

Take the Guesswork Out of Biblical Interpretation – Part 10

“Discerning Word Definitions”

We have been at the task of finding out what “world” means in John 3:16. As you know, this well-known and often used verse is commonly interpreted as the entire planet and everyone on it. The common mistake is that it is *assumed* that the modern understanding of “world” should be imposed on the word translated “world” in the English text. In order to find out what “world” means, we have to find the Greek word translated “world” and discover its original meaning.

Strong’s Greek Dictionary

One Greek reference widely used is Strong’s Greek Dictionary. If you don’t have a physical copy, you might consider purchasing one. Otherwise, there are many online sources that you can use. For example, biblehub.com or biblestudytools.com are good starters. Look up “world” and find John 3:16. Find the corresponding Strong’s Greek number, which is #2889. Now turn to the back of the dictionary to the section: Greek Dictionary of the New Testament. Locate #2889 which is the Greek word *kosmos*. It refers to “orderly arrangement.” But what does that mean? Orderly arrangement in respect to what or who? In order to correctly define orderly arrangement, you also need to be aware that sometimes other ideas have been added that may reflect the bias of the translators like “human race, mankind.”

In other words, a word definition itself may not always be accurate. The only true way to find the meaning of “world” is to trace each individual use of it in the Bible in its **context**.

Also, you will become aware that there are different Greek words translated “world.” I have reproduced a section from my book, *God’s Covenant Creation*, pp. 160-161, highlighting another Greek word also translated as “world” – *oikoumere*.

Oikoumere

As you can see from the definition on pages 158-159 of Book Four, *God’s Covenant Creation*, the Greek term *oikoumere* means inhabited earth such as the known Roman Empire of the first century. Here are a few representative examples:

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of **all the inhabited earth** [*oikoumere*]. – Luke 2:1

Note: The King James Version translates *oikoumere* as “world” in this verse.

Caesar Augustus was ruler of the Roman Empire. So, the command that a census be taken was limited to the Roman Empire or what was considered the inhabited part of that world.

It could also be reasonably assumed that Acts 11:28 referred to a localized and known land area:

One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine **all over the world** [*oikoumere*]. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. – Acts 11:28

What sense would it make to understand this prophecy of “a great famine” as inclusive of South America, for example?

“World” (*oikoumere*) was also used as a local area when the Apostle Paul was being accused of stirring up trouble:

When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset **the world** [*oikoumere*] have come here also ...” – Acts 17:6

Up to this point, historically, in Paul’s missionary journeys (Acts 9-16), he was not recorded as ever going to Japan or China. His apostolic ministry was confined to specific locations within the Roman Empire.

And last, Matthew 24:14, which we have previously discussed, uses *oikoumere* translated “world”:

This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached **in the whole world** [*oikoumere*] as a testimony to **all the nations**, and then the end will come.

If it is correct to understand all of Matthew 24 as Jesus’ prophetic word about what would happen in the first century within a specific land area (see chapter 7), then “world” must also be limited.

Notice also the comparisons of “world” with “all the nations.” The world was the known inhabited world at that time where “all the nations” were, as well. Could these nations be the nations of the house of Israel? And if those nations were limited to the known world at that time, does it make sense that “nations” included New Guinea or the Philippines? No, because they are outside the biblical and historical context of that time.

To limit *oikoumere* and “nations” to the local and known inhabited “world” at that time is justified by the first century context of Matthew 24. More on this later in this chapter.

Conclusion

Greek dictionaries may help define words, but the usage of English or Greek words must ultimately be defined by the immediate context where the word is used. The meaning of a word must also include the broad, overall context of the Bible.

The Stay tuned for Part 11.

Please download this blog and share. Thank you!

by Lawrence Blanchard, ND, MDiv

PS Book One of the Covenant Heritage Series, [*Discover the Story of Your Biblical Heritage*](#) and Module One of the Bible Mastery Boot Camp, [*Laying the Foundation*](#), will help you get the big picture of what the Bible is about and who it's for. You'll never see the Bible in the same way again! Just go to our website:

YourBiblicalHeritage.com

to learn more about this book and Module One. To purchase your own copies, click on the link for the [YBH Store](#).

PSS Also consider both Book One and Module One together for a maximum learning experience!