The Thrill of Discovery
Reflections on Frederick W. Danker’s Contributions to New Testament Lexicography

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The only sure cure for insomnia is reading a dictionary.

If it’s so dull to read a dictionary, imagine what it must be like to write one. Frederick W. Danker, Professor of New Testament at Christ Seminary — Seminex, recently finished twenty years of revising and rewriting the standard dictionary to New Testament Greek, and so I asked him, “What was it like, Fred?” His answer: “The thrill of discovery overcame all moroseness and drudgery!”

The thrill of discovery is no cheap thrill. Fred had to read thousands of pages of Greek and (again, literally) thousands of articles and books, pore through the Dead Sea Scrolls, and sift through the Bodmer Papyri (ancient Greek texts from Alexandria). He directed a long line of student assistants in checking quotations and monitoring verse numbers in an endless search for accuracy. He encouraged them to be budding lexicographers.

But we’re getting ahead of our story. Back in 1957 Concordia Seminary Professor W.F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, from Albright College, published an English translation of Walter Bauer’s A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Though they added American bibliography and modified slightly some of Bauer’s opinions, their work was basically a straight-forward translation of Bauer’s fourth German edition of 1952. Arndt died in the same year the translation was published, and that’s when Frederick Danker joined up with Professor Gingrich to begin work on the Second Revised and Augmented Edition, published by the University of Chicago Press in January, 1979. Bauer had lived to bring out a fifth German edition in 1958 and translating and incorporating its new data for the new American edition was the chief task of Gingrich, the senior editor of the project.

Danker and Gingrich formed a productive team, and they knew how to work on a slim budget. They xeroxed the pages from the first American edition on large sheets of paper (11½ by 13 inches) and penned in their additions and corrections around the large margins. A sample page of their work is photocopied on the inside back cover. Sometimes the entire discussion of a word had to be rewritten; sometimes they merely added more “for instances” from the New Testament; sometimes they supplied the meanings of variant readings buried in the textual apparatus of the Nestle Aland 25th edition; and sometimes they included lexicographical information on a whole new early Christian document, like the apocryphal 3 Corinthians, written in the second century long after Paul’s death.

Skilled typists — able to work accurately also in Greek and Hebrew — took the large sheets glossed by Danker and Gingrich and set the galleys with immense intelligence and with much pride. These people knew the importance of this lexicon. It will be the standard in New Testament studies for fifty years or more. Since the publishers could count
on big sales (the first edition ran to almost 50,000 copies), and since they used smaller type and got much more on each page, they held the price to $28.00, a bargain price for such a reference work in today's market. Fred Danker's praise for the people at the University of Chicago Press is almost unbounded.

The net result of all this work: the first edition of 1957 is now obsolete. The second revised and augmented edition has roughly 10 percent more material than its predecessor, its accuracy of citation and definition is considerably improved, and a student can use its vast bibliography to study in great detail the meaning of any given word.

One difficulty in writing a New Testament lexicon is that translators and interpreters have been telling us what the words mean for 2,000 years, and this exegetical tradition often hides the original sense from us. Danker discovered, for instance, that the Bereans did not just receive the apostolic word "eagerly" (Acts 17:11), they heard it "without prejudice." That is, they didn't turn off the apostles without listening to them. They were less prejudiced against them than the people in Thessalonica. Danker learned this nuance of the Greek by reading newly discovered manuscripts of the comic poet Menander.

Anyone who knows Fred Danker is acquainted with his colorful speech. Among his publications are listed such titles as "How to Rock the Boat" and "On Getting the Church Off the Seat of its Toga." Although lexicons are supposed to be timeless, almost stuffy, Danker insists that Mary didn't 'ponder' all the things about Jesus (Luke 2:51). Rather, the Greek says "she tried to get it all together." Such colloquial language gets put in quotation marks in "Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker."

Occasionally the new edition of this lexicon reverses the judgment of its father, Professor Bauer. He had suggested, for example, that St. Paul may have been no tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Instead, according to Bauer, Paul built stage-properties for theater companies. Danker observes, however, that Paul had been a Pharisee, and no Pharisee would have felt at home working for a dramatic group in whose plays the gods often had a part. So Paul's curriculum vitae again includes service as a tentmaker, but even here there's a new wrinkle: perhaps he built tents for the military.

Danker has always been known as "Red Fred" (his brother William ["Black Bill"] Danker is a missiologist at Christ Seminary — Seminex), and his friendship for students and passion for the truth are legendary. He takes on all comers in noon hour chess matches in the Seminex commons. But Fred and his wife Lois are also entrepreneurs. When Missouri Synod heresy hunters scuttled Fred's commentary on Luke scheduled for the Concordia Commentary series, the Dankers published it on their own (Jesus and the New Age According to St. Luke) and started a new St. Louis CPH: Clayton Publishing House. Clayton has also issued Fred's No Room in the Brotherhood: the Preus-Otten Purge of Missouri and a series of exegetical and practical books. Exodus Books (6901 Manchester, St. Louis, MO. 63143) is the retail outlet for Clayton and the most convenient place to order the new lexicon or other theological books, including all those reviewed in Currents. His other publications range from the exotic (Threnetic Penetration in Aeschylus and Sophocles, his Ph.D. dissertation at Chicago) to his practical and widely-acclaimed Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study (3rd revised edition, Concordia, 1970). In 1976 and 1977 he contributed manuscripts on Luke and 2 Peter to Proclamation Commentaries, a series
The next time a New Testament lexicon is written, according to Danker, it should be done by a team of scholars financed by a major foundation and provided with time off from regular teaching duties to devote full time to the task. "Give me a million dollar budget and ten free years, and I'll write you a fantastic lexicon," Fred promised.

Most scholars will insist that Gingrich and Danker, building on the classic work of Bauer, have already produced that fantastic lexicon.

"How do you stay sane in such work?" I asked. Fred laughed and quipped, "Whom the gods hate they make lexicographers." But Fred obviously loves his work and even now is studying inscriptions chiseled in stone in ancient public market places to pick up the unique connotations Luke intended in portraying Jesus as a public benefactor, as a divine politician whose deeds were as mighty as his words (Luke 17:1-10).

As Fred dashes off into the future, the thrill of discovery still overcomes all moroseness and drudgery.