LEXICAL ANALYSIS

I. Introduction to Lexical Analysis

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. It is fascinating to watch a building under construction. After the edifice has been constructed piece by piece, it eventually reveals a master plan. Similarly, words—the building blocks of Scripture—reveal mind-changing concepts about God and His world. The construction of words determines not only the meaning of the parts but also shapes the concepts of the whole. Studying the words of the NT involves investigating the most basic components that lead to exegetical and theological discovery...however, words are tricky things, because there is a flexibility” (Bock).

B. “In any piece of literature words are the basic building blocks for conveying meaning” (Fee). 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.

C. Roy Zuck put it this way: “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.”

D. The challenge for the interpreter of Scripture is that a given word may have several different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. For example, as Zuck observes, “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 exchanges. Obviously it cannot mean all these things or even several of them at once in a single usage.”

E. The job of the interpreter, then, is to determine what a given use of a word means in a specific context. As Fee notes, “it is especially important to remember that words function in a context. Therefore, although any given word may have a broad or narrow range of meaning, the aim of word study in exegesis is to try to understand as precisely as possible what the author was trying to convey by his use of this word in this context.”

**Key Question:**

What is the intended meaning of this word in this context?

F. In the process of answering this question, it is essential for the interpreter to pursue what the words of a passage meant at the time they were written in the context in which they occur (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard). For this reason, the “meaning of the original words, not what ideas may occur to us when we read the passage, is the objective for word studies. We must always remember the biblical writer selected certain words to express specific thoughts. Our aim is to recover the ideas that the writer sought to communicate by means of those words” (ibid).

G. In other words, 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?

- “Authorial intent is the initial goal of the exegete. The exegete is preoccupied with the message of the human author. Initially the goal is to understand the message as set forth in the setting in which the
author operated. The process of correlating that message with other biblical texts, either earlier of later ones, is the task of a subsequent theological process” (Bock). This, of course, involves issues of the progress of revelation and the NT use of the OT.

- Put the passage in perspective of its context. This placement helps see the primary meaning of the author. By noticing where it is at in the overall flow of the book/passage, words that can at times be overshadowed by the technicalities of grammatical analysis of such words is understood. Look for instances where the author himself has explained the meaning.
  o For example: 2 Tim 3:16-17 “that the man of God may be perfect” (KJV)
  o What does perfect mean?-sinless? Incapable of error?
  o Paul explains in the next phrase, “that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly equipped unto all good works.”

- Look at syntax—the way thoughts are expressed through grammatical forms.

- Watch for parallelism, especially in Hebrew poetry.

H. Again, the exegete must initially pursue the meaning intended by the author for his original audience. Communication fundamentally involves the transfer of an idea from one mind to another. Words do not automatically have meaning. They receive their meaning from the author who wrote the words.

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 analyze carefully 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 indentifying which terms in the passage must be studied.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES:

- Do not select words that are obvious in their meaning.
- 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.
- Select words that appear to have theological significance.
- Select words that appear to be central to the point of the entire verse or passage.
- Select words that will clearly make a significant difference in the meaning of the passage but that seem ambiguous or unclear.
- Select words that are repeated or that emerge as motifs in a section or paragraph.

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

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.

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**


**Greek Lexicons**


**Concordances**
- Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance (careful because the numbering is not accurate), Cruden, NASB-Exhaustive-Thomas


### Theological Dictionaries


### Misc.


- Computer Programs: Logos Bible Software, Bible Works, or Accordance

### 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 have a tendency 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). As Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard write: “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!
Words do NOT carry meaning autonomously and their meaning can be variously construed when detached from their original setting. Furthermore, the interpreter cannot use later NT passages to determine the referents of OT passages.

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).

▪ Sometimes the use of the word by the same writer in the same
  book helps clarify the meaning (e.g., “the heavenly places” in
  Ephesians).

▪ Sometimes the very same verse in which a word occurs may
  clarify its intended meaning (e.g., the word “mature” in Heb
  5:14).

▪ Sometimes the way the word is rendered in another
  translation may clarify the intended meaning of a word (e.g.,
  note how the NASB’s “lightness” in Jer 3:9 is translated in the
  NIV).

IV. Common Pitfalls in Lexical Analysis
One of the most common ways interpreters go astray is through invalid word studies. Recognizing some of the more common exegetical fallacies in lexical analysis can help the careful interpreter avoid these pitfalls. For an in-depth discussion of many of the following, see pages 27-64 of D.A. Carson’s *Exegetical Fallacies*.

A. **The Etymological Fallacy**

*Etymology* refers to the history of how a given word developed into its present form. Although etymology can sometimes be helpful in determining the meaning of a word, it often leads the interpreter to commit the *etymological fallacy*. As D.A. Carson notes, this fallacy “presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word.”

**FOR EXAMPLE:**
- The English word “nice”
- The English word “butterfly”
- The Greek word *huperetes* (“servant”)
- The Greek word *Nikolaites* (“Nicolaitan”)

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. For example, it would not be valid to assume that the Greek word *ekklesia* refers to the church of Jesus Christ in Acts 7:38 like it does so often later in the New Testament.

**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!!!

H. The Fallacy of Lexical Override

As Gordon Fee cautions: “It is possible to make too much of the use of specific words in a context. Biblical authors, like ourselves, did not always carefully choose all their words because they were fraught with significance. Sometimes words are chosen simply because they are already available to the author with his intended meaning.” The warning here is for the interpreter to be careful not to dig so “deep” into the meaning of a word that he digs past the intent of the biblical author and into the soil of his own imagination! In addition, studying a word apart from a careful observation of its immediate context—as if the word existed in a vacuum—can also lead the interpreter astray.

Conclusion

Lexical analysis is demanding but necessary. Through lexical study the barriers that hinder one’s understanding of the meaning of terms are often overcome or significantly lowered. The student who appropriates and implements sound methodology, and who avoids the common fallacies made in word study will be able to achieve a high level of accuracy in interpreting words; the building blocks of Scripture.

For further study:

“Lexical Analysis” in Interpreting the NT Text-Bock & Fanning (be careful of the book, as it is full of historical-critical ideologies)

“Lexical Analysis” in Old Testament Exegesis-Douglas Stuart

“The Analysis of Words” in New Testament Exegesis-Gordon Fee

Biblical Words and Their Meaning (An Introduction to Lexical Semantics)-Moises Silva

“Lexical Analysis” (p143ff) in Principles and Practice of Greek Exegesis- John Grassmick

For Practice:

1. Take the word “faith,” examine the different contexts, and note the variety of nuances in meaning. Consider: Rom 3:22, 27-28; Jas 2:14-24. Also, Jude 3; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 1:23;
3:23; Rom 4:19; 12:3; 14:2, 23; Eph 4:5, 13; 6:16, 23; Phil 1:25; Heb 11:3. Also, note the range of things that faith produces.

2. Take the words “save” and “salvation” in the NT and list the various ways in which it is used. Does it always mean “saved” from God’s wrath? If not, what are some of its other meanings, or usages? Use your own concordance consider such passages as: Acts 15:11; 16:30; 27:20; Phil 1:19; Matt 14:30. You may also want to look at several usages of the term in the Psalms and consider its various shades of meaning it has. If you want to think a little deeper, you might ask how each of these relates to the idea of God’s salvation from His wrath and to Himself.

3. What are some of the uses of the term “righteous?” Does it always mean ‘imputed righteousness through faith in the atoning sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ?’ What kind of righteousness is being referred to in the following passages: Matt 5:20? Rom 1:17; 3:21-26; 6:12-13; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 1:11; 1 Jn 2:29? Also, consider the root term translated in “just” in Rom 3:28, for example, and consider what this also implies about its meaning.