TWELVE RULES
for Understanding Biblical Words

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Twelve Rules for Understanding Biblical Words

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Language, and the various literary forms and genres in which it finds expression in Scripture, is part of history and culture. That is, the linguistic forms in which Scripture has come down to us—in the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic—are a reflection of the historical-cultural world in which God chose to reveal himself to his people in both Testaments. In fact, the failure to appreciate *language*, which by its very nature is subjective and varied in style and often eludes being reduced to a simple formula or rigid dictionary definitions, hinders much of common biblical interpretation.

What is language? In short, language is *convention*. It is the arbitrary assigning of a certain sequence of letters or symbols to a particular object or action. There is no reason why the object we know as "apple" should be designated by the successive letters "a," "p," "p," "l," and "e," other than that at one point in the past a language user or a group of language users determined to call this particular fruit by that particular name.

To be sure, once this usage had attained common acceptance, it became the standard, and new language users (such as children or non-native speakers) were taught that 🍎 means

"apple." The important lesson for us at this point is that there is nothing sacred, or absolute, about 🍎 being an "apple." Language is a human convention, and as such is subject to change or modification. Words have a history and can take on new meanings over time or acquire additional connotations.

Language is not a hard science like mathematics or quantum physics but rather a "soft," rather subjective and malleable medium. Perhaps this is why theologians and others who deal with religious absolutes and theological certainties have frequently had such a difficult time adjusting to the challenges presented with interpreting biblical texts. Unless we become students of language and literature *as well as* theology we will always be limited in our ability to "accurately handle the word of truth."

SEMANTICS: THE SCIENCE OF DETERMINING WORD MEANINGS

Linguistics is the field of research devoted to a study of the nature of language. A related field of study is the area of *semantics*, the science of determining word meanings.[1] Ever since the seminal contributions of the French philologist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 1900s and subsequently the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, it has been increasingly understood that language is an intricately interwoven fabric in which, in de Saussure's words, "*tout se tient*" ("everything holds together"). For this reason de Saussure spoke of "associative fields" or systems of paradigmatic relations between words.

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1. For a helpful treatment see J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982).

John Lyons provides a helpful articulation of the seminal insights of de Saussure and others:

> People often think of the meaning of words as if each of them had an independent and separate existence. But . . . no word can be fully understood independently of other words that are related to it and delimit its sense. Looked at from a semantic point of view, the lexical structure of a language—the structure of its vocabulary—is best regarded as a large and intricate network of sense-relations; it is like a huge, multidimensional, spider's web, in which each strand is one such relation and each knot in the web is a different lexeme.[2]

In his *General Course in Linguistics*, de Saussure distinguished between two linguistic phenomena: *langue* and *parole*, whereby the former constitutes the language system in its entirety and the latter specific words chosen by the language user for the sake of written or oral communication.[3] In essence, de Saussure's point was that a given language user, in construing particular utterances or discourses, draws on his general knowledge of a certain language system (e.g., English), made up of its stock of vocabulary and syntactical options. Wittgenstein, in positing the notion of "language games," made a similar point, showing that language users have a variety of options in

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2. John Lyons, *Language, Meaning and Context* (London: Fontana [Collins], 1981), 75.

3. Ferdinand de Saussure, *General Course in Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966 [1915]).

accordance with the parameters of a given linguistic system at large.[4]

Applied to the field of biblical studies, Paul, for example, when wanting to say that Jesus died for our sins, had several linguistic options available to him in keeping with the Greek language in which he was writing. Should he say that "Jesus died *anti* us," that is, "in our place" or "instead of us"? Or should he choose the wording "Jesus died *hyper* us," that is, "for our sake"? The options may be partially overlapping, but they are nonetheless distinct. Which word best encapsulates Paul's intended meaning? This process illustrates de Saussure's model well. Paul's Greek vocabulary, in the present instance comprising prepositions conveying the notion of "for" or "in the place of," corresponds to language viewed as a whole (*langue*), while his specific chosen wording (e.g., *hyper*) represents his actual words (*parole*).

The important implications of this kind of theory for the study of biblical words may not be immediately obvious, but they are significant nonetheless. Rather than study merely the specific word a biblical writer, such as Paul, was using in a particular instance, biblical interpreters, in applying de Saussure's insights, will do well to study also other words Paul may have used in a given passage but chose not to use. This will be justified especially where Paul does use alternative or similar expressions elsewhere in his writings. This will result in a more realistic, more relevant, and richer picture of the message and meaning of a given text of Scripture. Since our underlying hermeneutical purpose is the determination of authorially intended meaning,

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4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

and authors have a number of linguistic options to convey a particular proportion or meaning, the larger linguistic system must be taken into account.

CONTEXT AND DISCOURSE: INTERPRETING THE PARTS IN LIGHT OF THE WHOLE

What is the proper relationship between words and context in the study of biblical concepts? Many older treatments tend to detect meanings in biblical words that are actually supplied by the context in which those words are used. However, it is important to distinguish between information supplied by the context in which a word occurs and the component of meaning contributed by the word itself. As Grant Osborne observes, "Meaning is determined on the basis of the congruence of two factors, semantic field . . . and context."[5]

Among these two factors, context must have priority. Moisés Silva notes, "[A]mong the diverse meanings a word possesses, the only one that will emerge into consciousness is the one determined by the context."[6] Anthony Thiselton concurs: "Any meaningful linguistic unit . . . has meaning in context."[7] J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida, too, make reference to the basic principle of semantic analysis "that differences in meaning are marked by context, either textual or extratextual. . . . Since any differences of meaning are marked by context, it follows that

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5. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 414.
6. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 139.
7. Anthony C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 75.

the correct meaning of any term is that which fits the context best."[8]

Nevertheless, the fact that context must be given priority does not warrant the neglect of the other factor relevant for determining a term's meaning, namely, semantic field. The semantic field provides the word options available to the writer, the assumption being that a writer chose the word employed to communicate a meaning or nuance not provided by a different word. The following guidelines will be helpful here: (1) semantic field (i.e., terminology) and context are both important for the study of a biblical concept; (2) context has priority over semantic field; (3) if the second point is kept in mind, semantic field seems to be a very appropriate starting point to guide one to at least some of the most relevant context which need to be considered in one's study of a concept. Thus terminology (in the present case, biblical terminology) will serve as a guide to most of the relevant contexts where a given word or group of words is found.

As mentioned above, therefore, rather than narrowly focusing on words in isolation, resulting in reductionism, part of the solution is an expansion of one's focus beyond *words* to *concepts*. Thus Osborne cautions against "the failure to consider the concept as well as the word, that is, the other ways the biblical writers could say the same thing."[9] Indeed, "We dare never study only occurrences of the particular term if our purpose is to trace the theology behind a word or phrase. . . . None of us ever uses the exact same words to describe our thoughts.

8. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989), 1.xvi.
9. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 92.

Rather, we use synonyms and other phrases to depict our ideas. Therefore a truly complete picture must cluster semantically related terms and phrases."[10]

These insights with regard to semantic fields and biblical concepts, in turn, should be viewed within the larger framework of biblical discourses. In their important work *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, Peter Cotterell and Max Turner draw the vital distinction between *lexical* and *discourse concepts*.[11] The example provided by Cotterell and Turner is that of "Uncle George's old red bike," which later in a given discourse may be simply called "the bike." However, in the context of the discourse at large, "the bike" is not just any bike, but rather "Uncle George's old red bike." Or to use a biblical example, when reference is made in Revelation 13:1 to "the dragon" who stood on the shore of the sea, reference to the larger discourse unit of which the verse is a part leads the interpreter to the fuller reference to "the great dragon, . . . that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray" (Rev. 12:9). The lesson is clear: biblical concepts must be understood and interpreted within the context of the larger discourse of which they are a part.

FROM WORD STUDY TO SEMANTIC FIELD STUDY: A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

The old-fashioned notion of "word studies" has in recent years been increasingly replaced by the more refined approach of what has been called a "semantic field study." By "semantic

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10. Ibid., 92–93.
11. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 151.

field" we mean a particular set of words that are linguistically related, be it by synonymy, antonymy, or some other association of meaning. Groundbreaking in this regard was the *Greek-English Dictionary Based on Semantic Domains* compiled by Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida under the auspices of the United Bible Societies (1988, 1989).[12] Initially prepared as a resource for Bible translators, the innovative approach used by this dictionary has pointed the way forward to a more accurate and faithful appraisal of word meanings in both Testaments, particularly the New Testament.

In this dictionary, the vocabulary of the New Testament is grouped into a total of 93 semantic domains, which in turn are divided into two or more sub-domains each. For example, you might want to conduct a study of possessions in the New Testament. If so, you would want to include an analysis of several words related to wealth and poverty, be it nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, such as "rich," "poor," "wealth," "poverty," and so on, of course in the original Greek. Most of these terms are found together in Louw and Nida's domain 57, "Possess, Transfer, Exchange," which is divided into as many as 21 sub-domains.

Assume that your focus is on a study of wealth and poverty in the Gospel of Luke, a New Testament book where this theme is particularly prominent. Perhaps the ace for you to turn in order to locate specific instances of "wealth and poverty" vocabulary in the Gospel of Luke is *The Book Study*

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12. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*. Though no corresponding work exists at present for the Old Testament, there is a growing interest in such a work. A search of Hebrew semantic/lexical projects on the internet reveals several data base projects currently underway. (United Bible Societies is working on an OT counterpart titled *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew,* edited by Reiner de Bois. I'm not sure when it will be released. See http://sdbh.org.)

Concordance, which organizes the vocabulary of the New Testament book by book.[13] This enables you to survey the vocabulary of any one New Testament book much more quickly than by the use of a conventional concordance. By way of scanning the English glosses even those interpreters who do not know New Testament Greek are able to delineate the contours of the Lucan theology of wealth and poverty.

The (partial) results present themselves as follows (references are to the Gospel of Luke):

13.1. SEMANTIC FIELD STUDY OF WEALTH AND POVERTY IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE	
πτωχός (*ptōchos*, **"poor"**)	
4:18	anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor
6:20	Blessed are you who are poor
7:22	the poor have good news preached to them, etc.
πλούσιος (*plousios*, **"rich"**)	
6:24	But woe to you who are rich
12:16	The land of a rich man produced plentifully
14:12	When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your . . . rich neighbors, etc.
πλουτέω (*plouteō*, **"be rich"**)	
1:53	he has filled the hungry . . ., and the rich he has sent empty away
12:21	So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God
πλοῦτος (*ploutos*, **"wealth, riches"**)	
8:14	choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life

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13. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Raymond P. Bouchoc, *The Book Study Concordance* (Nashville: B & H, 2003).

A quick glance at passages show that wealth and poverty is indeed an important theme in Luke's Gospel. A semantic field study, rather than a series of isolated word studies, is better able to provide the interpreter with a full-orbed understanding of Luke's theology of wealth and poverty. It is not our purpose here to develop this theology further. The above listing of passages merely provides us with the relevant data from which this important Lucan theme can be profitably studied.

The value of semantic field studies for the Old Testament can be illustrated in a study of the word "kill" in the command "You shall not kill" (Deut. 5:17; רָצַח, [rĕṣāḥ]). The more recent translations of the Old Testament read "You shall not *murder*." This change of wording is, in part, based on the recognition that the English word "kill" is more general than is the Hebrew, which comes into sharper focus when one compares it with other Hebrew words used of taking life.[14]

TWELVE RULES FOR UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL WORDS

Now that we have laid out a responsible procedure for conducting semantic field studies, it will be helpful to take a look at twelve rules for understanding biblical words. These are addressing exegetical fallacies, in particular fallacies that relate to determining word meanings. This is an important subject because the biblical interpreter is ultimately accountable to God and charged with handling the word of truth accurately.

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14. Regarding helpful tools for word studies and semantic field studies and other original language biblical research, see chapter 16 in *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* by Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson.

This, in turn, involves discerning the meaning of individual words in context.

At this point it is worth remembering that our hermeneutic is founded on the two bedrock principles of (1) the integrity of Scripture (including its verbal inspiration); and (2) the importance of determining the meaning intended by the original author (rather than supplying a meaning of our own). Giving utmost care to the study of each individual word of Scripture flows directly from these two bedrock principles (though it must be said that this does not entail a rigid, atomistic approach to word study that fails to consider contextual meaning).[15]

It has been said that a little knowledge is dangerous. This is nowhere truer than when it comes to the knowledge of biblical languages. Many a preacher has been known to parade his command of the Greek or Hebrew language before his congregation and to make confident assertions that would have made competent linguists or informed biblical scholars cringe. We therefore turn our attention now to the matter of exegetical fallacies related to the meaning of words.[16]

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15. See especially Kevin Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," in *Whatever Happened to Truth?*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 93–129; and his earlier treatment, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 49–104.

16. For helpful treatments of exegetical word fallacies see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), chapter 1 and Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, chapter 3.

Rule 1: Beware of Meanings Derived from Word Roots.

We all have heard people say, "You know, the word X originally meant such-and-such," with the implication that knowing this original meaning of a given expression is significant for interpreting the meaning of the word in a later instance. But while this may at times be the case, it is not invariably so, and in many cases will be downright fallacious. To use an example from the English, the word "nice" comes from Latin *nescius*, which means "ignorant." How does knowing that the term underlying the word "nice" originally meant "ignorant" help the contemporary reader understand the use of the word in a particular written text (or oral communication)? The answer is, only does it not help, drawing on the root meaning of the word can be rather confusing and lead to wrong and unfounded conclusions, in some cases even bizarre or humorous ones. For example, "butterfly" does not mean "butter" + "fly," nor does "pineapple" mean "pine" plus "apple"![17]

This caution pertains also to conclusions drawn from the meaning of two or more component parts of a given expression. Among the common examples in this area is the Greek word ὑπηρέτης (*hypēretēs*) which is properly translated "servants" in many English translations of 1 Corinthians 4:1. However, some have pointed to the fact that, taken by itself, the preposition ὑπό (*hypo)* means "under," and the word ἐρέτης (*eretēs)* means "rower"; hence, ὑπηρέτης (*hypēretēs)* means "under-rower," as in "one who is part of a crew rowing a boat." The all-important question, however, is: Was Paul consciously drawing on rowing imagery when writing to Corinthians?

17. Cf. Johannes P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), 27.

Or had the original metaphor been lost as a connotation that would have resonated in the writer's and readers' minds? If the latter (and in the present instance, there is good evidence that it had), it is fallacious to claim that Paul invoked an illustration from the realm of rowing in 1 Corinthians 4:1. It may be tempting for the preacher to suggest this, and hard to pass up an opportunity to impress the audience with one's knowledge of the original Greek, but such temptations must nonetheless be firmly resisted, for our quest for truth must override points made on flimsy linguistic foundations. Contextually, it appears that ὑπηρέτης (*hyperetēs*) used in 1 Corinthians 4:1 is a virtual synonym of διάκ**ονος** (*diakonos)*, "servant."[18]

A further pitfall in this regard can be illustrated as follows. In several instances, Jesus is called μονογενής (*monogenēs)* in John's Gospel (John 1:14, 18; 3:14, 18). Many have claimed that the best understanding of this word is that Jesus is the "only-begotten" Son of God. Even on the premise that the sum of a word's parts makes up the meaning of the word as a whole, however (which we have shown to be fallacious), the problem in the present instance is that μονογενής (*monogenēs)* is derived not from μονο *(monos,* "only") + γενναω (*gennaō,* "beget" or "give birth"), which would add up to "only-begotten," but from μονός (*monos,* "only") + γενος (*genos,* "kind"). Thus μονογενής (*monogenēs)*, based on the meaning of its component parts, more properly means "the only one of a kind" (i.e., unique), not "only begotten." This is confirmed by the usage of the word in the Greek Septuagint (e.g., Judg. 11:34) and other New Testament passages (e.g., Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38), where the term

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18. See ibid., 26–27, followed by Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 29–30.

is applied to only children who by virtue of being such were considered unique and particularly precious to their parents.[19]

In short, then, we must avoid the etymological or root fallacy and study the contextual meaning of a given word in a biblical passage. Rather than focusing on *diachronic* study (the use of a given word "over time"), the emphasis should lie on *synchronic* study (the use of a word "at the same time" as the word under consideration). This way we will compare apples to apples rather than to oranges, will build our linguistic work on more proper foundations, and will more likely arrive at accurate conclusions with regard to the meaning of a particular biblical word in its proper context.

Rule 2: Be Careful About Using Subsequent or Previous Word Meanings (Semantic Anachronism or Obsolescence).

As mentioned, language is a matter of convention, and words have a history. The relevance of these observations has already been shown with regard to the "root fallacy" above. It is also an issue related to the present set of fallacies. *Semantic anachronism* may be defined as the reading of a later use of a word back into earlier literature.

It may seem compelling to many preachers and people in the congregation that God loves a "hilarious" giver (2 Cor. 9:7), because the Greek word underlying "hilarious" is ἱλαρόν *(hilaron)*, but this conclusion is also certainly wrong, because "hilarious" is a later connotation taken on by the word in subsequent English usage. At the time of the writing of New

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19. For a fuller treatment see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 42–44.

Testament, the Greek word meant "cheerful" (NIV), not "hilarious," and the preacher should be content to leave it at that. No playing of laughing tapes during offertory, please!

Likewise, while it is true that the Greek word underlying "miracle" in the New Testament is *dynamis*, this does not mean that Jesus' miracles were "dynamite"! "Dynamite" is a later linguistic development that should not be read back into earlier usage. This would be committing the fallacy of semantic anachronism. Or, is Paul telling Romans 12:1 to render "logical worship" because the word modifying "worship" is Grk. λογικὴν *(logikēn)*, this improperly assumes that λογικὴν *(logikēn)* = "logical," which may or may not actually be the case. "Spiritual" or "reasonable" (orig. [changed in 2010 version]) is therefore a better translation. Another example of such a fallacy is the use of the word "bishop" to translate Greek ἐπίσκοπος *(episkopos)*. "Overseer" [e.g. 1 Tim. 3:2 NIV]) is better; "bishop" carries unwelcome connotations of the later development of a three-tiered monarchical episcopate.

And are we really God's "poem" merely because the Greek word underlying "workmanship" in Ephesians 2:10 is ποίημα *(poiēma)*, the word from which we get "poem" in the English language? Hardly. More properly understood, ποίημα *(poiēma)* is related to the Greek verb ποίεω *(poieō)*, which means "do" or "make," so that ποίημα *(poiēma)* denotes the work of one's hands more generally, as in "workmanship" or "product," not necessarily the work of a poet, as in "poetry." Finally, when Jude urges his readers to contend for the faith" (Jude 3), does the fact that the Greek word ἐπαγωνίζομαι *(epagōnizomai)* is used to denote the word "contend" in this passage mean that we should "agonize over" our faith? This is

hardly the case. We could give more examples, but the point is clear enough.

A related fallacy is that of *semantic obsolescence*, in which case the interpreter assigns to a word in a given biblical passage a meaning that the word in question had at an earlier point in the development of the language but that is no longer within the live, semantic range of the word. In other words, this meaning is semantically obsolete.[20] A possible example is the meaning "to kiss" for the word φιλέω (*phileō)*, which is quite common early on but seems to be largely obsolete in the New Testament.[21] A New Testament instance where obsolescence can be detected with regard to a type of grammatical form is the almost complete loss of the superlative sense in most superlative forms.[22] The important interpretive implication is that most superlatives should be understood to carry

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20. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 56, cites as an example of semantic obsolescence the Greek word μάρτυς*s* meaning "martyr," but this is itself fallacious, since it is not the case that the meaning "martyr" had become obsolete by the time of the New Testament, but that it had not yet appeared! Thus this is actually an instance of semantic anachronism, not obsolescence.

21. See the observation registered by W. Feneberg, "φιλέω," in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, ed., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 3.425 (with references to further bibliography): "Why, in sharp contrast to secular usage, does φιλέω phileō recede so noticeably in the LXX (15 occurrences, vs. 266 of ἀγαπάω) and (doubtless dependent on this) also in the NT (25 occurrences vs. 143)?" See also the thorough survey by G. Stählin, "φιλέω κτλ.," in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 9.113–71.

22. See F. Blass, A. Debrunner, trans. by R. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 1, n. 2.

"elative" force, that is, convey simple comparison or even mere emphasis.[23]

Or, conversely, interpreters may assign a particular meaning to a word that it took on at a later point in its semantic development but that it did not yet possess at the time period from which the text stems. An example of this latter fallacy is the imposition of the notion of martyrdom onto the New Testament instances of the μάρτυς (*martys*) word group (with the possible exception of certain instances of this word group in the book of Revelation). Another example is the translation, "On this rock I will build my *church*," of Matthew 16:18, even though "church" may anachronistically suggest the New Testament doctrine of the church as the body of Christ that was developed only subsequently by Paul. More properly, Jesus spoke of establishing his new messianic "community" (the more likely meaning of the term ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia)* in the present example).[24]

Rule 3: Be Cautious About the Unknown or Unlikely Meanings or Background Material.

The appeal to unknown or unlikely meanings or background material is one of the most common fallacies in biblical interpretation and preaching. One of the most serious negative consequences of this practice is that the actual explicit message

23. For a full discussion and numerous New Testament examples, see ibid., §60, pp. 32–33. E.g., ἥδιστα in 2 Corinthians 12:9 means "all the more gladly," not "gladdest"; in 2 Corinthians 12:15, the same word is to be rendered "very gladly."

24. Note that the expression occurs only twice in all of the Gospels, here and in Matthew 18:18, which makes clear that "church" had not yet become a technical term in Jesus' day. See further the fallacy related to false assumptions about technical meaning below.

of the text is set aside in favor of an alleged construal of background or word meaning, which substitutes the message intended by the given interpreter for that intended by the biblical author and ultimately God himself as the author of Scripture. In light of the above comments made about the importance of context, we must be careful in our use of lexical or background information so that we give preference to the connotation that is most likely in keeping with the surrounding and later context rather than resort to dubious extratextual pieces of information. As Louw and Nida aptly note, "the correct meaning of any term is that which fits the context best."[25]

Perhaps one of the most egregious examples of the present fallacy in biblical scholarship of which I am aware is the argument by Catherine and Richard Kroeger that the term αὐθεντέω (*authenteō*), commonly translated "to have authority," in 1 Timothy 2:12 should be translated as "to proclaim oneself the author of man."[26] The Kroegers posited this previously unknown meaning on the basis of an alleged teaching in Ephesus at the time of writing, according to which women claimed that God created the woman first, and then the man, rather than the other way round. If so, Paul's prohibition against women occupying authoritative offices over men in the church would be recast as a prohibition for women to claim, wrongly, that God made, first Eve, and then Adam.[27] The problem with this

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25. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1.xvi.
26. Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffet Not a Woman* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).
27. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the well-known Hebrew scholar and feminist Phyllis Trible recently suggested just that—though this does not prove that the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12 advanced by the Kroegers is accurate! See Phyllis Trible, "Wrestling with Scripture," *BAR* 32/2 (March/April 2006): 49–50.

interpretation is that it lacks complete textual support, which is why few, if any, scholars have adopted this rendering.

Rule 4: Refrain from the Improper Construal of Greek or Hebrew Grammar or Syntax.

In any given language, there are certain rules of proper word order, grammar, and syntax that, while capable of being broken, nonetheless are required for proper expression in that particular language. To cite an example in English, "Car kills man" means something quite different than "Man kills car," though the words are exactly the same. Word order makes all the difference. Or someone may say, "I is Andrew." We may still understand that the person's name is Andrew, but clearly the person is using improper grammar (in the present case, the third rather than the first person singular of the verb "to be").

The same principle applies in the biblical languages, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Properly understood, these fairly hard and fast rules of Greek or Hebrew grammar and syntax (as well a certain semantic range, which means that certain words will be outside this range) can be the interpreter's best friend, for these rules set proper boundaries for correct or incorrect interpretation. The problem comes only where someone is either ignorant of what constitutes proper grammar in a biblical language underlying a particular text or where such a person willfully sets aside these rules in order to advance his or her own preferred interpretation even though it violates common usage with regard to semantic range, grammar, or syntax.[28]

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28. With regard to semantic range, see the example of the alleged meaning of αὐθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12, "to proclaim oneself the author of man," discussed above.

Let's look at a few examples of this fallacy. The first comes from Genesis 1:2. Many have attempted to show that Genesis 1:2 forms a parenthetical observation to Genesis 1:1 (e.g., the translation in the Anchor Bible of Gen. 1:1–3). Others have suggested that there is a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, so that a long period of time existed after the original creation, allowing for the fall of Satan and his hosts. Genesis 1:2 then becomes a subsequent recreation because of what the earth had become: "formless and empty."

The former view illegitimately assumes an unlikely grammatical structure, because the Hebrew verbal phrase here contains a perfect rather than the normal imperfect tense in a special construction denoting verbal sequence. The latter view would also demand an imperfect verb tense and call for a different construction with "formless and empty" if the meaning "became" were to be distinctly clear. Appeal to Isaiah's remarks that the Lord did not create the earth "to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited" (Isa. 45:18) likewise fails to substantiate the case for the gap theory, for Isaiah simply emphasizes the Lord's purpose in creating the earth rather than the process of his activity in doing so.

It is best simply to view verse 1 as a sovereign God's original creation and verse 2 as the opening conditions from which God proceeded in his further creative and fashioning work with regard to planet earth. The Hebrew construction in verse 2 (*waw* + the perfect) is thus best viewed as conveying anticipatory emphasis. Having spoken of the universe, the text now moves on to consider the earth: "Now as for the earth."

A New Testament example comes from John 2:20, a verse in which translations commonly render the Greek original as indicating that the temple had been under construction "for

46 years." This seems to make good sense in that Jesus then would be saying that he can tear down and rebuild the temple in three days rather than the 46 years that it had already taken to do so in his day. The problem with this, however, is that the expression "46 years" in the Greek is in the dative rather than accusative case. Yet it is the accusative that would need to be used (an "accusative of time") if the above-cited interpretation were valid. On the former reading, the dative suggests, not duration *of* time ("for 46 years") but location *in* time: "at [a point] 46 years [ago]." Therefore what is most likely in view is the beginning of reconstruction of the temple 46 years ago in the past (location), not the extended period of reconstruction (duration) of the temple.[29]

Rule 5: Avoid an Improper Appeal to Alleged Parallels.

Another very common fallacy is the improper appeal to alleged parallels, whether semantic or conceptual. Regarding the latter, Samuel Sandmel has written a well-known essay opposing what he calls "parallelomania," that is, the urge felt by some scholars to adduce parallels of questionable value.[30] Often it appears that interpreters feel they can simply *assume* that a given passage constitutes an actual parallel without demonstration. Yet it must be stated unequivocally that simply quoting a similar-sounding passage and asserting that this is a "parallel" does not amount to and must never take the place of an argument supported by evidence.

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29. See Köstenberger, *John*, 109–10. Note that this rendering has been added as a footnote to the ESV.
30. Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 2–13.

During the heyday of the history-of-religions school, for example, it was common practice to explain virtually every feature of Christianity by appeal to other religions, particular the so-called "mystery religions." Scholars explained baptism in connection with secret initiation rites in those cults, and likened the Lord's Supper to sacred ritual meals. Similarly, they interpreted Old Testament legal observance and worship in light of other ancient Near Eastern religions. Somehow, it was always other religions that had a claim to originality, except for Christianity, which was always assumed to borrow its ideas from other religions![31]

Caution is always called for when we adduce a given parallel, because we must never assume that even the predominant usage of a given word or image prevails in each and every case. It is highly precarious simply to take the most frequently attested lexical meaning of an expression from a dictionary and to assume it obtains in a particular instance. There is no substitute for contextual interpretation, and what we said about determinative role of context for word meanings above applies here as well.

For example, 1 Timothy 2:15 is commonly rendered, "But women will be saved through childbearing." Saved by childbearing? This sounds very un-Pauline, for according to the apostle, salvation is by grace through faith, not works (e.g., Rom. 3:21–28; Eph. 2:8–9). Some have sought to alleviate this difficulty by arguing that future salvation *on the last day* is in view here, but it is hard to see how merely transferring the

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31. See the sidebar on mystery religious and the history-of-religions approach in Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 88.

point in time of salvation from the present to the future takes care of the problem.[32]

A better solution involves a close look at the meaning of the Greek word underlying "saved," σώζω/*sōzō*. While the expression connotes religious salvation in most instances in Paul's writings, in its non-biblical usage the word refers more broadly to rescue or deliverance from any kind of danger. In the New Testament epistles, this "danger" from which people are said to be delivered is normally sin and eternal death. However, the sense "rescue from danger" is still found in the New Testament in the several uses of the word διασώζω/*diasōzō* in the book of Acts in conjunction with Paul's shipwreck (Acts 27:43-44; 28:1, 4; cf. 23:24, which speaks of Paul being "taken safely" to Governor Felix). The Gospels use σώζω/*sōzō* differently as well. There, the word refers to a person getting well or whole as a result of being healed by Jesus (e.g., Mark 5:23, 28, 34; 6:56; note that these people do not always experience religious salvation as well). In light of these semantic data and in light of the difficulty of translating σώζω (*sōzō)* with its common Pauline meaning, the question arises if there is an alternative way of rendering the term in 1 Timothy 2:15.

In fact, there is. Later in the same epistle, Paul urges Timothy to pay close attention to how he lives and to the content of his teaching, so that he may "preserve" or "ensure salvation"

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32. Thomas R. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: A Dialogue with Scholarship," in *Women in the Church*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 115–20. See also Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 417–41, who argues for women's salvation through "*the* Childbirth," i.e. Mary's giving birth to Jesus the Messiah.

(NASB) for both himself and his hearers (1 Tim. 4:16). Clearly in this instance Timothy will not literally "save" himself or those who listen to him. Rather, Paul's concern is for the *spiritual preservation* of those under Timothy's care, the danger lurking in the form of the false teachers who sought to lead believers astray. Likewise, in 1 Timothy 2:15 Paul's probable intended meaning is not that women will literally be *saved* by childbearing (or even by "the" Childbearing of Mary) but that they will be *preserved* by adhering to their God-ordained role of motherhood (a figure of speech called synecdoche).[33] The lesson, therefore, as mentioned, is this: one must never assume that the predominant meaning of a given word (in the present case, "save" for σῴζω/*sōzō*) will certainly prevail in a particular passage. The actual meaning of the word will be indicated by the respective context.

The same principle obtains when it comes to the use of common metaphors, such as sheep or infants. Many things may be said about either of these metaphors, but not all characteristics may be the point of a biblical writer's illustration. Since "sheep" is also a good illustration of another fallacy called "illegitimate totality transfer," we will discuss this example below, but a brief look at the way in which infants are used to illustrate spiritual truths in the New Testament will make the issue clear. In places such as Hebrews 5:12–13, the readers are chastised by the author who says that

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33. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Ascertaining Women's God-Ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 107–44; idem, "Saved through Childbearing? A Fresh Look at 1 Timothy 2:15 Points to Protection from Satan's Deception," *CBMW News* 2/4 (1997): 1–6; and the interchange with Ben Witherington posted at www.biblicalfoundations.org.

these believers are like babies who "need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness." Conversely, "solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). Clearly, babies are used as a negative example here. Believers ought to grow up. But consider 1 Peter 2:1–3. In context (1 Pet. 1:23), Peter wrote that believers have been born again to new life. As those who have been reborn spiritually, Peter proceeds to exhort the recipients of his letter, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." Strikingly, here babies are used in a diametrically opposite fashion, as good examples of something the biblical author wants his readers to emulate. This means that we must not assume that a given type of illustration is used in the same way in every instance. Again, context must decide.

On a verbal level, the same principle applies. In English, "gift" means a present given to or a special ability possessed by a person. In German, "gift" means poison. Context must decide—in this case, which language is in play? Depending on the language in which you are operating, you are advised to accept a gift in English but *not* in German! In our study of the Bible, too, we must beware of assuming too quickly that an *apparent* parallel is a *genuine* parallel. Again, merely quoting a similar-sounding passage and assuming without further substantiation that it will be self-evident to others that the alleged "parallel" explains the use of a given word in a certain passage is inadequate. Beware of "parallelomania" and recognize the all-important role of context in interpretation.

Rule 6: Stay Clear of an Improper Link of Language and Mentality.

Conventional wisdom has it that Hebrew thought was concrete while Greek thought was abstract. This leads to corresponding assertions in the interpretation of specific biblical passages. Truth, for example, is said to be conveyed in the sense of a person's faithfulness in the Old Testament (in keeping with Hebrew thought) while the term is said to convey the notion of correspondence to reality in the New Testament (corresponding to the Greek way of thinking). This would be a nice theory if it were true; the problem is that the evidence does not bear this out, whether on a general or on a specific level.[34]

On a specific level, to continue with our example of the concept of, and words for, "truth" for the moment, both the Old and the New Testament feature both types of usage, "truth" in the sense of faithfulness and in the sense of correspondence to reality. In both Testaments, statements are said to be true (i.e., they correspond to reality), and in both Testaments truth is conveyed in personal terms, by people—or God—keeping his word and proving to be faithful (as suggested by the English word "fidelity" or the expression of one remaining "true" to his word).

On a general level, too, it has been shown convincingly that generalizations with regard to language use and word meanings on the basis of the mentality of peoples cannot be sustained.[35]

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34. See James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961), chapter 7.
35. See especially the trenchant critique of works such as Thorleif Boman's *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* in Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, esp. 46–79. For a good summary of the debate, see Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, 17–32.

Are all French people gourmets? Are all Germans perfectionists? The list could go on and on. Yet the claim persists, as a representative work has it, that "the Hebrew thought in pictures, and consequently his nouns are concrete and vivid. There is no such thing as neuter gender, for the Semite everything is alive."[36] Yet we must not confuse grammatical and biological gender or hold that there is a necessary correspondence between the two. Do Germans believe girls are neuter because of the gender of "das Mädchen"? Did Greeks think sin was a uniquely or distinctively female trait because "sin," ἡ ἁμαρτία (*hē hamartia)*, is feminine in grammatical gender? If so, they must have thought "truth" was a feminine trait as well, since the Greek word for truth, ἡ αληθεία (*hē alētheia)*, is likewise feminine in gender. Examples such as these illustrate that linking language to mentality is fraught with problems and is best avoided altogether.

Rule 7: Resist False Assumptions about Technical Meaning.

We have already made reference to Matthew 16:18, which is commonly translated as, "On this rock I will build my *church*." In light of the fact that the Greek word underlying "church," ἐκκλεσία (*ekklēsia)*, only occurs one other time in all the Gospels combined (Matt. 18:17), we suggested that the translation "church" may be misleading since it suggests, erroneously, that this term had already become a technical term in Jesus' day when in fact it did so only in the days of the apostle Paul who developed the notion of the church as the body of Christ. For

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36. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 219.

this reason we proposed that "community" may better convey the sense of Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:18.[37]

Another possible instance where a technical meaning may be wrongly surmised is the New Testament doctrine of sanctification.[38] The student of systematic theology would tend to assume that "sanctification" refers to the process of Christian growth following a person's conversion. It is often assumed that justification (a person being declared righteous on the basis of Christ's substitutionary cross-death) occurs at the time of conversion, while sanctification is a process that takes place subsequent to this event. However, as a study of the instances of "sanctification" terminology (especially the ἁγιάζω (*hagiazō)*, "set apart," word group) makes clear, according to the New Testament people are not only justified but also "set apart" ("sanctified") at the point of conversion (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11). For this reason the neat distinction between justification and sanctification in our systematics textbooks collapses. Both justification *and* sanctification take place at conversion, and the New Testament terminology for what we call "sanctification" is that of Christian growth (e.g., 2 Pet. 3:18).

Rule 8: Look out for Improper Distinctions Concerning Synonyms.

One very common fallacious assumption in biblical interpretation is the notion that every difference in wording is

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37. Perhaps the reason why translation committees are slow to embrace this is that the conventional rendering is so deeply entrenched in our collective psyche that an alternative rendering, even if more accurate, would take some getting used to. But this is no good reason not to translate more accurately.

38. See especially the excellent study by David Peterson, *Possessed by God*, NSBT 1 (Leicester: Apollos, 1995).

theologically motivated. This assumption is fallacious because it fails to consider alternative possibilities such as that two or more different words which are roughly synonymous may be used owing to stylistic variation or other factors. This fallacy, in turn, is linked to another improper hermeneutical practice, that is, the unwarranted linking of sense and reference (see further below). The classic example is the use of two different verbs for "love" in John 21:15–17, αγαπάω (*agapaō*) and φιλέω (*phileō*).[39] The state of affairs can be laid out as follows:[40]

13.2. TWO DIFFERENT VERBS FOR "LOVE" IN JOHN 21:15–17	
v. 15	Jesus to Peter: "Simon son of John, do you love (ἀγαπάω, *agapaō*) me more than these?"
v. 15	Peter to Jesus: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love (φιλέω, *phileō*) you."
v. 16	Jesus to Peter: "Simon son of John, do you love (ἀγαπάω, *agapaō*) me?"
v. 16	Peter to Jesus: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love (φιλέω, *phileō*) you."
v. 17	Jesus to Peter: "Simon son of Johyou love (φιλέω, *phileō*) me?"
v. 17	Peter to Jesus: "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love (φιλέω, *phileō*) you."

The standard explanation of the use of verbs for "love" in this passage is that the first two times Jesus uses ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) to denote a divine form of love, while Peter only pledges a human form of love. The third time around, we are told, Jesus lowered himself to Peter's standard and used the "human" word for love, φιλέω (*phileō*), rather than the "divine" one, αγαπάω (*agapaō)* seems to be a very satisfying

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39. See the discussion in Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 51–53.
40. Our own translation. The original NIV inserts the word "truly" (which has no equivalent in the Greek) in verses 15 and 16 (rendering αγαπάω with "truly love") in order to bring out the meaning of the passage.

explanation of the data that only has one problem: it does not comport with the linguistic evidence from John's Gospel. D. A. Carson and others have shown, both ἀγαπάω (*agapaō)* and φιλέω (*phileō)* are used in John with reference to both divine and human love and function interchangeably in the Gospel![41] This means that the underlying semantic distinction between the two words for "love" in John 21:15–17 is illegitimate. Another explanation must be found. Most likely the two words are synonyms that are used alternatively for the sake of stylistic variation. This is strongly suggested by the presence of two other sets of synonyms for common words in the same passage: γινώσκω (*ginōskō)* and οἶδα (*oida)* for "to know," and expressions such as "feed my lambs" or "tend my sheep."

Or take the use of the Greek word for "receive," δέχομαι (*dechomai)*, in 1 Thessalonians 1:6. In a recent sermon, the preacher made the point that the use of this particular word for "receiving" in the present passage, rather than the other Greek word for "receiving," λαμβάνω [*lambanō*], is significant, because it means that the Thessalonians did not merely "take" the word (as would be indicated by λαμβάνω (*lambanō)*, they truly "received" it. However, once again, there is little support for making such a distinction between these two Greek words. More likely, they are virtual synonyms that are used with no discernible distinction in meaning. For this reason students and teachers of the Word should take care lest they find distinctions in their interpretation of biblical words even where the original authors did not intend to make such a distinction.

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41. Cf., e.g., John 3:35 and 5:20 (the Father loves the Son) or John 11:5 and 36 (Jesus loves Lazarus). D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 676–77.

Rule 9: Steer Clear of Being Selective or Prejudicial in the Use of Evidence.

Virtually every one of us at one time or other has been guilty of selective or prejudicial use of evidence.[42] By this we mean the practice of citing only the evidence that can be adduced in favor of a person's viewpoint while countervailing evidence is omitted or suppressed. Not only is this practice fallacious from a standpoint of thoroughness of research and presentation, it is also ethically suspect if not dishonest. Awhile back one researcher asked the other, "How is your research going?" To which the other person replied: "Great! I'm finding a lot of people who agree with my conclusions."

If this is your definition of research, it has to change, for whatever the above-stated procedure is, it is certainly *not* research. Research means the unearthing of *all* of the evidence, whether it agrees with one's own findings or not. Everything else is merely a matter of prooftexting or deduction, and while some may dress up their findings as research, unless they present the evidence in an even-handed, thoroughgoing manner, their arguments will likely fail to convince, because it will quickly become transparent that theirs is an exercise in dogmatism likely to convince only those already converted.

As mentioned, biblical interpretation, properly understood, requires a commitment to listening and perception of what is there. Proper procedure demands that the various alternatives be set forth and pros and cons be weighed before the interpreter settles on the interpretation that accounts best

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42. For a helpful discussion and some examples, see Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 93–94.

for all the data under consideration. This will flow from an honest search for truth that is willing to hold one's own predetermined notions in abeyance and to be seriously engaged by the data of the biblical text. In the end, this will also most likely convince others of a given view.

Rule 10: Reject Unwarranted Semantic Disjunctions or Restrictions (Including Illegitimate Totality Transfer).

As in many other areas of life, so also in the realm of biblical interpretation, simplistic "either-or" alternatives are often suspect. An example of this "disjunctive fallacy" is the insistence by some that the Greek word κεφαλή (*kephalē*), translated "head," in Ephesians 5:23 means "source" rather than conveying the notion of authority, when contextual study shows that *both* senses are present: the husband is to be a source of nourishment and encouragement to his wife, *and* he is put in charge of his wife as Christ is over the church as the head is over the body (Eph. 5:23–30).[43]

Also in this category falls the unwarranted restriction of a semantic field, that is, the insistence that a word can only mean one thing when there is in fact a semantic range (i.e., a multiplicity of potential meanings). This problem may arise with a too narrowly conceived notion of formal equivalence, leading to the insistence that every instance of a given Greek or Hebrew word be translated with the same English word.

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43. See Thomas R. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 212–13; Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Head," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. Pheme Perkins et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 754–55.

However, this insufficiently accounts for the possibility—and often reality—that a word's semantic range in Greek or Hebrew on the one hand and in English on the other may differ. If so, it is not only legitimate but even imperative to render the same Greek or Hebrew word with a variety of English words. While this may make it harder to see from the English translation where the same word was used in the original, the practice of finding context-appropriate renderings will prove to be more accurate and faithful to the meaning intended by the original authors.

The opposite of the unwarranted restriction of the semantic field is the unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field, a fallacy that has also been called "illegitimate totality transfer." In this fallacy a word's entire semantic range is improperly considered to be part of the term's meaning in a specific context when, in fact, only one of the several possible meanings obtain in that particular instance. This is the fallacy at least suggested, if not committed, by the "Amplified Version."

A case in point is the biblical use of the shepherd metaphor.[44] Many a preacher, when expounding on the meaning of a particular passage involving a reference to sheep, has imported all the characteristics of sheep, even though not all of these may be in play in that particular case. To be sure, Isaiah 53:6 says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray," but is this the point of Jesus' statement, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know

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44. For useful treatments, see Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds: Explorations in pastoral theology* (2d ed.; Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1997); and Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).

them, and they follow me" (John 10:27)? This is hardly so. In the former case, it is sheep's waywardness that is the point of the biblical illustration; in the latter instance, it is sheep's need for a shepherd and their following of his voice. Both are characteristics of sheep, but one is invoked in the former passage and the other in the latter. The fallacy of illegitimate totality transfer unduly lumps all the characteristics of sheep together and wrongly claims that all of these are relevant every time an illustration involving sheep is used.

Or take Jesus' reference to salt in his statement, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). We have all heard sermons where the various characteristics of salt are mentioned at this point: salt is a preservative, salt provides seasoning, and so on. Did Jesus intend to invoke all of these attributes in the present passage? Maybe so, but this must be established on contextual grounds rather than be assumed merely on the basis that salt is mentioned.

Rule 11: Be Attentive to Distinctive Characteristics or Personal Style.

As mentioned, language is convention, and as such inevitably involves a subjective element. This includes matters such as personal style, preference, and distinctive vocabulary, and even theology. Hence we must beware of the notion that "righteousness" must mean exactly the same in Matthew or Paul, or that the relationship between faith and works is construed in exactly the same way in Paul and James (compare and contrast the use of Gen. 15:6 in Gal. 3:6 and Jas. 2:23).

In terms of the interpretation of specific biblical passages, one example where this comes into play is John 1:17, where the evangelist writes that "the law was given through Moses;

grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." In light of the fact that in Paul's writings a distinction is regularly made between observance of the law (which is unable to lead to salvation) and faith in Christ, some have construed John's message here in similar terms. In fact, some even inserted the adversative conjunction "but" between the two phrases (e.g., NLT: "For the law was given through Moses, *but* God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ"), even though the word is absent from the Greek. However, as a contextual study of John 1:17 shows, both with regard to the immediate context and the context of the theology of the entire Gospel, the Pauline law-gospel distinction is not present in John. Instead, John 1:17 presents Jesus as the climactic fulfillment of earlier manifestations of God's grace, *including* the law. For this reason, John 1:17, rather than constituting a negative reference to the law (conveying its inability to provide salvation, cf. Rom. 3:21; Gal. 2:17–21; 3:23–25), presents the law in positive terms: it, too, was God's gracious provision, albeit one that was preliminary to his ultimate provision of grace and truth in Jesus Christ.[45]

Or take instances of the Greek word σάρζ (*sarx)* , "flesh," for example. In Paul, the term frequently serves as a synonym for "sinful nature," that is, it carries a negative connotation. In other passages, however, "flesh" is used neutrally to refer to humanity, without intended reference to human sinfulness (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:24–25 citing Isa. 40:6–8). In light of the personal style characteristics and distinctive vocabulary and usage of individual biblical writers, the interpreter must take care to allow for the context of Scripture to guide his or her study and

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45. See Köstenberger, *John*, 47–48.

to avoid a "one-size-fits-all" approach when it comes to word meanings or biblical concepts.

Rule 12: Take Notice of Unwarranted Links Between Sense and Reference.

While the fallacy of an illegitimate linking of sense and reference is more subtle than some of the others and requires a bit of explanation, it is a fallacy nonetheless. For this reason it is worthwhile to understand the dynamics underlying this misuse. If *sense* is the actual meaning of a word in a specific context and *reference* is the object to which the word is referring, it is important to realize that part of a word's meaning in a given passage is supplied not by the word itself but by other words in its immediate context. The important implication of this realization is that it is improper to construe a word's lexical meaning on the basis of its contextual meaning as if the two were identical. They are not.

Take Paul's repeated reference to Timothy as his "coworker" (συνεργός [*synergos*]; Rom. 16:21; 1 Thess. 3:2; also Titus: 2 Cor. 8:3; Epaphroditus: Phil. 2:25) as an example. Apart from being Paul's coworker, Timothy also was an apostolic delegate and what some might call a "senior pastor." Does the fact that Timothy, as Paul's "coworker," was also a senior pastor imply that the meaning for "coworker" includes "senior pastor"? This does not necessarily follow. Timothy was both, and so is a shared referent of both terms, but this still allows for the possibility that there may be others who were Paul's coworkers but not senior pastors. Ignoring this important fact would be to confuse sense (i.e., the contextual meaning) and referent (the object to which a given term is referring). For this reason it is fallacious to argue, as some have

done, from the fact that Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2 are referred to as Paul's "coworkers" that this implies that they also served as pastors since this was true of Timothy. As we have seen, this follows neither logically nor is this conclusion linguistically sound or otherwise defensible. Whether or not these two women were pastors must be established on other grounds—such as Paul's teaching on women serving as pastors—not on the basis of the meaning of the word "coworker" alone.[46]

As James Barr has shown in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, the failure to distinguish between sense and referent is endemic to the work of many theologians, including even respected reference works such as the massive ten-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.[47] As Barr has demonstrated, much of what is listed under the rubric of specific Greek *words* flows in fact from the study of biblical *concepts* conveyed through various contexts. The reason why this is fallacious is because by listing a given entry under a particular word the editors misleadingly suggest that aspects of the contextual meaning of a given word reside in the lexical meaning of the word itself rather than being contributed by the context.

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46. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Women in the Pauline Mission," in *The Gospel to the Nations*, ed. Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 225–26, 232–33. Note also that, in a close parallel to Philippians 4:3 ("*contended* at my side for the sake of the gospel"), the verb συναθλέω in Philippians 1:27 is applied to all believers, so that it is at least equally plausible to align Euodia and Syntyche with the rest of the congregation as it is to put them on par with Timothy. After all, it is hardly possible that all believers in that church served as pastors!

47. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, chapter 8.

A case in point is the article on verbs of "sending" by K. H. Rengstorf.[48] On the basis of various contextual factors, Rengstorf argues that the two Greek verbs ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō)* and πέμπω (*pempō)* are distinct in meaning. In fact, Rengstorf construes an entire semantic profile on the basis of his study of the various contexts in which these two verbs are used. As it turns out, however, Rengstorf, like many other contributors to the dictionary, illegitimately intermingles sense and reference and thus arrives at fallacious conclusions with regard to the meaning of Greek "sending" verbs. More likely, the words are virtual synonyms and are used interchangeably for the sake of stylistic variation and several other factors.[49]

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the findings of recent linguistic research, we attempted to establish sound procedures in determining word meanings, involving the more sophisticated use of a "semantic field study" approach. To round out our discussion, we listed twelve rules for understanding biblical words. Under each we

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48. Karl-Heinz Rengstorf, "ἀποστέλλω, etc.," *TDNT* 1.398–446. See the thorough evaluation of Rengstorf's thesis in Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 99–102.

49. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Two Johannine Verbs for Sending: A Study of John's Use of Words with Reference to General Linguistic Theory," in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctures*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson. JSNTSup 168. Studies in New Testament Greek 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 125–43, esp. 131–34. As I point out, in order to sustain his thesis Rengstorf finds himself compelled to argue that a writer such as Luke, who uses the two "sending" verbs interchangeably, was insufficiently aware of such a distinction! However, rather than charging a writer as sophisticated as Luke with linguistic incompetence, it seems more appropriate to urge Rengstorf to reconsider the validity of his theory.

discussed commonly committed exegetical fallacies, a warning sign, as it were, that must be heeded by the skilled interpreter, lest he or she fall prey to a variety of questionable methods in the lexical study of words in Scripture.

GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING WORD MEANINGS IN SCRIPTURE

1. Select the word or words to be studied. This should be a word that is significant for the interpretation of a given biblical passage.

2. Make sure you study a given Greek or Hebrew term or set of terms, not the English one. This is important since, depending on the particular translation, a given Greek or Hebrew word will be rendered by several different English words and vice versa. What we want to study is what a given word means in the original rather than in English. This is possible even for those who have not studied Greek or Hebrew through the use of New Testament tools such as Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon* and *The Book Study Concordance*.

    Old Testament word studies have traditionally relied on a general knowledge of English synonyms and antonyms to find related English words and then worked back to the Hebrew (or Aramaic). Electronic resources improve on this process by giving the student access to the Hebrew lexicons without the formal study of the original languages. The standard Brown, Driver, and Briggs lexicon provides words that are "||" (in parallelism with) and "opp." ("opposite") the target word, yielding possible synonyms and antonyms.[50] In the digitized Old Tes-

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50. The original work by Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1901) now appears in several updated editions.

tament texts of Bible study software programs, the student can usually access these Old Testament words in BDB with a click of the mouse. Another type of electronic resource is the reverse interlinear. For example, the Logos ESVRI[51] has a Bible Word Study feature that will give a cluster of Hebrew words also translated "murder," the ESV's translation for רְצָח (rĕṣāḥ) in Deuteronomy 5:17. Clicking on these other Hebrew words brings up representative biblical passages and locates the discussion in the Hebrew lexicon.

3. If studying, for example, the different words for "love" in the Gospel of John, both nouns and verbs, and perhaps also adjectives and adverbs, identify the specific words by looking up the word "love" in the index volume (vol. 2) of Louw-Nida. Then locate the specific semantic domain (#25) in vol. 1 of Louw-Nida and determine which Greek words fall under this rubric.

4. Armed with this information, go to *The Book Study Concordance* and look up each of these Greek words under the respective heading. This will supply you with all the relevant data for your study (or at least the vast majority of relevant data).

5. Conduct a contextual study of all the relevant passages. In practical terms, one should start with passages for the target word. Lexicons and concordances can provide a quick overview of the semantic ranges for related words

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51. Chip McDaniel and C. John Collins, *The ESV English-Hebrew Reverse Interlinear Old Testament* (Logos Research Systems, 2006, 2009).

or can provide material for a more exhaustive (and some-
times exhausting) study.

6.   Categorize the passages according to types of usage (i.e.,
     word meanings). This will yield the semantic range of the
     word or words. In terms of Deuteronomy 5:17, an exami-
     nation of all the uses of the verb רָצַח (rĕṣāḥ) reveals that
     it is never used for the war or the killing of animals—other
     Hebrew words denote these—suggesting that the com-
     mand should not be used to support pacifism or a vege-
     tarian diet. It is usually found in a context of interpersonal
     killing (whether intentional or accidental) in the context
     of a community.

7.   In light of this semantic range, return to your base pas-
     sage and see how it fits within the overall semantic profile
     of your word and what it contributes to the overall the-
     ology or concept or theme in question. This is the process
     that led more recent translations to render Deuteronomy
     5:17 as "murder." Given the two nuances in the majority
     of uses for רָצַח (rĕṣāḥ) , it seems for some interpreters
     that God would not command a person not to have an
     accident.

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