

February 1995

Frank W. Nelte

SOME FACTS ABOUT N.T. GREEK VERBS

The following is a collection of some very general information about verbs in biblical Greek. I gathered this information purely to give me some kind of perspective on how verbs are used in the Greek text of the New Testament. It is in that sense that I present it in this article. The information here has been mostly taken from the ONLINE BIBLE, which includes much helpful material regarding the biblical languages.

The information is very general and basic, and is certainly not intended to be authoritative, or to take the place of proper textbooks for studying New Testament Greek. A good basic starter book in that regard, one that has been used by generations of Bible students, is "New Testament Greek For Beginners" by J. Gresham Machen, D.D., LITT.D., which is still in print from the MacMillan Publishing Company in New York.

Here is the general information about verbs.

1) In the Greek N.T. there are 1866 different verbs, which are used in 28862 places. They all generally have: A TENSE + A VOICE + A MOOD. (There are some exceptions to this. 22 occurrences of verbs have no tense stated, and 2788 occurrences of verbs have no voice stated.) These figures may vary amongst different MSS, but they give us a general indication of the scope.

2) **TENSES**: There are 6 different tenses, 4 of which have a second form, which is merely a spelling variation and which does not really change the meaning of the original tense. Thus there are 10 tenses in all, with 6 different meanings.

These 10 tenses are:

- PRESENT
- IMPERFECT
- FUTURE - SECOND FUTURE
- AORIST - SECOND AORIST
- PERFECT - SECOND PERFECT
- PLUPERFECT - SECOND PLUPERFECT

3) **VOICES**: There are basically 3 different voices. They are:

- ACTIVE VOICE
- PASSIVE VOICE
- MIDDLE VOICE.

Many verbs which occur ONLY IN MIDDLE VOICE FORMS are frequently translated into English as having an ACTIVE sense. These verbs are known as "DEPONENT VERBS" (also found in Latin). For these "deponent verbs" there are the following additional combinations of "voices":

- MIDDLE DEPONENT
- PASSIVE DEPONENT
- MIDDLE OR PASSIVE
- MIDDLE OR PASSIVE DEPONENT

This gives us a total of 7 different voice options.

4) MOODS: There are 7 different moods. They are

- INDICATIVE
- SUBJUNCTIVE
- OPTATIVE
- IMPERATIVE
- INFINITIVE
- PARTICIPLE
- IMPERSONAL

5) This may at first seem rather overpowering: 10 tenses and 7 voices and 7 moods. All of these options are accomplished by adding prefixes and suffixes to the basic stem of a verb. Theoretically there could thus be $11 \times 8 \times 7 = 616$ different combinations (10 tenses plus 'no tense' = 11 and 7 voices plus 'no voice' = 8 voices). IN PRACTICE, when all these various possibilities are considered (including cases where no voice is stated and/or where no tense is stated), there are exactly 143 different combinations of tenses/voices/moods found in the New Testament.

6) IN ENGLISH we express most of these options by employing additional words like : am, are, shall, will, should, could, would, being, having, is, etc. In addition, we vary the endings of the verbs. Further, different forms may be correctly translated into English (which has a far larger and more varied vocabulary) by different words. For example:

The verb that means "hear" in the indicative mood, can be correctly translated as "obey" or "listen to" when it is used in the imperative mood, etc.

7) THE TENSES: Let's briefly look at each one:

PRESENT TENSE: This is a simple statement of fact, corresponding to the English present tense. It also includes the "historical" present, which some translators render into the English past tense. This is used with 11765 verbs in the Greek text, representing or 40,76% of all verbs in the N.T..

IMPERFECT TENSE: This represents continual or repeated action. This is used with 1690 verbs, which represents 5,86% of all verbs.

An example helps to illustrate this:

PRESENT

IMPERFECT

they ask

they kept on asking

FUTURE TENSE: This is like the English future tense. This is used with 1597 verbs, which represents 5,53% of all verbs.

SECOND FUTURE TENSE: This is identical in meaning to the normal future tense. It is merely a spelling variation in Greek. It is only used with 33 verbs, or with 0,11% of all verbs.

AORIST TENSE: This tense is characterized by its emphasis on precise accordance with details, WITHOUT consideration for past, present or future time. THERE IS NO CLEAR EQUIVALENT FOR THIS TENSE IN ENGLISH! Most translators render it as the simple past tense. (Grammarians have broken this tense down into 3 further sub-divisions, which need not concern us.) It is used with 6836 verbs, which represents 23,69% of all verbs.

SECOND AORIST TENSE: This is identical in meaning and in translation to the normal (or first) aorist tense. The only difference is in the spelling of the Greek words. It is used with 5207 verbs, representing 18,04% of all verbs.

PERFECT TENSE: It is like the English perfect tense. It describes an action as having been completed in the past, viewed from the present moment described. It is used with 1470 verbs, representing 5,09% of all verbs.

An example of the Perfect tense is:

John 19:30 = "tetelestai" meaning "IT IS FINISHED".

SECOND PERFECT TENSE: It is identical to the normal perfect tense and represents merely a spelling variation. It is only used with 149 verbs, representing 0,52% of all verbs in the N.T..

PLUPERFECT TENSE: This is also called the PAST PERFECT TENSE. It occurs only rarely in Greek and corresponds to the English pluperfect. It describes an action viewed as having been completed in the past. It is only used with 92 verbs, representing 0,32% of all verbs.

An example of this tense is:

Matthew 7:25 = "tethemelioto" meaning "IT WAS FOUNDED".

To compare the Perfect with the Pluperfect, consider the following examples:

PERFECT	PLUPERFECT
he has finished	he had finished
it is built	it was built

SECOND PLUPERFECT TENSE: It is identical to the normal pluperfect tense and represents merely a spelling variation. It is used with only one single verb one time, in Luke 11:22.

THAT CONCLUDES THE TENSES!

8) THE VOICES: Let's briefly look at each of these.

ACTIVE VOICE: The subject is the doer or performer of the action. It is used with 18691 verbs, representing 64,76% of all verbs.

Example: "the boy hit the ball"

PASSIVE VOICE: The subject is the recipient of the action. It is used with 3239 verbs, representing 11,22% of all verbs.

Example: "the boy was hit by the ball"

MIDDLE VOICE: The subject is performing an action upon himself or for his own benefit (i.e. reflexive action). It is used with 698 verbs, representing 2,42% of all verbs.

Example: "the boy washed himself"

MANY VERBS OCCUR ONLY IN MIDDLE VOICE FORMS. THEY ARE CALLED "DEPONENT VERBS". They are usually translated into English as having an active sense. The following voices are possible:

MIDDLE DEPONENT: In almost all cases they are translated as being in the active voice. It is used with 1398 verbs, or with 4,84% of all verbs.

PASSIVE DEPONENT: In almost all cases they are treated as being in the passive voice. It is used with 327 verbs, or with 1,13% of all verbs.

MIDDLE OR PASSIVE: Many of the "deponent" verbs can have either of these two forms, though they are normally translated as having an active form. It is only used with 32 verbs, or with 0,11% of all verbs.

MIDDLE OR PASSIVE DEPONENT: In almost all cases they are translated as being in the active voice. It is used with 1689 verbs, representing 5,85% of all verbs.

NO VOICE STATED: This is the case with 2788 verbs, representing 9,66% of all verbs.

THAT CONCLUDES THE VOICES!

9) THE MOODS: Let's also briefly look at each of these.

INDICATIVE MOOD: This is a simple statement of fact. It applies if an action really occurs, has occurred or will occur. It is used with 15829 verbs, representing 54,84% of all verbs.

SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD: This is the mood of possibility and potentiality. The action described may or may not occur, depending on circumstances. It is used with 1894 verbs, or with 6,56% of all verbs.

OPTATIVE MOOD: This expresses a wish or desire for an action to occur in which the completion of such is doubtful. By the first century A.D. this mood was beginning to disappear from spoken Greek and rarely occurs in the N.T.. It is only used with 83 verbs, representing 0,29% of all verbs.

The best-known example is the phrase "me genoito" (from "ginomai", meaning "to become") which literally means: "NOT TO BECOME". It is used 15 times in the N.T. (10 times in the book of Romans alone), and usually translated as "GOD FORBID", reflecting a popular English expression from the 1600's.

IMPERATIVE MOOD: Like in English, the imperative mood expresses a command. It is used with 1900

verbs, representing 6,58% of all verbs.

An example is:

Mark 1:15 = "repent you and believe" the gospel

The Greek reads:"metanoete kai pisteuete", and both verbs are in the present active imperative. This is the expression of a command.

INFINITIVE MOOD: This corresponds to the English infinitive, and is basically the verb with "to" prefixed. It is used with 2341 verbs, representing 8,11% of all verbs.

Examples: - it is better TO LIVE than TO DIE

- this was done TO FULFILL what was written

PARTICIPLE MOOD: For the most part this corresponds to the English participle, reflecting "-ing" or "-ed" being suffixed to the basic verb form. It is often termed "a verbal noun". It is used with 6814 verbs, representing 23,61% of all verbs.

IMPERSONAL MOOD: In Greek this is only used in a few verb forms which do NOT conjugate in the full sense. It is used only once in the whole N.T., in James 3:10, where the expression "ought not" is a translation of the Greek "ou chre", the present active impersonal of the old Greek verb "chrao".

(IMPERATIVE-SENSE PARTICIPLE: This reflects a Greek participle which IMPLIES that a command to perform the action is IMPLICIT, even though it is not outwardly or directly expressed. This mood is quite rare, and is NOT found in the N.T. at all.)

We have now covered all the tenses, voices and moods. To accurately get the meaning of any verb in any given passage, it is of the utmost importance to know the parsing of the verb (i.e. the tense, voice and mood). Once the parsing is known, the precise meaning can be very readily ascertained.

10) Having covered all these areas that affect Greek verbs, one area demands special attention ... the two AORIST tenses (which can be treated as one tense).

A) We saw that of the 28862 verbs in the N.T., 6836 are in the (first) Aorist tense and another 5207 verbs are in the Second Aorist tense. This total of 12043 verbs represents over 41% of all the verbs in the New Testament, and this is the tense that has no equivalent in the English language. The Aorist does NOT imply the past tense automatically, though it is frequently translated into English as such.

B) Problems arise when people base their understanding on the English past tense rendition of these Aorist-tense Greek verbs. Many verbs that talk about the salvation process actually use the Aorist tense ... **PRECISELY BECAUSE THE EMPHASIS IS ON THE EXACT DETAILS OF WHAT IS INVOLVED, WITHOUT REGARD TO THE TIMING OF THESE EVENTS!**

C) When a verb uses the Aorist tense (or the Second Aorist tense), it does not reveal anything about past, present or future. It is assumed that the reader understands the timing of what is discussed (from an English language perspective) from the context or from other passages.

D) In plain language: an Aorist tense verb can "REFER TO" the past tense or the present tense or the future tense. But an Aorist tense verb DOES NOT ESTABLISH the past tense or the present tense or the

future tense ... IT ONLY ESTABLISHES PRECISE DETAILS, INDEPENDENT OF TIMING!

11) SOME EXAMPLES OF THE AORIST TENSES IN ROMANS CHAPTER 5:

In all of the verses listed below, the CAPITALIZED words represent the Aorist tenses, combined with various voices or moods. Remember that neither the voices nor the moods establish a tense; that is not their function. Thus all the examples from Romans chapter 5 (listed below) of past and present and future are translations of the one Greek tense called "Aorist".

Here are the examples from Romans chapter 5:

Romans 5:1 : ... BEING JUSTIFIED by faith ...

Romans 5:5 : ... Holy Spirit which IS GIVEN unto us ...

Romans 5:6 : ... Christ DIED for the ungodly ...

Romans 5:7 : ... some would even dare TO DIE ...

Romans 5:8 : ... Christ DIED for us ...

Romans 5:9 : ... BEING now JUSTIFIED ...

Romans 5:10 : ... we WERE RECONCILED to God ...

... BEING RECONCILED, we shall be saved ...

Romans 5:11 : ... WE HAVE now RECEIVED the atonement ...

Romans 5:12 : ... sin ENTERED into the world ...

... death PASSED upon all men ...

... all HAVE SINNED ...

Romans 5:14 : ... death REIGNED from Adam ...

... over them that HAD not SINNED ...

Romans 5:15 : ... many BE DEAD ...

... HAS ABOUNDED unto many ...

Romans 5:16 : ... by one that SINNED ...

Romans 5:17 : ... death REIGNED ...

Romans 5:19 : ... many WERE MADE sinners ...

Romans 5:20 : ... the law ENTERED ...

... the offence MIGHT ABOUND ...

... where sin ABOUNDED ...

... grace DID MUCH MORE ABOUND ...

Romans 5:21 : ... sin HAS REIGNED ...

... MIGHT grace REIGN through righteousness

The above examples from a single chapter should suffice to illustrate the possibilities that the Aorist tenses present to us when we translate them into English. A correct understanding of the context and of what the verse is intended to convey is very important when we are dealing with the Aorist tense.

12) At the start I mentioned that there are 1866 different Greek verbs in the N.T., which together are used 28862 times. However, the number of 1866 is due to the large number of prepositional prefixes that are used in Greek. In actual fact there are only a few hundred different root verbs, from which all of these 1866 different verbs are derived.

For example, consider the one verb for "come" which is "ERCHOMAI".

By using the prefixes "EIS", "EK", "EPI", "DIA", "KATA", "PARA", "PROS" and "SUN" we get the following Greek verbs:

ERCHOMAI

EISERCHOMAI

EXERCHOMAI

EPANERCHOMAI

DIERCHOMAI

EPERCHOMAI

KATERCHOMAI

PAREISERCHOMAI

PARERCHOMAI

PROSERCHOMAI

SUNERCHOMAI.

With most other verbs the range is not quite as extensive as with "erchomai", but the use of prepositional prefixes to emphasise or to extend the meaning of a word (both verbs and nouns) can hardly be exaggerated. It is one of the dominant features of New Testament Greek, very effectively extending the range and scope of a relatively small total root-word vocabulary.

N.T. GREEK VERBS WITH NO TENSE + NO VOICE STATED

According to PERSCHBACHER'S "THE NEW ANALYTICAL GREEK LEXICON" there are two verbs that

are used in the N.T. with no tense stated and no voice stated (though the present tense and active voice can be assumed, we are told). BOTH WORDS ARE ACTUALLY ADVERBS but always rendered into English as verbs. They are USED ONLY IN THE IMPERATIVE MOOD.

The first is: "DEURO", which is used 9 times. It had been used since Homer's time with a meaning in PLACE (i.e. "hither" or "here") and in TIME (i.e. "hitherto" or "now"). It is used in urging and calling (thus the imperative mood!) to mean "Here!" or "Come!".

The 9 places are: (the capitalized word)

Matthew 19:21 = COME and follow me ...

Mark 10:21 = and COME, take up the cross ...

Luke 18:22 = and COME, follow me ...

John 11:43 = Lazarus, COME forth ...

Acts 7:3 = and COME into the land ...

Acts 7:34 = now COME, I will send you ...

Romans 1:13 = I was hindered HITHERTO ...

Revelation 17:1 = COME HITHER, I will show ...

Revelation 21:9 = COME HITHER, I will show ...

The second word is: "DEUTE", which is used 13 times. Some reference works state that this is an Imperative form of the verb "eimi" (to go). It may also be derived from the first word (i.e. "deuro"). It has also been used since Homer's time with the meaning "Come!" or "Come here!" or "Come hither!". It has the force of an interjection.

The 13 places are: (the capitalized word)

Matthew 4:19 = FOLLOW me ...

Matthew 11:28 = COME unto me ...

Matthew 21:38 = COME, let us kill him ...

Matthew 22:4 = COME unto the marriage ...

Matthew 25:34 = COME you blessed of my Father ...

Matthew 28:6 = COME, see the place ...

Mark 1:17 = COME you after me ...

Mark 6:31 = COME you yourselves apart ...

Mark 12:7 = COME, let us kill him ...

Luke 20:14 = COME, let us kill him ...

John 4:29 = COME, see the man ...

John 21:12 = COME and dine ...

Revelation 19:17 = COME and gather yourselves ...

These are the 22 places where no tense and no voice is stated. They are not the typical way Greek verbs in the N.T. are used. Apart from these instances every verb has a clearly stated tense.

GREEK VERBS USED IN THE N.T.

Greek verbs incorporate a Tense, a Voice and a Mood. Of the 143 combinations which appear in the New Testament, 17 are used only one single time. The following are these 17 occurrences.

1) SECOND PERFECT, PASSIVE, PARTICIPLE = JOHN 1:51

And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven OPEN, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. (John 1:51)

2) IMPERFECT, MIDDLE DEPONENT, INDICATIVE = JOHN 3:23

And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and THEY CAME, and were baptized. (John 3:23)

3) PLUPERFECT, MIDDLE, INDICATIVE = JOHN 9:22

These [words] spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews HAD AGREED already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. (John 9:22)

4) FUTURE, ACTIVE, INFINITIVE = ACTS 2:30

Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, HE WOULD RAISE UP Christ to sit on his throne; (Acts 2:30)

5) SECOND AORIST, NO VOICE, PARTICIPLE = ACTS 13:42

And when the Jews WERE GONE out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath. (Acts 13:42)

6) PERFECT, MIDDLE, INDICATIVE = ACTS 25:12

Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, Hast THOU APPEALED UNTO Caesar? unto Caesar shalt thou go. (Acts 25:12)

7) PLUPERFECT, MIDDLE DEPONENT, INDICATIVE = ACTS 26:32

Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if HE HAD not APPEALED UNTO Caesar. (Acts 26:32)

8) FUTURE, PASSIVE, PARTICIPLE = HEBREWS 3:5

And Moses verily [was] faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things WHICH WERE TO BE SPOKEN AFTER; (Hebrews 3:5)

9) FUTURE, MIDDLE DEPONENT, INFINITIVE = HEBREWS 3:18

And to whom swore he that THEY SHOULD not ENTER into his rest, but to them that believed not? (Hebrews 3:18)

10) PERFECT, ACTIVE, IMPERATIVE = HEBREWS 12:17

For YE KNOW how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. (Hebrews 12:17)

11) SECOND FUTURE, MIDDLE, INDICATIVE = 1 CORINTHIANS 8:11

And through thy knowledge SHALL the weak brother PERISH, for whom Christ died? (1 Corinthians 8:11)

12) FUTURE, PASSIVE, SUBJUNCTIVE = 1 CORINTHIANS 13:3

And though I bestow all my goods to feed [the poor], and though I give my body TO BE BURNED, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:3)

13) IMPERFECT, EITHER MIDDLE OR PASSIVE, INDICATIVE = MARK 9:20

And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and HE fell on the ground, and WALLOWED foaming. (Mark 9:20)

14) SECOND PLUPERFECT, ACTIVE, INDICATIVE = LUKE 11:22

But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein HE TRUSTED, and divideth his spoils. (Luke 11:22)

15) PERFECT, MIDDLE DEPONENT, INDICATIVE = 1 TIMOTHY 5:8

But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, HE HATH DENIED the faith, and is worse than an infidel. (1 Timothy 5:8)

16) PRESENT, ACTIVE, IMPERSONAL = JAMES 3:10

Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things OUGHT not so to be. (James 3:10)

17) PRESENT, MIDDLE DEPONENT, PARTICIPLE = 2 PETER 2:18

For when THEY SPEAK great swelling [words] of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, [through much] wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. (2 Peter 2:18)

TO SUMMARIZE THIS INFORMATION:

While there are a vast range of possible combinations, the overwhelming number of cases are concentrated in just a few options. Thus:

- 1) TENSES: Over 85% of all verbs in the Greek New Testament are either in the present tense or in one of the two aorist tenses.
- 2) VOICES: Almost 75% of all verbs in the Greek text are either in the active voice or they have no voice.
- 3) MOODS: Over 78% of all verbs in the Greek text either have the indicative mood or they have the participle mood.

So if you become familiar with the meanings of these few tenses, voices and moods, then you are likely to be prepared to correctly understand approximately 75% of all verbs in the Greek text of the New Testament. These facts (i.e. the parsing of the verbs) are included in the computer ONLINE BIBLE; so you can know these things even without knowing any Greek.

If you become familiar with all the information I have here summarized regarding the tenses, voices and moods of Greek verbs, then you will be in a position to correctly interpret the information that a computer program, which includes the parsing of the verbs, makes available to you. And if you forget some of it, relax ... if you are using the ONLINE BIBLE, then all this information is never further than a click of your mouse away.

Hope this also helps you to get a bit of a handle on Greek verbs in the New Testament.

Frank W. Nelte