

THE MEANING OF WORDS

"I don't take a dictionary when I want to know the meaning of Bible words: I take the Bible and look up all the texts in which the word of doubtful meaning occurs, and judge of its meaning by its use in the Scriptures, irrespective of the definition given by dictionaries."

Thus writes one who, we doubt not, thinks he has stumbled upon the true method of study, and who does not see the nonsense of his conclusion. People who take such a position have little use for dictionaries or helps to accuracy of any sort. Ignorance is the strength of their position, and they not only do not wish to know the accurate meaning of the words they use, but they would like to keep others in the dark in order that *their theories* may not be endangered. And it is evident that any man who is afraid to have the true sense of a word understood has a theory to support which the *true* meaning of words would contradict and overthrow. Alas! that such a spirit of dishonesty should be found in any manner associated with the name Christian or the doctrines of Christ.

If we read an English translation of the Bible and do not fully understand the meaning of all English words, or are in doubt about any, there is but one proper way to do – Go to some one who does know their meaning and inquire. This is just what sensible people use a dictionary for. Thus even if the English were the original tongue of the Bible, a dictionary would be necessary.

But the fallacy of rejecting a dictionary is the more evident when we remember that the Bible was not written in English, that the English version is not the original Bible, but a *translation* of it. And the translators put the thoughts of the original as nearly as they could into the English language, using English words with their true significance as used by educated people and defined in

dictionaries. If, therefore, a man relies upon the English translation, the best he can do is to try to get the exact meaning of the English text.

But while the use of a dictionary is the best method of getting at the exact meaning of the English translation of the Bible, it is not infallible; for the translators, we find, did not always select the best English words to express the sentiments of the original.

Unless you have a thorough knowledge of the original languages of the Scriptures, or else some confidence in the statements of others, you had best stick to the English translation and the interpretation of it by Webster's Dictionary. But God has provided some very valuable aids to the study of his Word in the original languages for persons of even ordinary common-school education. These are found in *Young's Greek, Hebrew and English Concordance* and other similar works, of which it is the cheapest and best suited to the ordinary student. This book is a *dictionary* as well as a concordance. It shows the Greek or Hebrew word and gives its meaning in English. And any one, therefore, who desires to be more accurate than the English translation and the English dictionary needs the original languages and a dictionary of them.

To illustrate this subject, take the word *hell* in the New Testament.

First, follow the plan suggested by the one whose method we criticize – look up all the occurrences of the word *hell* in the New Testament and see what *light* you would be likely to get. None.

Second, take Webster's Dictionary and look up the meaning of the English word *hell*. There you would get much more information than you probably had at first, or could get from merely comparing the texts in the English Testament. You would

find that the original meaning of *hell* was "*to conceal*, to hide." You would find the *primary* meaning of the word given thus:

"The place of the dead, or of souls after death; the lower regions or *the grave*; called in Hebrew *sheol* and in Greek *hades*."

True, Webster gives a secondary meaning, or another sense in which the word *hell* is used, as "The place or state of punishment for the wicked after death; the abode of evil spirits."

The latter, however, the intelligent student will see, proceeds largely from the modern prevalent theological view and not from the true, primary significance of the word. We submit that most people would reach clearer views of the meaning of this by taking Webster's definition than by comparing all the texts of the Bible, with the ordinary and false meaning of the word in mind.

Third, take Young's Concordance and Dictionary (a standard work by an acknowledged scholar, an eminent Presbyterian in Scotland). It will show you that three totally distinct Greek words, with totally distinct meanings, are all translated *hell*. It separates the texts and shows which are from each of the three Greek words, *hades*, *gehenna* and *tartaroo*, and gives what he, as a Greek scholar, understands those words to signify. He shows also the word from which *hell* in the Old Testament is translated – *sheol*.

Here, then, after getting the different Greek and Hebrew words classified and the texts under each, is the time when a comparison of the several texts in each class will help the intelligent student to arrive at the true significance of any word by noting the usage by the inspired writers. And yet this is only a very limited comparison; and such as have the necessary education or other books to show the matter will find other texts in which the same Greek and Hebrew words occur and are translated by other words than *hell*, namely, *grave* and *pit*. And a comparison of the

texts thus translated, with those translated *hell*, will increase the light many fold.

In choosing the word *hell* as an illustration, we have taken one of the simplest, and not one of the most complex: other words in our English translation represent many more Greek words; for instance our words *come* and *came* represent 192 Greek and Hebrew words with various shades of meaning. And on the other hand a Greek or Hebrew word is often translated by a great variety of English words. For instance, the Hebrew word *nasa* is rendered in English by 64 different words, and the Greek word *ginomai* is rendered by 47 different English words.

But what could induce any one to disregard the exact meaning of words which every one knows is necessary to a correct understanding of any subject in any language? Ah! It was to support a theory – a theory which it was seen would not stand if the light were turned on, and the *real* meaning of words accepted; a theory which could best succeed if people were ignorant of the meaning of the key words, and would allow certain teachers to twist words so that death would mean life, and second death would mean second life. Yes, the theory which relies on this advice is the *no-ransom theory*; and the very word its teachers would most prefer should be misunderstood is the English word *ransom* and its equivalent *antilutron* and *lutron anti* of the Greek.
