An Introduction to Word Studies
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Introduction

Words are a major building block to communication. Words combined appropriately become sentences, and sentences become paragraphs. Paragraphs create chapters, and chapters become books. But we begin with the word because proper exegesis cannot occur unless the interpreter pays careful attention to the meaning of words.

Most words that survive long enough in a language will develop more than one possible use. That is why, when you look a word up in a dictionary, the entry will often list more than one denotation. Sometimes the various possible meanings of a word are quite similar to one another and differ only in subtle nuance. For instance, the word "silence" could be used to describe a condition characterized by the complete absence of noise, but it could also be used to request the cessation of noise. Other times a word can have meanings that are completely unrelated to one another. For example, the word "sentence" can refer to a combination of words arranged according to the syntax of a given language in order to communicate some idea, but it can also be used to speak of the penalty given to a convicted criminal. The good news is that most of the time words are clearly understood. We speak and communicate to one another with minimal misunderstanding of which meaning of a word is intended. The basic meanings of a word are known, and the context in which the word is used confirms which meaning is in mind.

The basic process of determining the meaning a word has in a given sentence, a process known as a word study, is simple. [See "Summary of the Word Study Process" below.] The first step is to establish the possible range of meaning that a word can have. A dictionary, also called a lexicon, typically can provide this information. Once all possible meanings are listed, the second step is to condense the list to only those meanings known to the author who used the word. This is necessary because if a particular possible meaning has not yet been established (or if a meaning has fallen out of usage) at the time of an author, it cannot be that author's intended meaning. Now consider which of the possible meanings is most likely in the context in which the word appears. Contextual clues must be considered in reaching a final conclusion about the meaning of a word in any given sentence.

Summary of the Word Study Process

1- What is the general range of meaning for a given word? In other words, what are the dictionary entries that I would find if I looked up the word?

2- How does my author tend to use this word? Within the possible semantic range of the word, which meanings are familiar to my author? If possible explore other works by your author to determine if he or she prefers to use a certain word in a certain way in a certain context.

3- How does my author use this word in the particular sentence I am studying? Which of the meanings did he intend? The sentence's context will be the most influential element in deciding a word's meaning in any given usage.

An English Example

Consider the sentence: "He had a ball." The word "ball" has multiple possible meanings. The dictionary might include the following possibilities:

1 – a spherical object for playing games
2 – a formal dance
3 – idiomatic for a good time

The sentence, "He had a ball" could have any of these three meanings in mind. It is only through considering the surrounding context that the interpreter can determine the most likely intended meaning. The sentences and paragraphs nearby this text provide the reader with clues.

Suppose the text in its context reads, "He had a ball. He threw it into the air." The context provided by the second sentence clarifies that the word "ball" is speaking, in this instance, of a spherical object used for playing games. Further contextual data could allow the reader to discern whether the particular ball is a soccer ball, a baseball, a football, or some other specific type of ball, even though such additional details are unlikely to appear in a dictionary definition of "ball."

Perhaps another author continued the text this way: "He had a ball, and he invited Cinderella to come to it." In this context, the only possible definition of "ball" that makes sense is a formal dance. The association with Cinderella, known for her appearance at the formal event rather than her athletic skill, provides the reader with one clue. The grammar, likewise, requires a meaning of "ball" that is an event or activity such that one could "come to it."

Finally, consider the use of "ball" in the following context: "He spent the weekend at Disney World. He had a ball." The simple addition of the preceding sentence—the context—removes any doubt as to the meaning of "ball." Although it is possible that the author is conveying two unrelated thoughts, one about the weekend activity and another about an object that is possessed by the subject, awareness of a typical

reaction to a weekend at Disney World supports the idiomatic use as the most likely meaning in this context.

Words Studies with Biblical Texts

The *process* for completing a word study on a word found in a biblical text is no different from what is described above. However, because the biblical texts were not written in English, the word that is studied is a foreign language word. Therefore preparatory work is required to identify the actual original Hebrew or Aramaic word (if you are working with an Old Testament text) or the original Greek word (if you are working with a New Testament text) under investigation. It is this original language word, rather than its English translation, that is needed in order to begin the word study.

Word studies cannot proceed on the basis of the word found in an English Bible alone as the following scenario illustrates. Suppose a believer reads the English words in his Bible. As an English speaker he knows their various nuances, and he draws conclusions and says this is what this word means here. Many times he is right. But sometimes the English word, a good translation of whatever the original Greek or Hebrew was, has denotations or connotations that were not present in the Greek or Hebrew word. Therefore, the original meaning—the author's intent—could not have been a nuance or meaning that the word did not possess for him!

For instance, Luke 13 describes the account of Jesus healing a crippled woman who is bent over. Verse 13 reads, "Jesus put his hands on her and immediately she was made straight and praised God" (NIV). In modern English, the word "straight" has various connotations, one of which has to do with sexuality. If we were to read this Biblical passage as proof that homosexuals can be healed by Jesus and thus made straight, we would be very far away indeed from what Luke intended to communicate! Never mind that the context is clearly not talking about sexuality, the word in Greek (*anorthoo*) "to be made straight" does not have this as one of its possible meanings. If you were to look it up in the Greek dictionary, you'll see that "straight" as opposed to "gay" is simply not a lexical option. Thus it is clear that our word studies must employ the original language words.

Finding the Original Language Word

In order to determine the original language word, the student familiar with the biblical languages need simply read the passage in a Hebrew or Greek Bible. Those whose language skills need assistance may find it necessary to consult an Analytical Lexicon in order to move from the form of the word that appears in the text to the form that appears in the dictionary.

The student who does not know the original languages will rely more fully on several kinds of lexical tools that are available to assist the modern student of Scripture with this and other steps of the

word study. While a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek certainly enhances one's ability to do word studies, the chart presenting the Hebrew and Greek alphabets in their alphabetical order [see below] will enable the student who does not know the original languages to make effective use of many original language resources.

Additionally, an increasing number of lexical tools are being keyed numerically to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, making it possible for the person who has no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek (or whose knowledge is "rusty") to do word studies in these languages. The most important kinds of lexical tools are described below.

In order to find the original language word behind an English word that has been selected for study, the interpreter should consult a concordance.

Concordances. A concordance contains a listing of all the times a given word is used in Scripture. To examine the various ways a given Hebrew or Greek word was used, consult a Hebrew or Greek concordance, which lists all the passages in which the word appears.

An English concordance lists all the passages in which various Hebrew and Greek words were translated into a given English word. Each English concordance will follow a given English translation of Scripture. Be sure to look up the English word that occurs in the same English translation as the one to which your concordance is keyed. For example, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* shows that the word *peace* occurs more than four hundred times in the KJV Bible, and it lists each reference. By use of a numbering system, it also identifies the various Hebrew and Greek words which are translated into our English word *peace* (there are ten Hebrew words and six Greek words). With the use of Strong's numbering system it is a relatively simple matter to turn to the back of the concordance and find the Hebrew or Greek word used in any particular passage so that a valid analysis can be made. The back of the concordance includes very brief definitions of the meaning of each Hebrew and Greek word, which can be supplemented by consulting a lexicon, the next step in the word study. *The New Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament* and *The New Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament*, both edited by G.V. Wigram, function in much the same way as Strong's and are keyed to Strong's numbering system.

Determining the Semantic Range of an Original Language Word

Once the original language word has been identified, the next step is to determine its range of possible meanings.

Lexicons. A lexicon is a dictionary of Hebrew or Greek words. Like an English dictionary, it lists the various denotations of each word found in it. Many lexicons survey the usage of words in both secular and biblical literature, giving specific examples. Words are often listed in Hebrew and Greek alphabetical

order, so it is helpful to know the Hebrew and Greek alphabets [see chart below for alphabetical listings] in order to use these tools.

Among the most widely used Hebrew lexicons are:

*Brown, Driver, and Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

Gesenius. *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*.

Holladay. *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

Widely used Greek lexicons include:

*Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated and edited by Arndt and Gingrich.

Louw and Nida. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains.*

Moulton and Milligan. *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*.

Thayer. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

Recent editions of some of these works are so constructed that the person with little or no Hebrew or Greek can use them. Recent editions of both Gesenuis's and Thayer's lexicons are keyed to the numbering system found in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. An Index to Bauer's lexicon, in a separate volume by John R. Alsop, makes it readily usable by someone without a knowledge of the Greek alphabet.

English, Hebrew, and Greek concordances can be used together to do word studies. For example, if you wished to study a particular kind of *fear* found in a given passage, you could use *Strong's* to identify the Hebrew or Greek word from which your English word was translated. Having gained a general sense of the range of meaning of this word by consulting a lexicon, you could then do your own analysis of other occurrences of your word in Scripture. Using the same numbers from *Strong*, you could go to the *Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance* or the *Englishman's Greek-English Concordance* and find a listing of all the passages where that Hebrew or Greek word was used. By analyzing these passages, you could make your own conclusions about the exact denotation(s) of that word. Such an analysis should enable you to reach a solid conclusion about the range of meaning of your word in various contexts.

Using Context to Discover the Denotation Intended In a Specific Context

Having discovered the range of meaning a word possessed in its contemporary culture, the next major task is to ascertain which of those denotations the author intended when he used the word in the passage under study. An objection occasionally voiced is that the author may have intended more than one denotation simultaneously, and that therefore he was communicating a variety of meanings concurrently. However, the simultaneous use of more than one denotation of a word runs counter to all

normal communication (with the exception of puns, which are humorous precisely because they do use words in two senses simultaneously). Thus when we read, "He had a ball," we would err to assimilate all possible meanings into one such that we imagined the sentence to mean, "He had a good time playing with a spherical object while attending a formal dance."

There are several methods for discerning the specific denotations intended by an author in a particular context:

First, look at definitions or explanatory phrases that the authors themselves give in context. For example, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 states that the Word of God was given so that "the man of God might be *perfect*" (KJV). What does the author men by "perfect" here? Does he mean sinless? Incapable of error? Incapable of error or sin in some specific area? The best answer is supplied by his own explanatory phrases immediately following—"that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." In this context Paul meant for this word, translated into our language as *perfect*, to convey the idea of being thoroughly equipped for godly living.

Similarly the author of Hebrews says in 5:14, "But strong meat belongeth to them that are perfect" (KJV). Again the author makes his intention clear with an explanatory phrase immediately following: "But strong meat belongeth to them that are perfect, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." Here the word means *mature*, and refers to those "who by reason of constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (NIV). Thus the author's own explanatory phrases often serve as an important way of ascertaining his intended denotation.

Second, the subject and predicate of a sentence may mutually explain each other. For example, the Greek word *moranthei* found in Matthew 5:13 can mean either "to become foolish," or "to become insipid." How do we determine the intended denotation? In this instance the subject of the sentence is *salt*, and so the second denotation ("If the salt has lost its savor") is selected as the correct one.

Third, look at parallelism if it occurs within the passage. Nearly one-third of the Old Testament (and some of the New Testament) is poetry. Hebrew poetry is characterized by parallelism, a feature which may shed light on the meaning of words that are in question.

Hebrew parallelism can be categorized into three basic types: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic.[1] In *synonymous parallelism* the second line of a stanza repeats the content of the first, but in different words. Psalm 103:10 is an example:

> He does not treat us as our sins deserve
> or repay us according to our iniquities.

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[1]More recent scholarship is suggesting that Hebrew poetry includes more kinds of parallelism than these three types, although a consensus about a new set of categories to add to these traditional three has not been reached.

In *antithetic parallelism* the idea of the second line sharply contrasts with that of the first line. Psalm 37:21 provides an example:

> The wicked borrow and do not repay
> but the righteous give generously.

In *synthetic parallelism* the second line carries further or completes the idea of the first line. Psalm 14:2 is an example:

> The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men
>   to see if there are any who understand,
>   any who seek God.

Thus, if a passage is poetry, recognition of the type of parallelism employed may give clues to the meaning of the word in question.

Fourth, determine if the word is being used as part of a figure of speech. Sometimes words or phrases are used in ways which deviate from simple, normal speech in order to produce a fanciful or vivid impression. Such phrases are often called figures of speech, and are intended to have a meaning different from the literal. If a figure persists and becomes widely accepted within a culture it is called an idiom. Some English examples of figures of speech or idioms are:

> His eyes were bigger than his stomach.
>
> This fog is as thick as pea soup.
>
> I'm broke.
>
> The White House said . . .
>
> We'll hit Athens about 2 P.M.
>
> The thermometer is going up.
>
> The furnace has gone out.
>
> She made the cake from scratch.
>
> Take a bus.
>
> I'd better get off the phone so I don't tie up the line.

Figures of speech, as can be seen from the above list, are ubiquitous—we use them frequently in everyday speech, as did the biblical authors. In addition, figures of speech convey a definite meaning just as surely as do literal usages. To say that something is a figure of speech does not imply that the meaning of the phrase is ambiguous. Figures of speech convey a single intended meaning just as other speech does.

An interpretation of a figure of speech using the normal denotations of a word will usually result in a radical misunderstanding of the author's intended meaning. For example, if I were to interpret literally the phrases "his eyes were bigger than his stomach" or "it's raining cats and dogs," I would seriously misinterpret the meaning of these phrases. For this reason, those who proudly boast that they believe

everything in the Bible literally (if by this they mean that they fail to recognize figures of speech and special features of poetry and prophecy) may be doing a disservice to the very Scripture they respect so highly.

Figures of speech are common in the biblical text. A good procedure to follow whenever doing an in-depth study of a passage is to consult Bullinger's *Figures of Speech Used In the Bible*. Index III of Bullinger's book will indicate whether or not there are any figures of speech in a passage, and will provide appropriate explanations of them. Bullinger's book must be used with discretion (it represents his personal judgments and knowledge of Hebrew and Greek figures of speech), but it does provide a large amount of important and useful information.

Fifth, study parallel passages. In order to understand the meaning of an obscure word or phrase, look for additional data in clearer parallel passages. It is important, though, to distinguish between verbal parallels and real parallels. *Verbal parallels* are those which use similar words but refer to different concepts. The concept of God's Word as a sword, found in Hebrews 4 and Ephesians 6, is an example of a verbal, but not a real, parallel. Hebrews 4 speaks of the Bible's function as a divider which differentiates between those who are truly obedient to its message and those who profess obedience but inwardly remain disobedient. In Ephesians 6, Paul also speaks of the Bible-as-a-sword, but in this instance refers to it as a defensive weapon to be used against the temptations of Satan (v. 11). (Christ used the Word in this way when Satan tempted him in the desert.)

Real parallels, in contrast, are those which speak of the same concept or same event. They may use different words, and frequently add additional data not found in the passage under study. The marginal references found in most Bibles are designed to yield real parallels, although occasionally such parallels seem to be more verbal than real. A careful examination of the context is the best indicator of whether the passages are verbal or real parallels.

In summary, five ways of ascertaining the specific intended denotation of a word in a given passage are: (1) Look at definitions or explanatory phrases that the author gives; (2) use the subject and predicate to explain each other; (3) look at parallelism if it occurs in a passage; (4) determine if the word or phrase was intended as a figure of speech; and (5) study parallel passages.

Checking Your Work with Secondary Sources

Although it is possible for the beginning student to draw accurate conclusions about the use of words, it is also worth checking what other scholars have said about your word and its use in various contexts. A theological wordbook can assist with this step.

Theological Wordbooks. These books give more extensive definitions of words than are found in lexicons or books of synonyms. The most well-known is the ten volume *Theological Dictionary of the*

New Testament (TDNT), edited by Kittel and Friedrich. This monumental work provides an extensive examination of the usages of important Greek New Testament words. A typical article will discuss the role of that word in (1) secular Greek sources, (2) the Old Testament, (3) Philo, Josephus, psuedepigraphical and rabbinical literature, (4) the various New Testament books, and (5) the apostolic fathers.[2]

While this dictionary is a valuable source in many ways,[3] there are a number of disadvantages of TDNT for the average pastor or evangelical Christian who wishes to do word studies. First, the frequent appearance of Hebrew and Greek words in the text makes TDNT difficult reading for those who are not familiar with these languages. Second, the entries are extensive (fifteen or more pages on many important words) and often do not include summaries that would help put the discussion into perspective. Third, the theological position of its authors varies considerably, and the influence of liberal presuppositions on some of the articles is significant. Fourth, the price of this ten-volume set places it beyond the reach of many students of Scripture.[4]

The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown, is a three-volume reference work that gives word studies midway between the concise definitions of a lexicon and the very extensive discussions of the TDNT. The articles are scholarly and up-to-date, and appear generally to be written by orthodox theologians. Frequent references and summaries from TDNT are made. Most of the text is in English and in regular-sized print (in contrast to the small print in TDNT). The average length of a word discussion is three to five pages; the total price of the three-volume set is approximately one-third the price of TDNT. For these reasons the *New International Dictionary* set probably represents a more usable tool for the average pastor and student of Scripture than does TDNT.[5]

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[2]A comparable work for the Old Testament is the anticipated 17 volume *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* edited by G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Begun in the 1970s, 14 volumes are currently available. Volume 15 is forthcoming and is the last volume devoted to Hebrew words. Volume 16 will focus on Aramaic words, and volume 17 will be an index.

[3]The fact that *TDNT* has been accused of committing the word study fallacy which suggests that one's language determines one's thought patterns is an important consideration in the use of this source, but it by no means diminishes the overall contribution made by *TDNT*. See Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 44.

[4]The one volume abridged version also called *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is a more affordable alternative.

[5]A comparable work for Old Testament words is the five volume *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, edited by Willem VanGemeren. Typical articles review the use of the Hebrew word in the Ancient Near Eastern literature, the Old Testament, and post-biblical texts as well as discuss its Greek translation in the New Testament. Similarly, the two volume *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* by R. L. Harris, et al., eds. is a very usable source for Old Testament words.

Conclusion

We have been doing word studies from our earliest days in school when we approached our teachers to inquire about the meaning of a word and were told, "Look it up." The concept is that simple. As we grow and develop a larger vocabulary we become more skilled at "looking it up" and determining which meaning to choose. In completing word studies with biblical texts, we take our skills to the next level and learn to work with the necessary resources to study a foreign language word. In the sometimes tedious process of looking at usages, however, we are doing nothing more than "looking it up," a reminder that should encourage us along the way.