

Section 7: THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL METHOD: LEXICAL ANALYSIS

I. Introduction

WHICH IS TO BE MASTER?

"There's *glory* for you!" said Humpty Dumpty.

"I don't know what you mean by '*glory*,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But '*glory*' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The *question* is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

– Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

II. The Importance of Lexical Analysis

A. Gordon Fee: "In any piece of literature words are the basic building blocks for conveying meaning." For this reason, determining the meaning of significant words in a given passage is a critical step in understanding the overall meaning of that passage.

B. Roy Zuck: "Thoughts are expressed through words, and words are the building blocks of sentences. Therefore to determine God's thoughts we need to study His words and how they are associated in sentences. If we neglect the meanings of words and how they are used, we have no way of knowing whose interpretations are correct."

C. One word may have different meanings depending on the context.

Roy Zuck: "The word *trunk* may mean part of a tree, the proboscis of an elephant, a compartment at the rear of a car, a piece of luggage, the thorax of an insect, a part of the human body, or a circuit between telephone line

¹ Notes compiled from The Master's Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God's Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).

exchanges. Obviously it cannot mean all these things or even several of them at once in a single usage.”

- D. Lexical analysis involves determining the meaning of a word in its context.

INTERPRETIVE QUESTION: What is the intended meaning of *this* word in *this* context?

- E. We must pursue what the words of a passage meant at the time they were written in the context in which they occur (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard).
- F. Waymeyer: “The goal of determining the meaning of key words in a given passage flows out of the goal of determining the meaning of Scripture in general. That goal is to answer the question: *What did the biblical author intend his original reader(s) to understand as the meaning of this word?*”

III. The Process of Lexical Analysis

The process of determining the meaning of key words in any given passage involves the following three steps:

Three-Step Process:

1. Determine Which Words Need to be Studied
2. Determine the Range of Meanings of Each Key Word
3. Determine Which Nuance of Meaning Best Fits the Context

A. Step One: Determine Which Words Need to be Studied

It is neither practical nor necessary to carefully analyze the meaning of every single word in a given passage of Scripture, “for the meanings of most terms will be clear when the student compares a good sample of modern translations” (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard). At the same time, the interpreter must be careful not to overlook and neglect a word that is crucial to an accurate interpretation of the passage under consideration. For this reason, the interpreter must begin his lexical analysis by identifying which terms in the passage must be studied.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES:

- Do not select words that are obvious in their meaning.
“He *said*”

- Do not select words that clearly play no significant role in the meaning of the passage.
- Do not select words that appear in italics (since these words do not occur in the original and have been supplied by the translators).
- Select words that you are not familiar with.

Ephesians 1:9-10: “administration”

- Select words that appear to have theological significance.

Romans 3:25: “propitiation”

Ephesians 2:7: “redemption”

- Select words that appear to be central to the point of the entire verse or passage.

1 John 2:15: “Do not love the *world*”

Romans 11:29: “irrevocable”

- Select words that will clearly make a significant difference in the meaning of the passage but that seem ambiguous or unclear.

1 Thess 4:4: “each must know how to possess his own *vessel*”

- Select words that are repeated or that emerge as motifs in a section or paragraph.

Matt 5:1-12: “blessed” (9x)

B. Step Two: Determine the Range of Meanings of Each Key Word

Waymeyer: “Most words can be used to mean different things in different contexts. For example, among other things, a “board” can refer either to a piece of wood or to a group of individuals on a board of trustees. The variety of possible meanings that given word possesses is often referred to as the range of meanings of that word. A word will communicate only one of those meanings in a given context, but before identifying that intended meaning, the interpreter must first determine the possibilities.”

As Kaiser notes, the reason it is so important to begin by determining the range of meanings of a given word is that the meaning of words is

determined “by custom and general usage current in the times when the author wrote them. No intelligent writer deliberately departs from...the current usage that is prevalent in a particular age, without having a good reason for doing so and without furnishing some explicit textual clue that he has done so.” For this reason, the current usage of a given word – with all of the possible nuances of meaning – is the place to begin.

Dictionary: “The Meaning of Everything”

WHERE TO LOOK:

The two most helpful resources for discovering the range of meanings of a given word are lexicons and concordances. The list of possible definitions provided for each word in a good lexicon *is* that range of meanings. In contrast, a concordance allows the interpreter to look up each biblical use of the word himself to seek to determine that range of meanings. For this reason, a good lexicon is the place to begin, but concordances can sometimes provide supplemental information. In addition, by comparing various translations of a given passage, the interpreter can sometimes discover different possible nuances of meaning (e.g., *didaskalia* in 2 Tim 3:16 is translated “teaching” in the NASB and “doctrine” in the NKJV).

▪ Hebrew Lexicons

- Logos: BDB (Brown Driver Briggs), Theological Workbook of the OT
- *William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Boston: Brill, 2001.
- Willem A. Van Gemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
- William D. Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

▪ Greek Lexicons

- Logos: TDNT, Louw-Nida, etc

- *Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1986.
- Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- William D. Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

FOR EXAMPLE: The Range of Meanings of “World” (*kosmos*)

- that which serves to beautify through decoration, *adornment, adorning*
- condition of orderliness, *orderly arrangement, order*
- the sum total of everything here and now, *the world, the (orderly) universe*
- the sum total of all beings above the level of the animals, *the world*
- planet earth as a place of habitation, *the world*
- humanity in general, *the world*
- the system of human existence in its many aspects, *the world*
- collective aspects of an entity, *totality, sum total* (BDAG, 561-63)

OBSERVATIONS:

- Note the diversity in these various nuances of meaning.
- Discovering the possibilities is clearly not the end of the process!

C. **Step Three: Determine Which Nuance of Meaning Best Fits the Context**

- A. Some interpreters tend to treat a given word as if it were intended to communicate *all* of its possible nuances of meaning in a single use. This is an unsound approach, for except in very rare instances where creative language is at play (e.g., a pun or double-entendre), a word will have only one nuance of meaning in a given context. For example, if someone were to state that “Hillary Clinton decided to run for the office of president,” the fact that the word “run” sometimes refers to a ravel in a woman’s nylon is entirely irrelevant. The question is not, “What does this word *sometimes* mean?” but rather, “What does this word mean here in this context?”

WARNING: “Be sure that you exercise care to avoid...imposing any of the possible senses onto a specific use. This temptation is especially great where one meaning fits the interpreter’s theology or pet position” (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard). Instead, the interpreter must seek to discern the specific nuance of meaning intended by the biblical author who used the word.

- B. Like people, words are known by the company they keep – it is the *context* in which a given word occurs that will serve as the chief indicator as to its intended meaning (Kaiser).

Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard: “Once the potential meanings of the word are known, *contextual factors* become the supreme arbitrator for selecting the most probable meaning. Often the general subject of the passage will strongly favor one semantic domain of the word. This marks the key principle: The use of a word in a specific context constitutes the single most crucial criterion for the meaning of a word. Thus the interpreter must scrupulously evaluate the total context to decide which of the possible meanings fits best in the passage under study.” In other words, context is king!

- C. In this process, the interpreter should be aware that good exegetical commentaries are often helpful in determining the intended meaning of a given word. At the same time, the use of commentaries should not become a substitute for the lexical analysis of the interpreter.

PRACTICE: Consult the immediate context of each of the following words to determine which nuance of meaning was intended by the biblical writer:

- “Near” in Philippians 4:5:
 - nearness of place
 - nearness of time
- Teleios in Philippians 3:15:
 - moral perfection
 - spiritual maturity
- Didaskalia in 2 Timothy 3:16:
 - “teaching” (used actively to refer to the activity of teaching)
 - “doctrine” (used passively to refer to that which is taught)
- Protokos in Colossians 1:15:
 - one who was born first (as in Heb 11:28)
 - one who is preeminent and superior to others
- “Healed” in 1 Peter 2:24:
 - physical healing (when used literally)
 - spiritual healing (when used figuratively)
- “Walk” in Ephesians 2:10:
 - to physically walk around
 - to conduct one’s life in a certain manner

NOTE: See how Paul uses the same verb elsewhere in the book of Ephesians (2:2; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15).

- “Sleep” in 1 Corinthians 11:30:
 - natural sleep
 - the death of the body
- “Heart” in Psalm 19:8:
 - an individual’s physical organ (heart)
 - an individual’s thoughts
 - an individual’s emotions
 - an individual’s will
 - an individual’s immaterial nature in general
- “Faith” in Ephesians 6:16:
 - used subjectively to refer to an individual’s personal trust or faith in a person or a promise – “faith” (as in Eph 2:8)
 - used objectively to refer to the content of divine revelation that constitutes what Christians believe – “the faith” (as in Jude 3)
- *Suneidesis* in 1 Peter 2:19:
 - “conscience” (i.e., the believer’s conscience before God informs him this is the right thing to do – that it is God’s will – and this accountability motivates him to bear up under suffering)
 - “consciousness” or “awareness” (i.e., the believer’s trust-filled awareness of God’s presence and never-failing care enables him to bear up under unjust suffering)

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES:

- Sometimes the use of a synonym or an antonym in a parallel clause may clarify the meaning of a word (e.g., Prov 5:1; 15:1).

The meaning of a given word may or may not reflect its etymology, but the interpreter should not *assume* the meaning of a word can be determined by etymology. Put simply, the range of meanings of a given word is found not in the history of its development – or in the root words that make up that word – but rather in the current usage of the word at the time it was written. See pages 44-51 of Moises Silva’s *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* for a helpful discussion of the role of etymology in the process of exegesis.

B. The Historical Fallacy

Because new meanings of words develop over time while old meanings become obsolete – consider, for example, the evolution of the English word “gay” in the 20th century – it is essential that the interpreter determine the range of meanings that was common at the time when the word was written. In contrast to this approach, sometimes interpreters appeal to the meaning of a word that was common either long before or long after the writing of the passage in which it occurs. Carson divides this fallacy into two separate categories:

- **Semantic Anachronism**

“This fallacy occurs when a late use of a word is read back into earlier literature” (Carson). For example, because the English word “dynamite” is etymologically derived from the Greek word *dunamis* (“power”), many interpreters read the concept of dynamite back into the New Testament use of that word even though dynamite did not exist until centuries later.

- **Semantic Obsolescence**

“Here the interpreter assigns to a word in his text a meaning that the word in question used to have in earlier times, but that is no longer found within the live, semantic range of the word. That meaning, in other words, is semantically obsolete” (Carson) and therefore cannot be the meaning intended by the biblical author in the passage under consideration.

C. The Fallacy of Majority Rule

Some interpreters assume that a given use of a word is more likely to carry nuance-of-meaning A than nuance-of-meaning B if the word means

A more often than it does B elsewhere in the New Testament. This could be referred to as *the fallacy of majority rule*. For example, in Titus 1:6 Paul writes that elders must have children who are *pistos*. In this verse, there is a legitimate question as to whether *pistos* means “believing” or “faithful.” When the word *pistos* is used to describe people elsewhere in the New Testament, it means “believing” 12 times and “faithful” 36 times. To commit the fallacy of majority rule is to insist that *pistos* should be translated “faithful” in Titus 1:6 because that’s what it means in the majority of its other uses in the New Testament.

QUALIFICATION: At the same time, when a given nuance of meaning is either *extremely rare* or *questionable at best*, the burden of proof is against that particular meaning in a given context.

- *Anastasis* = Regeneration in Revelation 20:5

In none of the 42 times that the word *anastasis* (“resurrection”) is used elsewhere in the New Testament does it refer to the regeneration of the believer. For this reason, the heavy burden of proof is against the interpretation that *anastasis* refers to regeneration in Revelation 20:5.

- *Eis* = “Because of” in Acts 2:38

The Greek preposition *eis* is used 1,607 times in the New Testament, and only three times does it *possibly* mean “because of” (Matt 3:11; 12:41; Luke 11:32). For this reason, the burden of proof is against the interpretation that *eis* means “because of” in Acts 2:38.

D. The Fallacy of Illegitimate Totality Transfer

This fallacy consists of the assumption “that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range” (Carson). Put another way, this fallacy occurs when the interpreter imports more “theological baggage” into a given use of the word than was intended by the biblical author.

E. The Fallacy of Assuming Technical Meaning

This fallacy consists of assuming “that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning—a meaning usually derived either from a

subset of the evidence or from the interpreter's personal systematic theology" (Carson). For example, the interpreter may assume that the Greek verb *dikaiow* ("to justify") always refers to the act of forensic justification in which God declares the believing sinner to be righteous in the divine courtroom, but this is not the case in verses such as Matthew 12:27 and James 2:24.

F. The Fallacy of Equating Sense and Referent

The "sense" of a word is its meaning, that is, the actual concept which is conveyed by the word itself. In contrast, the "referent" of a word is the specific thing that the word stands for or refers to in a given context. For example:

- The Sense of "Man" = an adult male
- The Referent of "Man" in 1 Tim 2:5 = Jesus

Except in the case of proper nouns (e.g., "Chicago," "Nero," "Pearl Harbor"), the sense and referent of a given word is rarely one and the same. The failure to distinguish between sense and referent may lead to reading the referent of a word in one context into the sense of that same word in another context. This is very similar to fallacies D and F above.

G. The Fallacy of Obscure Meanings

This fallacy occurs when the interpreter appeals to an unknown or unlikely meaning of a given word to support a novel interpretation of a given verse or passage of Scripture. For example, in spite of an absence of evidence for this nuance of meaning, some feminist interpreters have insisted that the Greek word *kephale* means "source" or "origin" in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 rather than "head." As Carson notes, there are many examples of interpreters committing this fallacy: "Some spring from poor research, perhaps dependence on others without checking the primary sources; others spring from the desire to make a certain interpretation work out, and interpreter forsakes even-handedness. In some instances an intrinsically unlikely or ill-attested meaning receives detailed defense and may even become entrenched in the church."

CAUTION: Don't search for a nuance of meaning that fits with your desired or preconceived interpretation of the text. Let the Word of God say what it has to say.