

Strong's Concordance – a Good Tool Gone Bad

Gary S. Shogren, PhD, Professor of New Testament, San José, Costa Rica
www.openoureyeslord.com

For Bible students who don't use Hebrew and Greek, the Strong Concordance is a popular tool, available online.¹

But it has a serious limitation – namely:

the “dictionary” in the back of Strong's is not really a dictionary at all, and should not be used to find the “real, true, or root meaning” of a word.

I will use the KJV version of Strong's, since that is the one version I have on hand, but the same thing applies with the ESV or NASB editions.

We are all familiar with Matthew 1:20 –

But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

Let's say I want to learn more about the words *angel* (Strong's #G32). Look in the back, and it says:

32 aggelos {ang'-el-os} from aggelos (probably derived from 71; compare 34) (to bring tidings); a messenger; especially an "angel"; by implication, a pastor:--angel, messenger. See Greek-- 71 See Greek-- 34

So, it can mean a messenger, or an angel, or perhaps (Strong is thinking of its use in Rev 2-3) the pastor of a church. However, Strong is *not* telling you what the word means in Matthew 1:21. Rather, he is merely telling you (the material after the --) that “This is how the KJV translated *angelos* in the New Testament, as *angel* or as *messenger*.”

The “right answer” in *Matthew 1:21* is the special use of the word to mean a spirit messenger of the Lord, an angel.

However, the word also appears in James 2:25 – “was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent *them* out another way?” Here the better translation is “messengers.” It simply won't do to announce, “James says the two spies whom Rahab hid were *angeloi*, literally ‘angels.’” No he doesn't! It doesn't mean “angel” in *this particular verse*.

¹ For example, on biblestudyonline.com or <http://biblehub.com/strongs.htm>

What Strong does do is to show how a word was translated into one English version (KJV, NASB, ESV), but doesn't give you any help in choosing messenger or angel in any given passage – the Bible student has to study the context of the verse, not the possible meanings of the word. And while Strong shows you where in the New Testament the word is used, it cannot tell you how it is used in any one passage.²

Most words have a range of meaning rather than a point of meaning. The NT has two of its known meanings from antiquity, but beyond that, it was used in other ways in Greek literature – for example, it was the title of the goddess of Artemis and also of the god Zeus. Birds that brought messengers from the gods were called “angelos”. An *aphthoggos angelos* was a beaconfire. But saying that an angel in the Bible is “literally” a beaconfire or literally a bird is less than useless, it is positively misleading.

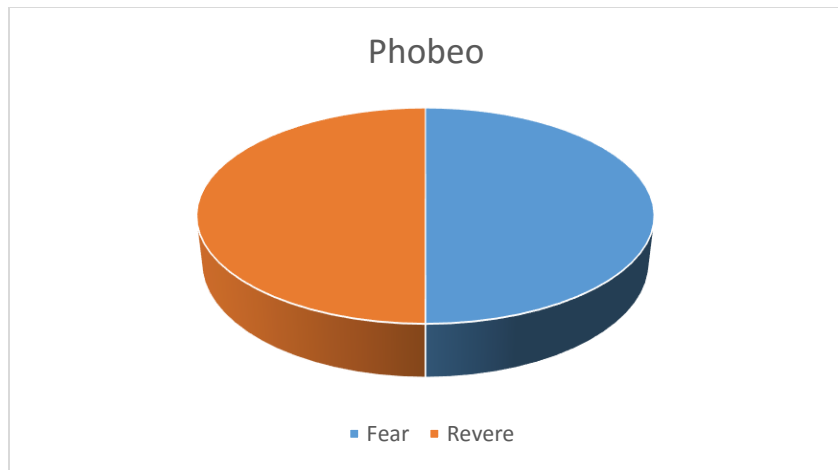
Let's go back to Matthew 1:21 – the angel tells Joseph, “Fear not!” The Strong number is G5399. Strong says concerning this verb –

5399 phobeo {fob-eh'-o} from 5401; to frighten, i.e. (passively) to be alarmed; by analogy, to be in awe of, i.e. revere:--be (+ sore) afraid, fear (exceedingly), reverence. See Greek-- 5401

Here there are several options. Does the angel tell Joseph not to frighten somebody? No, because in the original he uses the passive voice. So the KJV translations (signaled by the --) are “be afraid,” “fear,” or “reverence”; these short definitions are known as “glosses,” as in the word, glossary. In the context of Matthew 1, the verb clearly means “Don't be afraid,” that is, don't have the unpleasant emotion of fear. It does not mean “reverence,” not here – but it does mean that in *other* passages, for example, “fear God” (1 Pet 2:17) or as another version has it, “reverence God” (NEB).

Linguists use the term “semantic range of meaning,” which means the range of meaning that a word might have, depending on its usage in context. We can illustrate the range of meaning of *phobeo* (passive voice) thusly:

² I understand that Zondervan now offers an “expanded” edition of Strong's, with fuller definitions. My comments have to do with the commonly-used original.



A word has a semantic range, but that doesn't make it a free-for-all, where you can just pick any meaning that suits you, buffet-style. Context is king in word study, as it is in much of Bible interpretation. (The same thing can be said about the Amplified Bible, which is sometimes misused in the same way.)

It is perhaps easier to use an English word and illustrate its possible range of meanings. The verb “run” can mean all sorts of things – run, as in catching a bus; run as an athlete in a footrace; run for a political office; one’s stockings can run; salmon can run upstream; someone can run her fingers through her hair; a river runs; Fred runs a factory. For “run,” to paraphrase, “We’re gonna need a bigger semantic range!”

Nevertheless, while “run” may mean all this and much more, it doesn’t mean all these things *in any given context*. Suppose the news comes out that, “Senator Smith has decided not to run for president.” Only a very dull news commentator would take that as, “Oh, it’s because Smith is too out of shape, no way he can run a 440 meter, let alone a min-marathon!”

Yet that is what happens in pulpits all around the world, week after week. It is self-evidently of zero help for a preacher to announce in his exposition: “The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid. This is from the Greek verb, *phobeo*, which means ‘to be afraid.’” Oh, really?

That’s why the late Dallas Seminary professor, Howard Hendricks, used to preach things like “Now this word ‘joy’ is taken from a Greek word that means...‘joy.’” And this is why I insist that my students refrain from using Hebrew or Greek words from the pulpit, unless there is some really good reason to do so. If a person does not know Greek or Hebrew, perhaps it’s better to abstain entirely.

Let’s add a Hebrew example for the sake of balance. The term for “spirit” in the Hebrew is from the word *ruach*. This noun is H7307. Strong’s says that it can mean Spirit or spirit (232x), wind (92x), breath (27x), side (6x), mind (5x), blast (4x), vain (2x), air (1x), anger (1x), cool (1x), courage (1x), miscellaneous (6x). Got all that? We’ll have to have the boys down in the graphics department sketch out a semantic range for *that* one.

So, *ruach* cannot mean *anything*, but it can mean *many* things, depending on what the author is using it for. It shows up in Zech 6:5 (“the four winds from the four quarters of heaven”); in Job 15:30 (“And by the breath of his mouth shall he go away”); in Isa 61:1 (“The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me”). But it’s best not to preach that, for example, Zech 6:5 *literally* means the four breaths (Lamaze, anyone?)

Nor is it any justification to say, *Well, the Bible is inspired; or they are ancient languages; or Hebrew had hidden code meanings, therefore it’s not like reading English*. Not at all! The inspired Word is written in human language using human vocabulary.

Preaching from undiluted Strong’s Dictionary or Concordance is typically a dead end. It is a tool, but does not provide a message from God. I have to say that I have seen study after study on YouTube or the net, where the author bases his or her conclusions of this sort of misuse of Strong’s.³

Don’t use a can opener to dig a ditch; don’t use a hammer to replace a light switch; don’t use Strong’s for full word studies.

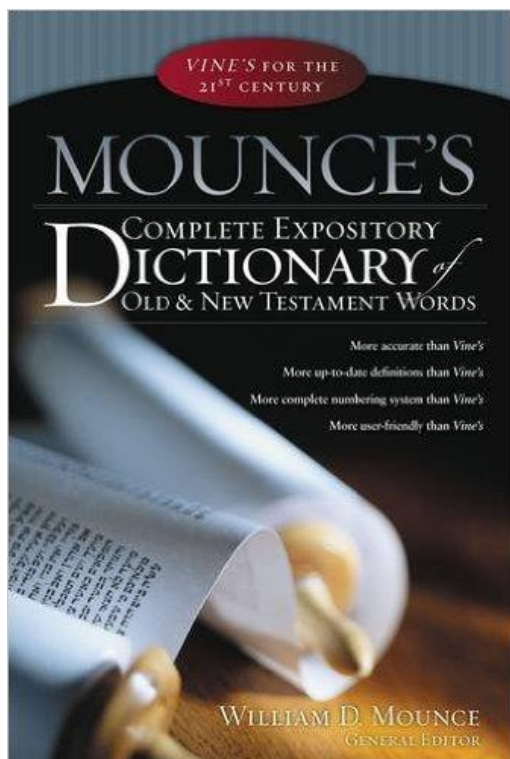
There is another danger I should mention – because it is free of copyright restrictions, people can also access Thayer’s lexicon online, and they can use the Strong’s numbering system to do so (so it is on Bible Hub). While this is a handy connection, it must be remembered that they don’t make Thayer available because it is the best or most reliable, but because *it is economical to do so*.⁴

Of the word study books that are available for the English reader, Wuest and Lenski too are not reliable.

And let’s end on a positive. Vine’s is still basically reliable; Vincent’s too. But if I had to recommend one single book for the reader of the English Bible, it would be Mounce’s *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Great price too, 1300+ pages for \$23.48 (<https://www.amazon.com/Mounces-Complete-Expository-Dictionary-Testament/dp/0310248787>). If you’re serious about Bible words, shell out the 23 bucks!

³ Okay, since you insist, I’ll just mention one egregious example – “The Serpent’s Seed Examined Using The Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JarIuoym7A>

⁴ I refer you to my article, “Libronix/Logos and Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon,” <https://openoureyeslord.com/2009/10/05/logoslibronix-and-thayers-greek-english-lexicon/>



Here's an example of Mounce, dealing with the word for "angel" –

New Testament

Noun: ἄγγελος (*angelos*), GK 34 (S 32), 175x. *angelos* means "angel, messenger." Similar to *malîāk* in the OT, there are two primary uses of this word in the NT.

(1) *angelos* can refer to a human messenger serving as an envoy (see messenger).

(2) *angelos* refers especially to nonmaterial, spiritual beings—a transcendent power who carries out various missions or tasks for God ("Then an *angel* of the Lord appeared to him" Lk 1:11; cf. Acts 5:19; Gal 4:14). The NT also makes distinctions between good and evil angelic beings or spirits; note Jesus' words in Mt 25:41 ("the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his *angels*") or Peter's words in 2 Pet. 2:4 ("For God did not spare *angels* when they sinned"). *angelos* can also be found in the multitudes surrounding the throne of God, who are a part of the heavenly world (Rev 5:11) and who act out God's will and judgment (1:1; 7:1).

(3) Our culture has a strong interest in angels for their own sake. It is important for Christians to realize that angels in the Bible are always witnesses for God and do not draw attention to themselves. They bring messages from God (Lk 1:26–33). They praise God (2:13–14; Heb 1:6; Rev 5:11–12). They serve God's people on his behalf (Mt 4:11; Heb 1:14). They protect and care for God's people (Mt 18:10; Lk 4:10; Acts 12:7–10). They sometimes give specific guidance to God's people (Acts 8:26; 27:23–24). They are also involved in the punishment of God's enemies (Rev 14:17–

16:21). All of God's creation is to serve God alone and to witness to his greatness and glory. See *NIDNTT-A*, 8–9.