

## **Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 21, Apocalyptic 2, Lexical**

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We said that one of the characteristic features of apocalyptic literature, but especially the Book of Revelation, is that it communicates symbolically. Yes, it refers to actual events and persons in history, and also in the future, when God returns to bring history to a close, but it describes them not literally, but describes them through the medium of symbolic communication and metaphorical type of language. And so, one must be able to come to grips with the way that Revelation communicates through symbolism.

One, perhaps too simplistic way of putting it, but one way to understand Revelation and the symbols is to, number one, note the symbol itself and its contours and how it is depicted. The second one, though, is to understand the meaning of that symbol. What is meant by that symbol? What is communicated by it? What is the meaning of the symbol itself? And then finally, third, to understand what the symbol is referring to.

What person or event, historically, is the symbol referring to? For example, in Revelation, we find numerous references to a beast. The beast is described as having seven heads. It has horns on it.

It is portrayed as being the color red. So that is the symbol. That is what John sees.

The next step is to ask, what might be the meaning of the symbol? What meanings are communicated by that? A beast, a seven-headed beast, usually is associated with things like evil and chaos and destruction. That would be the meaning conveyed by that symbol. And then one can go further and ask, what is referred to by that

symbol? What does the symbol of the beast that communicates destruction and evil and chaos, what does it refer to? Or who does it refer to? Most likely, if I am a first century reader reading the book of Revelation, I will identify it as the Roman Empire, or perhaps the emperor who is currently seated on the throne.

Or to give another example that we have already looked at, in Revelation chapter 9, we saw this description of these locusts. The symbol is the locust, which is described as having crowns on its head. It has the head of a human being, the face of a man, the hair of a woman, the teeth of a lion.

It has a tail like a scorpion. It can sting and cause suffering and harm. The meaning of that is, what is the meaning of the locust, the symbol of the locust? It suggests ideas of carnage and destruction and widespread damage.

It suggests might and strength and power. But then when we ask, what does it most likely refer to? There seem to be indications, in my opinion, in Revelation chapter 9, that the locust symbolizes or refers to demonic beings. The fact that they come out of the abyss, which is often in Revelation the place of demonic and satanic beings, probably the locusts refer to demonic beings.

One final example, what about the two witnesses in Revelation chapter 11? We find this description of two men who function as witnesses. Fire comes out of their mouths to devour those who oppose them. Yet they themselves are put to death at the end of chapter 11, or at the end of the narrative of the two witnesses in this section of chapter 11.

But they are raised in the end. What is the meaning of these two symbols, the symbol of these two witnesses? Probably it indicates the meaning of witness and truth, witness of the truth, especially in the face of conflict. What do the two

witnesses refer to? Probably they refer to the church, the entire church, that functions as a witness, even in the face of conflict with the Roman Empire.

So those are sort of examples of how symbols can function, that is, describing the symbol itself, what the symbol is, second, what it means, what connotations does the symbol seem to have. And then finally, what might the symbol refer to. Sometimes the third one, what the symbol refers to, can be a little more tricky.

To talk just a little more briefly about symbols, also I think we need to realize that even the numbers in Revelation have symbolic value. That is, the numbers are there not for the mathematical information they communicate, or the temporal information that the numbers communicate, whether it's three and a half years, or 42 months, or a thousand years. Those numbers are there not so much for the mathematical or the temporal information they communicate, but instead for the symbolic values, the symbolic information that it communicates.

To start with a rather easy one, one of the numbers that is ubiquitous in Revelation is the number seven. Seven, as most people recognize and can identify, seven indicates perfection or completeness. So you have, for example, seven seals, the cycle of seven seals and seven trumpets and seven bowls, are not so much there to indicate a literal number of only seven plagues with the seals, trumpets, and bowls, but the number seven indicates the complete judgment of God upon the world.

Or another one, the number twelve. The number twelve occurs in Revelation as the number twelve, or sometimes in multiples, such as 144 is twelve times twelve, or 144,000, a number you see occurring a couple times, would be twelve times twelve times one thousand, a number that indicates greatness, or a large amount, or completion again. The number twelve is significant because it is the number of the people of God, modeled after the twelve tribes, or the twelve apostles, so that when

you find, for example, the number 144,000 probably refers to the complete number of God's people.

Or the dimensions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 are often seen, are portrayed as multiples of twelve, 144 cubits, or something like that, or 12,000. So everything in the New Jerusalem is modeled on the number twelve. Again, the number twelve, symbolic of the people of God.

So twelve is not there because of the mathematical value as much as the symbolic meaning it communicates. It communicates the people of God in its completion. Three and a half years, you find this number several times, especially in chapter 11, 12, 13, in the center of the book you find three and a half years mentioned a couple of times.

Probably three and a half years is there, once again, not to indicate a literal temporal time. Three and a half years of 365 days each, and then the half year being half of that. So the idea is not a literal period of time, but instead three and a half probably symbolizes the idea of a short, intense period of time, but that gets cut off.

So you have a first year number one, year number two, year number three, but then a half a year. It gets cut off. Things start to get rolling and then all of a sudden it comes to an end.

It's also half of the number seven, which again would suggest something that falls short of completion. So the idea of three and a half years then is not to depict so much a literal period of time, but it's to portray the time of the church's existence. It's a time of intensity, of intense persecution and opposition, but it won't last.

It will be cut off and brought short. And in fact, I would also argue the mentions of three and a half years are not to be added up into seven, but the mentions of three

and a half years or 42 months or 1260 days, you find all those designations in Revelation, all refer to the same period of time. Starting in the first century until the second coming of Christ, the church's existence will be sometimes a turbulent one, a time of intense opposition and conflict with the empires of the world, but it will not last.

It will be brought short when God returns to judge evil humanity and to vindicate and reward his faithful people. Then finally the thousand, the number one thousand, again is probably not there for its mathematical value, nor in a text like Revelation 20, it's temporal information that communicates. But instead, in chapter 20, instead of referring necessarily to a literal period of time of one thousand years of 360 days or so, instead one thousand, again, I think communicates the idea of completeness or a complete or perfect period of time and not so much a specific literal temporal designation.

And so even the numbers, I would suggest, should be seen symbolically for the symbolic information they convey, not to be taken literally for their mathematical or their temporal value. In fact, I would suggest to interpret Revelation symbolically rather than literally, is in line with how Jesus himself interprets two of the symbols back in chapter one of Revelation. It's almost as if Revelation chapter one, in a sense, introduces us to or sets us up for how we should read the rest of the book.

In Revelation chapter one, John sees a vision, the vision of the Son of Man holding a lamp stand, and the author, Jesus himself, commissions John at the very end of the chapter, in verses 19 and 20, Jesus commissions John and Jesus himself interprets two of the images from chapter one. Again, John has this vision of the Son of Man, and he's holding a candle stand, and now Jesus himself interprets that. In verse 20, he says, the mystery of the seven stars, which is one of the other features of John's vision.

He sees the Son of Man, he sees seven stars, and the seven golden lampstands, and now Jesus says, the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands is this, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. So do you see how Jesus has understood that the seven stars are not literal stars, but they symbolize, the stars that John saw symbolize seven angels that belong to the seven churches, and the seven lampstands that he saw in his vision refer not to seven literal lamps, but they symbolize and refer to the church. So I take it that, again, unless there's really compelling reason not to, is that everything in Revelation should be interpreted symbolically, not literally.

Again, that doesn't mean that Revelation doesn't refer to actual events and persons and places, it does, but it describes them symbolically, rather than literally. The other feature of the symbolism, just to mention in passing, is much of John's language comes out of the Old Testament. In a later session, we'll talk about the Old Testament's usage in the New Testament, New Testament authors' use of Old Testament texts, and we'll discuss some examples from Revelation, but much of John's images, much of the symbolism he picks up, comes out of the Old Testament.

So John's language, including the numbers, should be interpreted symbolically, rather than literally. The second principle, I think, that is important in interpreting Revelation, is to understand it in light of its original historical context, that is, in the way any other book of the New Testament would be treated. Revelation was written in response to and during a time of imperial domination, that is, the Roman Empire ruled over the world of that time, and Rome was also seen, though, Rome was seen as being responsible for the well-being of its subjects and of the Empire, everything that they experienced they owed to Rome.

Some of you have heard of the well-known Pax Romana, the fact that the peace of Rome, Rome had brought peace to the entire Greco-Roman rule. But further than that, within the context of Roman rule, Rome worked with a complex, advocated a complex relationship between politics, economics, and religion. The three were complexly intertwined, much unlike some of our societies today, where religion and politics or religion and society are kept separate.

In that day, the economic system of Rome, its political system, and its religious system would have been closely intertwined. You could not participate in one without participating in the other. So that Christians then were frequently tempted to, by being involved in the political and the social and economic life of Rome, were in peril of also compromising with the religious idolatry of the Roman Empire, through not only their worship of pagan gods, but also worship of the Emperor itself.

Part of Rome's religious system involved worship of the Emperor as the one who was responsible for your well-being, and responsible for all the things that the Roman Empire did for its subjects. So if you were a Christian in the first century, by participating in the political and the economic life of Rome, often required participation in the religious system of Rome too. Which the author of Revelation sees as idolatrous, involving one in worshipping pagan deities and pagan gods, and even worshipping the Emperor himself.

Which then would involve the Christian in compromise. Compromising the exclusive worship that belongs to God and Jesus Christ alone. So John writes then to address this situation.

Again, you can see that for Christians there are a couple of possible responses. Christians could choose to oppose and resist and refuse to participate in certain idolatrous religious practices, and therefore perhaps suffer the consequences. That is

economic oppression or persecution in the form of oppression and problems, usually caused at a local level.

Most of the persecution at this point would not have come necessarily from the top, from the Emperor himself, but a lot of it would have come from local elites and local rulers in the different communities, keen to curry favor with Rome and keep on good terms with Rome. They are the ones that would have seen Christians' refusal to participate as showing ingratitude, and even rebellion against Rome and its political and economic and religious system. Otherwise, many Christians might choose to compromise, and think that somehow they could justify inclusion and participation in the Roman system, and even their idolatrous system, and still maintain their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

So, therefore, Revelation then is a response to that situation, where John must address those, and perhaps comfort those, who are undergoing oppression and persecution because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. But also to warn and address those who are in danger of compromising. It's interesting that when you read the seven letters in chapters two and three, the seven messages to the seven churches that John addresses, that provide the backdrop for understanding Revelation, that only two of them are suffering any kind of oppression and persecution.

The other five are all basically so ensconced and enmeshed in the Roman world that they are in danger of losing or have already lost their witness. So, Revelation is not just literature for the oppressed and persecuted, it's also meant to shock those who are compromising with Roman rule and the Roman religious system. So, one needs to understand Revelation in light of its historical and cultural context as a response to that.



Just as one would understand any of Paul's letters as a specific response to rather specific problems. Third, is another principle that arises out of a couple things that John himself says, but specifically out of the literary genre of Revelation, is that any interpretation that John could not have intended, or his readers could not have understood, is probably to be rejected. Because, first of all, we've seen that Revelation is a letter.

It's couched in the form of a letter, which is meant, a letter was meant to communicate information to the readers that would respond to their specific situation. So, as a letter, presumably, it is communicating information that John's readers could have understood, and that John would have intended. Again, to see Revelation as addressing 21st century technological realities, is to take it out of the hands of the original readers for whom it was intended.

Interestingly, the book of Revelation ends in chapter 22, with an interesting statement that again suggests that it was meant to be relevant to the very first readers. And, starting in verse 10, this is the, at the very end of the book now, an angel addresses John, and some concluding exhortations as far as what John's to do with the book, and how a reader should respond, how it should be read and responded to. Verse 10, Now, interestingly, this is exactly the opposite of what Daniel was told to do.

He was told to seal up his prophecy, because it was for a later time. Now, John is told not to seal it up, because the time is near. That is, these events are already being fulfilled, or on the verge of being fulfilled.

This is a message for his readers. John is not writing for some later generation. He's writing an apocalypse, a prophecy, in the form of a letter, that is meant to address the situation of his contemporaries, of his readers.

So, again, to overturn a common misconception, once again, I was taught that Revelation, basically, was a book that was now being fulfilled and unfolding, and could be understood by 20th and 21st century readers. And that the 1st century readers would not have understood, and John probably did not understand what he was seeing. Again, that should be turned on its head.

The 1st century readers and author were the ones who understood. If anyone, we're the ones who don't understand. And we have to do the hard work of trying to figure out, what was it that John was communicating to 1st century readers struggling to live out their lives, in the context of 1st century imperial Rome.

So, Revelation is a book that is not to be sealed up, but is a book to be understood and read, and to address, and to be fulfilled, in the midst of the 1st century readers. So when I hear interpretations that equate certain parts of Revelation with computer chips, or thermonuclear warfare, or the nation China, or someone else, is immediately, that should raise questions and red flags in your mind. And those interpretations should probably be rejected.

And it's interesting to me that people that, students that will advocate understanding every other new book, every other New Testament book, in light of its original historical context, refuse to follow that when it comes to interpreting Revelation. Instead, they jump right into asking how Revelation is apparently being worked out and fulfilled in our own day. A couple more principles, number one, or I'm sorry, number four.

So, number one is to interpret it in light of its symbolism, to recognize that Revelation communicates symbolically. Second, to interpret it in light of its original historical context. Number three, to recognize any interpretation that John could

have never intended, and his 1st century audience could never have possibly understood, is probably to be rejected.

The fourth one is, simply don't lose sight of the forest for the trees. That is, don't get so bogged down in the details that you miss the main message of the text that you're dealing with. For example, the seven bowls in chapters 8 and 9, I'm sorry, the seven trumpets in 8 and 9, but also the seven bowls in chapter 16 of Revelation.

One could speculate as to exactly how these plagues will be fulfilled, when they're going to take place, what events they could be associated with. One could get so bogged down in the details that one misses the fact that these bowls and trumpets, the plagues that are associated with them, correspond very closely to the ten plagues in the book of Exodus, as God delivered the Egyptians from the hands of Pharaoh and Egypt. So that, when reading the account of the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, the important point is not so much exactly how these will be fulfilled and what they will look like.

I think it's very difficult for 20th and 21st century interpreters to tell conclusively. But instead of asking what exactly were these, or how will they be fulfilled, when will they transpire, what events will fulfill them, is instead to note that in the same way, the message seems to be in the same way that God judged an evil, godless, oppressive nation and delivered his people from that in the first Exodus. So in a new Exodus, God will once again judge a wicked, oppressive nation and save and redeem his people in the same way that he did in the first Exodus.

Even if we can't figure out exactly what that will look like and exactly how those plagues and those judgments will take place. So don't lose the forest by getting too preoccupied with the trees. Yes, we need to look at the trees and try to figure them out, but don't miss the entire forest that they make up.

Fifth, I think more than in any other book in the New Testament, is a good piece of advice would be to use good commentaries. There are a number of very good commentaries on Revelation or books that aren't just commentaries but kind of introductions to it. I think of a work by Richard Baucom, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, published by Cambridge University Press, is one of the best single volume treatments of the book of Revelation that I've found.

A recent book by Michael Gorman called *Reading Revelation Responsibly* is a very helpful introduction to reading the book and some of the pitfalls to avoid. A mid-level commentary by Robert Mounts in the *New International Commentary in the New Testament* is still a very, very helpful guide and sane analysis of the text. There are more advanced commentaries on Revelation that are also very helpful, but these are particularly helpful guidelines in Revelation.

So, with a book like Revelation, I think one needs to rely on good commentaries, others who have wrestled with the text. The sixth principle, I think, is that a good dose of humility is necessary for reading Revelation. There's no place for dogmatic assertions, there's no place for unwillingness to listen or I-have-it-right attitude, but instead, given the type of book Revelation is, given the diversity of ways it's been treated, given some of the difficulties in understanding it, within the above framework of the suggestions I've made, I think any interpretation needs to be tempered with humility.

I know I should have a seventh one in a book like Revelation, we shouldn't end with six, but I don't, so I will end with six. So, genre criticism, I think, is an important and valuable tool in interpretation. Again, it gets us off on the right foot, it doesn't solve all the problems, each book has its own unique structure and way of developing, but genre criticism serves to get us off on the right foot, it gets us to ask the right

questions of the text, and it gets us to expect the right information from the text, and not expect it to do something that it's not meant to do.

And particularly because the New Testament and Old Testament are written in literary genres that may or may not correspond to anything that we have, it's necessary to try to come to grips with what kind of literary forms and literary genres made up the Old and New Testaments, and how that influences the way that we interpret those books. Now, with genre criticism, we have asked very broad questions related to the entire books, and how they're put together, and how the genre of the book might influence the kind of questions we ask and how we approach the book in order to interpret it. Now, what I want to do is get a little more narrow and look at, in the next couple sessions, look at how we might interpret some of the details of the text, and we'll also talk more about principles that transcend the different types of genre, although some of these will be applied in different ways to different literary types.

But what I want to do now is talk a little bit about lexical and semantic analysis of biblical text. That is, now we want to deal with issues related to the text itself, its wording, its grammar, the meaning of the lexical items or the words that one finds in the biblical text. How do we understand those? As we've already mentioned, the New Testament and Old Testament texts are written in languages very different from our own in our modern-day world, so we must come to grips with how we understand the meaning of words, how we understand the grammar of the text, and when we come to trying to understand the meaning of the words, this is what hermeneutics textbooks or biblical interpretation textbooks often call word studies, or to use fancier terms, lexical or semantic analysis.

And again, the problem is, for most of us, especially English speakers, but speakers of other languages, is that most of the words in our translations may not necessarily

line up with or overlap or correspond in meaning to the Greek or Hebrew words they're meant to convey. That is, the Greek or Hebrew words may escape our understanding, or may be only imperfectly or partially captured in our translations, so that we need to consider the meaning of the words that we find in the biblical text. So let me make a handful of observations related to words and word meanings, and then we'll consider how might that make a difference in the way we do lexical analysis or word studies.

First of all, is it words? A word is basically a symbol that marks out a field of meaning, or a range of meaning. That is, words seldom have only one meaning. If they did, language would become almost unusable.

If you had to have one word for every single meaning, language would become almost unmanageable. So that usually a word marks out a field of meaning, it can mean more than one thing. But in some rare occasions, words might have one single meaning, but usually words have a range of meaning.

For English speakers, think of the word trunk. The English word trunk could refer to the aperture of an elephant's trunk. It can refer to the bottom part of a tree, the trunk of a tree.

It can refer to the back compartment of a car. British speakers would call that the boot of the car. But in English, the trunk refers to the back compartment of a car, used for storage.

It can refer to a large box that one sometimes puts at the foot of a bed. A trunk used to store clothing or other items or something like that. So even the English word trunk can seem to have a mark out or a range of meaning.

What happens is usually context will function to disambiguate meaning. That is, to point to only one of those meanings. Very seldom, except for a play on words or irony or something like that, very seldom will words carry more than one or all of these meanings wherever it is used.

So when I use the word trunk in a sentence, it never brings all of these meanings at the same time. Usually the context will indicate that I am narrowing it down to one of those. So if I use the word trunk in the context where I am talking about a zoo and animals, you probably will know exactly what trunk means.

A part of an elephant. So context generally limits one of those meanings. Limits the word to one of those meanings in its context.

Again, it can't mean all of those things. A second important thing to understand is that words change meaning over time. One can think of a number of examples of this.

One interesting example is from the English language that has had a number of repercussions. The word gay in English, 30 years ago, 40, 50 years ago, to use the word gay would have been equivalent to call someone happy or cheerful. Even one of our Christmas carols, Don, We Now Are Gay Apparel, would suggest cheerfulness and happy, something like that.

Whereas now, in modern day English, it means something very, very different from that. Referring to someone's sexual orientation. So words change over time.

Sometimes the changes are minor, but at other times, as the example I just gave, it can become a rather significant change that has very significant implications on how you use that word. So we can't assume then that what a word means at a given point

in time corresponds to what it may have meant in the past or how it may have been used at other times because words change. Not all the time, but often it does.

Words change in meaning. Part of the reason for this is meaning is arbitrary. Basically, except for some instances, most words mean simply what all the users decide it will mean and how they decide to use it.

In other words, what does it mean for a group of language users at a specific point in time? A third principle is that words relate to other words. We call this synonyms. What a synonym is, is two words that overlap in meaning.

That does not mean they're completely identical in meaning. It simply means that there is some overlap. Sometimes words overlap in meanings, like having two circles that intersect, though not completely.

Words overlap in meaning, though they still may have meaning that is unique to them. At other times, words might overlap as hyponyms. That is, one word is the broader word and another term is a narrower one.

For example, the word flower would be the broader term, and a hyponym might be rose. A rose is a type of flower, but it's a very specific hyponym of flower. So there's a variety of ways that words can relate to each other.

But again, words aren't always just isolated entities. Sometimes they relate to each other and overlap. Another principle is that words are not the primary carriers of meaning.

Understanding a text is more than just understanding the word meanings and adding them up. Words are not the primary carriers and bearers of meaning, however important they are. Instead, words are combined to make clauses.



Clauses are combined to create sentences. Sentences are combined to create paragraphs. Paragraphs are combined to create entire discourses.

So we need to understand that words are not the primary bearers of meaning. Yes, they do play an important role, but they function within a broader context. It's also important to understand that the Bible was written in the common everyday language of the time, in Hebrew and Greek.

In the past, some, especially with Greek, thought, especially back in the 19th century and even into the early 20th century, you'd often hear people talking of Greek in terms of it being a special language, a biblical language, a language. One scholar called it very early on a Holy Ghost language. That is that Greek, especially, and sometimes even Hebrew, the language of the Bible, was a special language suitable to and tailored specifically for communicating God's revelation.

But through much research, we've come to discover that the Old and New Testament communicated in Hebrew and Greek utilized the common language of the day. Especially a lot of discovery of papyruses and other literary artifacts from the 1st century and around that time have demonstrated that the Greek of the New Testament is nothing less than the common, ordinary, everyday language of the common people of the 1st century. Which is why scholars often refer to it as Koine Greek.

It's not a special type of Greek or a specialized Greek suited to communicating God's revelation. But instead, God chose to reveal himself and his word through the common, everyday language of the people. So when we refer to the Bible's inspiration, the fact that it's inspired, we should not confuse this with making the language do something it didn't do.

That is, inspiration does not mean that the language of Hebrew or Greek was somehow used in an unnatural, unordinary, or specialized way. But again, the New Testament and Old Testament authors are communicating in the common, ordinary language of their day. Another principle is that the meaning of a word should be distinguished from its referent or what it refers to.

That is, if I am speaking of a ship, and talking about the Titanic and the sinking of the Titanic back in 1912, the word ship does not mean Titanic. The word ship would very simplistically refer to something like a very large boat. I may be referring to the Titanic, but the word ship does not mean Titanic.

So when you look at biblical text, for example, the word king may be used in Old Testament text to refer to David, but the word king does not mean King David. It does not mean a Davidic king. The Hebrew word *melech* means, or we would translate as a king or a ruler, but in certain contexts, it could refer to a very specific king.

So it is important to recognize that what a word means is different from what it might be referring to in reality. So, based on that, let's talk a little bit about the method of doing a word study. How does one go about doing a word study or doing a lexical analysis? I want to simply summarize three stages that most interpreters agree should be involved in doing a word study or lexical analysis.

The first step is obviously selecting the word. It's not necessary, nor does one have time to do a word study of every single word in the text that one is dealing with. So it's important to select words based on whether they are problematic words, or, for example, there's dispute as to what the word *yom* or day means in Genesis chapter

1. How do we understand that? Or maybe a word is a rare word, especially in Hebrew.

A lot of the words occur only once in the Hebrew Bible, so it's difficult without having a number of usages that one can compare in the Bible or even outside of it.

Sometimes that can be a challenge. So words that are rare or only occur once, words that seem to be significant, that is, they occur frequently in the text or the author seems to base his argument on the word.

Some words that are maybe more theological, words like in Paul's letters, reconciliation or justification, or in the Old and New Testament, the word covenant, words that seem to have theological significance to them. Those are the words that you would select in order to do a more detailed study of those, obviously beyond just how an English translation translates them. The second stage, related to some of the things we've said about words and what they are and what they do, the second stage is to determine the field of meaning.

What could this word possibly mean? What are the possibilities? What is the range of meaning? What could this word possibly mean in both Hebrew or Greek words? What are the possibilities? For example, sometimes a tool such as a concordance can help to simply look at how a word is used and to see all the examples and to note how they differ and how different authors seem to use words, etc. A very helpful tool is word study tools or theological dictionaries. Two that are more recent and are accessible to English readers would be a tool such as the New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, edited by Willem van Gemeren.

And then the New Testament counterpart, the New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, edited by Colin Brown, are two works that are accessible based

on Hebrew and Greek words. They're not exhaustive. They seem to focus on what they think are significant theological words, as the titles of the dictionaries indicate.

But they are accessible to English readers and will provide a lot of information on how the words are used. If you read Greek and Hebrew, you have access to a lot of other lexicons and tools that are of help. I would recommend avoiding other works.

A very common one was Vine's Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words. There may be some valuable information in there, but there have been a lot of advances in resources that we have at our disposal, but also updates in methodologies and linguistic principles that I think suggest we need to, if we do use older works, make sure we check them against more recent word study tools. So utilizing those tools to, again, be able to try to define what could this word mean, what are the possibilities that are available.

And then third, the third step is to determine, out of the range of meaning and the possibilities, what most likely is the author intending in this context. Again, context functions to disambiguate meaning. Out of all the possibilities, context will usually narrow it down to one of those.

Outside of possible double entendre or double meaning, or perhaps intentional ambiguity, or play on words, irony, those kinds of instances where the author often intends two meanings, outside of that, context will usually limit the possibilities down to one meaning. And one needs to ask, in this context, what most likely is this word conveying. For example, in John chapter 3 and verse 3, where Jesus interacts at night with Nicodemus, you actually find this in verse 8 too, I think, but just reading chapter 3 and verse 3, Jesus begins a discussion with Nicodemus, and Nicodemus asks him, one of the Pharisees, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come

from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God was not with him.

And now Jesus replies in verse 3, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Some translations, I think, have unless he is born from above. That is a Greek word that could mean either above or again.

And the question is, is this just an ambiguity that we can't be exactly certain which one John intended, or at least we should try to figure out which one of these John intended, or could this be an example of something we do sometimes see in the fourth gospel, and that is the author using words that intentionally have a double meaning, so that actually this word is probably indicating both. Is it possible that Jesus is saying, John, in recording Jesus' words, is saying that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are both born again, and this birth should be from above, very different from the physical birth that Nicodemus seems to go on and want to discuss next. Again, one wants to rely as well on the two tools at least that we just talked about, the New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, and the New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, but also commentaries are a good place to find help in performing word studies as well.

In discussing word studies and lexical analysis, it's sometimes important to discuss what not to do and what to avoid, and a number of works summarize a variety of fallacies or a variety of things to avoid, and I don't intend to repeat all that, but I simply want to highlight and summarize a handful of things to avoid when doing word studies, and the reason I think this is necessary is because most students of the Bible find it easier to, and perhaps have more tools at their disposal for doing word studies, and frequently you'll find students stopping there, and not going much beyond making comments on word meanings, so it's probably easier to commit some of these mistakes, and so I'll summarize just a handful of them. The first one is don't

be influenced or overly influenced by the history or etymology of a word. Scholars call that the etymological fallacy, and what that is is simply placing too much weight on what a word meant historically, or the origin of that word, as if somehow that has an influence on or a bearing on what it means at a different time period.

Now that may be the case. Sometimes a word may not have strayed that much from its original meaning, or the author could maybe intend to use it in a way that reflects its original meaning, but again at the end of the day, what is important for understanding a word's meaning is not what it meant in the past historically, or in its origin, but what it means at the time it is being used. What does it mean to the author and the readers who are using it at a given point in time? So just be aware of, especially in your own reading and relying on other works, be aware of statements such as the root meaning of this Hebrew word is, which may not be wrong, but if it's used in a way to somehow suggest that this is what it therefore means at this time, is to commit this root or etymological fallacy.

Again, you think about it, most speakers of languages are not even aware of what words meant in the past, or where they even came from. All they're aware of and interested in is what they mean and how they communicate today. So how do language users use it at a given point in time? Scholars also call this a synchronic approach as opposed to a diachronic approach.

A diachronic approach is interested in the history of the word, which is helpful and interesting, but a synchronic approach focuses on the meaning of a word at a given point in time, in history. And so most linguists would agree that synchrony, looking at the meaning of a word at a given period of time that you're dealing with, must take priority over diachrony, what that word meant historically. An example from the New Testament that you frequently find referred to, and others have drawn attention to this, is the word *ekklesia* for church.

Ekklesia for church comes from two words, a preposition ek, meaning from or out of, and klesia, the noun form of a verb meaning to call. And so the implication is usually seen as the church is a group of those who are called out of their culture and their location to be a witness for Jesus Christ. The church is a group of called out ones and separated ones.

And however much that might be true, at least by the time of the New Testament, that word seems to have simply meant an assembly, and could be used to refer to different types of even non-religious assemblies in the Greco-Roman world. So to insist that it means called out ones, because it may have meant that originally, or that might be the constituent parts of the word, seems to be overemphasizing the root, or the history of the word, over what the word meant during the time that the New Testament authors were writing. So don't place too much weight on the history of the word.

Not that it's unimportant, or not that a word can't ever mean what it meant historically, but again, the priority has to be, what does this word mean at this given point in time, in its context? And be aware of works that overemphasize the root meaning, especially more popular level works that often say something like, the root meaning of this word, or this word comes from a word that meant this originally, when they use that to determine what it means in a given context. Second is, don't overload a word with too much meaning. I often refer to this as the dump truck method, that is, you take everything a word can possibly mean, back it up to the use of a word in a context, and dump it all on there.

Again, this is particularly abused at a more popular level. But as we've already seen, whenever a word occurs in a text, it doesn't necessarily mean, and usually doesn't

mean, everything that it possibly could. You don't dump everything the word trunk could mean every time it appears in a text.

Instead, as we've seen, context serves to disambiguate meaning, and functions generally to limit that meaning to one of the specific things that it could possibly mean, out of the range of meaning. So, to take everything a word can mean, its range or field of meaning, and dump it onto the meaning of a word in any given place, is to commit what I call a semantic overload. To overload a word with everything that it can possibly mean.

One final one in this session, and in the next session we'll discuss a couple more, and make a couple of other observations about word studies, is don't confuse a word with a theological concept that is found in the text. Generally, theological concepts and meanings are found in the broader context, and not only, or not in the words that are often associated with them. In other words, if I see the word church in a context, not everything that we associate with church, its leadership, its organizational structure, elders and deacons, pastor, its function in worship and evangelization, all of that is not inherent in the word church, or is not to be dumped on the word church.

So, a word is to be distinguished from the broader theological concept that it might be referring to. Or, another way of putting it is, if I want to study Matthew's understanding of the kingdom of God, and Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God, I don't limit myself to wherever the word kingdom occurs. Matthew teaches about God's kingdom.

Jesus teaches about his kingdom, apart from just the usage of the word *basileia*, the Greek word kingdom. So, avoid confusing the meaning of a word, or avoid confusing a word with the theological concepts that are found in the broader context, and with



which the word might be associated with. In the next session, we'll highlight just a couple of more fallacies to avoid, and then give an example of how might one do a word study.

We'll look at the Greek word flesh in Galatians chapter 5, and just very briefly look at doing a lexical analysis of flesh in Galatians 5, what that might look like, and how that might contribute to understanding that passage.