

A Critique of James Barr's Critique of Old Testament Philology

Thomas McDaniel

Because of the expanded interest in the philological approach in recent years, Barr proposes in his most recent work (*Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1968) to provide the student with the necessary critical equipment through a general survey of the philological approach (pp. 8–9). But this purpose seems secondary to Barr's attack upon the philological method for its (a) weakness on questions of semantics (p. 88), (b) taking specialized meanings in one language as a generalized meaning in another language (p. 165), (c) dismissal of Massoretic vocalization (p. 218), (d) insisting that linguistic misunderstanding rather than graphic error has produced an unintelligible text (p. 194), (e) producing an overabundance of homonyms (p. 125), and (f) assuming an excessive degree of cognate community and overlap (p. 156).

Either way Barr seems to have failed in the fulfillment of his purposes. The student who does not already have the critical tools of the philological approach will not be able to evaluate Barr's arguments and presentation. He must uncritically accept Barr's very critical presentation. But this is hardly an improvement over the present situation. On the other hand, O. T. philologists will not be convinced of the validity of Barr's criticism because of Barr's own poor methodology and homework.

Barr's subjectivity shows through on such statements as those made on page 12 where Greek, Sanskrit, Gothic and Lithuanian are paralleled with the cognate languages of the Near East. More serious though is his failure to be specific, as on pages 80, 82, 93, 102, 109, 128.

Poor homework is reflected in his footnotes on pages 15, 237 and 251. On page 15 he notes that Reider does not call upon the LXX to reinforce his arguments that *KLM* means “speak” in Judges 18:7; but Barr himself adds what he thinks to be the evidence of the LXX. Nevertheless, he lists the use of an ancient version as a characteristic of Reider’s methodology and then refutes his own use of the LXX evidence through a footnote. The footnote on p. 237 does not save Barr’s argument that *Qameṣ* had no previous history of usage. Barr must show that the technical usage of this word in Modern Hebrew is based on Löw’s suggestion. Otherwise his whole argument falls.

Another example of oversight is his failure to note the one occurrence of the preposition *min* in Ugaritic in Text 1015.11. Its presence in Ugaritic has been general knowledge since 1957.

Barr’s methodology in Chapter 7 is inadequate and misleading. In this chapter he deals with the degree of coincidence in the vocabulary of Semitic languages. His contention is that the degree of coincidence is very low and he finds support for this through his analysis of Syriac verbs beginning with *b* over against Hebrew verbs beginning with *b*. He finds about 40% of the Syriac verbs have corresponding cognates in Hebrew with similar meanings. But can dictionaries and lexicons really be compared? Barr notes elsewhere the inherent weakness of the lexicons that are available (p. 115). These weaknesses caution one against too great a dependence on lexical notations. Any adequate check on cognate correspondence would have to be made on a uniform body of literature that could be carefully controlled in both languages. Furthermore, is it fair to impose the larger Syriac lexicon upon the smaller lexicon of Biblical Hebrew? Why not try Ugaritic words beginning with *b* and

see what correspondence there is with Biblical Hebrew beginning with *b*. A quick survey shows that there are 55 Semitic roots in Ugaritic beginning with *b*, of which 39 are found in Hebrew with similar meanings, plus three more presumed to be found. Only 12 Ugaritic roots (about 20%) are not found in the BDB lexicon. All of which proves nothing except that comparing lexicons is no better than the lexicons available, and a larger lexicon imposed upon a smaller lexicon will yield obviously more roots in the larger lexicon than the smaller.

Sometimes Barr omits significant information as on p. 101, where he fails to note that the preposition *b* means “from” also in Amarna Canaanite, Phoenician and Akkadian, as well as Ugaritic and Ya^cudi. On page 160, one would have expected Barr to indicate that the root *L³K* “to send” occurs in Ugaritic, as well as the more remote Ethiopic.

One area of seeming inconsistency is Barr’s treatment of Jewish tradition. He argues strongly (pp. 195–203) for a reliable tradition behind the Massoretic vocalization, but on questions of meaning Barr finds tradition to be wholly inadequate (cf. pp. 39, 42–43, 56, 59, 60, 65, 209). He fails to explain though how the vocalization could be so accurately transmitted while the meaning of the words could be so readily lost.

Barr’s work is certain to initiate a more rigorous discussion on O. T. research. But it cannot be used as a textbook for would-be philologists nor a canon for philological methods. Perhaps its greatest contribution is the negative one of calling attention to the weaknesses of the philological approach while at the same time demonstrating the weakness of a traditional textual approach.