

## THE ABUSED AORIST

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TO the grammarian it may seem like beating a dead horse to protest that the aorist does not necessarily reflect the nature of the action or event it covers. But the horse is not dead; he is very much alive and cavorting rather freely in exegetical and theological pastures. The fallacy of "theology in the aorist tense" stubbornly persists, even in the writings of distinguished scholars.

To cite a few, the following are among those who have built theology or biblical interpretation upon what to this writer is a misunderstanding of the nature of the aorist: F. W. Beare, W. Bousset, R. H. Charles, J. Jeremias, R. Law, Leon Morris, J. A. Sanders, R. Schnackenburg, and A. N. Wilder (see examples below). Raymond E. Brown and C. H. Dodd may be cited among those who reflect a basic understanding of the aorist and yet succumb to the fallacy that it normally indicates "point action" (see below). Although this article has been fermenting for a long time, these examples were garnered in the course of a limited period of reading, with no concerted effort to canvass biblical or theological literature to demonstrate the full extent of the abuse, but they are sufficient to suggest that the abuse is extensive.

The *Aktionsart* of the aorist is introduced in the grammars as "punctiliar," "point action," "snapshot action," etc. Properly understood, this is serviceable. Careful grammarians make it clear that the "punctiliar" idea belongs to the writer's manner of presentation and not necessarily to the action itself. Some grammars actually misrepresent the matter, holding that at least in the indicative mood the aorist has to do with action which itself is punctiliar (see below). From this follow the ill-advised arguments of exegetes or theologians that because the aorist is used, the reference has to be to a single action or even a "once-and-for-all" action. It is this line of argument that is false and needs to be challenged; the action may be momentary, singular, or "once and for all," but it is not the use of the aorist that makes it such.

"Aorist" is one of the few grammatical terms well suited to its purpose. Many terms are arbitrary and poorly suited to what they are supposed to designate or illuminate. Participles, e.g., are not finite, so they could just as well have been called infinitives; and infinitives participate in the functions of noun and verb, so they could as well have been called participles. "Present tense" does not illuminate the past action of a "historical present" or the futuristic force of a

"futuristic present."<sup>1</sup> And so it goes. But "aorist" is a term happily suited to the primitive form which it labels. It is "a-oristic," i.e., undetermined or undefined. The aorist draws no boundaries. It tells nothing about the nature of the action under consideration. It is "punctiliar" only in the sense that the action is viewed without reference to duration, interruption, completion, or anything else. What is "aoristic" belongs to semantics and not necessarily to the semantic situation. The aorist can properly be used to cover any kind of action: single or multiple, momentary or extended, broken or unbroken, completed or open-ended. The aorist simply refrains from describing.

*Examples of Abuse*

Wilhelm Bousset in his great commentary on the Apocalypse repeatedly argues from the aorist to the kind of action behind the tense. He argues that from *ἔδωκα* in Rev 2:21 we are to understand that a single, great warning was given: *dass schon einmal eine ganz bestimmte Warnung an das Weib ergangen ist.*<sup>2</sup> He argues that *ἡκουσας* (3:3) designates *einen einmaligen Zeitpunkt in der Vergangenheit.*<sup>3</sup> Context may imply this, but the aorist does not. He sees the aorist imperative *μετανόησον* (3:3) *als ein einmaliger Akt gedacht.*<sup>4</sup> It is true that the repentance may be viewed as singular, but its actuality may be momentary or linear. In his treatment of 3:19 he stresses the linear action of *ζήλευε* as over against the singleness of action in *μετανόησον*: *die Sinnesänderung ist eine einmalige Handlung, das "Eifern" etwas dauerndes.*<sup>5</sup> Again the exegetical conclusion may be sound, but the grammatical base for the argument is fallacious.

R. Schnackenburg builds his interpretation of 1 John 5:6 (Jesus' coming by water and blood) on the aorist *ἐλθών*. He sees the aorist as pointing to definite salvation events attending Jesus' once-for-all coming into the world: *Der Aorist ἐλθών zwingt den Blick auf bestimmte, mit Jesu einmaligem Kommen in die Welt gegebene Heilsereignisse.*<sup>6</sup> The text may intend this and the aorist participle is not incompatible with this idea, but the use of the aorist does not prove it.

Commenting on John 1:5, Raymond E. Brown correctly sees that the aorist *κατέλαβεν* could be "a complexive aorist summing up a series of attempts" or "a gnomic aorist indicating that darkness is always trying to overcome light," although he opts for this aorist as referring to a specific attempt of darkness to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stephen M. Reynolds, "The Zero Tense in Greek, a Critical Note," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 32 (1969) 68-72.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1896) 255.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-73.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (HTKNT 13/3; 4th ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1970) 257.

overcome the light, viz., the fall of man.<sup>7</sup> He clearly sees that the aorist does not necessarily refer to a single past action. But it is misleading for him to say that thus the aorist receives its "normal meaning" as referring to "a single past action."<sup>8</sup> This is neither the necessary nor normal use of the aorist, and it is just this misunderstanding of the aorist which results in so much unwarranted building upon this tense.

C. H. Dodd wavers in his appeal to tenses as a possible solution to the apparent contradiction within the First Epistle of John to the effect that no one is without sin (1:8, 10) and yet one who abides in Christ does not sin (3:6, 9). Dodd offers "a distinction of tenses in Greek" as a possible solution to the apparent contradiction but also cautions against reading too much subtlety into tenses.<sup>9</sup> He confuses the matter, however, when he writes, "The imperfect forms of the oblique moods (including infinitive and participle) express continuous or habitual action; the aorist forms express momentary or occasional action."<sup>10</sup> This holds almost always for the imperfect but not for the aorist.

It is altogether possible that the problem in First John may be resolved by appeal to the change in tense, but this is not conclusive, as Dodd himself recognizes. But for all his caution, Dodd does keep alive the fiction that the aorist tense (including participle and infinitive) normally presupposes "momentary or occasional action." He misleads the reader when he implies that this is to "interpret the tenses strictly."<sup>11</sup> It would be nearer the truth to say that when the aorist tense is interpreted strictly it remains a-oristic, undefined as to action. Only contextual factors permit one to go beyond that to ascertain whether the action alluded to is singular or not.

A. N. Wilder falls into the aoristic trap in his interpretation of 1 John 2:1, "But if any one does sin (i.e., commits an act of sin [aorist tense]; contrast habitual sin in the present tense, 3:6, 9 and 5:18. . .)"<sup>12</sup> John may imply a distinction between a single act of sin and habitual sin, but the aorist tense does not require this. It permits it.

R. H. Charles falls into the same aoristic trap in his comment on Rev 4:11, ". . . were (then by one definite act) created."<sup>13</sup> Though not his point, this settles the question of evolution with an aorist indicative! Despite Charles, the aorist does not require "one definite act."

F. W. Beare in his commentary on Philippians builds interpretation and

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 27.

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (Moffatt New Testament Commentary; New York: Harper, 1946) 78-79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> A. N. Wilder, "The First, Second, and Third Epistles of John," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1957) 12, 227.

<sup>13</sup> R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920) 1, 134.

theology upon a confused view of the aorist. Commenting on 3:10 he observes, "The aorist has what is styled 'punctiliar' action; this means that it sums up the action of the verb at a point. . . . The main point is that it cannot represent action as progressive."<sup>14</sup> What Beare fails to bring out is that the aorist refrains from description but that what is covered by the aorist may be any kind of action. One cannot assume that the action itself is necessarily a single one. The aorist can cover action which in itself is progressive. In his treatment of 2:6-7, Beare writes: "It is to be noted that all verbs are *aorists*, 'expressing only the occurrence of an action or the entrance into a state or condition.'"<sup>15</sup> This is not an illuminating statement.

In 2:8, "He humbled himself in becoming obedient unto death," Beare again evolves theology from the punctiliar force of aorist forms, holding that the aorists "do not describe a disposition, but an act of obedience."<sup>16</sup> All such attempts to construct theology or reconstruct the shape of an historical event on such understanding of the aorist are ill-advised and indefensible.

Beare's appeal to Moulton for support is misleading. Moulton clearly distinguishes between semantics and the semantic situation. For Moulton "point action" belongs to one's way of viewing an action and not necessarily to the action itself. He holds that "it looks at a whole action simply as having occurred, without distinguishing any steps in its progress. . . ." <sup>17</sup> He cites Rev 20:4, "They reigned [*ἐβασίλευσαν*] a thousand years," as an example of the "constative" aorist, where the action itself is linear but where it is simply viewed as a point.

J. A. Sanders appeals to the aorists in Philippians 2:6-8 as indicating specific acts: "Not only are *ἐκένωσεν* in vs. 7 and *ἐταπείνωσεν* in vs. 8 clearly narrative aorists revealing specific acts in the mythic drama, but so is *ἡγήσατο* in vs. 6, which expresses the self-asseveration in humility of the *deus obsequens*."<sup>18</sup> Paul may well have in mind specific acts, but the aorist form does not require this. The aorist may cover a specific act, but it may also cover repeated or extended acts; and other tenses also may cover specific acts. Sanders' statement is thus not illuminating.

J. Jeremias places entirely too much weight on Matthew's employment of the aorist imperative in the first "We-petition" in the model prayer, contrasting the Matthean and Lucan versions:

Moreover, in Luke the Greek word for "give" now had to be expressed with the present imperative (*δίδου*, literally "keep on giving!"), whereas elsewhere throughout the Prayer the aorist imperative is used, which denotes a single action. Matthew also has the aorist imperative in this petition: *δός*, "give!"<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> F. W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Harper's New Testament Commentaries; New York: Harper, 1959) 122-23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Vol. I Prolegomena* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906) 109.

<sup>18</sup> J. A. Sanders, "Dissenting Deities and Philippians 2:1-11," *JBL* 88 (1969) 289.

<sup>19</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 13.

Jeremias argues that Matthew's aorist is older than Luke's present and that it points not to a daily giving of "earthly bread" but to the eschatological "bread for tomorrow" or "the great Tomorrow," i.e., "bread of life" or "bread of the age of salvation."<sup>20</sup> Luke's present imperative does clearly imply repeated giving as his "day by day" makes explicit, but Matthew's aorist imperative does not of itself require "a single action." Jeremias may be correct in his understanding of the first "We-petition," but he misunderstands the nature of the aorist imperative to build upon it as he does. It may be said positively that the aorist imperative does not imply necessarily a single action (cf. Matt 5:42; Luke 10:35; 11:41; 19:13; 1 John 5:21; especially the latter two examples).

Robert Law is probably correct in seeing strong anti-docetic concern in First John, but his argument for "the physical reality" is not so conclusive as he thinks when he rejects the "faith-mysticism" interpretation of 1:1 by appeal to John's change of tenses:

How, on that theory can we explain the sudden change from the perfect tense in ἀκηκόαμεν and ἐώρακαμεν to the aorist in ἐθεασάμεθα and ἐψηλάφησαν? The change of tense is quite naturally accounted for by referring the aorists to a definite occasion, that, namely, on which the Lord invited His disciples to satisfy themselves of the reality of His Resurrection by the most searching tests of sight and touch (Luke 24:39, John 20:27).<sup>21</sup>

To begin with, it is sometimes far from apparent why the writer switches his tenses (cf. γράφω thrice, followed by ἔγραψα thrice in 2:12-14). But chiefly to be rejected is Law's assumption that an aorist must necessarily refer to "a definite occasion" (cf. ἠκούσατε in 2:7, 18; ἐτύφλωσεν in 2:11; ἐπηγγείλατο in 2:25; etc.). How would one hold ἠκούσατε to a single action in ὃ ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς (2:24; 3:11)? In 3:8 the present ἀμαρτάνει is used with ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. In 5:6, would the aorist ὁ ἐλθὼν imply a single coming through water and blood? The balance of the verse seems to imply two comings, ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι. This is simply to demonstrate that it is fallacious to argue from the grammatical aorist to a historical singularity.

In 5:18 the change from ὁ γεγεννημένος to ὁ γεννηθείς is unclear as to the reason, whether the critical text is to include αὐτόν or ἐαυτόν. If ἐαυτόν, the perfect and aorist participles refer to the same subject, the Christian disciple. Law opts for this reading and concludes that the perfect stresses the abiding result whereas the aorist merely points to the act as having taken place.<sup>22</sup> He sees the change to the aorist as deliberate, to warn against the presumption that the "Divine Begetting" necessarily has "present efficacy."<sup>23</sup> This is possible but dubious. The more strongly attested reading has αὐτόν, and ὁ γεννηθείς thus seems to refer to

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (3rd ed., Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1914) 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

Christ and not to the Christian. If so, would Law conclude that the "Divine Begetting" has no necessary "present efficacy" if it refers to Christ? This is the kind of trap the exegete sets for himself when he holds that the aorist must necessarily relate to a single event.

If Law applied his understanding of the aorist to 1:2 he should conclude that "the life eternal" was manifested (ἐφανερώθη) on one particular occasion. But interestingly enough, Law finds "life eternal" to be present in "every hour" of Christ's history, in "every word" and "every deed," citing 1:2 and 5:11. He does not explain why the aorist here must not necessarily refer to "a definite occasion." The writer's reasons for tense changes in 4:9-10 are not apparent. God's love was manifested (ἐφανερώθη) in that he sent (ἀπέσταλκεν) his only son — aorist then perfect (4:9). Then God's love is (ἐστίν) in this, that he sent (ἀπέστειλεν) his son as an expiation for our sins — present and aorist (4:10). By Law's understanding of perfect and aorist, it seems that ἀπέσταλκεν (vs. 9) and ἀπέστειλεν (vs. 10) should exchange places, vs. 9 presenting "point action" in both the "manifesting" of God's love and the sending of his son and vs. 10 picturing the continuing state of God's love and the continuing effect of the sending of his son. But the author of First John felt no such necessity as to his placement of aorist and perfect.

Throughout his commentary on the Revelation of John, Leon Morris rides the Greek tenses, with frequent appeal to the significance of the aorist (e.g., pp. 61, 76, 84, 96, 99, 117, 162).<sup>24</sup> He says of μετανόησον in 2:5, "the aorist points to a sharp break with evil," in contrast to the linear force of μνημόνευε in the same verse.<sup>25</sup> According to Morris, the aorist μετανόησον in 3:3 (p. 76) is "urgent," in 3:19 (p. 84) it is "aorist of once-for-all action." Morris fails to indicate what force is carried by yet another aorist imperative in 2:5, τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσον. Are these works to be done once-for-all, sharply, intensively, or how? Of course, the aorist here carries no such force. In 5:5 ἐνίκησεν points to "Christ as completely triumphant, and the aorist tense of the original may well indicate a victory once and for all."<sup>26</sup> In 5:9 ἐσφάγης καὶ ἠγόρασας "points to the once-for-all action on Calvary (this is the most natural way of taking the Greek aorists)."<sup>27</sup> In 7:14 he says of ἔπλυναν and ἐλεύκαναν, "(both verbs are aorists, in each case indicating once-for-all action)."<sup>28</sup> In 12:11 "the aorist tense," ἐνίκησαν, puts stress on "the completeness of the victory."<sup>29</sup> He does not tell us the significance of ἠγάπησαν in the same verse, whether it means that they "once-for-all loved not," "completely loved not," or what. Most damaging to Morris' case of "aoristitis" is his failure to deal with such usages as in 20:4, καὶ ἔζησαν

<sup>24</sup> Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Tyndale Bible Commentaries, 20; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

καὶ ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη. That the aorist here covers a semantic situation which in itself is not punctiliar but clearly linear is as normal an aoristic usage as can be found. The aorist is simply a-oristic.

#### *Aorists and Non-punctiliar Situations*

If the scholars cited were consistent in their misuse of the aorist, some rather interesting exegetical conclusions would be forced on them at points in the NT. For example, in Mark 1:11 it is stated that Jesus at his baptism heard the heavenly voice saying, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα. If the aorist be "once-for-all," then the meaning would be "I was once [or once-for-all] pleased with you"! If the aorist indicative must be a preterit, then God's pleasure would refer to the past, but the context obviously relates it to the present. God's pleasure in Jesus is neither momentary and a single action nor limited to the past. His pleasure is not punctiliar. All that may be said of the aorist here is that it refrains from describing.

A clear case of the aorist indicative for repeated action may be seen in 2 Cor 11:24-25: "by the Jews five times I received (ἔλαβον) thirty-nine stripes; three times I was beaten with rods (ἐραβδίσθη), . . . three times I was shipwrecked (ἐναυάγησα)." It would be nonsense to see point action here. These actions were not singular, momentary, or once-for-all. Not less nonsensical is it elsewhere to build biblical interpretation or theology upon the fallacy that an aorist must imply a single or once-for-all occurrence.

A clear example of the employment of the aorist for a non-punctiliar situation appears in John 2:20: Τεσσαράκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτεσιν οἰκοδομήθη. The temple had been under construction for forty-six years, there had been interruptions and resumptions of work, and the temple was not yet completed. The aorist indicative does not here designate a single action in the past. Neither is this an exceptional usage. This is a normal aoristic usage, a simple allusion to an action without description, i.e., a-oristic or undefined.

Equally instructive is the aorist imperative in Luke 19:13, Πραγματεύσασθε ἐν ᾧ ἔρχομαι. The slaves are to carry on business until or while the master comes. The action contemplated is not momentary, single, once-for-all, or even viewed as completed. The aorist imperative tells nothing of the nature of the action. It may treat it as a "point," but this is simply to say that the aorist refrains from describing. The aorist belongs to semantics and not to the semantic situation.

#### *The Grammarians*

Ernest De Witt Burton is crystal clear and consistent in his treatment of the aorist and leaves subsequent grammarians and interpreters without excuse when they obscure the force of the aorist:

The constant characteristic of the aorist tense in all its moods, including the participle, is 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 its uses.<sup>80</sup>

He gives ample examples of the aorist to cover (non-descriptively) actions which in themselves are not punctiliar. A few examples suffice. In the Sadducees' story of the seven brothers who in turn took the same woman to wife, the aorist is used: πάντες γὰρ ἔσχον αὐτήν (Matt 22:28). Jesus prayed for his disciples for the indefinite period ahead: Πάτερ ἄγε, τήρησον αὐτοὺς . . . (John 17:11). Paul's two years in Roman custody were covered by an aorist: Ἐνέμεινεν δὲ διετίαν ὄλην . . . (Acts 28:30). Paul was hardly shipwrecked three times as a single event, yet he could write, τρὶς ἐναυάγησα (2 Cor 11:25; cf. other aorists in context).

A. T. Robertson is equally clear in distinguishing between the semantics of the aorist and the various kinds of semantic situations which may be covered by the aorist.<sup>81</sup> He writes, "The aorist stem presents action in its simplest form (ἀ-όριστος, 'undefined')." <sup>82</sup> Further, "The aorist . . . is not the only way of expressing indefinite (undefined) action, but it is the normal method of doing so . . . the aorist is the tense used as a matter of course, unless there was special reason for using some other tense."<sup>83</sup> Yet again, ". . . the aorist can be used also of an act which is not a point. This is the advance that the tense makes on the verb root . . . The 'constative' aorist treats an act as punctiliar which is not in itself point-action."<sup>84</sup>

The Blass-Debrunner-Funk treatment of the aorist is essentially sound, but it leaves something to be desired as to clarity of distinction between a way of viewing an action and the nature of the action itself. It is recognized at the outset that "the complexive (constative) aorist" is used for linear actions which have been completed (e.g., Acts 28:30) and for repeated actions (e.g., 2 Cor 11:25), citing A. T. Robertson's clearer exposition (Rob. 831-34).<sup>85</sup>

Nigel Turner offers ample demonstration to clarify the force of the aorist in its various moods, but he jeopardizes the study by putting it in wrong perspective, finding it necessary then to qualify certain generalizations which simply will not hold up. He begins with misleading terminology in saying that the aorist stem "expresses" punctiliar action, having already equated punctiliar with "instantaneous."<sup>86</sup> He would have been truer to his own subsequent development

<sup>80</sup> Ernest DeWitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (5th ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1903) 16.

<sup>81</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (4th ed.; New York: George H. Doran, 1923) 821-910.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 824.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 831.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 832.

<sup>85</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Tr. R. W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) § 332. For a comparison of present and aorist imperatives, see § 335-37.

<sup>86</sup> Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 59.

of the study had he stuck to the term "regard" instead of "express," having said at the outset, "In short, the tense-stems indicate the point of view from which the action or state is regarded."<sup>37</sup> "Regard" is not unambiguous but comes nearer than "express" to representing the force of the aorist. The term "express" implies that there is necessarily a one-for-one relationship between the "punctiliar" perspective of the aorist and the actual nature of the action in the semantic situation behind the aorist. Even "regard" is misleading if it implies that the writer necessarily thinks that the action itself is "punctiliar." To equate "punctiliar" with "instantaneous" invites the very abuses protested in this paper.

Turner further confuses the study by his reference to "rules," making it necessary then to point out the "exceptions" (p. 77) to the rules, saying that these "rules . . . must be viewed with great caution" (p. 71), and to explain the occurrence of a present imperative (*πορεύου* in Acts 22:10) when "the rule demands aor."<sup>38</sup> Continuing abuses among exegetes and theologians indicate that many are influenced more by the grammarian's "rules" than by his cautions, with a resultant tyranny of grammar over the intention of the text.

Despite his prejudicing of the study by terms and "rules" which he himself virtually rejects, Turner demonstrates well the actual force and limitations of the aorist. After declaring that the imperfect and aorist indicatives illustrate "the difference between linear and punctiliar *Aktionsart* in its most complete form," he then wisely adds with respect to the imperfect what he could have applied likewise to the aorist, "The classification is not inelastic and the chief determining factor for translators will be the context itself."<sup>39</sup> He is on target in saying that "the aorist advances the bare story and the imperfect supplies the picture's details, when the two tenses are woven together in narrative."<sup>40</sup> Even so, he correctly sees that often tense change reflects "no other motive than avoidance of monotony."<sup>41</sup>

Turner is correct in saying, "Sometimes however the aorist will not even express momentary or punctiliar action but will be non-committal; it regards the action as a whole without respect to its duration. . . ."<sup>42</sup> He can even cite "linear" aorists as in Acts 1:21 (*συνελθόντων, εισηλθεν και εξηλθεν*), Luke 9:32 (*διαρρηγορήσαντες*), and Matt 27:8 (*εκληθη . . . έως της σημερον*).<sup>43</sup> He demonstrates the "constative" or "complexive" aorist as not limited to a brief span of time, citing Acts 14:3 *ικανόν χρόνον διέτριψαν*; 18:11 *εκάθισεν* (for eighteen months); 28:30 *ενέμεινεν* (two whole years); and other examples.<sup>44</sup> But Turner misleads when he finds necessarily a "once and for all" in the aorist imperative

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

(1 Cor 7:21, *μᾶλλον χρήσαι*; Matt 5:42, *δος*; Matt 6:28, *καταμάθετε*).<sup>45</sup> Also ill-advised is his claim, "Requests to the deity are regularly aorist, for they aim to gain a hearing for specific matters rather than to bind continually."<sup>46</sup> He recognizes passages which "do not conform" (cf. 2 Cor 13:11-12; also cf. Matt 5:36 *μήτε . . . ὁμολογῆς* with Jas 5:12 *μὴ ὀμνύετε*).<sup>47</sup> It is not a matter of exceptions to a rule. Turner opens the way to this fallacy by his oversimplified comment, "The aorist stem expresses punctiliar [which he had just equated with "instantaneous" action], and the present expresses linear action."<sup>48</sup> Neither "express" nor "regard" is a choice word here. The aorist "presents" an action, of whatever nature, without respect to its nature. It does not as such reflect the nature of the action itself. Turner is wrong in the implication that the aorist normally "expresses" punctiliar action.

For all his caution, Turner overtranslates aorist imperatives, and he encourages the very abuse of the aorist protested in his paper by, e.g., citing the amazing conclusion of M. Zerwick (*Biblical Greek* [Chicago: Argonaut, 1963] 184), who "goes so far as to distinguish *ὁ ἀκούων* (he who hears with lasting effect) from *ὁ ἀκούσας* (who hears ineffectively and momentarily): Lk 6:47-49."<sup>49</sup> Applied to Matt 2:22, Joseph heard (*ἀκούσας*) "ineffectively and momentarily," and this caused him to relocate his family in Galilee instead of Judea! The nonsense is obvious when so applied. It is nonsense in many applications where a grammatical "rule" is given tyranny over the biblical text.

### Conclusion

It does not follow that the aorist tense is without exegetical significance (compare, e.g., aor. subj. and pres. impv.). The aorist is well suited to action which in itself is punctiliar whereas some other tenses, e.g., the imperfect, are not. But the aorist is also suited to actions which are in themselves linear, unless one wants to stress its linear nature. It follows, then, that the action covered by the aorist may or may not be punctiliar, and the presence of the aorist does not in itself give any hint as to the nature of the action behind it. Contextual factors are primary for any attempt to go behind the aorist to the nature of the action itself.

If, as indicated by the primitive nature of its stem, the aorist is the oldest Greek tense, it is understandable that it is also the simplest. It simply points to the action without describing it. To stress such matters as duration or state of completion, other tenses were developed. Consequently, these later tenses are more significant for the nature of the action than is the aorist. To state it otherwise, departure from the aorist is exegetically more significant than the presence of the aorist.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

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

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.