

# THE REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR

---

Vol. XVIII.

October, 1921

No. 4

---

## THE PLACE OF THE GREEK TENSES IN THE PROVINCE OF NEW TESTAMENT INTER- PRETATION.

W. HERSEY DAVIS, M. A., T. H. D.\*

(I must here record my gratitude to my teacher, the incomparable master of Greek syntax, Dr. A. T. Robertson, who first gave me insight into the beauty and significance of the Greek tenses.)

“The Greeks had a linguistic gift which fitted them for world-wide service. Their language had become so facile an instrument of thought and feeling that they were able to excel all other people in expressing the finer shades of the experiences of the spirit”.<sup>1</sup> This language, so highly and finely developed; spoken by a people of the subtlest intellect, who observed distinctions where others saw none; and which so singularly lent itself to fine and delicate discriminations, became the vehicle for conveying God’s thought and plan to the minds and hearts of men. In no department of the study of the language is the right perception of the delicate variations in an author’s meaning and the appreciation of the finer nuances of thought more important than in the tenses of the verb.

There is probably nothing in the realm of New Testament exegesis that leads to more inaccuracies than the imperfect understanding of the tenses. Should one desire

---

\*Inaugural address as Assistant Professor of New Testament Interpretation Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>1</sup>L. C. Barnes, *Two Thousand Years of Missions Before Carey*, p. 5.

proof that the average student of Greek is woefully lacking in the proper appreciation of the meaning of the tenses, one has only to read the translations of any portion of the Greek New Testament by a class of students who are college graduates. If the purpose in college is simply to acquaint the student with the excellencies and the cultural value of Greek literature, then to give him such a knowledge of the language as will allow him to get the general meaning of a passage may be all that is desirable. There accuracy in the use and translation of the tenses is not attempted. It is felt that a free or loose rendering of a narrative or discourse is accurate enough for all practical purposes. But the earnest student of the New Testament knows that such a method can have no place in his search for the truth contained in the words of eternal life; otherwise, he will miss, where it is so desirable and imperative that he miss nothing, the finer intention of the writer found in those words which are the conveyers of the very mind of God Himself.

“The translators of our English version have failed more frequently from their partial knowledge of the force of the tenses than from any other cause.”<sup>2\*</sup> The Greek tenses do not and cannot be made to coincide with the English tenses. The failure to see this has resulted in confusion. It is next to impossible to understand the Greek tenses from the English point of view. One must approach the Greek tenses from the Greek point of view. English is English, and Greek is Greek. Translators and exegetes have been in the habit of reasoning on the fitness of a Greek tense and word to express an idea which has been derived from their English translation. Consequently English is set up as a standard by which Greek is measured. To follow this method means that mistakes are sure to occur. For by inexactness in the rendering of

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, *Gram. of the Gr. N. T. in the Light of Hist. Research*, p. 821. (Hereafter cited by name Robertson.)

\*It is an interesting fact that no grammarian has made a translation in English of the Greek New Testament.

the Greek tenses the true sense cannot but be missed. "Ignorance, one may add, both of English and Greek still stands in the way of proper rendering of the Greek".<sup>3</sup> "A translation owes as much to the language into which it is made as to that out of which it is made."<sup>4</sup> Faithfulness to both languages often requires that an idiom of one be in the other turned into an utterly different idiom. It is doubly important to recognize this principle where an idiom of one language has been carried literally into another of which a translation into a third language is to be made. A pertinent example is found in John 9:24, which is variously translated: "Give God the praise", "Give glory to God", and "Give God the glory", with the explanation that the Pharisees did not want Jesus to be credited with opening the eyes of the blind man, but wanted God to have credit for the act. This cannot stand in view of the fact that Jesus would be considered the agent used of God; and this is the very implication the Pharisees tried to obviate. There is no difficulty when the idiom in its history is known. Joshua 7:19 gives the clue: "And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto Him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me."<sup>5</sup> It is an Hebrew idiom taken over literally into the Greek. It is a phrase used to put one on his oath to tell the truth, as is seen from the parallelism in the verse just quoted, "and make confession unto Him". To put it into our vernacular, it would be "On your oath before God, tell the truth". The literal translations into Greek and into English had doubly obscured the meaning.

Translation is primarily interpretation, for its purpose is to express the sense of words in one language by those of another. Or, we might say, translation is the re-

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, p. 821.

<sup>4</sup>Prof. T. Harwood Pattison, in a letter to Dr. Henry G. Weston, June 2, 1890.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Ezra 10:11 and 3 Esdras 9:8.

sult of interpretation. From beginning to end it involves the process of exegesis. Dr. Robertson has well said that historical grammar is not to be dissociated from exegetical grammar.<sup>6</sup> Historical grammar is the fundamental basis of, and at the same time the tool or instrument of, exegesis. It is an irrational demand that the one should not be operative till after the other has completed its work; since both are simultaneously involved by an author in expressing his thoughts, and they are both at the same time required in the understanding of those thoughts. From this it is clear that translation, in the sense of the result of the action of historical and exegetical grammar, should come last. Exegesis is the process and translation the result.

Further, historical grammar and lexicology cannot be dissociated. They are continually encroaching upon each other. He who begins the study of grammar must of necessity learn the meaning of words. He who will not begin with a close study of words will never make any considerable advance in historical grammar, and least of all in the science of exegesis; for sure disappointment is in store for him who hopes to possess the whole without first gaining the parts of which that whole is composed. In its very nature exegesis demands patient investigation of the force of words, "the accurate weighing of their precise value, absolute and relative". These two sciences, historical grammar and lexicology, go hand in hand with exegesis. They are interdependent. The undervaluation of these departments of linguistic investigation and of their relation one to the other has played havoc with the tenses. It has hindered the clear understanding of the distinctive meaning of tenses, caused over-elaboration of each tense-idea, and, consequently, obscured the meaning of the sacred writers.

Thanks to the recent results of scientific criticism, a

---

<sup>6</sup>Robertson, p. 388.

multitude of absurdities have been removed from the explanation of the use and meaning of the tenses—such as the interchange of tenses (*enallage temporum*), the temporal relations as the main idea, and the correspondence in meaning of the Greek tenses with the tenses of another language (e. g., English or German). We can here dispense with a further discussion of these errors, as, also, excellent scientific grammars, being adopted at present by our theological schools, assure the student freedom from them. Yet the fact that we have received invaluable help from these great books should not deter us from claiming the right of reconsidering the explanations made by them and from pointing out what may appear to us deficiencies or shortcomings.

At the outset one must keep clearly in mind the distinctive meaning of each tense. It has been plainly shown that "time is not the basal idea" in the tenses. "Time belongs only to the indicative mode in Greek save by indirection, and is not the main idea in the indicative". "Time is distinctly a secondary development in tense grafted on the main idea".<sup>7</sup> The fundamental idea in tense is the state of the action. "This is the original and only general idea of tense."<sup>7</sup> As to the state of the action there are three distinct ideas, viz., "incompletion, completion, and indefiniteness"; that is, the action may be represented as incomplete, or as completed, or as indefinite (i. e., without reference to the progress or completion of the action). These three kinds of action have also the names, durative or linear, perfective or perfected state, and punctiliar or point action. The tense for punctiliar or indefinite action is the aorist; the tenses for durative or incomplete action are the present, imperfect, and future; the tenses for perfective or completed action are the perfect, pluperfect, and future perfect. These are the assured results of historical grammar. Dr. Robertson has

<sup>7</sup>Robertson, *A Short Gram. of the Gr. N. T.*, p. 136.

sufficiently stressed these results. Yet in view of the prevalent misunderstanding of the tenses he cannot be accused of giving an excess of caution when he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the tense-idea: "Each Greek tense has its meaning and is used to express that idea".<sup>8</sup> "Each tense has its specific idea."<sup>9</sup> "Each tense has a separate history, and presents a distinct idea." Even yet we find in translations and interpretations that the tenses very frequently are not given their proper tense-meaning. Take, for instance, Mark 6:18, which is translated: "For John said to Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife". From this one would think that John just made a single vigorous statement. But the word translated "said" is in the imperfect tense. And the imperfect expresses linear action in the past. Hence we see that John made the statement repeatedly. From the context we also know that Herod had heard John a number of times. It was the repetition of the statement and its effect on Herod that worried Herodias and caused her to plot John's death. Acts 19:18 is translated: "And many that believed came, and confessed, and showed their deeds". This translation would lead one to suppose that the "many that believed" had for the first time made a profession of faith, come in a body, and confessed publicly what they had done. On a close study and a clear understanding of the tenses the real meaning becomes apparent. The word rendered "believed" is the perfect participle which here as always is true to its tense-idea of completion. The state of the action is represented as completed, and by suggestion as antecedent to the main verb. The "many that believed" is "many of those who had believed" at a time prior to the incident recorded. In all probability a considerable interval of time had elapsed between their first act of faith and their confession. The imperfect tense of the verb for "came" describes them to

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>9</sup>Robertson, p. 830.

us, not as coming in a single body at one time, but one after another, or group after group. Further, the words "confessed" and "showed" are present participles, and in accordance with their meaning fill in the details of the picture. The scene here described is, if I may so put it, the return of "backsliders" confessing in open meeting their evil conduct. Examples here could be multiplied if time allowed.

The proper valuation of the precise meaning of a tense is found to be more difficult when the tense-idea is modified by the Aktionsart (kind of action) of the verb-root and the "perfective" force of a preposition in composition with the verb. The verb itself may accent the beginning of the action or the end of the action. A preposition in composition with a verb often loses its local meaning and simply intensifies the meaning of the verb. Misunderstanding of the presence of these two elements has often hindered the perception of the force of the tense and, consequently, the exact thought of the author. A good example is found in Hebrews 2:1, "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." The last clause is sometimes translated, "lest haply we drift away from them", or "lest perhaps we drift past them", or "for fear we should drift away from them". The verb rendered "let slip", "drift past", etc., is in the second aorist passive subjunctive (*παραρνωμεν*). It is a compound verb, made from a simple verb and preposition (*παρα*). The verb properly means "floated past" as on a flowing stream, "drifted by", "carried past". Now, the tense presents the action of the verb as a point; the verb itself accents the end of the action; and the "perfective" force of the preposition (translated "past" or "by") naturally blends with and stresses the resultant meaning of the tense action and verb action. The time of the action is suggested by the whole context, but especially by the ad-

verb "at any time" (ποτέ). Thus we come to see the imagery and thought of the writer. He is giving his hearers warning of the danger of their condition and its inevitable result, by comparing it to that of those who, having embarked on a flowing stream with the intention of making a certain landing, through inattention and neglect of instructions and directions have drifted past the landing-place, and become aware of the fact only when it is too late. The writer used the aorist tense because it fitted exactly his thought and purpose.

In the reaction to the misconception of the meaning of the tenses and the consequent inaccurate treatment accorded them, there has come a marked tendency to over-refinement of the tenses and "multiplication of categories". And there is as much danger in the latter as in the former. "Too much has been read into the Greek tenses and not enough allowance is always made for the meaning of the verb itself"<sup>10</sup> and for the whole context. One must keep distinctly in mind in what particulars the context modifies the tense-meaning; otherwise, one will unconsciously be led to predicate of the tenses this or that element found in the context. If the tense-idea is not to be beclouded and the tenses made bewildering fogs, it must be kept free from suggestions of the context, the import of which has often been forced into the tense-meaning. A few examples will be sufficient to make the point clear. Why is the perfect in 2 Cor. 12:17 (ἀπέσταλκα, "I have sent") called the Present Perfect of Broken Continuity?<sup>11</sup> and the same tense and form of the same verb in Acts 10:20 (ἀπέσταλκα "I have sent") not included in the same category? The verbs are identical, the tenses are identical, the forms are identical. The answer is: because it is known from the context that the former has reference to various missions to the Corinthians, and the latter has reference to one mission to Peter. In both instances the

<sup>10</sup>Robertson, *A Short Gram. of the Greek N. T.*, p. 141.

<sup>11</sup>J. H. Moulton, *A Gram. of N. T. Greek. Prolegomena*, p. 144.



meaning of the tense is the same. The perfect was employed in each case because its meaning suited the thought the writer wished to express. In Mark 15:23 ("And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh") the imperfect "gave" (*ἔδιδουν*) is called the Conative Imperfect; while in Mark 8:6 ("and gave to his disciples") the same tense of the same verb is not so called. The reason for the discrimination lies in the context; from which it is known that, in the first case, Jesus did not receive the "wine mingled with myrrh", and, in the second, the disciples did receive the bread. Again, the imperfect in Luke 1:59 ("and they called (*ἐκάλεον*) him Zacharias") is named the Inchoative Imperfect.<sup>12</sup> Yet, in Acts 14:12 ("And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercury") the same tense and form of the same verb is not given the inchoative meaning. The reason for this is that, in the first case, the inchoative idea is gathered from the context, for Elizabeth would not allow the name; and, in the second, because the names Jupiter and Mercury were applied to Barnabas and Paul for a considerable period of time. It is evident that these distinctions have grown out of the context in connection with the tense-idea. Some grammarians and interpreters may feel inclined to justify this method of elaboration in the treatment of the tenses on the ground of utility, i. e., it helps one to see the distinct idea of the tenses. If this be allowed, there can be as many different kinds of imperfects, for instance, as there are different ideas in the contexts which modify the tense-meaning. But I venture to assert that more often this practice tends to obscure the meaning and value of the tenses. The same idea has been put in these words: "It has long been clear that the 'tense' has been overworked and made to mean much that it did not mean".<sup>13</sup> The practice has been to read into a tense a meaning that has been predicated of the same tense of another verb from

<sup>12</sup>S. G. Green, *A Handbook to the Gram. of the Gr. Test.*, p. 300.

<sup>13</sup>Robertson, p. 823.

a different context; and this led to still further refinement of the tense and a division into another category. All of which make for confusion in interpretation. An instance of this procedure is found in the Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament, by S. G. Green.<sup>14</sup> After exhibiting what is called the inchoative imperfect, he says, "From the inchoative sense arises a peculiar usage, in which the imperfect of verbs expressing desire seems to take a kind of potential sense". He cites Romans 9:3 as an example.

Let us look closely at this example, for it will illustrate well all that I have said. It has been translated: "I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh",<sup>15</sup> and "I could even myself pray to be anathema from Christ on behalf of my brethren", etc. It has been explained that Paul did not actually wish or pray to be anathema (accursed) from Christ, but that he was just on the point of doing it. It was thus translated and explained because it was felt that there was a "moral impossibility" in the way. Three things, I take it, are involved in this "moral impossibility" explanation; and when they are rightly understood the "moral impossibility" no longer exists: they are, first, the imperfect knowledge of the meaning and use of the word anathema (translated "accursed"); second, the misunderstanding of the preposition ἀπό (translated "from") with the ablative case; and, third, the ascription to the tense of the verb, rendered "pray" or "wish", a meaning which it was thought fitted the context as it was understood. We shall take these up in order. Ἀνάθεμα (anathema) was originally a dialectic variation of ἀνάθημα and used with the same meaning. It meant an offering dedicated to the gods, such offerings as crowns, vases of silver or gold, etc., which were suspended in the temples.

<sup>14</sup>Page 300.

<sup>15</sup>What I consider to be the true interpretation of this passage was suggested to me by Rev. Q. C. Davis, of North Carolina.

But to the Hebrew mind anything dedicated to an heathen god was an accursed thing. The writers of the LXX naturally used the dialectic form (*ἀνάθεμα*) to express this idea; but according to the MSS. the distinction of form and meaning seems never to have become certain. *Ἀνάθημα* occurs in Luke 21:5 with its proper meaning of gifts or offerings, but three MSS. (Aleph A. D.) here read *ἀνάθεμα*. The Fathers often explain the words as identical. "No certain instance is quoted of *ἀνάθημα* for *ἀνάθεμα* but *ἀνάθεμα* could be and was **used dialectically for *ἀνάθημα***".<sup>16</sup> Those who find "separation from" God as the main idea in *ἀνάθεμα* are unable to trace a common bond of meaning between it and *ἀνάθημα*.<sup>17</sup> There is no reason, then, why one should not allow Paul to use this word in its two meanings; since it is conceded that others before and after Paul did so use it. To this word then let us allow the meaning of votive offering.

In this passage the meaning generally given to the ablative (*Χριστοῦ*) with *ἀπὸ* ("from") is that of separation. But the idea of separation is not the only one carried by the ablative with *ἀπό*. It often has the meaning of source,<sup>18</sup> and, used of persons, the source of authority. For example, 1 Cor. 11:23, "For I received from the Lord (*ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου*), what I also delivered to you".<sup>19</sup> Paul gives the Lord as the authority for what he delivered to them. So then, let us take the phrase "from Christ" as expressing the source of authority.

The verb (*ἠύχουμην*) translated "wish" or "pray" is in the imperfect tense. The verb simply means "pray". Interpreters have read into this tense here a potential idea, because they felt that the context meant separation from Christ for destruction; and they considered this an im-

<sup>16</sup>Sanday and Headlam, in *Internat. Crit. Com. on the Epist. to the Romans*, p. 228.

<sup>17</sup>Vid. Trench, *Synonyms of the N. T.*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup>Vid. Robertson, pp. 514, 517.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. John 7:28, 29; 8:28, 42; 14:10.

possible wish or prayer on the part of Paul. In order to take away the logical result of their interpretation of the context, they made a meaning for the tense to fit their idea. But if we allow the imperfect tense here to have its true meaning, if we do not read into it something that is not there, if we let Paul say what he wants to say, we shall find the content of an high and holy prayer. He gives the prayer that has been continually going up from his heart, the prayer that he might be a votive offering coming from Christ in behalf of his brethren. As Christ was an offering on the cross in behalf of His people, he too wanted to be an offering in behalf of his brethren. The analogy is not between the offering on the cross and an offering on an altar, but between an offering suspended, hung up, and the offering on the cross. Paul desired to follow Christ's example;<sup>20</sup> and he did not contemplate being lost any more than Christ was lost.

---

<sup>20</sup>See also Col. 1:24.

Time forbade consideration of all the tenses or any one of them fully. I can only hope that the discussion may in some measure contribute to the proper appreciation of the Greek tenses. If it lead some into the study of the Greek New Testament, if it lead others into an earnest and more accurate investigation of His Word, I shall be glad.