

Below is an excerpt from a review by Rodney Decker of "BDAG", the most helpful and comprehensive lexicon to NT Greek that exists for the English student of the Bible. Decker was professor of Greek and New Testament at Baptist Bible Seminary in Pennsylvania until his death in 2014. The full title of the volume referred to as BDAG is:

*Walter Bauer. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker. 3d ed. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000.*

Here is what Decker wrote:

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Long awaited, the recent release of the third English edition of Bauer's lexicon—the standard in New Testament lexicography—marks a significant achievement in biblical scholarship. Everyone who is serious about grappling with the text of the Greek testament owes a great debt to Frederick Danker and to the University of Chicago Press. Originally due in the mid-90s, many of us have fretted over innumerable delays, but the wait has been worth it.

The history of BDAG (as the new edition is to be known) may be traced to Preuschen's *Vollständiges griechisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testament* which [appeared in 1910—the first lexicon to be published after the discovery and study of the papyri](#). This work was revised several times by Walter Bauer as *Griechisch deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*. The fourth German edition (1949–52) was the basis of the first English edition prepared by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (1957). A second English edition (in which Danker took the place of Arndt who had died in 1957) followed in 1978, based on Bauer's fifth edition (1957–58). The sixth edition of the *Wörterbuch* (following Bauer's death in 1960) was edited by the Alands (Kurt and Barbara) and Viktor Reichmann (1988). The third English edition builds on the preceding English editions, the sixth German edition, and Danker's own work.

### **Historical Background**

So that you appreciate better the new edition of Bauer's lexicon, let me provide a bit of historical background. The first lexicon of the Greek NT was published in 1522. It was only 75 pages long and consisted of a glossary list of the words in the NT with a Latin equivalent.

In the Middle Ages Greek was little known, although intellectual life was much influenced by Greek writers. The Greek philosophers, mathematicians, and astronomers were expounded at the universities, but they were read in Latin translation, not in Greek. The Council of Vienne in 1311 recommended the setting up of chairs for the study of the Greek language so that a better understanding of holy scripture might be attained, but theological questions were discussed in terms of the Vulgate, not the Greek text. Since the NT was not known in Greek, no Greek dictionary of the NT was needed. (G. Friedrich, "Pre-History of the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament," transl. G. Bromiley, *TDNT* 10:613–61 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 10:613)

Other early lexicons were published by Pasor in 1619 and by Lucius in 1640. All of these were Greek-Latin dictionaries. So far as I know, the first lexicon that provided English translations was the work of Edward Leigh, published in 1639. Better known of the early Greek-English

works was the lexicon by Parkhurst in 1769. The standard Greek-English lexicon of the late 19th C. and for more than half of the 20th C. was Thayer. This influential lexicon traces its origins to Wilke's Greek-Latin lexicon of 1839, as revised by Grimm in 1868. At the time this was considered to be a major accomplishment, "by far the best Lexicon of the NT extant." In a review published in 1878, Professor Schürer declared that "it is not only unquestionably the best among existing NT Lexicons, but..., apart from all comparisons, it is a work of the highest intrinsic merit.... It ought to be regarded by every student as one of the first and most necessary requisites for the study of the NT, and consequently for the study of Theology in general." Thayer's own work of editing and translating Grimm-Wilke into English, although described modestly in his introduction, was significant and added substantially to the quality of the English edition.

As valuable as it was in its day, no such work is ever the final word. From our perspective, 115 years later, it is obvious that Thayer's work contained some serious flaws. All such efforts—the 3d edition of BDAG included—reflect the state of the discipline at the time as well as the theological perspective of the author. In the 19th c. it was frequently assumed that the Greek of the NT was not classical Greek, but rather a special dialect of Greek created by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of accurately conveying divine revelation: "Holy Spirit Greek" as it was sometimes called. A classic statement of this position can be found in Rothe's *Dogmatic* (1863):

We may appropriately speak of a language of the Holy Ghost. For in the Bible it is evident that the Holy Spirit has been at work, moulding for itself a distinctly religious mode of expression out of the language of the country which it has chosen as its sphere, and transforming the linguistic elements which it found ready to hand, and even conceptions already existing, into a shape and form appropriate to itself and all its own."

Thayer accepted the same view of the NT's Greek, listing in an appendix about 300 "biblical" words that either did not occur outside the NT or which were used in the NT with meanings unique to Scripture.

What Thayer did not know, indeed, could not have known at the time, is that almost all of these 300 words were used in Greek contemporary with the NT. The list of such words is now, I believe, about a dozen—and it is likely that many (perhaps all) of them will sooner or later be found in extra-NT texts as well.

What has made the difference? In one word, "papyri."

The situation took a decided change when, in the 1890s, there began to appear in great abundance those volumes which make available to the learned world the Greek papyri found in Egypt. As a result, interest was awakened, too, in ostraca ... and inscriptions. In all of them we have witnesses of the speech of daily life, especially in its colloquial form, in so far as they avoid the influence of custom, formula, and school—and infinitely many do just that! Here, at length, was discovered the proper background for a truly scientific view of the language of the oldest Christian literature. The honor of having been discoverer and pathfinder in this field belongs to Adolf Deissmann, who, beginning in 1895, demonstrated to us more and more clearly ... that our literature on the whole represents the late Greek colloquial language, which, to be sure, some authors used with more literary polish, others with less. (Bauer, "Introduction," BDAG, xiv.)

Although for the past 100 years biblical scholars have been able to employ the evidence of the papyri, Thayer published just before this flood of information. It is unfortunate that his extensive efforts became obsolete so quickly.

Danker also criticizes Thayer for his diachronic orientation:

**(Bob's Note:** a *diachronic* approach to words is the belief that they have some meaning "out there in the cloud" that feeds into every context where it is used. A future historian using a diachronic approach to the word "cellphone" might say that "cell" referred to a small room with bars where criminals were kept. Therefore, when somebody of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century refers to a "cellphone" what they have in mind was a communication device that was like a digital jail that imprisoned the soul of the user. Only low-status people, like drug users and criminals, used cellphones in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.)

The contrast here is with a *synchronic* approach to words, that is not interested so much the etymology of words – where they came from originally – but in the use of those words in particular contexts.)

“Thayer’s adoption of comparative philological methodology, with stress on etymology, contrasts with developments at the turn of the century, and even the publication of a corrected edition in 1889 could not disperse the pall of obsolescence that had settled on Thayer’s work even before its publication.” This is perhaps slightly overstated in that Thayer’s method, defective as it is, was the reigning method in most circles of biblical study well into the 20th C. as may be seen in Robertson’s *Grammar* (4th ed., 1923) and (especially) in the massive TWNT edited by Kittel. Thayer appears to have been sensitive to the changing currents in regard to these methodological issues, noting that “on points of etymology the statements of Professor Grimm have been allowed to stand, although, in form at least, they often fail to accord with modern philological methods.” Yet he goes on to discuss his own use of “the meaning of radical [i.e., root] words,” derivatives, etymology, etc., all the while he tips his hat in the synchronic direction: “A student often wants to know not so much the inherent meaning of a word as the particular sense it bears in a given context or discussion.” Thayer was living in a transitional age methodologically. This resulted in his work having a much shorter useful life than those which began life but a short time later (as seen particularly in the Preusen/Bauer lexical line).

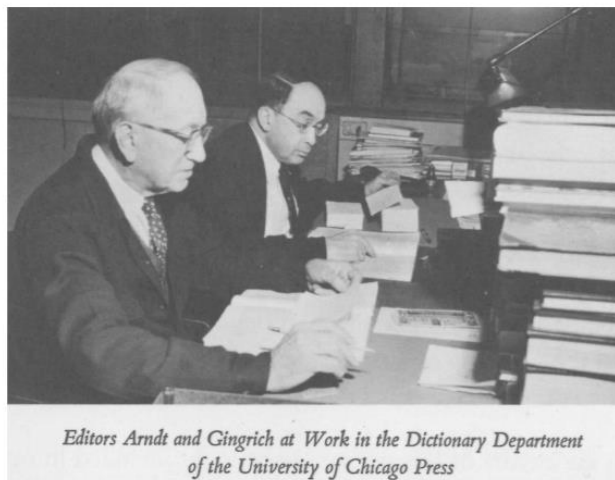
In addition to Thayer’s inadequate, pre-papyri knowledge of the language of the NT and his diachronic methodology, his lexicon also suffers from his theological perspective. His lexicon, he tells us, is explicitly theological in many entries, giving “all the materials needed for a complete exposition of the biblical content” of key words. This is not only methodologically deficient (theology cannot be done on the basis of isolated words, though it requires no less than a study of the vocabulary), but gives scope for Thayer’s own theology to come to the fore. Although he claims that he represents the consensus of theological thought except for “the comparatively few points respecting which doctrinal opinions still differ,” Thayer was an unitarian, and this cannot but help having an impact on his work in some areas.

This is certainly not unique to Thayer. All of us have theological preconceptions that color our thinking and our writing. The criticism here is not that Thayer had them, but that the nature of them was inimical to orthodoxy.

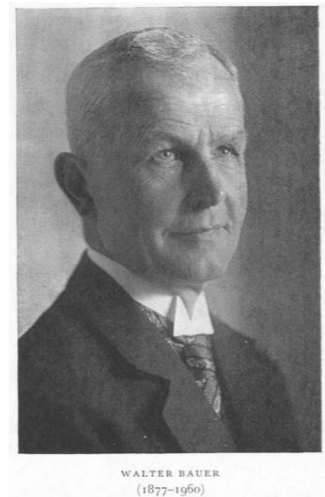
A careful reading of his entry on ὁἰος, e.g., will evidence his Christology; his entry on θεός in relation to Jesus is non-committal.

Following the discovery, study and publication of the papyri, the first lexicon to be published was the Greek German work by Preuschen (1910), though he did not make significant use of this new material. It was, however, the beginning of what we know today as BDAG. When Preuschen died in 1920, Walter Bauer (1877–1960) was charged with the revision of this lexicon. The second edition of Preuschen (edited by Bauer) was published in 1928 and widely acclaimed as the best NT lexicon then available. A third edition was published in 1937 with Bauer's name alone on the title page. Bauer continued to revise and expand this lexicon with a fourth edition in 1949–52. This was a major revision and has prompted not a few expressions of awe.

It was this 4th German edition that was translated into English, revised, and expanded by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich in 1957 (BAG). This substantial project was financed in part by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, leaving all NT students in their debt.



Bauer continued his work on the lexicon, published (as was the fourth edition) in fascicles 1957–58. This edition contained so much new material that a revision of the English translation was deemed necessary. When Arndt died (just one month after the first English edition was published), one of his former students, F. William Danker, was asked to work with Gingrich to prepare the second English edition. This was subsequently published in 1979 (BAGD). It was not just a translation of the German edition, but contained a significant quantity of new material, including additional bibliographical entries, new material from papyri, Qumran, etc.



If you learn nothing else from this potted history, you should be impressed that such work is never finished. “Any lexicographic endeavor worth its name must evolve in a context of new discoveries and constantly changing theoretical structures.”(BDAG, Foreword, vii). Work continued on the German lexicon following Bauer’s death in 1960, a 6th edition being published in 1988 by Kurt & Barbara Aland and Victor Reichmann (BAAR). Since Gingrich died in 1993, the work on the preparation of the new 3d English edition has been carried out by Danker. As with most such projects of such a and complex nature, there have been seemingly interminable Danker delays. The 3d edition technical was originally anticipated in the mid-late 1990s. Each fall anticipation rose that BDAG would be released at the annual SBL meeting in November of that year—but this anticipation proved to be only speculation. Even when it appeared in the University of Chicago Press’s catalog with an official ISBN in the fall of 1999, hopes were once again unfulfilled, though promises of “this winter” were given. These soon became “this spring,” followed by “this summer,” and “in time for the fall semester.” All to no avail. But November 2000 finally saw the official publication of the 3d English edition of Bauer. Display copies arrived in Nashville (the site of the 2000 annual meeting) from the printer on November 17, the night before the convention began. (It is mildly surprising that University of Chicago Press did not install a salad bar type “drip shield” over the display copies!) Copies actually shipped to customers in December of that year.

### Reading/Deciphering BDAG

With that historical introduction to BDAG, turn now with me to your copy and let me take you on a tour of what I hope will become your very good friend—a tool that you will use weekly (if not daily) for the rest of your ministry (or until a better edition is available)....

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Bob here again. Decker's conclusion was that BDAG – which is not cheap to purchase – was going to be so valuable to students of the Bible that "you should sell your car if you have to" in order to buy a copy.

I am going to look into getting a digital copy of BDAG that I can share with the class – like a library copy that I can loan out, which only one person at a time can use...just as if I were loaning a hard copy.



Danker

The contents of the analytical-lexicon notes that I have you download for each passage when you start translating are not from BDAG, of course, but they *are* from a quality, 21<sup>st</sup> century lexicon. Though more limited than BDAG (which runs to 1200 pages of small print), they are still quite good, having been developed by Bill Mounce, a scholar who served on the translation committees for both the NIV and ESV versions. He gave us permission to use his lexical notes in our class without charge.