

Introduction to Theological Word Studies

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic (Old Testament), and Greek (New Testament) languages. In many cases these original languages have shades of meaning that do not carry over completely into English. For this reason, especially when it comes to the task of interpretation, it is quite helpful to do word studies of key biblical terms that formulate into theological concepts.

The good news is that you do not have to be a Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or theological scholar to gain understanding of biblical languages and theological concepts. Through the process of word studies, using such tools as exhaustive concordances and expository Bible dictionaries, theological dictionaries, and systematic theologies you can uncover rich nuggets of biblical truth and gain opportunities for critical reflection.

STEP 1:

How to do a simple Word Study using an exhaustive concordance:

1. Select a **significant word** from the passage you are studying. Significant words are those words which are emphasized, repeated, alike, unlike, and related.
2. Find the word **alphabetically** in an exhaustive concordance and note its **assigned reference number**.
3. Find the Greek/Hebrew word in the corresponding **dictionary section** of the concordance by its assigned reference number.
4. Note such information in the dictionary as: 1) the original spelling, 2) the English **transliteration**, 3) the **root word**, 4) a brief **definition**, and 5) the different **ways it is translated into English** in your Bible (note the translation).
5. Look up and note **root words** when given.

STEP 2:

Do further study by:

- Consulting *Vine's Expository Dictionary* and other word study reference books using the assigned reference number from Strong's numbering system.
- Comparing how different translations rendered the same verse and word. Consider the ESV, NASB, NKJV, NET, and NIV.
- Finding and reading other passages where the same Greek or Hebrew word is used, noting the different English words used in their context. Start with the immediate context (unit of thought) then proceed to examine the word by chapter, the particular book, authorial usage, and whole Bible.
- Consulting the *International Standard Biblical Encyclopedia* (ISBE).

- For an introduction to an unfamiliar theological concept I would encourage you to read the appropriate article (s) in Walter Elwell's *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* and the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
- Other theological sources you may want to consider esp. in doing biblical theology include the following: *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Brown), 3 vols.; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Kittle and Friedrich) 10 vols.; *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Boetterweck); *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (Richardson).

STEP 3:

Lastly, consult Systematic Theologies to see how particular theologians have considered the particular theological term or concept you are investigating. Closely observe similarities and dissimilarities between their various descriptions, arguments (for and against), and justification (e.g., authors, proof-texts, creeds, etc). Be sure to bombard their statements/arguments with questions e.g., “*What do they mean? How did they come to that conclusion? Why? When? Do they offer justification for their claims?*” Consider examining the following sources.

- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949.
- Buswell, J. Oliver. *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962-3.
- Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology*. 8 vols. Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-8.
- Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1989.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983-85.
- Garrett, James Leo. *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 1995.
- Geisler, Norman. *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. Minneapolis: Bethany, 2002.
- Griffith, Thomas, W H. *The Principles of Theology*. London: Church Book Room Press, 1951.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.
- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1877.
- Lightner, Robert P. *Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992).
- McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993.
- Ryrie, Charles. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988.
- Shedd, W. G. T. *Dogmatic Theology*, rd ed. 3 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1891.
- Strong, A. H. *Systematic Theology, A Compendium*. 3 vols. Valley Forge: Judson, 1962.
- Warfield, B. B. *Biblical and Theological Studies*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952.