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“FIRSTBORN”: HOW TO DO A WORD STUDY

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If someone were to ask you, “What does the word *dog* mean?” you might respond, “Well, use it in a sentence!” Most words have a range of meanings, and what a word means depends on how it is used.

Doing a word study is a helpful Bible study practice; however, it involves more than just looking up all the verses where a word is used in the Bible. It involves discovering those factors that specify which meaning is being used in a given context. People sometimes make the mistake of thinking that a word has the same meaning in every instance. Consider, for example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses explanation of the meaning of *firstborn* in Colossians 1:15:

In what sense is Jesus Christ the “firstborn of all creation”?...According to the customary meaning of “firstborn,” it indicates that Jesus is the eldest in Jehovah’s family of sons....Before Colossians 1:15, the expression “the firstborn of” occurs upwards of 30 times in the Bible, and in each instance that it is applied to living creatures the same meaning applies—the firstborn is part of the group. “The firstborn of Israel” is one of the sons of Israel; “the firstborn of Pharaoh” is one of Pharaoh’s family; “the firstborn of beast” are themselves animals.¹

Doing a word study also involves considering the word in its original language. You may not have any formal training in the biblical languages, but you can still study some things about the original biblical words. Anyone who has access to some basic reference materials can do this. The eight steps below explain how.

Step One: Identify the word that you want to study and ask questions like, Why is this word important? Is it a key word in the passage? The word we will study here is *firstborn*. Jehovah’s Witnesses use this word to argue that Jesus is not God, but is part of creation—literally the first (oldest) of Jehovah’s created sons.

Step Two: Look up the English word in *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* of the Bible in order to identify the main form of the Greek word that was used originally.² *Strong’s* lists each English word used in the Bible and every verse in which it appears.³ Next to each verse listed is a number. *Strong’s* assigns a number to the main form of each original word in the Bible, and many Bible reference materials use *Strong’s* numbers to help identify words. *Strong’s* number for *firstborn* in Colossians 1:15 is 4416.

Next, turn to the Greek dictionary in the back of *Strong’s* and find the entry with that number.⁴ The numbered entry will tell you the *lexical form* of the Greek word in that verse. The lexical form is the main form of the word, the form that is found in a Greek *lexicon* (dictionary). *Strong’s* number 4416 points to the Greek word *prototokos*.

Step Three: Identify the *textual form* of the word. The *textual form* is how the word appears in a particular verse and may differ from the lexical form. A word may have several variations (called *inflections*) depending on how it is being used in a sentence. In English, for example, the words *talked*, *talking*, and *talker* are inflections of the word *talk*.

If you don’t know how to read Greek you can discover the textual form by using an *interlinear* New Testament, which shows the Greek text of the New Testament with an English translation below it. Find the verse and the particular English word (or phrase) you are studying, then look at the Greek word

above it. Look closely at the letters in the Greek word, even if you don't know what they are, so that you can visually identify that word in Step Four. In Colossians 1:15, above the English word *firstborn* is the Greek word *prototokos*. This is the textual form, which happens to be the same as the lexical form.

Step Four: Identify the *parsing information* for the textual form of the word. The *parsing information* explains how a word is functioning grammatically in a sentence, such as whether it is a noun or a verb, singular or plural.

A good tool to help you discover this information is *The Analytical Lexicon* by William D. Mounce.⁵ This is a special dictionary that lists the parsing information for each textual form found in the New Testament. Mounce numbers the words according to a different system than *Strong's*, but includes an appendix that cross-references the two numbering systems. To find a word, first look in the appendix and find the *Strong's* number that you identified in Step Two. Next to *Strong's* number will be the corresponding number that Mounce uses. Turn to the lexicon section and find that number next to one of the main entry words in bold (it is the first number inside the brackets). The word in bold is the lexical form and under it is all its variations. Visually identify which one of these forms matches the textual form you found in Step Three. The textual form of our word in Colossians 1:15, again, is the same as the lexical form: *prototokos*.

Finally, look next to the form you have identified to find its parsing information. Our word *prototokos* is a nominative, singular, masculine adjective. A nominative adjective modifies a certain type of noun or pronoun. In this instance, the adjective *prototokos* is attributing a quality to the subject, which is "He" (Jesus). It is saying that He is *prototokos* (*firstborn*).

Step Five: Look up the word in a Greek dictionary and discover its range of meaning. The standard dictionary for the Greek New Testament is *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Walter Bauer.⁶ Our word, *prototokos*, can be found in the third edition of Bauer's dictionary on page 894. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that this word can mean only that Jesus "is the eldest in Jehovah's family of sons." Bauer's dictionary, however, indicates that *prototokos* has two broad ranges of meaning: (1) literally pertaining to birth order; and (2) pertaining to having the special status associated with a firstborn, even if one is not literally the firstborn. The word, therefore, does not always have the literal meaning that the Jehovah's Witnesses insist it has.

Step Six: Go back to *Strong's* and locate other occurrences of the word in the Bible. Look for three things: (1) other uses by the same author in the same book; (2) other uses by the same author in his other books; (3) uses by other authors.

Same Author, Same Book: Paul uses *prototokos* twice in Colossians, in 1:15 and 1:18. Verse 18 could not possibly be referring to physical birth because it identifies Jesus as the firstborn "out of the dead." Paul must be using the term figuratively here to indicate having the status of the firstborn. This seems to be Paul's emphasis when he says, "so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything."

Same Author, Different Books: Paul uses a different form of the word (*prototokon*) in Romans 8:29. Here he refers to Jesus as "His Son," which points to the first meaning from Bauer's dictionary, literally pertaining to physical birth order; but the text is not specific enough to dictate that this *must* be the meaning. On the basis of this sentence alone, the word can be taken either way; therefore, this context is not decisive.

Same Word, Different Authors: Luke uses *prototokos* in Luke 2:7, where it refers to Jesus' physical birth order. This use, however, does not help the Jehovah's Witnesses argument that Jesus therefore must be a created being. First, "created being" is not one of the meanings of *prototokos* found in Bauer's dictionary, and Jehovah's Witnesses offer no evidence that the word was ever used to mean this. Second, the fact that Jesus was physically born does not necessarily mean that He was created. Christian theology explains that although Jesus took on a human body that had a beginning, He (in His divine nature and person) is eternal. Finally, physical birth order is only one of the possible meanings, and just because Luke uses it this way does not mean Paul must be using it this way.

The word is also found in the Greek translation of Psalm 89:27, where it refers to the Davidic King whom God will exalt above all kings. In this passage, however, the term cannot mean physical birth order,

because the king that God will make His firstborn is already living. The use here indicates a place of preeminence or supremacy. There are other instances of the word in the Bible, but these are sufficient to illustrate how other authors' use of the word helps us to understand its range of meaning.

Step Seven: Discover any relevant historical and theological information about the word using the Bible and other works. Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, and books on ancient Jewish manners and customs will provide historical information. Systematic theologies, theological dictionaries, theological wordbooks, and even commentaries will provide information about any possible theological significance of the word. Our term *firstborn* seems to have significance in ancient Jewish culture as referring to a position of greater blessing and importance among brothers, usually based on birth order, but not always; for example, Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27:1–42) and Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 48:8–20).

Step Eight: Draw conclusions and make applications. Some things we have learned from our brief word study are: (1) The word *firstborn* (*prototokos*) does not always mean "first in physical birth order." It sometimes means preeminence or superiority. Colossians 1:15 may be saying that Jesus has preeminence or superiority over all of creation. (2) The meaning "first in physical birth order" does not mean that the person must be a created being. Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the firstborn of an animal is itself an animal. Following this reasoning, then, the firstborn of God must be God! (3) Colossians 1:15 does not say that Jesus is a created being (and Christ's deity is well attested in that chapter and throughout the Bible); therefore, if Jehovah's Witnesses believe this verse is saying that Jesus is a created being, they must already believe this, because they cannot get this meaning from the text.

Understanding the Bible in its original languages involves more than just doing word studies; but doing a word study *correctly* is a good place to start in order to unravel debates that turn upon the meaning of a single word.

— Thomas A. Howe

NOTES

1. *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1985), 408.
2. A number of Bible study computer programs and Web sites simplify word studies by automatically identifying much of the information and linking together many of the tools discussed in this article.
3. *Strong's* uses the King James Version, but concordances for other translations are available.
4. These steps apply to Hebrew words as well using Hebrew language tools. *Strong's* dictionaries can be helpful for identifying words, but are not standard works for discovering definitions.
5. William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).
6. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). This lexicon is commonly referred to as BDAG. The third edition of BDAG includes an index of words numbered according to *Strong's* to help you find the correct Greek word.