

Tools to Help with Controversial Interpretations

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Recently a friend asked me about a book he was reading. It had caught him off guard, he said. The book addressed Psalm 23 but felt confusing. It seemed to undermine much of what one might expect. “The Lord is my shepherd.” You’ve likely already heard this poetic chapter, perhaps at a funeral. “This kind of destroys our thinking about Psalm 23,” my friend said. Then he sent a screenshot of a page from the book. He mentioned how it bothered him.

Even though I didn’t yet know the publisher or author, I could tell from a single page of content that the author was using a form of study called Textual Criticism. “This won’t be the only thing he says that will bother you,” I said. More on that in a bit.

“An interesting page,” I replied after I finished reading it. “There are a number of tools and principles you might like to use.” When my friend identified the author, I let Google do some work for me. The author’s bio says he has a PhD in Old Testament Studies. Let’s call him Dr. Jonnycomelately. But I didn’t find any of his published works on TREN.¹

The page from the troubling book suggested that the word “forever” in Psalm 23:6 should not be translated *forever*, but rather something like *all my life*. This was a new and bothersome idea for my friend to process.

I told my friend that he might like to use an online tool called BibleGateway.com, a free website where you can read many translations and languages.² If you search for any particular (individual) verse, it will display a link after it which reads “[address] in all English translations.” I like this tool because it’s a fast, easy, free way to see where the many, many English translation teams have landed on the translation of the particular verse.

Dr. Jonnycomelately claims that tradition has kept these teams from certain words and phrases. If everybody else says “forever,” then we must also, suggests the bossy tradition in Dr. Jonnycomelately’s mind. It’s possible. But given a great number of reasons (which we can discuss) unlikely.

¹ TREN is a collection of Theological Research papers. It stands for the Theological Research Exchange Network. It’s available online at www.tren.com

² If you’re counting, out of the 55 English translations I found of Psalm 23:6, 19 of them read *all my life* or *a long time*, and 35 of them read *forever*. Which translation is right? And how do we determine this? These are the kinds of questions my friend sought to answer.

Bible Gateway is one of several ways you can compare and contrast English translations. This will reveal whether there is great disagreement about a particular verse—in which case we should hold loosely our understanding of it—or agreement—which would lead us to more confidence.

There is another principle we can use toward greater understanding: Find the same word in other biblical texts to see how it is used. The context surrounding the word in multiple texts can color our understanding of how the word is used. You can use the same tool, Bible Gateway, to search for usage of English words.

But this method has its own limitations.

The downside to this is that it is centered around the translated language (in this case English) rather than around the original language. The English is helpful for those who don't know Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic. But there's a catch. A single word in Hebrew can be rightly translated into multiple words in English. At the same time, multiple words in Hebrew can be rightly translated into one single word in English. Simply put: Words have more than one meaning. How does the translation team choose?

This means reading an English word in one verse does not necessarily mean another verse with the same English word uses the same Hebrew or Greek word. The multiple verses could read the same in English, but come from two different words.

There's a solution to this too.

Another free tool we can use is called Blue Letter Bible.³ Type the address of the verse in question, select the translation you are studying, and tap the right arrow button (looks kind of like a play button). This will display the verse in the translation you selected, in context.

Click the Tools button next to the verse. This will display many things, including the original language (it's okay if you cannot read that part), a breakdown of the individual words with links to *Strongs Concordance*, and the original roots. Depending on how much or how little formal theological education you have acquired, you might like additional details about these parts. But that's for another discussion.

Look on the left for the English word you are studying. It might not be an exact match, depending on which translation you selected earlier. In this case, we are looking for the word *forever*.

The Strongs ID is H753. This ID can help us find every other instance when the word (the original, untranslated word) has been used in the Bible. Click the Strongs ID to open a page about that word.

³ Available online at www.blueletterbible.org

At this point, you're looking at a page about Strong's H753 - 'ōreḵ. You can listen to a pronunciation of the word, see its part of speech, and find more info. Strong's is a tool with its own strengths and weaknesses. It used to be in a massive book. Now that it's digital, it's WAY easier to use. Those books have since become doorstops, window props, or a way to get your monitor 3-inches higher on the desk.

The people who made Strong's labeled every biblical word with an ID. This means we can look up every instance where these words appear in the original languages, even if we don't speak the original languages. It's especially easy online. You don't even have to read the word 'ōreḵ. You can just click on it. By finding the usage of the words, then we can read the other instances in English. This gives us more context for how the word is used.

This is especially helpful if the usage comes from the same human author. For example, Paul uses the Greek word *sarx* often translated *flesh*. Does it mean *skin*? Or *sinful nature*? Or something else? We can read every instance in which he used the word *sarx* to get a better idea for how he understood and used the word. The same is true for our example word 'ōreḵ.

The Blue Letter Bible page for 'ōreḵ includes a link for the *Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon* (another tool that is much easier to use now that it is digital... man, where was all this stuff when I was in grad school?!?!?). This will show you the variety of ways the word 'ōreḵ has been translated. It starts with *length*, as in the length of the ark Noah built. Then a *measurement of time*. Then *patience / self-control*. We can see already that one word - 'ōreḵ - has more than one meaning. (This is what led Dr. Jonnycomelately to take the liberty he did in his book).

But it hasn't yet shown us which of these meanings is best for our verse, Psalm 23:6. Should it read forever, all my life, a length of days, or something else?

My next step would be to see how the same author and/or the same genre uses the word. We can look at how the word 'ōreḵ is used throughout the Psalms. And we can look at other usage in the wisdom literature. On the 'ōreḵ page at Blue Letter Bible, scroll down a little to the scripture index. You'll see that it lists Psalms 21:5; 23:6; 91:16; and 93:5 (along with many other instances elsewhere in the Bible).

By reading Psalms 21:5; 91:16; and 93:5, we can get a better understanding about the meaning of the word 'ōreḵ in Psalm 23:6.

A word of explanation is necessary at this point: Sometimes the verse numbers will be off by one (because Jews and Americans don't get along with our numbers hehehehe).⁴ In this case, instead of 21:5 (as listed) we need to head over to 21:4.

⁴ Just kidding. It's because we don't agree on where the numbers go when we put them in there. No big deal. It just means you might have to read the verse before or the verse after the one you look up in order to find what you're actually seeking.

It reads, “He asked you for life, and you gave it to him—length of days, for ever and ever.” Reading additional context can help even more.

Psalm 91:16 reads “With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.” Unlike Psalm 21:4 which clearly indicates *eternity*, this one mentions *long life*. Not really enough for us to determine how long, without further explanation.

Psalm 93:5 reads, “Your statutes, LORD, stand firm; holiness adorns your house for endless days.” Again, a clear indication of eternity with that whole “endless days” thing in there.

Dr. Jonnycomelately landed on *one* way to translate 'ōreḵ. Not *the* way. Others landed somewhere else. Who will we believe? You’ll ultimately need to decide on your own.

The methods of textual criticism—which Dr. Jonnycomelately uses—have a tendency that I really don’t like. With great frequency, those who use textual criticism are far more interested in impressing others with complex academic positions than they are in helping others come to a deeper understanding, appreciation, and use of God’s Word.⁵ They love to perplex and confuse their students and readers. If such a student or reader is able to endure this perplexity and confusion, then they achieve a sense of accomplishment and superiority. And thus the cycle continues as the student becomes a new advocate of textual criticism.

It can be helpful. But it is often, often abused. For this reason, I use the method with care, sparingly, and with a humble attitude to guard against haughty academia and confusion. Academic stuff like this is good for research and sometimes for sermon prep, but not so much for delivery of the sermon. It can inform how a preacher prepares. But if it finds its way into the pulpit, then it tends to add unnecessary (and in my opinion inappropriate) confusion in the congregation. Our goal in preaching is to communicate clearly what God said, not to impress with our academic prowess.

I told my friend to ask himself: Do you ever feel like Dr. Jonnycomelately is trying to impress his readers with his supposedly superior academic knowledge? I haven’t read his works. And I don’t know him. So I don’t know if this is the case. But I have observed this unhealthy and unhelpful attitude in many others who use his methodology.

It almost feels as if he is saying, *Believe nothing you’ve heard before; I have the superior answer*. Uh huh. Okay. It seems arrogant to presume that we’ve all gotten it wrong for literally thousands of years. Thank goodness Dr. Jonnycomelately figured it out and is here to set us all straight. Riiiiiiight.

⁵ Before you start sending hate mail, I know this is an oversimplification and that not every practitioner of Textual Criticism does this. Chill.

Can we learn new things? Sure. Could we have collectively gone wrong. Yep. But it is far, far more likely that the new fad that seeks to undo millennia of research is askew, maybe even heretical.

Now that we have some principles and tools, we can do the same work for Strong's H3427 - yāšab and other words in question from Psalm 23:6. Even if you don't know Hebrew (or Greek or Aramaic), you can use these tools and this process (called word study) to get to a better understanding.

Just please, please don't presume that your / his new interpretation is superior and undoes everyone else's research and understanding. If we can learn from Dr. Jonnycomelately—one person with one perspective—then we can learn from the thousands of others who came before him. Read a lot. Take it in. Use the tools. But don't let the new knowledge puff you up. Don't preach out of selfish ambition (Philippians 1:17).

I close with the words of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

So it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.