THE PERFECT TENSE-FORM, THE SON OF MAN, AND JOHN 3:13, ONCE MORE

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Abstract: This article responds to the article by Madison Pierce and Benjamin Reynolds on the use of the perfect tense-form in John 3:13. While we commend their treatment of verbal aspect in their analysis, we offer several points of correction on several issues, including the semantics of the perfect tense-form, the use of the aorist participle, and the conditional clause. (Response)

Keywords: Greek tense-form, perfect tense-form, stative aspect, aorist articular participle, conditional clause.

1. *Introduction*

In a 2014 issue of *NTS*, Madison Pierce and Benjamin Reynolds put forward a useful study of verbal aspect theory and its potential implications (specifically related to issues of temporality) for ascent language in John 3:13. Pierce and Reynolds argue that the notoriously problematic passage regarding the ascent and descent of the Son of Man in John 3:13 can be solved through recent developments in Greek grammar, in particular verbal aspect theory and the timing of the ascent and descent.[1] They accentuate the enigma of the verse, so often interpreted to indicate the previous ascent of the Son of Man.

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1. Pierce and Reynolds, "Perfect Tense-Form." See their article for representative references to scholars who hold to many of the traditional opinions to which they are responding.

Pierce and Reynolds rightly identify traditional understandings of the perfect tense-form (ἀναβέβηκεν) (as indicating a past action with continuing results) as a driving force behind these readings.[2] This use of the perfect tense-form, combined with the subsequent aorist articular participle (καταβάς) (traditionally thought to indicate past action), results in the following translation: "No one has previously ascended into heaven, except the one who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man, has ascended into heaven," with the last phrase implied by the verbless "exception" clause.[3] As Pierce and Reynolds point out, numerous scholars endorse this interpretation of the grammar of John 3:13, especially of the use of the perfect tense-form. Some even pronounce it as the "literal" or "natural" interpretation of the verse.[4] Consequently, Pierce and Reynolds list five different proposals in the history of scholarship that attempt to remedy the difficulty of this interpretation and its use in the Johannine context.

We applaud this effort to apply linguistic criticism to questions of exegesis. We also appreciate their mentioning, even if tentatively, the stative semantic content for the perfect tense-

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2.   See, for example, Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar*, 175–76. They have been preceded and followed by many others (see Pierce and Reynolds, "Perfect Tense-Form," 153 n. 20), including some who argue from a linguistic perspective. These include, among others, Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 119–20 and Andrason and Locatell, "Perfect Wave." This is not the place to criticize these views, except to say that they seem to assume the prior definitions and then seek to impose them upon Greek usage; utilize lexical aspect as the basis of their analysis; and impose unnecessary (and one might add, unsatisfactory) typological understandings upon the Greek verbal edifice.

3.   This translation is a modified version of the one presented by Pierce and Reynolds, "Perfect Tense-Form," 150.

4.   Pierce and Reynolds ("Perfect Tense-Form," 150–51) provide several examples of those who recognize the traditional interpretation of the grammar of the verse. Some scholars apparently do not recognize the linguistic models at play that contribute to their understandings, so they refer to their understandings in such terms as "taken literally" (Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 195) or "natural reading" (Ashton, "Johannine Son of Man," esp. 513–14). It almost defies belief that such naïve statements can be made by scholars in the twenty-first century.

form. However, they fail to understand the interrelationship of semantics and pragmatics in grammaticalizing temporality via contextual features. While the point of recent work on verbal aspect may seem simple at first (time is encoded through context not verbal morphology), calibrating verbal aspect with temporal deictic (contextual) features involves precision in grammatical interpretation of contextual features at several levels of language: the word level, the clause level, and the clause complex level (and perhaps higher levels as well). Although Pierce and Reynolds apparently grasp the basic point in verbal aspect theory that time is not located in the verb, they do not exhibit competence in their assessment of broader temporal deictic features and their interaction with the (aspectual) semantics of the verb. This creates problems throughout their analysis.

2. *Word Level Analysis*

We do not intend here to be overly negative. Pierce and Reynolds are correct in their understanding at a number of places. We agree that the traditional interpretation of the perfect tense-form is to be questioned and that Greek tense-forms are not temporal in sense, including both the perfect- and aorist-tense forms. However, we are conflicted. While we welcome and celebrate the attempt of Pierce and Reynolds to utilize verbal aspect theory to solve interpretive problems, their analysis is contaminated by a number of inaccurate assumptions related to Greek grammar and linguistics that penetrate other elements of their interpretation.

The first problem that this study faces involves clear identification of the semantics of the perfect tense-form and, with it, issues revolving around the relation of clausal semantics to discourse semantics.[5] Verbs encode at the word level a

5.   This is similar to but different from the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. We prefer to conceptualize the distinction as one between clausal and discourse semantics, in which there are various ranks within clausal semantics that help to modulate the meaning. This is not the place to go into further detail about this distinction. However, it makes for a more satisfactory

semantic aspectual value—i.e. verbs grammaticalize aspect as a semantic value that is realized at all levels of analysis. If the interpreter skews analysis at this semantic level then higher levels of analysis will also be undermined since the value of a form results from the modulation of its semantic value by higher-level contextual features. Therefore, failure to properly identify semantic features at the word level will introduce problems with higher levels of analysis, including (but not limited to) attempts to identify the temporal features of a discourse and their relation to verbal aspects.

The theory developed within Pierce and Reynolds's article seeks to construct a semi-eclectic approach to the perfect tense, but in combining several theories, it creates a contradictory analysis at some points. They state that, "Though the aspectual value for the perfect is currently debated, the consensus among proponents of verbal aspect is that time value is *not* the primary feature of the verbal form."[6] But the claim that the perfect does not encode time as a primary feature of the form provides a strictly negative assessment. What does the perfect encode? Since the article seems to urge—more than anything else—a fundamental point about translation (i.e. we should translate οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν as "no one ascends to heaven"), one would think that the semantics of the perfect tense-form would factor in as an important component of the argument before translation is attempted.

Second, whereas Pierce and Reynolds are ready to accept the non-temporal semantics of Greek tense-forms (i.e. time is a contextual not a formal feature), they do not clearly commit themselves to the aspectual meaning of the perfect tense-form.[7]

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explanation than the one between semantics and pragmatics, in which there is not a formalized meaning relationship between the two levels and where theories of polysemy are usually assumed. On some of these issues, see Porter, "Systemic Functional Linguistics," esp. 32–47.

6.   Pierce and Reynolds, "Perfect Tense-Form," 153.

7.   They note two recent views. The first, that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes stative aspect, is held by Porter (*Verbal Aspect*, 245–90; although they only cite Porter, Reed and O'Donnell, *Fundamentals*, 315, a beginning grammar!), McKay ("Use of the Ancient Greek Perfect" and "On the

As a result, rather than adopting one of the five previous views for understanding John 3:13, they simply posit without substantive support the so-called "timeless perfect," to indicate "a unique quality of the Son of Man."[8] So they miss entirely the significance of the aspect (i.e. the semantics) of the perfect tense-form.

Porter's proposal, upon which they apparently (at least partially) depend, argues that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes stative aspect.[9] That is, the verbal process is conceptualized by the author as a state of affairs of the subject, without specific temporal placement. (And even if the perfect tense-form is understood as indicating imperfective aspect with heightened proximity, as has been suggested, this still suggests problems for their understanding.) The clause is thus to be understood as indicating something like: "no one [is, was, has been, etc.] in an ascended-into-heaven state," with temporal reference left open by the clause itself (though various translational equivalents may be possible). The result is that Pierce and Reynolds miss the semantic significance of the perfect tense-form by failing to determine its verbal aspect.

Perfect," 289–329), and Louw ("Die Semantiese Waarde," 23–32); and the other, that the perfect grammaticalizes imperfective aspect with heightened proximity, by Campbell (*Verbal Aspect*, 210–11). Porter's critique of Campbell's position, along with some of those above (note 2), is found in Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 195–215. Note the recent proposal of Crellin, "Semantics of the Perfect," whose conclusions, as he admits at several places, once one sorts through the linguistic typologizing and unnecessary appeal to lexical aspect, are surprisingly similar to those of Porter and McKay (he does not apparently know the work of Louw, who is found nowhere in the entire volume, if the index is to be believed).

8. Pierce and Reynolds, "Perfect Tense-Form," 154.

9. Porter argues for the stative aspect of the perfect tense-form on the basis of the tri-aspectual structure of the Greek verbal system and not by imposing either the traditional understanding or a binary aspectual system or various forms of linguistic typology on the Greek verbal system.

3. *Clause Level Analysis*

Pierce and Reynolds's failure to properly assess semantic aspectual values in John 3:13 results in further mistakes within their clause level analysis of the syntactical (temporal) features at work in the passage. We agree that clause level considerations may play an important role in determining the contribution of temporal elements to the discourse, but not in the way that Pierce and Reynolds propose. In order to invoke a syntactic pattern where adverbial aorist participles preceding their main verb tend to indicate previous action, they postulate a hypothesized main verb that follows the substantival participle in a particular syntactical order: "the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man [has ascended to heaven]"![10] We notice several problems here. First, their reconstruction emerges entirely from considerations based upon English translation rather than the semantics of Greek. Such translational considerations apparently lead them to posit an elided verb that follows the participle. This creates a second problem. Even if we grant an elision here, on what basis do Pierce and Reynolds make their claim about word order? If the finite verb has been elided, how do Pierce and Reynolds know that the elision occurred after rather than before the participle? To state the problem more directly: the posited word order is based upon English grammar rather than Greek word order, making their reconstruction impossible (besides the fact that they have misunderstood the participle—see below). Furthermore, the elision very well may be the verb "ascend," as Pierce and Reynolds propose, but a verb of existence ("be") seems also plausible, potentially allowing for the following translation: "except for the existence of the coming-down-from-heaven one, the Son of Man." So postulating an elided verb here really does nothing to help their case, only introducing further ambiguity.

Finally, whereas Pierce and Reynolds are correct that the aorist participle is aspectual and not temporal, with temporality indicated by context (mostly, but not entirely, at the discourse

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10.   Pierce and Reynolds, "Perfect Tense-Form," 150.

semantic level), they believe that the substantival use of the aorist participle functions similarly to the adverbial use of the participle, in examining temporal patterns of syntax. Even if we grant their claim regrading word order, this still does not address the fact that they have applied principles governing adverbial participial structures to substantival participles. However, these syntactic descriptions are not transferable.[11] In other words, Pierce and Reynolds incorrectly apply a syntactical general-ization regarding the adverbial participle to a non-adverbial participle. This leaves their explanation of the verse with little to commend it.

4. *Clause Complex Level Analysis*

The conditional clause complex similarly requires re-interpretation. So-called conditional structures are constructed around a complex of clauses involving a protasis clause and an apodosis clause (thus it is a set of clauses that creates a supposition-consequence relation). Pierce and Reynolds are correct that the εἰ μή phrase indicates an exception (or "if not"), not simply disjunction ("but"), and that factors at the clause complex level may contribute to the indication of time in a discourse. However, they go too far in positing the existence of the finite verb and more particularly its placement in the protasis clause. This is unnecessary in any case, as the participle (in this case the aorist) does not indicate time but verbal aspect. The verbal aspect of the aorist tense-form is perfective aspect. There is no syntactic factor that indicates the temporal placement of the process encoded. Thus, this phrase cannot be assumed to indicate a past act of descent, but can be interpreted semantically (though again, a range of translation equivalents may be possible) as indicating something like: "except (or if not) the coming-down-from-heaven one, referring to the Son of Man." The article is not

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11.   Pierce and Reynolds apparently get confused at least in part because they use Porter, Reed, and O'Donnell, *Fundamentals*, 110, even though the paragraph they are referring to clearly refers to the "adverbial participle." See instead Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 380–81; Porter, *Idioms*, 188.

a definitizer, but indicates the extent of the wordgroup and nature of the grammatical relation in which the participle is the headterm of the nominal construction, elaborated by the appositional phrase ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Pierce and Reynolds conveniently use their newly grammatically informed interpretation of the verse to substantiate an orthodox solution to the *crux interpretum* in John 3:13: Jesus' descent, indicated by the aorist participle, precedes the timeless description of him as the one who ascends, presumably an ascension that transpires after his descent and preserves the traditional understanding of the Gospel account. So, for Pierce and Reynolds, Jesus descends at the beginning and ascends at the end of his time on earth. As we have seen above, the grammar of the passage by no means requires this interpretation (especially when so many grammatical misunderstandings are involved). In order to understand this verse, we must move beyond considerations of verbal aspects at the word level. We must also assess the role of the conditional clausal structure in which they are utilized.[12] Conditional clauses formulate logical and other relations between supposition and consequence statements. The specific logical relations between the protasis and the apodosis vary depending upon context, but in each case the protasis provides the logical supposition from which consequences are drawn. The conditional clause of John 3:13 has an inverted ordering that places the apodosis before the protasis and hence thematizes the consequence statement over the supposed one.

5. *Conclusions*

In light of all three levels of contextual analysis considered above, we propose that the semantics of the entire conditional structure of John 3:13 can be rendered as indicating something like: "except for there being one who is a coming-down-from-heaven one, the Son of Man, there is no one in an ascended-into-heaven state"—though, again, a range of translational renderings

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12. See Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 291–320; Porter, *Idioms*, 254–67.

of the semantics may be possible. In other words, the descending one is the logically posited supposition for the consequent implication regarding ascension. Except for such a one as the Son of Man (note that the conditional conjunction can be rendered as "if there is not one who . . . "), there is no one who is in an ascended state.

Our conclusion may seem close to (even if more nuanced and semantically viable than) the conclusions generated by Pierce and Reynolds's study. And indeed, it is. However, our point is one about methodology, not results. If flawed methodology is employed then there is no way to assess the probability of the resulting interpretation(s). So while Pierce and Reynolds may end up at the right place (or, at least, close to it), they do so for reasons unconnected to proper assessment of the grammar of the passage which—they claim—is the major contribution of their article. Their conclusion is certainly not novel, so they showcase their method as the contributing component of their study. But this is precisely where their analysis is so flawed.

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