

Word Studies

Uses and Abuses

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Most of us have heard someone at one time or another inform us, “In the Greek this word actually means...” something that is not quite brought out in the English. Often this so-called deeper meaning is based on what the teacher tells us the word originally meant. Sometimes the discussion is even prefaced by, “It just can’t be translated into English.” This is all so much nonsense. In fact, the preacher or teacher who regularly practices this runs the danger of creating in his congregation’s minds the nagging suspicion that they can’t really understand the Bible for themselves—since they don’t know Hebrew and Greek.¹

ETYMOLOGIES: WHAT IT “ORIGINALLY MEANT”

The Word Study approach to biblical teaching is prone to lexical overloading, forcing an individual word to carry more freight than it could ever carry by itself. A popular device for this move is etymologizing, that is, looking up what a word “originally” meant then teaching that this is what it “really” means. James Barr has taught us how wrong-headed this is:

The main point is that the etymology of a word is not a statement about its meaning but about its history; it is only as a historical statement that it can be responsibly asserted, and it is quite wrong to suppose that the etymology of a word is necessarily a guide either to its “proper” meaning in a later period or to its actual meaning in that period.²

This etymologizing business might seem like nothing more than a bit of innocent fun, an interesting side note in a sermon; however, it often works its way into arguments, giving a spurious twist to the meaning of the passage, which supposedly rises out of this “proper” meaning. Even more damaging, this often occurs at a crucial point, providing the argument’s “scholarly clincher.”

Look at some examples that are quite common in sermon and lesson material:

The Greek word for a witness or testimony is μαρτυρία, but we are often told that the “real” meaning of the term is martyr.

One of the Greek terms for power is δύναμις. Someone is always telling us that it means “something like dynamite.” No real harm comes from employing this “illustration”,

¹ It has also been my experience that some of the worst practitioners of this method are themselves poorly trained—or even totally untrained in the languages, and they therefore misunderstand how to use their lexical tools properly.

² James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 109.

but it lacks substance and really does not shed a bit of additional light on any occurrence of δύναμις.

A common Greek word for sin is ἁμαρτία. We regularly hear that the verbal form means, “to miss the mark.” At first glance this appears to be just another harmless diversion, and it is even backed up by an actual etymology. Classical usage supports this meaning; however, biblical usage indicates a stronger sense. Missing a mark, as in target shooting, is something decidedly less ethically oriented than “sin”, which is rebellion against God, disobedience of his commands, and faithless behavior. “Sin” is a death-dealing slave master (Rom. 6:1–7); saying that it is “missing the mark” hardly provides any significant biblical-theological insight.

Turn away from the biblical languages for a moment to our own language. When we hear the word *hussy* its etymological background is far from our minds. It originally had a positive sense, meaning *housewife* or referring to a strong country lass (16th century); but now it has a negative meaning. When I say someone is *nice*, I mean she is a pretty good sort of person, though *nice* came from the Latin word *nescius*, meaning *ignorant*, and it was so used in sixteenth-century English. These are genuine etymologies of the English words, but none of us would want to attempt any “rich” interpretive moves based on the etymologies of *hussy* and *nice*. Can you imagine the difficult time you would have explaining yourself if I heard you call my wife a “nice hussy”; it just wouldn’t be worth it would it? Try it with or without the etymologizations; neither approach could absolve you.

WORDS AND CONCEPTS: “PROOF-WORDING”

Another common error is attempting to make some hard-and-fast connection between concepts and words, as though a word itself carries a whole theology. The idea has arisen that we can look at the Hebrew or Greek language itself and determine contrasts between the “Greek mind” and the “Hebrew mind.” Moisés Silva notes that many people who should know better “read off theology from Hebrew and Greek morphology, syntax, and etymology.”¹

Others think they can see, in the languages themselves, various contrasts between Greek and Hebrew thought. Barr outlined the common claims based on this faulty method:—(1) Contrast between static (Greek, supposedly noun-based) and dynamic (Hebrew, supposedly verb-based). (2) Contrast between abstract (Greek) and concrete (Hebrew). (3) Contrast in the conception of man as duality (Greek) and unity (Hebrew).² This just will not pan. Eugene Nida, a fine linguist who works in the area of Bible translation, points out how unworkable it is to attempt global psychologization of a people merely on the basis of an inventory of their lexical stock.

¹ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Academie Books, 1983), 18.

² Barr, 10–12.

The idea that the Hebrew people had a completely different view of time because they had a different verbal system does not stand up under investigation. It would be just as unfounded to claim that people of the English-speaking world have lost interest in sex because the gender distinctions in nouns and adjectives have been largely eliminated, or that Indo-Europeans are very time conscious because in many languages there are time-distinctions in the verbs. But no people seems more time-oriented than the Japanese, and their verbal system is not too different from the aspectual structure of Hebrew. Furthermore, few peoples are so little interested in time as some of the tribes of Africa, many of whose languages have far more time distinctions than any Indo-European language has.¹

Trying to argue to such sweeping conclusions from an analysis of lexical stock leads to all kinds of absurdities. And it is just that sort of method that has led some people to argue that the Hebrew mind is “dynamic, vigorous, passionate,” while the Greek mind is “static, peaceful, moderate, and harmonious.”²

This misguided overemphasis on locating meaning in distinctive lexical stock sometimes provokes statements like these: “There is just no term for it in English,” or “It just can’t be said in English.” Barr argued, “some forms of theological interpretation so emphasize the peculiarity of Hebrew and the reflection of the thought structure by the language that they lead in principle to the untranslatability of the Bible.”³ Though some loss of nuance might occur in translation, the most likely problem when someone complains that a word is untranslatable is that he is “insisting on reading into it an impossible sense.”⁴ When teachers say an idea in the Hebrew (or Greek) just can’t be translated into English, what they are proposing probably wouldn’t make any more sense to a native reader of Hebrew or Greek than it does to their own English audience—it is probably nonsense in any language.

A proof-texting approach fails to do any real justice to the richness of biblical teaching, but proof-wording has even less value. Theological concepts can not be cut down to the size of word studies without potentially serious loss of meaning—or even actual misunderstanding. The person who is heavy into word studies will not necessarily be a theological heavyweight; quite the contrary, he may find himself a little light on genuine biblical understanding. Perusing the concordance, theological dictionary, and handy guide to word studies will never substitute for reading and re-reading the Bible if you want to learn what it teaches.

¹ Eugene A. Nida, “The Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972), 83.

² T. Bowman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 27.

³ Barr, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

EXAMPLES

The Greek words meaning “to love” give us a common example of how “insights” from the Greek often break down and, in fact, prove quite the opposite of what the teacher intends. Teachers will set up rigid distinctions between the words ἀγάπη, φίλος, and ἔρως. They will insist that ἀγάπη is divine, self-sacrificing love; φίλος is the love befitting friends, but nothing so noble as ἀγάπη; and ἔρως is erotic love connected to paganism and base sexuality.

Let’s see how this word study works if we actually look at biblical usage. The first thing we note is that the comment on ἔρως may have some substance: it is never used in the New Testament, and it occurs only twice in the Greek OT (Prov 7:18; 24:51 [30:16]). However, when we look at the evidence for the use of the other two terms in the NT, the clear-cut distinction between ἀγάπη and φίλος for divine and human love fails.

For an example of an overloaded word definition, use the “amplified” meaning of φίλος in the *Amplified Bible*: “a deep, instinctive, personal affection... as for a close friend” (John 21:15–17). Looking at the passages that use the word φιλεῖν should give us some clue as to the adequacy of that definition and the accuracy of the divine-human distinction between ἀγάπη and φίλος.

“The Father loves (φιλεῖν) the Son” (John 5:20)

“The Father himself loves (φιλεῖν) you, because you have loved me” (John 16:27)

“Those whom I [Jesus] love (φιλεῖν) I rebuke and discipline” (Rev 3:19)

These are positive expressions of the word, which all translate nicely “to love.” Notice, however, that these are expressions of divine love, even though the term is φιλεῖν rather than ἀγαπᾶν. There are also some negative uses of φιλεῖν, and they are surely not speaking of “a deep, instinctive, personal affection... as for a close friend.”

Hypocrites “love (φιλεῖν) to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men” (Matt 6:5)

Pharisees “love (φιλεῖν) the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues” (Matt 23:6)

“The man who loves (φιλεῖν) his life will lose it” (John 12:25).

Let’s try the *Amplified Bible* for an example of overloading ἀγαπᾶν: “that reasoning, intentional, spiritual devotion such as is inspired by God’s love for and in us” (1 Cor 13:1). Now look at how the NT uses the word ἀγαπᾶν:

“The Father loves (ἀγαπᾶν) the Son” (John 3:35)

“God so loved (ἀγαπᾶν) the world” (John 3:16)

There was a “disciple whom Jesus loved (ἀγαπᾶν)” (John 13:23)

“Jesus loved (ἀγαπᾶν) Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5)

“Men ought to love (ἀγαπᾶν) their wives as their own bodies” (Eph 5:28)

You should “love (ἀγαπᾶν) your enemies” (Matt 5:44)

Christians should “love (ἀγαπᾶν) the brotherhood of believers” (1 Pet 2:17)

There is a crown of righteousness prepared for those “who have longed for (ἀγαπᾶν) his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8)

These examples appear to support the view that ἀγαπᾶν might mean “to love as only God loves”; something that might well be higher than human love—that is, higher than φιλεῖν. But when we look at other evidence, we see the necessity of moderating that exclusive view.

“Even ‘sinners’ love (ἀγαπᾶν) those who love (ἀγαπᾶν) them” (Luke 6:32)

“Pharisees... love (ἀγαπᾶν) the most important seats in the synagogue and greetings in the market places” (Luke 11:43)

“Pharisees... love (ἀγαπᾶν) praise from men more than praise from God” (John 12:42–43).

“Men loved (ἀγαπᾶν) darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19)

Demas forsook Paul because he “loved (ἀγαπᾶν) this world” (2 Tim 4:10)

“Balaam... loved (ἀγαπᾶν) the wages of wickedness” (2 Pet 2:15)

In the first set of references for ἀγαπᾶν, we could have replaced the word “love” with the deeper meaning that the *Amplified Bible* used; but in the second set of references, replacing it with “that reasoning, intentional, spiritual devotion such as is inspired by God’s love for and in us” would certainly not work. It just would never do to say “Sinners also love with that reasoning, spiritual devotion such as is inspired by God’s love for and in them” (Luke 6:27). No one would really be willing to say that the sinner’s love for darkness might be inspired by God’s love for and in them (John 3:19).

The concept of love is richly variegated in its divine and human and its positive and negative manifestations; however, no word or set of words conveys the biblical teaching on love except as they are read in meaningful contexts. With no knowledge at all of Greek and Hebrew, the faithful Bible reader can do a far more useful WORD-Study by reading and re-reading the passages that speak of love than the most ambitious proponent of word studies will ever pull off using his cherished proof-words.

I am not saying word studies, rightly understood and employed, are useless; I am only saying the wrongful applications like those I’ve outlined lack theological richness and, in fact, may be theologically misleading. Concordances serve an important purpose: they can be like preliminary exploratory trenches at an archeological dig, which cut through the layers of the area being studied. They are often helpful for getting a feel for the lay of the land, for indicating the areas that might prove the most fruitful for further investigation. In the end, however, we must open up the whole site, one layer at a time, carefully charting our every step.

When you approach the words in the Bible, approach them as words in the Bible, keeping their actual usage and particular context in mind. Don’t employ etymologization,

because that is only an attempt to read in a meaning from a context far removed historically from the biblical context. And don't overload words as though an individual word could carry the freight of an entire systematic theology. Words are such little things until they are spoken in phrases, sentences, and books and in the Book; it is in that Book's entire message that the word-based message develops its function as the power of God for salvation. That is why we have always emphasized the necessity of preaching the Full Gospel. I challenge you to "preach the Word" rather than to give mere word studies.