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Book Review

What did Jesus mean? Explaining the sermon on the mount and the parables in simple and universal human concepts.

By Anna Wierzbicka
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp 528. Paper $37.50. ISBN 0195137329.

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In this important book, Wierzbicka (W) raises the significant and non-trivial question, "What did Jesus mean?" rather than a more cautious one, "What did the biblical authors mean?" It is the latter question that most commentaries spend their energy on, answering questions about what Jesus did, who he was, and what he said. To answer her own question about what Jesus meant, W examines a number of parables and ethical aphorisms from the Gospels. She states her most important criterion as "coherence," which presupposes a semantic analysis. Her book is also a "study in the semantics of religious language and in the interpretation of religious metaphors," (p. 5) and should therefore be of interest to Bible translators and consultants.

Comprehending the way W presents her materials is not for the uninitiated. The reader must understand and, to a large degree, accept the "universal concepts" or Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM—p. 466) that is used to explicate the meanings. At present they include the following: **Substantives** (I, you, someone(person), something(thing), people, body); **Determiners** (this, the same, other); **Quantifiers** (one, two, some, many/much, all); **Attributes** (good, bad, big, small); Mental predicates (think, know, want, feel, see, hear); Speech (say, word, true); **Actions, events, movements** (do, happen, move); **Existence, and possession** (there is, have); **Life and death** (live, die); **Logical concepts** (not, maybe, can, because, if); **Time** (when(time), now, after, before, a long time, a short time, for some time); **Space** (where(place), here, above, below, far, near, side, inside; **Intensifier, augmentor** (very, more); **Taxonomy, partonomy** (kind of, part of); and **Similarity** (like, how, as).

The reason why a set of universal concepts is necessary to explicate the exegesis of the parables underlies what W calls (p. 6) her "semantic exegesis." Her NSM employs the universal human concepts and the conceptual primes listed above and the goal is always to reduce the words and their meanings to a NSL that cannot be further reduced. For example, primes and concepts like "good" and "bad", "do" and "happen", etc. cannot be made clearer by defining them further, such that a sentence like "I did something bad," cannot be further explained or defined with more basic words.

There are other important reasons why the NSM can be helpful in understanding a story (such as Jesus' parables)—or in translating Bible texts. One of the most important is her view that the intended Gospel message was universal rather than culture-specific, otherwise, she asks, what would be the point of the Great Commission. So, although Jesus was a Jew and grew up in a Jewish cultural context, aspects of what he meant can be separated from those constraints. As W notes, "For this message to be clothed in new garments, it has first to be stripped of its old ones," that is, from its Palestinian metaphorical context "without recourse to culture-specific metaphors" (p. 12).

That is a tough assignment for any translator—we often simply try to substitute a biblical metaphor with a cultural one without reducing it to a literal and simpler (to grasp) meaning. W does this by means of formulaic expressions that use only her metalanguage which, as she admits, may strike readers as stilted. Nevertheless, it is "comprehensible to a nonspecialist (unlike many passages in hermeneutic theological literature)" (p. 13). She gives Sproul's (1992:445–446) definition of the trinity[1] as an example that is meant to explain a theological concept but is "in fact incomprehensible to most people."

[1] Sproul's definition (1992:35, from his book *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith: 100 Key Doctrines in Plain Language*, is quoted by Wierzbicka like this: "The historic formulation of the Trinity is that god is one in essence and

The introduction of WDJM (What did Jesus mean?) outlines the importance of understanding the Jewish context in which Jesus lived and taught. This is especially important when considering images, hyperboles, cultural artifacts and symbols, assumptions and values, all which form the historical context for the universal message of Jesus. She comments throughout the book on the Jewish hyperbolic forms that accompany the sayings of Jesus and how the timeless aspect of his teachings have to be stripped of their "baggage of history, culture, and tradition" (p. 17).

In the introduction to WDJM and after a discussion on the meaning of the "kingdom of God," W illustrates her methodology and outlines the constraints that she follows, which I summarize as:

- Use of only the synoptic Gospels, with a focus on the Sermon on the Mount
- Interrelating the sayings of Jesus into a coherent overall picture
- Use of independently established universal syntactic patterns and the avoidance of metaphors in the explanatory formulas
- Restricting the range of possible interpretations in the semantic explications
- Not separating the issue of authenticity (as done by proponents of the Jesus Seminar (Funk et al. 1993) from the meaning
- Recognition of her own Roman Catholic perspective, but claiming an understanding of Protestant, Jewish and Eastern Christian traditions

Part I of WDJM contains four chapters on the Sermon on the Mount; Part II explicates and discusses several parables, while Part III concludes with an overall picture of the teachings, a chapter on Christian theology "in a nutshell" and a final chapter on the use of language as a key factor in understanding both Jesus and Christianity. Extensive notes accompany each chapter, and there is a bibliography of 25 pages as well (including ten references to her own works).[2]

I note W's salient facts about the Beatitudes as follows:

- There were probably at least four Beatitudes
- Luke's version is closer to Jesus' own words
- Jesus probably did not speak Greek, although to understand his words the path leads through the Greek words in Luke's and Matthew's "reworked" accounts
- The key terms are *poor, weeping/grieving, hungry* and *persecuted*
- The beatitude of weeping invokes Isaiah 61:1–2
- The "blessing" of weeping extends to everyone who suffers
- The "hungry" are those deprived from the necessities of life
- The attributes of hungry and poor are "inextricably linked"

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three in person. Though the formula is mysterious and even paradoxical, it is in no way contradictory. The unity of the Godhead is affirmed in terms of essence or being, while the diversity of the Godhead is expressed in terms of person . . . . The term *person* does not mean a distinction in essence but a different *subsistence* of the Godhead. A subsistence in the Godhead is a real difference but not an essential difference in the sense of a difference in being. Each person subsists or exists "under" the pure essence of deity. Subsistence is a difference within the scope of being, not a separate being or essence. All persons in the Godhead have all the attributes of deity."

[2] Wierzbicka's knowledge of semantics and pragmatics is far-reaching and comprehensive. In addition to the books that I cite as having reviewed, for a start note her books on cross-cultural pragmatics (1991), culture and cognition (1992) and emotions (1999). I first came across her writings when studying lexicography and speech acts (Wierzbicka 1985, 1987) and have reviewed several of her books elsewhere (Franklin 1986, 1989, 1990, 1995). Nevertheless, I do not consider myself to be an expert on NSM. GIAL faculty member Dr. Les Bruce and SIL consultant Dr. Bob Bugenhaggen have both applied her methodology and theory extensively to lexicography and grammar. A recent introduction to semantic analysis using Wierzbicka's theory can be found in Goddard (1998).

- The "poor" refers to both a condition and an attitude (a state of mind)
- The "meek" are nonviolent and do not rely on military power
- The meek are concerned with what God will do for people
- God feels and identifies with human pain
- Choices lead to living close to God or not close to him
- The terms refer to human conditions and "aspects of human life subject to people's choices (p. 55)

In totality then, the beatitudes indicate that there "are many forms of human suffering (poverty, hunger, oppression, and persecution," p. 56), which W explicates as follows (ibid):

According to W, the central message of the Beatitudes is that:

a. "everyone knows
b. very bad things happen to some people
c. these people feel something very bad because of this
d. I say
e. God[3] knows about this
f. God feels something bad because of this
g. God wants to do good things for these people because of this
h. God will do good things for these people because of this
i. these people feel something bad for some time, not forever
j. God will want to do good things for these people forever."

Explications of each facet of the Beatitudes lead up to the "central message." For example, in the case of the *anawim* ("the poor", p. 37) the semantic representation is:

a. "many bad things happen to some people
b. because other people do bad things to these people
c. these people know that they can't do anything because of this
d. [because they don't have anything]
e. at the same time these people know that God can do good things for them
f. they know that they can live because God wants to do good things for them, not because of anything else."

Each part of the explication is explained in terms of the lettered components, e.g., (a) shows that people suffer many misfortunes, (b) adds oppression by others, (c) they are powerless, (d) which is an "option," links powerless and poverty with these final two components also signaling a known dependency upon God.

I have omitted the references to other parts of the Bible and to other scholars that W uses to justify her interpretation of the meanings.[4]In every instance she is interested in, and concerned with, "the question of what Jesus is likely to have had in mind when he pronounced certain categories of people to be 'blessed" (p. 32). For, as she says, "To understand the meaning of the words used by Jesus is not the same thing as to understand what Jesus meant by them" (p. 38).

In addition to the central meanings of the Beatitudes, W provides additional explications that are necessary background as well, such as for covenant, the law and the prophets, rejection of polygamy, divorce and remarriage, marital intercourse, adultery, inner conflict and its resolution, and turning the other cheek.

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[3] Wierzbicka attempts (p. 21) an overall explication of the concept of God as: someone (not something) good, who lives, but who is not like anyone else, someone who always existed and has made everything else, including people, exist because he wanted them to.

[4] As I indicate from the size and scope of her references, W has done extensive research, including more reliance on the interpretation of the Jesus Seminar than many translators might find acceptable.

Chapter 3 of WDJM examines in some detail passages that describe the relationship between Jesus and the law (Matthew 5:17–20) and concludes that "as Jesus saw it, in the Hebrew Scriptures God was speaking to people, using Moses and the Prophets as his spokesmen" (p. 60). The question was whether the people to whom Jesus spoke had understood fully what God had said. She expresses this as follows (pp. 57–59):

a. "I do not say: God wasn't saying these things then

b. I say: I want to say something new

c. when these people were saying these things about God

d. God wanted to say things to all people [all Israel] in this way

e. people [Israel] didn't always know what God wanted to say

f. I want people to know what God wanted to say

g. I want to say this to you now

h. these people were saying at that time that some things would happen after some time

i. I say to you these things are happening here now"

In her explication (a) and (b) are meant to represent that Jesus did not believe that everything in the Mosaic Law was God's will (e.g., that a man might divorce his wife); (c) and (d) refer to God speaking through the prophets; (f) and (g) show that Jesus wanted people to know what God had said, and in (h) and (i) Jesus reveals God's message to the people.

The remainder of the chapter discusses and gives semantic formulae for Matthew 5:21–22 (Whoever is angry with his brother…), Matthew (5:31–32; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:2–12, (Whoever divorces his wife…), Matthew 5:27–28 (Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her…), Matthew 5:29–30 and 18:8–9 (If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out), Matthew 5:33–37 (Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No", 'No'), Matthew 5:38–42 (Turn the other cheek), Matthew 5:43–48 and Luke 6:27–36 (Love your enemies) and Matthew 5:20 (The righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees).

Chapter 4 analyzes these key sayings:

- You are the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13–16)
- When you do a charitable deed do not sound a trumpet (Matthew 6:1–4). Do not let your left hand know…(Matthew 6:3)
- When you pray, go into your room (Matthew 6:5–6)
- When you fast, anoint your head (Matthew 6:16–18)
- Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–21 and Luke 12:33–34)
- The eye is the lamp of the body (Matthew 6:22–23 and Luke 11:34–36)
- You cannot serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13)
- Consider the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25–33 and Luke 12:22–31)
- Do not judge (Matthew 7:1–5 and Luke 6:3–7)
- Ask, and it will be given to you (Matthew 7:7–11 and Luke 11:9–13)
- The golden rule (Matthew 7:12)
- Enter by the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13–14)
- Do people gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:15–20; Luke 6:43–45 and Matthew 12:33–35)
- The will of my Father (Matthew 7:21 and Luke 6:46)

- Building on the rock (Matthew 7:23–29 and Luke 6:46–51)

Chapter 5 is W's explication of the Lord's Prayer, following her earlier working paper (1995) on the subject. She refers to the Luke and Matthew versions (11:2–4 and 6:8–11, respectively) and considers Luke's version as representing "the shared core of the two" (p. 227).

In this chapter W also discusses the use of "Father" as a metaphor, seeing it "as a key to understanding the relationship between people and God" (p. 227). She quotes scholars who claim that it denotes the "nuance of intimacy" (p. 230), positing for Abba (addressing God) the components of "familiarity" and "closeness," but not a child's address form, such as "daddy."

W then takes the reader through the Lord's Prayer phrase by phrase, with commentary, justifying the NSL explications as she does so. As she indicates, her semantic exegesis "can be seen as a new kind of radical translation, reaching beyond the culture-specific metaphors to a nonmetaphorical meaning that can be understood directly and literally" (p. 254). This goal should be of interest to any consultant checking a vernacular translation.

Part II (pp. 257–437) of WDJM explicates 18 parables or sets of parables: The Sower; The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price; The Leaven and The Mustard Seed; The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin, The Prodigal Son; The Unforgiving Servant; The Laborers in the Vineyard; The Servant's Reward; The Great Feast; The Last Judgement; The Good Samaritan; The Rich Man and Lazarus; The Rich Fool; The Doorkeeper; The Talents; The Dishonest Steward; The Unjust Judge and the Friend at Midnight; The Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Some of the general principles and remarks that arise from her interpretations and explications are:

- There is no hard and fast rule to distinguish parables from allegories (p. 260)
- The sower is the key to Jesus' other parables and the theme is the Kingdom of God (p. 264)
- Many parables come in pairs with two different images but one message, showing that the two cannot be separated (p. 267)
- The "intimations of universal salvation implicit" in several parables, yet these cohere with Jesus' "warnings that one's life on earth is a unique opportunity" (p. 290)
- In Luke the favorite theme is repentance (p. 298)
- Jesus used parables to make his audiences think but not to confuse them (p. 313)
- When two parables are linked, one can be taken as a commentary of the other (p. 327)
- Jesus' harsh words are hyperbolic and paradoxical, not literal (p. 338; p. 355)
- Symbolic language must be interpreted in the light of the NT as a whole (p. 355)
- An important and final component of The Good Samaritan explicates the fact that Jesus wished to abolish the divisions that naturally arise between people and groups (p. 378)
- Jesus generally avoids thoroughly positive characters as models in the parables (except for the Good Samaritan) (p. 418)

There is often a "meta-message" underlying certain parables, such as the one about the Pharisee and the tax-collector (p. 431). In that case, the meta-message is:

I am not like some other people

these other people are bad people

these other people do many bad things

these other people do not live with God

I do not do bad things

I am someone good

I live with God

this is very good

Part III summarizes W's view on the overall picture of Jesus' teaching, providing a concise Christian theology. She also comments on how language is a key issue in understanding Jesus and Christianity.

W's methodological tool of universal human concepts (p. 442) portrays Jesus as primarily a teacher of wisdom, in fact "divine wisdom" (p. 443), that is represented in his ethical teachings. She summarizes this wisdom and teaching as "The goal is for people to live with God, now and forever (p. 443).

W claims that "theology needs a new language" (p. 444), certainly news that will be discouraging to our seminaries, but which will make sense to the layman. She notes in particular the creeds that are recited in churches are "largely incomprehensible" due to the complex language of theology. This follows her cardinal rule that complex and obscure terms should be explained in simple and clear ones (p. 445). She outlines the "Christian faith in a nutshell" by summarizing these key ideas (p. 449–451):

- God's plan for people
- The incarnation
- Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection
- The Ascension, the Holy Spirit, the church
- The Second Coming and the Last Judgment
- The resurrection of the dead, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life

She explicates each of these key ideas in terms of what she claims is "a form that is free (or almost free) of metaphors and not bound to any particular language or culture" (p. 451). This "requires an awareness of cross-cultural differences in ways of speaking and of difficulties and misunderstandings that such differences may give rise to…" (p. 454).

Finally, regarding the matter of language, W says that the reader must understand:

- The style Jesus used and the linguistic and cultural tradition to which he belonged (p. 456)
- The tradition of the Jewish Drohrede (the language of rhetorical threats and warnings, prophetic hyperbole) (p. 457)
- The hyperboles and paradoxes of Jesus belong to the same Jewish tradition (p. 461)
- The differences of language and style between the Gospel of John and the synoptics (p. 461)
- The different cultural scripts that are used (p. 461)
- The nature of Jesus' Jewishness (p. 463)

This seems to me to be an important book for translators and translation consultants, as well as lexicographers or anyone interested in semantics and hermeneutics. This is partly due to the size of the book and the far-ranging research that underlies it, but it is also due to the requirement of tracing the NSL carefully through the illustrative texts. Such an effort is more difficult than examining a back-translation of the texts (the present universally accepted manner of checking a cross-cultural translation). However, by making this effort we begin to appreciate W's analysis and understand what Jesus meant, not merely what he said. For me it has been a refreshing Bible study on the meanings of the parables, the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount.

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