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THE AORIST TENSE OF GREEK VERBS IN THE N.T.

In Biblical Greek there are 6 different tenses. Of these, 4 have a second form which is merely a spelling variation of the original form, but which does not alter the meaning of the original tense. Thus: the "future tense" conveys exactly the same meaning as the "second future tense", the "perfect tense" conveys exactly the same meaning as the "second perfect tense", the "pluperfect tense" means the same as the "second pluperfect tense" and the "aorist tense" means exactly the same as the "second aorist tense". Thus, grammatically there are 10 different tenses; but these have between them only 6 different meanings.

Besides having a tense, Greek verbs almost always also have "a voice" and "a mood". However, it is important to understand that the voice and the mood do NOT affect the timing the verb has reference to. The timing of a verb is determined by the tense, and not by the voice or the mood.

A verb in the present tense is always present tense, with every combination of voice and mood; a verb in the future tense is always future tense, with every possible combination of voice and mood. Thus, when we want to determine what timing a verb has reference to, we only need to concern ourselves with the 6 different tenses.

The 6 different tenses in Biblical Greek (they are not all found in modern Greek) are made up as follows:

- a present tense,
- a future tense,
- 3 past tenses (perfect, imperfect and pluperfect),
- an aorist tense.

THE AORIST TENSE

The aorist tense (and its grammatical variation, the second aorist tense) has no clear equivalent in English. It is characterized by its emphasis on precise accordance with details, **without consideration for past, present or future time!** Some authorities disagree with this assessment for reasons we'll look at in a minute.

The aorist tense is **not** just another past tense. Its emphasis is really on precise accordance with details. However, in an English translation those details **obviously** must have reference to one of the other tenses ... past, present or future! In actual practice the uses of the aorist tense in the Bible refer **overwhelmingly** to one of the 3 past tenses. For that reason most translators have rendered it in most cases as the simple past tense. And that is why even many scholars may look upon it as just another form of past tense. But in some instances that will be a mistake.

The aorist tense is also used sufficiently often to very clearly refer to the present tense and to the future tense to demonstrate that it cannot be limited to the past tense. It is used by the writers (and the speakers who are quoted) of the New Testament when they were concerned with emphasising that their statements were correct and precise.

In the Majority Text of the Greek New Testament there are 28862 occurrences of Greek verbs. Of these, 11765 occurrences (or 40.7%) are in the present tense. A further 6836 occurrences (or 23.6%) are in the aorist tense and a further 5207 occurrences (or 18.0%) are in the second aorist tense (purely a grammatical variation). Together these two aorist tenses are used over 12000 times in the New Testament. That means that over 41% of all Greek verbs in the New Testament are in the aorist tense. The aorist tense is the most used tense in the Greek text of the New Testament.

Together the aorist tenses and the present tense are used for over 82% of all verbs in the New Testament, leaving less than 18% of all verbs for the remaining four other tenses (the future tense plus the three past tenses).

Those over 12000 occurrences of the aorist tense represent a lot of emphasis, by speakers and writers, on precise correctness of details. And in some of those places the translators have chosen the wrong tense for their English translations.

As I said earlier, the overwhelming majority of times the aorist tense does in fact refer to the past tense. But let's now look at a few examples where the aorist tense very clearly refers to the present tense or to the future tense. I will present only a few examples as illustrations, though there are in fact many more that could be cited.

In the following Scriptures all the **bolded verbs** are in the aorist tense with the active voice and the indicative mood:

And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom **I am well pleased**. (Matthew 3:17)

The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light **is sprung up**. (Matthew 4:16)

But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God **is come** unto you. (Matthew 12:28)

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, **he hides**, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. (Matthew 13:44)

While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom **I am well pleased**; hear ye him. (Matthew 17:5)

Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees **sit** in Moses' seat: (Matthew 23:2)

For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but **it withereth** the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. (James 1:11)

A bruised reed **shall he not break**, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory. (Matthew 12:20)

Paul used the aorist tense with the active voice and the subjunctive mood in 1 Cor. 16:12.

As touching [our] brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren: but his will was not at all to come at this time; but he will come **when he shall have convenient time**. (1 Corinthians 16:12)

John also used the aorist tense with the active voice and subjunctive mood in 1 John 2:24.

Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning **shall remain in you**, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. (1 John 2:24)

Let's look at another Scripture where the aorist tense and the second aorist tense and the present tense are all used together.

Men [and] brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that **he is** both **dead** (aorist, active, indicative) and **buried** (second aorist, passive, indicative), and his sepulchre **is** (present tense) with us unto this day. (Acts 2:29)

Let's consider one more example. In this verse the aorist tense is translated as the past tense, but it really should be translated as the future tense. Here is Revelation 6:14.

And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island **were moved** out of their places. (Revelation 6:14)

The Greek verb translated as "were moved" is in the aorist tense passive indicative. In this Scripture it is really referring to the future tense. And therefore this should be correctly translated into English as "every mountain and island **shall be moved** out of their places".

The proof for this is found in Revelation 16:20, the reference to the last of the seven last plagues.

And **every island fled away**, and **the mountains were not found**. (Revelation 16:20)

In the end-time events islands and mountains are **not** going to be moved **twice**. They will only be moved once.

So in Revelation 6:14 we have a statement about **what** will happen at a time slightly future to Revelation 6:14; and in Revelation 16:20 we have a statement about **when** that event will actually happen (i.e. at the 7th plague).

So in Revelation 6:14 the English past tense for the Greek aorist tense is in fact misleading.

These examples (and many more could be cited) should suffice to demonstrate that the aorist tense is indeed at times used to convey the present tense and at other times to convey the future tense. This becomes clear from the context in which this aorist tense is used.

The lesson for us is this:

In most cases the aorist tense does not really affect the way we understand a specific Scripture. Usually the context makes quite clear which tense applies from our perspective, and so the translators have in the overwhelming number of cases got it right.

However, **sometimes** changing the past tense for the present tense or the future tense can have a major impact on the meaning of a specific verse. And in some such cases it may not be immediately obvious from the context which tense (i.e. when the Greek text employs one of the two aorist tenses) applies in our way of viewing the tenses in the English language.

In such cases it behooves us to examine those Scriptures very carefully. Simply because the translators (some of them, or even many of them) decided to translate that particular occurrence into the past tense

in their English translations, that alone is not any guarantee that they were correct in doing so.

A better understanding of the use of the aorist tense should assist us in coming to a better understanding of the New Testament in general terms.

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