Grace Journal 3.2 (1962) 25-34

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**SEMANTICS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

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In dealing with a subject which includes the word “semantic" there is a double

reason for beginning with the defining of terms; because semantic itself needs defining,

and because semantics has to do with the meaning of words, or definition.

The word "semantic" is used in two senses; (1) as a technical term in the science

of linguistics, and (2) a more general sense of linguistic and grammatical studies into the

meaning of words. The latter is the sense to be used in this paper.

My topic deals with the components of the sentence, that is, words and word

relationships. Its goal is to discover the meanings of these words as they contribute to the

meaning of the whole sentence. For example, in order to properly interpret the meaning

of a sentence such as, "The Church is the Body of Christ," we must understand the

meaning of each of its components. What does the word "Church" mean? and similarly,

"body," "Christ," the copula "is," the genitive relationship "of"? These are the materials

of semantics.

The semantic problem, in turn, may be considered as comprised of two parts; (1)

the meaning of the words in themselves, the lexical study of words, and (2) the meaning

of words in their grammatical relationships, the syntactical study of words. Perhaps the

first of these might by some be considered the specific field of semantics, but the second

seems to be equally involved in the meaning of words.

LEXICAL STUDY OF WORDS

Etymology

By this I am dealing with the study of the meaning of a word as it might stand

alone, apart from any context. What meaning is born to our understanding by the word

itself? Such study naturally takes two directions.

First, let us define what we mean by Etymology. The dictionary says it is "that

branch of philology which treats of the derivation of words." It usually is thought of as

the ascertaining of the original meaning, or the meaning of the primitive basic root from

which a word is derived, in the parental language. Basically it is an historical pursuit;

practically it is a very complex, technical scientific investigation of comparative

philology, one which is safe only in the hands of experts.

Often, however, the term is used in a less precise sense to include various kinds of

"appeals to the original." In this broader use it includes the study of compound words,

word formation, and appeals by expositors to the meaning of the Greek word, or the

Hebrew original. For example, the word "synagogue" might be explained as "derived

from the Greek, from the two words, together, plus to gather, therefore a gathering

together of people. In the strict sense this is not etymology, or at least only a very

elementary part of it.

We may illustrate the etymological approach to the study of words by two

examples. The Greek word “church” in the New Testament is *ekklēsia*. This word is

formed of two parts, the preposition *ek* meaning "out of” and the root connected with the

verb *kalēo*, “to call." Therefore, the etymology of the word suggests "a called-out

assembly." From this point on the process

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of rationalization and imagination may go as far as the interpreter's sense of good

judgment will let him. It is a select group, called out from among the rest of the world.

Therefore also it is a separatist group. It is composed of those who are called, so it is

involved in the doctrine of election. Since the calling involved a caller, and an actual call

issued, therefore the church is an official constituted body rather than a heterogenous

mass of separatists. Perhaps you can go on further.

The Bible word "atonement" most frequently is the translation of the Hebrew

word *kapar* which means “to cover." Atonement, then, is the “covering" of sin. This

covering, however, must be understood in the light of the whole Old Testament concept

of God and of sin, and points primarily toward the removal of the defilement and guilt of

sin from the sinner rather than the placating of an angry God, the idea which seems

primary in the Greek words later used. Also, this meaning of the word is very useful in

the explanation of the symbolism of the Old Testamental system and in the Christian

explanation of the significance of the cross of Christ.

It seems obvious that there are dangers in this type of word-study, so let me

suggest next warnings against its wrong use.

First, there is the danger of settling on a mistaken or false etymology. In the hands

of one except a trained specialist there is a natural tendency to look for similarities of

sound meaning to identify derivations. Thus "God" and "good" are often thought to be

etymologically related, also "sorrow" and "sorry," "bless" and "bliss." Of a similar fallacy

is the supposition that the English word "call" and the Greek word *kalēo*, even the

Hebrew *qol*, because of similarity of sound and sense, are derived from the same basic

root. Another example is the explanation of the word "deacon" (Gr. *diakonos* as coming

from *dia*, "through," and *konos*, "dust," "to raise a dust by passing through," or "to serve

energetically." Actually all of these supposed etymologies have been proven false by

scientific etymological studies, except perhaps the last one, and the experts will not even

guess at its true derivation.

I have suggested earlier that discovering the etymology of a word is a complex,

technical process to be undertaken only by experts let me explain this further by reference

to one of the basic principles of that science, namely, Grimm's law.1 By study of actual

words in a situation the processes of change can be traced step by step in comparative

literature it has been shown that certain sounds in one language are regularly changed to

certain other sounds when the root into another group of languages, and to still another

sound when it passes into a third group languages, and that these changes are consistent.

For example, a root which occurs in Greek beginning with a voiced stop, b, d, g, will

appear in English words as beginning with p, t, k Thus, *bursa*, purse, *duo*, two, *genos*,

kin, *ginōskō*, know. Also, words in Greek beginning with a voiceless stop, p, t, k, will

appear in English as f, th, and h. Thus, *patēr*, father, pous, foot, pur, fire, *treis*, three,

*kardia*, heart, *kuon*, hound. Words beginning with the aspirated stops ph, th, ch are

represented in English by b, d, g, thus *pherō*, bear, *phatēr*, brother, *thura*, door, *chortos*,

garden. This process becomes exceedingly complicated, as can be imagined. Voltaire was

speaking more truly than he knew when he defined etymology as "a science in which

vowels signify nothing at all, and consonants very little."2 At least it should warn us

guessing at etymologies on the basis of external similarities.

A second warning concerning the use of etymology is the obvious fact that words

change their meanings and often lose any distinguishable connection in meaning with the

roots from which they

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were derived. We who use the King James Version do not need to belabor this point, I am

sure, but perhaps a few illustrations outside the Scripture language might be helpful. The

man today who uses the word "sincere" probably is hardly aware of the etymological

source of the word, as coming from the Latin *sine* "without," plus *cera*, "wax,” or of its

original meaning as an object that has not been doctored up to look pretty by using wax

to cover imperfections. Especially would it be questionable exegesis to explain the

"sincere milk of the word" as milk from glass bottles rather than waxed paper cartons.

Our word "book" comes from a German word meaning "beech-tree." Therefore a wooden

tablet, but we normally do not conjure up mental pictures of wooden tablets when we go

to the library. The word "musket" had its derivation from a kind of hawk used in hunting

when, after the invention of firearms, men decided to name their various types of guns

after the hawks previously used in hunting. However, we do still use the expression, "let

fly at.” Our word "silly" will probably be no better understood if we are aware that it

came from an Anglo-Saxon root meaning “to bless.” We use the English word "court' in

three senses, (1) a royal court, (2) a law court, and (3) to court, or woo the affection of a

fair lady. Will the meaning of any of these be better understood if we are told that the

word is derived from a Latin word *cohors*, or *cors* which meant an enclosure, a pen, or a

cattleyard? Similarly we might deal with these words: oxygen, provide, dilapidated, nice,

palace, presbyterian. Even the word "etymology" illustrates this change of meaning, for

etumos in Greek means "true," therefore the study of the true meaning of a word. Yet it is

invariably used for the study of the origin, the derivation, the original meaning, a sense

which the Greek word never had.

A third warning with regard to the use of etymology must deal with the danger of

its misuse and misapplication. An uncritical over-zealousness for a homiletical

application, or a more serious misconception of the nature of language may lead to

humorous and sometimes serious errors. A pastor-friend once argued that the apostle Paul

had never been married, because the Greek word used to describe his state in I Cor. 7:8

was *agamos* from a-privative, meaning "not," plus *gamos*, “married,” therefore "not

married, un-married." He forgot to read verse 11 where Paul tells those married folks

whose partners had left them, "Let them remain un-married, *agamos*." And I am

sure we all are familiar with the completely unjustifiable practice of transliterating the

original into a cognate English form to clarify the meaning, as "The Lord loveth a

hilarious giver." True, the Greek word used here is *hilaros*, but there is absolutely no

evidence that *hilaros* ever meant “hilarious.” As a matter of fact, the idea of boisterous

mirth contained in the English word is certainly a cheapening of the very clear and

correct and meaningful translation "cheerful” of our English version.

More serious is the harm sometimes done when one overemphasizes the meaning

of the root (which may not even exist) by assuming that the root meaning is dominant in

all the derived form, thereby neglecting the particular semantic values of the separate

words. Norman H. Snaith, in the *Interpreter’s Bible*, says:

While it must be recognized that words can change their meaning in strange and

unexpected ways through the centuries, yet in all languages there is a fundamental

motif in a word which tends to endure, whatever other changes the years may

bring. This fundamental "theme” of a word is often curiously determinative of

later meanings.3

For illustration he uses the first word in the first psalm, ‘ashre, "blessed,” pointing out

that it is related by root to words meaning “foot-step,” “go straight ahead,” "advance,"

and also the

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Hebrew relative pronoun. Then he draws this conclusion:

All this shows how apt is the use of the first word. This Psalm tells of the true

way as distinct from the false. The happy man is the man who goes straight ahead,

because, as the last verse says: “The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, while

the way of wicked shall perish."

James Barr, in *Semantics Biblical Language*4 criticizes this "root-fallacy," as he calls it,

saying that there is no evidence that such an association could have been present to the

mind of the writer. He goes on to another illustration. The word for "worship" ‘*abadah*

and the word for “servant,” ‘*ebed*, are from the same root. Once commentator makes

application as follows:

*Latreuein* which came in later theology to be the normal technical word for

worship, means to serve, with the service of a hired labourer or slave.

Significantly there lies behind it the Hebrew word ‘*abodah*, which is the same root

as the noun ‘*ebed*: the Suffering Servant of the Lord, whose part Jesus assumed, is

called in Hebrew the 'ebed Yahweh. The obedience of the Son of God, as the

Suffering Servant of the Lord, is thus precisely the offering of *latreuein*, or

worship.

Barr comments:

Precisely nothing of value is contributed by the fact that the word for worship and

that for slave are from the same root in Hebrew. Though the Suffering Servant no

doubt worshipped God, he was not so named because of this; his name does not

mean ‘worshipper’ but ‘servant’, just as ‘the servants of David’ were not

worshippers of that monarch but his officials and slaves. The connection made in

the passage is a quite general association based neither on a semantic relation of

the words, nor on any passage where conscious association takes place, nor on

historical derivation of one word from the other, but purely on the possession of a

common root.

Having called attention to some of the dangers of etymologizing, let us now

attempt to evaluate its usefulness.

First, when properly handled and supported by known usage, etymology can

furnish valuable illustrative material. For examples, a steward is the manager of a

household, a trustee responsible for the handling of another’s goods. A bishop is an over-

seer, one with the oversight of the church entrusted to him. The word "Gehenna" as a

name for hell gains some illustrative value from its, association with the valley of

Hinnom where the fires of the city dump never went out.

Second, etymology may sometimes give a clue to a special shade of meaning, not

otherwise noticed. I offer an example of my own. While studying Rom. 12, I read verse

9, "Abhor that which is evil,” and became interested in the word translated "abhor,"

*apostuqeō*. The lexicon offered an additional meaning, "hate,” but there is another word

meaning "hate," *miseō*, much more common. What was the difference? I traced the word

*stugeō* through various related forms, all with the general meaning "abhor, hate, loathe,

abominate." Then I discovered the word *styx*, the name of the river that separated the land

of the living from hades, the river of death. The idea dawned

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on me that *stugeō*, means “to abhor, hate, shrink back from," like men dread the river of

death. "Abhor that which is evil, like men shrink back from death." This passage is richer

to me now as a result of an etymological study.

A third beneficial result of etymological study has been the help it has given in

discovering the meaning of rare and obscure words. Particularly has this been true in

Hebrew, because of the relative meagerness of the literature and the resulting large

number of words which occur only once, or so few times that inductive study of usage is

not possible. If we can study a word in enough different contexts the sense of these

contexts will help to make clear the meaning. But if we see it only in one context it is

extremely precarious to fix upon its meaning with any certainty. Here comparative

etymology can help by suggesting root meanings and meanings of related words. This,

used along with the study of the context, is often the only source of information there is.

So, even though we recognize the dangers of such a method, when it is our only means

we are grateful for it. Actually this method has been extremely fruitful in Old Testament

studies.

Usage

The second, and the more important, general approach to the study of the meaning

of words, is usage. Everyone seems to agree in principle that usage determines the

meaning of words. Thus, Rollin T. Chafer, in his *Science of Bible Hermeneutics*, lists

eight axioms, the third being, “Usage determines the meaning of words."5 In Terry's

*Biblical Hermeneutics* there is a quote from a Whitney:6

Language has, in fact, no existence save in the minds and mouths of those who

use it; it is made up of separate articulated signs of thought... and has its value and

currency only by the agreement of speakers and hearers. It is in their power,

subject to their will.

So the ultimate goal of word study must always be the meaning intended by the speaker

and understood by the hearer, the meaning as actually used.

Sources for the study of usage. There is actually only one ultimate source for the

study of usage in any language: that is the body of literature available in that language.

To know how the Greeks used the word *pistis* or *ginoskō* or any other word it is

necessary to read and study all the places where such words occur. Practically, of course,

this is not possible, at least not in a language like Greek. But it must be recognized that,

other things being equal, the broader one’s knowledge of the literature the better qualified

he is to be an interpreter of it.

Since we cannot inductively examine every usage we must be content then to

depend on secondary sources, which may be called our tools for the study of usage.

These are primarily two.

First, and most immediately useful, is the lexicon, or dictionary. Actually, the

lexicon is a concentrated gathering together of the results of many experts who are

qualified and have had the opportunity to do the study of literature which we cannot do.

It brings together and classifies the usages of words as actually found in the literature,

making it available to all in usable form. Dictionaries vary greatly in their size, scope

and format, and it seems an absolute essential that a serious interpreter of the Scriptures

have at hand the best lexicons available, and understand how to use them.

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Perhaps the second most important tool for the study of usage is a good

concordance, preferably in the original language. While we cannot hope to study every

occurrence of a word in the whole language, we can at least do so with the body of

literature which makes up our Bible. It is well enough to depend on the labors of others

by using a dictionary, but no definition in a dictionary will give the insight into the usage

of a word like a personal study of every passage in the Bible where that word occurs.

Principles for the study of usage. I submit next a few suggestions to guide in the

study of the usage of words.

(1) List and study every place where the word occurs in Scripture and outside, to

the widest extent possible with your facilities.

(2) Try to find a common denominator which will link all the various occurrences

around a general thought concept. This will be the general frame of reference for that

word. Here the etymological study may be of help, for the word might not have changed

its basic meaning. At least it will suggest a place to start. Be ready, however, to ignore

the derivation if it doesn't fit naturally into the actual usage. Also, it must be recognized

that there may not be any one common denominator. The usage may demand several

general thought concepts. This is not at all strange, as a look at English will readily show.

The word 'top', for example, in different contexts, is a verb, an adjective, and a noun, with

several completely distinct general thought concepts (compare a house-top with a

spinning top). The word "board" needs at least four frames of reference: (1) a piece of

wood, (2) a panel of directors, (3) to provide food, and (4) to get on a ship.

(3) Apply this general word reference to the context of the passage in question,

allowing the nature of the subject and any qualifying ideas to sharpen and narrow the

general reference to a specific meaning for this place.

(4) Look for side indications which may help to delimit its meaning. For example,

the author may have included in the context his own definition or explanation of his

meaning. Thus, in 2 Tim. 3:17 Paul explains his use of the word *artios*, "perfect", by

adding, "completely equipped unto every good work.” And in Heb. 5:15 the *teleioi*

"perfect" are described as those who by use have their senses exercised to discern good

and evil. The use of contrasts, antitheses or opposition may give a clue to the meaning.

So "grace" in Eph. 2:8 is clarified by the added phrase, “not of works." Often the

parallelism of Hebrew poetry will suggest the specific idea conveyed by a word, likewise

the study of parallel passages in the Gospels.

(5) Give attention to the study of synonyms. The multiplying of words which have

nearly the same general meaning, but each with its own particular shade or nuance to

contribute to the general thought pattern, greatly enrich a language, and make it capable

of expressing thought more precisely. Both Greek and English are rich in this respect and

we should expect therefore to be able to interpret very precisely. Unfortunately, little

work has been done in this field recently, and in my judgment this represents one of the

most needed areas of study today.

(6) Keep in mind that part of the background of words in the Christian Scriptures

is the historical and theological content of the Scriptures themselves. Look for the usage

in the language of the day; for example, the way the koine Greek used the word. But also

remember that the Old Testament Scripture with its Semitic background must have had

its influence on the usage of the

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New Testament writers who lived in that background. Also the Christian faith necessarily

must have had some effect on words, both in adding new meaning and in changing the

meaning of words.7 All these factors must be taken into account in studying the usage.

GRAMMATICAL STUDY OF WORDS

The second part of this subject of semantics deals with the contribution which

grammatical or syntactical relationships make to the meaning of words. These

relationships include such factors as gender, case, tense, voice, mood, state, order of

words, modifiers, etc. In an illustration given just above we saw how the word "spinning"

affected the meaning of the word "top." So in Greek, it is impossible to talk about the

meaning of the verb *balein* without dealing with its tense stem, for the punctiliar nature of

the aorist stem is a part of the meaning of that word. How this same principle applies to

Hebrew may be seen in this comment by Barr:

I would think it safer, for example, to take the formation of the hiphil in a Hebrew

verb as a new formation semantically rather than as a variation within a paradigm.

This means that it may have its own semantic history and hence its semantic value

has to be determined for itself and not by a process of schematic reasoning from

the qal.8

Of course, it is not my purpose to re-teach Hebrew and Greek grammar at this

point, or even to attempt to illustrate the importance and significance of this aspect of

word study. Perhaps it will be sufficient to pick out a few of the places where

grammatical study has been weak. I shall use Greek only.

The Use of the Article

At first it seems very convenient to the beginning Greek student that Greek has a

definite article just like English has, and uses it in much the same way. But unfortunately

many never get beyond the elements, and never discover that there are very important

differences as well. So very commonly we hear men arguing, “The Greek has the article;

therefore it should be translated 'the faith' 'the Christ.’" But who would want to insist on

"the Jesus"? Or, “There is no article in the Greek, therefore it should be translated a life,

a son." In John 1:1 we read, "and the Word was God." "God" does not have the definite

article. So Jehovah's Witnesses read it "a god," and Christ something far less than God

Himself. And many students with only slight exposure to Greek do not know how to

answer them. Actually, the Greek expression as it stands without the article is the

strongest possible way that John could insist on the deity of Christ, for the absence of the

article characterizes and describes and emphasizes the nature of the noun. To insert

article here would make this passage teach the heresy of Sabellianism, that Christ and the

Father are identical. Similarly, the proper understanding of the article clears up the

difficulty. In Heb. 1:2 where the KJV has "his Son" (with "his" in italics) and the ASV

reads in the margin, “Gr. a son." Actually the meaning is "a person whose nature may be

described by the term "Son." It is merely naming God's new spokesman it is giving his

rank and pedigree, and the passage is stronger for that grammatical insight. "The faith" in

Greek may rightly be in one place insisted upon to mean "the body of truth which we call

the Christian faith." In another context it may mean "the faith which was mentioned in

the preceding verse." Both are valid uses of the article. The point to be made here is that

the study of the word *theos* in John 1:1 or *huiōi* in Heb. 1:2 is not complete without a

study of the grammatical relations of these words, even to the significance of a word that

is not there.

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The Aorist Tense

Perhaps one of the commonest misconceptions in Greek grammar is in the

meaning of the aorist tense. The grammars call it the tense of punctiliar or point action

simple occurrence, as opposed to continuing or repeated action, with the idea of past time

added for the indicative mood. But often the simple occurrence is understood to mean

single occurrence, point action is taken to mean instantaneous action, and non-repetition

is construed to mean once-for-all never-to-be-repeated action. So we commonly hear the

aorist described as indicating once for all instantaneous action, never to be repeated.

How far this interpretation is from the truth may be seen by trying to impress this

meaning on the tense every time it occurs. Let me offer some examples.

John 2:20: "During forty and six years this temple was built in an instantaneous,

once for all, single act of construction, never to be repeated."

Mt. 23:2: "The scribes and Pharisees once and for all sat down on Moses' seat. All

things therefore whatsoever they say to you once and for all never to be repeated, you do

that instantly once for all never to be repeated, and then keep on doing it."

Mt. 27:8: "Therefore that field was once and for all called 'The field of blood,'

never to be repeated until this day.”

Nor are these examples unusual. They can be repeated on practically every page

of the New Testament. While I was preparing this paper I opened my Greek Testament at

random to Luke 4. Verse 13 might be read, "and the Devil having completed once and for

all every temptation, never to be repeated, he instantly went away from him once and for

all, never to come back, for a season." Skipping over dozens of illustrations I came to

verse 29, "And all who were in the synagogue were once and for all filled with wrath

when they heard these things once and for all and having risen up once and for all they

immediately in one single act of throwing, in one great big heave they threw him clear

out of the city, and they brought him once and for all unto the brow of the mountain

where their village was built, so as to cast him headlong once and for all. But he having

once and for all passed through their midst was going on.”

The fallacy behind this popular misunderstanding of the aorist tense is the failure

to distinguish between the event being described and the statement about that event. I

went to town --that a statement about a fact. It simply says, "I did it, it happened.” Of

course the event itself was a long series of events: a process that took half the day. But

when I said, "I went to town," I was not interested in calling attention to these details.

This is precisely the aorist tense in Greek, simple occurrence; a whole series perhaps of

details and processes, but all concentrated in the thought of the speaker into a point-

concept and the simple statement made, "it happened." Thus the aorist is the most

colorless, the least distinctive of all the tenses in Greek. It is the catch-all tense which was

used whenever there was no particular reason to emphasize duration or abiding result.

From the viewpoint of exegesis a safe rule, perhaps slightly exaggerated, might be: When

you come to a present, or imperfect or perfect tense, dig into it and squeeze out of it its

full significance. But when you come to an aorist tense, translate it as simply as possible

and forget it.

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Nineteen hundred years ago "Christ came into the world" (I Tim. 1:15). That is an aorist

statement, simple occurrence, it happened. But if I say it was an instantaneous once for

all coming never to be repeated, I am misrepresenting the fact, for his coming was

actually a long series of events involving many prolonged processes covering many years

of time, and it is going to happen again.

The Conditional Sentence.

A third illustration of a common grammatical fallacy is the treatment of

conditional sentences. Kenneth Wuest, in his works which are so commendable in so

many ways, occasionally falls into this error. In dealing with Rom. 6:5 (KJV, "for if we

have been planted together in the likeness of his death") he says, "The word ‘if’ in the

Greek is not the conditional particle of an unfulfilled condition. It is a fulfilled condition

here, its meaning being ‘in view of the fact.’9 What does he mean by a fulfilled

condition? I think the natural meaning would be that here the form of the Greek

expression makes it clear that there is really no ‘if’ involved at all. The Greek says "in

view of the fact that such and such is actually so." In John 10:35 he uses the word ‘since’

to translate this type of condition. Two verses later however, vs. 37, 38, the same type of

condition occurs twice. Here he translates "assuming that . . ."10 Why the change?

Obviously because his "in view of the fact," or "since" won't fit here. "In view of the fact

that I am not doing the works of my Father" cannot be what Jesus said, so he resorts to

"assuming that." But it is still a condition determined as fulfilled, exactly like the others.

Therefore, the fulfilled conditions of vs. 35 and of Rom. 6:5 do not mean what he made

them mean by his translation and comment.

Again the problem is a careless misapplication of the grammatical point. A

condition determined as fulfilled has nothing whatever to do with the truth or reality of

the supposition, only with the way the author is looking at it. For the sake of argument he

assumes it as fact and draws a conclusion from it. As in John 10:37 already used, Jesus

states two opposite assumptions and draws conclusions from them. He uses exactly the

same form of conditional sentence for both, knowing well that only one could possibly be

the actual truth. Thus to translate this simple condition *ei* with the indicative by "in view

of the fact' or "Since" is a very serious mistranslation.

In conclusion, the best preparation for proper Biblical exegesis, particularly in

matters of semantics, the meaning of words, including both lexical and grammatical

study, is the widest possible experience with and constant practice in the use of the

original languages. One dare not look up a word in the analytical lexicon, discover it is a

verb in the aorist tense, turn to the aorist tense section of Dana and Mantey, then say,

"The original Greek says so and so.”

DOCUMENTATION

1. For fuller treatment of this law, see Muller, Max, The Science of Languages (New

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