THE GREEK PERFECT ACTIVE SYSTEM
200 BC – AD 150

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What does the ancient Greek perfect stem (covering both perfect and pluperfect forms) mean?[1] This has proved a controversial question for at least a century, as it has been recognised that traditional accounts leave the form performing functions associated with present and past tenses in certain other European languages. Thus to say 'I know' and 'I stand', both present forms in English, a perfect is used in Greek. By contrast, the sentiment 'I have made' also corresponds to a perfect in Greek. In addition to this aspectual problem the perfect is also involved in a transitivity problem: some perfect actives in Greek are functionally passive. For example, the active perfect ἀπόλωλα means 'I am lost', and not 'I have lost (something)' which might be expected.

These issues are not limited to Greek in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but in particular the aspectual problem has proved acute here not least because of the considerable research which has been undertaken into verbal aspect in biblical and New Testament Greek in recent years. It has come into specific focus since the recent suggestion that in fact any Greek perfect form from a dynamic verb may correspond to a present progressive in English.[2]

A case in point is that of 2 Timothy 4:7 (perfects are underlined):

τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἠγώνισμαι, τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα, τὴν πίστιν τετήρηκα·

This verse, it has been argued, could be translated: 'I am fighting the good fight, I am finishing the race, I am keeping the faith', rather than

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[1] This is an abstract based on R. Crellin, 'The Greek Perfect Active System: 200 BC – AD 150' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, Faculty of Classics, 2011). Supervisor: Geoffrey Horrocks.

[2] See C. R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) and C. R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

the traditional, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith' Such a principle has potentially significant doctrinal implications on questions such as the dynamic event of justification: Romans 6:7, ὁ γὰρ ἀποθανὼν δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας, would be capable of being translated, 'one who has died is being justified from sin' as opposed to 'one who has died has been justified from sin', implying that the justification is still in process after death.

It is important, therefore, for correct exegesis to establish as precisely as possible the conditions governing the behaviour and semantics of the perfect. The thesis aims to establish under what circumstances the various senses may be attributed to the perfect active stem in the post-Classical period, and from this to seek to provide an account of the semantics and function of the form. At the heart of the investigation is a very large corpus of post-Classical historians, of approximately 800,000 words, containing work of the historians Polybius, Plutarch, Josephus and Appian. The New Testament is deliberately avoided because of the small size of the corpus, the varied nature of the corpus and the theological contentiousness of many of the examples, none of which is conducive to establishing normal behaviour.

A combination of close contextual analysis and quantitative statistical methods is used to analyse the data. The investigation is limited to examination of perfect active stem forms, although the findings may also be applied to the medio-passive. It is primarily synchronic, but seeks to use findings made on a synchronic level to inform discussion of diachronic developments. Accordingly, the behaviour of the perfect active stem in terms of aspect and transitivity as seen in the Hellenistic and Roman periods is compared with that of the Greek of earlier periods to determine if the findings made for the later periods might successfully be applied to earlier ones.

The thesis is laid out as follows. After the introduction setting up the problems posed by the Greek perfect active stem, the dissertation contains three chapters. The first (method) chapter, places the transitivity and aspect of the Greek perfect active stem in the context of more wide-ranging linguistic discussion on these topics. The second addresses the transitivity problem of the Greek perfect, while the third elucidates the aspectual problem. The thesis seeks a novel solution to the function and semantics of the Greek perfect by accounting for both

problems in terms of lexical aspect, i.e. the aspectual contribution made by the semantics of individual lexical items.

The key factor determining the behaviour of the perfect active in terms both of transitivity and aspect is found to be this: the extent to which the kind of action described by the verb involves a state or change of state on the part of the subject. If the subject is involved in a state, then the perfect active in most cases is not required to carry the implication of any situation prior to the present, or, in the case of non-indicative forms, of the time referenced by the clause in which it sits (henceforth 'reference time'). By contrast, if no state of the subject is involved, the perfect simply presents the event as completed at a point prior to reference time.

If these two behaviours of the perfect can be clearly distinguished, what, if anything, may the perfect be said to 'mean'? How, furthermore, may it be said to differ in meaning from the aorist and present forms with which it appears to partially overlap? Of course, there is no *a priori* necessity for a given morphological entity, such as the perfect stem, to have a single meaning. Nevertheless, the fact that its behaviour is predictable based on the semantics of the lexical item to which it is formed suggests that such an underlying meaning may indeed exist. A proposal for such a meaning is given, that the perfect stem presents an event as a property of the subject as a function of the event described by the verb having run to some terminal point. Where the verb concerned describes an event which terminates with the subject in a (new) state, the perfect may naturally denote that state as a property of the subject. By contrast, where no such state follows for the subject, the perfect simply presents the completed event as a property of the subject's existence or experience. Furthermore the definition proposed is able to explain how the perfect differs from the aorist and present in cases where *a priori* it may appear that there is an overlap in meaning: while the aorist and present stems are fundamentally event oriented, presenting the event either as an atomic whole (aorist) or without reference to its endpoints (present), the perfect stem is subject focused and static.

As an example of how these findings can benefit New Testament study, and assuming a certain level of correspondence between the verb system seen in post-Classical historians and the New Testament, it is possible to apply the findings in such a way as to explain satisfactorily why δεδικαίωται at Romans 6:7 should be interpreted differently from

at least two of the verbs at 2 Timothy 4:7.[3] The medio-passive form δικαιοῦμαι 'I am being justified' describes a dynamic event in which the subject changes state, passing from a non-justified state to a justified one. Since this event leaves the subject in a new state, namely 'justified', the perfect may describe that resultant state. The same possibility should be admitted for the third of the perfects in 2 Timothy 4:7, τετήρηκα, traditionally translated 'I have kept (the faith)', since this verb in itself describes a state of the subject. The same may not be said, however, in at least two of the verbs from 2 Timothy 4:7. Here the first two verbs, ἀγωνίζομαι 'I fight' and τελέω 'I complete, finish', clearly do not describe events where the subject ends in a new state. Consequently the perfects of these verbs should be interpreted as implying the completion of an action prior to the time of reference, much as the English 'I have fought' and 'I have completed, finished' respectively.

In short, the thesis provides an account of the Greek perfect stem which resolves many of the problems raised in recent times in the interpretation of the form, and gives a definition of the meaning which is capable of regularly predicting its behaviour. It is hoped that in time much of the confusion which has dogged discussion of the matter may be laid to rest, and unwarranted exegesis avoided. Furthermore, it is hoped that the proposal presented here for the nature of the underlying meaning of the perfect may give rise to fruitful and edifying insights into the word of God.

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[3] These cases are not, however, addressed directly in the thesis itself, since the corpus excludes the New Testament.