Getting the Most out of Your Strong's Concordance

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For many English Bible readers, especially those who use the time-honored King James Bible, Strong's Concordance is a tool they have grown to trust. It provides a concise etymology of the Greek and Hebrew words behind a Bible study tool been more commonly abused. Where did this tool come from? How does it work? How can you get the most out of your Strong's Concordance? How can you avoid abusing it?

Meet James Strong

James Strong was an erudite Methodist scholar of the later 19th century. He graduated in Greek from Wesleyan University, was president of Troy University, and taught for 40 years at Drew Theological School. While his primary life's writing was extensive, as were his contributions to the editing of the 10 volume, "Cyclopædia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature" (known as "McClintock and Strong"), he also will known for his work on the OT concordance of both the Hebrew and Greek Testaments. Published in the year of his 1890 Revision commencement, the KJV, Run by the work he is most known for is the creation of the better-known Strong's Concordance.

A History of Strong's Concordance

When the 19th was created, it provided a unique opportunity. Because the Revision had been undertaken by a committee of scholars, it was not clear which Greek text would be the basis for the KJV. A full examination of the Greek text underlying the KJV was completed. Contrary to decades sometimes raised against them, they were passionate to fulfill their obligation. There was no intention of "fixing" the text of the Greek New Testament, and there was a longtime student of the history of the English Bible. His detailed examinations allowed him to reconstruct the Greek text behind the KJV. Strong's work was to be the basis for the Revision, but it was not the text many of the variant readings adopted by the RV. This was the first time that the exact text behind the KJV was known. Strong's work was the first Greek New Testament edition of the KJV, and it was important enough to publish the Greek text, lasting relationship study of this text provides for the layman could be created.

Since James Strong, The tools text that created a complete concordance indexing every single English word in the Greek text of the KJV and the English KJV. Other guys also created Greek and Hebrew concordances of these words a proper translation. The detailed concordance between that would give a small gloss for each word. Strong's work was the first to do this. Strong's Concordance was the first work to provide a concordance of all words in the original text. The English words could not only easily find every occurrence of a particular English word in the text, they could also have some access to the original language words behind these English words. The rest is history. One author, perhaps the most influential, Bible Study Tool, Strong's Concordance.

And to that precount lesson of James Strong, Strong another great, also was governing. He would compute a Biblical Concordance which should displace all other concordances, were Memphis Leighton Strong, a Methodist minister and Hebrew scholar, and author of Strong's Concordance. Strong's Concordance was extremely adeptly prepared, and entire, even down to "a" and "the". Furthermore, it should enable the student, however unfamiliar with the original language, to identify the Hebrew or Greek original of an English word, and to know its pronunciation and its definition. It should be absolutely exhaustive, so that the student could be confident that no other word in the original could be found in the English Bible, and so forth.

This is James Strong's monument. It tells of his inventive faculty, his organizing mind, his boundless energy, and his capacity for remaining unwearied. At night in his library, says Dr. Buckley, he worked like a plane-horse, but he never was known to take any work home as a task. He one never was seen to bring home unless he was out of health or an invalid.' Indeed he was so full of matter and every subject that why he was not a man of genius, and why he was not a man of genius, he was a man of genius. Strong's concordance, original some, was second only to a concordance which would set the pattern for all other concordances, which not only afforded immediate interest and information, but which consumed time that he might otherwise have wasted on trivial or sensational pursuits of students who were inadequately prepared with answers.'

It should be noted that anyone who uses a Strong's Concordance has the Romans to thank for this tool, and that Strong's tool is based on their labor, and Strong, this tool would not exist, we would the primal Greek text of the KJV, and the Greek Testament. This work was published in 1890 under the title,

> The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order. Together with A Comparative Concordance of Words Not Translated Alike in the Authorized, the American Revision, Also Both Concordances of the Hebrew and Greek Words of the Original with References to the English Revised Version.

The preface opened with the explanation: This work, as the title page indicates, is a concordance of words pertains somewhat distinct but mutually related: of having reference to one great object, a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Its design is to show the exact relation between the Hebrew and Greek words of the old and American readers and scholars, namely, the partly Hebrew and partly Greek original text, and the Authorized and Revised English versions." Its purpose is to unite, "By showing to every student of the Bible, the associated use of the Comparative Concordance and the Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries, the reader and student of the Scriptures may be enabled to trace the connection of the Hebrew and Greek words with each other, and of the Hebrew and Greek Testaments with the English Bible."

While the concordance initially was published in a format that indexed both the KJV and the KJV (with minor KJV differences later noted as well), the KJV soon fell out of regular use, being supplanted by newer translations. The popularity of the Strong's Concordance of Strong's was now dependent that connect with the KJV, and has continued to be printed to this day. In fact, even in no ambiguous and academic a sense, the Strong's Bible Study Tool is the Strong's Concordance. Strong's Concordance is the tool that most today's Long-standing standard modern translation Hebrew (BDB/L) for Hebrew Strong's Concordance. Greek Concordance, Greek, Old, New Testament Exegesis, Third Edition A Handbook for Students and Pastors, Gordon Fee, Hendrickson, 1994-1995). Fee, Gordon Fee, Hendrickson not an exegesis could still what needed to a 19th century tool is a testament to its enduring usefulness.

How to Use Strong's Concordance

There are two tools we use to Strong's. The concordance to the English text of the KJV. Kind second, as easy to you also a Bible tells about the Greek and Hebrew words which stands behind the English words in the English Bible. Strong's Concordance is a tool that most today's Long-standing standard modern translation of Strong's Concordance. Strong's Concordance. Strong's Concordance.

Understanding of non-language words. Orthodox theologians insist that the Holy Spirit protects the individual words of the original text. Words are the stuff from which ideas are made, they argue, and unless the words are inspired, the ideas cannot be guarded from error.

While an orthodox doctrine of inspiration may be a necessary plank in the evangelical platform on biblical authority, this sometimes gets in the way of expository preaching [and we might add, of good Bible study in general]. Although we examine words in the text and sometimes deal with particular words in the sermon, words and phrases should never become ends in themselves. Words are stupid things until linked with other words to convey meaning.

In our approach to the Bible, therefore, we are primarily concerned not with what individual words mean but with what the biblical writers mean through their use of words. Put another way, we do not understand the concepts of a passage merely by analyzing its separate words. A word-by-word grammatical analysis can be as pointless and boring as reading a dictionary. If we desire to understand the Bible in order to *communicate* its message, we must grapple with it on the level of ideas."
(Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed., 2014, pg. 6.)

> *"Words are stupid things until linked with other words to convey meaning."*
> *- Haddon Robinson*
> *(Tweet This)*

D. A. Carson's little book, *Exegetical Fallacies* is a classic that has rightly humbled many a Bible student (this one included!). His chapter on lexical fallacies is worth the price of the book. After his long list of common mistakes, he summarizes them as an ignorance of the language that focuses on individual words without regard to their surrounding context:

> **"The Heart of the Matter: Coping with Context**
> Perhaps the principal reason why word studies constitute a particularly rich source for exegetical fallacies is that many preachers and Bible teachers know Greek only well enough to use concordances, or perhaps a little more. There is little feel for Greek as a language; and so there is the temptation to display what has been learned in study, which as often as not is a great deal of lexical information without the restraining influence of context. The solution, of course, is to learn more Greek, not less, and to gain at least a rudimentary knowledge of linguistics...the heart of the issue is that semantics, meaning, is more than the meaning of words. It involves phrases, sentences, discourse, genre, style; it demands a feel for not only syntagmatic word studies (those that relate words to other words) but also paradigmatic word studies (those that ponder why this word is used instead of that word)."
> (D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed., pg. 64.)

> *"In our approach to the Bible...we are primarily concerned not with what individual words mean but with what the biblical writers mean through their use of words."*
> *- Haddon Robinson*
> *(Tweet This)*

Steps For Doing Good Word Studies

Most works on exegesis have a decent section on how to responsibly conduct a word study. I list a few simple steps from Gordon Fee here. They are geared to NT studies, but work for both Testaments. There are three basic steps to doing word studies;

1. Isolate the significant words in your passage that need special study.
1.1. Make a note of those words known beforehand or recognizable by context to be theologically loaded.
1.2. Note any words that will clearly make a difference in the meaning of the passage but seem to be ambiguous or unclear.
1.3. Note any words that are repeated or that emerge as motifs in a section or paragraph.
1.4. Be alert for words that may have more significance in the context than might at first appear.
2. Establish the range of meanings for a significant word in its present context.
2.1. Determine the possible usefulness of establishing the history of the word.
2.2. Determine the range of meanings found in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world contemporary with the NT.
2.3. Determine whether, and how, the word is used elsewhere in the NT.
2.4. Determine the author's usage(s) elsewhere in his writings.
4.3. Analyze the context carefully to determine which of the range of meanings is the most likely in the passage you are exegeting.

Some of the four parts of step two require tools beyond a *Strong's Concordance* (see below). But the last two parts, with a few extra steps, can be accomplished with your *Strong's*. *Strong's* nowhere lists every place a particular Greek or Hebrew word occurs in the Bible (his *Concordance* only lists English words). But once you've used the *Concordance* to find a "*Strong's #*" that stands behind the English word, you can then look up that number in the lexicon. At the end of each entry, after the "---" symbol, he lists every way in which that particular word is translated in the KJV. You can then look up each of the English words in that list in the *Concordance*, and note which of the uses of that English word have your "*Strong's #*" behind them. If you take careful notes, you would then have a list of every single place that your Greek or Hebrew word occurs in the original language texts behind the KJV. Examining the surrounding contexts of the passages in this list would help you trace the range of meaning for the word, at least as used in the rest of the NT/OT (step 2.3).

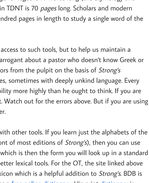
It should be noted along the way that this work has been done for you already. For every *Strong's* entry. You could spend hours flipping back and forth between *Lexicon* and *Concordance* in a hard-copy *Strong's* to accomplish this work, hoping not to miss anything or make a mistake in your notes. But *Strong's* is free in a number of online or digital formats. Many of them have already done this "cross-referencing," so that one can see at a click (or mouse-over) a list of every use of the Greek or Hebrew word in the KJV. By far, the best format I have seen for *Strong's* is the free website, BlueLetterBible. Look up a word or reference in the search box, and when the data comes up, the text will be displayed with a little "tools" button by each word/phrase. Clicking this button brings up the text in a sort of word-by-word interlinear with a *Strong's* number. Clicking that number brings up all the *Strong's* data for that word. (Entering the *Strong's* number in the search box on the first page will jump you to the same data.) The *Strong's* data is supplemented with other material from public domain sources. Understand, *there is literally never a reason to purchase a hard-copy of Strong's Concordance*. This data is free online, in a dozen places, in a format exponentially more useful. Many used bookstores will not even let you give them a copy of Strong's (I've tried), because a hard-copy simply has no value today. This is the beauty of the digital age.

Note also that more important than how the word is used broadly in the Bible as a whole is how *your particular author* uses that word (step 2.4). We all develop a particular style, and tend to use words in unique ways, and sometimes especially so for a certain audience or in a specific context. You might mention the word "*daddy*" with various referents in a lecture on the history of English, and in a story you tell friends at work. But in most cases, when you speak to your 5-year-old child, the word is an endearing reference to yourself. The most helpful part of your word study will be to trace how the author of your passage uses your chosen word in his other writings, and especially in the same book of which your passage is a part. Sometimes that will considerably narrow the range of meaning that is likely in your passage.

And finally, as you look closely at your passage in its context, you ask; *of the possible range of meanings, which single one makes the most sense here, in this context, in this passage?* That's the bread and butter of word study. The three basic steps then are;

1. Determine which word(s) needs a closer look.
2. Employ the best tools you can to determine the possible *range of meaning* for that word which the author might have made use of in your passage.
3. Study the context surrounding your word to determine which *one meaning* out of that possible *range* is the *most likely* in your passage.

Tools For Doing Good Word Studies



Scholars, academics, seminary students, and faithful pastors, simply do not turn to *Strong's Concordance* as their primary tool to study the original languages. Most will know the biblical languages themselves (making a tool like *Strong's* superfluous). Even if they don't, they will make use of *standard* linguistic tools, rather than outdated and methodologically flawed ones. That doesn't mean there is no value to *Strong's*. We have explained above how to use it profitably. But no teacher feeding God's flock should let it be the final stop on their journey into the original language texts in which God gave his words.

For OT lexical work, the standard tools scholars use for Hebrew are the 8-volume DCH, the 5-Volume HALOT, and the older (but still somewhat useful) 1-volume BDB. In addition to simple lexicons, theological dictionaries like the 15-Volume TDOT, the 5-volume NIDOTTE, TWOT, and other tools are employed.

For NT lexical work, the gold standard is BDAG (&SJ and BrillDAG aid in comparative work). Theological dictionaries like the 10-volume TDNT, NIDNTTE, Louw-Nida, and other tools are also employed. Thousands of dollars can easily be spent on such linguistic tools. (And this is just for word studies - one small part of biblical study!) The entire entry in *Strong's* for *logos* is 77 words long (the etymology and definition section only 37 words). But the same entry in TDNT is 70 *pages* long. Scholars and modern translators might dig through a monograph several hundred pages in length to study a single word of the biblical text.

I share this not to discourage the student who has no access to such tools, but to help us maintain a humble perspective. There is something astoundingly arrogant about a pastor who doesn't know Greek or Hebrew sharply correcting modern scholars or translators from the pulpit on the basis of *Strong's Concordance*. Yet I have seen it happen too many times, sometimes with deeply unkind language. Every man should be warned not to think of his linguistic ability more highly than he ought to think. If you are using *Strong's Concordance*, that's great. Glean from it. Watch out for the errors above. But if you are using *Strong's* at all, then a strong dose of humility is in order.

I would strongly recommend supplementing *Strong's* with other tools. If you learn just the alphabets of the original languages (which are actually taught in the front of most editions of *Strong's*), then you can use *Strong's* to identify the lexical form of a biblical word, which is then the form you will look up in a standard lexicon. *Strong's* can thus be an entry point to much better lexical tools. For the OT, the site linked above (BlueLetterBible) provides the gloss from Gesenius' lexicon which is a helpful addition to *Strong's*. BDB is also freely available here. For NT study, Bill Mounce has a free online dictionary. His print dictionary is helpful. And Vines Expository Dictionary, while older, still adds a great deal to *Strong's*, and has great value (because of its attention to usage and context).

Perhaps the best thing a student on a budget could do is purchase the abridged version of BDAG for the NT. The concise 1-volume abridgement of HALOT, or Mounce's Expository Dictionary (which is more usefully keyed to English words) will cover the OT. Starting with *Strong's* to find the lexical form, they could then make great use of these standard tools and their niches. Keep in mind that an electronic edition that has hyperlinks will be far more valuable to the student who doesn't know the language.

Above all, dig deep, study well, *be humble*, and let your studies compel a worship of the Risen Christ, lest they be made of no value.

Happy word study!

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Dale Bruggemann
Using -ec/dbmg/ec/ln for lookup is no longer needed, with the wide variety of online, desktop, and device apps available for biblical studies. Many of the Bible apps have built-in lexicons and dictionaries covering the original languages and even to lexicons that are much more reliable than the glosses in the concordance. For example, many offer free access to BDB (Hebrew and Aramaic) and Thayer (Greek).
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Philip Brown
Excellent article! Thank you for the work this represents.
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