

CLARIFYING GREEK VERBAL ASPECT FOR ACCURATE EXEGESIS

A. Greek Verbs: Inflected Forms

| <u>Tense</u> | <u>Voice</u> | <u>Mood</u> | <u>Person</u> | <u>Number</u> |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Present | active | indicative | 1 st | singular |
| Future | middle | imperative | 2 nd | plural |
| Imperfect | passive | subjunctive | 3 rd | |
| Aorist | | optative | | |
| Perfect | | | | |
| Pluperfect | | | | |

B. Greek Verbs in 3D: TIME vs. *AKTIONSART* vs. ASPECT

- x. Time – the time of the verb’s action (past, present, future)
- y. *Aktionsart* – the verb’s objective kind of action (momentary, iterative, continual, gnomic, etc.)
- z. Aspect – the author’s subjective perspective of the verb’s action (imperfective vs. perfective)

C. Greek Verbs and TIME: *WHEN* the Action Occurs

The tense-forms of indicative mood verbs do not denote time of action by themselves.

1. Present tense-forms can be used for past (John 1:29), past-to-present (1 John 3:8), present, and future (John 14:3) time.
2. Aorist tense-forms can be used for past, present (Mk 1:11; 1 Pt. 1:24), and future (Rev. 10:7) time.
3. Imperfect tense-forms normally occur with continuous actions in past time, but may also occur with action in present time (2 Cor. 11:1; Gal. 4:20; Col. 3:18) or momentary actions whether past, present, or unrestricted time (Matt. 24:1; Mark 14:35; 1 Cor. 11:23).
4. Conclusion: The time of a verb’s action (whether past, present, or future) is not necessarily indicated by its tense-form (except future tense-form = future time) but by other words in the context, such as adjectives, adverbs of time, and prepositional phrases.

D. Greek Verbs and *AKTIONSART*: *HOW* the Action Occurs

Tense-forms in Greek may be used with many different kinds of action. But the kind or type of the verb’s action (i.e., ingressive, conative, constative, iterative, punctiliar, gnomic, etc.) depends on two factors: (a) context – indicators of time (deixis) in the context such as adverbs of time, adjectives, and prepositional phrases; (b) lexis – a word’s inherent nature or meaning—*not* the verb’s tense-form!

1. The aorist tense-form does not necessarily indicate action that is once-for-all (Rom. 13:7; 2 Cor. 11:24; 1 John 2:24), nor does the present tense-form necessarily denote continuous action (Matt. 3:13; Mark 5:22)

2. The kind or type of a verb's action (whether momentary, iterative, continuous, etc.) is not inherent to a verb's tense-form. The kind of action is determined by: (a) other words in the context, such as adjectives, adverbs of time, prepositions; and (b) the nature of the verb itself (lexis), where some verbs are typically instantaneous by nature (die, dip, fall, hit) vs. continual (abide, endure, etc.)
3. Though the tense-forms of Greek verbs do not in themselves denote a certain kind of action, they are capable of being used with context and lexis to express a wide variety of actions as a matter of *Aktionsart* (not aspect), e.g., the present tense-form (historical, gnomic, futuristic/proleptic, instantaneous, progressive, iterative, perfective) and the aorist tense-form (constative, inceptive, culminative, gnomic, epistolary, futuristic, dramatic).

E. Greek Verbs and ASPECT: Writer's or Speaker's PERSPECTIVE of the Action

Tense-forms of verbs in Greek inherently contain an aspect (invariable, semantic meaning), which is the writer or speaker's subjective perspective of the action, not the objective nature of the action (*Aktionsart*) or even the time of the action (the verb's variable, pragmatic meaning).

1. The tense-forms indicate the writer or speaker's subjective choice in viewing the action from a certain perspective, whether seeing the action imperfectively/proximately/internally or perfectly/remotely/externally.
2. Parade analogy – imperfective/proximate/internal aspect views the parade from the curb or within a block of the parade, while perfective/remote/external aspect views the parade remotely as complete from above it.

| PRESENT TENSE-FORM | IMPERFECT TENSE-FORM | FUTURE TENSE-FORM | AORIST TENSE-FORM | PERFECT TENSE-FORM | PLUPERFECT TENSE-FORM |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Imperfective | imperfective | perfective | perfective | imperfective* | imperfective* |
| Proximity | less proximity | temporal remoteness | remoteness | heightened proximity* | heightened remoteness* |

There is no consensus on the aspect of the perfect & pluperfect tense-forms. Some view these as a third type of aspect called "stative" (McKay, Porter, Decker, Plummer, Merkle, Kostenberger), others see them as "combinative" of perfective & imperfective (Fanning, Olsen, Aubrey), while others (Evans, Campbell*) view them as essentially imperfective.

Comparison of Views on Tense-Forms

| Tense-Form | Traditional View | Aspectual View |
|-------------|---|---|
| Present | Continuous action in present time | Action of any kind viewed as imperfective |
| Imperfect | Continuous action in past time | Action of any kind viewed as imperfective |
| Aorist | Punctiliar action in past time | Action of any kind viewed as perfective |
| Perfect* | Past action with present results | Action of any kind viewed (a) perfectly as logically antecedent and/or (b) imperfectively as a currently existing state |
| Pluperfect* | A past action with existing results in the past | Action of any kind viewed (a) perfectly or (b) imperfectively as a state of affairs but more remotely |
| Future | Future action | Future action viewed as perfective |

F. SIGNIFICANCE for Exegesis

1. Understanding verbal aspect upholds the inerrancy of Scripture. Parallel passages describing the same action or event with different tense-forms do not describe conflicting kinds of action; they just portray that action or event using different perspectives of the action. (Matt. 4:1 cf. Luke 4:1-2)
2. Verbal aspect allows greater consistency when interpreting varying tense-forms for the same event or action within the same verse or passage. (Matt. 6:6; Mark 12:41-44; Rom. 13:6-7)
3. Interpreting tense-forms as inherently denoting differing perspectives of action rather than kinds of action also helps avoid doctrinal errors that have plagued many interpreters in the past. (John 3:16; 1 John 5:4-5 cf. Mark 14:18-20, 23-24; Rom. 12:1; Matt. 5:31-32)
4. Understanding verbal aspect is helpful in discourse analysis by allowing us to recognize different levels of prominence for actions or events in a passage that use different tense-forms, whether in narrative or epistolary literature. The *aorist* tense-form often provides the backbone of the main story line or theme by summarizing “background” events or information. The *imperfect* tense-form often fills in “background” information that is considered additional in the discourse. The *present* tense-form is often used to bring important information to the “foreground” of the discourse. The *perfect* tense-form is often used to “frontground” an event or action, bringing it to the forefront of the discourse for emphasis or to highlight a certain event or action. (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Acts 16:25-34)
5. Cautions: When interpreting Greek verbs, keep in mind that communication in any language often involves conventions or idioms rather than a speaker or writer making a conscious choice or distinction between tense forms.
 - οἶδα – normally occurs in the perfect tense-form (it doesn’t have an aorist or present form)
 - limited choices for grammatical forms – indicative mood vs. subjunctive & imperative (only aorist and present tense-forms) & infinitives (no imperfect, future, or pluperfect)
 - genre – frequency of aorist vs. other tense forms in narrative vs. epistolary literature;
 - author tendencies (idiolect) – Paul uses the present imperative 3x more often than aorist imperative; but Peter in 1 Peter uses 25 aorist imperatives vs. only 10 present imperatives.

Recommended Introductory Resources

Campbell, Constantine R. *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

Campbell, Constantine R. *Advances in the Study of Greek*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.

Mathewson, David L. “The Abused Present.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23.3 (2013): 343-63.

Naselli, Andrew D. “A Brief Introduction to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek.” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007): 17-28.

Picirilli, Robert E. “The Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek: Where Are We?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (September 2005): 533-55.

Runge, Steven E. *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010.

Stagg, Frank. “The Abused Aorist.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 222-231.