

LINGUISTIC MUSH:  
SEMANTIC SQUABBLES ABOUT A FEW “RELIGIOUS” WORDS

Introduction

Perhaps all of us have certain words that we like and other words that we do not like. These words could be called our linguistic pet peeves. Partly dependent on how we were taught English and who our teachers were, we develop over time certain proclivities for a variety of words from our native language. And our regular cultural contexts (i.e., who we associate with, who we admire or dislike, what we hear, what we read) certainly have an impact on word choice and usage. This is why when I write I now enjoy use of the online Google English Dictionary, provided by Oxford Languages, to check definitions of words and find synonyms and antonyms. I also keep beside my desk a Simon and Schuster pocket book, *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (Fourth Edition, 2003), which is handy and helpful. More precisely, however, I do not write. Rather, I compose text with my WordPerfect word processor, and I use a traditional QWERTY keyboard. In other words, I type and do not write, although occasionally I will write or scribble notes on index cards (or whatever writing material is at hand) in order to remember what thoughts I have had.

The English language is a marvelous and amazing phenomenon with its rich history and development. It is a living language with the annual assimilation of new words and the discontinuance of old words.<sup>1</sup> Those of us who are older and traditional will never accept some words. For example, what is a “tweet”? Or what is a “blurb”? I had an English teacher in high school—her name was Ms. Patton and I didn’t like her—who made us write a blurb in her class

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<sup>1</sup>See the interesting article by Christopher Shea, “The New Science of the Birth and Death of Words: Have Physicists Discovered the Evolutionary Laws of Language in Google’s Library?” *Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 2012.

every morning. The instructions were: Write a short paragraph about whatever comes into your mind. That was our blurb for the day. Maybe it was a psychological ploy used to control us adolescents. From the teacher's perspective, let them express their frustrations verbally. But of this I am not sure.

Other words may be forced on us out of necessity to survive in today's hyper techno internet-driven world. We now have the "World Wide Web," "hyperlinks," the "cloud," "bandwidth," and "cookies." Of course, we have had bands, clouds, cookies, links, and webs for a long time, but they have changed or been altered in meaning. We all have gotten another "address"—the "IP address" as well as our "email address"—and we have to put up with "mainframes," "motherboards," "modems," and "routers." "Phishing" is not what it used to be, and "pop-ups" and "spam" present daily challenges to our computer's gut. In "cyberspace" there are "captchas" and "emoticons," "exabytes" and "petabytes," "widgets" and "worms." We "login" and "logout" daily, and we hope never to get a "virus" or be attacked by "malware." In many ways, our vocabulary has been shaped and stretched by the new cyber world that all of us inhabit.

Then there are words that have become overused by people in today's self-absorbed or "me" culture, for example, "like," "really," "seriously," and "actually." Does the use of the modifier "actually" make a person's statement more believable, or does it suggest that without the use of "actually" what that person says is not true? Overuse of this adverb may call into question the veracity of a person's speech or writing. "Like" is a good word with a wide variety of meanings. To say "I like it" is fine. But—"I am going to, like, go to the mall today and, like, buy some shoes and socks." Really! "Seriously" often is used as a very strong interjection. One web site says that an interjection is "an exclamation or sudden expression within a sentence that

has no real connection to it.” Another web site indicates that you should “avoid using interjections in formal writing because it may appear that you are not treating the topic seriously.”<sup>2</sup> Seriously! Of course, “darn” as a mild form of “damn” still is common, as well as “hell,” “huh,” “shucks,” and maybe “jeez” and “yippee.” Gomer Pile famously could stretch “golly” to five or six syllables and effectively catch the attention of his audience with “shazam.” But these days hardly anyone uses “egads,” “fiddle faddle,” “holy smokes,” or “yikes.” Many other words nowadays are used too frequently. One of these is “multiple.” There is multiple this and multiple that. In my recollection, “multiple” always had something to do with mathematics, and as an adjective a standard definition for “multiple” is “having or involving several parts, elements, or members.”<sup>3</sup> By that definition, what does “multiple persons” mean? It doesn’t make sense, but I guess that’s my pet peeve. Dr. Walter Renn, one of my European history professors at Middle Tennessee State University, told us to purge from our papers verbs that ended in “-ized.” He felt that these verbs had been overused and lacked specific meaning.

And, of course, there are the evening news programs that have “breaking” news on every broadcast, every evening. “Break” as a verb means “to separate or cause to separate into pieces as a result of a blow, shock, or strain.” This definition hardly will fit the idea behind “breaking news.” The networks are not tearing apart new stories about life in our world. To the contrary, they are compiling “news” from bits and pieces of information they have gleaned. Perhaps the idea behind “breaking news” is the use of “break” to mean “to interrupt a sequence, course, or continuous state.” But what are the major television channels interrupting with their news

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<sup>2</sup>From [www.grammar.yourdictionary.com](http://www.grammar.yourdictionary.com) and [www.grammarly.com](http://www.grammarly.com).

<sup>3</sup>Word definitions unless indicated otherwise are from Oxford Languages provided by the online Google English Dictionary.

stories? Yes, they interrupt your evening meal, but that's not the point. They should be interrupting the normal news broadcast with information so important that it cannot wait. So how can the news be "breaking in" on the regular broadcast of news when it is headlined as "breaking news" at the beginning of each and every news program, every night? By extending the definition of "breaking news," ABC, CBS, and NBC have made the concept of "breaking news" trite and meaningless.

Interestingly, some words seem "cool" which, according to the colloquial or slang definition, means "popular, in style, pleasing, very good." One web site lists sixty "awesome sounding English words." Among these are: apocalyptic, bamboozled, bumblebee, conundrum, dastardly, diabolical, effervescent, flippant, gerrymandering, hyperbolic, incognito, kleptomania, luminescent, mercurial, nefarious, onomatopoeia, persnickety, plebeian, quintessential, rambunctious, reptilian, sanctimonious, serpentine, synergistic, tectonic, trapezoid, ubiquitous, villainous, whimsical, and zigzag.<sup>4</sup> But other words seem wrong. One of these, and I am not alone in this, is "snuck" used as the past tense for "sneak." It doesn't seem right to say, "He snuck (rather than sneaked) into the house after it was dark." This usage can be traced to the late 1800s, so it is not a newer development. But I didn't catch on. Another of these "wrong" words, and for me this is the opposite of sneak/sneaked, is the use of "dived" for the past tense of "dive." It doesn't sound right to say, "After she put on her swimsuit, she dived (rather than dove) into the water." We learned in elementary school English lessons that certain words form their past tense with the addition of "-ed" and other words do not but have irregular past tense forms. For me, it is sneak/sneaked and dive/dove, but I guess which verbs are "regular" and which are "irregular" have changed over time.

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<sup>4</sup>From [www.owlcation.com/humanities/awesome-sounding-words](http://www.owlcation.com/humanities/awesome-sounding-words).

Finally, there are words that are indefinite, misused, and misunderstood, especially in religious circles. They fall into the category of what I call “linguistic mush.” These words include “religion,” “relationship,” “worship,” and “miracle.” Admittedly, this critique may be no more than my own “semantic squabbles.” The words that we use, what we like and what we dislike, are part of us and very personal. I doubt it could be any other way, but preferences do change over time.

### Religion

“Religion” is defined as “1, belief in and worship of God or gods; 2, a specific system of belief, worship, etc., often involving a code of ethics.”<sup>5</sup> While the second entry for religion can mean a wide variety of things as long as it fits the description of “a specific system with a code of ethics,” the first entry at least pinpoints the idea of belief or adoration of deity. But what is belief? What is worship? And what is deity? “Belief” has a wide semantic range, as indicated by entries in a thesaurus: “1, trust, assurance, confidence, conviction, feeling, impression, judgment, notion, opinion; 2, faith, credo, creed, doctrine, dogma, ideology, principles, tenet.” “Worship” in its basic sense is not quite as difficult to pin down in meaning. Words with similar meaning include: “[as a verb], 1, to praise, to adore, to exalt, to glorify, to honor, to pray to, to revere, to venerate; 2, to love, to adore, to idolize, to put on a pedestal; [as a noun], 3, praise, adoration, adulation, devotion, glory, honor, kudos, regard, respect, reverence.” And “deity,” which is a little more specific than “religion” in meaning, indicates: “God, divinity, goddess, godhead, idol, immortal, supreme being.”<sup>6</sup> The difficulty of coming to any agreement about the

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<sup>5</sup>*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, Editor In Chief, Michael Agnes (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2003), 544.

<sup>6</sup>*Collins Pocket Webster’s Thesaurus*, Second Edition, Editors, Emma McDade, Jennifer Sagala, and Paige Weber (Glasgow, UK: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 51, 137, 625.

meaning of religion, though, is magnified by the simple truth that there may be more than 4,300 different religions in the world today. While many of these religions have similar beliefs about deity, or a supreme being, or the unknown power of the universe, or the other (as Rudolph Otto put it in his *The Idea of the Holy*, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*), most religions today differ from the others in some respect, that is, all have a certain distinction or dissimilarity from the rest. This makes it almost impossible to come to any unified conclusion about the meaning of the word “religion.”

This impossibility of defining “religion” was my experience in an introductory course called “Perspectives On Religion,” a graduate seminar I took during the 1980s at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Fred Clothey, then chair of the university’s Department of Religious Studies, led our seminar of twelve students. Clothey had lived in India for sixteen years and was an expert in the religions of India and southeast Asia. He was what we would call in religious studies a phenomenologist. A couple of us in the seminar agonized to know if his perspective was theistic, agnostic, or atheistic. He never would say. But I do know that we spent the first five weeks of the seminar trying to define religion, and we could not come to a conclusive definition of “religion.” This seemed then like a waste of time. In retrospect, I think Clothey was right to impress on us the difficulty of the complicated world of religious studies.

Some people know exactly what religion is. In church circles, I often hear the idea that Christianity is not a religion. Rather, it is a personal relationship with Jesus. This, to me, is a popular Baptist idea and almost gnostic. I believe (notice the use of that word that defines “religion”) that Christianity is a religion about Jesus, as Son of Man and Son of God, and his God, our God who creates, sustains, and redeems the world. Sure, it is personal, and it involves association, that is, union or a joining with Jesus and his God. I do not dismiss the personal

aspect of the Christian religion by virtue of a semantic squabble. In other church circles, mostly Churches of Christ which are my heritage, I sometimes learn that Protestant Christians and Roman Catholic Christians are not Christians at all but belong to “other religions.” This is shocking, since Protestants and Roman Catholics confess Jesus as Lord and his God as God over all. These Church of Christ brothers and sisters have a different definition of religion than I have. That’s okay, but it highlights the difficulty in using a word that in current usage has a wide range of meanings. I guess that “religion” is difficult to define in our society since we have indoctrinated every person to be an individual and independent in whatever they think, say, and do. And religion is a very personal matter.

But as a catch-all English word with a wide range of meanings, maybe we’re stuck with “religion.” The Greek New Testament has words that are similar to “religion” but have a narrower semantic range.<sup>7</sup> One of these is *threskeia* and means “punctilious expression of devotion to transcendent beings” or “religion.” Its verb form, *threskeuo*, can mean “to perform cultic service.”<sup>8</sup> The NIV<sup>9</sup> translates *threskeia* as “religion” (Acts 26.5; James 1.26, 27) and “worship” (Colossians 2.18). Another Greek word is *deisidaimonia*, used only in Acts 25.19 in the New Testament, and means “way of dealing with deity and related matters, belief system, religion.” The corresponding adjective, *deisidaimon*, means “religious” and occurs only in Acts

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<sup>7</sup>In Middle English, “religion” had the narrow meaning of “life under monastic vows” which derived from the Latin *religare* (“to bind”) and *religio* (“obligation, bond, reverence”).

<sup>8</sup>Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 171.

<sup>9</sup>Scripture references and quotations are from the New International Version (2011) unless indicated otherwise.

17.22.<sup>10</sup> The NIV translates these terms as “religion” and “religious.” A third Greek word is *eusebeia* which means “devotion to and awesome respect for the deity and religious tradition . . . devoutness, piety.” It is used fifteen times in the New Testament, in letters to Timothy, to Titus, and by Peter. The NIV usually translates these as “godly” or “godliness,” but better English translations would be “pious” and “piety.” The similar verb, *eusebeo*, indicates “an especially respectful attitude toward deity or . . . members of one’s household, such as parents or other senior relatives.”<sup>11</sup> It occurs only in Acts 17.23 and 1 Timothy 5.4. In these two places, the NIV translates “worship” and “put their religion into practice,” but better English renderings would be “revere” and “respect.” The use of “religion” for different Greek words by the translators of the NIV, and other translations, shows that our English word “religion” has a broader range of meaning and is less precise than the underlying Greek words. But its indication of “something to do with God, gods, the divine, or deity” will keep it useful for discourse and discussion about matters that transcend the mundane.

### Relationship

“Relationship” is one of the many “ship” words in the English language, and there are gobs (look that one up if you don’t know it) of them. The “ship” suffix is a “word-forming element meaning ‘quality, condition, act, power, skill, office, position, or relation between.’” It comes from the Middle English “schipe” or the Old English “sciepe” that possibly derives from Proto-Germanic “skepi” (“to create, ordain, appoint”) and the “pie” root (forming words that mean “to cut, scrape, hack”). “It often forms abstracts to go with corresponding concretes.”<sup>12</sup> So

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<sup>10</sup>Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 85, 86.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 155.

<sup>12</sup>From [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com).



we can blame the Brits or the Germans for this unfortunate appendage to our words. And that last part of the definition says it all: a word that is “concrete” has been made “abstract” by the addition of “ship.” Perhaps it was invented by lawyers or linguists who with the gift of gab obfuscate the meaning of things in order to ply their trade. Whatever the exact origin of the “ship” additive, the use of these words, in my opinion, muddles rather than clarifies most conversations. In an effort to improve our mother tongue, I have created a small dictionary of “ship” words that are defined by using the natural meaning of “ship” as “a vessel larger than a boat for transporting people or goods by sea.”<sup>13</sup>

So what is a “relationship”? The Google English Dictionary tells us it is “the way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected, or the state of being connected.” For people, it can be “the state of being connected by blood or marriage.” Or, it can be “the way in which two or more people or groups regard and behave toward each other.” Now I understand what it means to be “related” to my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, and so forth. We are “kin” or “kinfolk.” But if I say, “I have a relationship with Jonathan,” or, “I have a relationship with Suzanne,” what have I said? In my opinion, in our culture these two sentences say very little or nothing, that is, without knowing the context in which the statements have been made. You would not know that Jonathan is my grandson or Suzanne is my cousin (on my dad’s side of the family), unless I told you that. The problem is with the word “relationship” which adds nothing to the meaning of each sentence, except that “in some way” (obviously ambiguous and undefined) we are connected. Thus, if I say, “I have a relationship with Robert,” you have no clue what I am talking about without further information.

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<sup>13</sup>See Appendix: Some Ship Definitions at end of paper.

This problem of the ambiguity of “relationship” in our culture is increased when we use the word in religious language. What do we mean by a relationship with God? What does it mean to have a personal relationship with Jesus? Of course, any relationship is “personal,” isn’t it? So “personal relationship” seems to be a redundant way of speaking. Maybe “personal relationship” is meant to set it apart from an “impersonal relationship,” whatever that is. I would suggest that there are better words or phrases in English that capture what the apostles mean when they tell us about Jesus and his God and how they relate to us. One way of expressing our connectedness to the Father and the Son is to say, “We have been united with him . . .” (Romans 6.5). Paul says, “You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12.27). Jesus tells his disciples, “You are in me, and I am in you” (John 14.20). But nowhere does the Bible say that we have a personal relationship with Jesus or with God.<sup>14</sup> Besides being difficult and maybe impossible to define, this idea of a personal relationship with Jesus and his God tends to downplay, or make routine, God’s work for us and in us. The use of “relationship” is ubiquitous with reference to all sorts of human interactions, and by its use the perspective certainly is anthropocentric.

This is not to deny the “personal” aspect of our God, our Creator.<sup>15</sup> According to Christian teaching, Jesus assumed a human body with flesh and blood. He was born, lived on this earth, died, and was resurrected. Through his incarnation, he became a person. Scripture is

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<sup>14</sup>See Robb Bell, “Is Having A Personal Relationship With Jesus A Biblical Concept?” At: <[www.prestonsprinkle.com/blog/2014/10/is-having-a-personal-relationship-with-jesus-a-biblical-concept](http://www.prestonsprinkle.com/blog/2014/10/is-having-a-personal-relationship-with-jesus-a-biblical-concept)>; accessed 27 October 2021. See also James Pedlar, “Why ‘Developing A Personal Relationship With Jesus’ Might Be A Bad Idea.” At: <[www.jamespedlar.ca/2012/02/02/why-developing-a-personal-relationship-with-jesus-might-be-a-bad-idea/](http://www.jamespedlar.ca/2012/02/02/why-developing-a-personal-relationship-with-jesus-might-be-a-bad-idea/)>; accessed 27 October 2021.

<sup>15</sup>But see Numbers 23.19; Job 9.32; Isaiah 55.9; Hosea 11.9.

plain about this. But Jesus is much more than flesh and blood. He is Son of Man, and he is Son of God.<sup>16</sup> In one sense, then, it would be impossible for us to have a common relationship with Jesus. In fact, the bond that brings us as sinful creatures into harmony with both Jesus and his God goes much deeper than any type of “relationship” we can imagine. The initiative and the work belongs to Jesus and to God. It is not by our doing. The New Testament speaks about our adoption as God’s children and our oneness and union with God and his Christ. It is a mystery and similar to the mystery of the marriage bond between a man and a woman. In the covenant of marriage, Jesus, quoting the Old Testament (Genesis 2.24), says that a man and a woman are “united” and become “one flesh” (Matthew 19.5). Here, there is no unclear language about a personal relationship. The concepts of “oneness” and “union” that Jesus uses are much stronger, since the bond is intended to be for life. In the same way, Jesus has redeemed us and has reclaimed us from this sinful world for life. As the bride of Christ, we are married to him. We are bound to him. We are united with him. He is in us, and we are in him. This is so much more than what our culture understands by a personal relationship.

### Worship

“Worship” is another religious or ecclesiastical word that seems to be misused and misunderstood. As noted above, in its original sense, “worship” as a noun indicates “praise, adoration, adulation, devotion, glory, honor, kudos, regard, respect, reverence.” This follows the etymology of the word from the Old English *weorthscipe* (“worthiness, acknowledgment of worth”). But unlike “religion” which has become broader in meaning, “worship” is used to

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<sup>16</sup>In the Gospels, both of these titles reflect the deity of Jesus.

denote “a service or rite showing reverence for a deity.”<sup>17</sup> For example, we talk about the “worship service.” Besides being redundant, this is a restricted use of the word that does not reflect accurately the words in the New Testament that are translated into English as “worship.” This can cause misunderstandings and lead to misguided discussions about what is worship and what is not worship.

The NIV uses “worship” about seventy-five times in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> This one English word does service for approximately eleven or so Greek words such as *proskuneo*, *latreuo* and *latreia*, *sebomai* (Matthew 15.9; Mark 7.7; Acts 13.43, 50; 16.14; 17.4, 17; 18.7, 13; 19.27), *sebadzomai* (Romans 1.25), *sebasma* (Acts 17.23; 2 Thessalonians 2.4), *theosebeia* (1 Timothy 2.10), *eusebeo* (Acts 17.23; 1 Timothy 5.4; cf. *eusebeia*, *eusebes*, *eusebos*), *phobeomai* (Acts 13.16), *threskeia* (Acts 26.5; Colossians 2.18; James 1.26, 27; cf. *threskos*), and *ethelothreskia* (Colossians 2.23). The less frequent terms above,<sup>19</sup> with New Testament occurrences noted in parentheses, indicate fear, respect, reverence, or piety toward deity or persons to be so honored.<sup>20</sup> Depending on the context, these words sometimes are to be understood in a cultic sense (i.e., acts of a sacred ritual) but sometimes not. If “worship” in this

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<sup>17</sup>The British also use the word in a restricted sense as “a title of honor . . . in addressing magistrates.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, 746.

<sup>18</sup>See Bible Gateway Online at: <[biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com)>.

<sup>19</sup>With the exception of *phobeomai*, “to fear,” which occurs some ninety times in the New Testament and is translated “worship” only once by NIV at Acts 13.16.

<sup>20</sup>For definitions and New Testament occurrences, see Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 108, 155, 156, 169, 171, 319, 374; W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*, Fifth Edition, revised by H. K. Moulton (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 255, 404, 457, 461, 889, 890, 992.

restricted sense is what is conveyed to the reader of the NIV, and other translations, then the meaning of the original text in certain places possibly will be obscured.

The Greek word used predominately of “worship” in the New Testament is *proskuneo* (cf. *proskunetes*, “worshiper,” John 4.23). It is used fifty-seven times and is translated “worship” about forty-eight times by the NIV.<sup>21</sup> According to Danker, it has a wider range of meaning than “worship” in a restricted sense, since it signifies “do obeisance to” or “pay homage to.”<sup>22</sup> The nine or so times the NIV does not translate *proskuneo* as “worship” are instructive (see Matthew 8.2; 9.18; 15.25; 18.26; 20.20; Mark 5.6; 15.19; Acts 10.25; Revelation 3.9). In these verses, the NIV renders *proskuneo*, which the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew word *shachah* (“to bow down, to fall prostrate”),<sup>23</sup> with phrases such as “knelt before,” “fell on his knees before,” “kneeling down,” “fell on his knees in front of,” “falling on their knees,” and “fell at his feet in reverence.” Of course, the translators would look at Greek syntax and context to make their decisions about the precise wording. But the point to be made is that the NIV does not translate “worship” for these occurrences of *proskuneo* in order to avoid the idea of an act of religious devotion (i.e., homage to one who is divine or worship in the strictly religious sense) on the part of the person who is doing the kneeling. In other passages, where they do translate *proskuneo* with “worship,” the NIV does intend for the reader to understand the religious nature of this act of “bowing down” or “kneeling.” The problem may be that in our culture the English word

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<sup>21</sup>Moulton and Geden, *Concordance to the Greek Testament*, 865-866; Bible Gateway Online at: <[biblegateway.org](http://biblegateway.org)>.

<sup>22</sup>Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 305.

<sup>23</sup>See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, translated by Edward Robinson (reprint; Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1951), 1005.

“worship” carries with it a technical sense that is different from an act of obeisance, respect, or reverence.

The other Greek words used often for “worship” in the New Testament are the verb *latreuo* and its cognate noun *latreia*. Danker notes that *latreia* means “cultic devotion,” which the NIV renders variously as “service” (John 16.2), “temple worship” (Romans 9.4), “worship” (Romans 12.1; Hebrews 9.1), and “ministry” (Hebrews 9.6). He defines *latreuo* less narrowly suggesting that it is used “in reference to service rendered to a deity, to carry out cultic activity, the strictly religious aspect, minister, serve . . . [or] be committed in homage and devoted service beyond cultic activity, serve.”<sup>24</sup> Of twenty-one occurrences of *latreuo* in the New Testament,<sup>25</sup> the NIV translates only seven of these with “worship” (see Luke 2.37; Acts 7.7, 42; 24.14; Hebrews 9.9; 10.2; 12.28). The other occurrences, except Hebrews 13.10 where the translators use the verb “minister,” are translated with the word “serve.” In its narrow definition, this Greek word certainly comes closest to our cultic meaning of “worship” (i.e., ritual acts of devotion to deity).<sup>26</sup> But the difficulty lies in choosing which passages use *latreuo* in a general sense of service or devotion to God and which passages use *latreuo* in the specific sense of acts of a religious ritual. What is interesting, however, is that the English word “serve” easily could be substituted with as good as or a better fit to the context in most of the seven passages where the

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<sup>24</sup>Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 213.

<sup>25</sup>See Moulton and Geden, *Concordance to the Greek Testament*, 584.

<sup>26</sup>See “*latreuo, latreia*” by Hermann Strathmann in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume IV, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 58-65.

NIV renders “worship.”<sup>27</sup> This seems to show that, by syntax and context, the cultic meaning of *latreuo* (and likewise the cultic meaning of “worship”) is not indicated necessarily.

So, just as we’re stuck with “religion,” maybe we’re stuck with “worship” to refer to our religious acts of devotion. But this, in my mind, leads to difficulties in understanding several biblical texts. It would be better to use “liturgy” or “divine service” to designate those public, as opposed to private, periods of devotion by the assembled people of God in a particular locale. This type of language has been in use for a long time by so-called “high church” traditions. And, it is biblical language, since “liturgy” comes from the Greek word *leitourgia* (“service, in cultic matters . . . [or] in material matters, of aid rendered”; see Luke 1.23; 2 Corinthians 9.12; Philippians 2.17, 30; Hebrews 8.6; 9.21; cf. New Testament uses of *leitourgeo*, *leitourgikos*, *leitourgos*).<sup>28</sup> I guess, though, that even this semantic shift would not preclude the resolve of self-appointed guardians to preserve the traditional acts of worship that supposedly have been derived from the biblical texts. The bigger challenge, however, with use of “worship” in Western cultures comes from problems associated with the post-Enlightenment dichotomy between sacred and secular. Worship is something we do after we leave our homes and go to worship at church, synagogue, or temple. When we go to these places of worship, we observe acts of worship according to a set order of worship. And after we leave church, synagogue, or temple, there is no more worship. The idea that worship belongs to a “sacred” category, rather than one’s entire life, is pervasive in our society. But this idea about worship is not what is meant by *proskuneo* or *latreuo* in the Bible.

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<sup>27</sup>The exception might be Acts 7.42-43 where Luke uses both *latreuo* and *proskuneo*.

<sup>28</sup>Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 214; Moulton and Geden, *Concordance to the Greek Testament*, 597.

## Miracle

The final word from my list of linguistic mush is “miracle.” When I think about how freely and loosely the word “miracle” is used, I am reminded of the tune by the rock band Kansas, “Miracles Out of Nowhere.”<sup>29</sup> Also, I am reminded of the line in the movie *Shawshank Redemption* when Warden Norton discovers that Andy Dufresne has escaped, “Lord, it’s a miracle. The man up and vanished like a fart in the wind.”<sup>30</sup> But concerning the need for empirical proof about God’s work in our world, I caution myself with the dictum in Hebrews 11.3, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” And there is this word of encouragement from the apostle Paul, “For we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5.7). There is no doubt in my mind that we miss much of the marvelous work of God simply because of our lack of faith. Jesus taught us, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17.20; cf. Luke 17.6). So my effort here is not to downplay the ongoing work of God in our world today.<sup>31</sup> Instead, I wish to suggest that there are words in the English language besides “miracle” that may be less open to misunderstanding when talking about God’s activities today.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>From the album *Leftoverture*, produced by Jeff Glixman and released in 1976.

<sup>30</sup>Released by Castle Rock Entertainment in 1994. Norton was played by Bob Gunton, and Dufresne was played by Tim Robbins.

<sup>31</sup>See the excellent study by Craig S. Keener, *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2021).

<sup>32</sup>Language describes the work that God is doing to get our attention and to rouse us out of complacency and monotony. Language is important. Such was true in the days of Jesus and his followers, and the phenomenal stories of the New Testament proclaim what is mysterious and unexplainable.



The etymology of the English word “miracle,” from the Latin *miraculum* (“object of wonder”) and the Old French *miracle* (“wonderful work of God”), highlights the out of the ordinary or the unusual character, as well as divine handiwork, in the happenings that are thereby described. These happenings cause us to marvel or to wonder, since we do not observe such occurrences on a day to day basis. The New Testament describes these events with a variety of Greek words such as *dunamis* or “power,” *teras* or “wonder,” and *semeion* or “sign” (see Acts 2.22; 2 Corinthians 12.12; Hebrews 2.4). There are other ways the biblical text indicates things out of the ordinary. A good example is when Paul is bitten by a poisonous viper on the island of Malta, but “nothing unusual happened to him” (Greek, *meden atopon eis auton ginomenon*; Acts 28.6). The use of “miracle,” in its original sense, seems to be fine to describe these happenings, since it does not impose an entire set of unnecessary categories on the use of the word itself (i.e., what I would call linguistic cultural baggage). But, unfortunately, “miracle” does not convey to most moderns the simple idea of wonder, amazement, and awe.

In our post-Enlightenment world, a world of empirical science, we talk about nature and the ever present laws of nature.<sup>33</sup> These ideas were instilled into our psyches during the days of our youth and throughout our years of education. We believe them to be true; we live by them; we depend on them; we do not contradict nor deny them. But there is no true opposite for this idea of nature. Try finding antonyms for the word “nature” that are consistent in meaning. You cannot. Nature is all powerful and ever present. We cannot escape nature. Perhaps, though, we have been brainwashed by an Enlightenment mentality. This is a mentality that overlays or superimposes the idea of the supernatural on the natural in order to have the divine, to have

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<sup>33</sup>Of course, it is more complicated than this. The “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy” indicates that “the Laws of Nature are to be distinguished both from Scientific Laws and from Natural Laws.” Norman Swartz, “Laws of Nature,” online at: <[www.iep.utm.edu/lawofnat/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/lawofnat/)>.

religion, to have wonder or “miracles.” Perhaps you understand my semantic squabbling now.

The word “miracle” in Western cultures is wrapped up in endless discussion and argumentation about this dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural.<sup>34</sup>

Definitions of “miracle” fall in line with this post-Enlightenment mentality. Miracle is “an extraordinary event attributed to a supernatural power.”<sup>35</sup> Or, miracle is “an event or action that apparently contradicts known scientific laws.”<sup>36</sup> Craig Keener says, “Probably the most common definition of a miracle throughout history, from Augustine to Aquinas, has been a divine action that transcends the ordinary course of nature and so generates awe.”<sup>37</sup> And John Court defines, “A miracle is an extraordinary happening, something not easily explained by existing frames of reference; as a result it is interpreted as directly caused by God or supernatural agencies.”<sup>38</sup> Because of this infusion of the idea of nature into our thinking, we cannot get away from the notion of nature when we talk about miracles. This is unfortunate. And it also is unfortunate when English translations muddle the clear meaning of Greek words in the Bible with their use of the word “miracle.” For example, the NIV uses “miracle” or “miraculous” twenty-four times in the New Testament. Twenty-two of these translate *dunamis* (Matthew 7.22; 11.20, 21, 23; 13.54, 58; 14.2; Mark 6.2, 5, 14; 9.39; Luke 10.13; 19.37; Acts 2.22; 8.13; 19.11; 1 Corinthians 12.10, 28, 29; 2 Corinthians 12.12; Galatians 3.5; Hebrews 2.4). All of these could

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<sup>34</sup>For an older but helpful work, see Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984).

<sup>35</sup>*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia*, edited by Mark A. Stevens (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2000), 1076.

<sup>36</sup>*Webster's New World Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, 413.

<sup>37</sup>Keener, *Miracles Today*, 3.

<sup>38</sup>John M. Court, *The Penguin Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), 232.

be translated “mighty works” or “powerful deeds.” In John 7.21, the NIV translates *hen ergon epoiesai kai pantes tuaumadzete* (literally, “one work I did and everyone marvels”<sup>39</sup>) as “I did one miracle, and you are all amazed.” In Acts 4.22, the NIV translates *eton gar en pleionon tesseraconta ho anthropos eph’ hon gegonei to semeion touto tes iaseos* (literally, “for of years was more than forty the man upon whom had happened this sign of healing”<sup>40</sup>) as “for the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.” In these two passages, “miracle” is not needed, as “work” and “sign” convey the meaning of the text accurately. In all instances, the use of “miracle” by the NIV makes the text less understandable, since “miracle” typically is understood by moderns as a happening that is supernatural by way of contrast with what is natural.

For some time I have been thinking about and doubting more and more this common distinction, a post-Enlightenment one I believe, between what we label “natural” and “supernatural” or “ordinary” and “extraordinary” concerning the work of God in the world. The differentiation hardly seems defensible by a careful study of the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, and its overriding worldview. I agree with John Walton who pointedly states, “There is no concept of a ‘natural’ world in ancient Near East thinking. The dichotomy between natural and supernatural is a relatively recent one.” He goes on to suggest:

Deity pervaded the ancient world. Nothing happened independently of deity. The gods did not “intervene” because that would assume that there was a world of events outside of them that they could step into and out of. The Israelites, along with everyone else in the ancient world, believed instead that every event was the act of deity—that every plant that grew, every baby born, every drop of rain and every climatic disaster was an act

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<sup>39</sup>Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, translators, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, editor, J. D. Douglas (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 347.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 423.

of God. No “natural” laws governed the cosmos; deity ran the cosmos or was inherent in it. There were no “miracles” (in the sense of events deviating from that which was “natural”), there were only signs of the deity’s activity (sometimes favorable, sometimes not). The idea that deity got things running then just stood back or engaged himself elsewhere (deism) would have been laughable in the ancient world because it was not even conceivable. As suggested by Richard Bube, if God were to unplug himself in that way from the cosmos, we and everything else in the cosmos would simply cease to exist. There is nothing “natural” about the world in biblical theology, nor should there be in ours. This does not suggest that God micromanages the world, only that he is thoroughly involved in the operations and functions of the world.

As a result, we should not expect anything in the Bible or in the rest of the ancient Near East to engage in the discussion of how God’s level of creative activity relates to the “natural” world (i.e., what we call naturalistic process or the laws of nature). The categories of “natural” and “supernatural” have no meaning to them, let alone any interest (despite the fact that in our modern world such questions take center stage in the discussion).<sup>41</sup>

In other words, our common distinction between God’s work in and through nature and God’s work that overrides or supercedes nature simply would not make sense to the people of the Bible.

Does this mean that the people of the Bible did not recognize the great or mighty deeds of the Lord that went above and beyond what usually could be expected in human experience?

Such certainly is not true, because they would acknowledge the Lord’s control and guidance of infrequent or “irregular” events as well as his overriding handiwork in the “regular” or everyday affairs without deprecation of the latter to any systematic, independent working of the cosmos itself (i.e., the “natural”). Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book *Miracles: God’s Presence and Power in Creation*, tries to get at this difficult shift in our thinking in his chapters on “The Problematic Category” and “Reframing the Discussion.”<sup>42</sup> C. John Collins, in his work *The God*

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<sup>41</sup>John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 18. Compare similar comments by Walton in his *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Second Edition; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 47.

<sup>42</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *Miracles: God’s Presence and Power in Creation*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church, Series Editor, Samuel E. Balentine (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 21ff., 45ff.

*of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World*, does not agree necessarily with this jettisoning of “nature” or “miracle,” but his careful study does show the difficulties and even contradictions set up by use of such post-Enlightenment ideology.<sup>43</sup> This problem needs more work.<sup>44</sup> It has been with us a long, long time. I think that use of words like “miracle” only prolong the problem and do little to solve the difficulties.

### Conclusion

Well, you as the reader can judge whether or not my semantic squabbles about “religion,” “relationship,” “worship,” and “miracle” merit your further attention. Perhaps you too have pet peeves about words that you dislike. These merit our attention if only to help us communicate clearly and precisely. Yes, language is a marvelous phenomenon and full of surprises. Daily we are challenged by words that are spoken to us and words that we speak to others. Our speech can bring us together, and our speech can drive us apart. The Bible has considerable instruction about what we should say and what we should not say. Here are a few examples. “All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5.37). “Let your conversation be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4.6). “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1.19-20). And from the Proverbs we learn: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (15.1); “A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a

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<sup>43</sup>See his brief section, “Biblical Vocabulary for ‘Nature’ and ‘Miracles’: Are There Technical Terms?” C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 63-66.

<sup>44</sup>The book by Gerald R. McDermott, *Everyday Glory: The Revelation of God in All of Reality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), is promising with his use of a typological hermeneutic, although he refines some of the classic categories like “nature” and “natural law.”

timely word!” (15.23); “To answer before listening—that is folly and shame” (18.13); “Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity” (21.23). Choose your words wisely. You’ll be happier for it, and maybe, just maybe, others will understand you better.

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## APPENDIX: SOME SHIP DEFINITIONS

Apostleship - A ship that has been sent out by another ship for an important task.

Apprenticeship - A ship that is learning how to be a skilled ship in a professional trade.

Assistantship - Those ships that enjoy helping their fellow ships.

Authorship - A ship that has written, and possibly published, an article, a book, or a report.

Battleship - A ship to be used when fighting other ships.

Censorship - A ship that has a proclivity to criticism that is voiced against ships out of line.

Chairmanship - A ship that presides over formal meetings of other ships.

Championship - The ship which excels above all the rest.

Citizenship - A ship that belongs to or is a subject of a formal state or commonwealth.

Comradeship - A ship that enjoys working with other ships in institutions or organizations.

Consulship - A ship that docks in foreign waters and promotes the welfare of its home state.

Courtship - A ship that you would find typically in trouble and, therefore, in a courtroom.

Craftsmanship - A ship skilled in how to make creative waves when sailing through waters.

Dealership - A ship that likes to be involved in commerce and trade.

Dictatorship - A ship that takes control of other ships by forceful means.

Discipleship - A ship that follows another ship en route to a destination.

Eldership - A ship that is older than other ships.

Fellowship - A ship that is like other ships.

Flagship - A ship used to transport manufactured flags to points of distribution for commerce.

Friendship - A ship that is cordial and open to other ships.

Gamesmanship - A ship that plays games and does so very well.

Guardianship - A ship that acts as legal defender or protector of any other ship.

Hardship - A ship that is made of dense and impenetrable materials.

Horsemanship - A ship that runs faster on the water than the horses on the shore.

Internship - A ship in training for a particular trade or occupation.

Kinship - A ship that is related to other ships by birth or by marriage.

Kingship - A ship designated for use only by male royals.

Leadership - A ship that must be at the head of the convoy.

Lectureship - A ship that enjoys talking to other ships.

Longship - A ship that, by conventional definition, exceeds the length of other ships.

Marksmanship - A ship that is always on target in whatever it does.

Membership - A ship that likes to be a comrade and belong to institutions or organizations.

Messiahship - A ship that aspires or rises to the position of deliverer or savior of a group of ships.

Mentorship - A ship that advises and teaches its profession to a younger, inexperienced ship.

Ombudsmanship - A ship that investigates complaints against ship administration authorities.

Ownership - A ship that buys up other ships.

Partisanship - A ship that strongly supports a particular cause even to the point of prejudice.

Partnership - A ship that joins with another ship in a particular endeavor.

Penmanship - A ship that likes to write.

Proprietorship - A ship that owns a business or property.

Readership - A ship that likes to read books.

Queenship - A ship designated for use only by female royals.

Receivership - Any ship that is being loaded prior to its departure for an appointed destination.

Relationship - A ship that likes to be with other ships.

Scholarship - A smart ship that has been educated extensively.

Showmanship - A ship that is skilled in the presentation of entertaining performances.

Sonship - A ship that has been created by its parent ship or ships.

Spaceship - A ship that is annoyed when it is too close to other ships.

Spectatorship - A ship that enjoys watching games, shows, sports, etc.

Sponsorship - A ship that will pay the bill for other ships in their endeavors.

Sportsmanship - A ship that is involved in organized sports and may do so professionally.

Starship - A ship that has been in the movies or has been seen on television.

Statesmanship - A ship which has notable experience and skill in the affairs of foreign ships.

Stewardship - A ship that has been put in charge to manage and care for another ship's property.

Township - A ship that does not like being in the country or the woods.

Troopship - A ship that is used only for the transport of military personnel.

Trusteeship - A ship which has been given responsibilities of various kinds for other ships.

Viewership - A ship that enjoys watching the other ships.

Warship - A ship designed solely for use in military combat operations.

Workmanship - A ship that carries common laborers to their appointed place of employment.