



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

9. Exegesis (3): Word-Study Fallacies

I recently listened to a sermon on the much-debated passage found in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that begins, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” Early in the sermon the pastor stated, “You cannot understand this text unless you go back to the original language.” Though I’ve taken more Greek and Hebrew classes than most seminarians I was immediately perturbed, for two reasons. First, I disagreed with his conclusions (as he went in-depth into the Greek). More importantly, I was disturbed that the pastor was reversing a most important conviction of the Reformation. The reformers put their lives at risk to give people the Bible in their own language, believing that having done so, even a literate farm boy could know what God was saying, whatever the priests might say. To most of his listeners this pastor was saying, “Since you don’t know Greek you must trust me to tell you what the Bible means.”

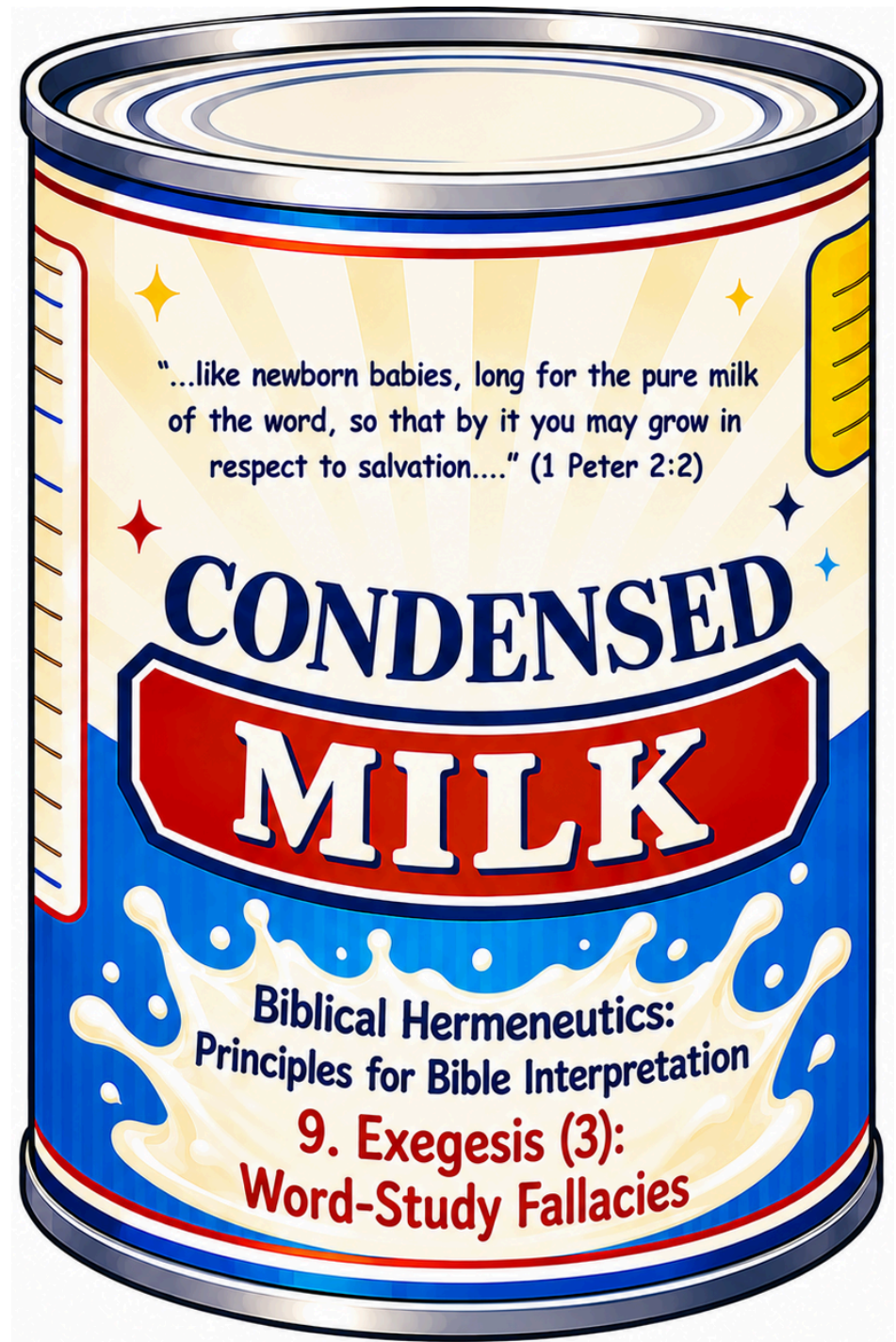
My goal in this article is not to equip you to do, or even evaluate, seminary level exegesis from the original languages. It is to give you a grain of salt to be applied to any claim to the “true” or “hidden” language-based meaning of a text, if that claim goes against your own thoughtful reading of the Bible in English. Modern translations of the Bible that are based on the original languages (such as the NIV and ESV), are so carefully translated by scholars that we can have a very high degree of trust in the accuracy with which they reflect those languages. This is not to say that language study has no value. But keep in mind that those skills often lead to opposing interpretations even among the best of scholars. In turn, questionable interpretations are passed on to us as scholarly facts when they might well be challenged. A few examples may reduce your feeling of helplessness as you face such claims

One of the most common errors is the root word fallacy. (See Exegetical Fallacies by D. A. Carson for much more). This is the idea that the meaning of a Greek or Hebrew word is determined by its etymology, that is, its use in history or in the meaning of a word related to it (a cognate word). For example, we are often told that the Greek word for sin (hamartia) was used to describe an archer who had “missed the mark” and therefore “sin” means “missing the mark”. This definition implies that a sinner is a person sincerely trying to hit the mark. Is that really what the Bible says about sinners? Better is John’s three-word definition of sin, “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

It should also be noted that this archer-example of the use of hamartia is taken from a writing dating hundreds of years before the writing of the New Testament. Words, however, can change their meaning over time. The English word “gentleman”, for example, once referred to a man who owned property. It no longer carries that inference. As Don Carson points out (26f) the English word “nice” comes from the Latin nescius, meaning, “ignorant”. No one would guess our subtle insult today if we referred to them as “nice”.

Another example we have often heard or even said ourselves, is that the Greek verbs “agapeo” and “phileo” both mean “to love”. Phileo, we are told, refers to friendship love but agape refers to sacrificial or divine love, that is, to the kind of love God has for us. However, both the verb agapeo (to love) and its cognate noun agape (love) are used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) to describe Amnon’s incestuous rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:15). We also read in the New Testament that Demas forsook Paul because he loved (agapeo) this present world. When John records that the Father loves the Son he uses both agapeo (3:35) and phileo (5:20) “without any discernable shift in meaning,” as Carson puts it (30).

It is good to remember that words do not have a meaning, they have a range of meanings (a semantic range) based on how they are used in a given sentence or context. How do we know what kind of love God has for us? Not by a single word but by the English sentence, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God’s love is immeasurable, personal and not distant. It is demonstrated by the death of Christ in our place. And, most astoundingly, his saving love is entirely undeserved and unearned. A literate farm boy can rightly interpret and apply that.



"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)

CONDENSED MILK

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