

THE MEANINGS OF BIBLICAL WORDS

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One of the currently more popular aspects of exegesis is the word study.¹ This is not surprising, for it is natural to wonder what the meaning of a Hebrew or Greek word that lies behind the English text is when encountering a difficult or intriguing statement in the Scriptures. Yet, despite the impression that is sometimes given, the primary meaning contained in the pages of the Word of God is found in what the writers say in the sentences themselves, rather than in the words that are the building blocks of those sentences.² This is not to say that words do not have meaning, but that it is only when words are examined within the sentences of the biblical text that their meaning can be discerned.³ For that reason God has given us literary works rather than a dictionary in which his message has been communicated to us. Recognition of the importance of context for determining word meaning has been one of the positive results of the work of modern linguistics.

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1. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 82. A word study is referred to in much of the scholarly literature as “lexical analysis.” Throughout this article “word study” is used simply to decrease the number of new words that need to be learned here by any reader who is new to modern linguistic study.

2. Barr, *Semantics*, 270.

3. Since the concern of this article is with words in the biblical text, the specific issues related to the meanings of words found outside a literary context (such as in spoken language) will not be discussed.

Although it is difficult to define, modern linguistics can perhaps best be regarded as the scientific study of language.⁴ That is, languages are studied to determine principles of how they are used in general in order to communicate. For although languages differ from one another, there are similarities between them that, when recognized, can help us to better understand how meaning is conveyed in each individual language. Particularly since the publication of James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* in 1961, biblical scholars have become aware of the importance of modern linguistics for an accurate exegesis of the biblical text.

Yet despite Barr's best efforts, there is still a large chasm between modern linguistics and much of current biblical scholarship.⁵ It is the purpose of this article to help bridge the chasm between modern linguistics and one small component of biblical exegesis: word studies. In order to accomplish this task, a few basic principles of modern linguistics are outlined, followed by a discussion of six issues that have a significant bearing upon what words mean. Once this theoretical information has been presented, the focus of the paper turns to the practical issue of how one determines the meaning of a biblical word. To this end a three-step process is given for determining word meaning, followed by two examples of how word meaning is established: a Hebrew verb and a Greek noun.

This article has been written primarily for those who have at minimum an elementary, first-year level grasp of either Hebrew or Greek. Those who do not have this education may still benefit from the theoretical half of the paper, but will be unable to utilize the practical steps outlined for determining the meanings of biblical words.⁶ The reader who is new to modern linguistics

4. See Porter, "Ancient Languages," for a more complete explanation and discussion of this definition.

5. See the comments in Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 82; Porter, *Studies*, 60; Silva, *Biblical Words*, 20–22.

6. It is my contention that without some ability to examine Hebrew or Greek syntactical structures, the meaning of a biblical word in a particular passage cannot with any certainty be determined. This fact should become clear

will find plenty of new terminology in this article. It is assumed that some readers have no knowledge of these linguistic terms, so each one is defined and explained below. The use of this terminology may seem cumbersome to some, but learning these terms will make it easier to understand other linguistic literature that may (and hopefully will) be read.

Linguistic Principles for Word Studies

The following three linguistic principles act as the foundation for a discussion of how to determine word meaning. These three principles are merely the tip of the iceberg that is modern linguistics, but each principle given below is particularly relevant for a study of the meanings of words. For a more complete introduction to linguistics, the reader is encouraged to begin with a perusal of the sources referenced within this article.⁷

1. Languages Have Structure

Each language is a cohesive whole composed of interrelated parts and can be likened to a basketball game. A player in the game who has possession of the ball is able to choose one of a number of different options: pass the ball, dribble the ball, or shoot the ball, to name just three. Furthermore, the actions of one player on a basketball court impact the actions and choices of the other players. For instance, if the player in possession of the ball shoots the ball, the actions of many of the other players on the court will be different than if the player who possesses the ball passes it or drives to the basket. The choice made even by the player with the ball is usually impacted by the position and actions of the other players on the court. The actions of the players are interrelated. However, since a basketball game is a cohesive whole with defined spatial and temporal boundaries,

with the reading of the article, in which I argue that context (including syntax) is essential for determining word meaning.

7. See especially Porter, "Ancient Languages."

the actions of the players in one basketball game do not directly impact the actions of the players in another basketball game.

Similarly, the user of a language is able to choose which words to use and how to combine those words into sentences. The selection by a user of a particular element in that language implies not choosing other available elements.⁸ As Porter writes, “For example, selection of the Greek perfect tense automatically implies not selecting the present or aorist, and it is the relationship among these tense forms which establishes their function and meaning within the language. Or selection of the Hebrew perfect implies not choosing the imperfect.”⁹ The recognition of structure in language is relevant for word studies because the meanings of the words in a language impact one another. As Lyons writes: “Any broadening in the sense of one lexeme [i.e., word] involves a corresponding narrowing in the sense of one or more of its neighbours.”¹⁰ The words in a language are interrelated.

Since a language is a cohesive whole, words in a language have meaning independent of the meanings of words in other languages. This is important to recognize because those who learn Hebrew and Greek vocabulary are usually not given definitions for words, but rather English word-substitutes.¹¹ Such an approach is a simple and effective way to learn biblical words, but the danger is that it can also give the impression that the Hebrew and Greek words mean the same thing as the English word-substitutes. Since each language has a structure and is a cohesive whole, the meaning of a word is determined by how it is used within its own language, and how that word relates to the meanings of the other words in the language.

8. Ibid., 152.

9. Ibid.

10. Lyons, *Semantics*, 1:252. The comments made here allow for the possibility that a language may have gaps and overlaps in its lexical field (the lexical field is all of the available words in the language); see Ibid., 1:260.

11. An English word-substitute is known as a “gloss.”

2. *Meaning is Different than Translation*

The second principle makes explicit what has already been alluded to, and that is, that there is a difference between determining the meaning of a word or a sentence and being able to translate that word or sentence into another language.¹² It is certainly true that translation is an important element of biblical studies; without it, millions of people would not have personal access to the Scriptures. However, since each language is a coherent structure, it is important to recognize that the meaning of a word is determined by how it is used within the structure of that language, rather than by the meanings of the words used to translate it into English.¹³ Lyons demonstrates the importance of this when he writes:

We could not reasonably say that “mat” has two meanings because it is translatable into French by means of two non-synonymous lexemes [words], “tapis” and “paillason”; or that “tapis” has three meanings because it can be translated into English with three non-synonymous lexemes, “rug,” “carpet,” and “mat.” The meanings of words (their sense and denotation) are internal to the language to which they belong.¹⁴

A focus on translation of the biblical languages may at times hinder understanding of the text, for ambiguity can be present in a translation that was not present in the original text due to the difficulty of conveying information that was originally written in another language. Similarly, ambiguity in the original text can be eliminated by a translation, presenting the reader with only one of two or more options for the text’s meaning.¹⁵ Translation should not be the primary goal of studying biblical words, for

12. Porter, “Ancient Languages,” 166.

13. Any of the general principles I state about translation into English would also be true of other languages.

14. Lyons, *Semantics*, 1:238.

15. For a discussion of some of the difficulties in translation, see: Nida, “Contemporary Linguistics,” esp. 74–76. Lyons writes: “So-called literal, or faithful, translations are notoriously unsatisfactory as translations; the Italian slogan, ‘Traduttore, traditore’ (‘The translator is a betrayer’), which itself can hardly be translated satisfactorily into English, is relevant in more ways than one to the whole question of faithful translation” (*Semantics*, 1:257–58).

there are many good English translations of the Scriptures.¹⁶ Rather, biblical words should be studied in order to increase our understanding of the passages in which they occur (whether the meaning of the passage can be adequately conveyed in English or not).

3. *Word Meaning Changes over Time*

The final modern linguistic principle is that a word's meaning is determined by how it is used within a particular period of time. A study of a word's meaning at a specific time in history is known as synchronic analysis. Diachronic analysis is the study of a word's meaning throughout a period of history. A number of helpful analogies have been postulated to demonstrate the relationship between the two, one of which is the analogy of a chess game. The history of the chess game (diachronic study) is inconsequential to the present possibilities in the game (synchronic study). What matters most at any given moment is the relationship between the pieces as they presently stand on the board, which, of course, can change at any moment with the movement of just one piece.¹⁷ Just as a person who understands how chess works is able to understand the significance of the current placement of the pieces on the board, so too a speaker of a language is able to communicate effectively without any knowledge of the history of that language. As Silva writes:

even a knowledge of that development is not bound to affect the speaker's daily conversation: the English professor who knows that nice comes from Latin *nescius*, "ignorant," does not for that reason refrain from using the term in a complimentary way.¹⁸

16. Porter, "Ancient Languages," 167.

17. Ibid., 153. Porter also mentions a second of de Saussure's analogies, that of a plant stem. Cotterell and Turner give the analogy of a river: "If we see the length of the river as signifying time then taking a cross-section at different points along the river, and comparing what is found, corresponds to *diachronic* linguistic study, while the examination of a single cross-section corresponds to *synchronic* study," *Linguistics*, 25.

18. Silva, *Biblical Words*, 38.

It is the synchronic analysis of a word that is of primary importance in a study of the biblical text.¹⁹

These three principles merely scratch the surface of modern linguistic study. They are, however, particularly pertinent for a discussion of word studies. Now that the foundation has been laid for determining the meanings of words, the nature of words themselves will be considered.

A Few Words on Words

Building upon the foundation of modern linguistics, the following section examines a number of issues that impact the meanings of words. As with the previous section, this one is not a comprehensive survey of all of the issues related to word meaning. However, the following six issues are particularly important to understand before analysing the meaning of a biblical word.

1. Words Have a Range of Meaning

A challenge in determining the meanings of words is explained by Cruse:

One of the basic problems of lexical semantics [word meaning] is the apparent multiplicity of semantic uses of a single word form (without grammatical difference). There seems little doubt that such variation is the rule rather than the exception: the meaning of any word form is in some sense different in every distinct context in which it occurs.²⁰

The fact that a word may be used in many different ways can be described as the semantic range (or range of meaning) of a word. That is, a word can be used with different senses or meanings in different contexts. As Cotterell and Turner write: “In fact, single point meanings usually arise only temporarily with neologisms, words freshly minted.”²¹ For all other words,

19. Lyons, *Semantics*, 1:243–45.

20. Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 50–51.

21. Cotterell and Turner give as an example: “Thus when Michael Faraday was experimenting in the field of electro-chemistry he invited a classics friend

the semantic range of a word “is the result of the synchronic study, a list of the ways the word was used in the era when the work was written.”²² It is, therefore, important to ensure that the uses of a word that are noted in determining a word’s semantic range are uses that were extant during the same time period.

As an example of a word’s range of meaning consider the word “bank”: a person may deposit money in a bank, or give blood to a blood bank. You could install a bank of lights, fall over a bank (either of snow or dirt), or walk into a bank of fog. Used as a verb, an airplane can bank to the right, a person can bank money, and it is possible to bank a basketball off a backboard. When a statement is trustworthy a person might be told, “You can bank on it.”

The same word-form, “bank,” can be used as a noun and a verb with a variety of meanings. It is essential to consider the context in which a given word is found to determine the portion of the word’s semantic range that contributes to the meaning of that sentence. Of further importance is to recognize that in most cases the semantic range of a word in one language does not exactly parallel (i.e., cannot be used in all of the same contexts, and no others) the range of meaning of any one word in another language. Continuing with the example of “bank,” the building where you deposit money is a “banque” in French, but you cannot install a “banque” of lights, nor will an airplane “banque” to the right. The semantic range of a word is particular to the language in which it is found.

It is worthwhile to mention here two terms related to the semantic range of a word. The first term is “homonymy,” which refers to the phenomenon of two or more words that have the same word-form. For instance, the word-form “ball” is used for the two completely different words in the sentences: “Kick the ball into the net,” and “I had a wonderful time dancing at the ball.” The second term is “polysemy,” which refers to the phenomenon of a single word that has many different

to create new words for his science. It is to this unusual partnership that we owe words such as anode and cathode and diode” (*Linguistics*, 135).

22. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 100.

meanings.²³ For example, the word “mole” means different things in the sentences: “A mole likes to burrow in the ground,” and “The mole will deliver us the information tonight.” However, the meanings of “mole” in the two sentences are related because both the animal and human moles are digging for things. Cotterell and Turner suggest limiting the term “homonymy” to words that have distinct and apparently unrelated meanings; the term “polysemy” is therefore used to refer to multiple related meanings of a word.²⁴

The uses of the word “bank,” listed above, can be used to further demonstrate the difference between homonymy and polysemy. In the list below, homonyms will be listed on separate lines, while different but related meanings of each word (polysemy) will be separated by a semicolon in the same line:

1. a bank for depositing money; blood bank; to bank money; “you can bank on it”
2. a bank of lights
3. snow bank; river bank; bank of fog
4. to bank an airplane to the right; to bank a basketball

Distinguishing between cases of homonymy and polysemy is not always an easy task, for it is often difficult to determine whether different meanings of a word are related or not. Therefore, not all linguists choose to make a clear distinction between the two.²⁵ Nevertheless, the important thing to note is that every time a word-form is found in the biblical text it will not necessarily carry the same meaning, nor will the meaning of a word in one context necessarily be related to the meaning of that word in another context.

2. *A Word Only Refers to Something When It Is in a Context*

A popular view of words has been that they are referential. A referential view of words is that each word has a particular referent, that is, a non-linguistic (non-word) thing that is signified.

23. Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 136.

24. *Ibid.*, 137.

25. See Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 80; Lyons, *Semantics*, 2:552, 565.

For example, it might be claimed that the word “apple” refers to a particular type of fruit that grows on trees. In light of the fact that words have a semantic range it can be seen that each word does not have one non-linguistic thing to which it always refers. The word “apple” may for example also be used to refer to a particular company or girl, or in the saying “apple of one’s eye,” the word refers to someone who is cherished or loved.

Even though words are not referential there are many words that can be used to refer to non-linguistic things in certain contexts. Porter explains:

Words are not the things, and they do not emerge from or return to the thing, except that within a linguistic system the users of the language may use a word to signify a thing. When a speaker uses a word to speak of a thing, this can be called reference. . . . It is when specific items are being spoken of that language users are using language to refer.²⁶

Although some would wish to differentiate between things in the physical world and things in the spiritual world, or in fictional stories, it seems best to conclude that in any case a word can be used to refer to a non-linguistic thing as long as it exists in *a* world.²⁷ Cotterell and Turner emphasize that for a word to be used referentially it must be found within a particular context:

A contextless sentence, for example, a sentence produced to illustrate a point in a grammar, does not have intentional reference. Even a sentence such as “London is one gigantic chaos,” if it is contextless, can have no reference. It might appear to have, provided that we are prepared gratuitously to assume that “London” is an intentional reference to London, England. But firstly “London” could in fact be the name of a house, a boat, a pet, or some other city: London, Ontario, for example.²⁸

It is important to note then, that the non-linguistic thing to which a word may refer is determined by the context of a

26. Porter, *Studies*, 68–69.

27. Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 87.

28. *Ibid.*, 84.

passage. The word itself has no referential meaning; it can only be used by an author to refer to something in a specific context.

3. *Words Are Not Inherently Technical*

Silva wishes to distinguish between technical and nontechnical words, suggesting that technical words are actually referential.²⁹ That is, certain words refer to or stand for defined concepts or ideas apart from context.³⁰ For instance, it could be argued that “sanctification” is a technical word. Yet “sanctification” can be used in at least two different ways, referring to (1) the moment of salvation when a person is cleansed from sin and made holy, or (2) the process of growing in Christ. Nevertheless, Osborne seems largely to agree with Silva, adding the caveat that there is no clear-cut distinction between technical and nontechnical words.³¹ I will refrain from examining their arguments in detail, but Osborne notes that there is still some flexibility in the Greek words that Silva says are technical. Context is ultimately key for determining the meaning even of technical words.³² It is difficult, therefore, to see how so-called technical words are any different than nontechnical words that can be used referentially. In either case, words can in some contexts be used by an author to refer to a non-linguistic thing. The nature of the referent will be evident by an examination of the context(s). Rather than suggesting that words in and of themselves can be technical, it may be best to say that an author is able to use a word in a technical sense in his or her writings.³³

29. Silva, *Biblical Words*, 107. He also creates a category of semi-technical words, which for the purposes of this discussion is immaterial, as can be seen by my treatment of technical words.

30. Ibid.

31. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 95.

32. Ibid.

33. Such an understanding of technical words serves as a helpful reminder to examine the use of a word by a specific author prior to examining its use in the entirety of the Scriptures, or in extra-biblical literature. Further, one must find evidence that an author is using a particular word in a technical sense, rather than merely assuming it to be true. In their introduction to Bible translations, Fee and Strauss write: “*Sarx* serves for Paul as a technical term for the eschatological concept of the old age of existence characterized by sin and

4. Words May Be Used as Synonyms

Cruse defines “synonyms” as: “lexical items whose senses are identical in respect of ‘central’ semantic [meaning] traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what we may provisionally describe as ‘minor’ or ‘peripheral’ traits.”³⁴ Examples of English words that may be used as synonyms are “sea” and “ocean” or “smile” and “grin.” Cruse expresses skepticism that absolute synonyms (words that can occur in all of the same contexts, but no others) exist at all in language, writing: “There is no obvious motivation for the existence of absolute synonyms in a language, and one would expect either that one of the items would fall into obsolescence, or that a difference in semantic function would develop.”³⁵ Returning to an earlier example, both “sea” and “ocean” may be used to refer to a body of salt water that surrounds the continents (e.g., the Atlantic Ocean), but of the two, only “sea” may be used to refer to an expanse of salt water that is surrounded by land (e.g., the Dead Sea). Words may be used synonymously without having the same range of meaning. The greater the overlap in the range of meaning of two words, the more likely it is that they may be used synonymously. Sometimes the difference in meaning between two words can simply be expressive, which is the emotion or attitude that is conveyed through the use of a word.³⁶ For example, “girl” and “wench”

death that is now superseded by the new age of salvation inaugurated by Christ” (*Translation*, 60). Considering the various contexts in which Paul uses $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ (*sarx*; for example, see Rom 1:3; 4:1; 8:4, 5; 1 Cor 1:26; 6:16; 2 Cor 5:16; 10:3; 11:18), however, one wonders whether it is really a technical term for Paul, or if the semantic range of $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ (*sarx*) merely makes it an appropriate word choice in contexts where Paul is describing the “eschatological concept of the old age of existence characterized by sin and death that is now superseded by the new age of salvation inaugurated by Christ.” The meaning of a word must be distinguished from the meaning of the passage in which that word is found.

34. Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 267; cf. the definition in Allen, ed., *Oxford Dictionary*: “word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another in the same language,” 763.

35. Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 270.

36. *Ibid.*, 274.

can in some contexts be used as synonyms, but the latter often carries negative connotations of “servant” or “prostitute.” The semantic ranges of no two words will be entirely synonymous. However, it is possible that in certain contexts two different words can be used interchangeably without any noticeable difference in meaning.

5. *Syntax Influences Word Meaning*

The meanings of words are particularly influenced by their syntagmatic relations (syntax),³⁷ which are, in the words of Lyons: “those which it [a word] contracts by virtue of its combination (in a syntagm, or construction) with other units of the same level. For example, the lexeme ‘old’ is syntagmatically related with the definite article ‘the’ and the noun ‘man’ in the expression ‘the old man.’”³⁸ Thus the meaning of the word “old” is not determined by its examination in isolation, but by considering how it is used in a particular context (in this case, “the old man,” which will in turn be influenced by the sentence and the whole discourse in which this phrase is found). The meaning of “old” is not the same in all of the following phrases, and is determined by how it is used in combination with other words: old cheese, the boy with the old face, old bicycle, and old friends (referring either to the friends’ age, the length of the friendship, or both). As another example, consider the different meanings of “lover” in the following sentences: Jack is a lover of food, and Jack is Jill’s lover. Notice that the meaning of “lover” depends upon whether the subject is a lover of another person or something else (e.g., food, cars, wine, or chocolate). It is by examining how a word is used in combination with the other words in a particular context that its meaning is determined.

One aspect of syntagmatic relations particularly important to consider is idioms. Cruse gives a helpful definition: “an idiom is

37. Brooks and Winbery define “syntax” in this way: “Syntax is that aspect of grammar which deals with the relationship and use of words and larger elements in a sentence” (*Syntax*, xiii).

38. Lyons, *Semantics*, 1:240. Cf. Porter, *Studies*, 71; Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 155–59.

an expression whose meaning cannot be accounted for as a compositional function of the meanings its parts have when they are not parts of idioms.”³⁹ When determining the meaning of an idiom, great care must be taken. For as Cruse writes: “in considering *to pull someone’s leg*, for instance, there is little point in referring to *pull in to pull a fast one*, or *leg in He hasn’t a leg to stand on*.”⁴⁰ An idiom has a meaning that cannot be determined by considering the meaning of its parts (i.e., individual words) in different contexts.⁴¹ Both Hebrew and Greek have idioms, so the possibility of an idiom must be considered when examining the meaning of a word in a given context.

6. *Non-linguistic Factors Influence Word Meaning*

Cotterell and Turner mention some non-linguistic (non-word) factors that impact the meanings of words. These factors include perception (how did the original hearers of an utterance understand what was said?), connotation (the societal or cultural perspective of the referent signified by the author’s use of a word; e.g., foxes are cunning, mules are stubborn: these perspectives differ from culture to culture), implicature (the meaning that is implied through the use of words; e.g., the statement “my shoes are tied” implies an affirmative answer to the question “do you want to go for a run?”; the implied meaning has little to do with the meaning of the actual words used), gesture (physical signs such as placing a hand or finger over the mouth, crying, throwing dust in the air; these gestures differ from culture to culture),

39. Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, 37.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Due to time constraints, word studies are usually restricted to a study of syntagmatic relations. It should be noted, however, that paradigmatic relations are also important for the determination of word meaning. In the phrase given above to demonstrate syntagmatic relations, “the old man,” “man” is paradigmatically related to “woman,” “boy,” “ostrich,” and any other word that could be meaningfully placed in the phrase. Similarly, the word “old” is paradigmatically related with words such as “young,” “astute,” “brave,” and “robust.” Meaning is partly determined by considering why the author chose a particular word, rather than any of the many others available in the language. Ideally, word studies will take these paradigmatic relations into account.

and body language (differs from gesture in that most people are overtly unaware of this aspect of communication, which includes posture and proximity between people).⁴² When examining words in biblical texts, it is important to be aware of (or at least consider the possibility of) non-linguistic factors that could impact their meaning.

Here ends the theoretical half of the article. At this point, it should be clear that it is not a simple task to determine the meaning of a word, since there are so many factors that influence a word's meaning. Great care and effort are necessary to conduct a word study correctly. Therefore, a process for determining the meanings of biblical words will now be outlined that builds upon the principles and issues that have been discussed above.

Determining Word Meaning

In order to explain how to figure out what a word means, some guidelines for conducting a word study will be presented and followed by two example word studies: one Hebrew and one Greek. When reading through the remainder of the paper, think about how the three modern linguistic principles and six factors that impact word meaning have influenced the three-step process for studying biblical words. It is important to remember that the goal of a word study is to determine what a word means *in a particular context*.⁴³

1. Determine the Range of the Word's Meaning

The first step in determining a word's meaning is to get a general idea of the various ways in which the word can be used. This is accomplished by looking at the various meanings of a word offered in a lexicon (deductive study), as well as by examining the contexts in which a word occurs (inductive study), found either in a concordance or through the use of a computer

42. Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 45–51.

43. I am indebted to the work of Dr. Mark J. Boda and his class handout: "Lexical Analysis" in the creation of this three-step process.

program such as the Libronix Digital Library System (Logos), Accordance, or BibleWorks. The more frequently a word occurs in the Bible, the more challenging it is to examine its every occurrence, but at least those passages listed in the lexicons should be considered inductively. As you become more comfortable with word studies and more knowledgeable of Hebrew and Greek, you will find it easier to inductively study words that occur more frequently. As you study the word, seek to determine its various meanings, but think critically about your conclusions: are these really different meanings? Has the word's range of meaning been correctly and adequately presented in the lexicons? Your conclusions after this first step of study will often be refined as you examine your particular passage in more depth (step 2, below).

2. Narrow the Meaning of the Word in the Passage Being Studied

Look for anything in the context of your passage that may refine the word's meaning. Elements in a passage that can limit a word's meaning include syntactical features (e.g., for a verb: prepositional phrases, or the subject and object of the verb; for a noun: modifying adjectives, the presence or absence of the article, or the grammatical function of the noun) and greater contextual factors (i.e., what is happening in the surrounding text?). During this stage of study, other passages where the same word occurs, which have similar syntactical features and contextual factors, can help determine the meaning of the word in the passage you are studying. As those other passages are examined, it is particularly important to consult texts in the following order of priority:

1. texts in the same corpus (i.e., written by the same author and of the same literary genre)
2. texts in the Bible
3. texts outside the Bible but contemporaneous
4. texts outside the Bible although not contemporaneous (you should only resort to this final corpus when it is a *hapax legomenon* [a word that only occurs once in the Bible]).

3. *Consult the Ancient Versions for Help in Narrowing the Word's Meaning*

Sometimes after steps 1 and 2, it is still very difficult to speak with much certainty about a word's meaning in a particular passage. When this occurs, the ancient versions (translations) of the Bible (e.g., Septuagint, Aramaic Targums, Peshitta, Latin Vulgate) can be consulted, but with great caution. Statements about a word's meaning that are based upon a translation can only be made tentatively.⁴⁴

Example Word Studies

In order to demonstrate how to determine a word's meaning, two word studies are described below: one Hebrew and one Greek. The three-fold process outlined above is followed below, although only the first two steps are taken; no ancient versions are consulted in the example word studies because it is unnecessary to do so. In practice, one often goes back and forth between steps 1 and 2 when determining a word's meaning, but for clarity's sake, the steps are closely followed below.

The example word studies may at first seem overwhelming because each of the two words occurs somewhat frequently. The Hebrew example, from Gen 15:6, occurs fifty-two times, and the Greek example, from Gal 1:1, occurs eighty times. The example words have been chosen intentionally to demonstrate the different challenges in determining the meanings of verbs and nouns. If the example word studies are grasped then it will be much easier to determine the meanings of words that occur less frequently. However, if example words had been chosen that only occurred ten or fifteen times in the Bible, it would then be much more difficult to tackle words occurring as frequently as those in the examples (even though they may be easier to understand as examples). Read through the following word studies

44. For a helpful introduction to some of the challenges in using the ancient versions for determining the meanings of Hebrew words (much of which is applicable for Greek words as well), see Groom, *Linguistic Analysis*, esp. 72–100.

carefully, re-read them if necessary, and check the references. If what is done here can be understood, the principles can then be applied to other words.

Genesis 15:6

וַיִּשְׂמַח אַבְרָם בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה (ESV: And he [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness).

The first verb in the verse is *וַיִּשְׂמַח* (*he'emin*), which is a Hiphil 3rd masculine singular of *יָשַׁח* (*'aman*). In order to determine what *וַיִּשְׂמַח* (*he'emin*) means in this passage, we begin with a survey of the word's range of meaning.

1. Determine the Range of the Word's Meaning

The most readily available and commonly used Hebrew lexicon is known as Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB), whereas the longer and more expensive current standard Hebrew lexicon is *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*. BDB gives two meanings for *וַיִּשְׂמַח* (*he'emin*—which is the Hiphil form of *יָשַׁח*, *'aman*):⁴⁵

- (1) to physically stand firm
- (2) to trust or believe

For the second meaning, BDB notes that the verb can either be followed by nothing, or by one of four different syntactical constructions:

- (a) the preposition *לְ* (*le*), with a human, God, or a thing as its object, showing whom or what is trusted
- (b) the preposition *בְּ* (*be*), with a human, God (more common than with *לְ* [*le*]), or a thing as its object, showing whom or what is trusted
- (c) the conjunction *כִּי* (*ki*), showing what is believed
- (d) an infinitive

HALOT does not include the first meaning found in BDB, but instead divides the second category into the following three sections:⁴⁶

45. BDB, 53.

46. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, 1:63.

(1) to think or be convinced of something. Here the uses with the infinitive and **כִּי** (*ki*) are noted.

(2) to trust or believe in a human or thing. Here the uses of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) followed by nothing, and by the prepositions **לְ** (*le*) and **בְּ** (*be*) are noted.

(3) to trust or believe in God. It is noted that this use of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) is followed by nothing, and by the prepositions **לְ** (*le*) and **בְּ** (*be*).

BDB breaks down its second meaning of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) according to the phrase that is connected to the verb (e.g., a prepositional phrase), while *HALOT* divides the word's meanings based upon the object of the verb (numbers 2 and 3) or a different meaning altogether (number 1).

The following synopsis of an inductive study of the fifty-two uses of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) in the Hebrew Bible is delineated differently than in the lexicons. *HALOT*'s first meaning is similar to the third meaning below. However, rather than following *HALOT*'s practice of having different categories when the object of the verb is a human or thing, or God, the first two categories below are based upon whether (1) something has been stated in the context, or (2) an animate being or a thing is regarded as reliable. This difference in categorization is because there is no actual noticeable difference in the meaning of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) in *HALOT*'s categories numbered 2 and 3 above. *HALOT*'s categories are theologically-driven rather than word-meaning-driven. People want to know when God is the object of the verb even though the meaning of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) does not differ from when a human is the object of the verb. Therefore, an inductive study of **אָמַן** (*he'emin*) reveals three main contexts in which the word is used:

(1) Something that has been said is either believed or not believed: Gen 15:6; 45:26; Exod 4:1, 5, 8 (x2), 9, 31; 19:9; Deut 1:32; 1 Kgs 10:7; 2 Chr 9:6; 20:20 (x2); 32:15; Ps 106:12, 24; Prov 14:15; 26:25; Isa 7:9; 28:16; 30:21; 43:10; 53:1; Jer 12:6; 40:14; Jonah 3:5; Hab 1:5.

(2) An animate being or a thing is regarded as reliable or unreliable: Exod 14:31; Num 14:11; Deut 28:66; Judg 11:20; 1 Sam 27:12; 2 Kgs 17:14; Job 24:22; 39:12; Ps 78:22; Mic 7:5.

(3) Some event is considered either to occur or not occur: Job 9:16; 15:22, 31; 29:24; Ps 27:13; Lam 4:12.

(4) Either (1) or (2): Num 20:12; Deut 9:23.

(5) Either (1) or (3): Ps 116:10.

(6) Unknown: Job 39:24; Pss 78:32; 119:66.

The final three categories above (4–6) would require further examination than an initial perusal of the passages in order to discover what is meant by the word *הִמִּינָה* (*he'emin*). After determining the general range of meaning that *הִמִּינָה* (*he'emin*) has in the Hebrew Bible, a closer examination of this range of meaning is necessary in order to determine the meaning of *הִמִּינָה* (*he'emin*) in Gen 15:6.

2. *Narrow the Meaning of the Word in the Passage Being Studied*

As noted in the lexicons, *הִמִּינָה* (*he'emin*) occurs in different syntactical constructions in the Hebrew Bible. It is important to examine these constructions to determine whether they have any bearing on the meaning of *הִמִּינָה* (*he'emin*) in Gen 15:6. In order to help you think through the complicated process of studying syntax as it relates to word meaning, brief examples are given below of the steps taken to arrive at the meaning of *הִמִּינָה* (*he'emin*) in Gen 15:6. Carefully read through the examples (multiple times if necessary) to ensure that you understand what is taking place in each step. The first step is to examine each one of the word's fifty-two occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, and to write down all of the syntactical information (and a note about what is happening in the context to which the verb refers) that may be relevant for determining the word's meaning. For example:

- Exod 4:1: Plural Human Subject + Negated Imperfect + *לֵךְ* (*le*) + Moses (Moses says that God has sent him).
- Exod 4:5: Plural Human Subject + Imperfect + *כִּי* (*ki*) (God appeared to Moses).
- Exod 4:8: Plural Human Subject + Negated Imperfect + *לֵךְ* (*le*) + Moses (God appeared to Moses)
- Exod 4:9: Plural Human Subject + Negated Imperfect + *לֵךְ* (*le*) + signs (as proof that what Moses says is true)

The second step is to group verses together that have related syntactical and contextual elements. For example:

Human Subject + Verb + הָ (le) + Non-Human Object

- What was said is considered to be true (Exod 4:8; Prov 14:15; Isa 53:1)

- What was said is considered *not* to be true (Exod 4:9; 1 Kgs 10:7; 2 Chr 9:6; Ps 106:24)

These groups of verses are then examined to more accurately determine the range of the verb's meaning. One question that must be answered at this stage because of its relevance to Gen 15:6 is this: *Is there any difference in meaning between הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (be) and הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (le)?* When the passages that contain these syntactical constructions are examined, it is discovered that thirteen of the fourteen occurrences of הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (le) are in contexts where something has been spoken, and the fourteenth occurrence may also have something that has been stated in view.⁴⁷ In other words, all of the occurrences of הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (le) (except for possibly one of them), fit within category 1 of the verb's range of meaning outlined in the first step of this word study. The 22 passages that contain הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (be) are much more varied in meaning, fitting within all three of the categories.⁴⁸ What this tells us is that when found within similar contexts, there is no discernible difference in meaning between הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (be) and הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) + הָ (le). There is just a wider variety of contexts in which the preposition הָ (be) can be joined with הָאֱמִינָה (he'emin) than can הָ (le). As important as it is to examine syntactical constructions in the process of a word study, it turns out that the presence of the preposition הָ (be) in Gen 15:6 does

47. The passages are: Gen 45:26; Exod 4:1, 8 (x2), 9; 1 Kgs 10:7; 2 Chr 9:6; 32:15; Ps 106:24; Prov 14:15; Isa 43:10; 53:1; Jer 40:14; the uncertain passage is Deut 9:23.

48. Category 1 (Something has been stated): Gen 15:6; Exod 19:9; Deut 1:32; 2 Chr 20:20 (x2); Ps 106:12; Prov 26:25; Jer 12:6; Jonah 3:5; Category 2 (Someone or something is reliable): Exod 14:31; Num 14:11; Deut 28:66; 1 Sam 27:12; 2 Kgs 17:14; Job 24:22; 39:12; Ps 78:22; Mic 7:5; Category 3 (An event will occur): Job 15:31; Uncertain: Num 20:12; Pss 78:32; 119:66.

not impact the meaning of the verb אָמַן (*he'emin*). What also becomes apparent during this stage of study is that there is no difference in the meaning of אָמַן (*he'emin*) when found in categories 1 and 3, even though the context varies between those two categories. So the range of meaning for אָמַן (*he'emin*) that was given at the end of the first stage of the word study has to be slightly modified in order to reflect what has been learned through an examination of syntactical issues, resulting in the following:

(1) To regard something as true, whether that thing is a concept, an expectation of something to come, or a statement that has been made by someone (numbers 1 and 3 above). This meaning of the verb could appropriately be translated, “to believe”: Gen 15:6; Exod 4:5, 8, 31; 19:9; 2 Chr 20:20 (x2); Pss 27:13; 106:12; Prov 14:15; Isa 28:16; 30:21; 43:10; 53:1; Jonah 3:5; With negation: to regard something as not true: Gen 45:26; Exod 4:1, 8, 9; Deut 1:32; 1 Kgs 10:7; 2 Chr 9:6; 32:15; Job 9:16; 15:22, 31; 29:24; Ps 106:24; Prov 26:25; Isa 7:9; Jer 12:6; 40:14; Lam 4:12; Hab 1:5.

(2) To regard someone or something as reliable and capable or willing to perform a specific action (number 2 above). This meaning of the verb could appropriately be translated, “to believe in” or “to trust”: Exod 14:31; 1 Sam 27:12; With negation: to regard someone or something as unreliable, incapable, or unwilling: Num 14:11; Deut 28:66; Judg 11:20; 2 Kgs 17:14; Job 24:22; 39:12; Ps 78:22; Mic 7:5.

(3) Uncertain: more study required: Num 20:12; Deut 9:23; Job 39:24; Pss 78:32; 116:10; 119:66.

The result of this word study is that in Gen 15:6, אָמַן (*he'emin*) means: *to regard something as true*, with that “something” here being what Yahweh said earlier in the same chapter. Therefore, the reason why righteousness (צְדָקָה , *tsedhaqah*) was credited to Abram is because he believed that what God said was true.

Galatians 1:1

Παῦλος ἀπόστολος οὐκ ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲ δι' ἀνθρώπου
 ἀλλὰ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ θεοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν
 ἐκ νεκρῶν (ESV modified: Paul, an apostle—not from humans nor
 through a human, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who
 raised him from the dead—).

The second noun in this verse is ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*), and occurs in the lexical form of the word: nominative masculine singular. In order to determine what it means for Paul to be an ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*), we begin with a study of the word's range of meaning.

1. Determine the Range of the Word's Meaning

The current standard Koine Greek lexicon is the 3rd edition of the English edition of Bauer's lexicon (BDAG). A second important lexicon of Koine Greek is the United Bible Societies' lexicon, known as Louw-Nida. This lexicon is unique in its division of words into semantic domains (groups of words with related meaning). If someone was to ask you to list all of the English words you know from A to Z, you would probably not be able to do it. However, if you were asked to list all of the words that come to mind when you think of a kitchen or a car, you would be able to list the words you know more quickly. The Louw-Nida lexicon applies this concept by grouping the various Greek words with others in the same semantic domain (having similar meaning). Both lexicons provide two distinct meanings for ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*):⁴⁹(1) one who is sent with a message, not having extraordinary status; (2) one who fulfills the role of a special messenger, having extraordinary status.

BDAG indicates that the second meaning was applied to three distinct groups of people: prophets, Christ, and highly honoured believers with a special function as God's envoys in proclaiming the gospel.

Louw-Nida note that the second meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) was generally restricted to the original followers of

49. BDAG, 122–23; Louw-Nida, 53.74; 33.194.

Jesus Christ, but was also extended to other Christians who proclaimed the gospel, such as Paul.

Through an inductive study of the eighty occurrences of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in the New Testament, two instances can be found where ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) would fit within the first category noted in the lexicons. It is probably best, however, to describe the first category without any indication of the person's status, which is usually unknown to us:

(1) one who delivers a message (John 13:16; Phil 2:25).

The second category would then be:

(2) one who delivers the message of the gospel.

The various people referred to by ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) who share the gospel message are as follows:

- The twelve disciples: Matt 10:2; Mark 3:14; 6:30; Luke 6:13; 9:10; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10; Acts 1:2, 26; 2:37, 42, 43; 4:33, 35, 36, 37; 5:2, 12, 18, 29, 40; 6:6; 8:1, 14, 18; 9:27; 14:4; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 1 Cor 15:7; Eph 2:20; Rev 18:20; 21:14.

- Peter, who is one of the Twelve: 1 Pet 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1.

- Either the twelve disciples or the prophets: Luke 11:49.

- Paul and the twelve disciples. 1 Cor 15:9 (x2); Gal 1:17.

- James, the Twelve, and maybe other messengers: Gal 1:19.

- Either the twelve disciples or other messengers: Acts 11:1; Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 12:28, 29; 2 Cor 8:23; Eph 4:11; 2 Pet 3:2; Jude 17; Passages where Paul is included in the reference: 1 Cor 4:9; 9:5; Eph 3:5.

- Paul: Rom 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor 1:1; 9:1, 2; 2 Cor 1:1; 12:12; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2:7; 2 Tim 1:1, 11; Titus 1:1.

- Paul and Barnabas: Acts 14:14.

- Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy: 1 Thess 2:6 (GNT 2:7).⁵⁰

- Jesus: Heb 3:1.

- Negatively: Those who claim to be messengers of the gospel, but are not: 2 Cor 11:5, 13; 12:11; Rev 2:2.

The above references that say "either" would require further examination than an initial perusal of the passage to discover who is referred to by the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*). After

50. GNT = Greek New Testament.

determining the general range of meaning that ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) has in the New Testament, a closer examination of this range of meaning is necessary in order to determine the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in Gal 1:1.

2. Narrow the Meaning of the Word in the Passage Being Studied

Since the purpose of this word study is to determine the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in Gal 1:1, it is not necessary to fully explain the significance of the word in every New Testament passage. There are, however, two questions in particular that need to be addressed: (1) Does ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) have the same meaning when used of Paul as it does when used of the twelve disciples? (2) Does ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) have the same meaning when used of Paul as it does when used of Barnabas, Silvanus, and Timothy? The answers to these two questions will enable us to more fully understand the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in Gal 1:1.

More than half of the 78 occurrences of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) that speak of one who delivers the message of the gospel refer without question to one, some, or all of the twelve disciples (see the above list). There are then two passages where Paul uses the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) to refer both to himself and the twelve disciples. First, in 1 Cor 15, Paul talks about how Jesus appeared to his twelve disciples, and then (in v. 9) finally to himself, “the least of the apostles.” Second, in Gal 1:17 Paul explains how after Jesus met him on the road to Damascus he did not go to Jerusalem to see “those who were apostles before me.” Based upon these two passages, it appears that ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) means the same thing when used of Paul or the twelve disciples. However, there are other passages that bring this conclusion into question.

In the book of Acts, the twelve disciples whom Jesus chose (with Matthias as Judas’s replacement, Acts 1:12–26) are often referred to as ἀπόστολοι (*apostoloi*) without any qualification (such as δώδεκα, *dōdeka*, twelve, e.g. Matt 10:2). They are distinguished from the other believers and are stationed in Jerusalem even when all other believers are scattered throughout

the Roman world (Acts 8:1). They receive recognition as a particular group of men who have authority in the early church and are distinguished from the elders (e.g., Acts 8:14; 15:4). In Acts 9:27 it says: “But Barnabas took him [Paul] and brought him to the apostles [ἀποστόλους, *apostolous*] and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.” It is significant to note that Paul could theoretically at this point be called an ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) because he is one who delivers the message of the gospel, and was sent by Jesus himself (cf. Acts 14:14 where Paul is called an ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*). Yet there is a clear distinction in Acts 9:27 between Paul and the ἀπόστολοι (*apostoloi*) who were originally chosen by Jesus. Furthermore, in Acts 15:2 Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to discuss an issue with the ἀποστόλους (*apostolous*) and the elders. A distinction is again maintained between Paul and the twelve disciples, even though both Paul and Barnabas are earlier referred to as ἀπόστολοι (*apostoloi*) in Acts 14:14. Therefore, the answer to the first question is this: *the word ἀπόστολος (apostolos) does not have the same meaning when used of Paul and the twelve disciples.* This conclusion, based on an inductive study of the uses of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in the New Testament, differs from the lexicons. The range of meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) can be more fully expressed at this point as:

(1) One who delivers a message. In these contexts, the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) could appropriately be translated by the word “messenger.”

(2) One who delivers the message of the gospel. In these contexts, the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) could appropriately be translated by the word “missionary.”⁵¹

(3) One of the twelve men originally chosen by Jesus to deliver the message of the gospel (Matthias, rather than Judas, is included in this category in the books of Acts to Revelation). In these contexts, the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is probably best translated “apostle.”

51. Thanks to Dr. Stanley E. Porter for this insight.

Notice that the people who can be referred to by the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) are restricted more and more in each successive category. It should therefore be recognized that there may in fact be occurrences of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in the New Testament where the word means “one who delivers the message of the gospel,” and one or more of the twelve disciples are referred to by that word (this may in fact be the case, for example, in 1 Cor 15:9 and Gal 1:17). An author is free to make full use of a word’s entire range of meaning. Therefore, when one or more of the twelve disciples is in view and the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is found, it must be asked whether the twelve disciples are being specifically referred to, or just included in a larger group of messengers of the gospel. The answer to that question may not always be easy (or even possible) to determine.

There is a distinction in the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) when used of Paul and when used of the twelve disciples. The second question is: *Does ἀπόστολος (apostolos) have the same meaning when used of Paul as it does when used of Barnabas, Silvanus, and Timothy?* The two verses that seem to indicate that these four men can each be referred to as an ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) with the same meaning are Acts 14:14, “But when the apostles [ἀπόστολοι, *apostoloi*] Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,” and 1 Thess 2:6 (GNT 2:7), “Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles [ἀπόστολοι, *apostoloi*] of Christ.” It is because Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy are listed as the authors of 1 Thessalonians (cf. 1:1) that we know they are the ἀπόστολοι (*apostoloi*) in 2:6. There are no passages that would indicate that ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) has a unique meaning when used of Paul. There will undoubtedly be things that are true of Paul that are not true of Barnabas, Silvanus, Timothy, or any other ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*), but this information does not seem to be part of the word’s meaning itself. The reader is encouraged to inductively study the occurrences of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in the New Testament in order to determine the veracity of this claim.

Now returning to Gal 1:1, “Paul, an apostle (ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*)—not from humans nor through a human, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—,”⁵² it can be concluded that the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in this particular context is: *one who delivers the message of the gospel*, that is, a missionary. After identifying himself as an ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) Paul then goes on to inform the Galatians that it was Jesus himself who commissioned him to deliver the gospel message.

The two word studies above are offered as examples of how to apply the linguistic principles outlined earlier in this paper to a word study. You may not agree with all that has been said in the discussion of either הָעֵמִינִי (*he’emin*) or ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) in Gen 15:6 or Gal 1:1. What is important to note, however, is the application of a linguistic methodology to word studies. The meaning of a word is determined by examining the ways in which that word is used in the same period of time.

The Challenge of Determining Word Meaning

The task of determining the meanings of most biblical words is fraught with many challenges, and often results in unanswered questions. As an example of some of those challenges (which are similar with both Hebrew and Greek words), we continue with the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*). In addition to what has been said above about the word, there are two other significant issues that have an impact upon its meaning. These questions will not be answered here, but are raised in order to show the complexity and challenge of determining the meanings of words. The first issue is this: *Does ἀπόστολος (apostolos) include in its meaning the idea of being chosen by someone else to deliver the message?* In favour of the idea that an ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is chosen by a person or group of people is the fact that most people in the New Testament referred to by the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) are said to have been selected to deliver

52. ESV, modified.

a message. See the following Scripture passages for the evidence:

- The twelve disciples (by Jesus): Matt 10:1–5; Mark 3:14–19
- Paul (by Jesus): Acts 9:10–16
- Barnabas (by the church in Jerusalem): Acts 11:22–23
- Paul and Barnabas (by the Holy Spirit): Acts 13:2
- Timothy (by Paul): Acts 19:22; 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Thess 3:2
- Jesus (by God the Father): John 4:34; 7:16; Heb 3:1–2
- Erastus (by Paul): Phil 2:25

What makes it difficult to determine if “being chosen by someone to deliver a message” is part of the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is the fact that in every example listed above, we are specifically told that the person was selected to deliver a message. Therefore, it is possible that these particular individuals were chosen by someone to deliver a message, even though this fact is not what the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) means. As English-speaking people who are seeking to determine the meanings of biblical words, we are faced with the difficult task of distinguishing between what is part of a word’s meaning, and what is not part of the word’s meaning but is true of the word’s referent in particular contexts. For example, most cars have bumpers, but “has a bumper” is not part of the meaning of the word “car.” It is quite likely that in determining the meanings of biblical words we cannot discern every aspect of a word’s meaning, because we have limited information with which to work in determining that meaning.

The second additional issue in determining the meaning of the word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is how the range of the word’s meaning relates to the ranges of meaning of other Greek words. For example, if one of the meanings of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is: *one who delivers the message of the gospel*, then how does this differ from the meaning of εὐαγγελιστής (*euangelistēs*, evangelist)? The answers to questions of this type are often difficult to find, but are also very important for determining word meaning.⁵³ With the limited information we have for the

53. For an excellent example of a Hebrew word study that involves a discussion of the word’s relationship to other Hebrew words, see Sklar, *Sin*.

study of biblical words, it is not always possible to determine the differences in meaning between two different words.⁵⁴ The complexity and challenge of determining the meanings of Hebrew and Greek words is a reminder of the great work involved in understanding the biblical text, and should remind us to avoid simplistically equating the meanings of Hebrew and Greek words with English words: e.g. ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) means *apostle*.

Conclusion

The task of determining the meanings of biblical words is both challenging and time-consuming. This reality may lead to discouragement for we all have limited time in which to do our exegetical work. Yet even though a full understanding of every word in a passage of Scripture may not be achievable in the time one has available for exegetical study, the time that is spent can produce dividends in revealing the semantic range of even one word, or limit the possibilities of its meaning in a particular context. Even a grasp of the possibilities of what a word might mean in a particular context can be quite helpful, so long as that information is handled appropriately (i.e., don't say more than you can be reasonably certain about regarding what a word means!). Every minute spent in the quest for an accurate grasp of a word's meaning is time well spent, because it will lead to a better grasp of the Scriptures. When words are given their proper place in terms of significance for a text's meaning, word studies can be conducted with much profit. A modern linguistic approach to word studies will guard against the all-too-common tendency to claim great things about the meanings of words in the Bible, rather than by declaring the truths conveyed through the use of those words in sentences and discourses.

54. Cf. Louw-Nida, "Introduction."

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