Chapter 8

Support the sinner not the sin: support-verb constructions and New Testament ethical frameworks

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In this chapter, I consider the development of support-verb constructions in New Testament Greek and the potential exegetical impact of philological developments. I investigate to what extent ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' and the construction ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'I commit a sin' may be considered synonymous and explore how the use of a support-verb construction may have an exegetical impact of distancing sin from sinner. The noun becomes more frequently used, but remains less frequent than the verb. In the New Testament, however, the ratio is 4:1. This increase in the use of the noun over the verb makes sin into a substantive, rather than a process. In doing this, sin can be separated from sinner, made into something which can be removed from them and is not necessarily part of their identity. This move to a support-verb construction with a noun is also evident with the related noun ἁμάρτημα *hamártēma* 'sin'.

En el presente artículo, se examina el desarrollo de las construcciones con verbo de apoyo en el Nuevo Testamento y el potencial impacto exegético de nuevos avances filológicos. Se estudia el grado en que se puede considerar ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'pecar' y la construcción ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'cometer un pecado' como sinónimos, y se analiza cómo del uso de una construcción con verbo de apoyo puede tener el impacto exegético de separar el pecado del pecador. El uso del sustantivo gana frecuencia, pero sin superar al verbo. En el Nuevo Testamento, sin embargo, la proporción es de 4:1. Este aumento en el uso del nombre sobre el verbo hace que se trate el pecado como un sustantivo, más que como un proceso. De esta manera, el pecado puede separarse del pecador, como algo extraíble que no tiene que formar parte de su identidad. Esta tendencia a favor de las construcciones con verbo de apoyo y el sustantivo se aprecia también con el sustantivo relacionado ἁμάρτημα *hamártēma* 'pecado'.

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1 Introduction

In this chapter[1], I consider the development of support-verb constructions in New Testament Greek and the potential exegetical impact of philological developments. My key case study verb is ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do'. In 1 John, for example, both the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' and the construction ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin' are used. I investigate to what extent these may be considered synonymous, and explore how the use of a support-verb construction may have an exegetical impact in terms of distancing sin from sinner. Support-verb constructions divorce the semantic and morphological roles of the verb used, and therefore allow for a different relationship between agent and action. This allows for the construction of Christian personhood distinguishing between agent and action, sinner and sin, which has significant moral implications. There may also be a diachronic difference in how the gospels portray Jesus differentiating between the two, how epistles reflect on this, and how Christian ethics beyond the New Testament deal with the topic more broadly. In blending philological and theological approaches to the same material, I therefore consider the potential exegetical impact of improving our philological understanding of the New Testament. Relatively little work has so far been done on support verb constructions in the New Testament, and this chapter therefore aims to add to both the philological discussion, and its application to New Testament exegesis.[2]

2 Definition

For the purpose of this chapter, I start with the simplicity of Salkoff's definition of support-verb constructions (SVCs henceforth): "The principal feature of the support verb construction is that the verbal slot in the sentence is occupied by the combination of a verb, V_{sup}, plus a noun, N_{sup}" (Salkoff 1990: 244). Nagy et al. (2013: 329) describe them as light verbs in multi-word expressions, where the verb functions as the syntactic head while the semantic head is the noun (see also Kamber 2008 for the German background to the concept). This splits process and product, a distinction which will be important to this chapter. Stefan Langer (2005) makes this distinction clear in his work on a general definition for SVCs which includes demonstrating the semantic emptiness, potential interchangeability, and removability of the verb. Gross (1984: 275) encourages us to consider

[1]The dataset is accessible here: http://dx.doi.org/10.5287/ora-dqjeo65n5.

[2]Jiménez López has done some work in this area, but it does not deal with sin specifically (my focus here) and in part deals with the Latin translation of the New Testament, with which I deal with further in Ryan (2025). See Jiménez López (2017, 2018), Baños & Jiménez López (2022).

phrasal lexical entries, that is nouns in their verbal contexts, and not just individual words. In this chapter, I examine the ramifications of choosing an SVC over a simplex verb for the exegetical impact of the text. Stroik (2001: 363) argues that light verbs (his term for what I am calling support verbs) have stronger phonetic and semantic justification than many SVC definitions allow, at least in English; I aim to demonstrate that with regards to sin in Judaeo-Christian thought, there is a relationship between morphology / syntax and theology which is predicated on the light verb enabling a particular more pragmatic relationship between agent and action, rather than necessarily a phonetic or semantic one.

I am working with a model of a periphrastic construction involving a semantically empty verb with a deverbal noun carrying the semantic weight, set against semantically equivalent verbs. My one modification would be that I will also consider combinations where the N_{sup} is replaced by an adjective functioning substantively; this is particularly relevant with the adjectives κακός *kakos* 'bad' and καλός *kalos* 'fine / beautiful'. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the use of adjectives as substantives in the New Testament more generally, but it is a frequent feature of New Testament Greek.[3] In addition to the definition of an SVC, for the purpose of this article there also needs to be a verb which could be semantically equivalent, but potentially not pragmatically equivalent. This chapter will consider what some of the pragmatic differences are, a topic well-discussed by Cappelle & Travassos (2022: 74).

3 My corpus and its limitations

This chapter is confined to the use of SVCs in the New Testament. Depending on the edition and means of counting, there are 138,162 words in the Greek New Testament. This comprises 5,437 different words, only 319 of which occur more than 50 times, and account for around 80% of the total word count. 3,465 are New Testament *hapax legomena*, and 8 are full corpus *hapax legomena*.[4] Given

[3]For the standard introduction to this given to many beginners, see Duff & Wenham (2008), chapter 5.

[4]In this chapter, my data are mainly drawn from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. For the basic information about total word counts, however, I have used the standard Greek editions as made available in the *Logos Bible software*. The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* gives a total word count for the Greek New Testament of 137,938, including 6,432 lemmata, which is significantly different to the usual figures quoted in New Testament studies. This is in part due to the texts used in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, and the way in which it distinguishes and counts words. Of the 8 *hapax legomena*, six are names, and only two are true New Testament *hapax legomena*: οἰκουργός, -ὸν *oikourgós, -ón* 'homemaker' and πραϋπαθία, -ας, ἡ *praüpathía, -as, hē* 'gentleness of temper'. Despite its prolific word-building, very few of the words in the Greek New Testament remain unquoted elsewhere.

how relatively few frequently used words there are in the New Testament, that 138,162-word corpus is large enough to analyse in terms of patterns, with some caveats.

Any analysis of the New Testament must accept its significant limitations as a corpus. It is an arbitrary collection of texts not formally canonised until the councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397). It is constructed on theological grounds rather than linguistic ones, and is written largely by authors whose first language was not Greek (Luke is the major exception, with Luke-Acts accounting for roughly 25% of the whole corpus). The Greek may broadly reflect the versions of contemporary vernaculars, but this is still an awkward collection of texts with which to work on linguistic grounds. New Testament linguistics faces many challenges when trying to extrapolate general points about Greek from this relatively small and disparate sample. The geographical, temporal, and linguistic backgrounds of the writers are sufficiently diverse as to make it in many ways an unrepresentative corpus on linguistic terms.[5]

As a simple example, the future tense is noticeably infrequent in the New Testament, and therefore often not well-taught. One would not, however, want to consider Greek a language without a way to express the future, or the New Testament as a text wherein eschatology is unimportant.[6] The future is talked about in different ways, including periphrastic phrases which, being multi-word phrases themselves, begin to lead us into the territory of SVCs.

Although the corpus may be limited and awkward, both in size and nature, it does demonstrate some trends, and once it became canonised as a closed corpus of religiously significant texts, the language in which it was written underpinned the development of a new religion and new forms of religious expression. By fossilising the New Testament to preserve the text's religious importance, therefore, the techniques with which it expresses some topics become significant in new ways. It is this relationship between the development of the expressions and their theological impact which I investigate in this chapter.

[5]For a general introduction to New Testament Koine as conceived in a great Greek context, see Georgakopoulou & Silk (2009). Horrocks (2010: 147–152) deals in particular with New Testament Koine; see pp. 147 and 149 for his discussion of it as a standard language under the Roman administration in particular. I challenge some of the standardisation of New Testament Koine as a form in Ryan (2024). Tronci (2018: 243) reiterates the point that many relevant linguistic analyses are synchronic, and the New Testament needs special attention as a corpus of linguistically disparate texts.

[6]See Ryan (2024) on the teaching of the future tense and the ideological impact of textbook design. In terms of the lack of frequency, there are, for example, only twelve future participles and five future infinitives in the New Testament.

4 Support-verb constructions in the New Testament

Sometimes it is possible to see clear idiolectical differences between New Testament authors, even in matters as simple as Mark's use of καί *kaí* 'and' and John's use of οὖν *oũn* 'so, therefore'. In the case of SVCs, however, the spread appears to be broader, governed by contextual criteria beyond individual authorship. I demonstrate how these criteria include the use of linguistic structures to sculpt a new theological framework. This involves considering differences in the locus of agency between various kinds of verbs, and support-verb constructions.

Of the 571 total uses of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in the New Testament, 50 meet my criteria for being interpreted as SVCs. These are a mix of active and middle verbs, predominantly active (16 middle). They are found in all four gospels and a further fourteen texts. A further 42 could be interpreted as SVCs if the substantive use of adjectives is included, including 20 related to doing good or bad. These lead to 9–12% of uses of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in the New Testament functioning as a support verb, according to my definition. This is a considerable proportion of the uses of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in the New Testament, which is sufficiently significant to be worthy of further investigation.

4.1 Choosing examples

When searching for collocations, I considered only examples where the verb was within five words of the noun. This allows for particles, articles or other modifiers, whilst acknowledging that, in order to be an SVC, the noun and verb needed to be in close proximity. I then checked each example manually, to ensure that these were phrases and not merely words in proximity but, for example, across sentence barriers.

My key phrase in this article pertains to sin, but I also consider other related terms and phrases, and ways in which the verb ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' might be used in an SVC. I do not, however, count examples such as 'bearing fruit' (ποιῶ καρπόν *poiō karpón* 'to bear fruit') as an SVC, as, although there is a verb (cf. καρποφορεῖ *karpophoreĩ* at NT Matthew 13:2), both the verb and the SVC are only used eight times each in the New Testament, which would be too few on which to base any argument. I outline the relevant numbers and examples further below.

4.2 The Septuagint as scene-setting

ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' is used along with ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' in order to form a mulit-word verb in the Septuagint. Written around 300 years before the New

Testament, it uses an older form of Greek, which is itself Atticising, and therefore occasionally archaic. The New Testament quotes the Septuagint directly, paraphrases it, and remodels ideas from it, as well as being generally influenced by it and the Jewish cultural language underlying it. Elements of New Testament Greek can therefore display archaising tendencies in keeping with the Septuagint, rather than being reflective of their own linguistic context.

Multi-word verbs do have a role in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. One might, therefore, consider that support verbs in the New Testament grow in part from the Hebrew influence on the Septuagint, but this does not seem to be the case. Most distinctive is the number of relative clauses using ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' to refer back to ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin', in some senses a 'split' SVC: OT Numbers 5:3, OT Deuteronomy 9:21, OT 3 Kings 16:19, OT 4 Kings 17:22, OT Psalms 8:13, OT Ezekiel 18:14, and OT Susanna 52:6. While there are lots of periphrastic phrases, particularly regarding the formulaic language of sacrificing cows / burnt offerings, they are not SVCs. Only OT Tobit 12:10, in the *Codex Sinaiticus*, fulfils my criteria for an SVC (see 1).

(1) οἱ **ποιοῦντες** **ἁμαρτίαν** καὶ **ἀδικίαν** πολέμιοί
hoi *poioũntes* *hamartían* *kaì* *adikían* *polémioí*
the.NOM do.PRS.PTCP.NOM sin.ACC and injustice.ACC enemies.NOM
εἰσιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν ψυχῆς
eisin *tẽs* *heautõn* *psukhẽs*
be.PRS.3PL theGEN.SG their.GEN.PL souls.GEN.SG
'Those committing sin and injustice are enemies of their souls.'
(OT Tobit 12:10)

This pre-empts the similar relationship drawn between ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' and ἀδικία *adikía* 'unrighteousness' discussed below, with particular reference to NT 1 John. It also follows the other conventions seen in New Testament SVCs in this context, that is, substantive participle of the light verb followed by the relevant noun. A textual variation replaces οἱ ποιοῦντες ἁμαρτίαν *hoi poioũntes hamartían* 'those committing a sin' with οἱ δὲ ἁμαρτάνοντες *hoi dè hamartánontes* 'those sinning', demonstrating the closeness of the relationship between the SVC and the simplex verb in the minds of those copying out this text.

Verbs other than ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' are also available for rendering description of sin in the Septuagint. There are 25 examples where the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' and the noun ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' are used within the same phrase. 22 of these, however, are in subordinate clauses where the verb refers back to the noun in fairly formulaic phrases, and 12/22 examples are in Leviticus (see (2)), further limiting the construction to particular contexts.

(2) ὁ ἱερεὺς περὶ τῆς ἁμαρτίας αὐτοῦ, ἧς
ho hiereùs perì tẽs hamartías autoũ, hẽs
the.NOM priest.NOM about the.GEN sin.GEN he.GEN REL.GEN
ἥμαρτεν
hḗmarten
sin.AOR.IND.3SG
'The priest… about his sin, sin which he had sinned.'
(OT Leviticus 5:10=5:13)

Indeed, 17/25 are from the Pentateuch, which very much suggests a specific linguistic and theological context for the phrasing, linked both to the Greek of those specific books, and to their significance within Judaism. Only three are used (see (3) to (5)) in any sense which could be called inflecting the topic (unnecessarily repeating multiple forms of a lexical root):

(3) Ὑμεῖς ἡμαρτήκατε ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλην
Humeĩs hēmartḗkate hamartían megálēn
you.NOM sin.PRF.IND.2PL sin.ACC great.ACC
'You have sinned a great sin'
(OT Exodus 32:30)

(4) ἡμάρτηκεν ὁ λαὸς οὗτος ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλην
hēmártēken ho laòs hoũtos hamartían megálēn
sin.PRF.IND.3SG the.NOM people.NOM this.NOM sin.ACC great.ACC
'This people have sinned a great sin'
(OT Exodus 32:31)

(5) Ἁμαρτίαν ἥμαρτεν Ιερουσαλημ
Hamartían hḗmarten Ierousalēm
sin.ACC sin.AOR.IND.3SG Jerusalem.NOM
'Jerusalem sinned a sin'
(OT Lamentations 8:1)

Both Exodus examples use verbs in the perfect tense, delineating the participants as sinners as much as the sin being committed. Both also use the adjective 'big', which may mean that the repetition is as much about contributing to the sense of importance and enormity, not as a linguistic trope. The example from Lamentations is again atypical, being poetic, and anthropomorphising a town, Jerusalem. It does not seem, therefore, as though this verb plus noun repetition is a standard feature of the Septuagint, so much as being available for specific uses, namely relative clauses and emphasis within the Pentateuch.

4.3 Voice

Jiménez López (2016) argues that SVCs use the middle voice of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do'. In the New Testament, this is true, on my criteria, in only 16/50 examples. The middle voice examples deal with memory, prayer, nouns derived from βάλλω *bállō* 'to throw', causing an increase, or making a journey. The examples are spread across authors (11/27 texts), but are restricted to specific contexts. Eight are in the first chapter of a text, and seven of those eight within the first four verses, in phrases which seem to suggest formulaic idioms rather than free linguistic choice (see (6)).[7]

(6) Τὸν μὲν πρῶτον **λόγον** **ἐποιησάμην** περὶ πάντων
Tòn mèn prō̃ton lógon epoiēsámēn perì pántōn
the.ACC PRT first.ACC account.ACC do.AOR.IND.1PL about everything.GEN
'I made the first account about everything…'
(NT Acts of the Apostles 1:1)

This example does not have an obvious corresponding verb apart from λέγω *légō* 'to speak, say, recount, tell', which does not cover quite the same remit. While it therefore meets my definition of an SVC in terms of using ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' as a semantically light verb along with a relevant noun, it is missing the equivalent verb for this context. Given the novelty and status Luke is trying to create for himself in this introduction, however, the ease with which the phrase can be understood, and the clearly "light" use of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do', I would count it as an SVC, but an example which demonstrates that there is a spectrum of usage in the New Testament, and not a clear polarisation between SVCs and other constructions.

More clearly under the category of SVCs with middle verbs are 1 Timothy 2:1 and Romans 1:9 (see (7) and (8) respectively).

(7) Παρακαλῶ οὖν πρῶτον πάντων **ποιεῖσθαι** **δεήσεις**,
Parakalō̃ oũn prō̃ton pántōn poieĩsthai deéseis,
urge.PRS.IND.1SG PRT first.ADV all.GEN do.PRS.INF.MID prayers.ACC

[7]The full list is NT Acts of the Apostles 1:1, NT Ephesians 1:16, NT Philippians 1:4, NT 1 Timothy 2:1, NT 1 Thessalonians 1:2, NT 2 Peter 1:10, NT 2 Peter 1:15. Throughout this chapter I put the relevant verb form in bold with underline, and underline any nouns joined with it, so that readers less familiar with Greek can identify constructions. All translations from the New Testament in this chapter are my own. They are intended to support understanding of the Greek, not as elegant translations in their own right.

προσευχάς, **ἐντεύξεις**, **εὐχαριστίας**
proseukhás, *enteúxeis*, *eukharistías*
entreaties.ACC petitions.ACC thanks.ACC
'So I urge you first of all to make prayers, entreaties, and petitions, and give thanks…'

(NT 1 Timothy 2:1)

(8) ὡς ἀδιαλείπτως **μνείαν** ὑμῶν **ποιοῦμαι**
hōs adialeíptōs mneían humō̃n poioũmai
how unceasing.ADV remembrance.ACC you.GEN do.PRS.IND.1SG
'…how I unceasingly make a remembrance of you…'

(NT Romans 1:9)

At first glance, therefore, it seems as though ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' is used in typical SVCs, in the middle voice, as we might expect, but infrequently, with some variation. Voice in the New Testament is a contested topic, remaining one of the key issues for debate among those dealing with New Testament linguistics (see e.g. Tronci 2018, Black & Merkle 2020). ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' used in the active voice as a support verb becomes more usual as we move into later Greek, however, and its New Testament use in this form is therefore not unexpected.[8] Given that ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' is only used in the active voice in the New Testament, it also makes sense for the replacement SVC to be expressed in the active voice, not least given the necessarily transitive status of an SVC, and the potentially more intransitive nature of the middle voice.[9] I explore some potential ramifications of voice differences later in this chapter, but at this point, it is enough to say that I do count active uses of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in the New Testament as eligible for forming SVCs, albeit demonstrating a difference in the range of uses available in the active to the middle voice.[10] This means that,

[8] See Cock, Alwies (1981) on voice choice with ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do'. This is also linked to the phenomenon of aorist middle endings falling out of use / merging with aorist passive endings noted by Horrocks (2010: 103) and Tronci (2018: 251–252). Further work on this area can also be found in Vives Cuesta & Madrigal Acero (2022).

[9] See Tronci (2018: 245) on ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' as active only, and p. 249 on transitivity.

[10] Jiménez López (2021) also writes about γίγνομαι *gígnomai* as the lexical passive of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in support-verb constructions. There is only one example in the New Testament where γί(γ)νομαι *gí(g)nomai* 'to become' could be said to be taking this role with regard to sin, however, which is NT Romans 7:13. This is not a clear case, given the more predicative nature of the statement. In terms of committing sin, a passive expression using γί(γ)νομαι *gí(g)nomai* 'to become' is not found. This means that there remains an agent of sin throughout the language around ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' in the New Testament, but, I suggest, this agent is also held at a

for the purposes of this chapter, ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin' is considered an SVC. My specific context is that of committing a sin, and the exegetical and ethical impact of using ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in this way.

4.4 Putting ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' as part of a support-verb construction in context

Before turning to sin, however, I further define some of the aspects of ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' and related terms as SVCs and similar in the New Testament, notably word order, negation, and the potential for plural head nouns. Word order is relatively consistent in SVCs using ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' in the New Testament. In only four examples does the verb occur before the noun. Three of those are in the formula πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν *pãs ho poiῶn tὲn hamartían* 'everyone who commits a sin' in John / NT 1 John, where πᾶς *pãs* 'everyone' + article + participle is such a stylistic pattern that this formula seems to override the SVC's internal syntax.[11] The other use is NT 1 Timothy 2:1, quoted above, where the verb governs a short catalogue of nouns, which follow neatly in order. In all other examples, the verb directly follows the noun; the only words which might intervene are descriptions of the noun (e.g. possessive pronouns, prepositional phrases, and adjectives), or negations of the verb.[12] In each of the negative cases (NT 1 John 3:9, NT 1 Peter 2:22, NT Romans 13:14, the verb is negated with the adverb (two veridical, one non-veridical), and not any of the more complex syntactical elements described by Fendel (2023: 7–8) in her work on negating support verb constructions. This strengthens the sense of the verbal phrase, with the noun syntactically subordinated to the verb in the SVC, rather than the noun being negated. None of these patterns are specific to the voice of the verb, however, suggesting that the active and middle do work similarly in support-verb constructions in the New Testament.

distance from the sin by the very form of the support-verb construction. The de-agentivisation talked about by Jiménez López is not needed, because the agency has already been reduced by the use of a support-verb construction.

[11]Examples include: NT 1 John 2:29 πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην *pãs ho poiῶn tὲn dikaiosúnēn* 'everyone who acts justly' – an SVC), NT 1 John 3:4 Πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν καὶ τὴν ἀνομίαν ποιεῖ *Pãs ho poiῶn tὲn hamartían kaì tὲn anomían poieῖ* 'Everyone who commits a sin also commits lawlessness', NT 1 John 4:7 καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται *kaì pãs ho agapῶn ek toũ theoũ gegénnētai* 'Everyone who loves has been begotten from God', and NT 1 John 5:1 Πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν ὁ Χριστὸς *Pãs ho pisteúōn hóti Iēsoũs estin ho Khristòs* 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is Christ', to give a representative sample from 1 John.

[12]See Fendel (2023: 4) on this discontiguous aspect of SVCs.

Only three of the New Testament SVCs with ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' feature plural head nouns (NT 1 Timothy 2:1, NT James 5:15, NT Luke 5:33).[13] One of these refers to sin, the other two to prayers. Prayer is also referred to singularly (NT Philippians 1:4), but in general, plural prayers standing as a collective concept is not peculiar ('our thoughts and prayers are with you'). Of the 18 uses of δέησις *déēsis* 'prayer' in the New Testament, 8 are plural, and the only example of δεήσεις *déēseis* 'prayers' not in an SVC is the NT Letter to the Hebrews 5:7, following on from a Septuagint quotation and so glossing archaising Greek rather than reflecting natural New Testament Koine.

The plural in James 5:15 may seem awkward (see (9)).

(9) κἂν **ἁμαρτίας** ᾖ̃ **πεποιηκώς**, ἀφεθήσεται
kàn *hamartías* *ᾖ̃* *pepoiēkṓs* *aphethḗsetai*
even.if sins.ACC be.PRS.SBJV.3SG do.PRF.PTCP.NOM forgive.FUT.PASS.3SG
αὐτῷ
autῷ̃
he.DAT
'Even if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven'
(NT James 5:15)

The majority (111/173) of examples of ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' in the New Testament are plural. The question might in fact be why all the rest of the examples in SVCs are singular, accounting for 7/27, or nearly a quarter of all the uses of ἁμαρτίαν *hamartían* 'sin' in the accusative singular.[14] There may be something formulaic about the phraseology of committing a sin developing in the New Testament, particularly as three of these phrases occur within one chapter of one letter (NT 1 John 3). In addition, the use of the singular makes sin specific, allowing for a clear example of an individual instance of sin being committed by an individual person, rather than as a general way of life. This begins to build a picture of a distinctive sinner committing distinctive sin, and not of general ethical sweeps. Within the parameters of permissible variation outlined by Fendel, however, there is very little relevant in New Testament SVCs. The sample may be small compared with the size of the corpus, but the construction seems to be relatively formulaic and context specific (Fendel 2023: 4–5). How, therefore, is it used with reference to sin?

[13] On pluralising head nouns as a feature of SVCs, see Fendel (2023: 4).

[14] The other references are: NT John 8:34, NT 2 Corinthians 5:21 (x2), NT 1 Peter 2:22, NT 1 John 3:4, NT 1 John 3:8, NT 1 John 3:9.

5 Committing Sin

The verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' is attested 26,518 times in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* corpus. It initially refers to a physical missing of a mark with a bow and arrow, but by Christian times it refers to the process of sinning. The meaning changes from literal mistake to metaphorical error to moral fault. In the standard lexicon of Classical Greek, *Liddell-Scott-Jones,* we find 'miss the mark… fail of one's purpose… go wrong… do wrong… err… sin' (Liddell et al. 1996). In Muraoko's lexicon of the Septuagint, this becomes 'act sinfully… commit a sin… fail to be available', which already emphasises both the moral quality of the term and its potential periphrastic expression (Muraoka 2009). In the standard New Testament lexicon, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (BDAG), we find 'to commit wrong, to sin', and only further down the entry any downgraded reference to its earlier physical meaning (Arndt et al. 2000). As a physical term, its remit is very limited and so, unsurprisingly, we find it used relatively infrequently. As it becomes more metaphorical, its usage increases.[15]

The distribution of the verb begins to form more of a pattern when considered in the light of its related nouns. The noun ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' has a very different distribution. There are 44,868 examples attested in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* corpus. The highest frequencies by author and text are again all Christian contexts, notably John Chrysostom and the catena to the New Testament. Overall, it is used 1.68 times for every use of the verb.

In what follows, I aim to demonstrate why the SVC formulation provides a morpho-syntactic framework to carry a theological point demarcating Christian ethics as different to other ethical systems, in distinguishing the product of an action from its producer.

Homer does not use the noun at all. In all other pre-Christian authors I have evaluated, the verb is more common than the noun. A few examples are given in Table 1.

I chose these authors as representative of genres where wrongdoing is discussed (drama, forensic oratory, philosophy). In the case of Lucian and Plutarch,

[15]It is most commonly used by John Chrysostom, the fourth-century Early Church Father. That is true, however, of most of the lemmata in this lexical group, and further work is needed to remove disproportionately over-represented authors such as Chrysostom from samples, not least because his much later date also means that his language represents a different phase in the development of Greek. I discuss the diachronic lexical development of the Greek terms used in this chapter further in my forthcoming monograph (Ryan 2025), but further discussion of lexical aspects is largely beyond the scope of this chapter.

Table 1: Ratio of uses of the noun ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' to the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' in 10 Greek authors

Author	Century	Genre	Noun : verb
Aeschylus	5th BC	Tragedy	0.31:1
Sophocles	5th BC	Tragedy	0.18:1
Euripides	5th BC	Tragedy	0.33:1
Plato	5th - 4th BC	Philosophy	0.16:1
Lysias	5th - 4th BC	Forensic oratory	0.07:1
Isocrates	5th - 4th BC	Forensic oratory	0.08:1
Demosthenes	4th BC	Forensic oratory	0.1:1
Aristotle	4th BC	Philosophy	0.49:1
Plutarch	1st AD	Various but contemporary	0.26:1
Lucian	1st AD	Various but contemporary	0.07:1

they are roughly contemporaneous with the gospel writers, reflecting other varieties of Koine used at the time.[16] In addition, the older texts represent examples of the Atticising style which both the Septuagint and New Testament sometimes emulate. While there is variation in the distribution, the verb remains more common, and there is broad consistency between genres.

The distribution only inverts once we look at a Judaeo-Christian context. In the New Testament, the noun is four times as common as the verb, which reverses all the figures above, and is significantly different from the whole corpus ratio of 1:1.68.[17] There is a clear shift in emphasis from verb to noun.

I suggest that the increase in the use of the noun over the verb makes sin into a thing, not a process. In so doing, sin can be separated from sinner, made into something which can be removed from the agent. This means the sin is not necessarily part of the sinner's identity, which allows for a human personhood that is not inherently sinful so much as capable of committing sins. This leaves people as ultimately good (God-created), but flawed, and so capable of sinning but of being forgiven and redeemed. It also allows for Jesus to be human and yet sinless, as sin is not inherently tied to human nature, but to human action.

This may also partly inform the voice of the support verb. Given the potential self-involvement of the middle voice, it may cast a self-referentiality into sinning

[16] See Horrocks (2010) for a broad categorisation of types of Koine.

[17] For reference, our top contributor John Chrysostom, uses ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' 1.46 times for every use of ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō*, so below the corpus average, but before the pre-Christian average.

which would be at odds with the distinction between sin and sinner. The balance of focus between sinner, sin, and anyone sinned against is already obvious in the use of objects with the different verbs. ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' can be directed towards a recipient; people can be sinned against. About 1/5 uses in the New Testament take a prepositional phrase, with seven examples of εἰς *eis* 'into', one of ἐπί *epí* 'upon', and two of πρός *prós* 'towards'.[18]

ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin', on the other hand, never includes a person sinned against. This is partly due to the fact that the verb already has a direct object (ἁμαρτίαν *hamartían* 'sin'), but a prepositional phrase could still have been used. The focus is on the fact that someone is sinning, not that sin might be causing a problem (e.g. see (10 to (12)).

(10) Πᾶς ὁ **ποιῶν** τὴν **ἁμαρτίαν** καὶ τὴν
Pãs ho poiõn tẽn hamartían kaì tẽn
every.NOM the.NOM do.PRS.PTCP.NOM the.ACC sin.ACC and the.ACC
ἀνομίαν ποιεῖ
anomían poieĩ
lawlessness.ACC do.PRS.IND.3SG
'Everyone who commits a sin also commits lawlessness'
(NT 1 John 3:4)

(11) ὁ **ποιῶν** τὴν **ἁμαρτίαν** ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου
ho poiõn tẽn hamartían ek toũ diabólou
the.NOM do.PRS.PTCP.NOM the.ACC sin.ACC from the.GEN devil.GEN
ἐστίν
estín
be.PRS.IND.3SG
'The one who commits a sin comes from the devil'
(NT 1 John 3:8)

(12) Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ
Pãs ho gegennēménos ek toũ theoũ
every.NOM the.NOM bear.PRF.PTCP.PASS.NOM from the.GEN god.GEN
ἁμαρτίαν οὐ **ποιεῖ**
hamartían ou poieĩ
sin.ACC NEG do.PRS.IND.3SG
'Everyone born of God does not commit sin'
(NT 1 John 3:9)

[18]Note that πρός *prós* 'towards' only describes the difference between mortal and venial sin, in NT 1 John 5:16, rather than sin against an individual.

The transitivity of sinning is less marked in the SVC. As a move away from the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' and any object, it may also reflect aspects of God's omnipresence in the New Testament. Just as miracles are often expressed in the passive with no agent (the so-called divine passive, where God is the assumed agent)[19], so sin requires no expressed recipient as it is ultimately always God against whom we are sinning. The production of sin is the problem, not the consequence of the sin against any one person, but against God in general. The construction ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin' appears to be used specifically to focus attention on production, but not necessarily agency. Where there is a third party affected by sin, the simplex verb is used. The SVC is only used where the affected party is not referred to. This makes what in Christian terms is a fundamentally relational process, sinning against someone (certainly in Luke, where ¾ uses are followed by εἰς *eis* 'into'), into an individualised one. It allows for reflection on the space between causation and impact.

My reading of this distinction between SVC and simplex verb can be demonstrated with some specific examples. Only 8 of the 173 uses of ἁμαρτία *hamartía* are within a five-word proximity of the verb ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' to create a meaningful phrase. Three of these are in the NT 1 John 3 examples given above, a text where the act of sinning is a running theme, echoing the use at NT John 8:34. 10/43 uses of the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' are also used in 1 John, and four of these ten are in chapter 3, making 1 John the densest use of sin language in the New Testament. In just the first ten verses, there are six examples of πᾶς ὁ *pās ho* 'the one who' + participle, and another three with just the article and participle. There is a rhythm, fluency, syllogistic undertone, potentially formulaic shape, and clear stylistic unity to this passage, which focusses in on the process of sin in relationship to God.

The ease with which Greek moves between lexically related items, however, potentially undercuts my argument about the distinction between sin and sinner. In NT 1 John 3:7, we read: ὁ **ποιῶν** τὴν **δικαιοσύνην** δίκαιός ἐστιν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιός ἐστιν· *ho poiῶn tὲn dikaiosúnēn díkaiós estin, kathὸs ekeῖnos díkaiós estin;* 'The one who does something just is just, just as that one is just'. Here, action and character are directly linked. A verse earlier, however, and sin has been described in very different terms: πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει· πᾶς ὁ ἁμαρτάνων οὐχ ἑώρακεν αὐτὸν οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν αὐτόν. *hamartánei; pās ho hamartánōn oukh heőraken autὸn oudὲ égnōken autón* 'Everyone who remains in him does not sin; everyone who sins has neither seen him nor come to know him', NT 1 John 3:6. Here, the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' is used and

[19]For example, NT Galatians 5:18, and NT Ephesians 3:19.

not the SVC, and there is no equation with the character of the person, but with what else the person has or has not done (remained / seen / known). The relationship between the two verses points to a difference between sin and other actions, but also to the lack of availability of the SVC in the context where there is the potential for the action to be equated with the character of the agent.

Differentiating New Testament ethics from its classical precursors also resulted in significant vocabulary coinage and repurposing. I now turn to consider my hypothesis about the impact of the increasing use of the noun ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' in the context of other words and phrases.

5.1 το ἁμάρτημα *to hamártēma* 'sin'

The -μα *-ma* suffix creates a noun representing the product of the verb.[20] Again, the word becomes steadily moralised as it develops. In *Liddell-Scott-Jones*, we find 'failure, fault', in Muroako 'sinful act…failure to achieve an aim…penalty incurred for committing a sin…slaughtered animal offered to atone', and in *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (BDAG) 'sin, transgression' (Liddell et al. 1996, Muraoka 2009, Arndt et al. 2000). In terms of Christian sin, therefore, this noun has two key uses. It differentiates Christian ethics from the language of Aristotle, where ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin' has a very specific Greek cultural remit, and it firmly represents sin as the consequence of action, divorcing the action from the agent, and potentially from the process.

There are, however, only four examples of ἁμάρτημα *hamártēma* 'sin' in the New Testament (out of 14,727 attested in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*), only one of which is used with ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' (see (13)).

(13) πᾶν **ἁμάρτημα** ὃ ἐὰν **ποιήσῃ** ἄνθρωπος ἐκτὸς
pãn hamártēma hò eàn poiḗsḛ̄ ánthrōpos ektòs
every.NOM sin.NOM REL.ACC if do.AOR.SBJV.3SG man.NOM outside.of
τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν· ὁ δὲ
toũ sṓmatós estin; ho dè
the.GEN body.GEN be.PRS.IND.3SG the.NOM PRT
πορνεύων εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα
porneúōn eis tò ídion sõma
be.sexually.immoraly.PRS.PTCP.NOM against the.ACC own.ACC body.ACC

[20]See Long (1968) on this process in Sophocles for a particularly strong discussion of the phenomenon.

ἁμαρτάνει
hamartánei
sin.PRS.IND.3SG

'Every sin which a man might commit is outside his body; but the one who is sexually immoral sins against his own body'

(NT 1 Corinthians 6:18)

The verb ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do' is only used in the relative clause to refer back to the noun, rather than independently, and is counterbalanced by the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin' in the second phrase. There seems to be some kind of interchangeability between the two here, but we do not have enough examples to be sure of the usage pattern.[21] The relative lack of ἁμάρτημα *hamártēma* 'sin' may also be explained by the existence of an SVC; an SVC achieves morphosyntactically what ἁμάρτημα *hamártēma* 'sin' achieves lexically when compared with ἁμαρτία *hamartia* 'sin'; within the whole corpus, there are under 100 examples of ποιῶ ἁμάρτημα *poiō hamártēma* 'to commit a sin' as an SVC, depending on definition, making it not an unusual construction, but not one the New Testament needs to use to achieve its theological goals.

Similar to -μα *-ma* nouns acting as products of verbs, -σις *-sis* nouns give the process of the verb in action.[22] A further way to consider and contextualise the use of SVCs in differentiating product from process is to look at the relative distribution of ἁμάρτησις *hamártēsis* 'sin' and verbs used with it. Of the 238 attested uses of ἁμάρτησις *hamártēsis* 'sin' found in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, only nine predate the Christian era; it is sufficiently uncommon not even to appear in *Liddell-Scott-Jones*. There is only one example in the New Testament (NT Matthew 18:21), after which it grows in popularity. Almost none are used with ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do'; while other -σις *-sis* nouns are used in SVCs postclassically, ἁμάρτησις *hamártēsis* 'sin' is not, except in later commentaries on Ecclesiastes, and Theophanes Continuatus.[23] This suggests, at first reading, that it is a thoroughly Christian (rather than biblical) way of expressing moral wrongdoing, which sits at odds with the rest of the argument I am making in divorcing product from process. It may be, however, that the crucial link is not between product and process, but between agent and action. It may also demonstrate the

[21]The greatest frequency of ἁμάρτημα *hamártēma* 'sin' is again in John Chrysostom, with other Christian literature providing the next most frequent sources.

[22]Again, see Long (1968) for a thorough discussion of Sophocles' manipulation of this form.

[23]Olympiodorus Diaconus Scr. Eccl. Commentarii in Ecclesiasten vol.93 pg.569 line 21; Maximus Confessor Theol. Scholia in Ecclesiasten (in catenis: catena trium patrum) 7:111; and Theophanes Continuatus Chronogr. et Hist. Chronographia (lib. 1–6) pg.27 line 17.

development of Christian thought in progress, from a biblical concept where sin and sinner need to be divorced, with morphology providing the mechanism, to later works where the lexicon supplies an alternative route.

Adding weight to my argument that the agency behind sin is not located in the sinner (but perhaps in the devil), the agent noun ἁμαρτητής *hamartētḗs* 'sinner' does not appear in the New Testament at all; indeed, it is only used twice, both in Georgius Gemistus, suggesting that this conflation between sin and sinner is very much not a Greek concept, let alone a New Testament one.[24] This distinction between agent and action has significant consequences for the concept of personhood developed in the New Testament. This links into the use of adjectives as substantives, reducing people to their characteristics (e.g. NT Luke 14:13, κάλει πτωχούς, ἀναπείρους, χωλούς, τυφλούς *kálei ptōkhoús, anapeírous, khōloús, tuphloús* 'call the beggars, cripples, hungry and blind people', and NT Luke 14:21 for the list remodelled). Where this link between characteristic and person is made in the case of disability, it is not made in the case of ethical action.[25] What we do find, however, are compound verbs which express ethical concepts akin to sin in different but related words, using adjectives with ποιῶ *poiō* 'to make, do', and it is to these that I finally turn.

5.2 ἀγαθοποιῶ *agathopoiō̃* 'to do good' and κακοποιῶ *kakopoiō̃* 'to do bad'

There are ten examples of ἀγαθοποιῶ *agathopoiō̃* 'to do good' in the New Testament, a synthetic verb which may be read as counterbalancing sin. Four are in Luke, five in 1 Peter, and one in 3 John.[26] The use of the verb, however, is syntactically notable. Only 2/10 uses are in finite forms; 6/10 are in participial phrases, echoing e.g. ποιῶν ἁμαρτίαν *poiōn hamartían* 'committing a sin' in NT 1 John. There are only three examples of the negative equivalent, κακοποιῶ *kakopoiō̃* 'to do bad', in Mark, Luke, and 1 Peter, that is, in very similar contexts.[27] In Luke and 1 Peter they are in the same phrase as ἀγαθοποιῶ *agathopoiō̃* 'to do good' and in NT Mark 3:4 it is set against the periphrastic or, I would argue, active SVC ἀγαθὸν ποιῆσαι *agathòn poiē̃sai* 'to do good'. In addition, the phrases all pertain to suffering and death, and seem to have a particular semantic context which is distinctive from the other contexts I am considering.

[24]Neither does the related term κακότης *kakótēs* 'wrongdoer' – 765 full corpus uses) appear in the New Testament.

[25]See particularly the work of Isaac Soon (2021, 2023) on disability in the New Testament.

[26]NT Luke 6:9, NT Luke 6:33 (x2), NT Luke 6:35, NT 1 Peter 2:14, NT 1 Peter 2:15, NT 1 Peter 2:20, NT 1 Peter 3:6, NT 1 Peter 3:17, NT 3 John 1:11

[27]NT Mark 3:4, NT Luke 6:9, NT 1 Peter 3:17.

There are, therefore, alternatives to the SVC ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin' available to New Testament authors, but they mainly do not use them. Although some uses of ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin' are formulaic, it also clearly functions as a phrase in its own right, distinct from the verb ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin'.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the shift in the language of sin and error to become more substantive as it becomes more ethically laden. This relationship between philology and theology demonstrates one of the ways in which the linguistic and cultural contexts of the New Testament had a profound effect on the development of Christian thought.[28] This work, as I take it further, has the potential to explain differences in Christian approaches to sin and forgiveness in general. Forgiving the sinner is a lot easier when the sin is a separate entity from them, the product of a process carried out by a person, that is, two stages removed from the person. This construction of a New Testament personhood in which people are fundamentally linked to but distinct from their actions and attributes may be important in a range of other contexts. Similarly, exposing the development of some branches of Christianity (notably Catholicism) away from a biblical way of expressing things leads to the chance to explore more thoroughly what the impact of *ad fontes* and *sola scriptura* meant in the Reformation.[29] The language of the New Testament may not be a consistent dialect, but it does reflect shifts in forms of expression which are as much theologically as either culturally or linguistically driven. There may not be a consensus among those working in linguistics about precisely what constitutes an SVC, and whether any definition is replicable between languages, but there is a clear and consistent pattern of change within Greek. A shift from a predominantly one-word expression of sin (ἁμαρτάνω *hamartánō* 'to sin') to a multi-word phrase which is not significantly modified (ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin') is clearly discernible. Alternatives to ποιῶ ἁμαρτίαν *poiō hamartían* 'to commit a sin' do not perform the same function, but the SVC holds a unique place in the New Testament in laying out a framework wherein a sinner is not inherently identified with their sin, either morphologically, or semantically. A semantically light verb has allowed for a new form of ethical precision.

[28] See, for example, Atkinson (1944), Wallace (1996), Hart (2017) on the relationship between theology and philology, and Conybeare & Goldhill (2021) for a view on the other way around.

[29] I explore this relationship between theology, philology, pedagogy, translation, and the development of Reformation thought further in Ryan (2025).

Abbreviations

NT New Testament
OT Old Testament

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