

How Words Work

(Common Sense and Avoiding Silliness in Word Studies)

The need for common sense

While word studies in the original languages can be a fruitful source of Bible Study, they have occasionally been abused. In that case, it has brought misinformation rather than understanding. It is therefore important to do word studies properly, avoiding the common pitfalls.

Some of the most common mistakes stem from a misunderstanding of the nature of the Bible and the way it communicates through language. The Bible is a supernatural, spiritual, powerful, fully inspired and inerrant book. But the supernatural power is in the message and not necessarily in the manner of communication. In other words, the Bible communicates a supernatural message, but it does it through normal, everyday use of language communication. Therefore, we should not seek the meaning of the Bible in hidden codes or esoteric language tricks. Rather, we should seek the meaning in the normal, standard use of words and language communication.

God is an excellent communicator Who wants to be understood. He communicates clearly in the manner most appropriate for good communication, not in a fanciful, secret manner, Therefore, God’s communication is accessible to all people through normal means, and do not require an initiated priesthood to decipher (see Deut. 30:10-15; Rom. 10:6-12). As Moises Silva reminds us, “the richness and divine origin of the biblical message are not compromised by the naturalness and simplicity of the form in which God has chosen to communicate to us.”¹

We normally use this kind of common sense in everyday communication. When a friend writes us an email, or we have a conversation with a co-worker, we don’t normally try to infuse their words with special, fanciful meanings. Rather, we take them at face value and try to understand what they mean using the normal conventions of language communication. We should have the same approach to the Bible (both in the original languages and in English translations). Bible words and language work in normal ways, even when the message being communicated is supernatural.

Mistakes also come when a person is being exposed to the Biblical languages. Obviously the Biblical languages are different than English in many ways. They don’t use exactly the same rules and patterns as English. However, the Biblical languages are not magical. They were the common speech of everyday people, which were used in mundane everyday matters as well as to write Holy Scripture. They have rules and standard ways of communicating.

Because the Biblical languages are unfamiliar, it is a temptation to forget that they are normal human languages and allow ourselves to use our newbie knowledge to twist the meaning of Biblical words into ways that would be totally unfamiliar to a native speaker

¹ “God, Language and Scripture” in Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, p. 201.

of the language (not to mention the authors). However, we want to do word studies well, and let them increase our understanding, not obscure the Scripture. Therefore study of original languages is not an excuse to throw common sense out the window.

There are a few principles that will help safeguard our use of original language word studies. These commonsense principles are automatically used in our everyday English communication. However, it is necessary to keep them in mind more explicitly when using the original languages. These principles will be stated positively, and will complement the negative examples in the “Word Study Fallacies” chapter of the Exegetical Fallacies textbook. If these positive principles are not safeguarded, there is a genuine danger of making one of the fallacies described in that book.

1. Word construction doesn't determine word meaning

The meaning of a word is not necessarily related to the parts/roots which make up the word (etymology). In Greek and Hebrew, many words have been formed by altering or combining pre-existing words. Therefore some will automatically assume that the meaning of the new word comes from the meaning of the earlier root word. However, understanding how a word was formed does not necessarily lead to understanding of its meaning.

In English, we have common sense to recognize that a butterfly is not a fly made out of butter, and a pineapple is not an apple that grew on a pine tree. But we don't always exercise the same restraint in dealing with Biblical words. That is why some people will teach that the Greek word ἐκκλησία (“church/assembly”) means “called out ones” because it comes from the words ἐκ (“out from”) and καλέω (“to call/invite”). Some have claimed that eternity is not actually eternal because the word αἰώνιος (“eternal”) comes from the word αἰών (“age”), and therefore (it is argued) only lasts for an undefined age. It is equally illegitimate to claim the meaning of the word “atonement” has to do with making us “at one” with God because it can be divided at-one-ment.

In some cases, the meaning of a word is indeed related to its etymology. Buttermilk *is* made of butter and a pinecone *does* come from a pine tree. It may be helpful to figure out the meaning of “ungrateful” to know that it comes from adding “un-” (which negates) to the word “grateful.” The problem arises because this is true in some cases, but certainly not in all cases. Etymology may be helpful for understanding or illustration of word meaning, but it is equally likely that it will be unhelpful or counterproductive. In every case, etymology is unnecessary and word meanings are more reliably found using other means. Gordon Fee summarizes nicely, “to know the etymology, or root, of a word, however interesting it may be, almost *never* tells us anything about its meaning in a given context.”²

2. Words have a range of possible meanings

If you were to look up the word “fast” in the dictionary, you would not, technically, find the definition of the word. Rather you would find a number of possible meanings. “Fast” may describe moving at a high rate of speed. Or it may possibly

² New Testament Exegesis (3rd ed.) p. 29 emphasis original.

mean to go without food (as well as other possible meanings). The word does not have one, stable meaning, but rather a range of possible meanings. The word “run” means different things when someone talks about an athlete running, a computer program running, a car running, or a nose running. Some or all of these possible meanings may be similar or closely related, but are not exactly the same.

In the same way, a word in the Biblical languages does not have one definition, but a range of possible definitions. One of the steps in a valid word study is to become aware of the range of possibilities before determining the meaning of a word which was intended by the author.

3. A word doesn't mean the same thing every time it is used

Because a word has a range of possible meanings, it does not mean exactly the same thing every time it is used. When Michael Jackson sang “I’m bad”, he did not mean the same thing as I do when I say that broccoli tastes “bad.” The Bible does not mean the exact same thing every time it uses the word “love.” Sometimes an author intends the same meaning when a word is used more than once, but not always. Therefore, there needs to be other reasons to think a word is used in the same way rather than just the fact that the same word is used.

It is tempting, whenever a word has powerful meaning in one passage to claim that this implication is present in every passage that uses the word. However, this would go against common sense. In conversation, we don't automatically assume that every word has the same meaning as when it was used by Shakespeare. When someone says they are “fasting” we don't think that they are moving quickly. We need the same kind of sanity when dealing with Biblical words.

For instance, in Romans 7:24, Paul asks “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” The next word in Greek is χάρις. This word is often translated “grace”. As a matter of fact, it is the standard New Testament word for “grace” in passages like Eph. 2:8. Some have therefore taught that “grace” is the answer to Paul's question. But this misses the fact that χάρις can also mean “thanks,” which is a much more appropriate meaning in Romans 7:25.

In Mark 5:6 the demon possessed man came and bowed down before Jesus. Because the Greek word used (προσκυνέω) means “to worship” in other passages, some have suggested this meaning is present in this passage. However, the word can simply mean “to bow down” and it is unnecessary, even irresponsible to insist that it means “worship” in this verse without good reasons for thinking so. Because the word can mean worship, does not mean that it does in this context.

4. An author intends a specific meaning whenever a word is used

Because a word has a range of possible meanings, and does not have every possible meaning whenever it is used, the author intends it to have a specific meaning which is part of, but not all of, the entire range of possible meanings.

In some cases, when an author uses the word “fast,” he is referring to a high rate of speed. In another case, “going without food” is intended. A word does not mean everything possible whenever it is used, but it does mean something. And that

something is intended by the author in using a word which has that meaning in its range of possible meanings.

On some occasions, the word meaning may be a bit ambiguous. We may not be 100% certain which specific meaning is intended. Sometimes that ambiguity is intentional. Sometimes authors are purposely vague or use double entendre. An author may occasionally coin a new meaning of an old word, thereby expanding its range of possible meanings. But in every case, an author has an intended meaning, even if we are not always completely certain what it is.

Therefore, in word studies, after you have familiarized yourself with the range of possible meanings, you must then attempt to narrow down from that range, what was intended in the specific use of the word in the passage you are studying.

5. Words can change meaning over time

All languages change over time. The range of possible meanings for a word can grow or shrink as new meanings are coined or old meanings drop out of use. For instance, two hundred years ago, the English word “gay” had nothing to do with homosexuality. If you were reading a book written during that time and came across this word, you would completely misunderstand if you insisted that the word must have the same meaning as it does now. Time moves in one direction, and the author of 200 years ago almost certainly would not have known what the word would mean now, let alone intended a meaning that was not current when he wrote.

For this reason, it is not very helpful in word studies to use a modern dictionary. It will tell you what a word means now, but will not tell you what it meant when the Bible was written. An English dictionary is even more unhelpful because the English word doesn't have the same range of meanings as the word in the Biblical language. It is more responsible to ask the range of possible meanings when the Bible passage was written, and to use resources that will tell you the range of the word the author chose.

It can be tempting to use a modern word which is related to a Biblical word to illustrate or explain the meaning of a Biblical word, but this is another form of the etymological mistake. Many people have noticed that the modern word “dynamite” comes from the Greek word δύναμις (“power”). It may seem like powerful³ preaching to speak of the “dynamite power of God.” However, dynamite was invented in modern times, hundreds of years after the Bible was written. Therefore the Biblical authors did not intend any thought about dynamite when they used this word. As a matter of fact, the power of God is infinitely greater than the power of dynamite. So making this connection, even in an illustration is entirely inappropriate, because it actually diminishes the scale of power illustrated. As another example, the Greek word μάρτυς (“witness”) is the source of the modern word “martyr.” In fact, the Greek word has the meaning “martyr” in its range of possible meanings. However, the primary meaning is “witness” and only later did it come to mean “someone who bears witness to their faith by suffering a martyr’s death.” This new meaning came

³ Pun intended.

about after, or near, the end of the New Testament period. So you should not assume “martyr” as this words meaning unless there is evidence to do so.

When doing word studies, try to obtain the range of possible meanings of a word when the New Testament author used the word, and disregard any meaning that was not possible for the author and first readers.

6. Idioms are not the same meaning as the individual words

An idiom is a word or group of words that has taken on a special meaning that is not related to the normal meaning of the individual words. For instance, the phrase “bite the dust” does not literally mean to chew on dirt. Rather it is a different way of saying “die” or “be defeated” in some way. Other English idioms are “off the hook,” “have a chip on your shoulder,” “made in the shade,” etc. Idioms are often creative ways of saying something for emphasis or rhetorical effect. Over time, these idioms become a standard part of the language, and so they are not a problem for a native speaker.

For a non-native speaker, idioms can be difficult if you try to find the meaning in the literal meaning of the individual words. The key is to recognize it as an idiom and treat it as a whole.

There are many examples of idioms in the Biblical languages. In both Greek and Hebrew, “son of...” may mean literal parentage, but it may also be used to describe a personal characteristic. “Sons of thunder” is saying nothing about James & John’s parents. Rather it is making a claim about the character they are demonstrating. In Hebrew, “son of 40 years” means “40 years old. In Hebrew “his nose grew hot” means “he became angry.”

The key to understanding idioms in the Biblical language is first to recognize that they exist. If you get stuck with a phrase that seems strange, you can investigate if it is an idiom. The standard Biblical language tools are very helpful with idioms as well as normal usage of words.

7. Languages use imagery and symbolism

The Biblical languages use poetic imagery and symbolic language in similar ways as English. Just as we naturally recognize in English that “the Lord is my shepherd” is not claiming that God is a literal shepherd or David is a sheep. So we should be careful not to confuse the use of literal and symbolic language in the Biblical languages.

It is helpful in this regard to clarify the difference between literal interpretation and literalism. As evangelicals, we insist on literal interpretation of the Bible. This means that we take the Bible to mean what the author intended using the normal meaning of the words as opposed to fanciful, allegorical meanings that are not closely governed by the Biblical words themselves. The meaning of the Bible is governed by the literal meaning of the words and concepts as intended by the authors and initial readers.

Part of responsible literal interpretation is the avoidance of literalism. Literalism is the denial that the Bible sometimes employs poetic, metaphor and symbolic language. Literalism would insist that God has a literal physical “right arm” because the Bible

uses that language. In other words, literalism is a failure to recognize when the Bible author is intending symbolic language and when literal description is used.

It is being debated more and more in recent decades what Bible passages are intended to be literal description and which are intended symbolically. And many people are claiming that key Bible doctrines are not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically. A good rule of thumb is to take a passage literally unless there is excellent evidence that the author intended it to function as poetic imagery or symbolic language. Responsible literal interpretation takes a word literally when the author intended it to be taken literally and recognizes metaphor and symbolic language when the author intended to communicate using metaphor and symbolic language.

8. Words take their meanings largely from their context

If words do not have one fixed meaning, but a range of possible meanings, if words can be used symbolically and idiomatically, if word meanings can change over time, how can we know the meaning of a word and understand what a Biblical author intended to communicate with this word? The key answer to all these issues is context. Word meaning comes partly from the range of possible meanings, word inflection (to be explained later), and the use of the word in a specific context. Words have meaning in the context of phrases and sentences. Sentences have meaning in paragraphs. Paragraphs have meaning in larger arguments, chapters, and books.

We recognize this automatically (common sense) in our native language. We automatically know what part of the possible range for the word “fast” is intended when someone uses the word with “car” or “rocket” or “bullet.” And when someone uses the word “fast” when talking about how hungry they are, we automatically recognize the specific meaning of the word.

Likewise, when working with Biblical languages, we need to conscientiously keep context as the determining factor in choosing a specific meaning from a wider range of possible meanings.

All of these principles will hopefully protect us from making mistakes in understanding when working with the Biblical languages. As promised, these seem like elementary common sense when working with English. The task is to keep them closely in mind when working with the Biblical languages to protect us from losing our common sense and believing nonsense. When working with the Bible, we need to aspire to a heightening of sanity, wisdom, good sense and critical thinking skill (in the best sense of “critical”).