making capability began to operate, he could begin naming animals without any further verbal direction from God. Nevertheless, God managed the circumstances of this language extension process by bringing the animals to Adam. Each animal had the form, function, and behavior that the creation act gave it. Each one had the structure laid down by God's creation language. Adam's human language was enough like the creation language that he could describe each animal sufficiently to decide whether it would be a suitable companion and helper. Here we observe the *teleology of human language*. First, it is the means of conversing with God (special revelation and prayer). Second, as a finite replica of God's creation language it is the means of inferring our dependency upon him from those structures we encounter in the creation around us (general revelation).

#5: Metaphoric Language.

Extension of human language relies upon using metaphor. Adam spoke in poetic metaphor as he names his wife, *isha*, from the noun for man, *ish*. His metaphor works because though the woman is different, she is similar and related to the man ("*bone of my bones. . . taken out of [me]*", Gen. 2:23). That Adam expresses his new metaphor poetically, doesn't impede our understanding of what he said. Metaphor rests upon the same general semantic foundation that literal language does, viz., the structures spoken into existence at creation. Metaphor, however, takes advantage of the similarities in these structures.

To appreciate this emphasis we need to examine creation a bit more. There is another realm of creaturely existence, a sort of parallel universe, inhabited by angelic beings and dead humans. Not only does such a realm exist, but there is cause-effect between it and our physical realm. How is one to interpret the religious interference into the northern kingdom of Israel in Ahab's day from a divine council meeting in this other realm (1 Kings 22:19-23)? The similarities on which metaphor relies can crisscross the boundary between the material world and this usually unseen parallel world of angels and the dead. For example, what the physical serpent did in the garden as a vehicle of Satan is remembered so vividly that Satan is known figuratively forever afterward as the serpent. But we do injustice to Scripture if we stop there, thinking that the "serpent image" of Satan is not what he is *really* like. The parallel world of spirits has forms and shapes akin to our world. Visions of the angelic beings report that they can have zoological form (e.g., Isa.6:2; Ezk.1:4-28). Since this angelic world was created prior to our world, the forms of our world may well be material derivatives of spiritual forms.³² Even man

³² John Pilkey made an astute observation concerning physical forms in our world: "The whole point of the Creationist-Darwinian debate is whether the leonine form, for example, originated as a perfect idea in the mind of God or as a casual exercise in feline development. . . . The evolutionary philosophy begins to lose its appeal the instant that a mind begins to suspect that certain visible forms have eternal value," *The Origin of Nations* (San Diego, CA: Master Book Publishers, 1984), 230.

himself is a metaphor—an image of God—in the sense that only the human form is suitable for Incarnation. Metaphors of Yahweh as Warrior (e.g., Isa. 59:16-17) speak of his arm and head. Are these “just” figures of speech? Or are we designed anatomically as well as spiritually in analogy to God?³³ The Bible explains metaphoric language without recourse to imaginary fictions randomly bubbling up from a fountain of man’s subjectivity.

#6 Hamartiological Damage to Language.

Any biblical perspective on language must include the effects of the fall. We know from Romans 1:18-23 and the earlier OT prophets that sinful suppression of the knowledge of God inevitably spawns idolatry which actually is a false metaphor of God. Sinful man in his guilt fears God and so imagines a make-believe world that is safe for sinners (i.e., free of the consequences of his sin). As the imager of this make-believe world, he is its creator. But he remains a finite creator. Try as he might he keeps “bumping” into the structures laid down by God’s creation language—the glory of God emanating from designs throughout nature, requirements for standards of truth and justice, and love so deeply a part of all men everywhere. Try as he might he can’t escape the inevitable sense of dependency that keeps coming to him as he thinks about these “bumps”—that they were created *independently* of him. So what to do? Change this kind of thinking! How? Systematically alter his language description of the real world to make it fit his make-believe world. The key is to alter his language in such a way that the “bumps” seem to be under *his* control. There’s only one way to do that. He must devise a creator and lord to organize and run his make-believe world, but it must be a “tame” creator and lord ultimately under his control. Altering language about God inevitably affects everything else, not the least of which is rupturing language’s relationship to reality. That is why the third and ninth commandments on Mt. Sinai reveal the hamartiological damage to language: “*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain*” (Exod. 20:7) and “*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*” (20:16). When language is re-engineered to avoid awareness of the true God, truth and justice can no longer be maintained since their source has gone. Language becomes a mere tool of rhetorical manipulation like that of the ancient Sophists.

#7 Babel Judgment on Language.

Continuing our biblical journey, we come to the Babel judgment upon language. Here we encounter the first appearance of multiple socio-linguistic communities, each one continuing in their locales the post-fall process of language perversion. But the Bible assures us that God remains the ultimate “situator” as he providentially engineers the space-time existence of such socio-linguistic communities so as to preserve a minimal seeking after him (Acts 17:26-27). Empirical evidence of this biblical language account is

³³ We are talking here analogically and not, like Mormonism, attributing a pre-incarnate eternal physical body to God! Rather we are saying that God in condescension appears anthropomorphically, not zoomorphically, because that is how he is. The human form is not merely just one of many possible forms that are all equally capable of revealing God; it alone meets the revelatory requirement.

found in the high complexity of supposedly “primitive” speech,³⁴ the prevalence of pictographs in old languages,³⁵ and the occurrence of Genesis 1-9 material fragments across many socio-linguistic communities.³⁶

#8 Israel: Language—Continuity and Uniqueness.

Next, we come to the creation of a special socio-linguistic community, Israel, which God has designated as his channel of special revelation and custodian of his covenants (Rom.9:4).³⁷ Note that this function is through the *nation* Israel, not just through the believing remnant. Dispensationalists have always maintained that God has a special purpose for the nation itself beyond its believing remnant. His unique work through this nation ought to sharpen our understanding of what are appropriate hermeneutics for interpreting the product of this custodial activity, our Bible. The Old Testament texts expound Yahweh’s relationship to Israel, and that relationship is controlled by covenants. “Covenant” is another word for “contract.” People enter into contracts with each other to stabilize relationships and to build trust. Every culture has its own manner of entering into contractual relationships, but their contracts always have the same essentials: definition of the parties to the contract, codification of expected behavior, some sort of enforcement criteria, and an enduring record of the contract.³⁸

Some important implications follow that seem overlooked by those enamored with modern language theory. First, there are two hermeneutical principles: (1) *the meaning of the contract’s terminology must be conserved for the duration of the contract from origin to fulfillment*; and (2) *only literal meanings can be verified or falsified against the enforcement criteria*. Israel’s historic continuity into the present day together with its stable Hebrew language resolves the linguistic relativism problem so often raised by language philosophy. Thanks to God’s special providence over that nation there exists a minimal linguistic gap between those who wrote the Old Testament texts and today’s

³⁴ Ralph Linton wrote, “Most of [the so-called primitive languages] are actually more complicated in grammar than the tongues spoken by civilized people” in *The Tree of Culture* (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1955), 184f. Since the fall linguistic entropy is increasing, contrary to the evolutionary model.

³⁵ Pictographs are ideally suited to situations of linguistic confusion: witness modern international symbols for rest rooms and vehicular traffic.

³⁶ I refer to the common corpus of special revelation originally available through the flood judgment as the “Noahic Bible”. Surviving remnants are discussed in Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991). Pictographic evidence within the Chinese language are given in C.H. Kang and E. R. Nelson, *The Discovery of Genesis: How the Truths of Genesis Were Found Hidden in the Chinese Language* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1979).

³⁷ Some have made the intriguing suggestion that the Semitic proto-Hebrew language may well have been the original language God taught to Adam. If so, then God did not have to select among the post-Babel variants. He merely had to preserve this language stock from decaying beyond its ability to carry ancient revelation. Perhaps the feature of Semitic language spoken of by Linguist Marla Perkins Bevin is evidence of this. She points out that “Hebrew is a verb-initial language, specifically V[erb]S[ubject]O[bject]; among the languages of the world, putting the verb first is fairly rare.” “Linguistics and the Bible,” *The Trinity Review*, 262 Dec 2006, 4 available at www.trinityfoundation.org.

³⁸ William F. Albright made the interesting observation concerning such covenants/contracts that “contracts and treaties were common everywhere, but only the Hebrews, as far as we know, make covenants with their gods or God.” *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 108.

translators and readers.³⁹ Moreover, if post-Mosaic prophets threatened covenant enforcement, their threats, in order to be genuine, had to be clearly related to the enforcement criteria. This implication of contract management ought to keep the semantics of prophetic locution from getting obscured by fascination with the pragmatics of illocution.

A theological implication also follows that directly challenges the wisdom of grouping biblical literature, especially prophetic texts, together with extra-biblical literature into common literary genres. Unlike their pagan counterparts, the human authors of scripture were not the ultimate source of their thoughts. In the passage Sandy cites (1 Pet. 1:10-12) Peter says it was the Spirit of Christ in them that testified. This is a *linguistically unique situation* wherein God was sending information through them. The information, then, wasn't originating ultimately in the prophets' minds or in the minds of demonic powers such as those that "informed" the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 22:19-23).⁴⁰ Do we really want to group these two kinds of language products into the same genre?

In prophetic literature we hear the Word of Yahweh speaking due to what orthodox theologians have called his "condescension." Scott Oliphint discusses God's condescension in regard to Moses at the "unburning bush" where God spoke his name:

"There is no analogy in the creation for the independent and the uncreated. So God creates a picture of his character in the burning bush. He gives Moses a sign: an 'independent' fire. . . .The bush is on fire, but the fire is not dependent on the bush. . . .This 'show and tell' method of God's revelation seems to have been all too often underemphasized. . . .[In the New Testament] we understand something of what it means that Christ is the true Bread as we see him miraculously feed five thousand."⁴¹

Citing the fundamental importance of the Creator-creature distinction, Oliphint faults philosophers for refusing to start their arguments with that binary set of existences. Any relationship the Creator has with his creation beginning with the act of creation itself is condescension on his part since creation is unnecessary to his being. Profound implications follow. One in particular applies to the matter of passionate revelatory prophetic language. Discussing the matter of emotion-language involving God repenting, he writes:

"All of God's revelation to us is anthropomorphic. . . .It is revelation accommodated to our mode of being. . . . It is not, therefore, that God's revelation is accommodated to us when it speaks, say, of God's eyes or his arm or his repentance, while it is not accommodated to us when it speaks of his eternity. . . . God's repentance, then, is not simply something that 'seems to us' like repentance. It is literal repentance, he is (covenantally) changing directions because of his faithfulness to his covenant. But it is repentance of a

³⁹ A language tutor in Tel Aviv once told me that if Moses should come back from the dead and walk the streets of Jerusalem he could carry on a reasonable conversation with any modern Hebrew speaker.

⁴⁰ See fn26.

⁴¹ K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 2006, 237. My attempt in *Biblical Framework Ministries* to utilize both the words and the works of God to teach biblical doctrine is a 'show and tell' approach.

condescended, covenant God who has come down, taking on the form of a creature, in order to glorify himself, and it is repentance that does not in any way sacrifice, undermine, or otherwise alter his essential character as a se. He repents, all the while remaining the eternal, immutable 'I AM.'"⁴²

The existence, then, of Israel as a divinely-designed, historically-conditioned socio-linguistic community for the express purpose of conveying information from God's mind to man's mind sets it apart from all other communities. Any philosophy of language that expects to be acceptable to Bible-believing exegetes must honor this fact.

#9 The Incarnation and Language.

Nowhere in history do deity and humanity come together more than in the incarnate Son of God. The Apostle John tells us of the conversation Jesus had with Philip.

“Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.” (John 14:8-11)

Is not the hypostatic union a refutation of the Kantian notion that finite man with his human language can't know specific truths about God? Was Jesus a divided person—half in the noumenal, half in the phenomenal? Did his use of human language impede his disciples coming to know God? All that Jesus spoke and did was revelation. Note Jesus' appeal to view his works as well as listen to his words. As Oliphint observed, God follows a 'show and tell' approach to support language as a vehicle by creating physical images of his truths. Prophetic language, therefore, speaks much of the images of Israel's special series of historical experiences, not as abstract images but as concrete happenings with revelatory details.

#10 The Great Commission, Pentecost, and Language

Unlike Islam's claim that God can speak in only one language (if at all), the Bible clearly shows that God's Word can be expressed in multiple, different languages. Not only was it originally written in at least three languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek—but it contains loan words from other languages. New Testament writers freely quoted from Greek translations of the Old Testament. Translation is again shown not to be the severe problem some language scholars insist exists. But the strongest challenge to supposed communications barriers is the Great Commission and the Pentecost event of Acts 2. God orders us to take his verbal revelation across all language differences. We know he does not ask the impossible. Pentecost shows that the Third Person of the Trinity abides with us so that we may be enabled to overcome our guilt-caused hamartiological antagonism to welcoming the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:14-15; 1 John

⁴² Ibid., 253f. Oliphint here uses the term 'covenant' to refer to the relationship God has with his creatures.

2:27). The same Spirit that inspired the prophets indwells every believer. Doesn't that extend the uniqueness of biblical language into the disposition of the believing interpreter?

To sum up this discussion of a biblical approach to language philosophy we have repeatedly found that once the Kantian notion of man's absolute subjectivity is corrected, the semantic problem disappears. We also observe that numerous secondary problems that obsess modern language theory also recede. We are now ready to respond to Sandy's hermeneutical proposal.

Thinking Through Sandy's Hermeneutical Proposal

Throughout his book (PPH) and his ETS paper (HD) Sandy seeks to devise a hermeneutic for prophecy that takes into account the figurative and emotional nature of prophetic language. He repeatedly argues that traditional exegesis of prophetic literature has neglected the *pragmatics* because of an obsession with the *semantics* of the details in the texts. The preface in PPH begins by sharply contrasting his approach with that of those who purport "to tell how prophecy will be fulfilled, often in relation to recent and anticipated events" and with "the fascination with the latest events in the Middle East."⁴³ He ends his book with a plea to not let eschatological differences divide evangelical unity. To make progress toward such unity "we Christians ought to be emphasizing our common hope rather than our complicated eschatologies."⁴⁴

His Methodology.

Sandy states in his ETS paper that he wants to improve the dispensational hermeneutic by invoking insights "that have come to the fore in recent decades" some of which "may seem ho hum because they are not novel" while "others are more cutting edge."⁴⁵ His methodology is to stress the illocutionary nature of prophetic texts as the *main* tool in interpreting them. He seeks to harvest the two fruits of modern language philosophy—speech-act theory and heightened interest in metaphor—for the practice of exegesis.

His Arguments in PPH and HD.

Prophecy requires metaphor. His first proposition is that prophecy *requires* metaphor in order to accomplish its biblical illocutionary function. To accomplish the function of bringing together deity, humanity, the threat of judgment, and the offer of blessing "ordinary and plain language simply was not enough."⁴⁶ Prophetic speech had to reveal God's raw anger and man's naked sinfulness so it contains "sirens and flashing lights" with metaphor, personification, and hyperbole.

⁴³ PPH, 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁵ HD, 3.

⁴⁶ PPH, 23.

Is it true that metaphor is absolutely necessary to speak of God's judgment? Perhaps this is an exaggeration born of Sandy's enthusiasm for the "cutting edge insights" of modern language philosophy. He seems to have absorbed an overly pessimistic view of the communication capabilities of human language: .[Slide #7]

"Language originates in humankind's fundamental need to communicate." (p. 25)

"God's choices [for a language of revelation] were limited. . .the other issue God faced was how to describe heavenly concepts in human language" (p. 26f)

"In a sense prophecy was assigned an impossible task. With language limited to what we have experienced, how can God be described?" (p. 27)

"Under divine empowerment, the prophets created metaphors and similes. . .as best they could." (p. 28)

God didn't seem to have difficulty "bringing together deity, humanity, the threat of judgment, and the offer of blessing" to Adam using "ordinary and plain language" in Genesis 2:15-16. Nor did such a difficulty prevent the hypostatic union. As we have noted in the previous discussion, language did not ultimately originate in "humankind's need to communicate." An eternal archetype existed within the Trinity and a creation language laid out the entire structure of the universe. Even God's choices for a human language of revelation were not "limited." He taught man the original pre-Babel language and preserved it as the language of revelation through Israel. While it is obviously true that God himself is incomprehensible (Isaiah 40), from that it doesn't follow that he can't come down and converse with his creatures. He isn't trapped in his transcendence. Isn't all creation, including man himself, revelatory of the Creator? Aren't the forms of sheep and lions, for example, adequate to serve as language images of qualities God wants to reveal? And surely heavenly concepts can be expressed in human language, or else we couldn't praise him for them. Think of the physical Tabernacle being a concrete image of a heavenly pattern (Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:5).

Allow me to use a modern metaphor that depends upon the created physical laws used in communication and information theory. Human language was designed with sufficient "bandwidth" to carry all necessary information from God to man. If the bandwidth weren't sufficient, amplifying the delivery power with "sirens and flashing lights" wouldn't make up for it. Sandy needs to clarify that his enthusiasm for metaphoric language doesn't imply a Kantian restriction on the bandwidth of information flow from the noumenal into the phenomenal.

[Slide #8] Prophecy doesn't absolutely *require* metaphor although most of the time it *uses* it. And when it does use metaphor, it does so within principles enumerable by an adequate biblical philosophy of language. Subject to that qualification, we can agree with Sandy that prophecy *relies extensively* on metaphor.

Zeal for knowledge of future details harms prophecy and the Church. Sandy plays up the pragmatic function of prophetic language, because he doubts that there is much semantic support for its details. He argues that interpreters' zeal to peer into the future makes undue use of such details. This activity in turn damages the reputation of prophecy and has even led to the rise of certain denominations and sects. Citing the examples of

Millerites and the Branch Davidians, however, isn't relevant for dispensational hermeneutics since these sects were historicist, not futurist.⁴⁷

Sandy buttresses his argument why the exegete must focus on the overall illocutionary act of a prophetic passage and not get hung up searching for meaning in each detail. He points to seven problem areas that set apart prophetic figurative language from ordinary language where details are more important. His presentation uses a series of sharp 'either-or' contrasts: predictive vs. poetic, literal vs. figurative, exact vs. emotive, unconditional vs. conditional, real vs. surreal, written vs. oral, fulfilled vs. unfulfilled—emphasizing the second side of each pair.

These are all good grist for the serious exegete, but are they really absolute contrasts? Is figurative language so unlike ordinary language that its meaning can be ascertained without attention to details? Take the 'predictive vs. poetic' contrast for an example. A poetic passage like Psalm 22 may not necessarily have been intended as prophecy by its human author, but what about its divine author? (Remember biblical literature is unique by virtue of its dual authorship and should not be treated exactly like analogous pagan literature said to be in the same genre.) Why could not the hyperbolic imagery details of the psalmist's suffering have been designed to picture the actual physical details of future crucifixion? If that be the case, how is this poetry not predictive? How are its details not prophetically important? Might this case be an instance of a 'both-and' rather than an 'either-or'? One can make the same point for each of his seven 'either-or' contrasts.

The 'unconditional vs. conditional' contrast provides another example. Sandy insists that we recognize conditional elements in prophetic passages that we might assume are unconditional. In HD he cites Walter Kaiser's argument that very few truly unconditional covenants exist in the Bible. "Most other prophecies are implicitly conditional."⁴⁸ As Stallard has noted, however, traditional dispensationalists have long distinguished the conditional from the unconditional using a multi-covenant rationale which Sandy seems to avoid mentioning.⁴⁹ He may be avoiding that discussion, however, because of his passion for exploring illocutionary language acts. In the example I gave on page 8 of Exodus 32:10-13 one could argue that God's threat to form a new nation from Moses—thereby appearing to break the unconditionality of the Abrahamic Covenant—was a case of "implicit" conditionality. But was it? Thinking in terms of illocution we could view it as God coming down to Moses' level, man-to-man, and prodding him to do priestly intercession by showing Moses how angry he was over Israel's state of disobedience. Of course God's sovereign plan included this confrontation as a means of securing the ongoing roll-out of the Abrahamic-derived nation. So unconditionality of the overall nation can coexist with conditionality toward individuals if we set the discussion theologically within God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁸ HD, 7. Also see his discussion in PPH, 44-47.

⁴⁹ Mike Stallard, "Response to D. Brent Sandy's Paper: 'Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism.'" (Evangelical Theological Society-Dispensational Study Group, 2007), 2.

It seems that figurative language is not so different after all from ordinary language that its details don't merit serious attention. Until we study the details with our traditional hermeneutic, we can't ascertain the poetic subtleties. I concur with Stallard that "poetic understanding of a text is a second-order observation that comes after the first-order grammatical-historical reading."⁵⁰ Examination of textual details doesn't make one a sensationalist; it is the necessary first step in understanding the meaning of a text, including its illocutionary function.

Prophetic language functions to produce repentance toward God. Sandy's third argument in PPH completes his main point. The prophets of the OT served as prosecuting attorneys who were going for a conviction. That illocutionary activity so dominates their writing that exegetes must make ascertainment of this overall feature the *primary* work of interpretation. In HD he writes, "The primary objective is transformation not information transfer. . . . For successful communication to occur, hearers must sense if there is an illocutionary intent of the speaker and what that illocution is. Missing this point means missing the meaning of the speaker."⁵¹ This is another overstatement due, I think, due to Sandy's unintentional acquiring the perspective of modern language philosophy toward the relative importance of pragmatics over semantics. Remember the Sophists: they forsook a search for meaning and resorted to rhetoric. Was prophetic rhetoric only to scare its listeners to get religion? Of course not, and Sandy would agree. But prophetic rhetoric could not accomplish its work toward Israel unless it first brought accurate information about Yahweh, his covenant stipulations, and the consequences of obedience and disobedience. Successful prosecution that aims for true conviction always is specific. If otherwise, only an emotional response is possible.⁵²

To understand the call for repentance, the exegete must decode the figures of speech. Here Sandy reminds us of the challenge:

"In metaphorical language, nonfigurative words with definitions that are generally well known are used to refer figuratively to something outside the purview of accepted lexical referents. For example, 'let's talk turkey.' In this case, most dictionaries are generally not helpful, for the meaning of turkey as used in this phrase is not given. . . . So metaphors require that we go beyond the dictionary definitions of words."⁵³

The only way, he says, for us to understand such language is by firsthand exposure to the culture that produced it, i.e, the socio-linguistic community. Once again we are back to language philosophy. How close are we to the Old Testament prophetic community? The more we imbibe modern language philosophy, the farther away we will appear to be and the less hopeful we will be in doing exegesis. With a biblical approach to language

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹ HD, 8,11.

⁵² This is the solution to the "head-knowledge vs heart-knowledge" slogan so common in evangelicalism. The heart can only respond to what the head is aware of and until it receives specific items of information the heart will not give its consent to stand before God with confidence (cf. 1 John 3:19-22). An everyday illustration is how traffic cops are trained to give a ticket. Regardless of the emotions of the conversation, they aim to make you aware of exactly what is your traffic violation and its specific consequences.

⁵³ PPH, 63.

philosophy, however, we will see ourselves much closer because of God's providential work in his custodial nation (concept #8 discussed above). We can then have hope that by traditional grammatical-historical exegesis we can identify and understand most figurative language. After nicely describing the challenge of understanding metaphoric language, Sandy leaves his readers somewhat discouraged about meeting that challenge.

Additional arguments. Sandy discusses the interpretation of several sub-types of prophetic texts: cursing/blessing, apocalyptic, already fulfilled, and yet-to-be-fulfilled. In each instance, he acquaints readers with numerous scriptural citations, challenging us to interpret their meaning by focusing on their purpose or illocutionary action.

Addressing curses and blessings that are built upon the Mosaic Covenant (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28), he urges us to put on "corrective lens" so we read these texts clearly. These lens come from reflecting "on the limits of human language to describe divine wrath and love" and from analyzing such language "in the context of Near Eastern treaties and the Pentateuch."⁵⁴ Since I've already treated the language limitations issue, I will comment only on analyzing the covenant language that Sandy says "actually originated in ancient Near Eastern culture."⁵⁵ We must be cautious in accepting the hermeneutical implications of saying with Sandy and others that the language of curses and blessings "originated" in ancient Near Eastern culture. *Pagan analogies to biblical covenants were legalistic creations of political convenience and were not enforceable through nature. Their threats of natural disasters had to be hyperbolic.* However, the Mt. Sinai treaty derived from the God who controls nature so his threats and promises are anchored in a way utterly unlike those of the Gentile kings. God made the difference quite clear when under Elijah and Elisha he carried out some of his threats and promises in obvious contrast to the vain language of Baalism. By classifying biblical treaty talk with the pagan talk in the same genre, it seems to diminish God's special work in Israel.⁵⁶

When treating the apocalyptic subgenre, Sandy correctly points out that the fantastic and surreal language is intended to encourage downhearted believers to trust that God controls history toward its finale. He draws upon his previous research that shows the difficulty in seeing how the details of Daniel 8 were fulfilled in history. Sandy argues that the original readers of Daniel 8 could not have correctly inferred the fulfillment from its vision. He concludes that the vision's details were allusive, i.e., correspondence between vision and fulfillment less defined than traditional interpretation has thought. So he concludes by asking whether the point of the vision was in the details or the overall impact.⁵⁷ Finally, regarding apocalyptic genre "Details may have no particular significance other than to give the account more emotive power."⁵⁸ Where this leads is shown by his discussion of Daniel's repetition of 'four' in his vision elements. Sandy cites parallels in contemporary pagan literature of four kingdoms and four eras in order to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁶ See his discussion in PPH, 81-97.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 126.

conclude that Daniel's use of four "did not reveal. . .the number of kingdoms to succeed Alexander."⁵⁹

Before agreeing that most of the details in apocalyptic visions are not meaningful in themselves, we ought to place this type literature inside a proper biblical view of the cosmos. Let's grant Sandy's idea that such figures are like political cartoons.⁶⁰ Political cartoonists use figure elements not just like individual strokes of a brush to paint a picture but often as individual information symbols.[Slide #9] Likewise Daniel saw animal figures for each of the four kingdoms in Daniel 7 but a man figure for the culminating fifth kingdom. [Slide #10] If we understand the basic biblical language concepts #2, #3, and #4 discussed above, can't we infer that the detailed animal forms depict behavior and character that God put into them at creation? And then doesn't it follow that only the fifth kingdom is truly human-like? In this case don't the "details" carry individual meaning?

We can carry this thought further. Metaphoric language of an evil monster—sometimes known Rahab, sometimes as Leviathan—recurs throughout the Old Testament and usually depicts Egypt (e.g., Pss. 74:12-15; 87:4; Isa. 30:7). Yet in Job Leviathan is an actually observed animal (Job 41) probably a dinosaur-like powerful animal. As a creation this animal's form and behavior is revelatory of prideful character. So we have a metaphorical use of this animal that supplies us with information about Egypt. But that is not all. Behind the nations are spiritual principalities and powers that have corporeal shapes (see concept #5). The metaphor of Leviathan when used of Egypt, therefore, can mean that nation's character that has been molded under the influence of the [spiritual] dragon. A similar line of reasoning would defend the identity of Satan behind the Kings of Babylon (Isa. 14) and Tyre (Ezk. 28). These kings' character was Satanic. Jesus invoked a similar metaphor in seeing John the Baptist as Elijah (Matt. 11:14; cf. Lk. 1:17). But Sandy in discussing such examples of prophetic literature dismisses the language as merely "extreme" metaphor (see page 2). He diminishes the semantic content while discussing these texts' illocutionary function.

Sandy also imputes to traditional exegesis the assertion that the prophets and their audiences understood the prophecies so well that they foresaw exactly how they would be fulfilled. But have dispensational commentators been guilty of this? I think not. Sandy places great emphasis upon his research that failed to find a complete historical correspondence between Daniel 8 and its fulfillment. That failure, however, could be due to missing historical data and/or not interpreting parts of that vision as referring to unseen spiritual powers.

Summary Evaluation.

Has Sandy accomplished his attempt to harvest the two fruits of modern language philosophy—speech act theory and heightened interest in metaphor—to create a paradigm shift in dispensational hermeneutics? He and many others certainly think so.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 108.

Those of us who don't adopt his semi-caricature of traditional hermeneutics and the subservient role of semantics to pragmatics (borrowed from modern language theory) think not. We do, however, appreciate his challenge to us to respect metaphor in prophetic texts.

Conclusion

Several lessons for seminary students and pastor-teachers emerge from this review. First, we ought to devote as much effort to thinking critically about embedded assumptions in our exegetical tools as we do to actually using these tools. This principle certainly applies to Sandy's proposed hermeneutical paradigm shift so influenced by modern language theory. To prioritize discernment of the *use* of language (illocution) so far above discovering the *prima facie meaning* of a text is to risk serious weakening of one's exegetical production. We have seen that modern language theory carries forward Kant's radical autonomous subjectivity. In spite of its clearer understanding of how language functions in various situations of daily life, it lacks the true interpretation of language given by the Bible. Consequently, it misunderstands the very thing it centers upon: the proper use of language!

Second, after evaluating Sandy's suggested hermeneutic within a biblical framework for language, we certainly can benefit from his admonition to carefully study the poetic expressions of the prophets and the imagery of so-called apocalyptic texts. If we understand that God taught the first human language to Adam as a tool for dominion and worship, that metaphorical development of language occurred immediately in the exercise of that dominion, that images are not just a random upwelling of man's subconscious mind, and that God providentially manages the outworking of his created design and purpose for human language, we will then be prepared to exploit a renewed appreciation for biblical imagery and emotional use of language. We can then seek to capture the convicting force of these texts as Sandy enjoins us, but we can do so without sacrificing important details. We can retain the results of years of grammatical-historical interpretation of literary details such as how unconditionality and conditionality function within the many and varied biblical covenants. We can even probe textual imagery for possible revelation of angelic and demonic influences.

Finally, we need to study and teach more of the Old Testament. Two-thirds of the canon is Old Testament. Why is this proportionality not reflected in our teaching and preaching? Certainly most recipients of New Testament epistles were familiar enough with the Old Testament for its thoughts to be recognized even in casual New Testament allusions. Sandy has challenged us to work harder at exegeting prophetic literature. Let's take his challenge further by building upon the advances made so far in the grammatical-historical understanding of the biblical framework!