



The Complete
Beginner's Guide to

Biblical Greek





Since 1992, Faithlife Corporation (formerly Logos Bible Software) has grown from a couple of programmers in a basement into the largest developer of Bible study software and a worldwide leader in multilingual electronic publishing. We partner with more than 500 publishers to make more than 120,000 Bible study resources available to customers around the world.

Innovation is key to Faithlife's growth. In the last few years, we've expanded from our flagship software product, Logos Bible Software, to a variety of tools to complement your faith and Bible study experience. In June of 2011, we launched Faithlife Ebooks, a Christian ebook store and ereader app. In 2012, we released Faithlife Proclaim Church Presentation Software along with the Faithlife Study Bible and Faithlife.com, a social network that allows Christians from all over the world to connect and share ideas online.

Most recently, we've launched an entire suite of church administrative tools including Faithlife Sites, Faithlife Sermons, Faithlife TV, Faithlife Giving, and more! And we're still just getting started.

About Logos

Logos Bible Software helps pastors, scholars, and other Christians get more out of their Bible study. It's a digital platform and library designed for deep biblical and theological studies.

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Introduction

You don't have to be a biblical scholar to know that the New Testament was written in Greek, not English. And you don't have to become a biblical scholar to use Greek in your Bible study.

You don't even have to go to seminary.

You can get reliable and valuable insights from Greek, no matter your skill level—if you use sound linguistic principles and rely on scholars who've done the hard work for you.

This little book was written for anybody who has heard someone say, “The Greek says . . .” and wondered what it really says. It's for folks who have heard of “word studies” and wondered how to do them.

In short, it's for anybody who wants to gain useful insights from New Testament Greek but doesn't have the opportunity to study it in a formal school setting.

You can get insights from Greek, and you can do it responsibly.

It's easier than you think.

3 Reasons to Study Greek (and 3 Reasons Not To)

You want to learn New Testament Greek?

Presumably, you're a Christian, so my advice on this topic will be written for those who desire to love God and neighbor in all they do—even and especially in learning New Testament Greek.

Thinking carefully at the outset about why you want to learn Greek will enrich your study and help ensure that your work is an offering to the Lord.

Here are three reasons not to study Greek—and three to study it.

1. Don't aim to discover errors in existing translations.

Some wheels need to be reinvented—for example, we need phone batteries that last for weeks rather than hours, and we need them now, people—but English Bible translation is not such a wheel. The level of expertise required to discover genuine errors in major translations is equal to the level required to produce those translations—and you don't get that level of expertise by aiming for it, anyway. Only love for the study will drive you that far.

When students with two years of Greek under their belts gleefully reveal the “errors” in the NIV, rolling your eyes is completely justifiable.

2. Don't aim to impress others.

Jesus said that those who do their good works to impress others “have their reward” ([Matt 6:2](#)). It's a terse and powerful phrase on its own. When teaching the text, it does not help you to say something like, “The Greek here is the word *misthos*, which means—according to the preeminent Greek-English lexicon, Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich—‘recognition (mostly by God) for the moral quality of an action.’” That's just showing off. It puts you on a pedestal and makes others assume they can't join you at your altitude of Bible study. If you do that, you have your reward.

If you know how to look up a Greek word in BDAG (it's as easy as a right-click in Logos), by all means use what you find, but any attempts you make to put your learning on display are likely to backfire. Trust me. Wear your learning lightly, whatever level you've reached. You'll have a better *misthos*.

3. Don't aim to discover the "true meaning" of NT Greek words.

Our many excellent Bible translations are not hiding anything. They already tell us, sometimes with a little help from commentaries, the "true meaning" of Bible words. The Greek words in the New Testament mean what our translations and dictionaries say they mean. Studying Greek will not give you access to word meanings everybody else is missing. Don't enter the quest for Greek with this El Dorado in mind; it's only a legend.

Now some good motivations.

1. Do aim to know God.

Here's the ultimate positive goal for studying Greek: knowing God. I never want to suggest that those who don't know Greek don't know God, of course. There are Christians whose knowledge of God is far broader and deeper than mine who can't tell an alpha from an omega.

I also don't want to spiritualize something that ought to be practical. But how could studying God's words be merely practical? God has to be the ultimate goal of all our actions; certainly he's got to be the point of Greek study.

Ideally, knowing Greek gives you a kind of confidence and interpretive precision—confidence because of interpretive precision—that can indeed bring you closer to God than you were before. It's not an automatic ticket, by any means. But shouldn't it be this way? Shouldn't it be that peering ever closer at God's words brings you ever closer to him? Make this your prayer, and your ultimate motivation, as you study.

2. Do aim to follow the work of commentators.

Some of the most insightful words ever written about the New Testament are found in commentaries. And some of the best of those commentaries aren't based on English translations; they're based on the original Greek. And even those that aren't based on the Greek are inevitably sprinkled with discussions of Greek words. The good news is, not all of these are highly technical; you'll be surprised how many arguments open up to you when you can just follow along with the words being discussed. Simply being able to read those weird little Greek characters when they're mentioned in a commentary is freeing. And even an elementary understanding of how the Greek language works will help you follow the arguments of these commentators.

The words Charles Spurgeon gave aspiring preachers over a century ago are still perfectly true:

In order to be able to expound the Scriptures ... you will need to be familiar with the commentators: a glorious army, let me tell you, whose acquaintance will be your delight and profit. Of course, you are not such wiseacres as to think or say that you can expound Scripture without assistance from the works of divines and learned men who have laboured before you in the field of exposition. ([11](#))

Some technical commentaries will remain out of reach unless you advance far in Greek. Most commentators today, however, want to sell copies of their volumes—so their work is purposefully designed to be accessible to those who have not achieved expert status. From [Andersen on Job](#) to [Jobes on 1 Peter](#), you'll find that good commentaries on books in both testaments are useful no matter how much language training you have—but more useful if you've done some language study.

3. Do aim to eliminate bad interpretive possibilities.

Studying Greek will not increase your understanding of the Bible by ten or even five times. You'll have just a small percentage increase; you'll be able to slow down and focus on smaller things in the text.

And, importantly, you'll decrease the number of minor falsehoods you come to believe in your Bible study. If you teach the Bible to others, this is especially valuable. And it's especially true if you'll combine your Greek study with some reading in basic linguistics. The real value in studying Greek is often simply being able to eliminate impossible interpretations rather than in coming up with the 100 percent certain one you couldn't see before.

The Bible is worth the effort

that doesn't involve biblical scholarship. I don't care a great deal if I commit basic errors in understanding Dante's *Inferno* or even Shakespeare. There's no way I'm learning medieval Italian (or the finest points of Elizabethan English!) to increase my proficiency in those texts. But the Bible is worth the effort.

Dr. John Schwandt's [Interactive Greek Alphabet Course](#) is the place to start to get you going using Greek in Bible study.

How to Set Realistic Goals for Your Study of Biblical Greek

In the last chapter, we covered good and bad motivations for the work of studying New Testament Greek. Now let's get more practical and talk goals.

If you set unrealistic goals you'll never arrive at them. You'll get discouraged and give up, and you won't want to try again. And if you set goals that are too low, you'll be missing out on some Bible study riches.

So set the right goals. Let me suggest three goals you should not set, and three goals you should.

1. Don't aim to make the Greek Bible your main Bible.

My editor studied Greek in seminary and says he made this his goal—and was immediately discouraged. I came into Greek study with a smattering of Latin and a good bit of Spanish. I could communicate in Spanish, but the easiest things to do were to listen to it and read it. Those are probably not practical goals to set for Greek study. At least not yet.

Spanish is close enough to English in structure and vocabulary that a fairly beginning student can gain some genuine reading fluency quickly. Greek is further from English, especially in its case system and the resulting flexibility in its sentence structures. Smooth reading of Koine Greek is not a practical goal for most people studying on their own.

2. Don't aim to learn Greek in six months.

What does it even mean to “learn Greek”? To learn Greek well enough to use it effectively at a basic level will probably take the average person with a full-time job and a life at least a year. Consider setting at least a one-year time horizon. You can evaluate at that time whether or not you have met the other goals you've set—or if you'd like to set more.

3. Don't aim to contribute to Greek scholarship.

Let's just get this one out of the way for now. You're free to add it back in later, because it's not a bad goal in itself. But with rare exceptions—people who already know who they are—you can't know now whether contributing to the scholarship on Koine Greek is your calling until you dig into it further.

Now three good, practical goals:

1. Do aim to read Greek words out loud.

Here's a realistic, attainable, and excessively practical reason to study Greek: try to get to the place where you can read Greek words out loud—I mean recognize and pronounce words written with Greek characters, whether or not you've learned them.

If you can't read Greek words, a section of the [New International Greek Testament Commentary](#) on Colossians will look like this to you: to slow down and focus on smaller things in the text.

Philo describes the **δυνάμεις** as “powers” (*De aeternitate Mundi* 107–9), and Hermas (*Visions* 3.13.3) speaks of the world as controlled **δυνάμεις** through the four **δυνάμεις** (cited also by DeMaris 53–55). And both here and in Galatians there is a clear implication that the **δυνάμεις** were closely associated with heavenly beings (Gal. 4:8–9—gods as popularly understood; Col. 2:10—rulers and authorities).¹³

Even if you have no idea what the Greek words mean, being able to read them “out loud” will help you follow the argument. You'll see that one word gets repeated three times.

Philo describes the **στοιχεῖα** as “powers” (*De aeternitate Mundi* 107–9), and Hermas (*Visions* 3.13.3) speaks of the world as controlled (**κρατεῖται**) through the four **στοιχεῖα** (cited also by DeMaris 53–55). And both here and in Galatians there is a clear implication that the **στοιχεῖα** were closely associated with heavenly beings (Gal. 4:8–9—gods as popularly understood; Col. 2:10—rulers and authorities).¹³

But, really, learning to read the Greek words out loud will make the section look like this to you:

Philo describes the **stoicheia** as “powers” (*De aeternitate Mundi* 107–9), and Hermas (*Visions* 3.13.3) speaks of the world as controlled (**krateitai**) through the four **stoicheia** (cited also by DeMaris 53–55). And both here and in Galatians there is a clear implication that the **stoicheia** were closely associated with heavenly beings (Gal. 4:8–9—gods as popularly understood; Col. 2:10—rulers and authorities).¹³

Can you see how one skill alone would enable you to access Bible study resources and follow arguments that are opaque (or fuzzy) to you now?

2. Do aim to learn all the vocab words used over 100 times.

That’s 173 words, common words (by definition) from “the” to “God” to “through” to “give” to “speak” to “age” to “put”—the last of which happens to occur exactly 100 times in the New Testament (an exciting factoid useful at parties when it’s time for the guests to go home).

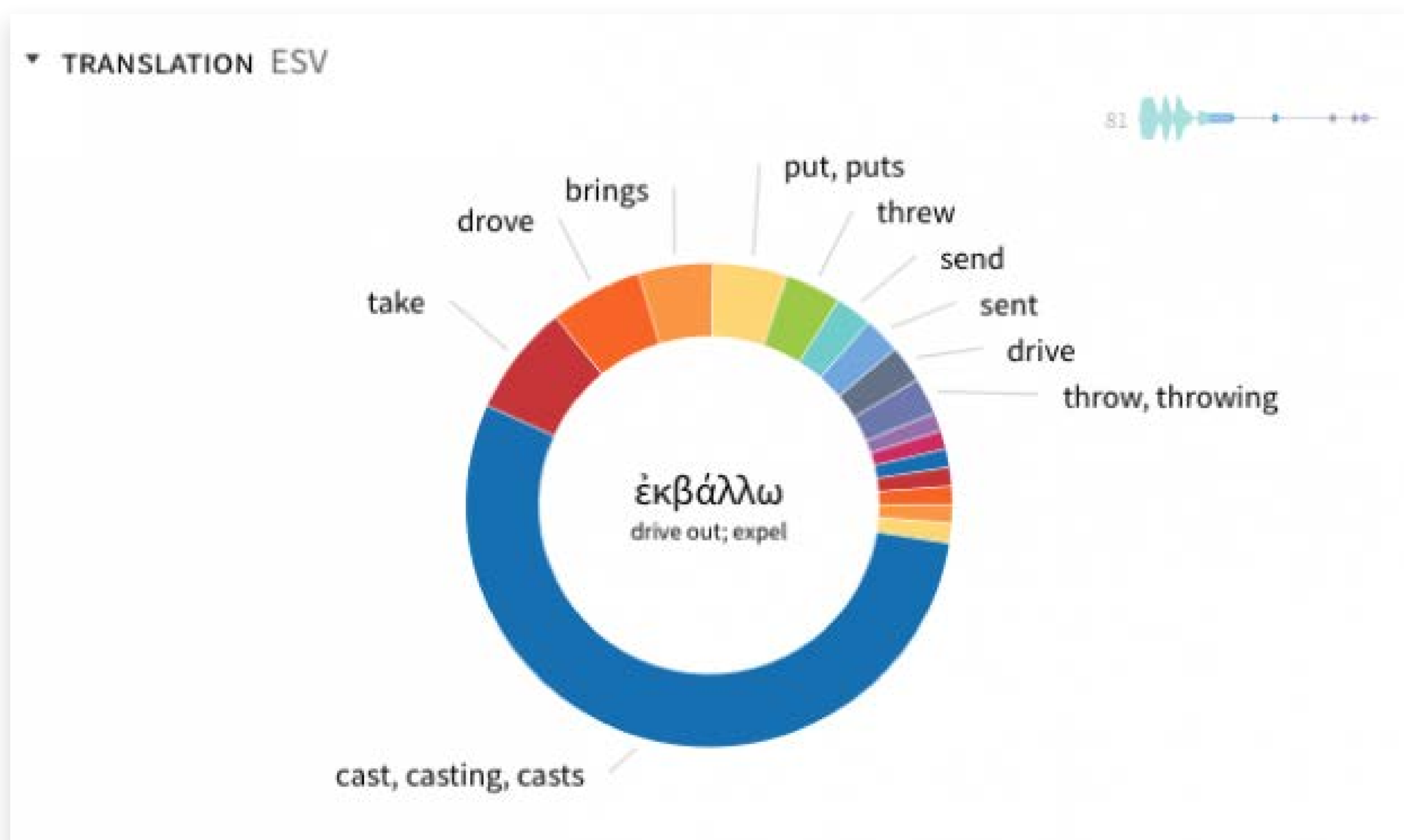
How many Facebook friends do you have? Do you know most of their names by heart? Yes? Then you can learn 173 words. Doing this will keep you from having to look up every last word you come across. In a way, you’ll learn more words, too—because you’ll start seeing roots that are

used elsewhere. *Ballo* means “throw,” and *ek* means “out,” and these are part of the 173. So guess what *ekballo* means? It’s not on your vocab list (it occurs only 81 times in the NT), but you’ll get it immediately if you learn the words that are on the list: *ekballo* means “throw out.”

3. Do aim to use Logos to do Bible study with Greek.

You *can* search for Greek words using Strong’s numbers even if you can’t read those Greek words. But just reading Greek words and having a basic grasp of vocabulary will make it much, much more comfortable for you to use Greek in Logos Bible Software.

Logos, for example, makes it easy to search for every instance of any given Greek word in the New Testament and in the Septuagint. And tools that do this work, such as the Bible Word Study, are far more accessible when you can read the Greek words in the middle of the ring graphs:



Logos also has tools for learning those 173 vocab words you’re going to learn.

And Logos makes it dead simple to look up in a lexicon (a dictionary) whatever Greek word happens to be underlying whatever English word you happen to be studying. If you can right-click, you can use Greek in Bible study. (And there’s even [a free version of Logos](#) you can get right now.)

4 Simple Language Principles That Will Improve Your Bible Study

Now that you've managed your expectations and set realistic goals for your study, you may feel like you're ready to jump right in and start [memorizing the Greek alphabet](#) and learning some vocab.

Not quite so fast. I have a suggestion that will help you in the long run: try learning about language more generally before learning Koine Greek in particular.

Here are four simple language principles that will improve your Bible study regardless of what level of proficiency you achieve in New Testament Greek. If you do end up studying Greek, sound linguistic principles will guide and shape your study by attuning your questions and focusing your answers.

1. Usage determines meaning.

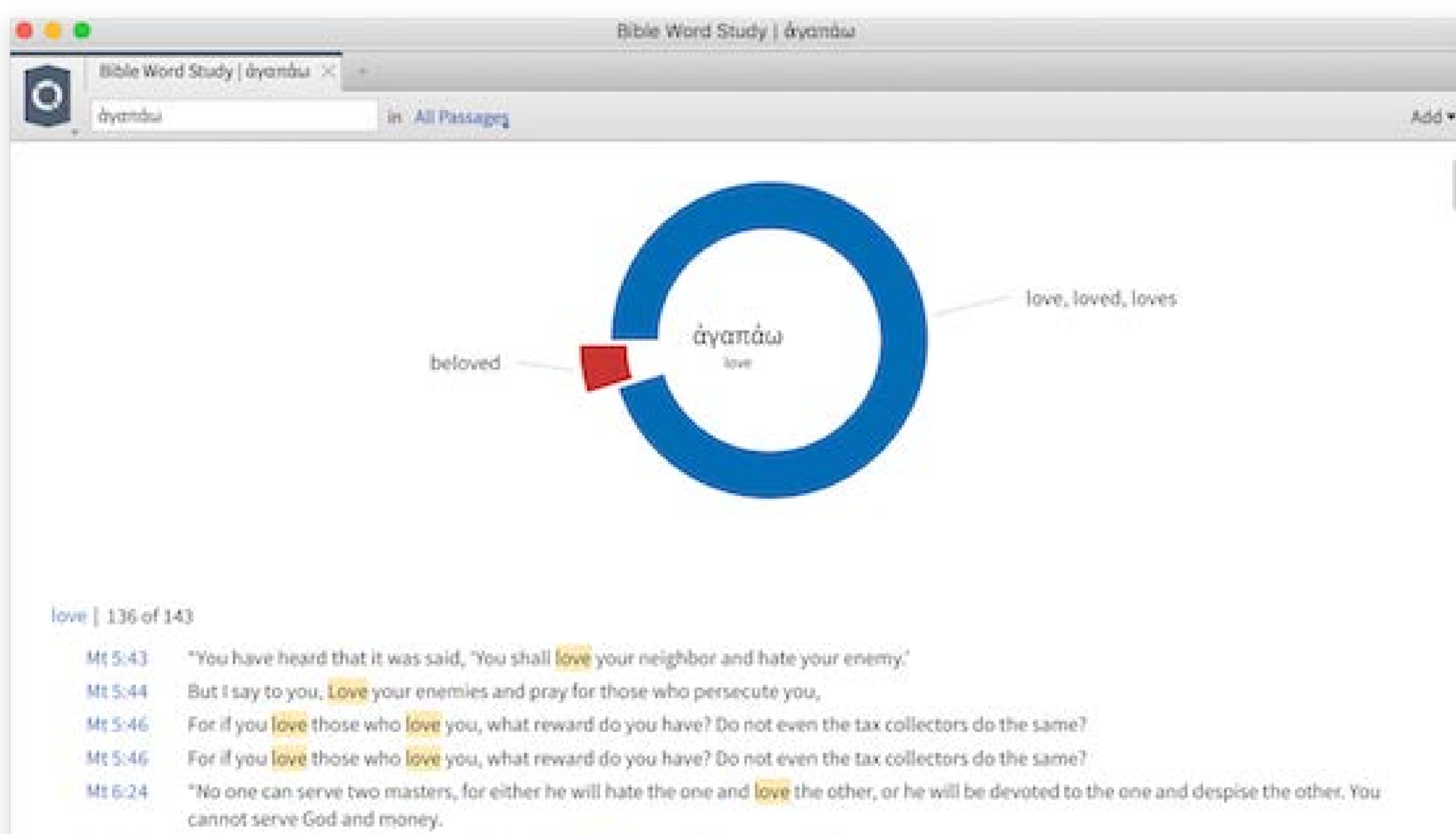
You've been accessing meaning through usage ever since you were a tiny baby. Your mom kept calling that white liquid "milk" until it dawned on you to make the same sounds (M-I-L-K) to refer to, and no doubt request, said substance.

Even a small child can learn to communicate complex ideas that are not tangible objects or substances, such as "He always gets to ride in the front!" What is an "always"? How does a tiny kid, who can't even put on velcro shoes, come to understand and then employ such a concept? Usage determines meaning—observing others' usage gave him access to "always." That kid is made in the image of a God who uses language.

"Meaning" refers to intention. "What did she mean?" and "What did she intend?" are basically synonymous, along with "What was her purpose?" and even "What did she desire?" And Christian theology teaches that though human intentions and desires are real, God's are ultimate ([Gen 50:20](#)). Ultimately God "determines" meaning.

But when you ask, “How do I access the meaning of a given word in a given sentence?” the answer can only be usage, because God hasn’t given us a dictionary. Like the child in the example above, you watch how that given word (or phrase or punctuation mark or any other feature of written or spoken language) gets used, and by doing so you find out what people mean by it.

Applied to Bible study, this means that you should look at how a word is used before you draw firm conclusions about its meaning. Using the Bible Word Study tool in Logos, you have access to basically the same data the dictionary writers do (they also have access to Greek outside the New Testament, but the latter is still their most important source). I’ve used other apps, but none gives me such quick and elegant access to a word’s usage.



In my experience, people who can’t and don’t do this kind of work tend to fall prey to linguistic errors and, not infrequently, some theological silliness. They haven’t trained themselves to recognize when “in the Greek, this word really means . . .” is just a cover for someone to insert his or her pet theology peeve. ([One common example is agape love.](#))

2. Usage determines meaning—no, I mean it.

My second simple principle is a direct restatement of the first because I have discovered that I simply can't repeat this linguistic/Bible study principle often enough. I cross sea and land to make two proselytes for it, and next thing I know they're back into denying or ignoring it in their sermons.

There's no way to learn language without understanding on an intuitive level that usage determines meaning. But (1) many Bible interpreters toss it out the window at the first provocation (or temptation!) and (2) many others cannot be brought to agree with it when it is presented to them explicitly.

The latter immediately sniff postmodern relativism, an attempt to undermine not just the Bible but the existence of truth itself. They don't like finding out that, as the editor of the *American Heritage Dictionary* put it, "the inmates are running the asylum." Arika Okrent, author of the fascinating book *In the Land of Invented Languages*, put it this way:

Our languages have inconsistencies and irregularities because they are run by us, and not by some perfect rule book or grand philosophy.
([260](#))

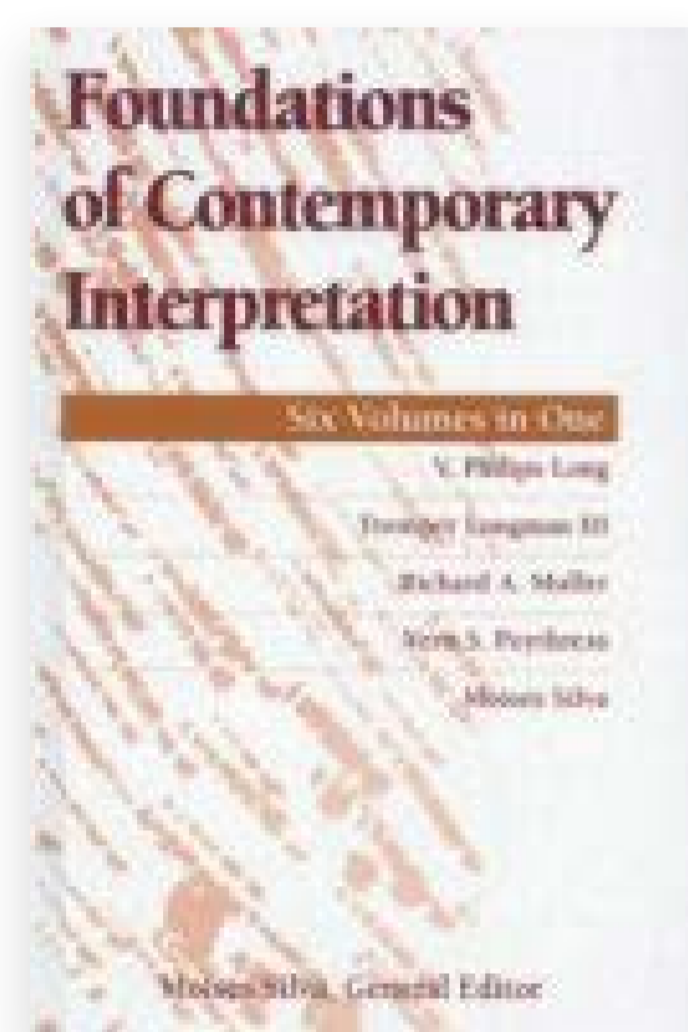
It is, honestly, like a bunch of professional cyclists looking at their racing bikes and saying, "Those things could never stay balanced with a person on top of them; they would fall right over." People will tell me with a straight face, using words that are all the results of linguistic change, that words can't change. Unless word meaning is 100 percent stable, they think, meaning is 100 percent up for grabs. If you "let" people change their language, if you source meaning in the intentions of people, then pretty soon every teenager will do what is right in his or her own eyes and we'll be reduced to grunting at one another. It's a moral imperative: we must all hang with the dictionary, or the dictionary will hang us all—along with our entire way of life. THE CHILDREN! THINK OF THE CHILDREN!

And when I ask such people, "How does the dictionary know what a word means?" (the answer is usage), they seem utterly bamboozled. This is a problem.

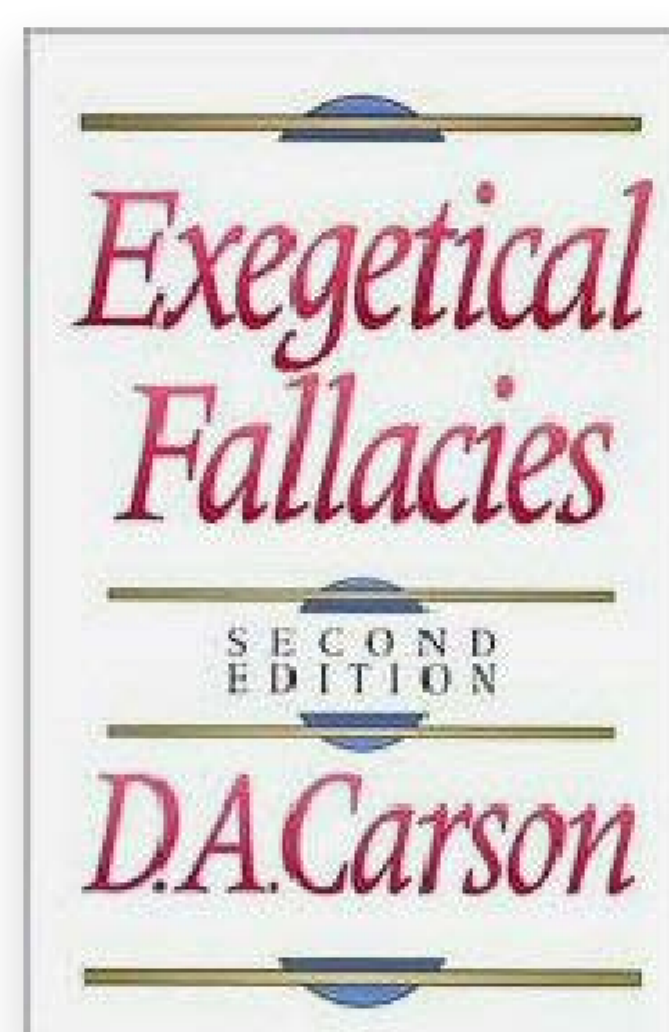
To be sure, I have very little idea how bridges hold up cars; I have no idea how ibuprofen relieves headaches; and Joe Q. Citizen should, in my opinion, be left free to live and die without ever reading a word about linguistics. He can be a faithful Christian while living in total ignorance of the field.

But you, I presume, are either a Bible teacher or someone who wants the instincts of a Bible teacher. That's why you're interested in learning Greek. And you, I say, will benefit greatly from the insights provided by the study of language.

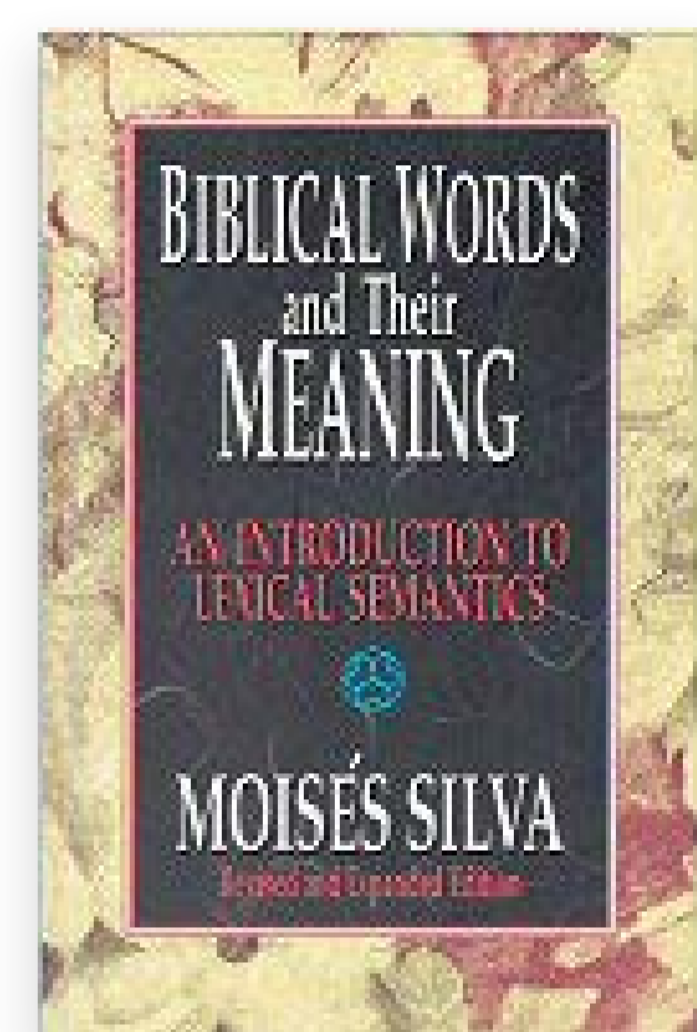
Here are the places to start, from a bit simpler to more advanced:



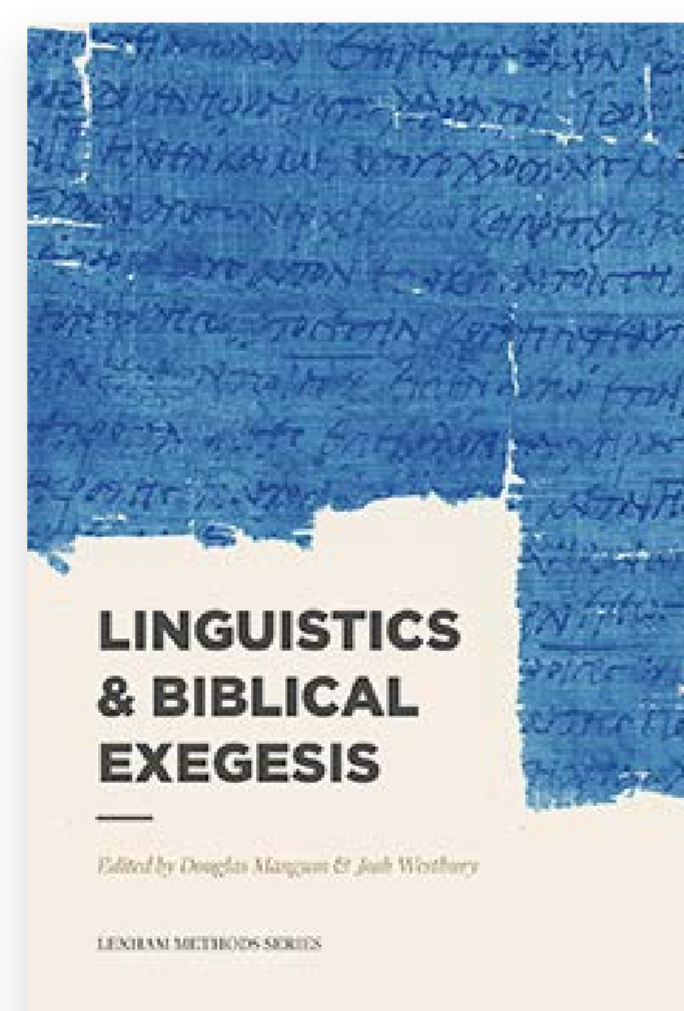
God, Language, and Scripture by Moisés Silva, part of [*Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*](#).



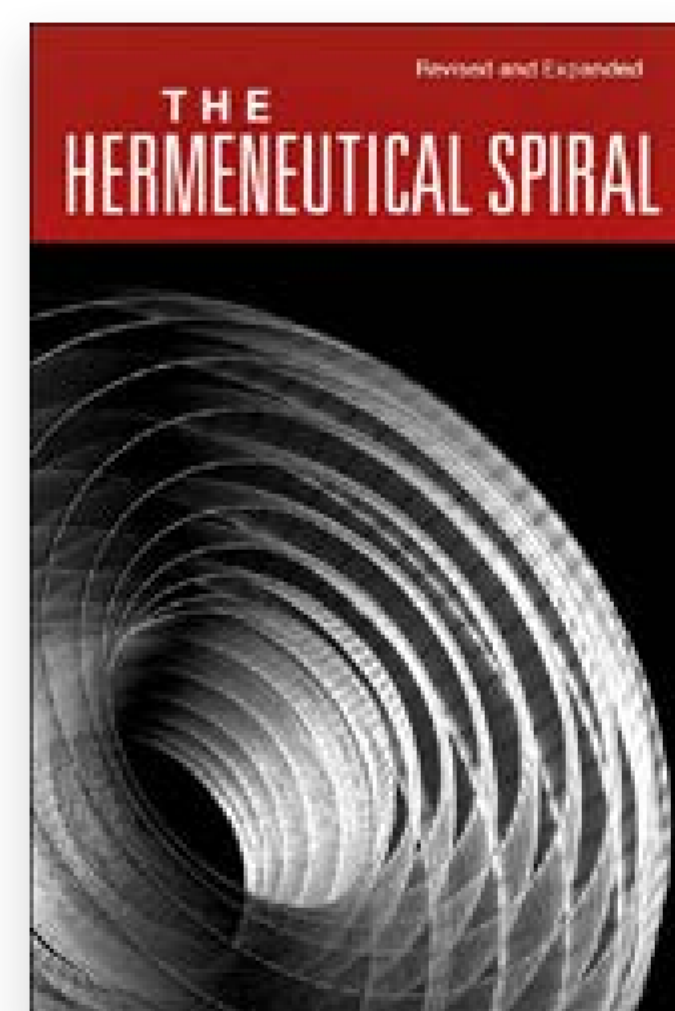
Introductory, a modern classic: [*Exegetical Fallacies*](#), by D.A. Carson.



More advanced, but short: [*Biblical Words and Their Meaning*](#), by Moisés Silva.



[*Linguistics & Biblical Exegesis*](#), part of the Lexham Methods Series, by Wendy Widder, Jeremy Thompson, and others.



More advanced, and long: [*The Hermeneutical Spiral*](#), by Grant Osborne

(Secular linguist John McWhorter is another helpful and entertaining guide to the field. I recommend *Words on the Move*.)

3. Look at every level of meaning, not just the word level.

Bible readers who fail to think of the bigger picture tend to invest individual words with too much theological freight. But you don't read books by counting words or fixating on them to the exclusion of context. I recently heard someone preach a whole sermon on the Hebrew word *selah*, an obscure term found in the Psalms (maybe a musical notation?), whose meaning no one knows for sure.

Bible readers who forget to think of the words, however, get lost in abstractions and end up denying what those words quite clearly say, busy as they are elucidating redemptive trajectories and all that.

That's why we must look at every contextual level of meaning, from word to sentence to paragraph to section to book to testament to the story of Scripture. And back again.

Readers who purposefully move their focus from word to story and back, from forest to trees to forest to forest to trees to trees to forest, they shall mount up with wings as readers, they shall learn and not faint. They will, with the light of the Spirit and the grace of God, understand what the Bible is saying.

(For a brief, constructive example looking at only two of the levels, check out [my post on Psalm 37:8.](#))

4. Learn linguistic and literary labels.

The Bible is a literary book. It contains multiple literary genres such as poetry, history, and epistle. It contains multiple literary devices such as personification, assonance, and zeugma. These sorts of tools are part and parcel (metaphor alert!) of every book worth reading, and the Bible is no exception.

If you know and understand the labels for the various genres and literary devices in the Bible, you'll perceive what you only half-perceived before. You'll be able to explain it more effectively to others.

Example: if you know that metaphors have a “target” and a “source” (others call these the “figure and ground” or the “tenor and vehicle”), you’ll be able to spot and understand metaphors more effectively. The source in a metaphor is the domain from which meaning is drawn to illuminate the target.

“Cast not your pearls before swine” is a rich combination of two metaphors (the Figurative Language dataset in Logos agrees). The “pearls” and the “swine” are both sources. We know how valuable pearls are and how dirty and base pigs are (or are considered to be!). “Pearls” here represent truth Jesus’ disciples possess (target)—perhaps particularly their words of rebuke for others who have specks in their eyes. “Swine” represent foolish people who don’t listen (target).

Jesus isn’t perfectly clear with either metaphor, and combining two unclear metaphors leaves open a number of interpretive impossibilities. I think Christ did this on purpose (duh) to provoke healthy thought. Jonathan Pennington says precisely the same thing about this passage in his much-praised recent book, [The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing](#). I like this:

This is the beautiful nature of poetic and proverbial sayings: they invite many applications. ([260–261](#))

You get this insight when you have clarity about what metaphor is and what it’s trying to do. You want to get to the place where you spot metaphors instantly and easily discern the source and target. The same goes for all the other literary genres and devices in Scripture: when you know how they work, you know how to use them.

Learn language to learn languages

It is a false choice to say, “Either learn Greek, or learn language more generally.” Gladly, you may be able to do both—and you should if you can. I’ve heard preachers who “know” Greek but don’t know language; their Greek helped them, surely, but learning a little linguistics would have helped them more.

What's the First Thing You Need to Know about NT Greek?

I've helped you winnow your Greek motivations and focus your Greek goals; I've offered some advice about how the study of language more generally can help you study the Greek language in particular. Now I will finally let you move on from general language principles to Greek itself.

What indeed is the very first thing you need to know about New Testament Greek?

What Greek is not

The first thing you need to know about Greek is what it is not.

[Greek is not math.](#)

Koine Greek was a normal human language spoken by real people in all social strata throughout the ancient Western world during the three centuries on both sides of Christ's birth. These speakers and their language are now dead, but they left a whole lot of important writing and unimportant writing—which is important.

Koine Greek is actually a lot like English in all these respects, except for its being dead. Because we have a lot of unimportant writing in each language, it's fairly easy to figure out what words mean—because usage determines meaning, and the more usage you have, the easier it is to figure out meaning. And because we have all that Greek writing, we know that the Greek of the New Testament was just the same as that being spoken by non-Christians.

Greek is not the perfect, hidden code of God through which readers may access the irrefutably true and absolutely correct interpretation of the New Testament. It is, again, like English: English is a wildly successful means of communication—the most popular one in America, I believe. But it consistently fails to reach the level of precision so many pedants demand of it. Likewise, Greek has all the strengths and weaknesses of any human tongue. Think about it: If Greek were as straightforward and perfect as algebra, wouldn't all the major interpretive controversies among Christians

be solved by now? It's 2019! Wouldn't everyone have come to see that my theology is the right one?

Learning Greek will give you all the help and clarity God intended, but it won't solve all your theological problems. Greek is not math.

1. You need to know the Greek alphabet.

The first thing you need to know is the alphabet. Alpha (α), beta (β), gamma (γ), delta (δ), epsilon (ε), zeta (ζ), eta (η), theta (θ), iota (ι), kappa (κ), lambda (λ), mu (μ), nu (ν), xi (ξ), omicron (ο), pi (π), rho (ρ), sigma (σ), final sigma (ς), tau (τ), upsilon (υ), phi (φ), chi (χ), psi (ψ), omega (ω).

But if you need a little more help, you can pick up Dr. John Schwandt's new [Interactive Greek Alphabet Course](#). It's a great way to get your feet wet with New Testament Greek. Logos Bible Software also includes a [Greek Alphabet Tutor](#) you can use for practice.

2. You need to know how to pronounce Greek words.

The second first thing you need to know is that there are different traditional ways of pronouncing Koine Greek words. I'm as interested as the next nerd in finding out The One True Pronunciation System, but since it appears to be disputed, I default back to a different approach, one I now suggest to you: use whatever system your "teacher" teaches you.

I like the Erasmian system I was taught because it gives a distinct sound to every Greek letter. I think that has value for all learners—especially those who will be using Greek to study the New Testament (as opposed to, say, digging into textual criticism or starting a Koine Greek singing group).

But linguists have worked hard to reconstruct what Koine would have sounded like in New Testament times, and future textual critics will indeed profit from learning this pronunciation system.

Regardless, just do what your teacher—book or person—says. Don't get stressed about pronunciation; it's only a big deal for a small crowd, mainly PhD students.

That [Interactive Greek Alphabet Course](#) I recommend offers both Koine and Erasmian pronunciation. Logos Bible Software also comes with a Pronunciation tool that distinguishes the three major Greek pronunciation

systems. Click a word, and you'll hear an audio clip recorded by an experienced Greek teacher.

Note: there are “living-language” approaches to learning Greek, and I think they're fascinating. It's amazing to [go on YouTube](#) and see a whole class using an ancient language to converse (even if it's just “Sit in the chair”). I haven't had the opportunity to learn via this method, but its major value appears to be teaching people implicitly that Greek is not math, which you already know. It does also engage other aspects of the brain's language-learning capacities through listening and speaking, but the anecdotal evidence to which I have access suggests that this method has not been the panacea we'd all love to discover. (And I can't shake the feeling that if actual Koine speakers heard one of these classes they would double over with laughter. When people learn a language without access to native speakers, they're bound to create [some linguistic oddities.](#))

3. You need to know which study program to use.

The third first thing you need to know is which Greek study program to use. You need to find that teacher who will be your guide.

And I'm duty-bound to mention yet another alternative method before I get to my recommendation. I know of several Greek teachers around the country who are trying to use [second-language acquisition research](#) to make NT Greek instruction more effective. Their work looks exciting to me, and I'll put you in contact with these pros if you ask. But I'm not aware that their work is available to a wider public. I think their work is mainly aimed at doing more with the shrinking formal instruction time seminary deans are allotting for Greek. The traditional methods, it seems to me, get you to the same place; they just take a bit longer. (Forgive me, friends who are at the forefront of Greek pedagogy, but I have to recommend what's available.)

And I'm going to go right for the people I trust, using the same methods that worked on me. Again, I recommend the work of Dr. John Schwandt, my coworker at Faithlife and a long-time Greek teacher at the college level. He now offers the [Biblical Greek Foundational Certificate Program](#).

This is a bundle of resources offered through Logos Mobile Ed that includes everything you need for learning to read, translate, and understand the Greek of the New Testament:

- The [Interactive Greek Alphabet Course](#), which I've already mentioned
- [Introduction to Biblical Greek \(GK101\)](#), which uses the Koine pronunciation and walks you through the basics of Greek grammar and syntax. You'll learn vocabulary and the various parts of speech while also learning to translate the New Testament.
- [An Introduction to Biblical Greek](#), an introductory Greek grammar with exercises—to supplement the courses.

This Biblical Greek Foundational Certificate Program qualifies you to earn a Logos Mobile Education Certificate of Completion. After working through GK101, simply submit your own translation of the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John to programsofstudy@faithlife.com to earn your certificate.

Privileges and responsibilities

Studying NT Greek is a privilege that carries a responsibility. James 3:1 warns that not many Christians should become teachers, and learning NT Greek almost necessarily makes you one. Once they find out you know Greek, people will ask you what you think about countless passages. If you don't take their view of that passage, they still won't listen and may even resent you for knowing more than they do, but at least they'll ask!

You've got to show yourself over time to be a faithful and edifying interpreter if people are going to come to trust you. You've got to do work in the study that shows up silently in the sermon or Bible lesson (or email or blog post or Facebook comment, etc.). You've got to demonstrate, without a shred of pride, that your study of Greek has given you some treasures to share with others.

This is all best done without even mentioning that you know Greek, and we'll get into that in a future post. It's kind of funny, actually, that the more you know, the less you will find yourself showing it off. It will provide an all-important foundation for you, however: you will know that you are coming to your interpretations with greater confidence and insight, and people

in whom God's Spirit resides will come to be built up over time, perhaps without really knowing what makes your teaching/Bible interpretation different from others'. Studying Greek is awesome.

The Easy Way to Do a Responsible Bible Word Study

You've managed your expectations. You've set realistic goals. And you've chosen a program to study Greek for yourself.

But you don't have to wait to start using Greek in your Bible study. Even if you don't know any Greek yet, you can get started right now by doing a Bible word study.

Word studies are a treasure trove . . . and a minefield. If you're not careful, your interpretation could blow up and scatter your theology all over the floor. But you're prepared. You already know that usage determines meaning, that Greek is not math. You've already overcome two of the biggest temptations you'll face when you begin a word study.

But still: somehow you have to weave through the dangers of this minefield to get the treasures. Think for a moment: if you were about to enter such a field, what would you want to know about first? The gold or the bombs?

I'd want to know about the treasures first: Do they make it worthwhile to even bother learning about the dangers? And then I'd want a detailed accounting of the dangers—so I can live to enjoy the good stuff.

The benefits and goals of word studies

So here's a quick account of the treasures in the word study field: you get to dig into rich and precious biblical concepts such as justification, repentance, reconciliation, redemption, salvation, even (surprisingly frequent) concepts like "going up."

Notice, however, that I said “concepts,” not “words.” And that brings us to the dangers. One of the most common mines in the word-study field is mixing up those two things: you can’t just search for the word “joy” to find every time the Bible employs the concept of joy. Psalm 150, for example, is a psalm bursting with joy, but the word is never used. Likewise, the Greek word usually translated “evangelize” or “preach the gospel” (εὐαγγελίζομαι, *euangelizomai*) shows up in places where the concept of preaching the gospel is simply not present—such as 1 Thessalonians 3:6, where Paul speaks of Timothy “[bringing] the good news” about the Thessalonians’ faith and love. Words and concepts are not always tied tightly together.

Studying the use of a particular biblical word, however, is one of the major means by which you can get insights into major biblical concepts.

This chapter is titled “The Easy Way to Do a Responsible Bible Word Study.” The key word there is responsible. If we’re responsible with our word studies, we won’t claim more than our work justifies.

And the best way to do that is to calibrate our expectations beforehand. What are we actually hoping to accomplish from a Bible word study?

These five easy steps will show you both what to expect and how to get there.

Step 0: Assume that the most responsible dictionaries are already right.

You’re not expecting to discover something no one else has ever seen but to make clear to yourself what everybody who’s done the work already knows. This is not discovering penicillin or the Titanic. This is discovering that the pope is Catholic.

In other words: the (most responsible) dictionaries are already right. [BDAG](#) is right. Not perfect, but right. So right that it will take another F. W. Danker four decades of his life to come up with something better. So right that you should expect the result of every Bible word study to be confirmed in BDAG (or HALOT for Hebrew words).

Step 1: Pick a Passage.

My next advice may seem a little counterintuitive when my topic is word studies, but it's healthiest if you pick a passage that you're trying to figure out rather than picking a word by itself. That's because words don't occur by themselves. Ever. Even the word "Ever," though it appeared in a "sentence" by itself, wasn't by itself. It was part of a particular context. You can usefully generalize about what a word means—that's what dictionaries do, and what word studies do. But you're more likely to be responsible, to avoid making unwarranted generalizations, if you tie yourself to a passage. What does ἀγάπη (*agape*) mean in *1 Corinthians 13*?

(It's possible for a word to occur in different senses within one passage, but let's leave that possibility aside for now.)

Put together with step 0, at the end of every study your goal is to state the obvious:

- *Agape* in *1 Corinthians 13* means "love."
- *Apostolos* in *Romans 3* means "apostle."
- *Hallelujah* in *Revelation 19* means "praise the Lord."
- "Pope Francis" is listed on the Vatican website—he's Catholic, all right.

But do a word study well, and your statement of the obvious will be built on a better foundation than it was before you started.

Step 2: Expect to build a stronger foundation for what you already know.

It's that strengthened foundation that should lead you to bother with a word study in the first place. Otherwise why wouldn't you just skip right to BDAG?

Well, often you will. But how you understand certain words in the NT may have a significant bearing on someone's spiritual life—first of all your own. So it's worth some effort to try to see the obvious.

Consider the meaning of ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) in [Romans 3:25](#), which speaks of Christ, "whom God put forward as a propitiation [*hilasterion*] by his blood, to be received by faith ([Rom 3:25](#)).

Hilasterion is a key word in what [John Stott, quoting Leon Morris](#) (two leading voices on Romans), called “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.” It’s worth a responsible word study.

And it’s fascinating to see what BDAG says about that word: editor Danker is responsible enough to include both sides in a controversy. So the entry starts with what is generally considered to be a more theologically liberal interpretation: *hilasterion* signifies “means of expiation.” In other words, the focus is on Christ’s payment, his making amends for our sins. But at the end of sense 1, BDAG has these words: “In this passage [*hilasterion*] has also been taken to mean...,” and it follows with sense 2. That sense, generally considered to be a more evangelical view, is that *hilasterion* means “place of propitiation.” In other words, the focus is on God’s wrath being satisfied. God, through Christ’s cross, is appeasing his own righteous wrath against human sin.

Both BDAG senses are true, theologically speaking; but what does *hilasterion* mean in [Romans 3:25](#)?

For a difficult and controverted word like this, your expectations may need to be adjusted: your goal will likely not be to “find the truth once and for all” but to familiarize yourself with all the data so that when you come to the commentaries (more on that later) you are ready to follow and weigh their argumentation.

Step 3: Use the Bible Word Study tool in Logos to find out how much data you have to go on.

Now for the real practical: use the Bible Word Study tool in Logos. I used to use a competitor’s software, and when I first saw the now iconic Logos “ring graphs” I thought they were just eye candy. I was wrong. Now I use them all the time. They are indeed beautiful, but they’re also highly functional. They show how your preferred English Bible translates any given word—like *hilasterion*.


Bible Word Study | ἱλαστήριον

Bible Word Study | ἱλαστήριον × +

ἱλαστήριον in All Passages Add ▾

TRANSLATION ESV

2



propitiation

ἱλαστήριον
mercy seat; place of propitiation

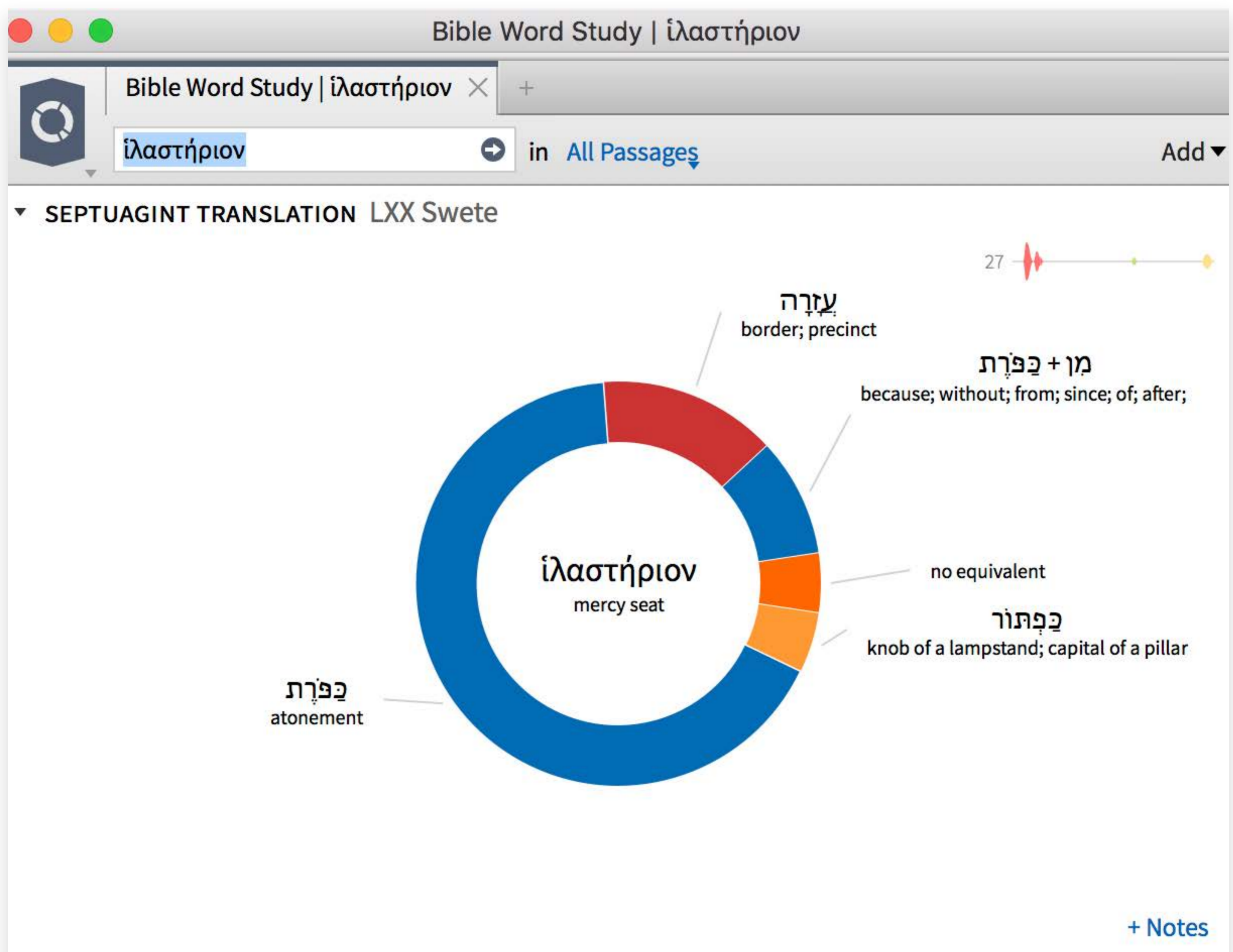
mercy

propitiation | 1 of 2

Ro 3:25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

The New Testament is not a big book, so it's little surprising that a fairly obscure word like *hilasterion* occurs only twice. So then what do you do?

Armed with the knowledge that usage determines meaning, you check more early Greek literature than just the New Testament (like the Apostolic Fathers, Josephus, and Philo). But more importantly, you check the Septuagint (LXX). The Bible Word Study tool makes it easy to see how the LXX translators rendered this all-important word. You'll note in particular that the word "atonement" keeps coming up. *Hilasterion* was repeatedly used to translate the term "mercy seat," or (depending on your translation philosophy), "place of atonement."



The New Testament may use the word *hilasterion* only twice, but it’s based on a rich history of LXX usage. This is the data any word study of *hilasterion* will have to work through on its way to a sound interpretation of the word’s meaning in [Romans 3:25](#).

Step 4: Look for contextual redundancies.

Now, when you do find usages of your word in other contexts in the New Testament or Septuagint, what are you looking for? You want “contextual redundancies,” clues in surrounding words and sentences as to what a word means. Anybody who already knows what a “mercy seat” is and what it’s used for in Israelite worship won’t need these redundancies. But we do.

The first use of *hilasterion* in the LXX, translating a Hebrew word rendered “mercy seat” in the ESV, is in [Exodus 25:16](#): “You shall make a **mercy seat** of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth.”

That doesn’t help us very much, because there’s little in the context to tell us what a “mercy seat” is. We just know it’s part of the tabernacle furniture.

I'm laying out a lot of dots for you. But you should connect them as best you can. Try to discern a relationship here.

There are other contextual redundancies to find out for other words, and the Bible Word Study tool is your best one for finding them. It shows you who the characteristic subjects of given verbs are, for example. If “priests” are the most common people to “make atonement” and “the Israelites” are the most common objects of that action—that’s a hint. Not a slam dunk, but a hint.

Bible Word Study | כפר

Bible Word Study | כפר × +

כפר in All Passages Add ▾

▼ CLAUSE PARTICIPANTS ESV

Grammatical roles | Semantic roles

With Benefactive ...

- ▶ 🏠 Israelites 22 ←
- ▶ 🏠 Israelites (the Exodus) 12
- ▶ 👤 A Person 11
- ▶ 🏛️ Temple altar 8
- ▶ 🏠 Bronze Altar 6
- ▶ 👤 Aaron 6
- ▶ 👤 A Leper 5
- ▶ 🏠 Israelites (the Conquest) 5
- ▶ 🏠 A Household 3
- ▶ 👤 A Mother 2

more »

With Agent ...

- ▶ 👤 A Priest 24 ←
- ▶ 👤 Aaron 16
- ▶ 👤 God 8

There are more places to look for usage data (extrabiblical Koine Greek literature, e.g. Josephus). The Bible Word Study tool will link you out to those, too. But the NT and LXX are the most accessible and important for your purposes in a Bible word study of a Greek word.

Step 5: Go to the dictionaries and commentaries.

I think now of the sage advice given by an idiolectic goose to Wilbur the pig in Charlotte's Web:

Go down through the orchard, root up the sod! Go down through the garden, dig up the radishes! Root up everything! Eat grass! Look for corn! Look for oats! Run all over! Skip and dance, jump and prance!"
([19](#))

That's what I'm urging you to do. Poke around, gathering whatever information seems worthwhile until its relevance or irrelevance is apparent to you. If you jump and/or prance, you may want to close the blinds first.

And remember that Wilbur got in big trouble for escaping the fenced-in barnyard and had to be tempted back in with nice, warm slops. In our case, warm slops are the responsible dictionaries and (especially) the good commentaries.

When you turn, armed with usage data, to [BDAG](#), you'll get some article recommendations, you'll get some cross references in extrabiblical literature, and you'll get reminders to check other dictionaries. You may even get a little hard-earned humblebrag: I already knew this. That is, the information BDAG collected is what you found, too (aside from the German journal articles). Instead of an impenetrable mass of abbreviated points, you'll see BDAG's argument developing in front of you.

And when you turn to [Doug Moo on Romans](#), you'll get a discussion built on that same data: you'll read of how *hilasterion* is used in the NT and LXX, what the history of interpretation of [Romans 3:25](#) is, and some reasons to adopt BDAG's sense 2 (mentioned earlier). This will all make more sense—and be more interesting—if you've already stocked your mind with the data and groped toward the right answer as much as you can. It's Moo's job to take the bricks you've collected and cement them into a stronger foundation.

The best interpretation

When you are done with the work you know how to do, you look to others for help. Their help will help more if you've done good work in advance. You ought to expect that your work and theirs, together, will give you sufficient (maybe not exhaustive) confidence that you have discerned the best interpretation of *hilasterion* in [Romans 3:25](#).

Conclusion: 5 Reasons Studying Greek Is Worth the Pain

To learn Greek will require some drudgery. But, as they say, “No pain, no reading the Greek New Testament.” I well remember sitting at my desk in grad school, cramming vocabulary into my head like a duck willingly stuffing its body for foie gras. At that desk I said to myself, This is boring and hard and I really don’t like it. I need sugar or TV or a TV program about sugar.

But now I can’t imagine my life without Greek. Is Greek worth the pain? Yes, yes, five times yes.

1. The Bible is inspired by God, and the language he chose for the New Testament is Greek.

This is really it, right? Do you need any other reasons to push past the pain? Some of God’s most important words are in Greek. The intricacies of essential NT teaching on righteousness, propitiation, and other topics are found in Greek. Romans 3 was, scholars agree, written in Greek.

Knowing Greek may not bring you to God, but it will bring God to you with a specific kind of immediacy available nowhere else. Someone may ask: Aren’t the (Greek) words of the New Testament a “medium” standing in between me and God? Is it fair to speak of “immediacy”?

Yes, it is. Actions may speak louder than words, but that is true mainly in the realm of promises. Everywhere else in relationships, it’s words that best reveal to me who someone else is. I’m a guy: I don’t know what my wife is thinking until she tells me. God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are visible through creation, but little else. God is mostly inscrutable until he speaks. His signal act in history, the resurrection of his Son, could have any number of meanings; he had to explain it to make its true meaning(s) clear. And he chose to explain it in Greek.

If translations are like kissing your beloved through a veil, it’s a very thin veil. Translations are the word of God, too. I insist along with the Christian tradition that they are. But not in precisely the same sense in which the Greek and Hebrew ones are. The thickness of the veil is just enough to make studying Greek worth the pain.

2. Greek is the single most important tool in a Bible interpreter's toolbelt.

My goal in studying Greek was the same as my goal in all my seminary studies: I wanted to have as much confidence as any human could have so that when I said to a Christian congregation, "Thus saith the Lord," I was representing that Lord accurately. That meant gathering all the tools available for this kind of work, and gaining facility in the use of these tools.

I stated this point pretty boldly. Is Greek truly the "most important" tool in my belt? Well, I'd be hard-pressed to come up with a more important one. Facility with linguistic and literary concepts is also highly important. Knowledge of theology, of commentaries, of reference works and journals and monographs and even blogs is all great. But if I had to give up all my tools but one, I'd keep Greek and build the other ones back up.

3. Greek makes you smarter—in English and in other areas.

You already know that the things you worked hardest to earn are the things you value the most, but what you can't know on the front end is why you'll value them. And one of the things I think you'll find if you study Greek is that your overall power of communication is improved.

If you've never studied a second language, you will most definitely begin to see English through new eyes. Its grammar and spelling and pronunciation will stand out in stark relief. Maybe you'll be that cool person at parties around whom people flock because you know so many etymologies.

Okay, maybe not. But many, many times over the years I have caught and correctly interpreted a difficult word in a book or lecture, a word I'd never heard, because I knew the Greek etymology (polygyny is one, as I recall). This value of improving your overall intelligence cannot be quantified, but it's very real.

4. Greek knowledge is a ticket into various guilds.

This is nowhere near as important as the first three reasons I've given. But knowing Greek is a ticket into various groups and discussions to which you simply won't have access otherwise. It's nothing personal, but the B-Greek mailing list kind of tells you right up front by its name that it's not for those who've never studied the language.

Countless online discussions about the Bible, especially those among pastors and academics, require some facility with the original languages. No one is purposefully excluding you if you don't know Greek, any more than people who know soccer are intentionally leaving me out of all of their discussions. I know almost nothing about "the beautiful game"—except that you can't touch the ball with your hands while flopping. Soccer aficionados are entirely justified in dismissing my opinions on their sport.

Even a minimal facility with Greek will give you access to some discussions you couldn't follow or contribute to before.

5. There is a secret intangible benefit I can't tell you.

"Why do we have to learn this stuff?" is the classic question asked by kids learning grammar. And what can a teacher really say in reply? Along with many things taught in the humanities, the value of grammar is difficult to explain to someone who doesn't yet possess the knowledge. Sometimes I find myself saying to my children, "You'll just have to trust me."

Or trust Moisés Silva, the great biblical linguist (and fellow graduate of my alma mater!):

A measure of proficiency in the biblical languages provides the framework that promotes responsibility in the handling of the text. Continued exposure to the original text expands our horizon and furnishes us with a fresh and more authentic perspective than that which we bring from our modern, English-speaking situation. ([Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation](#), 278)

Those are vague things to say: "fresh," "more authentic." Horizon expansion can't be quantified. In essence Silva is saying, "Trust me. Studying Greek is worth it, and you'll find out when you do it."

Insight and confidence in Bible study

In this little book, we've talked about good and bad goals; we've talked about good and bad motivations; and now we've talked about reasons studying Greek is worth the pain. And I find that all this is not frivolous self-psychology, because it is precisely during those moments of painful and drudgerous study that I need to remind myself why I'm sitting there. I need some prizes to set before my eyes to, by God's grace, pull me through the pain.

I have the prizes. I enjoy them literally every day. Studying Greek has affected everything I do in Bible study. It has brought an extra level of insight, of carefulness, and of confidence to my study of God's Word.

And I'm confident it can do the same for you.

Further Reading and Study

The literature on this topic is endless, and I'm not pretending to provide any sort of universal coverage. However, there are a few books I've personally found valuable—plus a few I wish had been around when I was learning Greek for the first time. I've listed them below with some musings on each.

Courses

[Interactive Greek Alphabet Course](#), with Dr. John Schwandt

I'm so jealous: all we had in my day was chalkboard and chalk.

[Biblical Greek: Foundational Certificate Program](#), with Dr. John Schwandt

I have a lot of respect for the highly trained and experienced Greek teacher who put this together.

Software

[Logos Fundamentals](#)

This new package is ideal for people just getting into biblical studies, and at a great price.

[Logos Basic](#)

This package is free, which in Greek means “you don't have to pay money for it.” Every Christian should have it!

Books

[Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation](#), by Moisés Silva, et al.,

(see especially Silva's *God, Language, and Scripture*)

The single most brilliant, hilarious, and insightful page on Greek interpretation I have ever read is included in this book. Silva satirizes poor approaches to the study of NT Greek so memorably that I had to include this work.

[Exegetical Fallacies](#), by D. A. Carson.

Carson, a dean of evangelical biblical studies and a consummate communicator, wrote this slim little modern classic with no desire to puff up Bible readers but with every desire to turn us into humble, careful listeners.

[*Biblical Words and Their Meaning*](#), by Moisés Silva

This book is a little more advanced, and readers who have at least basic Greek vocabulary down will benefit most. But it's not long, and is packed with linguistic wisdom.

[*Reading Koine Greek: An Introduction and Integrated Workbook*](#),

by Rod Decker

Rod Decker was a brilliant, careful scholar, an engaging writer, and a personal friend. He taught Greek for many years and formed his own approach to the work.

[*The Hermeneutical Spiral*](#), by Grant Osborne

This book is a seminary education by itself. Its comments on the use of Greek are only a small amount of the Bible study gold it contains.

[*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*](#)

(BDAG), by Walter Bauer

This lexicon (dictionary) is the standard Greek-English resource for biblical studies. The best place to use it is in Logos because it's easily accessible—and the compact paragraphs are expanded for ease of use.

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