Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 31
Studying the Original Languages of the Bible: Exegetical Fallacies (Part 2 of 4-part series)
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Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)

Summary

This episode continues the series on studying the Bible at the word level. The episode utilizes the audio of a short screen capture video (click to download) that Dr. Heiser created to illustrate a range of exegetical fallacies that amateur researchers frequently commit when doing Greek and Hebrew word studies. For those to whom the term is unfamiliar, an "exegetical fallacy" is the academic term use to described flawed methodology in word study and the flawed conclusions that such methods yield. Enjoy this important podcast!

Transcript

Thanks for tuning in to the Naked Bible Podcast again.

In this episode of the podcast, I'm going to be playing some audio of myself and using it for the podcast episode. I recently created a video that I'm going to provide a link to on the Naked Bible Podcast site under "Bibliography" so you can actually watch the video, but I'm going to be using the audio from that video in lieu of our episode today. The video was about exegetical fallacies. These are fallacies that are often committed when doing word studies. We're continuing here with doing word-level work in the biblical text. We're trying to do meaningful and sound research in the biblical text. Having had to create that other video, I thought it would be really useful to do this for the podcast, as well. So I've taken the audio from that. There's only one or two places where it might benefit you to actually be looking at the video, so I would say you don't even really need that to listen to the podcast episode, but you may want to go back and watch the video anyway so I gave you the link.

But today on the podcast, we're going to be covering exegetical fallacies, or "How to Do Bad Bible Study", or "How to Do Bad, Flawed Word Studies." So sit back and enjoy... here comes the audio from that lesson.

One of the things that biblical scholars and, really, scholars who do translation for a living (Bible interpretation, linguists, those sorts of people) run into a lot with non-specialists, especially (people who want to be doing research in books like

the Bible and are very well-meaning and, frankly, we wouldn't want to discourage that)... But this issue of exegetical fallacies seems to come up a lot.

An exegetical fallacy is a phrase that is probably not really familiar to you if you're not a specialist, if you're not a biblical scholar, or if you don't work in Bible interpretation regularly. But it's a very common phrase for scholars. Everybody knows what an exegetical fallacy is, and we have a whole list of the possibilities of different kinds of exegetical fallacies. What I want to do here is show you some of the more common ones and basically make the point... People might not like to hear this, but it's true. A lot of the "research" you read on the internet or in books that is done by non-specialists (the people who lack the credentials in biblical language work in translation skills—they lack the academic backgrounds in these things) will just be littered and cluttered with exegetical fallacies. That is, the conclusions that are drawn and what you're getting from that thing you're reading (whether it's a book or blog or website) is wrong because languages just don't work the way that a lot of these researchers try to make them work or want to believe they work. I'm going to illustrate that here.

I have here five of the more common fallacies:

1. **Foreign Root Fallacy**: the idea that we get the meaning of a particular English word based upon its Latin or Greek root that you can find, like in Webster's Dictionary.
2. **Root Fallacy**: a shared root among several words somehow determines the meaning of those words.
3. **Etymological Fallacy**: supposedly, the constituent parts of words (when you take them apart and then put them back together), that determines the meaning of the word.
4. **Sound Fallacy** (two varieties): shared sounds between words in the same language means that they have a shared meaning, or that shared sounds between words in two or more different languages somehow allow the meaning of those words (between the different languages) to be shared, essentially to be mixed and matched or to dictate meanings in the other languages from one of the different languages.
5. Totality Transfer Fallacy: a word can have any number of meanings (a broad range of meanings), but somehow there's one meaning that unites them (sort of "one ring to rule them all") or that you could transfer some sort of meaning. You collect all the possible meanings and get to a basic meaning and that sort of contributes to our understanding of that word wherever it occurs, no matter the context.

All of these are fallacies. They're well-known to scholars. If you're doing Bible interpretation using these methods, your interpretation is going to be flawed. Let me give you illustrations of each one.

Foreign Root Fallacy

5:00

Again, this is the idea that the meaning of an English word is determined by, in this illustration, a Latin root. Why is this a fallacy? Well, one illustration: our word "nice" comes from the Latin *nescius*, which means "ignorant." It's very obvious that the Latin root meaning does not transfer to the English word "nice." You can tell very easily from this example that it doesn't matter what the Latin root was. It doesn't matter what that Latin root meant. It has nothing to do with the word that has evolved in English. What determines word meaning *always*? The Golden Rule is *context*. "Context is king." Context determines meaning. When I say context, it means a range of things. It can mean the historical background as a factor (that gives us a context), the type of literature (literary genre is a context), religious background of the writer, cultural background, the paragraph preceding and the paragraph following our particular word or passage that we're looking at… Even the location of our word and its relationship to other words in the same sentence forms a context. These are the kinds of things that need to inform your understanding of a word's meaning, not an original root from another language.

Root Fallacy

This is the idea that shared roots determine meaning. Really? Again, this is easy to illustrate as a fallacy. In Greek, the word *timao* means "to honor." There's another word in Greek, *epitimao*, which means "to rebuke." Those two terms very obviously share a root: *tim*. This fallacy, if we were to employ it, would have Jesus honoring demons and it would change one of the Ten Commandments to "rebuke your parents" instead of "honor your parents." Look at the illustration. In Matthew 19:19, we have "*Timao* your father and mother" (honor your father and mother). In Mark 1:25-26, Jesus is confronting a demon and we read, "But Jesus *epitimao* him (Jesus rebuked him) saying, 'Be silent and come out of him.' And the unclean spirit came out of him."

If the root sort of united or fused these two and you could derive a shared meaning, you could interchange them. But you very obviously can't interchange these things here because, like I said, you'd have Jesus honoring demons and you'd be commanded by God to rebuke your parents! They're not interchangeable. You can see from the examples (*timao* and *epitimao*) that you can't really come up with a common ancestor (so to speak) or "meaning ancestor" out of which both "honor" and "rebuke" could come. They are mutually exclusive ideas.

So the root fallacy just falls apart here. This is not how meaning is determined. Meaning is determined by context. And, again, there's a whole range of contexts. Just remember: "context is king."

Etymological Fallacy

This is a fun one. It's the idea that constituent parts of words determine meaning. Two illustrations in Greek... There is a verb, *anaginosko*. It has two parts: *ana*, which means "up" or "above," and *ginosko*, which means "to know." You would

10:00

think that if we could just take the word apart into its constituent parts (*ana* and *ginosko*), the meaning would be something like "to know up" or "to know above," which doesn't make any sense. *Anaginosko*, though, actually means "to read." The constituent parts have nothing to contribute to that.

Next one... *epitimao*. We just saw this in the previous fallacy. Epi means "on, at, or upon." Then *timao* by itself would be "to honor." So you'd think if you pulled these apart and looked at the constituent parts, we'd have "to honor at" or "to honor upon." But that isn't what it means. We just saw that it means "to rebuke." Again, the constituent parts do not create the meaning. English has a whole host of these: "butterfly"... "butter" and "fly" are not going to give you the meaning of butterfly. Butter doesn't fly and flies are not buttery. "Headship"... "head" and "ship"... the thing on top of your shoulders and some big craft that floats in the water. When you put those together, they have nothing to do with the meaning of headship, which is leadership. I hope you get the point.

This fallacy is just ubiquitous. It just shows up everywhere in so much material that you read by non-specialists (by amateur researchers), especially people who are trying to go back into ancient texts in the ancient world, including the Bible, and study it and do research. Their conclusions are often terribly flawed.

Sound Fallacy

Two varieties here, again. The first one is that shared sounds between words in the same language create a shared meaning (or allow a shared meaning). I'll give you two English examples here: the words "wine" and "whine." There's no inherent semantic relationship between the two, and you wouldn't interpret either word that way. The same thing is true for "rain" and "reign." One is water that falls from the sky and the other is kingship or rulership. There's no relationship between them, even though they sound exactly the same.

The second variety here involves shared sounds between words in different languages. Do those allow the meanings of those words to be transferred from one language to another? Does one set of sounds in one language inform our understanding of the same set of sounds in another? Again, you'll see this everywhere. People on the internet...I think of William Henry right away. He does all of these fallacies and does them frequently. He's especially fond (I guess) of this one—these sort of sound relationships. The fact that I can make a set of sounds in English does not mean that the same set of sounds in Chinese carries the meaning that my English word does, and vice versa (the reverse is true).

Examples: in Hebrew, we have *yam* and in English we have "yam." We know what a yam is in English: it's a sweet potato. In Hebrew, *yam* is a body of water, like a sea or a lake. In Hebrew, *bw'* is a verb that means to go or to come or to arrive, as opposed to the English word "bow" (like "bow and arrow"), which is a noun. There's just no relationship. It doesn't matter that they sound the same. One doesn't inform the other. Last one: the Hebrew word *kol*, which means all or

every or whole or entire, and English "coal"—obviously, no relationship at all. Yet this is done *all the time*, both by people who want to interpret the Bible and people who want to interpret other ancient texts.

Totality Transfer Fallacy

15:00 This is the attempt to engage in the transfer of all meanings of a word in any given passage and somehow import all the meanings into any given occurrence of the word anywhere, or to sort of take all the meanings and try to come up with one base meaning and then impose that everywhere else that word occurs. It just doesn't work this way. Languages do not work this way.

I'll give you some funny examples. If I said about a friend, "He has a fetching wife," I don't mean that she's a dog and if he threw something, she'd run and go grab it with her mouth and bring it back. "Fetching" can mean that as a verb, but in this instance (in this *context*), the word "wife" tells you what we mean—the context of the words around the word we're interested in. In this context, it means that he has an attractive wife.

"You need to brand yourself." Well, ouch! That would hurt, wouldn't it, if you took a hot iron and plastered it against your skin and watched it burn a symbol on yourself? That isn't at all what we're talking about. Branding, in business parlance/context, refers to building a reputation or building notoriety—building recognition of either yourself or a product.

"I'm spoiled." Does that mean that I need to be taken out and thrown in the trash because we can't eat you anymore? You get the idea. Context is everything. We wouldn't take a word like "spoiled" or "fetching" or "brand" and make a list (like I've done here below with English "board—just try it)... We wouldn't list out meanings and then just scratch our heads and think, "Okay, what kind of base meaning can I contrive (and that's what you're doing), can I invent, can I fabricate, that could sort of explain all of these possibilities? And when I get that, it must be the fundamental, the base, almost the divine meaning of this word— and *that* I can therefore take to any verse and import that meaning into that passage." That's illegitimate. That's a fallacy. Languages do not work this way. Some words just have a multitude of meanings, like the English word "board." If this were a noun, it would be a piece of sawed lumber. It could be daily meals, like in the phrase "room and board." It could be a council or association ("I earned a place on the board"), the side of a ship, an electrical panel ("circuit board"), a writing surface ("white board"). If we're talking about a verb, it could mean to climb on, or to seal up (like you "board up" a window preparing for a hurricane or something), or it could be that you smash another hockey player into the boards—you check them. "Check" would be a word that we could use to illustrate this, too.

Languages just don't work this way. These are word games that amateur researchers play, and the result is flawed, misguided, and in some cases *harmful*

interpretation. It just ought not to be. Remember: "context is king." And context means all the things I mentioned before: historical context, the worldview context of the writer, the religious context, the cultural context. What made the person think as he or she did? All the things that informed them intellectually are the contexts. Then we have the literary context (what type of writing). If I was looking at the word "will," I would think of it differently if I had in my hand a legal document—something that came from a lawyer. The type of literature dictates how I'm going to take words that appear in that piece of literature. So literary context is important. Again, all these things—the way the word relates to other words around it. These are *contexts*, and "context is king" in interpretation—not exegetical fallacies, and not word games like this.