

THE THEOLOGIAN AS GRAMMARIAN

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This is a most interesting study,
and you have explained it well.
I agree that to look at even an
English translation of the New Testament
from a grammatical viewpoint is
very helpful and interesting.

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THESIS STATEMENT: When one understands the semantic qualities of verb tenses of both the New Testament (Koine) Greek and the modern American English languages, he has at his command tools which will enable him to more accurately understand and interpret his American English translation of the New Testament.

Introduction

- I. English and Greek tenses have general semantic meanings.
 - A. English tense has the meaning of time of action.
 - B. Greek tense has the meaning of kind of action.
- II. The Greek Aorist tense has the most complex meaning.
 - A. The Aorist has a constantive meaning.
 - B. The Aorist has an ingressive meaning.
 - C. The Aorist has a culminative meaning.
- III. The three other Greek tenses discussed have less complex meanings.
 - A. The Perfect tense is the trespassing tense.
 - B. The Present tense is the ambiguous tense.
 - C. The Future tense is the simple tense.

Conclusion

Title

All people, regardless of who or what they are, develop some sort of theology. Concerning the protestant Christian, Robert McAfee Brown has put it this way:

. . . the Protestant must make his own decision about the Christian faith, and . . . he cannot do this apart from the life of the mind. He cannot, in other words, decide not to be a theologian without deciding not to be a Christian. His options are never, "Shall I be a theologian or not?" They are only, "Will I be a good theologian or a bad one?"¹

This statement applies to the non-protestant as well as to the protestant. All people have some ideas or thoughts about the existence or non-existence of God.

The person who claims to be a Christian is in a difficult position concerning this aspect of being a theologian, for the book which he claims as his authority and as the source of his faith is written in three different languages, all of which are no longer in use as living languages. The Old Testament is written in Hebrew with a few chapters written in Aramaic. The New Testament is written in the ancient Koine Greek language, which was the common vernacular of the people of the first century.

This fact makes it difficult for the Christian to be an accurate and "good" theologian without knowing something about the language in which his authority is written and knowing

language involves the use of grammar. Dr. A. M. Fairbairn, a British theologian at the turn of the 20th Century, has said, "No man can be a theologian who is not a philologist. He who is no grammarian is no divine."²

A Christian who uses an English translation of the Bible can better understand and interpret it for himself if he has some understanding of the semantic qualities of both his own English language and the Koine Greek language of the New Testament.

To attempt to discuss the semantics of the entire Greek and English languages in one short paper would be an insurmountable task. Instead, the author has chosen to illustrate the audacious claim stated above by the exposition of one Greek verb using four Greek tenses. The other side of the coin will be an investigation of how the English language with it's unique grammatical structure and semantics can be used to express the Greek most accurately.

The Greek word chosen for this study is sōzō /sowdzow/³ which is the word commonly translated as "I save, preserve, or rescue."⁴ This is the word often used to express the "power of God at work in the world" which is the Gospel of Christ.⁵ The four Greek tenses to be used are known as future, present, perfect, and aorist tenses. Only the semantic qualities of these will be discussed.

The investigation will be limited to the use of sōzō in the writings attributed to the Apostle Paul in order that the

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usage of the word will be as uniform as possible. The study will be further limited by using only those references where σὺν is applied to the condition of the regenerated or Christian person.

English tense conveys a different meaning than does the Greek tense. In English, tense "is that property of a verb that makes clear the time of the action expressed by the verb."⁶ Although, grammatical tense does not always express the same time as the semantic time expressed. The important thing in English tense is time of action involved.⁷

In contrast to English tense, the important factor in Greek tense is not time of action but kind of action (commonly titled aktionsart--the German word for kind of action).⁸ The two main kinds of action are (1) instantaneous, which is called "punctiliar," and (2) continuous, which is called "linear."⁹ This can also be expressed in another way as three kinds of action: (1) action as continuous, (2) action as complete, and (3) action as occurring.¹⁰ It is plain that Greek tense is seldom concerned with the time of the action involved. When the verb is concerned with time, this is indicated either by an augment (prefix of an epsilon (ε) on the verb) or sometimes by the use of the future tense. These occur only in the indicative mood. As such, this mood is the only one concerned with time.¹¹

It is clear, then, that when one studies the tense involved in a passage of the New Testament, he should think of

kind of action involved rather than time of action, even if he is reading an English translation.

The first tense to be investigated is the aorist. This is the "most prevalent and most important of the Greek tenses."¹² The time relation of the tense is found, as has been said, only in the indicative mood, where the augment occurs. "The aorist signifies nothing as to completeness, but simply presents the action as attained. It states the fact of the action or event without regard to its duration."¹³ (underline mine)

One thing which gives the aorist tense its importance and prominence is its complexity. Three distinct aspects are included in this attained action. The constantive aorist deals with the event as occurring and simply that (such as John 1:14--"the Word . . . dwelt among us"). The ingressive aorist deals with the action as beginning to occur but still dealing with the action as a unit or whole (John 1:14--"the Word became flesh . . ."). The effective or culminative¹⁴ aorist deals especially with the completion of the action but again considers the whole unit (Philippians 4:11--"I have learned").¹⁵ As shall be seen, Paul's use of the aorist includes all three of these.

The English language has no direct equivalent of this tense even in syntax or word formation. The best way to translate this seems to be to use either the past tense or a form of the participle.¹⁶ Often the use of an auxiliary verb is required to express the meaning.¹⁷ There are, of course,

to past time. It simply means that before Timothy actually joins Paul in suffering, his (Timothy's) salvation has already been attained. This is an example of the constantive aorist.

The last reference listed conveys an entirely different time aspect than the rest, but still the action is considered as being in a finished or attained condition. The mood of this verb is subjunctive. In English the mark of the subjunctive mood can often be may, should or will.¹⁹ The meaning of the Greek subjunctive mood, as in English, is probability or mild contingency.²⁰

The time of this action must be gained from the context, which, in this case, speaks of the day of the Lord Jesus, which is yet to come. Thus, the time relationship indicates future, but the kind of action is aoristic or considered as a whole. This is an example of the culminative aorist.

The aorist tense is the most frequent and complex tense in the Koine Greek language. The other three tenses listed above, present, future and perfect, are also important to one's understanding of the New Testament. Of the three, the perfect tense seems to be used the least by Paul.

The perfect tense in Greek seems to trespass on both the present and aorist tenses. Because of this trespassing behavior, the perfect tense disappeared from Greek shortly after New Testament times.²¹

The perfect, in both English and Greek is the tense of completed action.^{22, 23} English has a past perfect, present

perfect and future perfect tense. All mean the same thing differing only in their time relationship. English perfect tense lays stress on completed action and the past, present, or future indicate the time relationship to the speaker. For instance "You have found it." denotes that you are now (at the time of speaking) in the condition of having made the discovery.²⁴

In Greek, the perfect tense is the "combining of the aktionsarten of aorist and present."²⁵

Its basal significance is the progress of an act or state to a point of culmination and the existence of its finished results. That is, it views action as a finished product. Gildersleeve significantly remarks that it "looks at both ends of the action" It implies a process, but views that process as having reached its consummation and existing in a finished state. The point of completion is always antecedent to the time implied or stated in connection with the use of the perfect.²⁶

In Paul's writings we find the verb σῴζω in the perfect tense only twice. These are both found in the letter to the Ephesians. Chapter two, verse five reads, "even when we were dead in our transgressions, (God) made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)," and verse eight reads, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;" Both of these verbs are perfect participles. The Greek perfect participles have their aktionsarten either antecedent to or coincident with the main verb of the sentence.²⁷

In both of these verses the main verb, concealed in the

English translation, is "you (plural) are." The action of the participle, then, is antecedent to the action and time of this verb "to be." A more complete (though less smooth) translation of both of these sections might be "you are now in the condition of having been brought into the condition of being saved."

This makes the perfect tense seem to take some of the responsibility of the present tense, which is probably the most ambiguous tense in Koine Greek.

The present tense in English can express several different meanings. Three of these are: (1) present, (2) future, and (3) historical present time.²⁸ The Greek can also express these but it does so in a more confusing manner.

Present tense in Greek is considered the linear action tense.

. . . the linear action is understood as taking place at the same time as the speech. The equivalent in English might be the periphrastic present: I am walking. There is however a complication, because Greek has no present stem with a punctiliar root. In order to say I walk without reference to time, English can be unambiguous; not so Greek. It must use the indicative of the present, with all the disadvantages of ambiguity arising from its linear stem Thus in Greek one seldom knows apart from the context whether the present indicative means I walk or I am walking. In other moods than the indicative, of course, the problem does not arise, there being no complicating augment, and so the aorist stem is freely used to indicate punctiliar action in present time. One must always bear that in mind for exegesis.²⁹

Keeping this in mind, however, it is recommended that "the progressive force of the present tense should be con-

sidered as primary, especially with reference to the potential moods, which . . . do not need any 'present punctiliar' tense."³⁰

Paul's usage of the verb sōzō in the present tense is limited to three contexts. I Corinthians 15:1, 2 read,

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

The context here (which also you received, in which also you stand) seems to favor the linear action of the verb which would convey the thought "by which also you are being saved," expressing continuing progress in present time.

The present tense is also found in participle form in I Corinthians 1:18: "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Again in II Corinthians 2:15 is found this passage: "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;"

The present participle in Greek conveys the same meaning as that of English--action contemporaneous with the action of the main verb of the sentence.^{31, 32} Both of these sentences have as their main verb a form of "to be" in the present indicative. The participles of sōzō, then, again show the progressive action of the verb occurring contemporaneous with the speaking.

The last of the four tenses to be considered is the future tense. This is the easiest and least complex verb tense in both English and Greek. In both cases the future tense simply means action or being that is yet to occur.^{33, 34} The time element is most dominant in this tense.³⁵ Romans 5:9, 10 contain the verb sozō twice in the future tense. Christian

Much more than, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

This study the semantics of tense in the Greek New Testament. Paul here pictures salvation for the Christian as something that can also be helpful to the student who has access to only an English translation of the New Testament. This is the third type of salvation to become, in the words of Robert McIfee Brown, "the word which Paul seems to speak of, using these four tenses of the verb sozō."

The first aspect of salvation, expressed by the aorist indicative and participle, represents an event that has occurred before the speaker, Paul, mentions it. This salvation is the regeneration or new birth pictured by Jesus in John 3:1-8, and the creation of the "new man" in II Corinthians 5:17.

The second aspect of salvation that Paul mentions uses the present tense of the verb. This is the continuing grace of God given to the Christian illustrated in passages such as I John 1:7.

The perfect tense seems to include both the regenerating

aspect of salvation and the continual sustaining aspect of salvation. This might be expressed by the terms "attaining" and "maintaining."

And the third aspect of salvation is that of deliverance from future judgement and death (Rev. 20:11-15). This also includes the gift of immortality promised to the Christian at the return of Christ to claim His own (I Cor. 15).

This picture of the three-fold salvation is one of many that can be understood as one begins to learn and apply to his study the semantics of tense in the Greek New Testament. This can also be helpful to the student who has access to only an English translation of the New Testament as he attempts to become, in the words of Robert McAfee Brown, "a good theologian."

13
ENDNOTES

- ¹⁹Pence, 218.
- ¹Robert McAfee Brown, The Spirit of Protestantism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 119.
- ²¹Moulton, 82.
- ²A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament In the Light of Historical Research (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1934), p. x.
- ²³Pence, 222-223.
- ³Russell N. Campbell and Judith W. Lindfors, Insights Into English Structure: A Programmed Course (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969), p. 62.
- ²⁵Moulton, 82.
- ⁴William F. Arndt and F Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 805.
- ²⁷Moulton, 85.
- ⁵Alan Richardson, (ed.), A Theological Word Book of the Bible (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1950), p. 221.
- ²⁸Pence, 222-223.
- ⁶R. W. Pence, A Grammar of Present-Day English (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947), p. 218.
- ³⁰Dana, 181.
- ⁷Homer C. House and Susan Emolyn Harman, Descriptive English Grammar, (2nd ed..rev.; New York: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1950), p. 116.
- ³²Moulton, 82.
- ⁸H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 178.
- ⁹James Hope Moulton and Nigel Turner, A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Vol. III: Syntax (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T Clark, 1963), p. 59.
- ¹⁰Dana, 178.
- ¹¹Moulton, 60.
- ¹²Dana, 193.
- ¹³Ibid., 193.
- ¹⁴Ibid., 195.
- ¹⁵William Hersey Davis, Beginner's Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1923), p. 124.
- ¹⁶House, 133.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 134.
- ¹⁸Dana, 230.

¹⁹Pence, 218.

²⁰Dana, 170.

²¹Moulton, 82.

²²Dana, 200.

²³Pence, 222-223.

²⁴House, 119-128.

²⁵Moulton, 82.

²⁶Dana, 200.

²⁷Moulton, 85.

²⁸Pence, 219-220.

²⁹Moulton, 60.

³⁰Dana, 181.

³¹Pence, 225.

³²Moulton, 79.

³³House, 122.

³⁴Dana, 191.

³⁵Ibid.

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