

# Rethinking Greek Verb Tenses in Light of Verbal Aspect: How Much Do Our Modern Labels Really Help Us?

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Spring, 2006

## Introduction

As an important foundation to theological education in our colleges and seminaries, the study and teaching of biblical Greek constitutes a challenging task as the student of the Greek New Testament (NT) is required to master a variety of grammatical forms and their functions. One of the more significant grammatical features of Greek that demands the student's (and teacher's) attention is the Greek tense system, not least of all because it differs so widely from the English tense system.<sup>1</sup> In elementary Greek students are taught forms and basic nuances of the different Greek tenses (present, imperfect, future, aorist, perfect, pluperfect) along with general translational glosses.<sup>2</sup> If the student advances to a second year Greek grammar and syntax class, he/she will sooner or later spend time acquiring a variety of labels which are supposed to reflect actual usages and meanings of the various Greek tenses, but which also have ostensible exegetical payoff. Thus, students acquire as part of their working "grammatical" vocabulary such labels as "progressive present," "conative present," "ingressive imperfect," "conative imperfect," "ingressive aorist," "constative aorist," "consummative aorist," "intensive perfect," and so on. Grammatical analysis of verbs, then, consists partly of finding an appropriate label for each verb encountered in a given text. These labels are time-honored ones and appear in virtually every intermediate and advanced NT Greek grammar book (as well as a

<sup>1</sup> At this point I am following fairly common parlance in speaking of Greek "tenses." I am using "tense" in a loose way simply to refer to the verb endings themselves without any implications regarding time (as in English). However, as will emerge from the rest of the paper, "tense" is probably an inappropriate description of this feature of the Greek verbal system (Greek verb endings, in addition to "tense," communicate voice, mood, person, and number). Due to its popularity, along with decades of standard usage, this paper will continue to use the term "tense" in a rather loose way to refer to the formal endings of verbs, though the rest of this paper will assume that another term ("aspect") is a more apt description of what is communicated by the Greek verb endings.

<sup>2</sup> See William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

number of classical ones), with the recent textbook by Daniel B. Wallace providing a full and in some cases expanded list of possible verb tense usages.<sup>3</sup>

However, despite the time-honored status of these tense labels, and the almost sacrosanct character with which they are treated (or merely assumed) by virtually every Greek grammar, this paper will take issue with this treatment of the Greek verb system and suggest that these traditional labels (progressive present, iterative imperfect, ingressive aorist, etc.) are neither helpful nor appropriate as descriptive labels for Greek tenses.<sup>4</sup> Although traditional theories die hard in that there is much at stake in them (and who can fault those who cling to such verb tense labels when they are repeatedly taught in all the major Greek grammars), as a result of the examination of the Greek tense system in the ensuing study I will suggest that we abandon such labels in our study and teaching of NT Greek as descriptive of Greek tenses. The following discussion will focus mainly on the aorist, present and perfect tense forms, and more briefly the imperfect tense form. The pluperfect tense is somewhat restricted in its usage in the Greek NT, often being taken over by a periphrastic construction. Moreover, the future tense appears to be an anomaly within the tense system of NT Greek and so will not be treated here.<sup>5</sup>

This study relies heavily on recent work done on the theory known as verbal aspect, and suggests that verbal aspect not only renders the traditional method of treating the Greek tense system more problematic, but also provides a more suitable model for treating the Greek tense system. It is now becoming increasingly recognized that Greek verbs do not signal time or kind of action, but verbal aspect, or how the author chooses to represent the action. The most comprehensive and linguistically astute definition is provided by Stanley E. Porter, one of the theory's major advocates. Verbal aspect is "a synthetic, semantic category (realized in the forms of verbs) used of meaningful oppositions in a network of tense systems to grammaticalize the author's reasoned

<sup>3</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 494-586.

<sup>4</sup> As will become evident later, I do not necessarily call into question the validity of these labels in and of themselves; I do call into question their attachment to the Greek tenses as descriptions of the different kinds of aorists, presents, perfects, etc.

<sup>5</sup> For arguments for this view of the future tense see esp. Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (Studies in Biblical Greek, 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 403-39; K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in the New Testament* (Studies in Biblical Greek, 5; New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 34. The future perfect also occurs in Greek, but only in periphrastic form.

subjective choice of conception of a process."<sup>6</sup> More succinct is the definition by Buist

M. Fanning: “Aspects pertain...to the focus of the speaker with reference to the action or state which the verb describes, his way of viewing the occurrence and its make-up, without any *necessary* regard to the (actual or perceived) nature of the situation itself.”<sup>7</sup> Or according to K. L. McKay, aspect is “that category of the Greek verb system by means of which the author (or speaker) shows how he views each event or activity he mentions in relation to its context.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, *aspect* needs to be distinguished from another term that is often used to characterize Greek verbs, *Aktionsart*. The latter term is used by grammarians to refer to the kind of action taking place, or “objectively” how the action actually unfolded. The former term refers to how the author conceives of or views the action. Greek verb endings indicate the latter. Thus, rather than telling the reader *when* the action of the verb took place, or *how* the action actually unfolded and took place (*Aktionsart*), verbal aspect as indicated by the verb endings tells the reader *how the author chooses to represent* the action. Porter postulates three primary aspectual meanings: the action viewed as a complete whole; action viewed as in progress, as developing; action viewed as a state of affairs.<sup>9</sup> These three aspectual meanings are grammaticalized in the aorist, present (imperfect), and perfect (pluperfect) tense forms respectively. Thus, by selecting a given tense form, the author chooses to portray the action in a certain way.

The rest of this paper will rely on the above theory of verbal aspect in examining the traditional method of treating Greek tenses and its accompanying labels. Given the importance of verbal aspect, as well as other questions raised by the traditional approach to treating Greek verb tenses, I will argue that such traditional labels are inappropriate and unnecessary as descriptive of the Greek tense system in the NT. At the same time,

<sup>6</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 21-22. Fanning postulates only two primary aspects, the simple opposition between aorist and present/imperfect, but considers the perfect as a combination of aspect, *Aktionsart*, and time (anterior action) (*Verbal Aspect*, p. 290-91). For defense of the perfect tense as communicating stative aspect see K. L. McKay, “On the Perfect and Other Aspects in NT Greek,” *NovT* 23 (1981), pp. 289-329; Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 245-59.

verbal aspect provides us with helpful avenues for exploring the significance of Greek tenses for teaching and studying the Greek of the New Testament.

### **A Survey of Some Recent Grammatical Discussion**

As already discussed above, a feature considered germane to virtually every intermediate or advanced NT Greek grammar is the inclusion of a discussion of the various possible kinds of tense usages arranged under accompanying labels (for an easy example of employing these labels consult the textbook by David A. Black).<sup>10</sup> The following is a representative sampling of some of the more prominent intermediate and advanced level grammars and their treatment of the NT Greek tense system. As a starting point we can begin with an earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century grammatical discussion by Ernest de W. Burton, *Syntax of Moods and Tenses in N. T. Greek*.<sup>11</sup> Without argumentation, Burton simply introduces the various tense categories in his otherwise helpful treatment. For the present tense, Burton includes progressive, conative, gnomic, aoristic, historical, future, and action still in progress as different kinds of present tenses. The imperfect tense is divided into the following: progressive, conative, repeated action, unattained wish, of an action not separated from the time of speaking, obligation or possibility, a present obligation, and with verbs of wishing. The aorist tense can achieve the following usages: historical (momentary, extended, aggregate), indefinite, inceptive, resultative, gnomic, epistolary, dramatic, aorist for the perfect and pluperfect. The perfect tense reveals, according to Burton, the following usages in the NT: completed action, existing state, intensive, and aoristic.<sup>12</sup>

In the exhaustive, historically oriented grammar by A. T. Robertson the Greek aorist tense is divided into seven different usages (which he designates *Aktionsart*) labeled constative, ingressive, effective, narrative, epistolary, future, in wishes.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Robertson classifies the present tense according to the following usages: punctiliar, gnomic, historical, descriptive, progressive, iterative, conative, deliberative,

<sup>10</sup> *It's Still Greek to Me: An Easy-to-Understand Guide to Intermediate Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), chap. 9.

<sup>11</sup> (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898).

<sup>12</sup> For additional discussion of the perfect tense see Burton, *Syntax*, pp. 38-44.

<sup>13</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), pp. 831-47.

perfective, futuristic. And for the imperfect tense Robertson utilizes such common descriptive labels as descriptive, iterative, customary, progressive, conative, and potential. The perfect includes such usages and labels as present, intensive, extensive, broken continuity, dramatic, gnomic, indirect discourse, futuristic, and aoristic.

Robertson is careful to note throughout his discussion, however, that these labels are true only as descriptions of how the tenses *function within and interact with* features of the surrounding context. That is, it is primarily broader contextual features, such as the lexical meaning of the verb itself, which suggests notions of ingression, progression, etc. For example, a verb expressing a state (ζάω, live), when used in the aorist tense, can suggest an ingressive idea (ἐζήσεν, come to life); an adverb of time (τοισαῦτα ἔτη) often accompanies a verb to express the notion of progression; or the constative aorist is frequently signaled by a temporal deictic indicator, such as ἐβασίλευσαν with χίλια ἔτη (Rev 20.4; they reigned over a period of 1000 years). Thus Robertson concludes his discussion of the aorist tense: “It needs to be repeated that there is at bottom only one kind of aorist.”<sup>14</sup>

Following in the spirit of Robertson’s grammar, the intermediate-level grammar by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, for years a standard intermediate grammar, provides a similar classificatory scheme when it comes to its treatment of Greek tenses.<sup>15</sup> Thus in analyzing the present tense, Dana and Mantey suggest that at least three factors must be taken into consideration: the force of the tense, the meaning of the verb root, the significance of the context. The convergence of these factors account for the variety of tense usages: progressive (subdivided into description, existing results, and duration), customary, iterative, aoristic, futuristic, historical, tendential, and static.<sup>16</sup> For the imperfect Dana and Mantey include the descriptive labels progressive, customary, iterative, tendential, voluntative, and inceptive. Their treatment of the aorist tense betrays the same categories as found in Robertson: constative, ingressive, culminative, gnomic, epistolary, and dramatic. Dana and Mantey round out their discussion of tense usage with the perfect tense falling into the categories of intensive, consummative, iterative, and

<sup>14</sup> Robertson, *Grammar*, p 835, though I would dispute Robertson’s faulty conception of the aorist as punctiliar. See below.

<sup>15</sup> H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

<sup>16</sup> Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, pp. 182-186.

dramatic. While their descriptions often appear to be more intuitive, at other times they point to contextual and lexical features as the deciding factor in classifying a given tense usage. For example, the *culminative aorist* usually occurs with “verbs which signify effort or process, the aorist denoting the attainment of the end of such effort or process.”<sup>17</sup>

In what has come to be considered by many the standard reference Greek grammar, the grammar of F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk assumes and perpetuates the well-worn but time-honored classifications of various tense meanings.<sup>18</sup> In their grammar they posit five important kinds of action (*Aktionsarten*), punctiliar, durative, iterative, perfective, and perfectivizing by means of prepositions, but then provide a more extensive categorization of possible usages. For the present tense some of the possibilities are: conative, aoristic, historical, perfective, futuristic, and used to express relative time. For the imperfect tense: iterative, conative, used to portray the manner of action (progress), relative time. For the aorist tense: ingressive (inceptive), complexive (constative), gnomic, futuristic, epistolary. For the perfect: present, continuing effect, for the aorist, and used to express relative time.

Without any linguistic justification for the inclusion of the various categories, Nigel Turner likewise follows a fairly standard classification of the Greek tenses.<sup>19</sup> Turner discusses the nuances of the present tense under the following categories: historic, perfective, continuance of an action during the past up until the present, futuristic, conative, gnomic. For the imperfect tense Turner includes discussion of conative or desiderative, descriptions of narrative, iterative, relative time, with verbs of speaking. For the aorist he includes ingressive or inceptive, perfective (or effective), constative, epistolary, gnomic, proleptic (future). Though he includes no clear scheme of classifying perfect tense usage, Turner does discuss the resultative and the so-called aoristic use of the perfect.

In a helpful volume devoted to the significance of syntax for Greek exegesis, M. Zerwick discusses the various tenses in terms of three “aspects:” simple realization

<sup>17</sup> Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, pp. 196-97.

<sup>18</sup> F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

<sup>19</sup> Nigel Turner, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament. III. Syntax* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963).

(aorist); activity in progress or habitual activity (present, imperfect); a completed act resulting in a state of affairs (perfect, pluperfect).<sup>20</sup> Though Zerwick is more restrained in his inclusion of categories, his classificatory scheme is still a standard one. Thus, for the aorist tense Zerwick discusses inceptive, effective, global, gnomic, and proleptic (dramatic) usages. Though he does not use precise labels, for the imperfect (present and imperfect) Zerwick discusses its use with verbs of speaking or asking, use for an attempted action which was not carried out, description of a continuous state, and repeated action. In his discussion of the perfect tense Zerwick does not provide detailed classifications, but rather demonstrates the exegetical significance of the perfect by comparing it with the aorist (summary of the action), finding the semantics of “state of affairs resultant upon the action” present in every case.<sup>21</sup>

C. F. D. Moule, in his engaging *Idiom Book*, discusses Greek tense usage along the same lines as the grammar outlined above.<sup>22</sup> Under the present tense Moule discusses the historical present, present for the future, conative present, gnomic present, present for action still in progress, present in reported speech. For the imperfect Moule includes inceptive, conative, iterative, desiderative (a wish). The aorist evinces the following meanings: ingressive, constative, of instantaneous action, epistolary (Moule seems to deny the presence of the category “gnomic”<sup>23</sup>). Moule’s discussion of the perfect tense largely emphasizes the “punctiliar event in the past, related in its *effects* to the present” and distinguishes it from the English perfect tense.<sup>24</sup>

At a more basic level, the intermediate NT Greek grammar by James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery prefers the term *Aktionsart*, by which they mean the kind of action found both in the verb root and in the tense ending.<sup>25</sup> Without justification for their method of treatment, Brooks and Winbery give a rather extensive list of tense categories, along with brief discussion of their semantics and several illustrative examples. For the

<sup>20</sup> M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (trans. J. Smith; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963), pp. 77-78.

<sup>21</sup> Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> Moule, *Idiom Book*, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Moule, *Idiom Book*, pp. 13-16.

<sup>25</sup> James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1979).

present tense they suggest the following usages determined by both *Aktionsart* (root meaning of verb) and context: descriptive, durative, iterative, tendential, gnomic, historical, futuristic, aorist, perfective. For the imperfect tense they include the following: descriptive, durative, iterative, tendential, voluntative, inceptive. Likewise their categorization of the aorist is a standard one: constative, ingressive, culminative, gnomic, epistolary, dramatic, futuristic. Finally, the perfect tense can be classified according to the following usages: intensive, consummative, iterative, dramatic, gnomic, aoristic.

Two recent, major works, one a monograph, the other a major reference grammar, discuss the Greek verbal tense system at a more methodologically rigorous level and in a more extensive manner. Fanning, in an innovative book which endeavors to implement insights from recent research into verbal aspect (see below), attempts to provide justification for the various traditional categories which other grammarians have sometimes simply assumed.<sup>26</sup> Fanning begins by distinguishing verbal aspect, that is, “the viewpoint or perspective which the speaker takes in regard to the action’,”<sup>27</sup> and procedural characteristics, that is the actual occurrence of the action (*Aktionsart*), the lexical meaning of the verb, and the larger expression in which the verb occurs.<sup>28</sup>

However, Fanning goes on to argue that verbal aspect does not stand on its own but interacts with and is in fact affected by the various *procedural characteristics* (the nature of the action itself), especially the lexical meaning of verbs. Fanning appeals to and develops the Vendler and Kenny taxonomy of the various actional characteristics of verbs: States and Actions; Activities and Performances; Accomplishments and Achievements; Climaxes and Punctuals.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, “these features of meaning are characteristic ultimately of entire *propositions* or sentences.”<sup>30</sup> However, according to Fanning these actional characteristics have a profound affect on the usage of verbal aspect, and can even restrict the way the action is viewed by the author (see below). That is, the interaction of aspect and procedural characteristics creates the various tense meanings (duration, iteration, ingression, etc.). As D. A. Carson states, “He [Fanning] is

<sup>26</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*.

<sup>27</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> See the helpful chart in Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 129 and the detailed description of the various categories as they relate to Greek verbs on pp. 129-63.

<sup>30</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 127.



not merely saying that the sentence or discourse carries the additional meaning, but that the verbal form itself takes it on board.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, Fanning attempts to provide linguistic justification for traditional categories. Consequently, Fanning’s chap. 4 reads like a traditional grammar where the reader is confronted with all the familiar terminology utilized to characterize the various tenses/aspects.

Therefore, the present tense combines with various procedural characteristics to produce the following usages: progressive, instantaneous, customary or iterative, gnomic, past action still in progress, conative, futuristic, historical, perfective. For example, the progressive present (action viewed as going on) occurs with verbs which are States, Activities or Accomplishments (see the Vendler and Kenny taxonomy above). For the imperfect Fanning discusses progressive, customary or iterative, conative, inceptive. The aorist tense reveals the following usages: constative (of instantaneous action, extended action, or repeated action), ingressive, consummative or effective, gnomic, proleptic or futuristic, dramatic, epistolary. For instance, the ingressive aorist frequently occurs with Stative verbs, while the consummative or effective aorist occurs with verbs of Accomplishment or Climax, emphasizing the end-point of the action. In combination with various lexis, the perfect tense can be used of resulting state, completed action, present meaning, as an aorist, gnominally, proleptically. Again, these various meanings come as a result of the combination of verbal aspect with the various procedural characteristics, especially the meaning of the verb itself. As Carson noted, in Fanning’s treatment the aspect is actually shaped by and takes on these meanings. As Fanning concludes, “Aspect operates so closely with such features and is so significantly affected by them that no treatment of it can be meaningful without attention to these interactions.”<sup>32</sup>

A recent, major grammar by Wallace, a former student of Fanning, argues a similar position as Fanning in relationship to the treatment of tense/aspect.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Wallace begins by maintaining a distinction between aspect (the portrayal of the action, the unaffected meaning) and *Aktionsart* (the combination of aspect with lexical,

<sup>31</sup> D. A. Carson, “An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” in S. E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 80; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*.

grammatical and contextual features).<sup>34</sup> Based on this distinction, Wallace concludes that “Categories of usage are legitimate because the tenses combine with other linguistic features to form various fields of meaning.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, Wallace’s discussion of verb tenses follows traditional terminology in labeling the various tense usages. So Wallace lists as possible meanings of the present tense instantaneous, progressive, extending from past to present, iterative, customary, gnomic, historical, perfective, conative, futuristic, retained in indirect discourse. For the imperfect Wallace includes the following: instantaneous, progressive, ingressive, iterative, customary, “pluperfect,” conative, retained in indirect discourse. The aorist tense combines with various lexical, grammatical and contextual features to produce constative, ingressive, consummative, gnomic, epistolary, proleptic, and dramatic aorists. The perfect tense can be used intensively, extensively, aoristically, perfectly, gnomically, proleptically, and allegorically. These various categories are justified based on the assumption that aspect interacts with and is affected by the lexical meaning of verbs, grammar and context.

By way of summary, from the preceding survey of representative grammars several observations can be made in connection with the treatment of the Greek tense system in modern grammatical discussion. First, lists of possible usages of each of the tenses are the accepted way to proceed in Greek grammars. A fairly standard set of descriptive labels appears in all the grammars as descriptive of the range of meaning of the different tenses. However, most grammars do not include any explicit justification for these categories and tense terminology.

Second, these various categories of tense usage depend on judgments about broader contextual features, not on the tense form alone. Such features as the lexical meaning of the verb itself, grammar (adjuncts), and broader contextual features must be taken into consideration in determining the usage of a given tense. Thus, an aorist in combination with the appropriate contextual features can be labeled a “consummative aorist.” Or within a certain contextual environment, a given imperfect tense can be

<sup>34</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 499. For Wallace, *Aktionsart* is not just the objective nature of the action, or a reference to the occurrence of the action itself, but the combination of aspect with the various other procedural characteristics. “*Aktionsart* is aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual features” (p. 499). Thus, Wallace uses *Aktionsart* in a different way from how it is usually understood.

<sup>35</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 500.

labeled an “inceptive imperfect.” The point is that such labels are due primarily to judgments about the meanings found in the broader contextual environment.

Third, the tense/aspect is not just a contributing factor to the broader meaning complex, but, according to Fanning and Wallace, actually “takes on board” the meanings provided by lexical meanings of verbs and other contextual factor. The various tenses are actually shaped by contextual factors or procedural characteristics providing justification for categories such as progressive present, inceptive imperfect, constative aorist, intensive perfect, etc. Therefore, it is important to realize that for Fanning and Wallace in particular it is not just a matter of the *differing functions* or usages of aspects in various contexts, but the interaction of aspects with context to produce *various fields of meaning*.

Finally, these categories are deemed to have exegetical significance, so that the task of the exegete is to move through the text and label each verb according to the various categories. In this way verbs are usually treated in isolation.

### **Evaluation of Traditional Treatments of Tense**

One might be tempted to think that virtually everything important has already been said about Greek grammar. Despite the long-standing tradition of treating Greek tenses in the above way, however, I wish to take issue with the traditional categories which have become enshrined in much modern grammatical discussion. After consideration of the shortcomings and problems of this traditional approach of classification of Greek tenses, I will suggest some possible avenues for how the student (and teacher) of NT Greek might approach Greek tenses. Most of the proceeding discussion will focus on the works of Fanning and Wallace, since they represent the most recent and thorough discussions of and attempts to provide justification for traditional categorization of Greek tenses in the NT.

#### *A Failure to Distinguish Aspect from Aktionsart, or Semantics from Pragmatics*

Most of the above categories reflect a failure to adequately distinguish aspect, that is, how the author views the action, from *Aktionsart*, that is, the kind of action, or how the action actually takes place. Another way of putting it is that grammarians who take this approach fail to adequately distinguish semantics (the meaning of the aspect) from

pragmatics (the function of the aspects in various contexts). As most grammarians recognize, the majority of the commonly used labels derive primarily from information gathered from the surrounding context, including the lexical meaning of verbs, adjuncts, and other grammatical and contextual features, and not the tense forms themselves. Thus Fanning flags the most important contextual features which would point to an “iterative present:” adverbs, plural nouns, broader circumstances (the nature of the utterance is of such that it must be repeated over a stretch of time; knowledge of the non-literary context).<sup>36</sup> For instance, Fanning’s sample of an iterative present from Matt 17.15 (πολλάκις γὰρ πίπτει εἰς πῦρ) depends largely on the presence of the adverb πολλάκις to suggest the notion of iteration or repetition. More telling is his inclusion and discussion of the category “perfective present.”<sup>37</sup> According to Fanning, this usage is present with certain words which denote a present state or condition (ἤκω, ἀπέχω, ἀκούω πάρεμι). However, this category results solely from the meaning of the verb, and raises the question as to semantically why the perfect tense, then, would need to be used. Wallace also suggests that a perfective force may be due to certain contextual factors. “This use of the present is especially frequent with λέγει as an introduction to an OT quotation. Its usual force seems to be that although the statement was spoken in the past, it still speaks today and is binding on the hearers.”<sup>38</sup> Yet this is a theological, and not a grammatical, statement. Such discussions confuse the semantics of the Greek tense/aspect itself and the *Aktionsart*, that is, the nature of the action as can be derived from lexical meaning of verbs and broader contextual and theological factors.

Several statements throughout Fanning’s work give the reader the impression that it is the context, rather than the tense form, that is the deciding factor, leaving the reader to wonder whether it is the verb tense itself or the context alone that communicates these meanings. In his discussion of the so-called customary present, Fanning suggests that it is “indicated by adverbs or plural nouns..., but frequently it is shown only by *contextual factors* of a vaguer sort (the nature of the prediction in that circumstance, knowledge of

<sup>36</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 239-240, although Fanning concludes that this usage is rather minor in importance.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 532.

the non-literary context of the utterance, etc.).”<sup>39</sup> Thus, this category of usage can apparently depend even on non-linguistic factors. Or on the constative aorist he concludes that “in each case the sense is dependent on the lexical character of the verb and other features, *not on the use or non-use of the aorist.*”<sup>40</sup> Or regarding the present for past action in progress, Fanning notes that it “always includes an *adverbial phrase or other time-indicators* with the present tense to signal past time meaning.”<sup>41</sup> Fanning discusses the so-called consummative aorist, the use of the aorist to highlight the end point of the action. See Gal 4.11 Paul states that “I have learned (ἐμαθον, a consummated action) in which state I am to be content.” However, Fanning goes on to conclude that “the conative or consummative sense is not automatic, and must be emphasized by the *contextual tone* of difficulty or resistance, *since the completion or lack of it would be a minor point otherwise.*”<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in Wallace’s discussion of the ingressive (inceptive) imperfect, he concludes that this use of the imperfect occurs in narrative literature when there is a change in activity. But it is “*the context in each instance* [which] indicates a topic shift or new direction for the action.”<sup>43</sup> Fanning concludes that “the narrative sequence produces an *inceptive* sense, since the verb in sequence denotes the process as beginning and then proceeding on without limit....”<sup>44</sup> Thus, in response to Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law Matt 8.15 records that she ἠγέρθη καὶ διηκόνει αὐτῷ. If the action here is inceptive (cf. NIV), it owes this idea to the “narrative sequence” as Fanning observes, and our need to bring this out in our English translation, not to the verbal aspect. But even here in Matt 8.15 it could be disputed whether this is inceptive at all, aspectually portraying instead the process of serving as action in progress.

Moreover, it is commonplace in most grammars to conclude that when used with stative verb types (e.g., γίνομαι, ἔχω, ἀσθενέω, ζάω, ὀράω), the aorist tense communicates an ingressive notion (entrance into the state; ἐγένομην, “I became” ἔζησα, “I came to life”). However, given the distinction between aspect and *Aktionsart*, or semantics and pragmatics, it may be more accurate to say that certain contexts implicate

<sup>39</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 206. Italics mine.

<sup>40</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 259. Italics mine.

<sup>41</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 217.

<sup>42</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 265. Italics mine.

<sup>43</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 544. Italics mine.

<sup>44</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 146.

an ingressive notion, usually being realized with the aorist tense. Yet it simply cannot be taken as some kind of a grammatical rule or axiom that the aorist tense with stative verbs are ingressive, since it is unlikely that all of Fanning’s examples in his thorough discussion of ingressive aorists are valid and many of them are patient of different analyses. For example, Fanning suggests that out of the eight usages of the stative verb ζάω in the aorist tense, seven of them are ingressives: Luke 15.24, 32; Rom 14.9; Rev 2.8; 13.14; 20.4, 5.<sup>45</sup> However, virtually all of his examples can be disputed. In the Luke passages it is not necessary to take the aorist as ingressive at all, since the author may just be comparing the lost son’s state of being dead (νεκρὸς ἦν) with the state of being alive (ἀνέζησεν/ἔζησεν). Similarly, in Rom 14.9 and Rev 2.8 the authors may simply be referring to Christ being in the state of living (ἔζησεν), using the aorist to summarize this state, rather than just his initial entry into the state of living. It is also not clear that the use of the aorist in Rev 13.14 is ingressive, since the author once again could only be summarizing the state of the beast as living.<sup>46</sup> In Rev 20.4, 5 an ingressive notion does seem to fit, especially with v. 5 since ἐζήσαν occurs with a precise temporal designation, ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη. In this latter case it is the adjunct which suggests the ingressive notion, not primarily the aorist with a stative verb. As Robertson concluded, the ingressive idea “is not...a tense notion at all. It is purely a matter with the individual verb.”<sup>47</sup> Based on these observations, we must refrain from concluding that the aorist with stative verbs necessarily becomes ingressive. Only broader contextual factors can determine if an ingressive notion is present at all. The problem that can be seen from many of these examples in this paper is that usages of tenses are often forced into a certain category of understanding based on assumed rules or principles of usage, ignoring other possible or more likely conclusions regarding tense usage. It appears that Fanning has been seduced by common tense terminology.

<sup>45</sup> According to Fanning, the eighth instance in Acts 26.5 has a past stative sense (*Verbal Aspect*, p. 262 n. 141).

<sup>46</sup> Even though the beast is described as being wounded by the sword, this does not justify giving the aorist ἔζησεν an ingressive idea, since it probably only refers to the fact that now he lives. Interestingly, Fanning does admit of the usage of the aorist with stative verbs to indicate “a summary view of the entire situation” (*Verbal Aspect*, p. 138). However, Fanning thinks that this is infrequent, though he does not tell us why it is so. It only appears infrequent, though, when one accepts Fanning’s general discussion of ingressive aorists and all the instances which he places within this category.

<sup>47</sup> Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 834.

However, as seen above, rather than *Aktionsart* (or even time) the Greek verbal system grammaticalizes aspect, or how the author chooses to view the action. Yet the traditional classification of verbs typically and consistently confuses the two. But both Fanning and Wallace attempt to show that aspect, though separate from *Aktionsart*, interacts closely with *Aktionsart* and other contextual features to produce the meanings suggested by the traditional labels. As seen in the survey above, Fanning concludes that aspect is affected by 1) the lexical meaning of verbs; 2) compositional elements (adverbs, adjuncts, etc.); 3) time reference; 4) discourse factors. For him the first category is the most important. As Carson concluded, Fanning “is not merely saying that the sentence or the discourse carries this additional meaning [e.g. inceptive, durative, constative, etc.], but that the verbal form itself takes it on board.”<sup>48</sup> Dependent on Fanning, Wallace likewise suggests that aspect is the unaffected meaning of the verb tense, while *Aktionsart* is aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical and contextual features.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the various “categories of usage are legitimate because tenses combine with other linguistic features to form various fields of meaning.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, it is not merely a matter of the differing functions or usages of aspects, but the creation of various fields of meaning. Yet it appears that Fanning and Wallace (as well as all the grammars surveyed above) merely assume that aspect combines with *Aktionsart* and other contextual features to produce the various semantic ranges of the tenses rather than providing rigorous linguistic justification. They fail to raise the question as to whether these meanings belong to the context, or adhere to the tense forms themselves. This assumption points to another problem.

### *The Confusion of Tense and Concept*

Fanning’s assumption that the actual semantic freight carried by any particular verbal form depends on a complex interaction with lexis (the basic semantic range of the verb in question), context, temporal structures and more is unjustified given the distinction between aspect and *Aktionsart*, but is also reminiscent of a similar error

<sup>48</sup> Carson, “Introduction,” p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 499. Wallace uses *Aktionsart* in a different way than most grammars. For Wallace, *Aktionsart* does not just refer to contextual kinds of action, but aspect in combination with context, or aspect as it had been affected by context. See p. 504.

<sup>50</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 500.

committed at the lexical level. In his magisterial and provocative work on lexical semantics, James Barr inveighed against the tendency of modern biblical lexical studies (namely *TDNT*<sup>51</sup>) to persistently confuse word and concept.<sup>52</sup> That is, words were made to bear the broader theological concepts derived from broader contextual features such as sentences and paragraphs, such as when ἐκκλησία is made to bear the entirety of the theological concept of “church” as treated throughout the NT.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the NT concept of “church” is reflected in sentences, paragraphs, and ultimately the entire discourse rather than on the lexical definition of ἐκκλησία. Moreover, Barr also warned against what he dubbed “illegitimate totality transfer” which refers to the error of reading all that a word could possibly mean in its various contexts into the word in any given context, a sort of semantic overload. It appears that the tendency to find multiple meanings of different tenses/aspect which depend on the interaction of aspect with various features from the broader context commits at a grammatical level the fallacies which Barr and others have warned of at a lexical level. To suggest as Fanning and others do that the tense grammaticalized in the verbal form (and only one element of the verb so grammaticalized [cf. mood, voice, person, number] at that) carries all the semantic freight derived from lexis, context, temporal structures and the discourse smacks of the confusion of word and concept endemic in Kittle’s *TDNT* and of semantic overload akin to Barr’s “illegitimate totality transfer.” Rather, according to Rodney J. Decker, verbal aspect is just one factor, along with lexis, adjuncts, and other broader contextual features which contributes to the whole complex of the verbal notion.<sup>54</sup> Verbal aspect as grammaticalized in the verb endings, then, contributes the notion of “the author’s

<sup>51</sup> Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Friedrich (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; trans. G. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76).

<sup>52</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). Cf. also Peter Cotterell & Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), chap. 4 for discussion of Barr’s important insights.

<sup>53</sup> “[T]he great weakness is a failure to get to grips with the semantic value of words in their contexts, and a strong tendency to assume that this value will on its own agree with and illuminate the contours of a theological structure...” (Barr, *Semantics*, p. 231).

<sup>54</sup> Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect* (Studies in Biblical Greek, 10; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 27-28, who concludes that “The web of semantic factors comprised by aspect, lexis, and *Aktionsart*, along with other grammatical and contextual factors (adjuncts, deixis, etc.) is referred to in this volume as the verbal complex. Thus a statement that ‘the meaning of the verbal complex of x...’ is to be understood as an inclusive, pragmatic statement (usually employed at the level of clause) summarizing the total semantic value of the verb and its adjuncts in a particular context, including aspect, lexis, *Aktionsart*, and contextual factors” (p. 27).



conception of a process” to the entire complex, which may include notions of inception, duration, iteration, etc. However much these notions may be reflected in our translation of a given tense form, given the above observations it is illegitimate to transfer these meanings onto the tense form itself, resulting in a kind of semantic overload or “tense and concept confusion.”

Fanning and Wallace seem to only assume, but do not clearly demonstrate, that aspect interacts with and is affected by contextual features to produce these various meanings. Moises Silva has raised the pertinent question: “how does one distinguish between the information conveyed by the aspect itself and the information conveyed by the context as a whole?”<sup>55</sup> According to Silva, if the context is sufficient to indicate notions such as duration, iteration, ingression, etc., is this the same as saying that the aspect indicates this meaning? It is best, therefore, to see tense/aspect as just one factor, along with the lexical meaning of the verb, adverbs, and broader contextual features that contribute to the whole complex of the verbal notion. Therefore, this means that it may be legitimate at times to speak of ingressive, constative, iterative, durative, etc. meanings. However, these meanings are pragmatic categories and are the property of the entire proposition and broader context, including lexical meanings of the verb, adjuncts, and other contextual features, *and not the aspect of the verb itself*. Furthermore, as Porter has noted, if we are to create labels to reflect the semantic categories of tense usage we would need far more than just the traditional handful of labels, since “the number of objective classifications of events is potentially as great as the number of events themselves....”<sup>56</sup> For example, virtually no grammar includes a category of an “iterative aorist.”<sup>57</sup> Yet under the traditional scheme this would certainly be a valid category based on *Aktionsart* and other contextual factors. Even if the traditional manner of labeling tenses were valid, we would need a lot more categories than just the traditional ones usually discussed.

Two studies have in a more limited way raised the question of tense usage and labels. Limited to discussion of the aorist tense, Charles R. Smith laments the abuse of

<sup>55</sup> Moises Silva, “A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect,” in S. E. Porter and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in the Current Debate* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 80; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley E. Porter, “Tense Terminology and Greek Language Study: A Linguistic Reevaluation,” *Sheffield Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* 3 (1986), p. 83. Cf. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> However, cf. Burton, *Syntax*, p. 20.

the aorist tense, and in doing so suggests that the interpreter exercise caution in the use of such labels as ingressive aorist, constative aorist, culminative aorist, etc.<sup>58</sup> While Smith is to be lauded for pointing out the difficulty of appealing to such labels (such notions belong to the context and not to the tense form), his reason for doing so remains problematic. Smith argues that at bottom the aorist is noncommittal regarding the action, that is, it does not assert anything about the action, and therefore cannot be seen in contrast to the present or perfect tenses. In other words, it is apparently devoid of any semantic content. However, as Porter has demonstrated it is necessary and beneficial to see the aspect as consisting of a network of semantic choices, with the aorist not being undefined or semantically empty, but as the least heavily marked aspect which portrays a certain perspective or view of the action, externally as a complete whole.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the aorist does contribute semantically to the discourse: a particular way of viewing the process. Smith's reasons for abandoning the traditional labels for aorist usage are illegitimate in that they are based on a misunderstanding of the semantics of the aorist tense. Nevertheless, he is correct in criticizing the value of traditional labels, and at least this feature of his insight should be extended to include other tenses.

More recently, from a different perspective than Smith, Robert Picirilli has attempted to wrestle with some of these issues relating to categorizing the various meanings of Greek tenses.<sup>60</sup> Picirilli correctly distinguishes between the perspective of the author on the action (aspect) and the pragmatic function of the context (*Aktionsart*, or kind of action) and expresses commendable caution in the use of traditional categories. Therefore, "such syntactical distinctions as iterative, inceptive, and the like should be seen as pragmatic functions of *context* and not of *tense*."<sup>61</sup> However, he still wonders what there is about the action that may have led the author to choose a particular tense

<sup>58</sup> Charles R. Smith, "Errant Aorist Interpreters," *Grace Theological Journal* 2.2 (1981), pp. 205-26. Smith builds on an earlier and important (but often ignored) article by Frank Stagg ("The Abused Aorist," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 [1972], pp. 222-31).

<sup>59</sup> For the concept of markedness as it relates to the Greek tenses/aspects see Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 89-90, 178-81; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 50-72. Over against Smith, both Porter and Fanning correctly see the opposition between the tenses as equipollent rather than privative. That is, the aorist tense is marked for meaning, but is the least heavily marked member of the systemic network. See K. L. McKay's comment that the aorist tense was used "when the speaker or writer had no special reason to use any other" ("Syntax in Exegesis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 [1972], p. 46).

<sup>60</sup> Robert E. Picirilli, "Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek: Where Are We?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/3 (2005), pp. 533-55.

<sup>61</sup> Picirilli, "Meaning of the Tenses," p. 548. Italics his.

form and therefore finds it worth discussing possible categories of meaning. Using Mark 1.5 as an example, he notes the use of the imperfect “were going out” (ἐξεπορεύετο) and asks “what there might have been about these actions that made it appropriate for his to choose to express them progressively.”<sup>62</sup> In addition, Picirilli wonders whether it might also communicate an inceptive, iterative, or simply a descriptive idea. Picirilli concludes that if it can be determined that in Mark 1.5 the scene was repeated over and over (iteration), then it was appropriate for Mark to express the action imperfectly.

However, while Picirilli’s comments demonstrate considerable improvement over traditional treatments of tense categories, and while Picirilli is perhaps fully justified in discussing such decisions and distinctions, I would still question whether his assumption is correct that there is something inherent in the actions that may have made it more appropriate for the author to choose one aspect over another. First, as Picirilli himself recognizes, the context, which is the determining factor, may still be ambiguous, including little if any indication at all of how the action objectively took place (Picirilli himself seems unclear about how to label ἐξεπορεύετο in Mark 1.5). The danger is that the student may still feel compelled, constrained under the traditional scheme, to select an appropriate label. Secondly, Picirilli’s comments still make it clear that the deciding factor for making such distinctions between ingression, iteration, description, etc. is the context. “The key is context and interpretation rather than the imperfect tense itself as such.”<sup>63</sup> But then we are back to the question, is it legitimate to “dump” all of the contextual information on the tense form itself, committing at a grammatical level Barr’s illegitimate totality transfer, or confusion of *tense* and concept? Thirdly, Picirilli seems to assume that the imperfect tense was the most appropriate tense to represent the action in Mark 1.5. However, it must be questioned what in the “objective” nature of the action in Mark 1.5 (if we can determine this) made the imperfect more appropriate, since the aorist can be (and could have been) used of all three of his suggestions for the imperfect in Mark 1.5: ingressive, iterative (so Burton), or descriptive (constative). Rather, the difference seems to be whether the author wanted to view the action externally, as a complete whole, or internally, as in progress, not whether the action occurred in a certain

<sup>62</sup> Picirilli, “Meaning of the Tenses,” p. 548.

<sup>63</sup> Picirilli, “Meaning of the Tenses,” p. 548.

way or not. Picirilli's comments seem to be at odds with his own (correct) distinction between the author's perspective on an action (aspect) and the pragmatics of the context.<sup>64</sup> Picirilli may be correct that such distinctions regarding the kind of action are important and perhaps worth listing and discussing, but I disagree that such discussion belongs at the level of tense-form and aspect. Rather, they belong solely at the level of context and pragmatics.

### *Overdependence on English Translation*

A further difficulty with the traditional scheme is that some categories seem to be merely the result of an inability to draw out an aspectual distinction in English translation, or they depend more on English translation than on the semantics of Greek aspects. A good example of this is the inclusion of the label "aoristic perfect" found in several grammars.<sup>65</sup> According to Fanning, in this usage the perfect functions as a "simple narrative tense to report past occurrences without attention paid to the present consequences."<sup>66</sup> The assumption appears to be that the usage of different tenses within the same contextual and temporal framework suggests identical meaning. Though he admits that this usage is rare, he finds several possible examples where the notion of present consequences does not seem to fit. One of the more common examples of this so-called "aoristic perfect" is Rev 5.7. Following a reference to the Lamb approaching the throne, the seer observes that the Lamb then took (ἐΐληφεν) the scroll from the hand of the one on the throne with a verb in the perfect where one might expect to find an aorist tense. However, it is doubtful that this constitutes an example of an aoristic use of a perfect where the semantic force of the perfect has disappeared in large part or altogether, for John feels free to use the aorist form of the verb in the very next verse (ἔλαβεν) and once more a few lines later (λαβειν, v. 9).<sup>67</sup> It appears that one of the reasons for this category of perfects is the inability or awkwardness of bringing out the force of the perfect in English translation. Instead, most English translations translate ἐΐληφεν like an

<sup>64</sup> Here Picirilli is in clear agreement with Porter.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Blass, Debrunner, Funk, *Grammar*, p. 177 (perfect for aorist); Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 898 (the "aoristic" present perfect), though Robertson is more cautious; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 578-79 (aoristic perfect); Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 299-303 (perfect with aoristic sense).

<sup>66</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 299-300. Wallace says, "it focuses so much on the act that there is no room left for the results" (*Greek Grammar*, p. 578).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. the use of the aorist in 3.11; 4.11; 6.4; 10.8, 9, 10; 17.12; 18.4; 20.4; 22.17.

aorist in narrative. Yet just because the interpreter cannot bring out the force of the perfect (or any other Greek tense) in English translation (or any other receptor language), or just because the traditional manner of translating the perfect does not sit well in the context, does not justify the conclusion that the semantic force of the perfect has been diminished in some instances. Furthermore, Fanning’s suggestion that the “present consequences” are no longer in view is due to a misunderstanding of the perfect tense and an over reliance on an outmoded time-based conception of verbal aspect as grammaticalized in the verbal forms (a past action with present results).<sup>68</sup> The perfect tense refers to a state of affairs, irrespective of whether it refers to past, present, or future time.<sup>69</sup> In addition, the fact that the aspects can be used side-by-side in the same context could be taken to suggest not similarity in meaning but conscious choice and distinction in aspectual meaning.

Fanning, following the intermediate grammar of Dana and Mantey, also includes a category in his discussion of the perfect tense of “perfect for completed action,” or consummative perfect, which “highlights the completion of [the action], while leaving the resulting condition in the background.”<sup>70</sup> However, most of Fanning’s examples he offers appear to reflect English translation sense of the verb rather than the semantics of the Greek perfect. Thus, for example, the ἑώρακεν in John 1:18 (“no one *has ever seen* God”), the νενίκηκα of 16:33 (“I *have overcome* the world”), the εἶρηκεν of Heb 1:13 (“to which of the angels *did he ever say*”), or the ἡμαρτήκαμεν of 1 John 1:10 (“if we say we *have not sinned*”) all appear to depend more on the sense of English translation of the verb and the awkwardness of bringing out the force of the Greek perfect in English translation, rather than on the semantics of the Greek perfect (stative aspect) itself. In each of the above cases, the full stative force of the perfect fits well. In addition, several instances of the category “ingressive aorist” or “ingressive imperfect” discussed above may also be the result of the sense of our English translations (see the discussion of the imperfect in Matt 8.15 above).

<sup>68</sup> See the slightly more restrained comments on this ostensible use of the perfect by McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 50.

<sup>69</sup> For examples of the different temporal contexts of the perfect tense see Porter, *Idioms*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>70</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 298. Cf. Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, pp. 202-3; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 577. Wallace does not think that the present state has disappeared, but only that it does not receive the emphasis. But one can still ask whether this is more the result of translation into English.

Part of the difficulty is that Fanning’s classifications of verbs according to the Vendler-Kenny taxonomy (States, Actions, Activities, Performances, Accomplishments, Achievements, etc.) appear at times to be more English-based than Greek-based.<sup>71</sup> McKay is one of the few who is acutely aware of the problem when he states that “Idiomatic English translations must use English categories, but this does not imply that those categories can be directly transferred to the explanation of Greek idiom.”<sup>72</sup> For example, Fanning classifies *νικάω* as a Climax or Accomplishment type verb, and therefore labels the aorist *ἐνίκησεν* in Rev 5.5 as a clear example of a “consummative aorist.”<sup>73</sup> However, according to McKay, *νικάω* may have originally signified a state, so that it should be understood to mean “to be in a state of overcoming.”<sup>74</sup> McKay concludes that “it cannot be clear to the modern reader how much the ancient speakers of Greek were aware of the distinctions we find it convenient, and often necessary, to make in translating, and some of them at least owe more to peculiarities of modern English (or any other target language) than to those of ancient Greek.”<sup>75</sup> This coheres nicely with Porter’s distinction between semantics and pragmatics, the latter being taken into consideration in translational realizations. Our *translation* of a given verb will often reflect the aspect, the meaning of the verb itself, broader contextual features, and even temporal distinctions. But this does not mean that these features belong to the *aspect* of the verb itself as grammaticalized in the verb ending.

#### *Failure to See the Tenses as Part of a System*

Classification of Greek tenses according to traditional labels that reflect their variety of meanings reflects a larger methodological problem, that is, attempts to manufacture the various categories of tense usage are grammatically unprincipled and linguistically unjustified. Greek maintains a close correspondence between tense forms (morphology) and aspectual meaning. That is, Greek is relatively morphologically stable, so that morphology is all important when discussing verbal aspect. In simple terms, we

<sup>71</sup> Cf. McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 29.

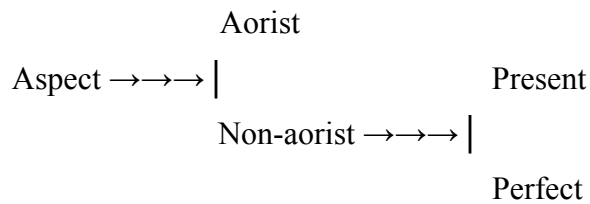
<sup>72</sup> McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 264.

<sup>74</sup> McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 28. “It is likely that our traditional lexical definitions of some Greek verbs obscure some of the qualities the speakers of ancient Greek felt in them” (p. 28).

<sup>75</sup> McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 29.

learn from 1<sup>st</sup> year Greek that Koine Greek is highly fusional or inflectional. All the grammatical information regarding the verb, including its aspect, is found in its ending. By choice of a given morphological ending, the author selects a perspective on the action being described (aspect). In light of this phenomenon Porter has applied systemic linguistics (esp. from the work of M. A. K. Halliday) to understanding the Greek verbal system as consisting of a network of semantic choices.<sup>76</sup> The different Greek aspects can be arranged according to a network of choices. The use of an aspect by an author entails a semantic choice from within the system which requires an increasingly specific semantic choice as one moves through the system. Each aspect is meaningful in relationship to the others. Porter graphically displays the network of choices accordingly:



The basic opposition is between the aorist and non-aoristic aspects. Then a further decision is required between the two non-aoristic aspects, the present and perfect, with the perfect offering a more specific semantic choice. What this means is that within the Greek verbal system there are no principled (formal and morphological) means of distinguishing between so-called ingressive, constative, consummative aorists, or durative, iterative, durative presents, etc. These are all contextual, semantic categories that are realized (if present at all) at the level of propositions and larger contextual factors rather than grammaticalized within the verb form itself, and depend on judgments that are interpretive in nature.

At a grammatical level this means that the most meaningful choices are *between* the aspects, not *within* them. As Porter says, “the meaningful choice of the Aorist occurs in relationship to the Present/Imperfect and Perfect/Pluperfect tenses.”<sup>77</sup> Further, not only are the various so-called tense usages not formally marked, but the same usage can often

<sup>76</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 1-16. Cf. M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn; rev. by C. M. Matthiessen; London: Arnold, 2004).

<sup>77</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 30.

be found under different forms: ingressive aorist and imperfect; inchoative present and imperfect; iterative present and imperfect; gnomic aorist and present. This significant overlap suggests that these meanings if present are *contextually* and not *aspectually* dependent. If one is to follow formal indications, there are no choices beyond aorist, present, imperfect, perfect and pluperfect tenses. As Robertson concluded regarding the aorist tense, “there is at bottom only one kind of aorist.”<sup>76</sup> Fanning and Wallace in particular are unclear as to how the functions of aspect are tied to morphology.

### *A Practical Consideration*

A final criticism of the traditional way of classifying and labeling tense usage is a practical one. How much have we really achieved exegetically by labeling a given verb an ingressive or constative aorist, or a progressive or customary present? If we decide that the ἤμαρτον in Romans 5.12 is a constative aorist, or that the ἔζησαν in Revelation 20.4 is an ingressive aorist, what have we really gained? Is exegesis merely a matter of moving through a text and attaching a label to each verbal form? And if it is the context that makes the various tense meanings clear, then why complicate things by creating numerous categories of tense meanings? I must confess that I have yet to find one example where labeling a certain verb tense according to its ostensible usage has yielded any significant exegetical insight. Rather, such a practice seems to perpetuate the fallacies of 1) forcing an arbitrary construct on a given tense; 2) leaving the impression that exegesis consists of little more than labeling given tenses; 3) isolating individual verbs and their tenses and giving too much exegetical weight to a mere tense usage, deflecting attention away from the broader discourse as the proper locus of meaning. The accompanying error is that students nurtured on the traditional scheme of labeling tenses will be tempted to force a classification on a given tense when the context may not support it (see the discussion of the ingressive aorist above).

### **Rethinking Greek Tenses**

Based on the preceding difficulties with the traditional means of classifying Greek tenses, I would suggest that we avoid the use of such labels as descriptive of the Greek tense

<sup>78</sup> Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 835.



system altogether. Yet if the traditional method of classifying and interpreting Greek tenses/aspects is unhelpful and inappropriate, is there another scheme that should replace it? How should teachers and students of NT Greek approach the Greek tense system? In a sense, this way of putting the question assumes the need for a system of classification, though classificatory schemes may be necessary to explicitly reveal meanings that native speakers take for granted, especially in an epigraphic language such as NT Greek. I would suggest that we classify Greek tenses simply in terms of how the author chooses to view the action, that is, according to the three primary aspects. As seen above, verbal aspect can be understood as “the author/speaker’s reasoned subjective choice of conception of a process.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the author can conceive of the action as in progress (Present, Imperfect), as a complete whole (Aorist), or as a state of affairs (Perfect, Pluperfect). Beyond these three categories, any other meanings (durative, iterative, ingressive, constative, etc.) are not to be attached to the Greek tenses/aspects, since there are no principled linguistic means for discerning them. Rather, if they can be determined at all they reside in the broader contexts.

Romans 5.1-5 shift aspects as indicative of how the author chooses to conceive of the various processes. The author begins with an aorist participle (Δικαιωθέντες) which summarizes what has already been discussed previously, the readers’ justification. The implication of their justification is presented as a process in progress with the present aspect (ἔχομεν). Then two more verbs in perfect aspect (ἔσχήκαμεν, ἔστήκαμεν) present the benefits that we have through Christ as a state of affairs. Two occurrences of καυχώμεθα in the present tense view boasting as a process in progress. The perfect tense εἰδότες then presents the knowledge of what tribulation accomplishes as a state of affairs, while the working of tribulation to produce endurance (κατεργάζεταιται) and the fact that hope does not disappoint (καταισχύνει) are viewed as processes in progress. The author shifts back to the perfect aspect to portray God’s love poured out in our hearts (ἐκκέχυται) as a state of affairs. The aorist tense then summarizes the experience of believers in receiving the Holy Spirit (δοθέτες). In this section, then, the author grammaticalizes his conception of the various processes, as either a process in progress, a summary or complete whole, or a state of affairs. Any other meanings (duration,

<sup>79</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 1.

ingression, iteration, etc.), if present at all, would have to be determined by broader contextual features and not by the usage of the different tense forms.

This still leaves the question as to what we do with such categories as ingressive, iterative, durative, constative, etc. if they are not to be attached to tenses as labels reflecting their meaning. Throughout this paper I have attempted to argue that these labels are inappropriate and unhelpful as descriptions of the tenses. Is there a place for these labels, then, in our Greek grammars at all, and if so, where should they appear? This is an area where we need to rethink the way we treat verbs in our Greek grammars. As suggested above, I think that they labels should be dropped in our discussion of verb tenses. Furthermore, I would suggest that such categories if included at all should be discussed under verbs as part of the verbal complex, but not as part of the verb tenses. Perhaps these labels should be introduced only *after* each of the aspects have been introduced and discussed. Following a treatment of each of the aspects and their semantics, these categories then could be introduced with a discussion of the contextual features (including the lexical meaning of the verb) that signal these meanings and the aspects that often find realization in these constructs. Yet there must always be the accompanying realization that at times the contextual indications may be ambiguous or not present at all. Most of all, it should be made clear that these meanings are contextual categories that do not belong to the tense forms themselves. The use of such categories is only justified when warranted by contextual evidence. In the end it may be better to avoid such terminology.

In addition to communicating the author's perspective on the action, a further function of the Greek aspects is at times to signal discourse prominence. One of the significant insights of discourse analysis is the recognition that discourse is not flat, but is structured to highlight certain elements as semantically and pragmatically more significant than others. As Robert E. Longacre notes, "The very idea of discourse as a structured entity demands that some parts of discourse be more prominent than others."<sup>80</sup> Therefore, language users use language in a way that sets apart certain information from other information within a given discourse. According to Jeffrey T. Reed, "Prominence is

<sup>80</sup> Robert E. Longacre, "Discourse Peak as a Zone of Turbulence," in J. R. Wirth (ed.), *Beyond the Sentence: Discourse and Sentential Form* (Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma, 1985), pp. 81-98.

defined...as those *semantic and grammatical elements of discourse that serve to set aside certain subjects, ideas or motifs of the author as more or less semantically and pragmatically significant than others.*"<sup>81</sup> Based ultimately upon the insights of Gestalt psychology, discourse analysts have recognized at least two levels of prominence: often labeled *figure* and *ground* or *background* and *foreground*.<sup>82</sup> Porter helpfully proposes a third level, *frontground*, for the following three levels of prominence in discourse:<sup>83</sup>

1. *background*: this does not refer to material that is non-essential or unimportant, but to material that serves a supporting role.
2. *foreground*: this refers to material that is selected for more attention and often consists of the main characters and thematic elements in a discourse.
3. *frontground*: elements that are frontgrounded are singled out for special attention, are presented in a more well-defined way, and stand out in an unexpected manner in the discourse.

Though more research needs to be done, one of the linguistic features of Greek that can function to signal discourse prominence is the aspectual system.<sup>84</sup> The notion of aspect as portraying the author's perspective on an action fits nicely with the notion of discourse prominence which communicates different levels of perspective (background, foreground, frontground) on various features of the discourse. As seen above, the Greek aspectual system should be seen systemically as a series of choices. That is, rather than studying the various verb tenses/aspects in isolation, they should be viewed in relationship to one another. As one moves through the aspectual system (from aorist, to present, to perfect) a more specific semantic choice is made. Thus, the three primary aspects can be seen to correspond to the three levels of discourse prominence:

<sup>81</sup> Jeffrey T. Reed, "Identifying Theme in the New Testament: Insights from Discourse Analysis," in D.A. Carson and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 113; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), p. 76

<sup>82</sup> H. A. Dry, "Foregrounding: An Assessment," in *Language in Context: Essays for Robert Longacre* (ed. S. J. J. Hwang and W. R. Merrifield; Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1992), pp. 435-50; P. Hopper, "Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse," in *Discourse and Syntax* (ed. T. Givon; New York: Academic, 1979), pp. 213-41; S. Wallace, "Figure and Ground: The Interrelationship of Linguistic Categories," in *Tense-Aspect: Between Semantics and Pragmatics* (ed. P. J. Hopper; Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1982), pp. 201-23.

<sup>83</sup> Porter, *Idioms*, p. 23. Jeffrey T. Reed and Ruth A. Reese use the terminology of "background," "theme" and "focus" in a very similar way ("Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 9 (1996), pp. 185-88.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Hopper, "Aspect and Foregrounding;" Wallace, "Figure and Ground."

1. *background* – aorist aspect
2. *foreground* – present aspect
3. *frontground* – perfect aspect

While I am not claiming that this is always the case in aspectual usage in the Greek of the New Testament, it appears that one of the ways an author can create discourse prominence is by selection of aspectual forms. As Reed reminds us, “the use of verbal aspect to signal prominence...is a secondary role...and thus a discourse function, not a morphological function of Greek grammar.”<sup>85</sup> As the least heavily marked aspect, the aorist aspect is used in narrative to form the main story line and backbone of the narrative, and in epistolary literature the aorist is used to related material that forms the background for the main thematic material. The more heavily marked present aspect selects certain events in narrative to dwell on, and in epistolary literature it serves to draw attention to the thematic material in the discourse. The most heavily marked perfect aspect, then, can function to draw specific attention to selected events in the discourse. These are not the only way to signal discourse prominence, and often aspect will converge with other features to signal prominence.

In light of the above discussion, several examples from the NT will illustrate how verbal aspect is important signaling the author’s perspective on the action or discourse prominence. In the well-known commissioning of Jesus’ disciples in Matt 28.19-20, the author alternates aorist and present tense forms. V. 19 begins with an aorist participle *πορευθέντες*, followed by an aorist imperative, *μαθητεύσατε*. The author then switches to two present participles, *βαπτίζοντες* and *διδάσκοντες*, followed by a verb in the aorist tense (*ἐντειλάμην*). In light of the function of aspects in relation to each other, the aorist participle *πορευθέντες* functions to background the action of going as a prerequisite to the action that takes place in the main verb, the imperative that precedes it (*μαθητεύσατε*).<sup>86</sup> The aorist imperative, then, serves to summarize Jesus instructions to the disciples, while the present participles (*βαπτίζοντες, διδάσκοντες*) serve to

<sup>85</sup> Jeffrey T. Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 136; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), p. 114.

<sup>86</sup> For this function of the participle see Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2000) pp. 181-87.

emphasize and specify in more detail what making disciples involves. The aorist ἐντειλάμην summarizes what the readers already know from earlier sections of Matthew.

To consider a discourse as a whole, the book of Ephesians manifests a fairly clear discourse function of verbal aspect. As is well known, the epistle to the Ephesians divides somewhat naturally into two broad sections: chaps. 1-3; chaps. 4-6.<sup>87</sup> That is, the epistle can be divided fairly evenly into a section that expounds theological truth, followed by a section that explicates the practical implications of the theological exposition. What is less well-known is that this way of dividing this letter corresponds nicely to a discernable shift in verbal aspect.

	Chaps. 1-3	Chaps. 4-6
Aorist Aspect	64	59
Present Aspect	54	120

What can be discerned in this chart is that the aorist tense has a slight distributional advantage over the present in chaps. 1-3, while the present tense clearly proliferates in chaps. 4-6. Thus as the section which forms the basis and theological foundation for the later exhortations, chaps. 1-3 are largely carried along by the aorist aspect. Conversely, as the section which contains a higher proportion of thematically significant imperatival forms (there are 38 imperatival forms in chaps. 4-6, and only one imperative in chaps. 1-3) and is hortatory in tone, the present tense predominates in chaps. 4-6. As Kathleen Callow states regarding attitudinal types, “material at the factual end of the purposive chain is considered less prominent than material at the activity end; there is a graded increase in prominence as we move away from fact towards volition and activity.”<sup>88</sup> Thus as the section which is volitional and in which imperatival forms are prevalent, it should not surprise the reader to find the more thematic present tense predominating in this material. Indeed, the imperatival mood is “the mood of *volition*,”

<sup>87</sup> See for example F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 247-48; Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (Anchor Bible, 34; Garden City: Doubleday), p. 53. In fact, Barth’s work on Ephesians is a two volume commentary divided into a volume each on chaps. 1-3 and chaps. 4-6.

<sup>88</sup> Kathleen Callow, “Patterns of Thematic Development in 1 Corinthians 5.1-13,” in D. A. Black (ed.), *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 197.

the mood utilized “to express the appeal of will to will.”<sup>89</sup> The above chart does show that the distribution of present tenses is close to that of the aorist in chaps. 1-3, and that the aorist tense is still found with only slightly less frequency in chaps. 4-6. However, in chaps. 1-3 it appears that the present tense is utilized when the author is relating material directly to the experience of his readers, or highlighting significant events.<sup>90</sup> The aorist tense in chaps. 4-6 continues to provide supportive and background material to the thematic material and recalls what the readers already know.<sup>91</sup>

Another example of how verbal aspect works within a stretch of discourse is found in 1 Corinthians 15.3-5. In citing what appears to be a traditional creedal formulation, Paul relates the most important events from that tradition. Including the reference to the passing on of the tradition itself (παρέδωκα, παρέλαβον), the events relating to the Christ event are all found in the aorist aspect (ἀπέθανεν, ἐτάφη, ὄφθη[see also vv. 6-8]). The only exception is the reference to Christ’s resurrection in the perfect tense ἐγήγερται in v. 4. Several grammars and commentaries classify ἐγήγερται, according to the well-worn grammatical categories, as an *intensive perfect* which focuses on a present state produced by a past action.<sup>92</sup> Thus according to Gordon Fee, the perfect ἐγήγερται implies “that he was both raised and still lives.”<sup>93</sup> However, the perfect tense/aspect says virtually nothing as to whether the state of affairs continues into the present or is permanent. The fact that Christ is still risen is a theological point, and not a grammatical one. Rather, it appears that here the author’s use of the perfect aspect in 1 Cor 15.4 is motivated from a discourse perspective. The reason that the perfect ἐγήγερται appears in the midst of several aorists is not to emphasize the continuous existence of Christ as raised, but as the foreground tense it serves to introduce and

<sup>89</sup> Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, p. 174.

<sup>90</sup> See Gustavo Martin-Asensio, *Transitivity-Based Foregrounding in the Acts of the Apostles: A Functional-Grammatical Approach to the Lukan Perspective* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 202; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000), p. 45.

<sup>91</sup> In Ephesians 6.10-20 the reader encounters a number of aorist imperatives (ἐνδύσασθε – v. 11; ἀναλάβετε – v. 13; στήτε – v. 14; δέξασθε – v. 17). The section begins (v. 10) with a present imperative, ἐνδυναμοῦσθε, which serves to draw attention to the overarching command, to be strong in the Lord. The aorist imperatives that follow, then, summarize and itemize what is involved in the overarching command to be strong in v. 10.

<sup>92</sup> For discussion of the category “intensive perfect” see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 574-77. See virtually all the major grammars for inclusion and discussion of this category.

<sup>93</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 726. For this perspective see also Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 301-302; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 576.

highlight the main topic of discussion in the next section of chap. 15: the resurrection of Christ. The perfect aspect, then, serves to anticipate the further discussion of Christ's resurrection, as well as the topic of resurrection in general, in the subsequent discourse. In fact, when one examines the rest of Chap. 15 the perfect ἐγήγερται occurs six more times (vv. 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20), all with reference to the resurrection of Christ. Thus the use of the perfect ἐγήγερται is highly motivated and serves to highlight the main focus of attention, Christ's resurrection, as well as to establish cohesion within the discourse.

Rev 5.1-13 provides an intriguing example of not only interesting uses of individual tenses/aspects, but also provides a sustained visionary account where tenses shift constantly. In the second scene of John's programmatic throne room vision (cf. Rev 4), a second figure is introduced (the slain lamb), along with other features (a scroll, a mighty angel, the harps and gold bowls). According to the traditional manner of treating verb tenses, one could simply move through the text, and armed with the traditional categories, attempt to provide a label for each verb (durative present, constative aorist, intensive perfect, and so on). However, it is more important to view the aspects systemically in relationship to each other and to notice how the author's aspectual choice might function to shape the discourse as a whole. The aorist tense, as the basic narrative tense, seems to be used to summarize the vision and mark out discreet units (εἶδον, vv. 1, 2, 6)<sup>94</sup> and to simply summarize key events and carry the vision along (ἀνοῖξει, λῦσαι, εὐρέθη, ἐνίκησεν, ἔλαβεν, ἔπεσαν, λαβεῖν ἐσφάγης, ἠγόρασας, ἐποίησας, ἔπεσαν, προσεκύνησαν). In semantic opposition to the aorist, the present tense is used to describe and highlight certain elements of the vision, for example, the one seated on the throne (καθήμενου), the speech of the angel (κηρύσσοντα) and the elders/four living creatures (λέγει, ᾄδουσιν, λέγοντες), which interpret the significance of the vision, and to describe the possession of harps (ἔχοντες) and the content of the bowls of incense (γεμούσας). The present tense also serves to emphasize the fact that no one could look at (βλέπειν) the scroll.<sup>95</sup> Thus the present tense adds further descriptive touches to the vision by selecting certain elements to describe with the foreground present tense.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC, 52a; Dallas: Word, 1997), p. 338; Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1997), p. 158.

<sup>95</sup> The presence of another present tense, βασιλεύουσιν (over against the future βασιλεύσουσιν), in v. 10 depends on a difficult text-critical problem. For discussion see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2 edn; Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1994), pp. 666-7.

Notable are the present tenses used to introduce the hymns which liturgically interpret the significance of the Lamb's action of taking the scroll (λέγει, ᾄδουσιν, λέγουτες).

The perfect tense, then, is reserved for the introduction of the most salient elements and events in this vision. Thus, the scroll which is first introduced in v. 1 is described with two perfect participles (γεγραμμένον, κατεσφραγισμένον), and the introduction of the lamb and the seven spirits are frontgrounded by means of perfect participles (ἑστηκος, ἑσφραγμένον [cf. v. 12], ἀπεσταλμένοι). Hence, these two new and significant elements in the vision (the scroll and the Lamb) are introduced with the most heavily marked perfect aspects.

One other significant usage of the perfect aspect requires attention. In v. 7 the lamb now approaches the throne (aorist ἦλθεν) and takes the scroll from the hand of God (see v. 1). This description of the lamb taking the scroll occurs in the perfect aspect (ἔληφεν). As discussed above, under the traditional classificatory scheme the majority of grammars label this as a clear use of an “aoristic perfect,” that is, the use of a perfect where one expects an aorist and where any notion of existing results drops out.<sup>96</sup> I have expressed my misgivings with this category above, especially since the author is clearly aware of the aorist form which he uses twice in the next two verses (ἔλαβεν, λαβείν).<sup>97</sup> A more satisfactory solution in light of verbal aspect is that the perfect tense, as the foreground tense, is used to highlight the most significant action in the discourse, the transfer of the scroll from the right hand of God to the Lamb (ἔληφεν) as the only one who is invested with authority to open the book and set its contents into motion.<sup>98</sup> Once the transition takes place, the author then switches back to the background aorist tense (ἔλαβεν, λαβείν) to recall what has already taken place. Given the systemic relationship of verbal aspects, an approach which sees the aspects in relationship to each other and which considers the pattern of aspectual use over a stretch of discourse seems much more profitable than simply moving through a text, isolating and labeling individual verb tenses. Revelation 5 provides an important example of how verbal aspect serves to

<sup>96</sup> See G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John* (Novum Testamentum Supplements, 27; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 265; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 579; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 303; E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT, 16; Tübingen: Mohr, 1970), p. 55 (“aoristisch gebrauchtes Perfekt”).

<sup>97</sup> For a complete discussion of this issue, cf. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 270-73.

<sup>98</sup> Aune labels Chap. 5 “The Investiture of the Lamb” (*Revelation*, p. 319).



structure the discourse and how the author desire attaches greater importance to certain discourse features by means of verbal aspect.

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*Excursus: Verbal Aspect in Imperatives in NT Greek*

Analysis of Greek imperatival constructions has also been subject to treatment based on supposed categories of meaning based on the apparent usage of tenses.<sup>99</sup> The following interpretive scheme is usually accepted as axiomatic by grammars and commentaries:

1. *Present imperative* – carries a durative idea of “keep on....”
2. *Aorist imperative* – carries an ingressive idea of a beginning action (“start...”).
3. *Present prohibition (present imperative with μή)* – carries a durative idea and commands the cessation of an action already in process (“stop....”)
4. *Aorist prohibition (aorist subjunctive with μή)* – carries an ingressive idea, forbidding the beginning of an action (“Do not start...”).<sup>100</sup>

However, given the significance of verbal aspect for understanding the Greek verbal system, the above scheme, though deeply entrenched in much modern grammatical discussion, will simply not hold up. First, it confuses aspect and *Aktionsart*, failing to recognize that there is no necessary correlation between the form of the verb as grammaticalized in the verb morphology and the kind of action it describes. This means that any notions of “stop,” “start,” “do not start,” “keep on” can only come from the context (if they are present at all) and do not belong to the form of the imperative itself. Second, the above scheme is beset with so many exceptions that it calls into question the validity of the scheme itself.<sup>101</sup> For example, James Boyer has calculated that out of the

<sup>99</sup> For a fuller discussion cf. Dave Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect in Imperatival Constructions in Pauline Ethical Injunctions,” *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 17 (Mayo, 1996): pp. 21-35.

<sup>100</sup> For this scheme see most clearly Dana and Mantey, *Manuel Grammar*, pp. 299-301. Cf. James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. Vol. 1. Prolegomena* (ed. J. H. Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), pp. 122-26; Moule, *Idiom Book*, pp. 20-21; Blass, DeBrunner, Funk, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 172-74; Turner, *Syntax*, pp. 74-75; Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, 78-81; Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax*, pp. 118, 127.

<sup>101</sup> For important discussion on Greek imperatives see J. Donovan, “Greek Jussives,” *Classical Review* 9 (1895): pp. 145-49; J. P. Louw, “On Greek Prohibitions,” *Acta Classica* 2 (1959): pp. 43-57; James L. Boyer, “A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study,” *Grace Theological Journal* 8.1 (1987): pp. 35-54; Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect.” These studies show that the supposed rules for Greek imperatives based on tenses simply will not stand.

174 instances of the present imperative with μή (present prohibition), 100 examples occur in contexts with *no* indication of whether the action is taking place or not, 36 occur in contexts where the action clearly is not taking place, and only 38 occur in context where previous action is either explicit or probable, warranting the translation “stop...”<sup>102</sup> This is a far cry from what is needed to establish a ‘rule’ or even a general principle for present prohibitions. Instead, I would propose that the following scheme based on verbal aspect be adopted.

1. *Present imperative* – commands an action as a process in progress.
2. *Aorist imperative* – commands an action as a complete whole.
3. *Present prohibition* – forbids an action as a process in progress.
4. *Aorist prohibition* – forbids an action as a complete whole.

Thus, any notion of ingression or duration, action as already taking place or urged to begin, can only be deduced from the context and not the imperatival form itself.

Consistent with the above discussion, it is more appropriate methodologically to consider the aspects in imperatival constructions in systemic relationship to each other, rather than to treat them in isolated fashion according to the assumed rules of usage. In Colossians 3.5-17, Paul continues a lengthy parenetic section with several imperatival constructions that effectively illustrate the importance of aspect for understanding imperatives. These verses can be divided into two sections, vv. 5-11 and 12-17, which delimit the Christian life by means of a vice and virtue list respectively. The structure of this section of discourse revolves around three aorist imperatives: νεκρώσατε (v. 5), ἀπόθεσθε (v. 8), ἐμδίσασθε (v. 12), with the former two imperatives introducing the negative parenthesis, and the later imperative introducing the positive parenthesis. In the midst of these aorist imperatives, several present imperatives are scattered throughout this section (vv. 9, 15-17): μὴ ψεύδεσθε (v. 9), βραβεύετω, γίνεσθε, ἐνοικείτω (vv. 15-17).

According to the assumed rules of usage, one could construe the aorist imperatives as ingressive, that is, it is a call to commence an activity, or see them as calling for decisive action.<sup>103</sup> But this would make the present imperatives problematic,

35-54; Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect.” These studies show that the supposed rules for Greek imperatives based on tenses simply will not stand.

<sup>102</sup> Boyer, “Classification,” p. 43.

<sup>103</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1982), p. 176.

as portraying actions that are to be continued, since they seem to correspond to and further explain the aorist imperatives. Moreover, on what basis does one decide that the present imperatives in this context are any less decisive, especially since the aorist aspect is usually regarded as the “default” tense? Conversely, the μή ψεύδεσθε in v. 9 could be understood as a call to stop an action already in progress.<sup>104</sup> However, apart from the assumed rule, there is no contextual evidence that the readers are already lying, thus necessitating the rendering “stop lying.” Rather, I would propose that verbal aspect offers a more compelling and fruitful treatment of the imperatives and the shift in tenses in this section. The aorist imperatives serve as the summary commands in both the negative (νεκρώσατε, ἀπόθεσθε) and the positive exhortations (ἐνδυσασθε). The aorist aspect, as that which summarizes the action as a complete whole, serves as the summary term in each case. The present imperatives (μή ψεύδεσθε, βραβεύετω, γίνεσθε, ἐνοικίτω), then, serve to spell out in more detail what is involved in the summary aorist imperatives. Therefore, it appears that the author’s choice of verbal aspect in imperatival constructions in Col. 3.5-17 evidence a conscious patterning. Paul employs the aorist imperatives to introduce the general admonitions. The author then switches to the foreground present tense to spell out in more detail specific areas of exhortation for his readers.

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## Conclusion

Drawing on insights from recent research into verbal aspect, the preceding work has attempted to argue that despite the long tradition and sheer influence of the traditional way of handling Greek tenses according to labels which ostensibly reflect valid meanings, these labels should be abandoned as inappropriate and unhelpful in discussion and interpretation of Greek verb tenses. Though these labels have a long pedigree of usage in modern grammatical discussion, and will probably continue to do so, to classify Greek verb tenses according to these semantic categories confuses the meaning of the aspect with *Aktionsart*, or how the action actually took place. Rather such categories of meaning (ingressive, durative, iterative, etc.) depend on interpretive judgments from the broader context, including the meaning of the verb itself. But to transfer all of this

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 140 n. 49.

meaning onto the tense form itself is to commit at a grammatical level a similar fallacy often committed at a lexical level (confusion of word and concept). Moreover, these categories frequently are based on English translation of Greek tenses in context, and also fail to take into account the Greek aspects as a system. The categories that are usually appealed to may be valid at times at a rhetorical and contextual level. But it is misleading and unhelpful to transfer all this contextual information to the verbal forms themselves. And often contextual evidence is lacking for finding these kinds of meanings.

Instead, I would suggest that students of NT Greek should view the Greek tenses in terms of the three primary aspectual values, seeing them as only contributing the author's perception of the action. The author can conceive of the action as a complete whole (aorist), as in progress (present, imperfect), or as a state of affairs (perfect, pluperfect). In addition, though not the only or primary function, the aspects of Greek verbs, as contributing the author's perspective on the action, often function to signal levels of prominence in discourse (background, foreground, frontground). Otherwise, students are advised to say as little as possible about the tenses of Greek verbs, and attention should be deflected to the broader discourse units made up of sentences, paragraphs, and genres.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>105</sup> For sane advice regarding treatment of verbal aspect in the interpretive enterprise see Moises Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 111-118.