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# ERRANT AORIST INTERPRETERS

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*The thesis of this essay is that exegesis and theology have been plagued by the tendency of Greek scholars and students to make their field of knowledge more esoteric, recondite, and occult than is actually the case. There is an innate human inclination to attempt to impress people with the hidden secrets which only the truly initiated can rightly understand or explain. Nowhere is this more evident than in the plethora of arcane labels assigned to the aorist tense in its supposed classifications and significations. Important theological distinctions are often based on the tense and presented with all the authority that voice or pen can muster. It is here proposed that the aorist tense (like many other grammatical features) should be "de-mythologized" and simply recognized for what it is—the standard verbal aspect employed for naming or labeling an act or event. As such, apart from its indications of time relationships, it is exegetically insignificant: (1) It does not necessarily refer to past time; (2) It neither identifies nor views action as punctiliar; (3) It does not indicate once-for-all action; (4) It does not designate the kind of action; (5) It is not the opposite of a present, imperfect, or perfect; (6) It does not occur in classes or kinds; and, (7) It may describe any action or event.*

\* \* \*

## THE ABUSED AORIST

In 1972 Frank Stagg performed yeoman service in publishing an article titled "The Abused Aorist."<sup>1</sup> A number of the illustrations referred to in the following discussion are taken from his article. His was not the first voice, however, nor the last, to be raised in objection to the disservice rendered to this most useful servant in the Greek tense system. But the warnings have largely gone unheeded.

During a recent automobile trip the author listened to two successive sermons (one on tape and one on radio) in which an aorist

<sup>1</sup>Frank Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," *JBL* (1972) 222-31.

tense was grossly perverted in "proving" a point of theological contention. In the first case, a well-known and gifted pastor argued that the use of an aorist form of the verb *νίπτω* ("wash") in John 13:8 proves that the footwashing by Jesus symbolized the once-for-all washing of salvation rather than the subsequent daily cleansing! This was in spite of the unmentioned fact that the same logic would require that people who have bathed need never to wash their feet but *once* thereafter (aorist in *v* 10). The second message argued that Jesus did not die spiritually for our sins because the aorist tense of the verb *ἀποθνήσκω* ("died") in 1 Cor 15:3 refers only to a *single* act of dying!

Such abuses would be humorous were it not for the fact that they are presented and received with such sincere conviction as the basis for significant theological assertions. Greek grammarians would instantly recognize the fallacies of the illustrations cited and have often spoken out against errors of this type. It is therefore quite surprising to find genuine scholars who may in one place legitimately describe the aorist tense, yet in another place misuse it in a manner not greatly different from the illustrations just cited. It is not surprising that student term papers, theses, and dissertations are often influenced by confusion in the grammars and commentaries.

The following discussion will briefly define the aorist tense and then respond to a number of the most common misrepresentations of its significance.

#### MEANING OF THE TERM

Unlike other grammatical terms, which are often ambiguous, the term *aorist* is an explicit and ideal grammatical term. A Greek 'present' tense does not always indicate present time—we have futuristic presents, historic presents, customary presents, and others. Likewise, the terms 'imperfect' and 'perfect' are not perfect. But like the term 'future,' the term 'aorist' is perfectly descriptive. No single aspect of the present tense is inviolable. Just as it does not always indicate present time, so it does not always indicate process. But the aorist tense is invariable—*all aorists are aoristic!*

In the matter of 'aspect' the purpose of the aorist is to be invisible. The term *means* "no boundary," "without horizon," "non-specific," "noncommittal," "indefinite," etc. The whole point of the aorist is to *refrain* from saying anything about the nature of the action. As Chamberlain said, the word means "I do not define."<sup>2</sup>

Grammarians generally agree that the aorist represents the most basic form of the Greek verb, employing the oldest and simplest stem

<sup>2</sup>William Douglas Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1960) 67.

form. Due to contemporary lexicographical methodology it would be impracticable but one could almost wish that Greek students could learn the aorist form of verbs *first* in order to entrench the basic concept of the verbal idea apart from an emphasis on time or aspect. Other tenses should be recognized as for the purpose of *adding* time or aspect considerations. *As it relates to the matter of aspect*, the aorist is transparent, it leaves the verbal idea 'naked' by adding *nothing* to the basic vocabulary concept. It merely labels or titles the act.

Since, in the familiar words of Broadus, Greek is "an aorist loving language,"<sup>3</sup> it is essential that the tense be stripped of its mythological accretions.

#### THE AORIST DOES NOT NECESSARILY REFER TO PAST TIME

The aorist is essentially, though not entirely, timeless. This is, of course, obvious in all but the indicative. Except for the participles it is mostly futuristic in its unaugmented forms. It hardly seems necessary to belabor this point, but on the part of some who do not use Greek regularly there is still a tendency to overemphasize the time aspect, and on the part of some scholars there is a tendency to overstate the case and remove all time considerations from the aorist.

#### *Examples of accuracy*

A. T. Robertson averred that "If one gets it into his head that the root idea of tense is time, he may never get it out and he will therefore never understand the beauty of the Greek tense, the most wonderful development in the history of language."<sup>4</sup>

Chamberlain states that "The student should disabuse his mind at once of the notion that the primary idea of tense in the Greek verb is time."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 831.

<sup>4</sup>In his Introduction to Davis' grammar (William Hersey Davis, *Beginner's Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1923] viii). The remark suggesting that the Greek tense system is the "most wonderful development in the history of language" was included in the above quotation to provide me with an opportunity to respond briefly to this unrealistic adoration of the Greek language. Greek teachers have often described Greek as "more expressive," especially in its tenses, than other languages. But the fact that God has revealed himself via this language does not make it a holy language, or a perfect language. God also revealed himself, infallibly, by means of Hebrew and Aramaic. Any well-developed modern language such as English, French, German, Spanish, etc., can express anything that Greek has expressed, though not by the same grammatical and semantic devices. Greek should not be worshipped.

<sup>5</sup>Chamberlain, *Grammar*, 67.

*Examples of inaccuracy*

All Greek grammarians adequately warn against viewing the aorist as primarily tense-related, but it is not uncommon to find overstatements of this matter. Dana and Mantey affirm, for example, that "it has no essential temporal significance, its time relations being found *only* in the indicative" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> In the definition given above it was clearly noted that it is in the area of *aspect* that the aorist adds nothing to the vocabulary concept. The aorist does commonly add time considerations in the indicative and also in its participial forms. Though aorist participles do not indicate tense in themselves, they do have special time relationships with the leading verb or the time of the context. The majority of aorist participles indicate time antecedent to the leading verb.

*Biblical examples*

Even in the indicative, time is not intrinsic to the aorist tense. The following are examples of biblical texts which employ aorist indicatives in ways that do not designate past events—they are essentially timeless.

"In you I am well pleased" (εὐδόκησα, Mark 1:11).

"Now is the Son of Man glorified" (ἔδοξάσθη, John 13:31).

"In this is my Father glorified" (ἔδοξάσθη, John 15:8).

"Wisdom is justified by all her children" (ἔδικαιώθη, Luke 7:35).

"The grass withers" (ἐξηράνθη, 1 Pet 1:24).

All of these examples appear to be timeless in their connotations and they adequately demonstrate that the aorist, even in its indicative forms, need not refer to past time.

## THE AORIST DOES NOT INDICATE COMPLETED ACTION

The examples just cited under the previous heading should also adequately refute this misconception, but a few additional comments may prove helpful.

*Examples of accuracy*

Stagg has succinctly noted that the aorist views the action "without reference to duration, interruption, *completion*, or anything else. . . . The aorist can be properly used to cover any kind of action: single or multiple, momentary or extended, broken or unbroken, *completed or open-ended*" (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927) 193.

<sup>7</sup>Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 223.

Dana and Mantey object to Blass' identification of the aorist as the tense "which denotes completion," and observe that "the aorist signifies nothing as to completeness." Unfortunately they add the unedifying comment that it "simply presents the action as attained."<sup>8</sup> Davis asserts that "it does not distinguish between complete or incomplete action."<sup>9</sup>

### *Examples of inaccuracy*

Summers states that "the aorist indicates finished action in past time."<sup>10</sup> Though he is referring to the aorist *indicative*, a point which many grammarians are not always careful to note, it is still not true that the aorist indicates finished or complete action—not even in the indicative.

McKay provides helpful insight into the significance of the tenses but then proceeds to misrepresent and misuse the aorist. With regard to the statement that Judas sinned (ἤμαρτον, Matt 27:4), he asserts that the "past time reference is unimportant: that it is aorist aspect, referring to the action as complete, is all important."<sup>11</sup> To the contrary, the past time reference as indicated by the augmented form and the context is more important than any nonexistent intimation about the nature of the event.

### *Biblical examples*

Only a few examples need be cited to demonstrate that aorist tenses (of any mood) need not designate completed actions.

"Death reigned through one man" (ἐβασίλευσεν, Rom 5:17).

"Guard yourselves from idols" (φυλάξατε, 1 John 5:21).

"That he might show in the coming ages the exceeding riches of his grace" (ἐνδείξῃται, Eph 2:7).

See also the examples under the previous heading. It should be apparent that while an aorist may be used with reference to a completed action, the tense itself does not indicate or imply this.

### THE AORIST NEITHER IDENTIFIES NOR VIEWS ACTION AS PUNCTILIAR

The term "punctiliar" is not only one of the most misunderstood of grammatical terms but also one of the most inappropriate. No grammatical feature can indicate a "punctiliar act," though vocabulary and context can readily do so.

<sup>8</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 193-94.

<sup>9</sup>Davis, *Grammar*, 78.

<sup>10</sup>Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville: Broadman, 1950) 55-56.

<sup>11</sup>K. L. McKay, "Syntax in Exegesis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972) 55-56.

Scholars are quick to point out that the term “punctiliar” must be “properly understood.” Stagg, for example, notes that “Careful grammarians make it clear that the punctiliar idea belongs to the writer’s manner of presentation and not necessarily to the action itself.”<sup>12</sup> He proceeds to defend Moulton’s and Robertson’s use of the term “punctiliar” as describing the way the action is viewed and not the action itself,<sup>13</sup> and explains that the aorist is “punctiliar only in the sense that the action is viewed without reference to duration, interruption, completion, or anything else.”<sup>14</sup> If language means anything, this says that the aorist is not punctiliar at all—especially not in the way it *views* (or *states*, or *regards*) the action! This terminology mars Stagg’s otherwise excellent discussion. The aorist neither designates nor even “views” the action as punctiliar. It does not view it in *any* way! It merely labels (names, titles) the action. For Robertson to state that “the ‘constative’ aorist treats an act as punctiliar which is not in itself point-action,” is to deny what he earlier affirms in identifying the aorist as meaning “*un-defined*” (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> The aorist does not “treat,” “view,” “regard,” or “state” the action as punctiliar or anything else. Its very purpose is to refrain from doing so.

### *Examples of accuracy*

According to Dana and Mantey, the aorist “states the *fact* of the action or event without regard to its duration.”<sup>16</sup> Burton declares that it “represents the action denoted by it indefinitely, i.e., simply as an event, neither on the one hand picturing it in progress, nor on the other affirming the existence of its result. The name *indefinite* as thus understood is therefore applicable to the tense in all of its uses.”<sup>17</sup> Machen demonstrates admirable restraint in avoiding the term “punctiliar” and identifies the imperfect as pointing to continued or repeated action whereas the aorist is a “simple assertion of the act.”<sup>18</sup> Wenham, unfortunately immediately after an invalid identification of the aorist as “a *punctiliar* (or point) tense,” clearly states that “the

<sup>12</sup>Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” 222.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 225, 229.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 223.

<sup>15</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 824, 31-32.

<sup>16</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 193.

<sup>17</sup>Ernest DeWitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1900) 16.

<sup>18</sup>J. Gresham Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1923) 81.

action of the verb is thought of as simply happening, without any regard to its continuance or frequency."<sup>19</sup>

### *Examples of inaccuracy*

Quotations here must of necessity be selective since almost every standard grammar may be faulted at this point—even those which in other contexts clearly state the matter. For example, in his next sentence after saying that the aorist regards action as undefined, Chamberlain unfortunately adds, "The common term for this is punctiliar action."<sup>20</sup> Whether or not it is the *common* term is not the point. The action need not be punctiliar and an aorist does not even *view* it as such—it merely names the act involved.

Conversation with Greek teachers will generally indicate a high degree of defensiveness with regard to any objections to such traditional terminology as "punctiliar." It is regularly insisted that the grammarians rightly distinguished between the nature of the event and the fact that an aorist is merely looking at an event "as a whole"—the latter being identified as a "punctiliar view." The response is threefold: (1) It is not being argued that all grammarians have misunderstood the aorist (Note the quotations, throughout this article, under the headings "Examples of accuracy"); (2) It is asserted that the term "punctiliar" is a misleading and inappropriate term to describe the fact that an aorist merely names an act without reference to its duration; and (3) Nearly all the grammars may be validly charged, at least with inconsistency, in that in their illustrations they interpret aorists as *indicating* "single acts," "particular occasions," and "fixed," "momentary," or even "instantaneous" events. If this be defended as a kind of "grammatical shorthand," meaning that the aorist *in a particular context* may point to such actions, it is responded that it is not the *tense* which indicates these matters and it is inexcusable to confuse students by such inaccurate "shorthand."

Dana and Mantey state that the aorist "presents the action or event as a 'point,' and hence is called 'punctiliar,'"<sup>21</sup> and "the play is entirely upon whether the action is punctiliar—viewed as a single whole—or whether it is the opposite, continuous or repeated."<sup>22</sup> On this basis they affirm that the aorist clause in I John 2:1, ἵνα μὴ ἁμάρτητε, means "in order that you won't ever commit an act of

<sup>19</sup>J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965) 96.

<sup>20</sup>Chamberlain, *Grammar*, 67.

<sup>21</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 194.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

sin."<sup>23</sup> This error has been perpetuated in scores of commentaries and sermons, in spite of the fact that all that John did was tell his readers what he wanted them to avoid, namely, sin. The number of acts of sin should not enter the picture merely on the basis of an aorist tense.

Hale states that "the chief emphasis is on the point-like quality of the action."<sup>24</sup> Godet wrote that the aorist ἔλθη, "shall have come," in 1 Cor 13:10, must allude "to a fixed and positively expected moment, which can be no other than that of the Advent."<sup>25</sup> Moule goes so far as to state that the chief function of an aorist "is to indicate an action viewed as *instantaneous*" (emphasis added).<sup>26</sup> Dodd says that "the aorist forms express momentary or occasional action."<sup>27</sup> With regard to the verb "entered" in Rom 5:12, Mickelsen remarks that "the tense of the verb indicates a distinct historic entrance."<sup>28</sup> One must respond that this concept comes from the meaning of the verb itself since it is difficult to have an entrance which is not distinct and not historical.

Robertson states that "the tense of itself always means point-action."<sup>29</sup> Summers says bluntly that "the kind of action is punctiliar."<sup>30</sup> One should note that these last statements refer to the *action* as punctiliar. It is an improvement to refer to the action as only being *viewed* in a punctiliar sense, but even this is a misrepresentation of the aorist. It should be added that attempts to represent the aorist as a "dot," in contrast to the representation of the linear tenses by a line or series of dots, are misleading at best.

### *Biblical examples*

Literally hundreds of examples could be listed to show that the aorist does not indicate, or even necessarily view, the action as punctiliar. Of course it may be used of a "punctiliar" event, but the use of the aorist does not prove this fact.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Clarence B. Hale, *Let's Study Greek* (Chicago: Moody, 1957) 32.

<sup>25</sup>Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977) 680.

<sup>26</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1968) 10.

<sup>27</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (The Moffat New Testament Commentary; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946) 78.

<sup>28</sup>A. Berkeley Mickelsen, "The Epistle to the Romans," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison; Chicago: Moody, 1962) 1197.

<sup>29</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 835.

<sup>30</sup>Summers, *Essentials*, 66.

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed” (ὀπηκούσατε, Phil 2:12).

“Look at the birds of heaven” (ἐμβλέψατε, Matt 6:26).

“He remained a whole two years” (ἐνέμεινεν, Acts 28:30).

“Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’” (μεριμνήσητε and φάγωμεν, Matt 6:31).

“If we forgive men their trespasses” (ἀφήτε, Matt 6:14).

“But you, whenever you pray” (προσεύχη, Matt 6:6).

“The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat” (ἐκάθισαν, Matt 23:2).

Again it should be noted that all the examples cited under the preceding heading are also applicable here.

Contrary to Moulton and Robertson, the aorist is not “punctiliar in statement” (nor in *fact*, as they admit).<sup>31</sup> It is noncommittal in statement. It refrains from viewing action as either linear or punctiliar. It abstains.

#### THE AORIST DOES NOT INDICATE ONCE-FOR-ALL ACTION

This aspect of “theology in the aorist tense”<sup>32</sup> has been criticized so often that one almost feels like he is “beating a dead horse” by even bringing up the subject. But the “horse” refuses to stay dead!

#### *Examples of accuracy*

All the statements which were quoted in objecting to the aorist as indicating completed or punctiliar action would also be appropriate here. Indeed, the once-for-all theory is just a “hyper-punctiliar” view and very few of the standard grammars deal directly with the terminology. (Of those examined for this study, only Turner misused it. See below.) After objecting to Law’s assertion that the aorists in 1 John 1:1 must refer to “a definite occasion,”<sup>33</sup> Stagg responds, “It is fallacious to argue from the grammatical aorist to a historical singularity.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise he notes that “Turner misleads when he finds necessarily a ‘once and for all’ in the aorist imperative.”<sup>35</sup>

#### *Examples of inaccuracy*

In his commentary on Revelation, Charles states that the aorists ἔκτισας (“created”) in 4:11 and ἐνίκησεν (“overcame”) in 5:5 each

<sup>31</sup>Moulton, quoted and approved in Robertson, *Grammar*, 832.

<sup>32</sup>Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” 222.

<sup>33</sup>Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.) 47.

<sup>34</sup>Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” 226.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 230-31.

indicate "one definite act" which was "once-for-all."<sup>36</sup> This statement is probably true except that this is not shown by the aorist tense, but by word meaning, context, and other revelation.

Ryrie builds a theological point on the aorists of Rom 6:13b and 12:1. Because the aorist "does not present the action as a series of repeated events . . . , the presentation of body is a single, irrevocable act of surrender rather than a series of repeated acts of dedication."<sup>37</sup> Walvoord makes the same error by stating that the aorist in 6:13b means, "Present yourself to God once and for all."<sup>38</sup> But neither grammar nor theology suggests any such limitation on these verbs. One might just as well argue that just as the Jews presented morning and evening sacrifices, so the believer should present himself to God both morning and evening. Is it dishonoring for a Christian who has failed (as all do) to present himself anew? (In reality, as long as men are sinners, no presentation can be a once-for-all presentation!) But frequency is not the point. Only the *fact* of presentation is at issue.

In his commentary on Revelation, Morris often refers to aorists as indicating once-for-all action. One example is μετανόησον ("repent") in 3:19.<sup>39</sup> But as Stagg notes, Morris fails to explain how the word ποιήσον ("do the first works," 2:5) may be taken as a once-for-all aorist.<sup>40</sup>

In commenting on the aorist ἐτύθη in 1 Cor 5:7, which refers to the fact that Christ was sacrificed for us, Johnson states that the aorist tense is "looking at the event as a once-for-all thing."<sup>41</sup> It is true that the verse is looking at a once-for-all event, but even with an imperfect tense the same would be true! (To say that Christ "was dying" for us would still point to the once-for-all event at the cross.) But the statement implies that this significance is because of the aorist tense and is therefore misleading at best. Such lack of precision has fostered the confusion which has led scholars like Francis Schaeffer to affirm that "the Greek aorist is a once-for-all past tense."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup>R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (ICC; 2 vols; New York: Scribner's, 1920), I. 134-35.

<sup>37</sup>Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) 79.

<sup>38</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954) 197.

<sup>39</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 84.

<sup>40</sup>Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 227.

<sup>41</sup>S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison; Chicago: Moody, 1962) 1237.

<sup>42</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972) 165.

A friend recently argued that the aorist imperative in the plural, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor 16:20, in contrast with the three earlier present tense forms of the same verb), proves that Paul was not commanding a general practice but only a conveyance of his personal greetings. My friend's interpretation may be correct, but it cannot be proved by the aorist tense!

### *Biblical examples*

Again, all the biblical examples previously cited are also applicable under this heading. In addition, none of the following refer to once-for-all actions.

"They loved not their lives unto death" (ἠγάπησεν, Rev 12:11).

"What you heard from the beginning" (ἠκούσατε, 1 John 2:24).

"Trade until I come" (πραγματεύσασθε, Luke 19:13).

"Jesus . . . went about doing good" (διῆλθεν, Acts 10:38).

"The promise which He promised us [many times], life eternal" (ἐπηγγείλατο, 1 John 2:25).

"Five times I received thirty-nine stripes" (ἔλαβον) . . . three times I was beaten with rods (ἐρραβδίσθη) . . . three times I was shipwrecked" (ἐναυάγησα, 2 Cor 11:24-25).

"For all [seven] had her" (ἔσχον, Matt 22:28).

"Holy Father, keep them, in your name" (τήρησον, John 17:11).

"They lived and reigned a thousand years (ἔζησαν and ἐβασίλευσεν, Rev 20:4).

"All the time in which Jesus went in and went out among us" (εἰσῆλθεν and ἐξῆλθεν, Acts 1:21).

"Wherefore that field is called 'Field of Blood' until this day" (ἐκλήθη, Matt 27:8).

"For all have sinned and fall short" (ἥμαρτον, Rom 3:23).

### THE AORIST DOES NOT DESIGNATE THE KIND OF ACTION

The truthfulness of this assertion should be adequately demonstrated by the very fact that the grammar books have divided the aorist into various "kinds" or categories (e.g., constative or indefinite; ingressive or inceptive; culminative, effective or resultative; gnomic; epistolary; dramatic; etc.). But, amazingly, it is necessary to fight an uphill battle against the grammarians at this point. Even though it contradicts what they say elsewhere, almost with one voice they proclaim that the "fundamental idea of the kind of action involved" is the "one essential idea" in the Greek system of tenses.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 293.

*Examples of accuracy*

Near the turn of the century Moulton popularized the German term "aktionsart" in describing the fundamental concept in the Greek tenses. The term is normally translated "kind of action," and as such it has produced all kinds of interpretive errors. As noted under the previous heading, even when "kind of action" is understood as meaning "way in which action is being viewed," the term misrepresents the aorist. McKay writes, "In common with most English-speaking classical scholars, I prefer to use another label, 'aspect,' for *what is referred to is not the kind of action*, but the way in which the writer or speaker regards the action in its context—as a whole act, as a process, or as a state" (emphasis added).<sup>44</sup> The term "aspect" is certainly an advance over "aktionsart" (or "kind of action") in referring to the aorist. But to define the aorist aspect as looking at the action in *any* way is to deny its basic noncommittal significance. As McKay himself later notes, the proper aspect of the aorist is "undefined."<sup>45</sup> It does not "look at" the action as any particular kind of action. His three aspects would better be named a "labeling" aspect, a "process" aspect, and a "state" aspect.

As Stagg has stated, "the presence of the aorist does not in itself give any hint as to the nature of the action behind it."<sup>46</sup>

*Examples of inaccuracy*

Davis incorrectly affirms that "the fundamental idea in tense is the 'kind of action.'"<sup>47</sup> Chamberlain makes an essentially identical statement but then contradicts it by correctly stating that the aorist regards the action as undefined, as "α-οριστος, from ἀορίζω, 'I do not define.'"<sup>48</sup>

The most extreme statements are those made by Moule. Under the heading "Aktionsart," he states that the primary consideration to the Greek mind was "the nature of the event," "the kind of action."<sup>49</sup> Here there is not even a pretext about how the action is *viewed*, but an explicit connection with the actual nature of the act!

Summers says of the aorist that "The *kind* of action is punctiliar."<sup>50</sup> But as everyone should know by now, the aorist does *not* tell anything about the kind of action.

<sup>44</sup> McKay, "Syntax in Exegesis," 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>46</sup> Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 231.

<sup>47</sup> Davis, *Grammar*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Chamberlain, *Grammar*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Moule, *Idiom-Book*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Summers, *Essentials*, 66.

Perhaps this is the most appropriate place to note that some grammarians have used the term "aktionsart" with reference to the *stem* (verb root) idea rather than, or in addition to, any reference to the tense idea. Chamberlain,<sup>51</sup> Davis and Robertson,<sup>52</sup> and Moule<sup>53</sup> furnish examples of this. This approach has more to commend it than the attempts to link aktionsart with the aorist tense itself, but as Moule is forced to conclude, "Many fascinating exceptions and modifications . . . present themselves."<sup>54</sup>

### *Biblical examples*

Probably the best way to establish the point at issue is simply to cite several aorists which describe distinctly different kinds of action.

Heb 11:5 refers to the action of many individuals over many years: "These all died in faith" (ἀπέθανον).

Acts 5:10 tells of an "instantaneous" single act: "Immediately she fell at his feet" (ἔπεσον).

Eph 2:2 refers to a "continuous past action: "In which you used to walk according to the way of this world" (περιεπατήσατε).

A number of references indicate indefinite future repetitions: "whenever you see a cloud rising . . ." (ἴδητε, Luke 12:54); "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (ἀσπάσασθε, Rom 16:16). Compare this latter illustration with the single occasion greetings employing the identical verb, e.g., "Greet Rufus" (Rom 16:13).

Other passages present what may be called general "policy" statements: "If you greet only your brothers . . ." (ἀσπάσησθε, Matt 5:47); "If you do not watch . . ." (γρηγορήσης, Rev 3:3).

### THE AORIST IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF THE PRESENT, IMPERFECT, OR PERFECT

With the possible exception of the once-for-all mistakes, this is probably the area of most confusion with regard to the aorist. It is commonly assumed that aorist tense verbs appear in a context for the purpose of establishing a *contrast* with, or even denying, what is affirmed by the other tenses. But, as should be evident from the foregoing discussion, this is plainly not the case. The aorist tense is never in *contrast* with the other tenses. It cannot be, for it does not assert anything! It merely refrains from affirming what they may imply. It is thus general and all-inclusive, rather than specific and exclusive or contrasting.

<sup>51</sup>Chamberlain, *Grammar*, 69.

<sup>52</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 295.

<sup>53</sup>Moule, *Idiom-Book*, 5-6.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

*Examples of accuracy*

It is embarrassing to admit the difficulty in finding accurate statements comparing the Greek tenses. The standard grammars almost all, at one time or another, succumb to the tendency to draw unnecessary contrasts. The most nearly consistent discussion available to this writer is that by Stagg. In properly responding to Dodd's differentiation between the imperfect and the aorist he notes that the common distinction "holds almost always for the imperfect but not for the aorist."<sup>55</sup> Later he remarks that "The aorist may cover a specific act, but it may also cover repeated or extended acts; and other tenses also may cover specific acts."<sup>56</sup> He also points out that the aorist is used with the phrase ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ("from the beginning") in I John 2:24 (ἠκούσατε), and the present is used with the same phrase in 3:8 (ἀμαρτάνει).<sup>57</sup>

*Examples of inaccuracy*

Dana and Mantey state that Greek writers were instinctively and "acutely conscious of the distinctive force of each tense in expressing the state of an action. The play is entirely upon whether the action is punctiliar—viewed as a single whole—or whether it is the *opposite*, continuous or repeated" (emphasis added).<sup>58</sup> This is certainly an overstatement. An aorist *never affirms* the fact of continuous or repeated action, as a present may do in certain contexts, but it is *not* the "*opposite*" of a present—it never *denies* or stands in contrast with what the present implies. The key proof cited by Dana and Mantey<sup>59</sup> is the variant reading in John 10:38 (ἵνα γνῶτε καὶ γινώσκητε, "that you might know and keep on knowing." Jesus' point, however, may simply be paraphrased, "I want you to know, and also to keep on knowing." There is no contrast; the present only elaborates—it *adds* to what the aorist says.

It is absolutely invalid to affirm that "The aorist infinitive denotes that which is eventual or particular while the present infinitive indicates a condition or process."<sup>60</sup> Dana and Mantey assert that "Thus πιστεῦσαι is to exercise faith on a given occasion, while πιστεῦειν is to be a believer."<sup>61</sup> This, of course, contradicts their own statements

<sup>55</sup>Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 224.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 225. See also Stagg's important correction of Law's misuse of the aorist in contrast with the perfect. Ibid., 226-27.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 226.

<sup>58</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 195.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 199.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

that an aorist speaks "without reference to progress,"<sup>62</sup> "or duration,"<sup>63</sup> "without implying that the action was either durative or perfective,"<sup>64</sup> and "without in any sense defining the manner of its occurrence."<sup>65</sup> An aorist infinitive (such as πιστεῦσαι) may designate a single act of faith or a life of faith. It definitely does not contrast with the present; it merely does not affirm what the present often does affirm.

Davis and Robertson claim that the aorist ἀμαρτήσωμεν in Rom 6:15 means, "Shall we commit a sin?"<sup>66</sup> But this is patently fallacious. It no more focuses on a single act than on a score of acts. It simply means, "Should we sin?"

One of the most common errors in this classification is the oft-repeated claim that the aorist subjunctive in prohibitions forbids one to *begin* an act, whereas the present imperative commands one to *cease* doing an act.<sup>67</sup> While these differences may often fit the context, they are by no means indicated by the tenses in either case. To insist that the aorists in the clause, "Do not give (δῶτε) that which is holy to the dogs, nor cast (βάλητε) your pearls before swine," must mean "*do not begin*" to do these things,<sup>68</sup> is purely arbitrary. Whether they had been done before, or not, is wholly beside the point.

Wenham gives a beautiful statement to the effect that a present imperative is used for "a command to continue an action or do it habitually" whereas the aorist imperative denotes "a command simply to do an action without regard to its continuance or frequency."<sup>69</sup> But almost unbelievably he proceeds to deny his own clear statement! He refers to the parallel accounts of the Lord's prayer in Matthew (6:11) and Luke (11:3) and notes that Luke uses the present imperative of δίδωμι ("give"), whereas Matthew uses the aorist. His conclusion is that the present "denotes a continuous act of giving, day after day" while the aorist indicates "a single act of giving: 'for today.'"<sup>70</sup> On the same basis, Jeremias argued that Luke's version requests the daily giving of "earthly bread" while Matthew's version requests the eschatological "bread of life" for "the great Tomorrow."<sup>71</sup> The correct approach is to realize that the present adds an emphasis which the

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 193.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 296. Even Stagg ("The Abused Aorist," 231) implies such a distinction!

<sup>67</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 296.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Wenham, *Elements*, 98.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 24-25.

aorist does not include but does not deny. They refer to the same action without any "contrast."

One of the most amazing examples of overly contrasting the tenses is McKay's contrast between the perfect, τοῖς γεγαμηκόσιν ("the married men") in 1 Cor 7:10, and the aorist, ὁ γαμήσας ("the married man"), in 7:37. The latter, he says, designates a "man newly committed to marriage," because the aorist refers to "a decisive event as a whole."<sup>72</sup>

### *Biblical examples*

The examples listed under the previous heading show that the aorist can be used of all kinds of actions, including repeated and continuous ones. This should adequately demonstrate that the aorist is not the opposite of the so-called durative tenses. Only a few additional references need be cited.

In Gal 4:9 there is an interesting textual variant between the aorist δουλεῦσαι and the present δουλεύειν. But is there a significant difference between, "Do you wish to serve as a slave to them again (aorist)?" and, "Do you wish to be in a condition of slavery to them again (present)?"

Likewise, is there a significant difference between, "To which of the angels did he ever say. . . ?" (εἶπέν, aorist, Heb 1:5) and, "To which of the angels has he ever said. . . ?" (εἶρηκεν, perfect, Heb 1:13)?

The gospel statement includes the fact that Christ "has been raised" (perfect tense, ἐγήγερται, 1 Cor 15:4). But continuance is not denied by the normal use of the aorist, "he was raised" (or "he arose," ἠγέρθη, Matt 28:7, Mark 16:6, Luke 24:34).

Aorist participles do not, of themselves, indicate momentary or temporary action in contrast with present participles. The aorist participle, ἀκούσας in Luke 6:49, does not describe a momentary and ineffectual hearing in contrast with the present participle, ἀκούων, in 6:47, which supposedly indicates an effective hearing with lasting results.<sup>73</sup> Otherwise, as Stagg has noted, Joseph's "hearing" (ἀκούσας) would have to be a momentary and ineffectual hearing, even though it caused him to obey in every detail (Matt 2:22)!<sup>74</sup> The context, not the tense, tells which of the hearings was effective.

Aorists deny neither results nor process.

<sup>72</sup>McKay, "Syntax in Exegesis," 56.

<sup>73</sup>Stagg ("The Abused Aorist," 231) rightly objects to this error of Zerwick and Turner.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

## THE AORIST DOES NOT OCCUR IN CLASSES OR KINDS

Though the labels vary extensively, Greek grammars and commentaries use a fairly standardized system of classification for what they call the various kinds, or uses, of the aorist tense. The most common labels for the six generally recognized classifications are as follows: constative, ingressive, culminative, gnomic, epistolary, and dramatic. It is hereby affirmed that these labels are wholly unrelated to the concept or function of the aorist tense. Most of them are equally applicable to other tenses. There may be constative, ingressive, or culminative (and etc.) *expressions*, but not constative, ingressive, or culminative *aorists*. This is not mere nit-picking. The distinction is essential to avoid misrepresentations of God's Word.

*Examples of accuracy*

Though they have misstatements, Davis and Robertson properly note that the classifications are closely related to the meaning of the words involved.<sup>75</sup> McKay states that there was "no problem about using the aorist of the same verb twice in quick succession with . . . apparently different meanings . . .," since "the aorist was simply the aorist, the 'undefined,'" and adds that "context is always important in deciding the precise significance of a particular form."<sup>76</sup>

Though he mixes it with error, Robertson states that the "ingressive" (or inceptive, or inchoative) aorist is not "a tense notion at all. . . , it is purely a matter with the individual verb."<sup>77</sup> By this he means that it is determined by word meaning and is not a tense function. He later notes that the "culminative" concept is shown "by the verb itself"<sup>78</sup>—not by any aspect of the tense. His best statement, stripped of its invalid accoutrements, is that "there is at bottom only one kind of aorist. . . ."<sup>79</sup>

Stagg's statement is perfect when he declares that the aorist is "a-oristic, undefined as to action," and that "Only contextual factors permit one to go beyond that to ascertain whether the action alluded to is singular or not."<sup>80</sup> A *statement* may affirm such distinctions, but the *tense* does not. This is why Dana and Mantey add, after introducing their classifications, "However, the verbal idea as well as the context usually affects very decidedly the significance of the aorist."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>75</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 296.

<sup>76</sup>McKay, "Syntax in Exegesis," 47, 56.

<sup>77</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 834.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 835.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 224.

<sup>81</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 196.

*Examples of inaccuracy*

Burton correctly states that the tense is *indefinite* "in all of its uses" (emphasis added), but then contradicts himself by using the standard classifications which, he says, are determined by the *differing* points of view and *functions* of the tense!<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Dana and Mantey assert that the point of the aorist is to speak of an event "without in any sense defining the manner of its occurrence," but then proceed to classify its uses based on the "modifications of the fundamental idea."<sup>83</sup> These "modifications," they say, result from the "different angles" from which the action is contemplated.<sup>84</sup> But as has been seen, the purpose of the aorist is to refrain from viewing the action in *any* way!

It should be noted here that just as one would not choose to employ an aorist to emphasize *process*, he would not employ an aorist to emphasize a *state*. It is therefore not surprising to find that verbs with meanings which usually point to a state of being may be used in the aorist tense to describe entrance into that state. This is to be expected since the aorist is employed in naming an act, not a state. If this usage is labeled as "ingressive," it should be made clear that any "ingressive" concept is derived from the meaning of the words, regardless of what tense is employed. An earlier statement is worth repeating: There may be constative, ingressive, culminative (and etc.) *expressions*, but not constative, ingressive, or culminative *aorists*. If one defends such labels as "ingressive aorist" as merely another example of "grammatical shorthand," the response is that any "shorthand" should express reality and should not mislead. Other tenses may also be employed in constative, ingressive, or culminative *expressions*. These distinctions are not shown by the tense and the terminology employed should not imply that they are.

Hale claims that "The aorist may put the spotlight on the beginning of the action, on the effect of the action, or on the action as a whole, *but not on its progress or its repetition*."<sup>85</sup> The emphasized words (his emphasis) are valid but the earlier phrases deny the fact that the aorist does not identify or view the action in *any* way. The meaning of the words and the context may point to these things, but the tense does not. The statement by Summers that "There are several shades of meaning in the use of the aorist tense" is simply not true.

<sup>82</sup>Burton, *Syntax*, 16-17.

<sup>83</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 195-96.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>85</sup>Hale, *Let's Study Greek*, 33.

*Biblical examples*

There is no way to illustrate this point except by showing examples of arbitrary classifications and insisting that the classifications are not derived from any tense function but from word meaning and context.

The most commonly cited example of an “ingressive” aorist is in the clause, “for your sake he became poor” (ἐπτώχευσεν, 2 Cor 8:9). But the aorist simply labels the act; he “abdicated” or “renounced” his riches; he impoverished himself. Nothing focuses on the *beginning* of the act. Attention is focused only on the *fact*.

Is the aorist in the statement “The lion prevailed” (ἐνίκησεν, Rev 5:5) ingressive, constative, or culminative? The answer is, It is *aorist*! Any classification comes from an interpretation of the *context* and could be true (or false!) regardless of the tense employed.

John’s command, “Produce fruit worthy of repentance” (ποιήσατε, Matt 3:8), clearly refers to a process, though the aorist is used only for the purpose of naming the action.

The word “received” (cf. ἔλαβον in John 1:12) is often cited as an ingressive aorist. But the aorist does not point to the beginning of an act—only to the fact of the act. Anything else is derived from the meaning of the word and sentence.

The KJV translated ἐσίγησεν in Acts 15:12, “*kept* silence,” while the NIV translates, “*became* silent” (constative versus ingressive). Which does the text affirm? Neither, though both are true statements! The best translation would be the most noncommittal (like the aorist), “the multitude was silent.”

To translate ἔκλαυσεν in Luke 19:41, “he burst into tears,” as Robertson does,<sup>86</sup> is absolutely arbitrary. All we are told is that “he wept.”

#### THE AORIST MAY DESCRIBE ANY ACTION OR EVENT

This is simply the converse of all the negative statements of the preceding headings. Further, the very fact of the various classifications such as ingressive, culminative, etc., proves the point.

*Examples of accuracy*

After introducing the Greek tenses, Chamberlain urges students to “Remember that the same act may be looked at from any of the

<sup>86</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 834.

<sup>87</sup>Chamberlain, *Grammar*, 67.

three viewpoints." According to McKay, "The action referred to by the aorist may be single and punctiliar or it may be repeated, or spread continuously over a long period of time."<sup>88</sup> Though he mistakenly identifies the aorist as indicating action viewed as instantaneous, Moule correctly states that it can refer to either past, present, or future.<sup>89</sup> This agrees with Stagg's statement that "the aorist can properly be used to convey any kind of action."<sup>90</sup>

Turner's remark is quite pertinent: "Sometimes the change of tense is prompted by no other motive than avoidance of monotony."<sup>91</sup> Stagg wisely notes that "it is sometimes far from apparent why the writer switches his tenses."<sup>92</sup>

### *Examples of inaccuracy*

A recent student paper explained that the verb "was confirmed" (ἐβεβαιώθη) in Heb 2:3 "expresses point action" and is therefore rightly translated in amplified form with the addition, "once-for-all." Of course, it does not refer to point action at all, but to the sign miracles of the apostles which were accomplished over a period of almost forty years.

Another student paper, in explaining the verb "sinned" in Rom 5:12, claimed that "as an aorist it . . . speaks of one single act of sin." Davis and Robertson argue the opposite view and say that it refers to "the whole history of the race."<sup>93</sup> Neither approach can be proved by the tense. The immediate context and the larger context (theology) must be involved in one's decision.

A well-known pastor recently distributed a paper arguing that the aorists in 1 John 2:1 were for the purpose of prohibiting even "one act of sin." He added, "the tense could not be present because John is addressing believers, and a true believer will *not* keep on sinning." This statement misrepresents the aorist, which may prohibit many acts as easily as one, and also misrepresents the present tense, which is often used of sinning Christians (cf. 1 John 5:16; 1 Cor 6:18, 8:12, 15:34; Eph 4:26; 1 Tim 5:20).

Hughes argues that "in favor of interpreting the present passage [Heb 6:4-6] in the light of the baptismal event is the series of

<sup>88</sup>McKay, "Syntax in Exegesis," 47.

<sup>89</sup>Moule, *Idiom-Book*, 10.

<sup>90</sup>Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 223.

<sup>91</sup>Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (vol. 3, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, ed. James Hope Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 66.

<sup>92</sup>Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," 226.

<sup>93</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 200.

participles in the aorist tense . . . which would appropriately point back to the moment of initiation through a rite. . . ."<sup>94</sup> But the same logic would require "having fallen away" (v 6) to refer to baptism! There is nothing about the tenses that even suggests that they all refer to the same event—much less that of baptism.

### *Biblical examples*

It is hardly necessary to provide examples under this heading. The great variety of examples listed under the previous headings all demonstrate that any time or kind of action can be described or viewed by an aorist. Furthermore, the grammars never dispute the point, though their statements and their practice are riddled with inconsistencies. Merely for the sake of completeness a few additional examples will be cited.

Matthias was selected from among "those who had accompanied" Jesus during his entire ministry (συνελθόντων, Acts 1:21). Here again the aorist describes a "durative" event. Similarly, Jesus said, "I *always* taught" (ἐδίδαξα, John 18:20) wherever the Jews gathered together.

The same verse states that Jesus "went in and went out" among the Jews (εἰσῆλθεν, ἐξῆλθεν), yet 9:28 uses present participles (referring to past time) to describe the same "going in and going out" (εἰσπορευόμενος, ἐκπορευόμενος).

In Rev 1:19 John was commanded to *write* (γράφον) the things he had seen, and the things which are, and the things about to *occur* (γενέσθαι). Both of these aorists refer to future events (for John) that would cover extensive periods of time.

### CONCLUSION

Dana and Mantey wrote: "Probably in no point have translators made more blunders than they have in rendering the aorist." Whether or not this is true of translators, it is certainly true of grammarians (including Dana and Mantey), commentators, teachers, preachers, and students. As McKay has stated, however, the aorist was simply the aspect used "when the speaker or writer had no special reason to use any other."<sup>96</sup> Robertson's terminology is almost identical: "The aorist is the tense used as a matter of course, unless there was special

<sup>94</sup>Philip Edgecombe Hughes, "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril to Apostasy," *WTJ* 35 (1973) 152.

<sup>95</sup>Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 200.

<sup>96</sup>McKay, "Syntax in Exegesis," 46.

reason for using some other tense.”<sup>97</sup> Writing with Davis, he amplifies by stating that “If one desires to *emphasize* the notion of linear action on the one hand or the state of completion on the other, it is not the tense to use” (emphasis added).<sup>98</sup>

The sum of the matter is simply that with regard to the kind of action, and the way in which action is viewed, the aorist says no more than the analogous simple preterite and non-durational participial, infinitive, imperative, and subjunctive forms in English. Departure from the aorist is therefore far more exegetically significant than its use.

<sup>97</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 831.

<sup>98</sup>Davis and Robertson, *Grammar*, 295.