



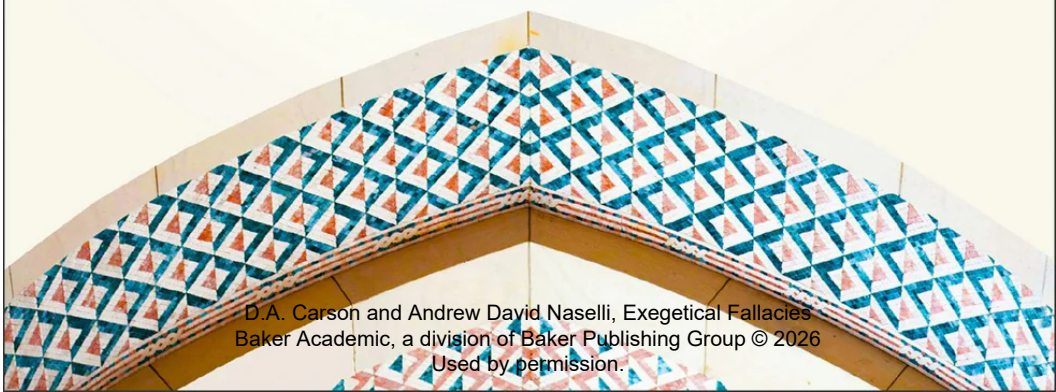
THIRD EDITION

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EXEGETICAL  
FALLACIES

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D. A. Carson  
Andrew David Naselli



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**Baker Academic**  
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Introduction



This book is about mistakes people make when they try to interpret the Bible. That's why the title is *Exegetical Fallacies*.

*Exegesis* is careful reading. To exegete the Bible is to analyze what the authors of the Bible intended to communicate by their words. Exegesis is drawing the meaning out of a text. The goal of exegesis is to understand what the author meant.

A *fallacy* is an incorrect belief based on an unsound argument. A *dog has four legs. Rex has four legs. Therefore, Rex is a dog.* That's a fallacy. Rex might be a giraffe.

You might be surprised at how many exegetical fallacies there are. And this little book isn't exhaustive! When one student first read this book, he remarked, "I'm not guilty of committing that fallacy, because I don't even understand what it is." (Unfortunately, that's a fallacy too!)

To focus on fallacies—exegetical or otherwise—sounds a bit like focusing on sin: You may grudgingly notice and briefly pause to examine your sins, but there is nothing intrinsically redemptive about doing so. But if your sins are common and if you frequently don't recognize them, then describing common sins could encourage you to examine yourself and to repent. We hope that focusing on what *not* to do in exegesis will help you interpret God's words more faithfully.

This book may be valuable as a primer for beginning Bible students, a tune-up for intermediate ones, and a refresher for the more

advanced. Even the most skilled professional athletes continue to practice the fundamentals of their craft and to study their own game film to see what they did well and how they can improve. In a similar way, even the most skilled exegetes can improve. For example, if you are a seminary-trained pastor, don't think you have arrived after taking a few courses on hermeneutics and exegesis. Continue to work hard for God's approval (2 Tim. 2:15).

Before we delineate exegetical fallacies in this book's four chapters, it is helpful at the outset to show how this study is important, dangerous, limited, and structured.

## The Importance of This Study

This study is important for at least three reasons.

1. *Studying exegetical fallacies is important because they are painfully frequent among Bible teachers.* Bible teachers have a God-given grace and responsibility to faithfully proclaim the word of God. If you misinterpret part of a Shakespeare play, the consequence is not eternal. But correctly interpreting Scripture is paramount. We are dealing with God's thoughts, so we must take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly. It is therefore all the more shocking when evangelical teachers—who officially revere the Scriptures—are frequently and inexcusably sloppy.

A fallen and finite human will inevitably make exegetical mistakes. We have sought to correct some of our own after increasing years, wider reading, and insightful feedback. But it is tragic when a preacher or teacher is perpetually unaware of the nonsense he utters and of the consequent damage he inflicts on the church of God. Nor will it do to be satisfied with pointing a finger at other groups whose skills are less than our own: We must begin by cleaning up our own backyard.

2. *Studying exegetical fallacies is important because understanding them helps you support your views with sound reasons.* If you think a text in Scripture teaches a particular truth, you should be able to show that your view is reasonable. You might justify your opinion with grammar, an argument diagram, the historical-cultural context,

the literary context, a word study, or theology. You would provide reasons for your choices and position. Sound exegesis is based on sound reasons.

Sound exegesis is opposed to merely personal opinions, appeals to blind authority (the interpreter's or anyone else's), arbitrary interpretations, and speculative beliefs. This is not to deny that piety matters or that spiritual things are spiritually discerned. But not even piety and the gift of the Holy Spirit guarantee infallible interpretations.

When two equally godly interpreters emerge with mutually incompatible interpretations of a text, they cannot both be right. Occasionally, a remarkable blind spot prevents people from seeing this point. Many years ago I (Don) rode in a car with a fellow believer who relayed to me what the Lord had “told” him that morning in his quiet time. He had been reading the King James Version of Matthew. I perceived that not only had he misunderstood the archaic English, but also that the KJV at that place had unwittingly misrepresented the Greek text. I gently suggested that there might be another way to understand the passage, and I summarized what I thought the passage was saying. The brother dismissed my view as impossible on the grounds that the Holy Spirit, who does not lie, had told him the truth on this matter. Being young and bold, I pressed on with my explanation of grammar, context, and translation, but he brushed me off with a reference to 1 Corinthians 2:10b–15: Spiritual things must be spiritually discerned—which left little doubt about my status. Genuinely intrigued, I asked this brother what he would say if I put forward my interpretation, not on the basis of grammar and text, but on the basis that the Lord himself had given me the interpretation I was advancing. He was silent for a long time and then concluded, “I guess that would mean the Spirit says the Bible means different things to different people.”

If two Bible interpreters are not only spiritual but also mature, we may hope that they will probe for the reasons they have arrived at different conclusions. If they examine those reasons cautiously, courteously, and honestly, they may in time resolve their conflicting claims. Perhaps one is right and the other is wrong; perhaps both are in some measure right and wrong, and both need to change their positions; or perhaps the two interpreters are unable to zero in on the precise

reasons they disagree and therefore remain unable to track down the exegetical or hermeneutical problem and resolve it. No matter: From our point of view, what is important is that the two interpreters are attempting to adequately justify every conclusion and opinion.

But if sound exegesis offers sound reasons, it must also learn to reject *unsound* reasons. That is why this study is important. Exposing exegetical fallacies helps us increase exegetical soundness.

*3. Studying exegetical fallacies is important because understanding them helps you move toward unanimity in thinking God's thoughts after him.* Carefully handling the Bible enables us to “hear” it a little better. It is all too easy to read into Scripture the traditional interpretations we have received from others. Then we may unwittingly transfer the authority of Scripture to our traditional interpretations and invest them with a false degree of certainty. Because people reshape traditions as they pass them on, after a while we may drift far from God's word while still insisting that all our theological opinions are “biblical” and therefore true. When we are in such a state and we study the Bible unsoundly, more than likely it will simply reinforce our errors. If the Bible is to continually reform what we believe and how we live, then we must do all we can to listen to it afresh and utilize the best resources at our disposal.

We can't overestimate how important this sort of study is if we are to move toward unanimity on interpretational matters that still divide us. Among us conservative evangelicals who share a high view of Scripture, it is very distressing to contemplate how many differences we have about what Scripture actually says. We do not mean to minimize the great, unifying truths we hold in common, such as the Trinity and justification by faith alone in Christ alone. But those with equally high views of Scripture's authority hold a disturbing array of mutually incompatible theological opinions. For example, note the following summary of opposing views:

- Calvinism versus Arminianism
- credobaptism versus paedobaptism
- the memorial view of the Lord's Supper versus the spiritual presence view

- cessationism (God has ceased to give miraculous spiritual gifts to churches) versus continuationism (God continues to give miraculous spiritual gifts to churches)
- Episcopal church government versus Presbyterianism versus congregationalism
- dispensationalism versus covenant theology versus progressive covenantalism
- amillennialism versus postmillennialism versus premillennialism

The reasons a person holds a particular position are not always rational, nor are they always correctable solely by exegetical rigor. A person's position may be less a result of sound exegesis and more a result of relationships and limited exposure. Many Bible teachers have never been forced to confront alternative interpretations at full strength—the difference between engaging a straw man versus a steel man. And because they might lose a certain psychological security if they let their own reading of Scripture lead to hard questions, they are unlikely to question received traditions.

But we are not talking about such people. We are talking about the wisest, most mature, best trained, and most devout leaders. Why don't they have greater unanimity on all kinds of doctrinal fronts?

Superficially, of course, several purely practical hurdles may be in the way. Leaders may feel that they do not have time for the kind of quality discussion that could win breakthroughs. Or they think that their opponents are so set in their ways that little would be gained by attempting such a dialogue—all the while feeling quite certain that most if not all the movement should come from their opponents, who ought to admit the error of their ways and adopt the true position! Others might feel too insecure in their position to venture into debate. But even if we could remove all of those kinds of hindrances, the most crucial cause of doctrinal division is different opinions about *what a particular passage actually says or how particular passages relate to each other.*

Frank and extended debate might do no more than expose the nature of the differences or how the differences are interwoven with

broader questions and historical-cultural issues. Ultimately, however, once we have carefully and humbly explored those tributaries, the remaining debates among those who hold a high view of Scripture are primarily *hermeneutical and exegetical*.

Let's pause for a moment to explain what we mean by *hermeneutics* and how it relates to *exegesis*. Hermeneutics is foundational to exegesis. Hermeneutics concerns principles for interpreting a text. For example, one principle for interpreting the Bible is to understand an unclear text in light of a clear text. Hermeneutics and exegesis are intertwined like homiletics and exposition. Homiletics concerns *principles* for preparing and delivering sermons, and exposition *applies* those principles in the act of preaching. In a similar way, hermeneutics concerns *principles* for interpreting the Bible, and exegesis *applies* those principles in the act of interpreting the Bible.

Now back to our argument. A difference in hermeneutics and exegesis is the fundamental reason conservative evangelicals hold mutually incompatible theological opinions. For example, the fundamental difference between a credobaptist like Steve Wellum and a paedobaptist like R. C. Sproul is hermeneutics and exegesis. Even if our opponents succeed only in getting to the place where they decide the exegetical evidence is insufficient to reach a sure decision, they will grow in the ability to distinguish a good argument from a bad one, a strong argument from a weak one.

It follows, then, that studying exegetical fallacies is important. An extra incentive is that Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to be like-minded, to think the same thing (Phil. 2:2; cf. 3:15; 4:2). That goes beyond merely encouraging mutual forbearance. It demands that we learn to move toward unanimity in the crucial business of thinking God's thoughts after him. This, surely, is part of the discipline of loving God with our minds.

## The Dangers of This Study

This study is dangerous for at least three reasons.

1. *Studying exegetical fallacies is dangerous because focusing on them can be spiritually perilous.* Persistent negativism is not good for

your soul. It is spiritually unhealthy to make it your life's ambition to discover all the things that are wrong, whether wrong with life in general or wrong with some aspect of it, such as exegesis. The first virtue to go will be thankfulness to God—both for good things and for his purposeful sovereignty in bad things. The next virtue to go will be humility. If you are deeply knowledgeable about faults and fallacies (especially those of others!), you may feel superior to those you criticize. Sustained negativism can feed your pride with high calories. Students, professors, and pastors must beware of this danger.

2. *Studying exegetical fallacies is dangerous because focusing on them can lead you to despair.* If you are already unsure of yourself or if you are deeply in awe of the responsibility that weighs on the shoulders of those the church commissions to preach the whole counsel of God, then a study like this may discourage you and even drive you to despair. A sensitive student may ask, “If there are so many exegetical traps, so many hermeneutical pitfalls, how can I ever be confident that I am rightly interpreting and teaching the Scriptures? How can I avoid the dreadful burden of teaching untruth, of laying on the consciences of Christ's people instructions that Christ himself does not impose? How much damage might I do by my ignorance and exegetical clumsiness?”

If you have that discouraged and despairing mindset, consider this: *You will make more mistakes if you fail to study exegetical fallacies.* You will make fewer mistakes by facing tough questions and improving your skills. The difference is that if you don't study exegetical fallacies, you will not be aware of your mistakes. Ignorance may be bliss, but it is not a virtue. If you are genuinely concerned about the quality of your ministry and not just about your own psychological insecurity, then you will want to study exegetical fallacies.

3. *Studying exegetical fallacies is dangerous because it may unsettle you when you realize how much distance there is between the text and you.* A fundamental danger with studying the Bible critically or carefully is what some call distantiation. Distantiation is “the action or process of setting or keeping something at a distance, esp. of mentally or intellectually distancing oneself from an idea, feeling,

etc.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, when you are reading a text, distantiation is stepping back or distancing yourself from the text you are scrutinizing. To distantiate yourself from a biblical text, you recognize your distance from it (e.g., historically, culturally, linguistically) so that you can better understand the text on its own terms. Mortimer Adler calls this kind of careful reading “coming to terms with an author.”<sup>2</sup> When you are reading an ancient text (or any text for that matter), you want to be able to accurately understand what the author is intending to communicate through the author’s written words. You are not reading carefully unless you understand what the author intended to communicate. Keeping your distance is a necessary component for carefully reading an ancient text, but it is difficult and sometimes costly.

We gain a glimpse of what is at stake when we consider a common phenomenon at evangelical seminaries. We’ll call it the story of Ernest Christian.

Ernest Christian first believed in Christ as a high school senior. He went to college and studied computer science, and he faithfully served in his church. His prayer times were warm and frequent. Despite occasional dearth, he often felt when he read his Bible as if the Lord were speaking to him directly. Still, there was so much of the Bible that he did not understand. As he began to reach the settled conviction that he should pursue full-time Christian ministry, his local congregation confirmed him in his sense of gifts and calling. Deeply aware of his limitations, he headed off to a theological seminary with all the eagerness of a new recruit.

After Ernest has been studying exegesis and theology for six months at seminary, the picture is very different. Ernest is spending many hours a day memorizing Greek morphology and learning the details of the itinerary of Paul’s second missionary journey. Ernest has also begun to write exegetical papers. But by the time he has finished his lexical study, his syntactical diagram, his survey of critical opinions, and his evaluation of conflicting evidence, somehow the

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/distantiation\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/distantiation_n).

2. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, 2nd ed. (Touchstone, 1972), 96–113.

Bible does not feel as alive to him as it once did. This troubles Ernest. He finds it more difficult to pray and witness than he did before he came to seminary. He is not sure why this is so. He does not sense the fault to be in the professors, who seem to be godly, knowledgeable, and mature believers.

More time elapses. Ernest Christian may act in one of at least three ways.

1. He may retreat into a defensive pietism that boisterously denounces the arid intellectualism he sees all around him.
2. He may be sucked into the vortex of a kind of intellectual commitment that squeezes out worship, prayer, witness, and meditative reading of Scripture.
3. He may stagger along until graduation rescues him so that he can return to the real world.

But is there a better way? And are such experiences a necessary component of seminary life? Yes, there is a better way, and yes, such experiences are necessary because *distantiation* is what causes them. (Remember, distantiation when studying the Bible means initially keeping your distance from the text so that you can better understand the text on its own terms.)

Understanding the process of distantiation can enable you to handle it better. Whenever you try to understand what a text means, you read it carefully—that is, not in some arbitrary fashion, but with sound reasons and as the author meant it in the first place. So you must first of all grasp the nature and degree of the differences that separate your framework from a text’s framework. The point of keeping your distance initially is not only to accurately understand the distance between you and a text—whether historical, cultural, linguistic, or whatever. You do this so that you can account for the different frameworks and then bridge the gap by accurately understanding what the ancient text means. Only then can you begin to accurately understand a text on its own terms and truly understand what it means. When you fail to keep your distance from a biblical text in order to understand it on its own terms, you may think that

you know what the text means, but all too often you have simply imposed your own thoughts onto the text.

Another way to think about this process is as fusing two horizons into one. In this case, a horizon refers to one's worldview, or vantage point, including one's presuppositions and cultural baggage. There are two horizons to join together: the horizon of the author's text and the horizon of the interpreter. When you read an ancient text like the Bible, a huge gap initially separates those two horizons due to such different historical and cultural locations. But you may imperfectly but profitably fuse the two horizons—that is, you may minimize the gap—by deliberately distancing yourself from your biases and preferences so that you can understand what an author intended to communicate in an ancient text.<sup>3</sup>

If a seminary is teaching you to think carefully like this, you will necessarily feel dislocated to some degree. Keeping your intellectual distance from a biblical text can feel disturbing. (A less-demanding institution may not be quite so upsetting because it may encourage students to learn but not to evaluate.)

Keeping your distance is difficult, and it can be costly. But *it is not an end in itself*. Done properly, distantiation can be wonderfully constructive. Indeed, the result of this process is that your Christian life and your faith and your thinking will be more robust, more spiritually alert, more discerning, and more biblical than it could otherwise have been. But some of the steps along the way are dangerous. If Christ is supreme in *all* of your life, then studying exegetical fallacies will prove beneficial. Failing to work hard at integrating your studies with your entire Christian life invites spiritual shipwreck. Careful reading and devotional reading must not be mutually exclusive.<sup>4</sup>

3. Cf. D. A. Carson, "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Zondervan, 1991), 52, 67. Three other ways to think about this interpretational process include the hermeneutical spiral, the asymptotic approach, and speech act theory. See Andrew David Naselli, "D. A. Carson's Theological Method," in *The Gospel and the Modern World: A Theological Vision for the Church*, ed. Brian J. Tabb (Crossway, 2023), 20–22.

4. See D. A. Carson, "The Trials of Biblical Studies," in *The Trials of Theology: Becoming a "Proven Worker" in a Dangerous Business*, ed. Andrew J. B. Cameron and Brian S. Rosner (Christian Focus, 2010), 109–29. For a brief summary of the

## The Limits of This Study

This study is limited in at least six ways.

1. *This study is not primarily for experts.* It is not a highly technical discussion. It is for seminary students, pastors, and any others who take seriously their responsibility to interpret the Scriptures.
2. *This study is not primarily about hermeneutics.* It is about exegesis. As we mentioned above, hermeneutics concerns principles for interpreting the Bible, and exegesis applies those principles in the act of interpreting the Bible. The title of this book is *Exegetical Fallacies* (not *Hermeneutical Fallacies*) because it focuses on the activity of interpreting the Bible (not on foundational principles for interpreting the Bible). Exegesis is about actually interpreting the text, and hermeneutics is about the nature of the interpretative process. Exegesis concludes, “This passage means such and such.” Hermeneutics concludes, “This interpretative process consists of the following techniques and preunderstandings.” Hermeneutics is not an end in itself. Hermeneutics serves exegesis. This book is about hermeneutics to some degree because we discuss various aspects of the interpretative process, but this book is not *primarily* about hermeneutics. The focus is not the interpretative process as you theoretically consider it. The focus is on how the practitioner explains and argues for what the sacred text means.
3. *This study does not include a bibliography.* The reason is that this is not a technical study. We do, however, document those works we refer to along the way.<sup>5</sup>
4. *This study does not focus on historical and theological fallacies.* It focuses on *exegetical* fallacies. We discuss some

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article, see Andrew David Naselli, “Carson on the Trials of Biblical Studies,” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 25, 2010, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/carson-on-the-trials-of-biblical-studies/>.

5. My (Andy’s) attempt to explain how to interpret and apply the Bible (which includes a foreword by Carson) has annotated bibliographies of recommended reading at the end of each chapter. See Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*, 2nd ed. (P&R, 2027).

historical and theological fallacies but only as they relate to exegetical ones.

5. *This study does not comprehensively address all exegetical fallacies.* It addresses errors that in our experience are most common. We have tried to be evenhanded in our examples. We cite exegetical fallacies drawn from the works of conservatives and liberals, Calvinists and Arminians. We mention relatively unknown persons as well as world-class scholars. Some of our own exegetical errors receive dishonorable burial. By and large we draw our examples from fairly serious sources, not popular publications where the frequency of error is much higher. But we also include a few examples from popular preachers. A slight majority of examples come from evangelical writers.
6. *This study does not focus on the Holy Spirit's role in exegesis.* That subject is important and difficult, but it is not the focus of this little practitioner's manual.<sup>6</sup>

## The Structure of This Study

This study consists of four chapters:

1. Word-Study Fallacies
2. Grammatical Fallacies
3. Logical Fallacies
4. Presuppositional, Literary, Historical, and Theological Fallacies

Each chapter contains a numbered list of exegetical fallacies, and each fallacy gets its own heading, followed by a brief definition. The paragraphs under each heading explain and illustrate the fallacy.

6. Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Baker, 1993), 44–66; John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Crossway, 2018), 567–619.

## ONE

# Word-Study Fallacies



What amazing things words are! They can convey information. They can express or elicit emotion. They enable us to think. Words of command can cause things to happen. With words we can praise God and blaspheme him (cf. James 3:10).

Words are among the primary tools of preachers—both the words they study and the words with which they explain their studies. Mercifully, there now exist several excellent volumes to introduce the student to the general field of *lexical semantics* (i.e., the study of what words mean) and to warn against particular misuses.<sup>1</sup> This is all to the good because “philology is the eye of the needle through which every theological camel must enter the heaven of theology.”<sup>2</sup>

1. See, e.g., James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford University Press, 1961); Stephen Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (Blackwell, 1964); G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Duckworth, 1980); J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, SBL Semeia Studies (Fortress; Scholars Press, 1982); Arthur Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic: A Preliminary Analysis*, 2nd ed., Biblical Seminar 75 (Sheffield Academic, 2001); and esp. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 1994). Cf. Dirk Geeraerts, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford Linguistics (Oxford University Press, 2010).

2. Nathan Söderblom: “Die Philologie ist das Nadelöhr, durch das jedes theologische Kamel in den Himmel der Gottesgelehrtheit eingehen muss.” Cited by J. M. van Veen, *Nathan Söderblom, leven en denken van een godsdiensthistoricus* (H. J. Paris, 1940), 59n4.

## Seventeen Word-Study Fallacies

This list describes common fallacies that repeatedly crop up when preachers and others attempt word studies of biblical terms. The negative illustrations along the way may serve as useful warning flags.

### 1. *The Root Fallacy*

► *To determine what a word means by its morpheme(s)*

The root fallacy presupposes that every word actually *has* a meaning bound up with its components. In this view, the morphemes or roots of a word determine what it means. (A morpheme is a meaningful unit of language—whether a word or a part of a word—that you can’t divide into smaller parts.) The root fallacy wrongly defines a word based on its parts. For words such as *bookshelf* and *waterfall*, knowing the meaning of a word’s component parts can clarify what the whole word means, but trying to define words such as *honeymoon* and *godparent* by their parts would result in linguistic nonsense. It is similar to the following logic: “Goodbye” is a contraction for the Anglo-Saxon phrase “God be with you,” so when people today say “goodbye,” the hidden meaning is “God be with you.” That is not how language works. The following five examples using biblical words further illustrate the fallacy.

1. In 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul writes of himself, Cephas, Apollos, and other leaders in these terms: “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants [ὑπηρέτας, *hypēretas*] of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.” J. P. Louw traces how interpreters have committed the root fallacy here.<sup>3</sup>

- R. C. Trench popularized the view that ὑπηρέτης (*hypēretēs*) derives from the verb ἐρέσσω (*eressō*), “to row.”<sup>4</sup> The basic meaning of ὑπηρέτης (*hypēretēs*), then, is “rower.” Trench explicitly asserted that ὑπηρέτης “was originally the rower (from ἐρέσσω).”

3. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 26–27.

4. R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (1854; NFCE, n.d.), 32.

- A. T. Robertson and J. B. Hofmann went further and said ὑπηρέτης derives morphologically from ὑπό (*hypo*) and ἐρέτης (*eretēs*).<sup>5</sup> Since ἐρέτης means “rower” in Homer (8th cent. BC!), and ὑπό means “under,” Hofmann explicitly connects the word’s meaning with its morphology and concludes that ὑπηρέτης was basically an “under rower,” “assistant rower,” or “subordinate rower.”
- Trench had not gone so far: He did not detect in ὑπό any notion of subordination. But Leon Morris concluded that a ὑπηρέτης was “a servant of a lowly kind.”<sup>6</sup>
- William Barclay plunged further by designating ὑπηρέτης (*hypēretēs*) as “a rower on the lower bank of a trireme.”<sup>7</sup>

But ὑπηρέτης never means “rower” in classical literature,<sup>8</sup> and ὑπηρέτης certainly does not mean “rower” in the New Testament. The ὑπηρέτης in the New Testament is a servant, and often there is little if anything to distinguish a ὑπηρέτης from a διάκονος (*diakonos*). To derive the meaning of ὑπηρέτης from the morphemes ὑπό and ἐρέτης is no more intrinsically realistic than deriving the meaning of “butterfly” from “butter” and “fly,” or the meaning of “pineapple” from “pine” and “apple.”<sup>9</sup> Even those of us who have never been to Hawaii recognize that pineapples are not a special kind of apple that grows on pines.

2. The search for hidden meanings bound up with etymologies becomes even more ludicrous when two words with entirely different meanings share the same etymology. James Barr draws attention to the pair עֵֿלֶם (lehem, bread) and מִלְחָמָה (milhāmā, war):

5. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4 vols. (Broadman, 1931), 4:102; J. B. Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Griechischen* (Oldenbourg, 1950), s.v.

6. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 1958), 74.

7. William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (Westminster, 1975), s.v.

8. There is only one possible exception, and it is merely possible, not certain. The inscription in question reads τοὶ ὑπηρέται τῶν μακρῶν ναῶν (*toi hypēretai tan makran naōn*, the attendants [rowers?] on the large vessels). According to LSJ, 1872, the meaning *rowers* is dubious.

9. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 27.

It must be regarded as doubtful whether the influence of their common root is of any importance semantically in classical Hebrew in the normal usage of the words. And it would be utterly fanciful to connect the two as mutually suggestive or evocative, as if battles were normally for the sake of bread or bread a necessary provision for battles. Words containing similar sound sequences may of course be deliberately juxtaposed for assonance, but this is a special case and separately recognizable.<sup>10</sup>

3. Is the “literal” meaning of μονογενής (*monogenēs*) “only begotten”? Here is what the second edition of this book says:

The word μονογενής (*monogenēs*) is often thought to spring from μόνος (*monos*, only) plus γεννάω (*gennaō*, to beget); and hence its meaning is “only begotten.” Even at the etymological level, the γεν- (*gen-*) root is tricky: μονογενής (*monogenēs*) could as easily spring from μόνος (*monos*, only) plus γένος (*genos*, kind or race) to mean “only one of its kind,” “unique,” or the like. If we press on to consider usage, we discover that the Septuagint renders ἑνῆς (ἡ) (yāhīd) as “alone” or “only” (e.g., Ps. 22:20 [21:21, LXX, “my precious life” (NIV) or “my only soul”]; Ps. 25:16 [24:16, LXX, “for I am lonely and poor”]), without even a hint of “begetting.” True, in the New Testament the word often refers to the relationship of child to parent; but even here, care must be taken. In Hebrews 11:17 Isaac is said to be Abraham’s μονογενής (*monogenēs*)—which clearly cannot mean “only-begotten son,” since Abraham also sired Ishmael and a fresh packet of progeny by Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2). Isaac is, however, Abraham’s *unique* son, his special and well-beloved son.<sup>11</sup> The long and short of the matter

10. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 102.

11. This note is also from the second edition of this book (31n13): For further discussion, see Dale Moody, “The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version,” *JBL* 72 (1953): 213–19. Attempts to overturn Moody’s work have not been convincing. The most recent of these is by John V. Dahms, “The Johannine Use of *Monogenēs* Reconsidered,” *NTS* 29 (1983): 222–32. This is not the place to enter into a point-by-point refutation of his article; but in my judgment his weighing of the evidence is not always evenhanded. For instance, when he comments on the use of μονογενής (*monogenēs*) in Ps. 22:20, he stresses that things, not persons, are in view; yet when he comes to Ps. 25:16 (24:16, LXX)—“Look upon me and have mercy upon me for I am μονογενής [*monogenēs*] and poor”—he concedes the meaning *lonely* is possible but adds: “We think it not impossible that the meaning ‘only child,’ i.e. one who has no sibling to provide help, is (also?) intended” (p. 224). Dahms argues this

is that renderings such as “for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16, NIV) are prompted by neither an inordinate love of paraphrase, nor a perverse desire to deny some cardinal truth, but by linguistics.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, Charles Lee Irons has compellingly argued that *μονογενής* (*monogenēs*) has two basic senses: (1) “only begotten” in the sense of an “only child” lacking siblings and (2) “unique” in the sense of the only one of its kind. It normally means “only begotten” in familial contexts (which for Irons includes John 3:16), and it normally means “unique” in nonfamilial contexts.<sup>13</sup>

4. How many times has a preacher asserted that because the verbal cognate of *ἀπόστολος* (*apostolos*, apostle) is *ἀποστέλλω* (*apostellō*, I send), the root meaning of “apostle” is “one who is sent”? The words may share the same root, but when the New Testament uses the noun *ἀπόστολος*, the focus is not on *the one sent* but on *the messenger*. Now a messenger is usually sent, but the word *messenger* also calls to mind the message the person carries and suggests that he represents the one who sent him. In other words, the New Testament uses the word *ἀπόστολος* to refer to a *special representative* or a *special messenger* rather than “someone sent out.”

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despite the fact that David wrote the psalm, and David had many siblings. But at least Dahms recognizes that “meaning is determined by usage, not etymology” (p. 223); and that is my main point here. Moody argues that it was the Arian controversy that prompted translators (in particular Jerome) to render *μονογενής* (*monogenēs*) by *unigenitus* (only begotten), not *unicus* (only); and even here, Jerome was inconsistent, for he still preferred the latter in passages like Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38, where the reference is not to Christ, and therefore no christological issue is involved. This rather forcefully suggests that it was not linguistic study that prompted Jerome’s changes, but the pressure of contemporary theological debate.

12. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 1996), 30–31.

13. Charles Lee Irons, “A Lexical Defense of the Johannine ‘Only Begotten,’” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Zondervan, 2017), 98–116; Charles Lee Irons, “Only Begotten God: Eternal Generation, a Scriptural Doctrine,” in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Barrett (IVP Academic, 2024), 401–18. Cf. D. A. Carson, “John 5:26: *Crux Interpretum* for the Eternal Generation of the Son,” in Sanders and Swain, *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, 87–90. Irons (“Lexical Defense,” 102–3) also argues (contra the previous footnote above) that *μονογενής* (*monogenēs*) did not develop in response to Arianism.

5. How often do preachers refer to the verb ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*, I love), contrast it with φιλέω (*phileō*, I love), and deduce that the text is saying something about a special kind of loving because the author chose to use the word ἀγαπάω? The entire ranges of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω are not exactly the same, but they substantially overlap. Where they overlap, appealing to a “root meaning” in order to discern a difference is fallacious.

In 2 Samuel 13 (LXX), both ἀγαπάω and the cognate ἀγάπη (*agapē*, love) refer to Amnon’s incestuous rape of his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:15, LXX). When Demas forsakes Paul because he *loved* this present, evil world (2 Tim. 4:10), there is no linguistic reason to be surprised that the verb is ἀγαπάω. Both John 3:35 and 5:20 say that the Father *loves* the Son, but the first passage uses ἀγαπάω and the second φιλέω—without any discernible shift in meaning. The false assumptions surrounding this pair of words are ubiquitous (we return to them below under fallacy 10—over-exegesis of synonyms). The point here is that there is nothing intrinsic to the verb ἀγαπάω or the noun ἀγάπη to prove that its real meaning or hidden meaning refers to some special kind of love.

In conclusion, we offer three caveats to this discussion.

1. *We are not saying that any word can mean anything.* Each individual word has a limited range of possible meanings, and the context may modify or shape a word’s meaning only within certain boundaries. A word’s total range of meaning is not permanently fixed, of course; with time and novel usage, it may shift considerably. Even so, words are not infinitely plastic. We are simply saying that a word’s etymology cannot reliably determine what it means. A word’s root does not always project a certain meaning onto any word that incorporates that root. A word is a verbal sign. A word signifies meaning. A word is a sign that points to meaning rather than possessing it intrinsically. Meaning “is a set of relations for which a verbal symbol is a sign.”<sup>14</sup> In one sense, of course, it is legitimate to say “this word means such and such” if we are providing a word’s range of meaning that we have inductively observed or if we are

14. Eugene A. Nida, *Exploring Semantic Structures* (Fink, 1975), 14.

specifying what a word means in a particular context. But we must not freight such talk with too much etymological baggage.

2. *The meaning of a word may reflect the meanings of its component parts.* For example, the verb ἐκβάλλω (*ekballō*)—from ἐκ (*ek*, out of, from) and βάλλω (*ballō*, I throw)—means “I throw out” or “I expel.” The meaning of a word *may* reflect its etymology, and this is more common in synthetic languages such as Greek or German, with their relatively high percentages of morphologically transparent words (especially compounds whose components retain their separate meanings), than in a language like English.<sup>15</sup> Even so, we cannot responsibly *assume* that etymology is related to meaning. We can test the point only by inductively discovering what a word means.

3. *Etymological study is not useless.* It is important, for instance, in studying words as they occur across long periods of time, in specifying a word’s earliest attested meaning, in studying cognate languages, and especially in attempting to understand the meanings of words that appear only once—that is, *hapax legomena*. For *hapax legomena*, although etymology is a clumsy tool for discerning meaning, the lack of comparative material means we sometimes have no other choice. That is why etymology plays a much more important role in determining what certain words mean in the Hebrew Old Testament than in the Greek New Testament: The Hebrew has proportionately far more *hapax legomena*.<sup>16</sup> But even then, specifying what a word means based solely on etymology can never be more than an educated guess.

## 2. Anachronism

- ▶ *To determine what a word means based on a different way people used it in a later period*

The anachronistic fallacy occurs when you take a late use of a word and then read it back into earlier literature. For example, what does it mean to describe a man as *gay*? Today *gay* typically means that a man is sexually attracted to men or effeminate. One hundred years

15. Cf. Ullmann, *Semantics*, 80–115.

16. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, 35–51.

ago, *gay* meant lighthearted and carefree—jolly, merry, happy. So if you are reading a book written one hundred years ago that describes a man as *gay*, it would be an anachronistic fallacy to define *gay* based on modern usage. This fallacy has three levels.

1. At the simplest level, anachronism occurs within the same language (as with the word *gay* in the English language). Sometimes the Greek early church fathers use a word in a manner that the authors of the Greek New Testament do not. For instance, some church fathers use *ἐπίσκοπος* (*episkopos*, bishop, overseer) to designate a church leader who has oversight over several local churches, but it would be anachronistic to define *ἐπίσκοπος* that way in the New Testament.

2. At a more complex level, anachronism can occur when we add a change of language. The word *dynamite* etymologically derives from *δύναμις* (*dynamis*, power, or even miracle). Preachers sometimes render Romans 1:16 like this: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the *dynamite* of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” A preacher may give a knowing tilt of the head as if he has uttered something profound or even esoteric. This is not merely the root fallacy revisited. It is worse: It is an appeal to a kind of reverse etymology—the root fallacy compounded by anachronism. When Paul wrote the word *δύναμις*, was he thinking of dynamite? (Hint: Alfred Nobel invented and patented dynamite in 1867.) In any case, even to mention dynamite as a kind of analogy is singularly inappropriate. Dynamite blows things up, tears things down, rips out rock, gouges holes, destroys things. Paul identifies the *power* of God with what raised Jesus from the dead (e.g., Eph. 1:19–20). And as God’s power operates in us, its goal is *εἰς σωτηρίαν* (*eis sōtērian*, for salvation, Rom. 1:16 ESV)—that is, God’s power aims to complete and perfect us. Quite apart from the anachronism, therefore, dynamite is inadequate to raise Jesus from the dead or to conform us to the likeness of Christ. Of course, when preachers mention dynamite, they are trying to convey that God’s power is great. Even so, Paul’s measure of God’s power is not dynamite but the empty tomb.

When I (Andy) was in college, my church had a week of special preaching meetings in the evenings, and the children had a separate meeting downstairs. My friend Justin dressed up the entire week in

a bright-red, oversized, fluffy costume shaped like a large stick of dynamite, and the front of his costume said something like this: “TNT: The Gospel Is the Dynamite of God.” Yes, I teased him for dressing up like an exegetical fallacy. (I had read the second edition of this book!)<sup>17</sup>

In a similar way, when preachers quote “God loves a *cheerful* giver” (2 Cor. 9:7), they sometimes highlight that the Greek word behind “cheerful” is *ἡλαρόν* (*hilaron*), and they conclude that what God really loves is a *hilarious* giver. Perhaps we should play a laugh-track recording when we give our offerings.

3. At a third level, anachronism can occur when you over-exegete an ancient word by reading a modern insight into it. Three articles about blood in *Christianity Today* painfully exemplify this problem.<sup>18</sup> The authors admirably explain wonderful scientific discoveries about what blood can do. In particular, blood has a cleansing role as it flushes out cellular impurities and transports nourishment to every part of the body. The authors claim that this wonderfully pictures how the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

But it pictures nothing of the kind. Worse, it is irresponsibly mystical and theologically misleading. The phrase *the blood of Jesus* refers to Jesus’s violent, sacrificial death.<sup>19</sup> In general, the blessings that the *blood* of Jesus accomplishes or achieves are equally what the *death* of Jesus accomplishes or achieves, such as the blessings of justification (Rom. 3:21–26; 5:6–9) and redemption (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 5:9). When 1 John 1:6 says that the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin, on what does our hope for continued cleansing and forgiveness rest? Our hope does not rest on insisting that we are good while our life is a sham (1:6 probably refutes proto-gnostics). Our hope rests on continually walking in the light and relying on Christ’s finished work on the cross.

17. This paragraph updates Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (P&R, 2017), 213.

18. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, “Blood: The Miracle of Cleansing,” *Christianity Today* 27, no. 4 (February 18, 1983): 12–15; “Blood: The Miracle of Life,” *Christianity Today* 27, no. 5 (March 4, 1983): 38–42; “Life in the Blood,” *Christianity Today* 27, no. 6 (March 18, 1983): 18–21.

19. See Alan Stibbs, *His Blood Works: The Meaning of the Word “Blood” in Scripture* (1954; repr., Christian Focus, 2011).

### 3. *Obsolescence*

- ▶ *To determine what a word means based on an obsolete way people used it in a previous period*

In some ways, this fallacy is the mirror image of anachronism (fallacy 2 above). It would be like reading a modern book that describes a man as gay and then defining *gay* as lighthearted and carefree. Here the interpreter assigns the word in question a meaning it had in earlier times but no longer does, a meaning outside the word's current range of meaning. In other words, that meaning is now obsolete.

While the meaning of some words changes over time, other words simply die. The *Dictionary of Obsolete English* lists many words that are no longer in use.<sup>20</sup> Such words are dead. They have lost their usefulness and dropped out of the language. For example, *chaffer* meant to bargain, haggle, dispute.

Far trickier than dead words are false friends. A false friend is a word like *charity*. If you see the word *charity* in a sentence today, you think you know what it means: (1) an organization that helps people in need or (2) voluntarily helping needy people or (3) judging people with kindness and tolerance. But *charity* used to be a simple synonym for *love*. A false friend is a word that remains in a language but changes its meaning in a way that a modern reader may not recognize. Modern readers assume they know what a word means, but they don't. In figure 1.1 we present examples of false friends from the King James Version (1611).<sup>21</sup> An English reader today may recognize the underlined words from the KJV in figure 1.1 but probably does not realize that the words meant something different in the 1600s.

False friends also occur in the biblical languages. A woman in a church I (Andy) pastored was a native Greek speaker, and with good intentions she occasionally tried to correct me after I explained what a Greek word in the New Testament meant. She assumed that

20. Richard C. Trench, *Dictionary of Obsolete English* (Philosophical Library, 1958).

21. Cf. Mark Ward, *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* (Lexham, 2018), 29–49. See also Mark Ward, *What Saith the Lord? KJV Words We're Getting Wrong—and How to Get Them Right* (Baker Books, 2026).

Figure 1.1. False Friends in the KJV

Passage	KJV	Assumed Meaning	Actual Meaning
1 Kings 18:21	And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long <u>halt</u> ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. <sup>1</sup>	stop (e.g., a medieval guard shouts, “ <i>Halt!</i> Who goes there?”)	“How long <u>will you go limping</u> between two different opinions?” (ESV).
Prov. 22:28	<u>Remove</u> not the ancient landmark, / Which thy fathers have set.	eliminate or get rid of	“Do not <u>move</u> an ancient boundary stone / set up by your ancestors” (NIV).
Matt. 13:21	When tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, <u>by and by</u> he is <u>offended</u> .	<i>by and by</i> : after a while, eventually <i>offended</i> : resentful or annoyed	“When tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, <u>immediately</u> he <u>falls away</u> ” (ESV).
Rom. 4:20	He <u>staggered</u> not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;	be astonished or deeply shocked	“waver” (NASB, LSB, ESV, NIV, CSB, NET) or doubt
Rom. 5:8	But God <u>commendeth</u> his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.	shows, demonstrates (or perhaps “praises formally”)	showcases; “to set off to advantage, or with added grace, lustre, etc.; to adorn or grace” ( <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> ) <sup>2</sup>
Eph. 5:3–4	But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not <u>convenient</u> : but rather giving of thanks.	involving little trouble or effort; favorable to one’s comfort or easy condition	“not fitting” (NASB, LSB), “not suitable” (CSB), “out of place” (ESV, NIV)

1. To avoid confusion, this example from the KJV does not reproduce the italics that the original translators used to indicate supplied words.

2. *Shows* or *demonstrates* is a fine translation of συνίστησιν (*synistēsīn*) in Rom. 5:8, and that is how most modern English translations read. The KJV translators could have used the words *sheweth* and *demonstrateth*, but they interpretively embellished it a bit with *commendeth*.

twenty-first-century Greek speakers are using the words in the same way as first-century Greek speakers. They are not.

It goes the other direction as well. We shouldn't assume that a Greek word in the New Testament means the same thing in the first century that it meant three to five centuries earlier in classical Greek. The same goes for Hebrew: A Hebrew word may mean one thing at an early stage of the written language and something else at a later stage.

Some changes are fairly easy to plot. The Greek μάρτυς (*martyrs*) stands behind our English word *martyr*. The Greek noun and its cognate verb developed in about five stages:<sup>22</sup>

1. one who gives evidence, in or out of court
2. one who gives solemn witness or affirmation  
(e.g., of one's faith)
3. one who witnesses to personal faith, even under threat of death
4. one who witnesses to personal faith by the acceptance of death
5. one who dies for a cause, a "martyr"

The meaning of μάρτυς did not develop smoothly. At a given period, one person might use a word one way, and another person use it some other way. Or the same person might use the word in more than one way depending on the context. In the case of μάρτυς, it developed more slowly because stage 3 was often before a court of law, similar to stage 1. The word developed to stage 5 by the mid-second century (see *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1; 19.1). The standard lexicon for New Testament Greek, BDAG, asserts that μάρτυς had reached stage 5 by the time John wrote Revelation. BDAG includes this definition: "one who witnesses at cost of life, *martyr*." And it cites Revelation 2:13, which the NIV translates, "You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful *witness*, who was put to death in your city." In that sentence, is it premature to conclude that μάρτυς means *martyr*? In the Revelation passage about the two

22. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 65–66. See also Alison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

witnesses, for example, they *complete* their witness *before* they are killed (11:7), which suggests a meaning along the word’s development no more advanced than stage 3. Perhaps, therefore, μάρτυς in Revelation 2:13 means simply *witness*. Or perhaps in John’s usage the term has a semantic range that includes several different stages.<sup>23</sup>

In short, words change their meaning over time.<sup>24</sup> Another example is that the force of diminutive suffixes in Greek had largely dissipated by the time the New Testament was written. It is difficult to distinguish ὁ παῖς (*ho pais*, boy, youth, child) from τὸ παιδίον (*to paidion*, child) by age or size.

It follows, then, that we should be a trifle suspicious when any piece of exegesis tries to establish the meaning of a Greek word in the New Testament by appealing first of all to its usage in classical Greek rather than to its usage in Hellenistic Greek. For instance, Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen argue that κεφαλή (*kephalē*, head) in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 means “source” or “origin.”<sup>25</sup> But they appeal to the standard classical lexicon, LSJ (which includes later Hellenistic sources),<sup>26</sup> and disapprove of the entry in the standard lexicon for New Testament and Hellenistic Greek, Bauer’s lexicon (now BDAG). BDAG does not list the meaning “source” or “origin” for κεφαλή in the New Testament period.

#### 4. Appeal to Unknown or Unlikely Meanings

- ▶ *To assign to a word an implausible meaning that does not fit its literary and historical-cultural contexts*

This fallacy assigns an implausible meaning to a word. When interpreters commit this fallacy, it may spring from poor research,

23. The English word *martyr* has gone to a sixth stage, which occurs when a speaker expresses irritation like this: “Oh, stop playing the *martyr*!” That means, roughly, “Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

24. E.g., John McWhorter, *Words on the Move: Why English Won’t—and Can’t—Sit Still (Like, Literally)* (Henry Holt, 2016).

25. Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, “What Does *Kephalē* Mean in the New Testament?,” in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (InterVarsity, 1986), 97–110.

26. Cf. John Chadwick, *Lexicographica Graece: Contributions to the Lexicography of Ancient Greek* (Clarendon, 1996), 177–83.

perhaps depending on others without checking the primary sources. It may spring from the desire to make a certain interpretation work out, so the interpreter forsakes evenhandedness. In some instances an intrinsically unlikely or ill-attested meaning receives detailed defense and may even become entrenched in the church. Here are two examples.

1. When the Mickelsens argue that “head” in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 means “source” or “origin” (see the end of fallacy 3 above), not only do they appeal to LSJ, but they also fail to note the constraints that even LSJ imposes on the evidence. The Mickelsens cite LSJ as indicating that κεφαλή (*kephalē*, head) refers to the *head of a river* as the river’s “source.” But in all such cases noted by LSJ, the word is plural, κεφαλαί (*kephalai*). When the singular form κεφαλή applies to a river, it refers to a river’s mouth. The only example LSJ lists where singular κεφαλή means “source” or “origin” is the *Fragmenta Orphicorum*, from the fifth century BC or earlier.<sup>27</sup> The document is textually uncertain and could be translated in multiple ways.<sup>28</sup> Although the New Testament uses κεφαλή in some ways that one could interpret as “source” (e.g., Eph. 4:15; Col. 2:19), all other factors being equal, in no case is that the required meaning; and in every instance the notion of “headship” implying authority fits equally well or better. The relevant lexica are full of examples, all culled from ancient texts, in which κεφαλή connotes “authority.”<sup>29</sup> Whatever the dependencies,

27. Further, if κεφαλή really develops the sense of “source” (rather than just occasionally referring to things that are sources), then we would expect to find unambiguous examples like κεφαλή ὕδατος (*kephalē hydatos*, head of a river). But we do not know of any such examples. The only time the source of a river occurs in the LXX (Gen. 2:10), the word is ἀρχή (*archē*). Cf. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (InterVarsity, 1989), 142–43.

28. Cf. Wayne A. Grudem, review of *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, by James B. Hurley, *Trinity Journal*, n.s., 3 (1982): 230.

29. The Mickelsens’ argument, and that of many others who have joined the same refrain, may depend on Stephen Bedale, “The Meaning of κεφαλή in the Pauline Epistles,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 5 (1954): 211–15. In Grudem’s review of Hurley’s *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (see previous note), he points out that Hurley

calls to account those who have used the study of S. Bedale (*Journal of Theological Studies* 5 [1954], 211–215) to argue that κεφαλή means “origin” and therefore not “authority over” in 1 Corinthians 11, noting that Bedale

the Mickelsens are attempting to appeal to an unknown or unlikely meaning.<sup>30</sup> Certainly there are sound exegetical reasons why such a meaning will not fit the context of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16.<sup>31</sup>

2. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. makes an implausible argument about νόμος (*nomos*, law) in 1 Corinthians 14:34: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the *law* says.” Kaiser argues that νόμος (*nomos*) here refers not to the Mosaic law but to rabbinic interpretation, rabbinic rules that Paul rejects.<sup>32</sup> Kaiser is assigning to the word νόμος an implausible meaning that does not fit its literary and historical-cultural contexts. Kaiser argues that the Old Testament does not say that women must be in submission. Rather, Paul is here posing a hypothetical argument based on rabbinic rules that Paul then refutes with his own comeback in verse 36: Did the word of God originate with you, or are you *men* (the masculine μόνους, *monous*, not the feminine μόνας, *monas*) the only ones it reached? In other words, Kaiser argues that Paul gives the gist of what the opponents argued, as he does elsewhere in this epistle (e.g., 6:12; 7:1–2), and then Paul corrects the wrong argument. The result is that the passage on the submission of women summarizes an erroneous view that Paul refutes. However, Kaiser’s interpretation does not stand up to close scrutiny.

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himself said that Paul *derived* man’s authority over woman from the fact that he was the “origin” of woman, and that (in Bedale’s own view) “the word κεφαλή . . . unquestionably carries with it the idea of ‘authority’” (164n1). Furthermore, Hurley argues convincingly that in 1 Corinthians 11 the meaning of κεφαλή must be “head over” or “authority over” (not “origin” or “source”) if one is to do justice to the passage exegetically. (228)

30. For the best summary of the κεφαλή debate, with conclusions in line with what we argue above, see Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Crossway, 2012), 201–11, 552–99. Grudem argues that in 1 Cor. 11:3 (and most other New Testament passages) κεφαλή refers not to source (i.e., origin) or to preeminence (e.g., being socially foremost) but metaphorically to authority (cf. Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10).

31. See Thomas R. Schreiner, “Much Ado About Headship: Rethinking 1 Corinthians 11:3,” in *Scripture and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Wayne Grudem*, ed. John DelHousaye, John J. Hughes, and Jeff T. Purswell (Crossway, 2018), 204–9.

32. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Paul, Women, and the Church,” *Worldwide Challenge* 3 (1976): 9–12; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Baker, 1981), 76–77, 118–19.

Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, when Paul rebuts or modifies certain erroneous positions, he never does so merely with a rhetorical question. Rather, he argues his case and sketches an alternative framework of understanding.<sup>33</sup> Paul does not intend for his question in 14:36 to rebut 14:34–35. Although Paul’s pattern of arguing elsewhere in the book does not *prove* that 14:34–35 could not be introducing a different structure, there is no other clear example of this alternative pattern, certainly nothing sufficient to warrant dismissing the predominant pattern.

The masculine *μόνους* in 14:36 does not indicate that Paul is addressing only the men of the congregation and asking if they think they alone, and not the women, are the only ones the word of God has reached. Greek regularly uses plural masculine forms to refer to people in general, without distinguishing gender, and *μόνους* here refers to all who constitute the church, both men and women. Therefore, the NIV translates 14:36 like this: “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only *people* it has reached?” Paul intends his rhetorical question as a rebuke of the entire church for its failure regarding the issue at hand. The Corinthians are displaying a highhanded approach to all kinds of issues, a highhandedness that prompts them to break with the practice of other churches and even question Paul’s authority.

Three aspects of the literary context confirm this interpretation of *μόνους*.

1. This interpretation makes sense of 14:33b: “as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.” Paul is refuting a practice that sets the Corinthian church off from other churches. Also,

33. Jay Smith examines the methodology for identifying whether Paul is quoting a Corinthian slogan. He suggests nine “specific criteria for identifying and isolating Corinthian slogans in 1 Corinthians” and then adds “three additional tests.” Jay E. Smith, “Slogans in 1 Corinthians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (2010): 84–86. Cf. Denny Burk, “Discerning Corinthian Slogans Through Paul’s Use of the Diatribe in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20,” *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 18 (2008): 99–121; Andrew David Naselli, “Is Every Sin Outside the Body Except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b Is Paul’s Statement or a Corinthian Slogan,” *JBL* 136 (2017): 969–87.

Figure 1.2. Phrase Diagram of 1 Corinthians 14:29–40 ESV

14:29 a	[A] Let two or three <u>prophets</u> <u>speak</u> ,	Applies 26h to prophecy
b	[B] and let the others weigh what is said.	
14:30 a	[A'] If a <u>revelation</u> is made to another sitting there,	Explains 29a
b	let the first <u>be silent</u> .	
14:31 a	For you can all <u>prophesy</u> one by one,	Reason #1 for 30
b	so that all may learn	Purpose of 31a
c	and all be encouraged,	
14:32 a	and the spirits of prophets are subject to <u>prophets</u> .	Reason #2 for 30
14:33 a	For God is not a God of confusion	Reason for 31–32
b	but of peace.	
c	[B'] As in all churches of the saints,	
14:34 a	the women should <u>keep silent</u> in the churches.	Explains 29b
b	For they are not permitted to <u>speak</u> ,	Reason for 34a
c	but should be in submission,	
d	as the Law also says.	Supports 34b–c
14:35 a	If there is anything they desire to learn,	Explains 34a–c
b	let them ask their husbands at home.	
c	For it is shameful for a woman to <u>speak</u> in church.	Reason for 35a–b
14:36 a	Or was it from <u>you</u> that the word of God came?	Reasons for 33c–35
b	Or are <u>you</u> the only ones it has reached?	
14:37 a	If anyone thinks that he is a <u>prophet</u> , or spiritual,	Two warnings: inferences of 36
b	he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.	
14:38 a	If anyone does not recognize this,	Inference of 1–38 (and 12:1–14:38)
b	he is not recognized.	
14:39 a	So, my brothers, earnestly desire to <u>prophesy</u> ,	Inference of 1–38 (and 12:1–14:38)
b	and do not forbid speaking in tongues.	
14:40 a	But <u>all things</u> should be done decently and in order.	

Source: This phrase diagram is adapted from the color-coded one in Andrew David Naselli, *Tracing the Argument of 1 Corinthians: A Phrase Diagram* (Logos, 2023), 37. Here the darker boxes emphasize prophecy (14:29a, 30–33b, 39a, 40); the lighter boxes emphasize *weighing* prophecy (14:29b, 33c–36); and underlined words emphasize the actions of prophesying or weighing prophecies. In the diagram, 14:29a corresponds to 14:30–33b (A and A'), and 14:29b corresponds to 14:33c–36 (B and B').

it is syntactically unlikely that Paul intends for 14:33b to go with 14:33a; rather, it begins the passage under debate (see fig. 1.2).<sup>34</sup>

34. For comments on this passage that correspond to the phrase diagram, see Andrew David Naselli, “1 Corinthians,” in *Romans–Galatians*, vol. 10 of *ESV Expository Commentary* (Crossway, 2020), 360–64.

2. This interpretation suits 14:37–38: “If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.” Apparently the Corinthian believers are so arrogant, so puffed up with an awareness of the spiritual gifts distributed among them, that they are in danger of ignoring apostolic authority. Are they the *only* ones who have prophetic gifts? Those with real spiritual giftedness will recognize that what Paul writes is the Lord’s command. The contrast in verse 36, carried on in verses 37–38, is thus not between male Christians and female Christians in Corinth; the contrast is between Christians (both men and women) in Corinth who set themselves over against other churches (14:33b) and even over against apostolic authority (14:37–38). The Corinthians must learn that they are not the *only people* (μόνους) the word of God has reached.
3. Other passages in 1 Corinthians with the same pattern of argument confirm this interpretation (7:40b; 11:16).

If 1 Corinthians 14:36 is not dismissing rabbinic tradition, then νόμος in verse 34 (“as the *law* says”) cannot refer to rabbinic tradition, which brings us to the heart of the fallacy. Insofar as νόμος can be a rough Greek equivalent for “Torah,” and since “Torah” can—in rabbinic usage—encompass both written Scripture and the oral tradition, one can *theoretically* deduce that νόμος in verse 34 refers to rabbinic tradition. However, Paul nowhere else ever uses νόμος in this way, and the word is common in his writings. So in addition to its other weaknesses, Kaiser’s interpretation of this passage falls under this fourth fallacy. Kaiser is assigning a meaning to νόμος that is unlikely for Paul, based on how Paul uses the word elsewhere. The only time such an approach is justified is when other interpretations of the passage are so exegetically unlikely that we are forced to offer some fresh hypothesis. But when this occurs, we need to admit how tentative and linguistically uncertain our hypothesis is.

Such a last resort is not needed in this case, however. We can adequately explain the passage in its literary context. There are ample parallels to this way of looking to the Old Testament for a principle,

not a quotation (and the principle in question is likely Gen. 2:20b–24, which Paul refers to in 1 Cor. 11:8–9 and 1 Tim. 2:13). Further, the demand for silence on the part of women does not irreconcilably conflict with 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, where under certain conditions women may pray and prophesy, because the silence of 14:33b–36 is limited by the context: Women must keep silent in connection with evaluating prophecies, for otherwise they would be assuming a role of doctrinal authority in the congregation (contra 1 Tim. 2:11–15).<sup>35</sup>

Considerable exegetical ingenuity may obscure this fourth fallacy, but it remains a fallacy just the same.

### 5. *Careless Appeal to Background Material*

- ▶ *To assign to a word a meaning that does not fit its literary and historical-cultural contexts*

In a sense, the example of the Mickelsens (under fallacies 3 and 4 above) fits this fallacy as well. But the borders of this fifth fallacy, although they overlap with the fourth, are somewhat broader. One may inappropriately appeal to background material in a way that does not involve an intrinsically unlikely meaning.

35. D. A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991), 151–53; Naselli, “1 Corinthians,” 362. For a dissenting view that affirms biblical patriarchy and rejects evangelical feminism, see Zachary M. Garris, *Honor Thy Fathers: Recovering the Anti-Feminist Theology of the Reformers* (New Christendom, 2024). There is a tension between 1 Cor. 11:2–16 (where Paul seems to allow for a woman to prophesy in the context of a church meeting) and 14:34–35, which Garris argues forbids a woman from prophesying in a church meeting. His argument hinges on his assertion that what Paul writes in 1 Cor. 11 “likely concerns private or semi-private worship (such as a Bible study or a prayer meeting in a home)” (106). Garris claims that he is following the interpretation of all earlier Reformed theologians regarding 1 Cor. 14:34–35 except one: “Bavinck did deviate from earlier Reformed theologians in limiting 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 to the prohibition of women teaching in church, as he thought that women could occasionally lead prayer and prophesy during worship” (82n35). For Garris, even if 1 Cor. 11 refers to public worship, there are at least two ways older theologians reconciled it with Garris’s view of 14:34–35: (1) Martin Luther and others argued that women publicly prophesying is exceptional and not normative, and (2) John Calvin and others argued that Paul disapproved of women publicly prophesying and simply delayed condemning it until 14:34–35 (43nn9–10).