



"It is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry."
—Thomas Paine

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'Arguments Over Words'

During my daily commute to and from the office, a trip of about twenty minutes, I usually listen to an audiobook. I remember devouring a wonderful book by Simon Winchester titled *The Meaning of Everything*. Its subject is the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a potentially dry subject if there ever was one. However, Winchester manages to weave an intriguing story, not only of the gargantuan book's long progress itself, but also of its colorful characters - originators, editors, contributors, and publishers. While some of it can be tedious at times, it is a truly remarkable story.

As many know, I have always been interested in words - in fact, I make my living with words. I began to read fairly early and quickly, and I have continued to read voluminously ever since. Early on - I cannot recall how early exactly - I began to notice similarities among words and learned to break them down into prefix, root, and suffix, and thus to spot probable origins and basic meanings. I am probably among a very small minority of people who own a handful of etymological dictionaries and word books and actually sit down to read them occasionally. Yes, I will admit it: I can be a strange bird. I might have been interested in joining the Oxford Dictionary team had I been alive then!

Nevertheless, my peculiar interest has stood me in good stead in the work I do as an editor and writer. Though I am not in the least perfect, I can often spot nuances of meaning in my own or another's writing and make edits that are helpful to the reader's comprehension of the subject under discussion. In terms of preparing sermons, I often spend inordinate amounts of time researching the meaning of a Greek or Hebrew word connected to my proposed subject - and often, that unintended excursion leads to a whole new direction of thought. To me, it is a fascinating process.

However, this process has its dark side, and I am just as capable of crossing over to it as the next person, though perhaps due to my experience, I may be more careful. Paul warns Timothy about teachers who are "proud, knowing nothing, but [are] obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wrangling of men of corrupt minds and destitute of truth . . ." ([1 Timothy 6:4-5](#)). "Arguments over words" can get a teacher into great trouble and actually lead him away from the doctrine of [Jesus Christ](#). So Herbert Armstrong cautioned the church in days past not to hang a doctrine on the definition of a Greek or Hebrew word but rather let the preponderance of Scripture - particularly the clear verses - define the correct, godly meaning.

I once received an admonitory email about the church's use of the word "Bible" of all things! Believe it or not - and these days, people seem to believe just about anything - some in the Christian world are teaching that "Bible" is a word of pagan origin and thus should not be uttered by God-fearing individuals. The argument runs that "Bible" originates in the name of a pagan [god](#) or goddess, and the evil "they," nudged along by [Satan](#) himself, have managed to convince the whole world to use this awful word to name God's own Book.

Would that these people had cared to crack open any respected etymological dictionary for the truth!

The word "Bible" is ***not*** of pagan origin. "Bible" derives from Byblos, the Greek name of the Phoenician city, Gebal. The Greeks called this city *Byblos* due to its importance in the *bublos* ("Egyptian papyrus") trade. Because they

were made of papyrus, books were called *biblia* by the Greeks, and from a Christian point of view, the greatest collection of Greek writings is what we call the Bible.

Gebal, the Phoenician name of the city, is a Semitic word that generally means a "line," as in a line of mountains or a straight coastline. Whatever it described about this city, "Gebal" is not the name of a pagan deity. Anciently, this Phoenician port's patron deity was named Ba'al Gebal or a Ba'alat Gebal (which mean "Lord of Gebal" or "Lady of Gebal," respectively). In either case, "Gebal" is not the pagan god's or goddess' proper name but merely denotes his/her place of residence: Gebal. This may be the fact that has led some to leap to the conclusion that "Bible" is a word of pagan origin. However, as mentioned above, *Byblos* ("papyrus," book) is an entirely different word in a distinctly dissimilar language from *Gebal* ("line"), even though they are both names of the same city.

We regularly receive similar emails on the words "Jesus" and "God." These common words for the Ones we know as the Son and the Father, respectively, are condemned as "pagan" (the critics' favorite word). The former is often said to be descended from the name of the supreme Greek god Zeus, while the latter has purportedly been discovered to come from the name of a Teutonic god, Got or Gott.

That "Jesus" can in any way derive from "Zeus" is ludicrous on its face! "Jesus" is, in fact, a Latinized spelling of the Greek *Iesous*, which is itself a transliteration of the Hebrew *Yahshua* or *Joshua*, "Yah saves" or "Savior."

As for "God," the esteemed Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* reads simply:

. . . the common Teutonic word for a personal object of worship. . .
. The word "god," on the conversion of the Teutonic races to Christianity, was adopted as the name of the one Supreme Being, the Creator of the universe.

As the writer points out, it is analogous to the Greek *theos*, used in New Testament Greek to name God.

So, just a caution to Christians in this "Information Age": Allow the red flag to wave furiously in your mind when you come across a theological argument that stands or falls over the meaning or origin of a word. As Paul says, it often leads to trouble. In fact, he cautions, "From such withdraw yourself." There is [wisdom](#).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Going Beyond Definitions](#)

by David C. Grabbe

We must be careful about using a concordance or lexicon as the final arbiter of the meaning of a Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic word; all words have multiple meanings and consequently do not yield to the faulty "one meaning" or "exact meaning" assumption. The meaning of the noun spirit, for example, is highly variable, based on context. The meaning of the Ephesians' "losing their first love" can in one context refer to their loss of original enthusiasm, but the phrase can also refer to their gradual reprioritizing, lowering God to a less dominant position in their lives. It is improper to build a doctrine on one Scripture. We need at least two reliable Scriptures (and hopefully more) to establish any doctrine, a lesson we learn from God's standard of evidence—that any important matter must be decided "at the mouths" of at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15). Strong is correct to assert that the Greek words *agape* or *agapeo* can mean in one context "social love," but sadly, because a decadent culture has distorted the concepts underlying the meaning of the noun social, Strong's definition is too general to be reliable. It is best to rely on the maxim in Proverbs 11:14: "In a multitude of counselors there is safety."

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Names of God](#)

by Martin G. Collins

The name of God is important—so important that He included its proper use among His Ten Commandments. What is His name? Martin Collins shows how God's names reveal His character to us. Includes the inset, "A Sampling of the Names of God."

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