

Reading in context: lexical-syntactical analysis

LEXICOGRAPHY & SYNTAX

‘Lexical-syntactical analysis is the study of the meaning of **individual words (lexicology)** and **the way those words are combined (syntax)** in order to determine more accurately the author’s intended meaning.’¹

‘Lexical-syntactical analysis **does not encourage blind literalism**: it recognizes when an author intends his words to be understood literally, when figuratively, and when symbolically, and then interprets them accordingly.’²

CONTEXTUALIZING PHRASES

The following is a list of phrases used consistently by Paul to provide a specific context for his words.

Universal application throughout all ecclesias³

- 1 Corinthians 4:17, ‘He will remind you of my ways in Christ, **as I teach them everywhere in every church.**’
- 1 Corinthians 7:17, ‘I give this sort of direction **in all the churches.**’

- 1 Corinthians 11:16, ‘we have no other practice, **nor do the churches of God**’
- 1 Corinthians 14:33, ‘As in **all the churches** of the saints’
- 1 Timothy 2:8-9, ‘So I want the men to pray **in every place**, lifting up holy hands without anger or dispute. **Likewise the women** are to dress in suitable apparel, with modesty and self-control’
- 1 Timothy 3:14-15, ‘**I am writing these instructions to you** in case I am delayed, to let you know **how people ought to conduct themselves in the household of God**’

Offence to non-Christians is to be avoided

- 1 Corinthians 11:32, ‘**Do not give offense to Jews or Greeks** or to the church of God’
- 1 Corinthians 14:23, ‘So if the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and unbelievers or uninformed people enter, **will they not say that you have lost your minds?**’
- 2 Corinthians 6:3, ‘**do not give anyone an occasion for taking an offense in anything**, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.’
- 1 Timothy 3:7, ‘And he must be **well thought of by those outside the faith**’
- 1 Timothy 5:14, ‘So I want younger women to marry, raise children, and manage a household, **in order to give the**

adversary no opportunity to vilify us’

- 1 Timothy 6:1, ‘prevent the name of God and Christian teaching **from being discredited.**’
- Titus 2:5, ‘so that the message of God **may not be discredited**’

Responding to local ecclesial issues

- 1 Corinthians 5:1, ‘**It is actually reported that sexual immorality exists among you**, the kind of immorality that is not permitted even among the Gentiles, so that someone is cohabiting with his father’s wife.’
- 1 Corinthians 5:9, ‘**I wrote you in my letter** not to associate with sexually immoral people’
- 1 Corinthians 7:1, ‘Now with regard to **the issues you wrote about**’
- Galatians 1:6, ‘I am astonished that **you are so quickly deserting** the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are following a different gospel.’
- 1 Timothy 1:3, ‘As I urged you when I was leaving for Macedonia, **stay on in Ephesus to instruct certain people** not to spread false teachings’
- Titus 1:3, ‘**The reason I left you in Crete** was to set in order the remaining matters and to appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.’

¹ Virkler & Ayayo, ‘Hermeneutics: Principles and processes of Biblical interpretation’, p. 98 (2nd ed. 2007).

² Ibid., p. 98.

³ See also Acts 14:23, ‘When they had appointed elders for them **in the various churches**’.

Standard modern English translations show a phrase of universal application is used by Paul in the context of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16,⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:34-35,⁵ Ephesians 5:22-25,⁶ Colossians 3:18-19,⁷ 1 Timothy 2:8-15,⁸ Titus 2:4-5,⁹ and 1 Peter 3:1-7.¹⁰

PARALLELOMANIA

The term parallelomania¹¹ refers to a particular error in assembling background sources for a particular text, whereby the interpreter reads ‘parallels’ into the text from historical sources, simply on the basis of isolated similarities of words, phrases, or concepts.¹² The error is typically committed

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:4, ‘any man’, 11:5, ‘any woman’, 11:16, ‘we have no other practice, **nor do the churches of God**’, referring to all men, all women, and all the ecclesias.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:33, ‘As in **all the churches** of the saints’, 14:34, ‘the women’ (or ‘the wives’), referring to all the women (or wives), in all ecclesias.

⁶ Ephesians 5:22, ‘wives’, 5:25, ‘husbands’, referring to all wives and all husbands.

⁷ Colossians 3:18, ‘wives’, 3:19, ‘husbands’, referring to all wives and all husbands.

⁸ 1 Timothy 3:14-15, ‘I am writing these instructions to you in case I am delayed, to let you know how people ought to conduct themselves in the household of God’, explicitly referring to how all people should conduct themselves in the ecclesias.

⁹ Titus 2:2, ‘Older men’, 2:3, ‘Older women’, 2:4, ‘the younger women’, ‘their husbands’, referring to all older men and women, all younger women and their husbands.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:1, ‘wives’, ‘your own husbands’, referring to all wives and all husbands.

¹¹ ‘Nearly forty years ago, Samuel Sandmel published his SBL presidential address for 1961 under the title “Parallelomania,” which he defined as “that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction” (p. 1). His article remains very useful but I think the discussion can be carried further today.’, Davila, ‘The Perils of Parallels’, lecture at the University of St Andrews (April 2001)

¹² This does not mean that all parallels are necessarily invalid; I am not denying that literary parallels and literary influence, in

when a word found in a Biblical book is interpreted as having the same meaning in its context as the same word found in an extra-Biblical source in a different context. A well known example is the Greek word *gnōsis* in 1 Timothy 6:20¹³ as a reference to Gnostic teaching. Having decided that the word here was a reference to Gnosticism, expositors attempted to find evidence in the entire letter that the Gnostics were the specific false teachers against which Paul was warning Timothy. The conclusion that Paul was warning against Gnostics was then transferred wrongly to Paul’s other letters.¹⁴

The result was a false interpretation which disregarded the actual historical evidence that Gnosticism did not exist in the 1st century, and was certainly never a challenge to Paul. New findings typically provoke new errors in this area. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran and the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt, inspired Bible commentators to rummage hastily through the New Testament looking for similar words to those

the form of source and derivation, exist.’, Sandmel, ‘Parallelomania’, Journal of Biblical Literature (81.1), (1962).

¹³ 1 Timothy 6:20, ‘O Timothy, protect what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and absurdities of so-called “knowledge.”’

¹⁴ ‘We must beware of imposing an outside situation upon the letters. **For instance, in previous generations some scholars read Gnosticism from the second and third centuries A.D. into the New Testament letters**, so that the opponents in almost every Pauline letter were identified as Gnostics. **Virtually no one advocates the Gnostic hypothesis today, for it is illegitimate to read later church history into first century documents.** The Gnostic detour could have been avoided if **scholars had read the Pauline letters themselves more carefully, for evidence for full-fledged Gnosticism cannot be read out of his letters.**’, Schreiner (complementarian), ‘Interpreting the Pauline Epistles’, Southern Baptist Journal of Theology (3.9), (1999).

used in these texts, assuming identical thoughts, concepts, and backgrounds on the basis of mere similarity of vocabulary. Though corrected repeatedly in the relevant scholarly literature, this error continues in populist, and even academic works.¹⁵

A typical fallacy accompanying this error is the selective fallacy whereby ‘parallels’ are drawn only from those sources which the interpreter has previously determined are relevant. When searching for true parallels, all possible sources should be evaluated, and criteria established for assessing which of the sources contains genuine parallels to the text under study. Instead, interpreters falling into this fallacy choose their source on the basis that they already believe it is the source of the parallels they expect to find.¹⁶

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

¹⁵ ‘Scholars are prone to engage in “parallelomania” **where information from the Dead Sea Scrolls or Nag Hammadi or the Church Fathers is imposed upon the New Testament documents.**’, Schreiner, ‘Interpreting the Pauline Epistles’, Southern Baptist Journal of Theology (3.9), (1999).

¹⁶ ‘An excellent article by Robert Kysar (1970:250–55) shows that Rudolf Bultmann and C. H. Dodd in their commentaries on John (specifically the prologue) used entirely different sources of evidence to “prove” their respective theories. Rarely did either consider the parallels adduced by the other. **In other words, they chose only those parallels that would support their preconceived notions.** This happens all too often in scholarly circles. Instead of a comprehensive study of all possible parallels in order to discover which best fits the context, scholars will select only those most favorable to the thesis and ignore the others. Further, they will often accumulate numerous examples in order to overwhelm the reader with volume. Carson calls this “verbal parallelomania, ... the listing of verbal parallels in some body of literature as if those bare phenomena demonstrate conceptual links or even dependency” (1984c:43–44).’, Osborne, ‘The Hermeneutical Spiral: A comprehensive introduction to biblical interpretation’, p. 91 (2nd rev. ed. 2006).