

## BOOK REVIEW

Thomas A. Robinson, *Mastering New Testament Greek: Essential Tools for Students* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 3rd edn, 2007), ix + 230 pp. Pbk. US\$19.95.

This revised edition of Robinson's earlier publication, *Mastering Greek Vocabulary*, has two purposes: first, to provide various helps to enable students of New Testament Greek to learn vocabulary efficiently; secondly, to provide tools to help students parse Greek words. These two purposes are evident throughout the various sections of the book, as well as in the accompanying compact disc.

The first section is called *Identical Greek/English Words*, which is a list of Greek words and the corresponding English words that Robinson says are merely transliterations of those Greek words. Robinson's intention is to show beginning Greek students that they already know about 250 Greek words due to their knowledge of the English language. The meanings of the Greek words are said to be quite similar to the transliterated English words. Some examples of words in the list are ἄγκυρα and *anchor*; τύπος and *type, pattern*; and ψαλμός and *psalm*. This section will undoubtedly serve to provide helpful memory aids for beginning students attempting to learn Greek vocabulary. Unfortunately, it will also lead the beginning student to believe that there is a greater correspondence between the Greek and English languages than there actually is.

In his instructions for how to use the book, Robinson says of the listed Greek and English words: 'not only do these words have similar spellings, their meanings are quite similar as well' (p. 4). He acknowledges here that the meanings of these Greek and English words are not exactly the same, but he intimates to the reader in the first section itself that the meanings of the words are identical. This is demonstrated by the title of the section: *Identical Greek/English Words*, as well as his comment that the only effort required of the student in learning these Greek words is in noting the difference in morphological endings (p. 7).

Yet the semantic range of a word in Greek will never be exactly paralleled by the semantic range of any one English word (see Barr's *Semantics of Biblical Language* or Cotterell and Turner's *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*). For instance, one pair of 'identical' words listed by Robinson is ἄστήρ and *star*. Both of these words are in fact used to refer to the same celestial bodies. However, the Greek word ἄστήρ is not used in a similar fashion to *star* in collocations such as *rock star* or *movie star*. Likewise, the student who is taught that *amen* is identical in meaning to ἀμήν will have a difficult time understanding its use in instances like the frequently occurring ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν. The semantic ranges of these 'identical' Greek and English words will undoubtedly overlap, but they are not exactly the same. Robinson would have been much better to title this section: *Similar Greek/English Words*, and to explain that the English words can serve as helpful memory aids, but simply knowing how the English words are used does not mean that the student thus knows what the Greek words mean.

The second section is the longest in the book: *Cognate Groups*, in which words sharing a common root are grouped together. For each grouping, the root is listed along with its frequency of occurrence in the New Testament, followed by an English gloss that Robinson calls, 'The general meaning of that root (in English)' (p. 5). Each group also contains 'English words derived from (or suggestive of) the Greek root', which are intended to serve as memory aids (p. 5). Where Robinson was unable to think of a helpful memory aid, there is a blank space where readers may write their own. Following this is a list of the Greek words in that cognate group, and for each Greek word: its frequency of occurrence in the New Testament (25 times or more, between 10-24 times, fewer than 10 times), an English gloss, part of speech (e.g. verb, feminine noun), and prefix, suffix and root. For example, the cognate group: ὀφθαλμ looks like this (p. 64):

## ὀφθαλμ

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## eye

Memory Aid: ophthalmology

ἀντοφθαλμέω	head into, face	vb	ἀντι-[√]-εω
ὀφθαλμοδουλία ας	eye-service	fem	[√]-[δουλ]-ια
≥25 ὀφθαλμός οῦ	eye	masc	[√]-ος

Every cognate group that occurs 20 times or more in the New Testament is included.

Sections three to six all complement the listing of cognate groups, and are intended to provide information that will enable students to learn Greek vocabulary more quickly. For this reason, a discussion of both positives and negatives of section two will be saved until after sections three to six are covered.

Section three is called *Explanation of Greek Prefixes and Suffixes*, and is intended to aid in the acquisition of vocabulary, rather than as a detailed and definitive explanation of those prefixes and suffixes. Robinson begins with a general introduction to how prefixes and suffixes affect the meaning of Greek roots, which includes a helpful summary of the various ways in which prefixes may affect the meaning of Greek compound words:

1. they produce no change in the meaning
2. the root is emphasized or intensified
3. the full impact of the preposition is added to the root
4. the meaning is changed, but the change cannot be explained by the added prefix (p. 114).

He then discusses specific prefixes and suffixes. Throughout this section he includes comparable examples from English.

Section four, *Identical Greek/English Prefixes and Suffixes*, is a helpful list of prefixes and suffixes that have similar forms and meanings in Greek and English. The list has four columns with the titles *Greek*, *English*, *General Meaning* and *Example* (from English). A prefix and a suffix from the list are:

δια-	dia-	divided	<i>diameter</i>
-ισμος	-ism	belief in	<i>Marxism</i>

As with section one (*Identical Greek/English Words*), the list itself is fine (and will probably be quite helpful for students), but the section would be more aptly titled: *Similar Greek/English Prefixes and Suffixes*. This is not only because the function of a prefix or suffix in Greek will not always be equivalent to the function of a similar prefix or suffix in English (in his list, Robinson gives the English suffix ‘-er’ as *identical* with *two* Greek suffixes: -τερος and -τηρ), but because even within Greek, as Robinson explains in section three, a Greek prefix can affect the meaning of a compound word in one of four different ways. Aside from the inclusion of the word ‘identical’ in the title of section

four, the list contained in it can certainly be used with much profit by students seeking to memorize Greek vocabulary.

In section five, *Derived English Words*, Robinson explains the meaning of most words given in section two as memory aids for the cognate groups. This allows students who are not familiar with the English words to understand their meaning, and thus benefit in using them as a mnemonic device. Not all students will find the memory aids to be beneficial, especially in light of what Robinson says about some of the words given: ‘the meaning of the Greek compound is often not the same as that of the modern English compound’ (p. 121). Therefore, the meaning of the memory aid may not have any correspondence to the meaning of the Greek word for which it is listed. Nevertheless, Robinson’s intent is that students will only use the memory aids that they find helpful. For those who do find them to be helpful, section five will be most beneficial.

A list of Greek roots (or cognate stems) is given in section six, *Mini Greek/English Cognate Dictionary*, accompanied by the English words said to have derived etymologically from those Greek roots. Robinson explains the purpose of this section in the introduction, where he writes: ‘Greek roots can be looked up in Greek alphabetical order to gain deeper insight into the meaning of a particular Greek root, to see its host of connections with English cognate words, and to discover useful aids for riveting the root in the memory’ (p. 3). It may be true that the English words that are etymologically related to Greek roots may serve as helpful memory aids, but they most certainly will not increase the student’s understanding of the Greek roots. The semantic ranges of words develop and change over time as they are used by speakers of the language. Thus, the meaning of an English word may have no relation whatsoever to the Greek word from which it was derived. In any case, the semantic ranges of the English word and the Greek root (which is not even a word!) will not be equivalent. Robinson’s expressed purpose of section 6 is entirely misleading, and will result in students believing there to be a greater connection between the meanings of English and Greek words than there is in fact.

Having surveyed the sections (three to six) that Robinson intends to be used in conjunction with section two, I will now consider *Cognate Groups* in more detail. In his *Instructions* section on how to use the cognate groups for vocabulary acquisition, Robinson writes: ‘Study each Cognate Group as a whole in order to get a sense of the various

relationships of words in this group' (p. 5). On the one hand, there is some benefit to being able to compare the meanings of words that share a common root. For example, one can quickly see the connections between the words included in the cognate group ὀργ: ὀργή (anger, punishment), ὀργίζομαι (be angry), ὀργίλος (quick-tempered), παροργίζω (make angry), and παροργισμός (anger) (p. 87). On the other hand, it is often difficult to see the connection in meaning between words that share the same root. For example, based upon the English glosses that Robinson gives for ἀγορά (market place) and ἑξαγοράζω (set free; p. 86), it is difficult to see how the knowledge of either one will help the student learn the other. The problem is that words that share a common root do not necessarily share any overlap in meaning. It may have been more beneficial for Robinson to group words into semantic domains rather than cognate groups, similar to Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. This would allow students to learn Greek words in groups that are related in meaning, rather than in morphology (and only sometimes related in meaning).

In the introduction, Robinson correctly acknowledges that the meaning of a word is determined by an examination of how it is used within a particular context. He then goes on to write:

However, an understanding of basic root meanings, coupled with a measure of insight into how these meanings are impacted by various prefixes and suffixes, can take the student a long way in the direction of comprehending a complex word's resultant meaning and can provide significant help in fixing new vocabulary in the memory (p. 2).

Unfortunately, the so-called 'basic root meaning' is not actually evident in every word that shares the same root (see Barr's *Semantics*). Furthermore, as discussed above, the meaning of a compound word sometimes has no apparent relationship in meaning to the prefix-less word. Robinson promises more than his cognate groups can deliver.

In section seven, *Prepositions and Cases*, Robinson does an excellent job of demonstrating the relationship between prepositions and the cases of their objects. He also includes helpful diagrams for the visual learner, although they would have been much better if they had a more 3-dimensional look, such as those found in Porter's *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*.

At the end of *Mastering New Testament Greek*, Robinson includes two appendices. The first is an explanation, diagram and examples of

Grimm's Law, and the second contains charts that show common prepositions, adjectives and adverbs.

He also includes three indices. The first is a list of all Greek words that occur between 10 and 19 times in the New Testament, but are not found in one of the cognate groups in section two. The second index is an aid for parsing words encountered in the process of translation. Robinson explains the uniqueness of this tool: 'This new resource enables the student to look up word endings in *reverse alphabetical order*, beginning with the last letter of the word and working backward until the puzzling form has been identified' (p. 2; emphasis is his). This resource would undoubtedly be beneficial for the student who only has access to a lexicon for translation work. Unfortunately, with the increase in availability and use of computer programs for parsing (such as *Logos Bible Software* and *BibleWorks*), Robinson's ingenious tool may have already outlived its usefulness. The third index is a listing of all cognate roots and words found in section two, which may also be used as a concise lexicon.

The accompanying compact disc includes a number of helpful tools for the student of New Testament Greek. The tools provide helps in learning the alphabet, pronouncing and memorizing vocabulary, and parsing verbs. Perhaps the best contribution of this CD is the 'Verb Decoder', which enables students to learn verb forms in a similar manner to computer programs designed for vocabulary acquisition.

Robinson has included a number of tools in this book that may be of some benefit to students learning the Greek language, yet it falls far short of living up to its subtitle: *Essential Tools for Students*. The distinction between the semantic ranges of words in the English and Greek languages is not made clearly enough, and there is too strong a dependence on roots for the acquisition of Greek vocabulary. The strengths of *Mastering New Testament Greek* do not outweigh its weaknesses. No library would be deficient without this book.

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