Learning to Do Word Studies in the Bible

By Thinking About What You Already Do in English

Goal: To Understand What the Bible Means

Rule 1: Go Do Some Other Stuff First

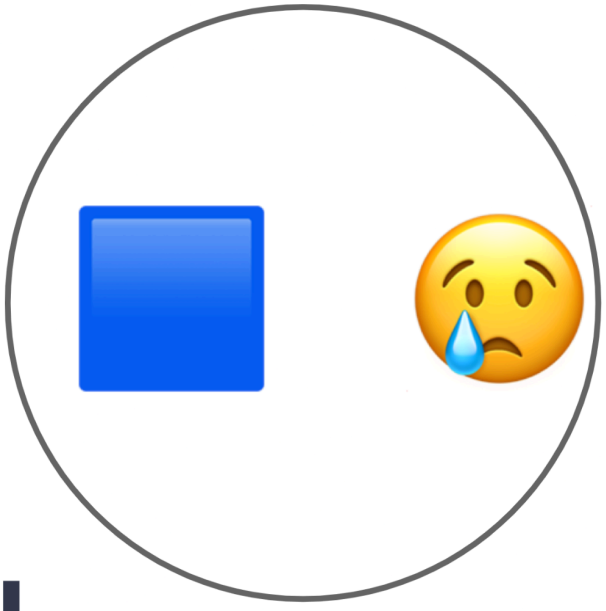
If you have to choose between word studies and some other activities, opt to spend time getting a better understanding of the context of the passage, doing some discourse analysis, or learning more about the author's line of thought. Word studies are very helpful, but they're just one part of Bible study.

Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*

There can be no question then that biblical scholars and ministers influenced by them have been much too worried about words; the approach was not deemed necessary by the great theologians of the church, nor is it the normal method in other areas of philology (classical studies, modern literature).

Rule 2: Stay Between the Guardrails





“Blue” can mean at least two different things: a color, or a depressed feeling.

Blue

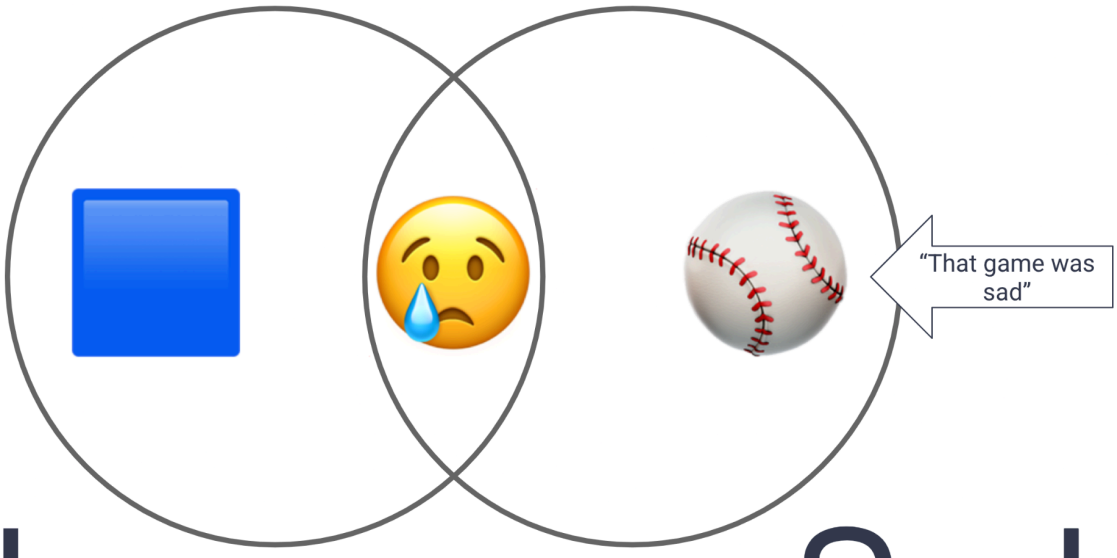
A word can have more than one meaning

A word can mean different things in different contexts

Righteousness: Different Meanings in Different Verses

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if **righteousness** were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Galatians 2:21 ESV)

Beware of practicing your **righteousness** before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 6:1 ESV)



Two words can mean the same thing in some contexts

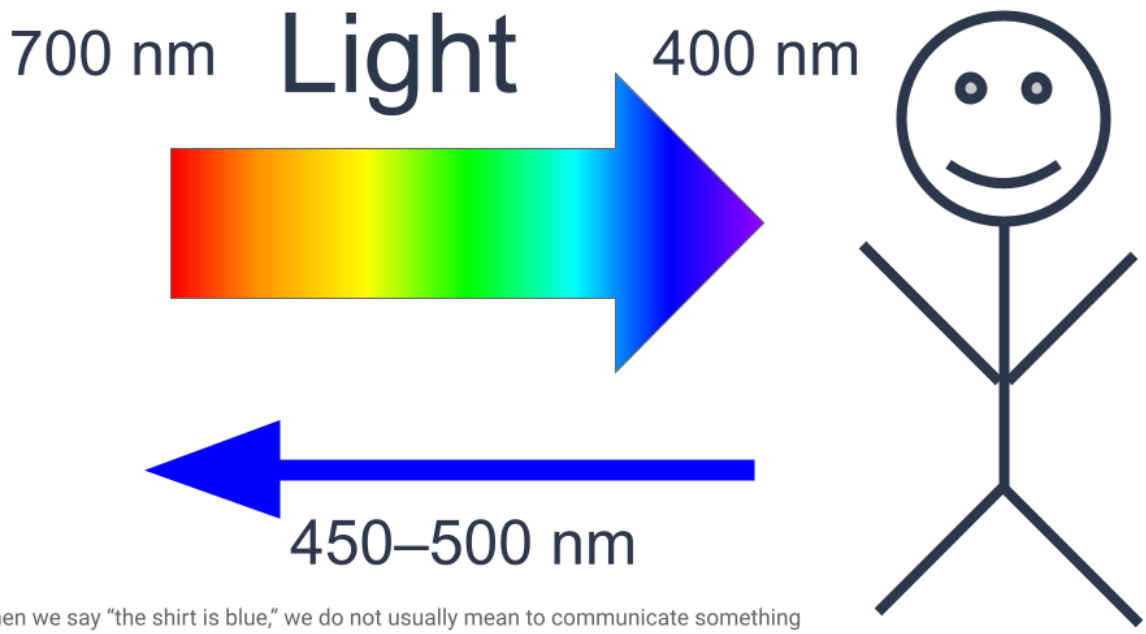
Words for Small Sets



From XCKD comic. See reference slides at the end.

A word has one meaning in each context*

* That's mostly true. Sometimes, an author may play on words.



When we say "the shirt is blue," we do not usually mean to communicate something technical about the nature of light, materials, or how we perceive color.

A word is not always technical

Word Roots



Butterfly



+





A word's root does not matter*

* ...usually. Sometimes it matters—moreso in Hebrew than Greek, and usually when a word only occurs once in the OT, because we have less biblical and extrabiblical literature to learn from.

Philippians 4:9 (ESV)

What you have **learned** and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

John MacArthur, “Grace to You”

“Spiritual Stability, Part 6: Obedience” by John MacArthur
https://www.gty.org/sermons/50-42/spiritual-stability-part-6-obedience

The first word is the word “learned” and this comes from the Greek verb root for the word “disciple.” And it has to do with the idea of teaching, instructing, discipling. The word [for disciple] …is a learner, one who receives instruction.

Acts 23:27 (ESV)

“This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having **learned** that he was a Roman citizen.”

⚠️The guy wasn’t a disciple, a learner, or one who received instruction.
Sometimes “learned” just means “learned.”
A word’s root usually doesn’t matter.



Is it **nice** to give you a dollar?

Word “nice” comes from Old French, which comes from a Latin word meaning “ignorant”

Nice ≠ Ignorant

In today’s language, “nice” is a compliment, not an insult.

A word's history does not matter*

* Again…usually.

"PRAETORIUM" in *Eerdmann's Dictionary of the Bible*

"Originally a general's tent, the word 'praetorium' in NT times was commonly used of the residence of a provincial governor"

“PRAETORIUM” in *Eerdmann’s Dictionary of the Bible*

~~“Originally a general’s tent,~~ the word ‘praetorium’ in NT times was commonly used of the residence of a provincial governor”



Imagine you see this headline in the news...

Today’s Slang Proves Shakespeare Tragedy is Really a Comedy

“Dead” in today’s slang...

...means that
something is very
funny.

...but we shouldn’t interpret *Romeo and Juliet* like this:

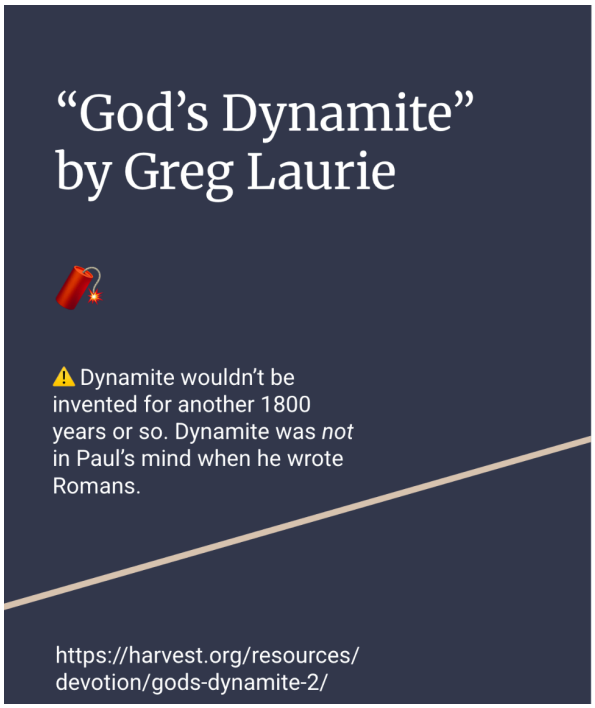
“Sovereign, here lies the County Paris slain;

And Romeo **dead** 😆;

and Juliet, **dead** before 😆😆”

–First Watchman, *Romeo and Juliet*

A word's meaning in today's language does not matter



"There is explosive power in the message of the gospel, because Paul says, 'It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes . . .' (Romans 1:16).

The word "power" that Paul used in this verse originates from the Greek word, dunamis…The English words 'dynamic,' 'dynamo,' and 'dynamite' are also derived from this word, dunamis.

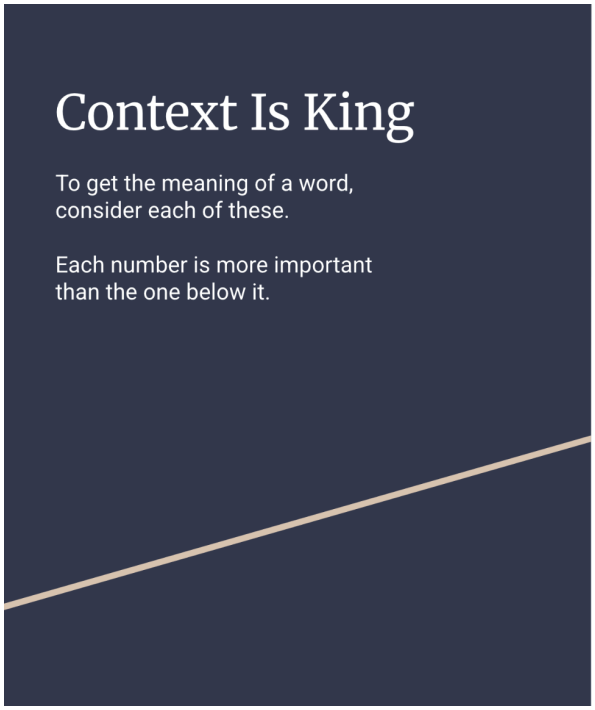
Paul was saying that the very message of the gospel is the dynamite of God."

Rule 3: Context Is King

Context Is King

Most written words get their meaning:

- from their literary context
- when they were written

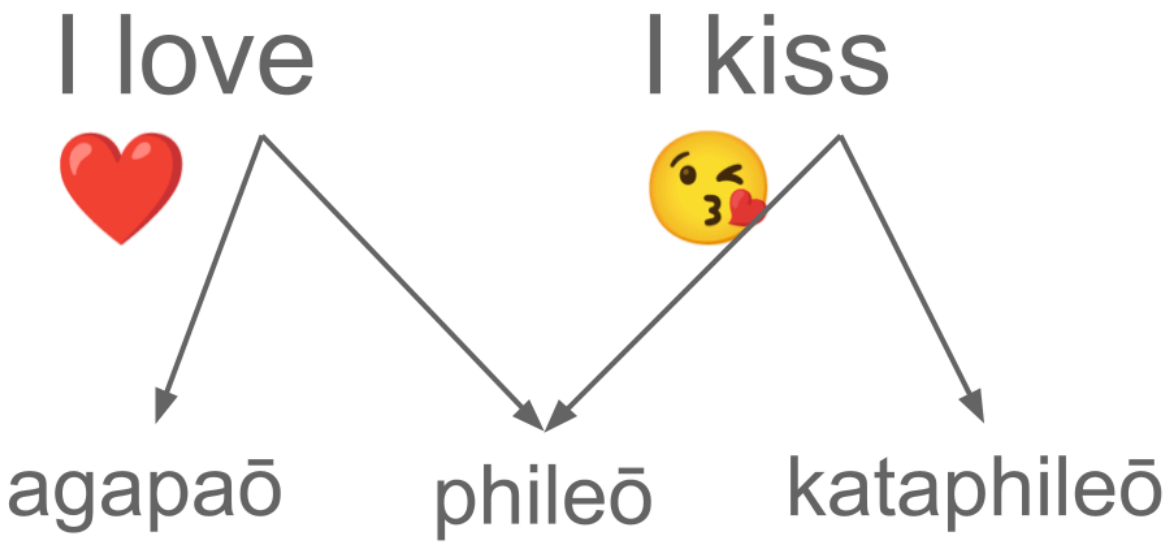


1. Sentence the word is in
2. Paragraph or narrative the word is in
3. Book the word is in
4. Other books by the same author
5. Other books in the same Testament
6. Literature outside Bible



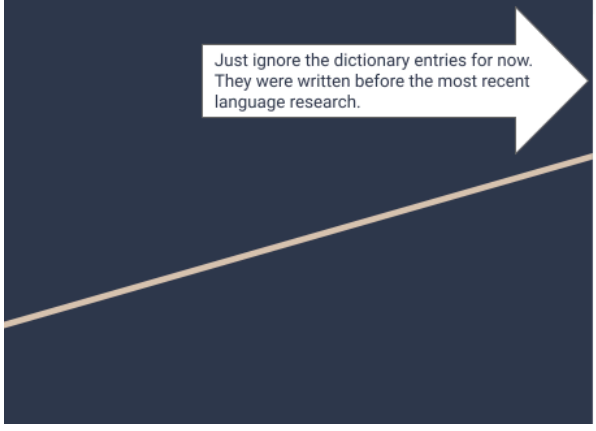
No matter what step you're on, consider the whole Bible's theological context.

Rule 4: Work from the Original Languages



👷‍♂️👷‍♀️ DIY Word Studies 🛠️🛠️

How to Do Your Own Word Studies



1. Go to https://www.blueletterbible.org/
2. Search for a passage or verse in the ESV
3. Find the verse reference link to the left of the verse containing the word you'd like to study.
4. Click on the Strong's number of the word you'd like to study.
5. Scroll past the Greek information and dictionary entries. Look at the concordance results. These show every verse where the Greek or Hebrew word occurs in the Bible.
6. Prayerfully look at how the word gets used in each verse.
7. Decide what the word means in the context of your verse.

What Words Should You Study?

If a paragraph makes no sense without a word, that's a good word to study.

Rule 5: Use Good Resources

Resources

Generally, avoid works written before 1970. There were some good advances in linguistics and word studies in the 1960s. Anything written before the early 1900s won't take into account ancient manuscripts that were discovered since then.

Still....John Murray's *Romans* commentary is great, even though it was written in 1959. John Calivin's commentaries are also great.

Usually, avoid commentaries that come from a sermon series when you're doing word studies.

- Recent
- Scholarly
- Try *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*

Recap: The Rules

1. Go Do Some Other Stuff First
2. Stay Between the Guardrails
3. Context Is King
4. Work from the Original Languages
5. Use Good Resources

References

- XCKD Comics
  - Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.5 License
  - https://xkcd.com/license.html
  - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.5/
  - https://xkcd.com/1070/ by Randall Munroe, who owns the copyright. He does not endorse my work.
- Visible light
  - https://sciencenotes.org/visible-light-spectrum-wavelengths-and-colors/
- New Oxford American Dictionary: "Nice," "Dynamite"
- Images are from Unsplash
- "Spiritual Stability, Part 6: Obedience" by John MacArthur
  - https://www.gty.org/sermons/50-42/spiritual-stability-part-6-obedience

References

- https://harvest.org/resources/devotion/gods-dynamite-2/
- https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-dynamite-1991564
- https://slangwise.com/200-most-popular-internet-slangs-of-2025/
- https://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/romeo_5_3.html
- William Mounce on his dictionary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJO5J3Vcnyg. The idea of what words to study came from this video.
- *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* by Moisés Silva
- *Exegetical Fallacies* by D. A. Carson
- *Semantics of New Testament Greek* by J. P. Louw
- *Eerdmann's Dictionary of the Bible*, Edited by David Noel Freedman