“W”hen 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.” So asserts Lewis Carroll’s colorful character in *Through the Looking Glass*. That may be the case for Humpty Dumpty’s use of words, but it is emphatically not the case for a person’s interpretation of words—especially in God’s written revelation to man.

When the Bible uses a word, it means exactly what the Author intended it to mean—neither more nor less. The Bible cannot mean what it never meant. When we read the Bible, our task is to discover what the Author meant. Sometimes that involves investigating the text right down to the smallest meaningful component of written language—a single word. Analyzing a word in the Bible is doing a word study.

The Value of Word Studies

Word studies are among the most rewarding methods of serious Bible study. Completing a word study is as satisfying as exiting a mine with a sack full of jewels. Word studies shed light on the meanings of passages that the reader may otherwise misinterpret. They also help the reader appreciate difficult—but theologically significant—passages.

For example, what does “only begotten” mean in John 3:16? Does it mean that Jesus was the only Son whom God the Father begat? “Only begotten” translates the Greek word *monogenes*, which some have assumed to be a compound of the words *monos* (“only”) and *gennao* (“I beget”). Consult a concordance and you will find that *monogenes* occurs nine times in the New Testament. One of those instances is Hebrews 11:17, which calls Isaac Abraham’s...
only begotten son. Was Isaac really Abraham’s only son? No, Genesis teaches that Abraham first fathered Ishmael. However, Isaac was Abraham’s unique son. That is what monogenes means: unique or one of a kind. It more likely is a compound of the words monos (“only”) and genos (“kind”). So, John 3:16 asserts that God gave His one-of-a-kind Son.

Word studies are valuable for the insight they provide in interpreting a word in a specific passage, but they are not necessarily quick and easy to do. They demand research, but should be condensed to be practical.

**Steps for Word Studies**

**Step 1:** Choose a word to study. Select a word from a specific passage in your English Bible and find out what word that is in the original text (Hebrew for most of the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament). You can do this in several ways: use an English Bible keyed with numbers matching Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, use a Greek-English interlinear Bible, or purchase a Bible software program, such as Online Bible or BibleWorks.

But how will you decide which word to study? Here are some options that may help you.

1. Study a word that you encountered in your devotional reading that you do not quite understand, such as “imputed” in Romans 4 or “propitiation” in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

2. Study a word with theological significance, such as “redemption” or “sanctification.”

3. Study a word whose significance is unclear in certain passages. (One example is the word “first-born.” Christ is described as the first-born among many brethren [Rom. 8:29], the first-born of all creation [Col. 1:15], and the first-born from the dead [Col. 1:18]. What does that mean—and equally importantly, what does that not mean? “First-born” translates the Greek word prototokos, which may refer to one’s order of birth or may emphasize one’s status, namely, preeminence.)

4. Study a word that appears infrequently. Generally, such words are less daunting to study thoroughly. For example, the word proorizo (“predestine”) occurs only six times. Of course, higher-frequency words are not less rewarding or significant. They just require more time.

5. Study a word with apparent synonyms and antonyms such as “love” or “hate” (see Matt. 6:24; John 12:25; Rom. 9:13).

6. Study a word with figurative meanings such as the New Testament word for “flesh” (sarx).

7. Study a word that occurs frequently in a single passage or that is the main theme of a passage, such as the word “sin” (hamartia) in Romans 6, “law” (nomos) in Romans 7, “love” (agape) in 1 Corinthians 13, or “patience” (makrothumia) in James 5.

**Step 2:** Compare the Hebrew or Greek word with its English translations. It may be enlightening to compile the different ways English translations render a word. For instance, the KJV translates the Hebrew word chesed as “mercy” 149 times, along with 9 other ways. However, the NASB translates it as “lovingkindness” 176 times, along with 18 other ways.

**Step 3:** Find and organize all (or at least a representative sampling) of the uses of the word in the Old Testament or New Testament. Some people may skip this step because looking up every occurrence could take hours, depending on how many times the word occurs. However, even if a word occurs hundreds of times, this time-consuming step is richly rewarding and is part of the thrill of personal discovery. You can perform this step by looking up all the references for a Hebrew or Greek word in Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible or a computer program like BibleWorks. When you do, take your time. Meditate on the word and its uses in various contexts. Cultivate a consuming preoccupation with the different ways the Author uses words.

When studying an action word, look for the subject (Who/what is doing the action?), the object (Who/what is receiving the action?), related words in the context including synonyms and antonyms, plus any other contextual clues. If you are studying an Old Testament word, remember that Hebrew poetry uses parallelism (rhyme of thought rather than rhyme of sound as in English).

**Step 4:** Determine the word’s range of meaning. Rarely does a word mean exactly the same thing in every context. Just flip through an English dictionary. Nearly every entry has multiple definitions because words have different meanings in relationship to other words.

For example, consider the range of meaning of the English word “run” in the following sentences: I run two miles a day. She has a run in her nylons. That grapevine runs through the fence. My nose runs when I have a cold. I need to run to the store. My new computer runs faster than my last one. I try not to let the water run when I’m not using it, because that runs up the water bill. I ran out of gas today. Someday I’ll run for president.

That’s quite a range of meaning for one small word! The Oxford English Dictionary lists 82 separate categories of definitions for the verb “run,” and many of those categories break down into more precise definitions. Obviously, “run” cannot convey all of those meanings at the same time, nor can an interpreter make it mean whatever he wants. He must interpret the meaning in context. Understanding words in the Bible works the same way. You cannot look a word up in a dictionary and arbitrarily pick whichever definition you prefer. A specific word means only one thing: what the Author meant. The context reveals what the Author intended.
Step 5: Determine the word’s meaning in key passages. Observing how the word functions in nontheological contexts often sheds light on its theological usage. Here are several examples:

1. The Greek word for forgiveness (aphiemai) is also the word for Jesus’ commanding a fever to “leave” a sick person (Luke 4:39). This nontheological context illustrates that forgiveness involves a dismissal of our sin.

2. Chata is one of the Hebrew nouns for sin. Judges 20:16 describes stone-slingers who would not miss at a hair. The word miss translates chata. Similarly, sin involves “missing the mark” of God’s perfection.

3. Zakar is the Hebrew verb for “remember.” What does God mean when He promises, “Their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:34)? God is not promising that He will choose no longer to be omniscient with reference to their sins. God is promising that He will not be actively preoccupied with forgiven sin. Nontheological passages demonstrate this meaning (see Gen. 8:1; 30:22; Esther 2:1).

Dangers of Word Studies

Word studies can be dangerous! D. A. Carson’s Exegetical Fallacies lists sixteen specific errors (pp. 27–64). (Insufficient space does not permit listing those here, but I recommend this section of Carson’s book.) The main error is determining a word’s meaning by its etymology (called the root fallacy). Etymology is the history of a word’s meaning and sometimes involves defining the compound parts of the word. However, the way to avoid this error is to focus on the word’s contextual usage, not its etymology. Etymology can be helpful (e.g., a bookshelf is a shelf for books), but it is not the governing factor in a word’s meaning.

For example, the words metanoeo (“repent”) and metanoia (“repentance”) do not mean only a change of mind even though their etymology seems to indicate that (meta means “after,” hence, change; noeo/nous mean “think/mind”). Based on the words’ usage, they refer to a change of one’s mind, emotions, and will that necessarily results in a change of life.

Here’s an illustration: Can you imagine people 2,000 years from now defining the English word “butterfly” based on its etymology? An airborne dairy product? That would be outrageous because contextual usage—not etymology—determines meaning. In word studies, as with all of Bible interpretation, context reigns! Abuse results from hasty conclusions, incomplete study, and faulty assumptions. Carson suggests that the principal cause for such abuse stems from a limited knowledge of original languages (p. 64). This should not frighten you from doing word studies, but it should suggest sensible caution as you do them.

Conclusion

What’s in a word? A word can be loaded with significance. Just be especially careful to interpret a word accurately in its context. When the Bible uses a word, it means just what the Author intended it to mean—neither more nor less. So don’t interpret words the way Humpty Dumpty uses them. Now get out your Bible tools and start digging!

*The New Testament’s standard Greek lexicon (i.e., dictionary), known as BDAG, gives only two definitions for monogoni: (1) “pert. to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship, one and only, only,” and (2) “pert. to being the only one of its kind or class, unique (in kind).” Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed., revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 658.

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Further Sources Explaining Word Studies

The following sources offer helpful information on word studies. This list progresses from simpler explanations to more technical studies.

William D. Mounce, Greek for the Rest of Us: Mastering Bible Study without Mastering Biblical Languages (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 198–220. This book is ideal for people who want to be familiar enough with Greek to use it in Bible study. It comes with a CD-ROM on which Mounce lectures through the book in easy-to-understand language.


