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VERB TENSES IN N.T. GREEK

The following information is compiled from information available in the COMPUTER ONLINE BIBLE. It is not of any religious significance, and serves merely to provide some kind of perspective and overview regarding the tenses of the verbs that are used in the Greek text.

THE SIX DIFFERENT TENSES:

1) Tense - PRESENT (used 11765 times in the N.T.)

The present tense represents a simple statement of fact or reality viewed AS OCCURRING IN ACTUAL TIME. In most cases this corresponds directly with the English present tense.

Some phrases which might be rendered as past tense in English will often occur in the present tense in Greek. These are termed "HISTORICAL PRESENTS," and such occurrences dramatize the event described as if the reader were there watching the event occur. Some English translations render such historical presents in the English past tense, while others permit the tense to remain in the present.

2) Tense - FUTURE (used 1597 times in the N.T.)

The future tense corresponds to the English future, and indicates the contemplated or certain occurrence of AN EVENT WHICH HAS NOT YET OCCURRED.

3) Tense - PERFECT (used 1470 times in the N.T.)

The perfect tense in Greek corresponds to the perfect tense in English, and describes AN ACTION WHICH IS VIEWED AS HAVING BEEN COMPLETED IN THE PAST, once and for all. No need to repeat it.

Jesus' last cry from the cross, TETELESTAI ("It is finished!") is a good example of the perfect tense used in this sense, namely "It [the atonement] has been accomplished, completely, once and for all time."

Certain antiquated verb forms in Greek, such as those related to seeing (eido) or knowing (oida) will use the perfect tense in a manner equivalent to the normal past tense. These few cases are exceptions to the normal rule, and they do not alter the normal connotation of the perfect tense as stated above.

4) Tense - IMPERFECT (used 1690 times in the N.T.)

The imperfect tense GENERALLY REPRESENTS CONTINUAL OR REPEATED ACTION. Where the present tense might indicate "they are asking," the imperfect would indicate "they kept on asking."

In the case of the verb "to be," however, the imperfect tense is used AS A GENERAL PAST TENSE and does not carry the connotation of continual or repeated action.

5) Tense - PLUPERFECT (used 92 times in the N.T.)

The pluperfect tense in Greek OCCURS RARELY. It corresponds in a single Greek word to the sense of

the English pluperfect, which indicates AN EVENT VIEWED AS HAVING BEEN ONCE AND FOR ALL ACCOMPLISHED IN PAST TIME. In contrast, the perfect tense

reflects the final completion of an action at the present moment described.

In translation the Greek pluperfect may not always follow the rendering of the English pluperfect, due to excessive wordiness. The English pluperfect is normally formed with the past tense of the "helping" verbs "to have" or "to be," plus the past participle, e.g., "he had finished." The English perfect is formed by the present tense of the helping verb plus the past participle, e.g., "he has finished."

6) Tense - AORIST (used 6836 times in the N.T.)

The aorist tense is characterized by ITS EMPHASIS ON PUNCTILIAR ACTION; THAT IS, THE CONCEPT OF THE VERB IS CONSIDERED WITHOUT REGARD FOR PAST, PRESENT, OR FUTURE TIME. There is no direct or clear English equivalent for this tense, though IT IS GENERALLY RENDERED AS A SIMPLE PAST TENSE IN MOST TRANSLATIONS. Sometimes such translations of the aorist tense can create a wrong impression for people who view the English translation as absolutely correct.

The events described by the aorist tense are classified into a number of categories by grammarians. The most common of these include a view of the action as having begun from a certain point ("inceptive aorist"), or having ended at a certain point ("cumulative aorist"), or merely existing at a certain point ("punctiliar aorist"). The categorization of other cases can be found in Greek reference grammars.

The English reader need not concern himself with most of these finer points concerning the aorist tense, since in most cases they cannot really be rendered accurately in English translation, being fine points of Greek exegesis only. The common practice of rendering an aorist by a simple English past tense should suffice in most cases, though there will be exceptions to this.

GRAMMATICAL VARIATIONS OF FOUR OF THESE TENSES:

1) Tense - SECOND AORIST (used 5207 times in the N.T.)

The "second aorist" tense is IDENTICAL IN MEANING and translation to the normal or "first" aorist tense. The only difference is in the form of spelling the words in Greek, and there is no effect upon English translation.

2) Tense - SECOND FUTURE (used 33 times in the N.T.)

The "second future" is IDENTICAL IN MEANING to that of the normal or "first" future tense. The classification merely reflects a spelling variation in Greek of the "first future" tense, and has no effect on English meaning beyond that of the normal future.

3) Tense - SECOND PERFECT (used 149 times in the N.T.)

The second perfect is IDENTICAL IN MEANING to that of the normal or "first" perfect tense, and has no additional effect on English translation. The classification merely represents a spelling variation in Greek.

4) Tense - SECOND PLUPERFECT (used only 1 time in the N.T.)

This is also IDENTICAL IN MEANING to the normal pluperfect. It is used only ONCE in the N.T. ... in Luke 11:22 in the verb "... wherein HE TRUSTED".

