

## THE MEANING OF THE TENSES IN NEW TESTAMENT GREEK: WHERE ARE WE?

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The world of scholarship about the Greek verb is in ferment, and the outcome promises to have a significant effect for all of us who interpret the NT. Since about 1990 there has been a paradigm shift in understanding the Greek tenses,<sup>1</sup> and, as George Guthrie has observed on this subject, “We do not care for people messing with our paradigms.”<sup>2</sup> Even so, we are being asked to reexamine some strongly-entrenched assumptions about how we understand and exegete the Greek verb. My purpose in this paper is to provide an introduction to the new paradigm, called “verbal aspect” theory, and to survey the issues that are involved and in need of resolution. I do so believing that this theory, though some refinements may still be called for, is worthy of broad acceptance and suffers from limited exposure among many who need it most.

First, a word is in order about the traditional understanding of the tenses that most of us once assumed was settled for good. At the risk of oversimplification, the prevailing view, for more than a generation, was that the primary meaning of the tenses was “kind of action,” often called *Aktionsart*. Most traditional texts developed this view: namely, that the present and imperfect indicate “linear” action, while the aorist indicates “punctiliar” action or action undefined (“aorist” = without boundary), and the perfect tenses a continuing state resulting from a prior act. This, we were taught (and taught our students in turn), is the primary meaning common to the tenses in all verbal forms. In addition, the tenses have secondary implications for time: absolutely in the indicative (the present tense typically indicates present time and the imperfect and aorist past time, for example) and relatively in participles (present and aorist participles typically indicate time contemporaneous with or antecedent to that of the main verb, respectively). This view,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I will use “tense(s)” and their traditional names neutrally, without any intended implications for time or any other meanings. Cf. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 67, who similarly uses the words “only to refer to morphological form.”

<sup>2</sup> George H. Guthrie, “Boats in the Bay: Reflections on the Use of Linguistics and Literary Analysis in Biblical Studies,” in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctures* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson; JSNTSS 168; SNTG 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 27.

with variations, can be found in most of the grammars from which many of us learned Greek, including those by Robertson; Blass, Debrunner, and Funk; or Dana and Mantey.<sup>3</sup>

Against this, the new view is that the tenses mean, primarily or exclusively, *verbal aspect* (to be defined below) rather than kind of action. This view first came to the attention of many of us with the publication of two volumes in 1989 and 1990, the first by Stanley Porter and the second by Buist Fanning.<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Consultation on Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics convened sessions devoted to the subject at the 1990 and 1991 meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and published the papers in 1993.<sup>5</sup> In this publication, Moisés Silva observed that "with the almost simultaneous publication of these volumes, our knowledge and understanding of the Greek verbal system has taken a quantum leap forward."<sup>6</sup> And Daryl Schmidt affirmed, "Together they will shape all future discussion of verbal aspect in Greek."<sup>7</sup> Dave Mathewson hails both works and observes, "There should now be an increasing recognition that the Greek verb inflections signal aspect rather than time or *Aktionsart*."<sup>8</sup>

Among others leading in this direction even before Porter and Fanning (and especially influential on Porter) was K. L. McKay, who published extensively on the subject from 1965 onward; his 1994 volume on the syntax of the Greek verb includes a critique of both Porter and Fanning.<sup>9</sup> For a concise history of the development of verbal aspect theory, and a more recent contribution (2001), see Rodney Decker's published doctoral dissertation, aimed at testing (and in conclusion confirming) Porter's view in Mark's verbs, especially the indicative.<sup>10</sup> One may note that a driving force behind verbal aspect theory has been the growing interest and expertise in systemic linguistics by some NT scholars like Porter.<sup>11</sup> As Carson notes, "Linguistics is

<sup>3</sup> For a brief survey of the development of *Aktionsart* theory, see Rodney Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect* (SBG 10; New York et al.: Peter Lang, 2001) 5–11; for more detail (from Winer forward), see Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (SBG 1; New York et al.: Peter Lang, 1989) 50–65.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*; Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley E. Porter and Donald A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Moisés Silva, "A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect," in Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek* 75.

<sup>7</sup> Daryl Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect in Greek: Two Approaches," in Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek* 73.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Mathewson, "Verbal Aspect in Imperative Constructions in Pauline Ethical Injunctions," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 9 (1996) 21, where he agrees that "it is illegitimate to progress directly from the form of the verb to the kind of action, or *Aktionsart*, being described since the different aspects can be used to depict the same 'objective' kind of action."

<sup>9</sup> K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek* (New York et al.: Peter Lang, 1994) 35–38.

<sup>10</sup> Decker, *Temporal Deixis* xiv, 22–26.

<sup>11</sup> See the following for a few examples. Porter and Carson, *Linguistics*; Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (FCI 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); David A. Black, Katherine Barnwell, Stephen Levinsohn, eds., *Linguistics and*

one of the fields that has erupted with torrential force in the twentieth century. Strangely, the power of that flood is only now [1999] beginning to wash over NT studies."<sup>12</sup>

## II. VERBAL ASPECT THEORY: DEFINITION AND IMPLICATIONS

In explaining the new theory I will use Porter's view as a basis and show how other major contributors agree or differ.<sup>13</sup>

1. *Tense as aspect*. First is the fact that the inherent meaning of the Greek tenses is defined as showing *aspect* rather than time or *Aktionsart*. Verbal aspect may be defined as the way the user of the verb subjectively views the action rather than as an objective indication of any certain kind or time of action. Porter gives this concise definition: "Greek verbal aspect is a synthetic semantic category (realized in the forms of verbs) used of meaningful oppositions in a network of tense systems to grammaticalize the author's reasoned subjective choice of conception of a process."<sup>14</sup> Fanning observes: "Aspect . . . involves a free choice by the speaker to view the occurrence however he or she chooses, while *Aktionsart* is more objective, since it is dictated by the actual character of the action or state described."<sup>15</sup>

For Porter, there are three verbal aspects, as follows.<sup>16</sup> (1) The *imperfective* aspect is expressed by the present and imperfect tenses, viewing the action of the verb internally, as in progress. (2) The *perfective* aspect is expressed by the aorist tense and views the action externally, simply or as a whole. (3) The *stative* aspect is expressed by the perfect and pluperfect tenses, viewing the verb as indicating a state of being, with the grammatical subject of the verb being "the focus of the state of affairs."<sup>17</sup> The future tense is "not fully aspectual" and thus falls outside the three categories.<sup>18</sup>

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*New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992); Stanley E. Porter and R. S. Hess, eds., *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects* (JSNTS 173; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Donald A. Carson, "An Introduction to Introductions," in Porter and Carson, in *Linguistics and the New Testament* 18; he also observes (p. 20, n. 10) that of the three (Porter, Fanning, McKay) "it is Porter who attempts to make his work *linguistically* rigorous."

<sup>13</sup> For those desiring a more thorough introduction, I suggest the following reading, in this order: Rodney Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, chapter one, "Verbal Aspect Theory"; Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek* 18–82; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), chapter one; McKay, *Syntax* 35–38. (Porter's *Verbal Aspect* is more detailed, of course, but it is tough reading for those not well read in linguistics.) The implications for grammars can then be seen in Porter's *Idioms*; or in McKay's *Syntax*; or (reflecting Fanning more than Porter) in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 88.

<sup>15</sup> Buist M. Fanning, "Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method," in Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek* 48.

<sup>16</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 88–90; *Idioms* 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 43. For Porter, the future "grammaticalizes expectation" rather than making direct assertions about future time; in this sense it partakes of the nature of the Greek modes, "speaking of events in a different way" (*Verbal Aspect* 439).

Porter approvingly cites the distinctions drawn by B. Comrie: the imperfective "looks at the situation from the inside, and as such is crucially concerned with the internal structure of the situation"; the perfective "looks at the situation from the outside, without necessarily distinguishing any of the internal structure of the situation."<sup>19</sup> The stative is the most complex of the aspects "since it is not concerned with the process itself . . . but with a point of observation removed from it"; it therefore references "a condition or state that depends upon the process."<sup>20</sup>

He attempts to clarify the differences by using an illustration he traces to A. V. Isachenko. (1) A reporter viewing a parade from a helicopter might *perfectively* see it "in its entirety as a single and complete whole"; (2) a spectator located beside the street might *imperfectively* watch it pass before him as an event in progress; and (3) the parade manager considering all the involvements and arrangements might *statively* view it "not in its particulars or its immediacy but . . . as a condition or state of affairs in existence."<sup>21</sup>

Though the major contributors share a similar theory, their terminology and details are not identical. McKay, for example, suggests "three full aspects": *imperfective* ("activity in process"); *aoist* ("a whole action or simple event"); *perfect* ("the state consequent upon an action"); and "one partial aspect": *future* (expressing "intention").<sup>22</sup> Fanning thinks of the "stative" element in the perfect as "an Aktionsart, not an aspect" and that the perfect shares the "summary" aspect of the *aoist*.<sup>23</sup> But Wallace, who generally follows Fanning, seems to adopt the threefold concept of aspect;<sup>24</sup> and throughout his work Fanning regularly compares the three—though he is more inclined to speak of "the perfect and the pure aspects (present and *aoist*)."<sup>25</sup>

**2. Tense and time.** A major characteristic of verbal aspect theory is that the aspects (and therefore the Greek tenses) have no temporal implications as such. Porter insists that the tenses themselves provide no information about time; all temporal awareness arises from the context and is signaled by "deictic" indicators like adverbs, genre, and historical references.<sup>26</sup> McKay agrees; the most he will admit is, "In some types of discourse some tenses

<sup>19</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 105, citing B. Comrie, *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 91. Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 216 uses the same illustration, slightly adapted, without identifying its source.

<sup>22</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 7, 27. Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 501, includes the future with the *aoist* as usually having the same aspect.

<sup>23</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 49–50; *Verbal Aspect* 117–19. The differences between Fanning and Porter on this score go beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>24</sup> Wallace, *Basics* 216–17; his treatment frequently manifests terminological confusion between aspect and Aktionsart.

<sup>25</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 50, n. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 25–26. Decker's *Temporal Deixis* was written to test and confirm this view in Mark.

are *usually* associated with particular time values, but it is clear that time is not morphologically expressed, but is determined by context."<sup>27</sup>

Though many would acknowledge this for verbal forms other than the indicative (or, relatively, in participles), Porter and McKay are confident that even these are not exceptions, that time is not implied by the tenses, as such, for *any* verbal forms; "tense" is therefore a complete misnomer. Furthermore, if Porter is right, the augment is not a sign of past time, as we have been told.<sup>28</sup>

At this point Fanning parts company, arguing that in the indicative mode, time is "almost always a major consideration in the overall sense" of tense.<sup>29</sup> Those who follow Fanning, like Wallace, are convinced that, in the indicative, "time is clearly involved" in the meaning of the tenses.<sup>30</sup> While those of this persuasion agree that verbal aspect is the *primary* meaning of the Greek tenses, they hold that there is a *secondary* meaning in the indicative (and relatively in participles) of time involved.<sup>31</sup> But both Porter and Fanning, as Donald Carson puts it, agree that "one cannot immediately leap to the kind of event to which reference is being made (*Aktionsart*) or to the time of the event . . . but to the writer's or speaker's decision to depict the event in a particular way."<sup>32</sup>

3. *Aspect as subjective choice.* Essential to Porter's view is the notion of subjectivity expressed in his definition of verbal aspect above. Thus tense represents the way the speaker chooses to conceive or view the action.<sup>33</sup> Porter emphasizes that the tenses must not be taken as "objective" statements about the kind of action in itself; all are choices the user makes to view the action in given ways. The concept of *Aktionsart*, with the various categories associated with it, requires that one focus on the way an action actually was in objective reality: whether linear or punctiliar, or whether iterative, conative, ingressive, effective, etc. The tenses themselves do not speak to such factors; they only signal the way the user chose to view the activity (or state) when he or she might have chosen to view the same activity from another perspective.

<sup>27</sup> K. L. McKay, "Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek," *NovT* 34 (1992) 226 (emphasis mine).

<sup>28</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 35, n. 1; *Verbal Aspect* 208–9. "Augment" does not appear in the index of McKay's *Syntax*, and if he discusses whether it indicates past time I missed it. I assume he agrees with Porter on this point.

<sup>29</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 323. I say "apparently" because Fanning sometimes sends mixed signals on this point, though I think this is his view. Stanley E. Porter, "In Defense of Verbal Aspect," in Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek* 37, also reads Fanning this way.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace, *Basics* 213. In *Greek Grammar* 504–12 he offers a systematic argument against Porter's "nontemporal" view; see also his brief book notes entry regarding Decker's *Temporal Deixis*, with three criticisms, in *RelSRev* 29/2 (April 2003) 195.

<sup>31</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 58; see also Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 499, who thinks of his view as "a working hypothesis subject to revision" (p. 496).

<sup>32</sup> Donald A. Carson, "An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate," in Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek* 22. For a helpful summary of the differences between Porter and Fanning, see pp. 22–25.

<sup>33</sup> I will often use "action" to stand for any actions, processes, or conditions expressed in verbs.

This emphasis on subjectivity sometimes appears to bypass objective reporting of events entirely.<sup>34</sup> Porter says, for example, that the tenses are "used by speakers to characterize processes, to *make* them, if you will, not simply to *reflect* them."<sup>35</sup> Fanning appears to be more temperate in this regard. He "strongly affirm[s] the basic sense of this" but thinks that "Porter has insisted too much on the subjective conception of the occurrence, without realizing the limits on the optional choice available to the speaker under many circumstances."<sup>36</sup> Thus McKay thinks that Fanning "makes too little allowance for the subjective choice of the writer."<sup>37</sup> This concept of subjectivity therefore does not appear so strongly in Fanning's work. Citing C. Bache, he is more interested in "the combination of aspect with other features" of the text [including the lexical meanings of verbs] that in effect often limit the user to one aspect rather than another."<sup>38</sup> For this reason he devotes a lengthy section to "The Effect of the Procedural Characteristics of Verbs on Aspectual Function," using the Vendler-Kenney taxonomy to categorize different kinds of verbs and then discussing how matters of aspect may be affected by these differences.<sup>39</sup> Carson also refers to "the kinds of factors (lexical, temporal, social and others) that might prompt the speaker to opt for one particular form. . . . The speaker's or writer's choice . . . , theoretically as open-ended as the forms available, may be sharply constrained, or at least reduced to within definable probabilities, by the pragmatics."<sup>40</sup>

4. *Aspect as choice between oppositions.* Yet another characteristic of Porter's view is his emphasis on the oppositional structure of the tenses, indicated by his use of "meaningful oppositions in a network of tense systems" in the definition of verbal aspect provided above. His point is that the user of the language made tense choices in pairs. The first choice was between the perfective (aorist) and non-perfective; then, if choosing non-perfective, another choice was made between the imperfective (present or imperfect) and stative (perfect and pluperfect). Though the user did not necessarily go through this process consciously, the choices have increasing significance in this order. The aorist was used when the user sensed no reason to use one of the others and is least significant—the "default" tense, in a manner of speaking. But when the user chooses one of the non-perfective tenses, the imperfective aspect has more significance and the stative even more so.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> I do not say that Porter *intends* this result, only that his stress on subjectivity all too easily leads to it.

<sup>35</sup> Porter, "Defence" 43 (emphasis mine).

<sup>36</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 59–60.

<sup>37</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 37.

<sup>38</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 50–51. See C. Bache, "Aspect and Aktionsart: Towards a Semantic Distinction," *Journal of Linguistics* 18 (1982) 57–72.

<sup>39</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 127–63. McKay, *Syntax* 28–29, appreciates and discusses the difference aspect makes in regard to the basic distinction between action and stative verbs but seems unimpressed with Fanning's detailed distinction between eight categories.

<sup>40</sup> Carson, "Introduction to Porter/Fanning" 25.

<sup>41</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 22; for more detail see his *Verbal Aspect* 90 and the chart on p. 109. The "network" of possible choices is more complex than this, involving modes and infinite verbal forms as

Some of the implications of this concept are seen in the following section. Meanwhile, Fanning agrees in principle that the choice of one aspect rather than another is made "within a network of contrasts between them," and that this has some value for "clarifying the sense of the aspect meanings in broad terms."<sup>42</sup> But though he started out assuming a system like Porter's he "became dissatisfied with it" and with others that "seek to explain aspect usage as oppositions at the macro level"; more important are "functional level oppositions [that] take into account the other linguistic features which affect the meaning of aspect in specific contexts."<sup>43</sup> McKay also thinks that Porter "leans too much towards the markedness theory of privative oppositions developed for the Slavonic languages,"<sup>44</sup> accusing him, at times, of "stressing oppositions theory rather than context."<sup>45</sup>

5. *Aspect and prominence.* One of the important implications of Porter's verbal aspect theory grows out of that which has just been mentioned. Given the network of oppositional choices and their relative significance, Porter finds in those choices a key to degrees of salience or prominence in the text, reflecting what the linguists call "markedness." He sees in this an additional role for the tenses: the aorist, being the least marked, is the "background" tense (carrying the narrative along); the present and imperfect are "foreground" tenses (introducing significant characters or noteworthy descriptions); and the perfect, being the most heavily marked tense, is the "foreground" tense (for well-defined points of special interest).<sup>46</sup>

Growing out of this distinction Porter finds a basis for the exegete to detect *emphasis*. It is obvious, if he is right, that the aorist ordinarily has no emphasis; the present and imperfect serve to point up significant characters or descriptions (and thus provide some highlighting); and the perfect even more obviously emphasizes points of special interest. On Acts 16:1-5, for example, he notes that the present tense forms "are used for selected or highlighted events" and the perfect "for selective mention of a few very significant items."<sup>47</sup> He says the present tense "draws added attention to the action to which it refers";<sup>48</sup> that the aorist "is relied on to carry a narrative

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well as tense; but for our discussion of tense this is the fundamental starting point. For the fullest development of the implications see Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell, "The Greek Verbal Network Viewed from a Probabilistic Standpoint: An Exercise in Hallidayan Linguistics," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 14 (2001) 3-41.

<sup>42</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 62.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 56. This difference involves a distinction Fanning often insists on: namely, the difference between the *definition* of the aspects (which is similar to that of Porter) and the way the aspects *function* in specific contexts and interaction with other features of the verb.

<sup>44</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 36.

<sup>45</sup> McKay, "Time and Aspect" 225, n. 42.

<sup>46</sup> See Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 22; Porter, *Idioms* 23; *Verbal Aspect* 92-93; though this appears to focus on the indicative in narrative, Porter does not limit the phenomenon to this mood or genre.

<sup>47</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 23.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 31.

along when no attention is being drawn to the events spoken of";<sup>49</sup> that present tense forms make "emphatic statements" which aorist forms merely recapitulate,<sup>50</sup> and that the perfect is "the semantically strongest tense-form available."<sup>51</sup>

I should observe that Porter and a group of NT scholars with whom he works in various contexts are especially concerned with the hermeneutical promise of discourse analysis as a method of study. Ways of detecting prominence are especially important among the tools being cultivated in this field of study, and so verbal aspect takes on added significance in this regard.<sup>52</sup>

Fanning, by comparison, neither gives this matter as much importance nor uses the terminology in the same way. He observes that the aspects "serve in a secondary way to reflect the prominence of events recorded in a narrative, with perfective [aorist] verbs used of the foreground events and imperfective [present and imperfect] verbs of the background ones."<sup>53</sup> Again: "As a means of showing prominence, the aorist can be used to narrate the main or 'foreground' events, while the imperfect or present is used to record subsidiary or 'background' ones."<sup>54</sup>

6. *Aspect and pragmatics.* A final, important implication of Porter's view of the Greek tenses is that a large class of *usages* of verb forms, long treated as *implications of their tense*, are not that and must entirely move into the realm of what he calls "pragmatics." We often speak of the present tense as descriptive, iterative, inceptive, conative, or historic, for example. Porter insists that such distinctions, if they are legitimate at all, must be derived from the context and are *not* functions of the present tense *as tense*.<sup>55</sup> For another example, he fairly scoffs at the traditional distinction between the constative, ingressive, and effective aorist, blaming this on the persistent error of thinking that the tenses signify time and objectively indicate *Aktionsart*. He refers to such lists as "all sorts of rather complicated terminology," "categories found in other grammars" that are "not employed here."<sup>56</sup>

This is another of the differences between Porter and Fanning. Porter does not approve when Fanning provides the same, traditional, syntactical

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>52</sup> Some helpful resources include: Stanley E. Porter and Jeffrey T. Reed, eds., *Discourse Analysis and the New Testament: Approaches and Results* (JSNTS 170; SNTG 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Jeffrey T. Reed, *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity* (JSNTS 136; SNTG 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Stanley E. Porter and R. S. Hess, eds., *Transitivity Based Foregrounding in the Acts of the Apostles: A Functional-Grammatical Approach to the Lukan Perspective* (JSNTS 202; SNTG 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 75.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>55</sup> Porter, "Defence" 43, 44, n. 1: "The distinction between semantics (the meaning of a form) and pragmatics (what the form means in context) is a useful one to differentiate between the level of definition and application."

<sup>56</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 28, 35.



lists of uses of the tenses as those previously given by grammarians who mistakenly thought that tense means kind of action. He does not believe that Fanning was "able to free himself from the traditional categories."<sup>57</sup> Porter's pragmatic categories of syntactical usage of tenses, best seen in his *Idioms*, tend to be fewer and different. McKay, on the other hand, seems comfortable with phrases like conative, inceptive, or iterative imperfect and ingressive or constative aorist.<sup>58</sup>

In summary, the differences in detail should not obscure the fact that verbal aspect theory represents a view of the Greek tenses that is more or less the same among its major proponents. According to this theory, the Greek tenses signify verbal aspect, defined as the user's choice to view the activity or state expressed by the verbal form either as in progress, as a whole, or as a state of being. Real time, if involved at all in the meaning of tense (and it is not, according to Porter and McKay) is at best a secondary implication and only in the indicative. Kind of action, including the traditional lists of ways tenses are used, is a pragmatic concern signaled by the context rather than the tense as such, no more than a way the tenses function in combination with other linguistic features. There are times, if not always, when the choice of tenses can be seen as an important feature of discourse analysis that signals prominence.

### III. VERBAL ASPECT THEORY: UNRESOLVED ISSUES

The discussion of details of verbal aspect theory above has exposed areas of disagreement and issues that need resolution. I will explain and offer some tentative suggestions.

1. *The issue of terminology.* As a teacher of NT Greek for nearly 50 years, I have some pedagogical concerns that result from attempting to teach students the meaning of the tenses since the new theory has developed. In a general way, I may say that the language of proponents of verbal aspect theory, Porter especially, is too much controlled by technical linguistics terminology; his *Verbal Aspect*, for example, is extremely tough reading,<sup>59</sup> though his *Idioms* is better.<sup>60</sup> Most certainly, some scholars must do the technical groundwork to undergird a new paradigm, but we need to be conscious of the practical effects of using too much insider vocabulary for those for whom our theory will ultimately make the greatest difference: our students who will become the pulpit interpreters of the Scriptures.

First, "aspect" is too indefinite a term, both in common parlance and for that matter in the field of formal linguistics. On the one hand, it is commonly used in a variety of ways that make it difficult for students to grasp the highly technical sense in which the new theory uses it. On the other,

<sup>57</sup> Porter, "Defence" 38.

<sup>58</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 44, 46.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 35, calls it "rather difficult to read."

<sup>60</sup> But even the second edition contains too many distracting misprints.

much of the literature in formal linguistics uses it in a variety of ways. Fanning discusses this problem.<sup>61</sup> The linguist G. P. V. Du Plooy, for one example among many, uses aspect very differently and observes that "tense form in itself is not a primary vehicle of aspect in Greek."<sup>62</sup> Another, R. I. Binnick, discusses aspect from a variety of viewpoints.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, even a standard dictionary defines grammatical "aspect" differently: "*Gram . . . a characteristic of verbs . . . indicating the nature of an action as being completed or single (called *perfective* or *nonprogressive aspect*), or as being uncompleted, repeated, or habitual (called *imperfective* or *progressive aspect*)."<sup>64</sup> This comes nearer representing *Aktionsart* than the new theory's "aspect."*

I tentatively offer "perspective" as a term more readily understood and one whose ordinary meaning will work well when applied to the Greek tenses. Indeed, most of the proponents of verbal aspect theory, at one time or another, use the word in their explanation of the meaning of aspect.

I may observe that, in choosing this word, I am consciously rejecting the understanding of J. W. Voelz that the meaning of aspect is *focus*. He suggests that the aorist stem focuses on the activity itself and the present stem on the relationship or connection between the doer and the activity.<sup>65</sup> Though his treatment offers insight into some examples, I think this is a result of perspective in certain contexts and not from tense or aspect as such.

Second, there is disagreement as to what the three aspects, or perspectives, should be called.<sup>66</sup> Fanning, as already noted, tends to use "present" (rather than "imperfective") for that aspect. McKay uses "perfect" where the others use "stative" and "aorist" for their "perfective."<sup>67</sup> Dave Mathewson, though "recognizing the inherent difficulties," uses "aorist, present, and perfect."<sup>68</sup> Worse still, there is too much confusion for students between "perfective" aspect and the Greek perfect tense, on the one hand, and between "imperfective" aspect and the Greek imperfect tense on the other hand. The problem becomes most obvious (intolerable?) when Porter resorts (in *Verbal Aspect*) to using capital letters for traditional tense names (Perfect, Present, Imperfect, Aorist) and small letters when naming aspects (imperfective, perfective, stative); or (in *Idioms*) to unwieldy combinations like "present tense form" and "imperfective aspect."

<sup>61</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 1.

<sup>62</sup> G. P. V. Du Plooy, "Aspect and Biblical Exegesis," *Neot* 25 (1991) 168. Though published after the volumes by Porter and Fanning, the article shows no awareness of those works and may have been prepared prior to their publication.

<sup>63</sup> R. I. Binnick, *Time and the Verb: A Guide to Time and Aspect* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>64</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*, Third College Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), s.v. "aspect."

<sup>65</sup> J. W. Voelz, "Present and Aorist Verbal Aspect: A New Proposal," *Neot* 27 (1993) 153-64, especially 159. He does not define the perfect stem in his paper; if his view is to gain acceptance, it needs wider testing.

<sup>66</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 89, observes that the terminology he uses is "taken from Slavonic linguistics."

<sup>67</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 39.

<sup>68</sup> Dave Mathewson, "Verbal Aspect" n. 11.

I think we must recognize that it is too late in the game, as A. T. Robertson said long ago, to change the names of the tenses or the word "tense" itself.<sup>69</sup> It is hard enough to teach Greek students that "tense" does not mean time and "present" does not mean present; but we have learned to handle that. If aspect theory is to win wide recognition and usage, as I think it should, I believe we must develop a terminology that does not overlap with those names and is both appropriate in meaning and relatively easy for students to learn and use. I tentatively suggest, then, that "progressive" works better than "imperfective" and that "wholistic" works better than "perfective."<sup>70</sup> I have no suggestion as a replacement for "stative."<sup>71</sup> From this point on, then, I may speak of aspect or perspective, and of progressive perspective or imperfective aspect (for the present and imperfect tenses), of wholistic perspective or perfective aspect (for the aorist tense), and stative perspective or aspect (for the perfect and pluperfect tenses).<sup>72</sup>

2. *The issue of time.* This is one of the key unresolved issues: is there ever an element of time in the meaning of the tenses? We can safely assume agreement that there is no implication for time in the tense of verbal forms other than the indicative and participles. Porter and McKay and those who follow them are likewise certain that time is not signaled by the tenses even in those forms, but Fanning and those who follow him are equally certain that there is at least a secondary meaning of time for tense in the indicative mood and, relatively, in participles.

Rodney Decker's work proposes to "test" Porter's views in the Gospel of Mark. His major thesis is that time is always indicated not by the tense of the verbs but by such "deictic" indicators as adverbs, temporal particles, and the like.<sup>73</sup> But some of his arguments are not finally persuasive. For example, he insists that any semantic definition of the aorist tense, *as tense*, that does not "fit" every instance of it, in the indicative and other modes, fails to define the aorist.<sup>74</sup> But the aorist *indicative*, like the imperfect and pluperfect indicative, has two things that the aorist in other modes does not have: namely, the augment and secondary endings. Robert Binnick makes essentially the same point, though he is not responding to arguments like

<sup>69</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 826: "The names cannot now be changed, though very unsatisfactory." Stanley E. Porter, *Studies in the Greek New Testament. Theory and Practice* (SBG 6; New York et al.: Peter Lang, 1996) 41, seems inclined to acknowledge this.

<sup>70</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 501, n. 14, thinks *progressive* is "often too restrictive in its application" and thus is not appropriate throughout, but I do not think so. I suggest the spelling *wholistic* (with the "w") both for ease of communication and to make the term technical.

<sup>71</sup> Regrettably, there is some overlap between stative aspect or perspective and a stative verb.

<sup>72</sup> I could wish that the community of Greek teachers might function to determine the most helpful (and accurate) terminology—which will no doubt become entrenched. All of us wish, for example, that the "present" tense (at least for verbal forms other than the indicative) had been named something else.

<sup>73</sup> Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 149.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 154.

those of Porter and Decker.<sup>75</sup> This may indeed require an understanding of the aorist indicative that does not fit the aorist subjunctive or imperative. It may not, of course, but Decker's argument—reflecting Porter—is not self-evident. It remains a question whether Porter has satisfactorily disposed of the Greek augment as an indicator of past time.<sup>76</sup>

Part of Porter's "logic" is that exceptions to a definition disprove the definition. In other words, if the Greek aorist and imperfect indicative, say, can be used for present time—as in wishes or polite forms, for example—this demonstrates that they do not really "mean" past time. I would simply raise a question by means of an English illustration, questioning only the *logic* of such an argument. If I say, "I wish I *were* you," then it appears that I am using a past tense "were" to refer to the present time. Does that prove that "were" is not really a past time verb in English? Now the analogy of English usage says nothing about Greek usage, to be sure. But the logic holds: if English can use a truly past time verb, in certain circumstances, for the present time, without negating that it really is a past time verb, then logically Greek *might* do the same.

I would not claim that this argument settles anything. I remain, after all, unconvinced but open to clearer demonstration that the tenses did not, in the indicative, have time as part of their meaning—though it is the whole indicative *form* and not the tense stem as such that indicates time. In my view, though I tend to the view that the tenses have time as part of their derived meaning in the indicative, this issue needs more research and analysis. Meanwhile, I am satisfied that the tenses do not indicate time in participles, not even relative time; I believe I have demonstrated this in the Gospels of Mark and Luke.<sup>77</sup>

We may ask how important this issue is practically. After all, the principals in the debate will usually agree as to the "real time" of a given verb, indicative or otherwise. If it is a "deictic" indicator that signals that a given aorist, imperfect, or pluperfect indicative is past time, rather than its tense, then past time it still is. And whether a "historical present" tells past time in the present to make it more vivid to the reader or not, both will agree that its real time is in the past. Those who hold the more traditional view show considerable flexibility of interpretation and willingness to see certain uses of the tenses as "exceptions" to the general rule—an assumption that McKay regards as "unsound."<sup>78</sup>

Even so, Porter often demonstrates a greater sense of freedom to interpret an aorist indicative, for example, as referring to present time. By comparison McKay, who agrees that tense never means time, suggests that "in his enthusiasm to overthrow the old erroneous assumptions [Porter] sometimes goes too far, and either ignores or misapplies the contextual evidence."<sup>79</sup> He

<sup>75</sup> Binnick, *Time and Aspect* 16–18.

<sup>76</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 208–9.

<sup>77</sup> I have submitted for publication an article on this subject that I hope will be forthcoming.

<sup>78</sup> McKay, "Time and Aspect" 209.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

finds fault with a number of Porter's "accounts of the imperfect and aorist tenses with present time reference and the timeless uses of the aorist"<sup>80</sup> and does not think, for example, that the aorist indicative with present (or future) reference "occurs in the NT as much as he would like to imagine."<sup>81</sup>

The final differences, then, may depend on how much freedom one is willing to take. Still, the theoretical issue needs resolving if possible. Meanwhile, Carson suggests that Porter needs to do more to systematize the factors that influenced the user's choice of tense, as Fanning has attempted to do, and that this "would go a long way toward deflating the protests of those grammarians who at this point are still unwilling to abandon all connections between verbal form and time in the indicative."<sup>82</sup>

3. *The issue of subjectivity.* As indicated above, Porter emphasizes that verbal aspect indicates the user's subjective choice of how to conceive or view the activity or state expressed by the verb, rather than an objective report of the nature of the action in itself. Fanning, while agreeing in principle, emphasizes that neither aspect nor *Aktionsart* can be totally subjective or objective and objects that "Porter has insisted too much on the subjective conception of the occurrence."<sup>83</sup> He cites sympathetically other grammarians who insist "that the suggested difference in subjectivity and objectivity between aspect and *Aktionsart* must not be seen in absolute terms."<sup>84</sup>

There is, of course, a danger in over-emphasizing the subjectivity of the user's report. Observers other than Fanning have expressed caution on this score. Carson, for example, recognizes that Porter may be "charged with too forcefully stressing the subjective nature of the user's choice of tense."<sup>85</sup> Schmidt offers that "Porter in particular seems inclined to over-emphasize it," meaning "viewpoint as the speaker's conscious [subjective] choice."<sup>86</sup> At the same time, I am entirely willing to proceed on the assumption that Porter only means to mark the difference between the user's freedom to view a given activity from a certain perspective and a view that the tenses rigidly report the way activity was.

Still, some thoughts can hardly be repressed. One of these is that when the NT writer expressed his perspective of an action, he *communicated* that perspective: speech is that sort of thing. Thus he meant for his readers to "see" the action from the same perspective; tense, then, is not merely the user's perspective, it will also be the reader's. Even Porter acknowledges that "the basis of the Greek tenses . . . is reference to how an action is depicted," and "depicted" implies more than "viewed."<sup>87</sup> He cites approvingly Wallace,

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 212.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 218.

<sup>82</sup> Carson, "Introduction to Porter/Fanning" 25.

<sup>83</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 50, 60.

<sup>84</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 33-34.

<sup>85</sup> Carson, "Introduction to Porter/Fanning" 25.

<sup>86</sup> Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect" 72.

<sup>87</sup> Porter, *Studies* 44.

who observes that while the speaker utilizes such linguistic categories as verbal aspect to structure an utterance, "the listener uses such categories as clues to interpreting the speaker's verbal picture."<sup>88</sup> Silva calls this "perceiving it and presenting it."<sup>89</sup> In other words, the tenses do not simply *see*, they *report*.<sup>90</sup>

And that immediately opens up the further possibility that the user "saw" an action or condition from a certain perspective (and intended for us to view it that way) *because* it was that way in at least some respects. While this cannot be assumed, it remains a question. And we who are exegetes of the Word apparently cannot avoid asking and seeking the answer to such questions. We want to know not only how the writer viewed an action (subjectively) but how that action actually was (objectively), if we can tell.

None of this means that the user of language cannot freely choose to view, and represent, a given activity in more than one way. Let us suppose that Jane Doe looks back on a certain trip and observes that on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when she heard the news of the planes flown into the World Trade Center, she was driving (Greek imperfect) up Main Street toward her office. In saying that, she chose to view the action of driving while it was going on—imperfectly or progressively. But she might also have chosen to view it perfectly or wholistically, reporting that on September 11 she drove (Greek aorist) to her office. Even so, it appears that Jane chooses to view action in a given way, at least in part, because she sees the action objectively in that way. In such instances, where reporting of real events is taking place, more than one perspective (aspect) is possible only when either is "objectively" accurate. If we elevate subjectivity in the *wrong sense* over objectivity, this may lead to questioning whether the record can be counted on to communicate objective truth—doubts I am satisfied that Porter would not countenance.

4. *The issue of pragmatics.* One of the possible effects of the new theory of tense, not necessarily intentional, is that *Aktionsart*—kind of action—will be deemphasized. This may result either from the fact that perspective (aspect) replaces kind of action as the key factor in understanding tense or from the emphasis on tense choices as subjective; kind of action tends to require an objective report of what transpired. "Linear" and "punctiliar" action may disappear from our vocabulary—and perhaps they should.

Further, traditional grammars list a variety of syntactical uses for each of the tenses. The present and imperfect may be conative, descriptive, iterative, or inceptive, for example, and the aorist may be ingressive, constative, or effective, among others. These categories have an entrenched acceptance in exegesis and interpretation. Should these also disappear?

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 16–17.

<sup>89</sup> Silva, *Language and Scripture* 116.

<sup>90</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 11, rejects the idea that language (and thus its tenses) tells us even the user's *viewpoint* of reality, only the way he *presents* it. In context, I understand his point, but I remain unsure whether this would lead him to an even more subjective approach or to a point similar to the one I am making.

I have already indicated that Porter tends to downplay such categories, relegating them to the area of "pragmatics"—perhaps only to put them in their proper place and to insist on verbal aspect alone as the meaning of tense. He describes the traditional names as "rather complicated terminology" that "is not used here,"<sup>91</sup> saying, "It must be questioned . . . whether such categories as ingressive, effective and constative Aorist are grammatically legitimate. . . . These names tend to confuse form and function, as well as semantics and pragmatics. I believe such categories are better seen as lexical and contextual interpretations of a particular grammatical and semantic category."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, his discussion of the syntax of tenses in *Idioms* is very different from that of traditional grammars, with each tense discussed under the headings of past, present, future, omnitemporal, and timeless action.<sup>93</sup>

But perhaps he tends to isolate verbal aspect from related, pragmatic concerns in too sterile a manner. As Fanning observes, the definition of the aspects is distinct from their function in context—a difference not carefully observed in traditional treatments of tense; thus they bear on each other and we must give attention to "the aspects in combination with lexical and contextual features."<sup>94</sup> He is convinced "that verbal aspect is too dependent on other features of the context for it alone to be determinative in interpretation."<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Wallace thinks of *Aktionsart* as "aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual features."<sup>96</sup> Thus both Fanning and Wallace offer lists of uses very similar to traditional ones. Mathewson observes that "Fanning is more sensitive to the various ways in which aspect (semantics) interacts with the context in which it is found (pragmatics) . . . even if he does attempt to salvage too much from traditional grammatical categories."<sup>97</sup>

Then what shall we do with the traditional, syntactical categories of tense usage? Shall we discard them? If we retain them, how should they be discussed and defined? No doubt we should begin by agreeing, as I think both Porter and Fanning would, that the user's perspective of the action (aspect) is *the* meaning of the Greek tenses, and that other factors, including these categories, if they are meaningful at all, are pragmatic. They depend on the ways the verbal forms, in various tenses, are actually used in various contexts of discourse.

If verbal aspect theory, as held by any of its proponents, is correct, then, the tenses do not objectively state "kind of action." That a speaker views an

<sup>91</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 28.

<sup>92</sup> Porter, *Studies* 47.

<sup>93</sup> Porter, *Idioms* 29–42.

<sup>94</sup> Fanning, "Approaches" 56–57.

<sup>95</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* vi; cf. his discussion (pp. 46–49) of "Aspect and compositional elements," including this: "The *meaning* of the aspects themselves must be distinguished from such factors, although the *function* of the aspects in combination with them must be noted" (emphasis mine).

<sup>96</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 499.

<sup>97</sup> Mathewson, "Verbal Aspect" n. 13.

action imperfectively (progressively), for example, does not necessarily mean it was "linear" in nature. Conversely, that he views it as perfective (wholistic) does not necessarily mean it was "punctiliar," and certainly not "once for all"—a common mistake that F. Stagg exposed long ago.<sup>98</sup> When the Jews bragged that the temple "was built" (aorist) with 46 years of labor, for example, they certainly did not mean that the action was objectively "punctiliar." Porter's implication, I think, is that we should not regard *Aktionsart* as a function of tense, as such.

Then such syntactical distinctions as iterative, inceptive, and the like should be seen as pragmatic functions of *context* and not of *tense*. The imperfect *tense* does not mean repeated action (iterative) or focus on the beginning of an action (inceptive) in and of itself. These notions, if they are justified at all, reflect the *use* of the verb (tense, voice, and mode) in context—and are often significantly affected by "lexis"—the lexical meaning of the vocabulary used. If a given sentence says that "Jesus was teaching" (imperfect), it may or may not have the *resultant* meaning that He *began teaching*. The decision is a matter of interpretation, and interpretation takes into account all factors in usage; furthermore, it calls for experienced and insightful judgment, thus always including some element of subjectivity on the part of the interpreter.

All of this does *not* mean, however, that such distinctions are meaningless or unjustified. In Mark 1:5, people "were going out" to, and "were being baptized" by John—two imperfect indicative verbs. Fundamentally, the tense means that Mark was viewing, and wanted us to view, the action as it was transpiring—and, in fact, it was transpiring at the point Mark reports. But tenses, like other things, are not used in a vacuum, so we may justifiably ask just what there might have been about these actions that made it appropriate for him to choose to express them progressively. Viewing the action of going and being baptized internally, then, from the perspective of while it was in progress, did he think of this as a beginning point from which the action continued (inceptive), or was this progress a repetitive and ongoing stream of folks who came one after another, and from one time to another, to be baptized (iterative) or was he painting the picture of a specific occasion (descriptive)? And how are we to decide? Making such a decision is often justified, and the key is context and interpretation rather than the imperfect tense itself as such. McKay refers, helpfully, to the variety of possible nuances that arise from verbs' "interrelation with all the features of the context" as "realizations," suggesting that a single imperfect verb might need to be translated "*did, was doing, was trying to do, began to do, used to do, would do, had been doing, etc.*"<sup>99</sup>

Then are such distinctions, and such lists of uses, to be discussed under the heading of *tense*? Or would some other heading be better—and if so, which one? Granted, the distinction between iterative and inceptive imper-

<sup>98</sup> F. Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," *JBL* 91 (1972) 222–31.

<sup>99</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 29–30.



fect verbs is not indicated by tense alone; it is a function of the whole context, with every factor playing a part. It would be possible, then, to discuss such things under the heading of "the clause," or "the predicate"—and thus to focus on all factors needed to make the interpretive decision. It seems to me, however, that it is still best to discuss it under the heading of tense: not the *meaning* of tense *per se*, but *the ways the tenses get used in practice*. In this regard, I am agreeing with Porter who refers such consideration to the area of *pragmatics* or *implicature*. And I am agreeing with Fanning that such categories are still worth listing and discussing.

Again, pedagogical concerns affect me here: I think it will be easier for the student to grasp the notions associated with such distinctions as iterative, inceptive, conative, historical, ingressive, or effective under the heading of the *uses* of the tenses of verbs—insisting all the while that the tenses alone mean no such things. Though I think this is what Fanning is getting at, Carson may well be right in observing that Fanning appears to think that the verb form itself takes on board such *Aktionsart* characteristics.<sup>100</sup>

Whatever we do, we should maintain the difference between the inherent meaning of the tenses themselves and the practical ways verbs in the tenses are used to convey a variety of resulting implications. Wallace calls the inherent meaning of tense its "unaffected" or "ontological" meaning, an apt characterization.<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey Reed and Ruth Reese emphasize, appropriately, that those working in verbal aspect must "delineate what they mean by morphological meaning [tenses as forms] and contextual meaning."<sup>102</sup> One of the advantages of this distinction is that the various implications of context will *correctly* be seen as matters of interpretation allowing room for different judgments. One cannot dogmatically say, for example, "This is an inceptive imperfect, meaning that he *began* to teach at that point." Interpretation is not so cut and dried; nor is the speaker's *use* of tenses. At the same time, such distinctions need to be studied and mastered, not abandoned—though some of them may well need to be reevaluated or refined.

In other words, if we can determine that in 1:5 Mark's use of the imperfect means that he viewed the action in progress, seeing it as a scene being repeated over and over (iterative), then (whether a function of the *tense* or not), it is objectively true that the scene was being repeated over and over, and therefore appropriate for Mark to express imperfectly/progressively. Of course, that may be impossible to "determine," but interpretation is, after all, about such matters.

In short, it seems clear that the understanding of a tense cannot entirely be divorced from all the other factors involved in communication. Tenses, like vocabulary, mean what users used them for, within whatever semantic

<sup>100</sup> Carson, "Introduction to Porter/Fanning" 23.

<sup>101</sup> Wallace, *Basics* 215–16—though he includes time and aspect in his definition of the unaffected meaning (p. 220); see also his *Greek Grammar* 511.

<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey T. Reed and Ruth A. Reese, "Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 9 (1996) 199, n. 9.

range of possibilities existed for them—and “perspective” (aspect) opens up room for a fairly broad range of possibilities.

5. *The issue of prominence.* I have introduced, above, the concept of prominence as one possible implication of a user’s choice of tense. This begins with the reading of “grounding” in those choices: Porter, who has had the most to say about this, regards the aorist as least marked (the default tense) and the background tense, the present and imperfect as more marked and the foreground tense, and the perfect as most heavily marked and the foreground tense. Growing out of this is the implication of salience or prominence, regarded as an important ingredient in discourse analysis.

But a problem arises when Fanning, another of the major proponents of verbal aspect theory, observes that the aspects “serve in a secondary way to reflect the prominence of events recorded in a narrative, with perfective [aorist] verbs used of the foreground events and imperfective [present and imperfect] verbs of the background ones.”<sup>103</sup> Again: “As a means of showing prominence, the aorist can be used to narrate the main or ‘foreground’ events, while the imperfect or present is used to record subsidiary or ‘background’ ones.”<sup>104</sup> That these two can reach apparently opposite conclusions on this subject is startling, to say the least, and may indeed cause readers to doubt the theory involved.

Jeffrey Reed gives some attention to this matter and reaches conclusions that are in measured agreement with Porter. He agrees that “the semantics of the aspectual categories lend themselves to discourse prominence” but qualifies that “the use of verbal aspect . . . to indicate prominence is a secondary role—a pragmatic function of grammar—and, thus a *discourse function*, not a morphological function of Greek grammar.”<sup>105</sup> He does not think that every occurrence of a given tense must be fitted into this model. Dave Mathewson presses a little more strongly, insisting that “one feature of verbal aspect that has yet to be sufficiently exploited is the concept of markedness,” another way of referring to prominence or to grounding. He is confident that the mixing of aorist and present imperatives in Paul’s ethical discourses, for example, can be explained on this basis, with the aorists viewing the actions as “complete wholes,” serving a summary function; and the presents viewing them as “ongoing processes,” used by Paul “to attach greater significance to the action” and thus to “highlight important emphases.”<sup>106</sup> Reed and Reese similarly treat verbal aspect as a key to detecting prominence in the letter of Jude, providing a good introduction to the subject of prominence in discourse analysis.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 75.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 191.

<sup>105</sup> Reed, *Philippians* 114.

<sup>106</sup> Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect” 29–30. When he observes at one point (p. 34) that “the present aspect is used in this context to urge continuing and ongoing activity,” he seems not to notice that he has almost fallen into the pattern of stating *Aktionsart* categories, a pattern he inveighs against heavily throughout his article.

<sup>107</sup> Reed and Reese, “Verbal Aspect”; see the definition of “prominence” on pp. 185–86 and the helpful bibliography on the subject in n. 17.

I should mention, in passing, that Silva casts some doubt on all this. He has "yet to see one example of good exegesis that *depends* on the interpreter's ability to explain why one aspect rather than another was used. . . . When a choice is involved, it is not likely to be a conscious one; therefore it is most doubtful that a speaker or writer would make use of this syntactical subtlety to stress any point."<sup>108</sup> He points up the difficulty of distinguishing between the effects of aspect and those of context and takes note of the "diametrically opposed conclusions" of Porter and Fanning about aorist and present imperatives in the NT, concluding that he is not persuaded by either of them and saying: "Exegetes and pastors are well advised to say as little as possible about aspect."<sup>109</sup> In contrast, Todd Klutz, after summarizing Porter's view of the background, foreground, and foreground roles of aspect, observes, "While this hypothesis has not yet won universal acceptance among authorities on the language of the New Testament, it certainly merits further testing."<sup>110</sup>

That this theory needs further testing is, I think, the safest thing to say at present. The problem with prominence theory for tense choices is simply this: if there is nothing else in context that confirms that a given tense was chosen by the writer with prominence in mind, there is no way to test the theory. Once we say that the three main perspective (aspect) forms imply degrees of grounding, markedness, or prominence, then the view is defined into existence and there is no way to confirm or discount it. But if there are other factors in the context that confirm these degrees of prominence, then it may well be that those factors provide the basis for conclusions about prominence rather than the aspects/perspectives as such. My own inclination, without having attempted much testing of this theory, is that any validity it may have is most likely to attach to tense choices within the indicative in narrative discourse. I have made a careful study of all the participles in Mark (and am presently engaged in a similar study in Luke) and so far have found no reason to suspect that their tenses were consciously intended to imply levels of prominence or differences in markedness in any way—with the possible exception of a few perfect participles.

6. *The issue of exegesis.* The final issue involved in verbal aspect theory is a practical and important one: How then shall we exegete the NT? In particular, when it comes to explaining the meaning of the Greek verbs, what can we say about their tenses? As I will note in my conclusion, I fear that verbal aspect theory is not receiving the attention it deserves among those whose ministry leans heavily on exegesis of the Scriptures; I suspect that one reason for this is that it leaves exegetes unsure what to say. Most certainly, many of the things we are used to reading in commentaries and hearing preachers say—things I confess to have said often—are being called

<sup>108</sup> Silva, "Response" 78.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>110</sup> Todd Klutz, "Naked and Wounded: Foregrounding, Relevance and Situation in Acts 19.13–20," in Porter and Reed, *Discourse Analysis* 263.

into question. But helping us know what we can say, with justification, has not been given enough attention.

As already indicated, one of the issues, here, is whether we can discern *why* the writer chose to view any given action as wholistic, progressive, or stative. Are such choices entirely arbitrary, or is there rhyme or reason?<sup>111</sup> McKay, for example, appears to view this as something of a continuum, with some choices "purely personal (even capricious)," and others "entirely significant," but always "appropriate" in context.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps we cannot always tell why from the context and the various pragmatic indicators found there. But perhaps we can, at times; and if we can we are closer to seeing not a "mere" meaning for a tense but *how the writer used that tense in practice*. And though the inherent *meaning* of the tenses is one thing (semantics), and the *way* the tenses are *used* in discourse is another (pragmatics), there may well be implications of the one for the other. We should pursue both in our study of the tenses.

I would suggest that, at times, we may be able to see patterns in a given writer's pragmatic use of the tenses of verbal forms that will help us understand both why he chose that verbal aspect and the objective nature of the action.<sup>113</sup> I tend to support this temperate observation of Fanning: "The grammarian should attempt to discover, as far as he is able, the reasons for one choice over another."<sup>114</sup> This in spite of Silva's doubts, already noted, that identifying the reason for the user's choice of tense will play a significant role in exegesis:<sup>115</sup> "No reasonable writer would seek to express a major point by leaning on a subtle grammatical distinction—especially if it is a point not otherwise clear from the whole context (and if it *is* clear from the context, then the grammatical subtlety plays at best a secondary role in exegesis)."<sup>116</sup> Schmidt is more temperate: "By its very nature subjective choice is something we cannot always explain"—and "not always" is a far cry from "never."<sup>117</sup>

The solution to the problem of what we shall say in exegesis of the tenses lies partly in keeping the inherent meaning of the tenses distinct from their pragmatic uses (*Aktionsart* categories) in context, and partly in a more careful wording of comments. As Wallace expresses it, "Categories of usage are legitimate because the tenses combine with other linguistic features to form

<sup>111</sup> Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 88, insists that "subjective choice" is not "wholly arbitrary." Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 34, identifies with the view that "[i]n most uses of the aspects the speaker's choice is restricted by other factors, including the external facts of the occurrence, and as a result the line between the 'subjective' aspects and the 'objective' Aktionsart is a very fluid one."

<sup>112</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 28.

<sup>113</sup> Though beyond the scope of this article, I believe I have discerned such patterns in many of Mark's choices of tenses for participles, for example.

<sup>114</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 53.

<sup>115</sup> Silva, "Response" 78.

<sup>116</sup> Silva, *Language and Scripture* 115. The entire discussion is pertinent, especially the concluding paragraph (p. 118).

<sup>117</sup> Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect" 72.

various fields of meaning."<sup>118</sup> This combination of all factors involved—lexis, voice, tense, and context—Decker helpfully calls the "verbal complex."<sup>119</sup>

Carson makes excellent observations on this point: "Just as the meaning of a word in any context is established in part by the set of relations that word enters into with its context, so also the meaning of a tense in any context is established in part by the set of relations that tense enters into with its context."<sup>120</sup> Referring, for example, to the possibility that ἀπέθανον in Heb 11:13 is a "constative aorist," he notes: "The label constative aorist is not meant to convey the results of morphological information, or even of semantic information borne exclusively by the aorist tense . . . but of semantic information borne by the aorist tense verb in its relationship with the rest of this particular context."<sup>121</sup> Perhaps it would be even better to say that this aorist *verb* (not its *tense*), in context, appears to be constative; all the same, it is an *aorist* verb that is constative.

Fanning, summarizing the meaning of the aorist, says: "This 'external, summarizing' viewpoint concerning the occurrence is what is invariant in the meaning of the aorist itself. Other nuances of meaning . . . come from combinations of the aorist with the lexical nature of the verb or from other features of the context."<sup>122</sup> McKay purposes to give "pre-eminence to the full appreciation of context, which is the more important because the choice of aspect is essentially sensitive to context."<sup>123</sup> Decker illustrates how to state exegetical conclusions with Mark 1:31 and the imperfect indicative clause καὶ διηκόνει αὐτοῖς ("and he was ministering to them"): "In this context the combination of imperfective aspect with the lexis of διακονέω . . . and the contextual features . . . together describe an iterative situation."<sup>124</sup> Whether his conclusion is correct or not, his way of expressing the exegetical result is to be recommended.<sup>125</sup>

#### IV. IN CONCLUSION, WHERE ARE WE?

In general, the 1999 evaluation of the situation by Jeffrey Reed may still hold: "The debate is far from over, and presently there are exegetes from all three schools of thought (temporal, *Aktionsart*, aspect), and some with mixed categories. The point, however, is that the interpretation of tense-forms as temporal deixis is disputed."<sup>126</sup> K. L. McKay is more optimistic that it "now

<sup>118</sup> Wallace, *Basics* 216.

<sup>119</sup> Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 27.

<sup>120</sup> Carson, *Fallacies* 71. The entire section on tenses, pp. 67–73, is instructive.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 72.

<sup>122</sup> Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 97; he makes similar observations (pp. 103, 119, 120) for the other aspects.

<sup>123</sup> McKay, *Syntax* 37.

<sup>124</sup> Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 27.

<sup>125</sup> The verb might as easily be inceptive, for example; I am halfway convinced that Mark's imperfects most often simply indicate the next thing that transpired: "and she proceeded to minister to them"—though that may in some sense be inceptive.

<sup>126</sup> Jeffrey T. Reed, "The Cohesiveness of Discourse: Towards a Model of Linguistic Criteria for Analyzing New Testament Discourse," in Porter and Reed, *Discourse Analysis* 39.

appears to be certainly the case, that the inflexions of the ancient Greek verb signal aspect (as well as voice and mood) but not time."<sup>127</sup> My impression is that his evaluation is closer to the present situation.

One of my concerns, however, is that the new paradigm is not receiving the widespread attention, or testing, I think it deserves, and discussion of the differing viewpoints about verbal aspect is limited to an elite few. In preparation for an earlier version of this paper I conducted a brief, informal e-mail survey of teachers of Intermediate NT Greek at selected, accredited Bible colleges. The results (from 15 responding) were unscientific and cannot possibly speak for teachers of NT Greek in general, but they are interesting. Awareness of verbal aspect theory varied considerably, as would be expected, though fully half indicated that they knew very little, if anything, about the issues and that the matters are too technical or impractical for their students. Where the differences were understood, there was almost unanimous support for the views of Fanning against Porter, by the way; a majority of them were using Wallace's text, while none were using Porter's *Idioms* or McKay's *Syntax*.

These results, indicative or not, are disappointing. In my view, the community of biblical scholarship, including teachers of NT Greek, needs to grapple with the implications of the new paradigm and move toward confirming, rejecting, or—as I tend to think—refining it. If the “bearing” of these issues on exegesis “cannot easily be overestimated,” as Carson observes, they are important enough to merit concentrated attention from all of us who are active in the field.<sup>128</sup> Though many of us may not be able to weigh the linguistics theory involved, we can test application of the theory to the NT and evaluate how well it fits.<sup>129</sup> I doubt that Carson has overstated the case when he says, “From now on, treatments of the verbal system of New Testament Greek that do not probingly interact with Porter and Fanning will rule themselves outmoded.”<sup>130</sup>

I believe the new approach needs to be tested in detail, especially by synchronic (rather than diachronic), inductive studies.<sup>131</sup> As Porter observed as recently as 1996, the new theory is “gaining greatly in influence,” but its “implications have only barely been touched upon.”<sup>132</sup> Decker observes that discussion has been mostly “at the theoretical level” and then comments on the need to test Porter.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>127</sup> McKay, “Time and Aspect” 209. Subsequently (p. 226) he observes that “the aspectually determined forms are part of the context, so they cannot be dismissed as making no possible contribution to the temporal effects.”

<sup>128</sup> Carson, “Introduction to Porter/Fanning” 22.

<sup>129</sup> Indeed, I would like to see at least an informal consortium of teachers of Greek working together in some coordinated way to do just this. I, for one, am testing it in reference to participles in Mark and Luke. How well the theory “fits” is the key: Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 61 acknowledges that “[d]irect proof for such a proposal is not possible due to the nature of the theory.”

<sup>130</sup> Carson, “Introduction to Porter/Fanning” 25.

<sup>131</sup> For this distinction, see Porter, “Defence” 43. See also Silva, *Language and Scripture* 43, for definition and importance.

<sup>132</sup> Porter, *Studies* 14 and 4 (respectively).

<sup>133</sup> Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 2.

By way of analogy, we have learned that different authors in the NT may use vocabulary with somewhat different nuances, and therefore that the meaning of a word, in a given place, depends not only on its usual meaning but also on *the way the author uses it*—within the framework of a “semantic range” of possibilities, of course. James Barr, for one, has taught us this.<sup>134</sup> It strikes me that the same thing will likely apply to the ways authors use the Greek tenses. The new paradigm, I take it, has established that the *inherent* meaning of the tenses indicates verbal aspect or perspective. But it seems likely to me, both *a priori* and from my reading of the Greek NT, that various writers *used* those tenses, with their perspectives, in at least subtly different ways. I think that we must focus on how *Mark* uses the imperfect, for example, or on how *John* uses the perfect, or on how the tenses are used in various *kinds* of literature in the NT. It may turn out that Luke and Matthew do not have precisely the same verbal “aspects” in mind when they use the tenses, or that Paul is subtly different from both. Furthermore, I think this must involve a different study for each of the verbal forms, finite and infinite. How do the writers use the tenses for participles, for example, or for the subjunctive? I would not be surprised to learn that the “meaning” of a tense cannot be cleanly divorced from the mode of its use. Silva, along similar lines, comments on the difficulty of reducing a given aspect to one invariant meaning and speaks of the attention that needs to be given to the preferences of individual users.<sup>135</sup> Like words, aspects are used in combination with other contextual features and should be studied in that light.<sup>136</sup>

Most grammarians have been looking at the issues on the whole; I think we must now focus on the parts as a way of testing and fleshing out the basic theory. This has to be done a little at a time, and comparatively little has yet been done. Decker, for example, has treated verbs in the Gospel of Mark, focusing primarily on finite verbs, especially the indicative.<sup>137</sup> If we carry out such studies carefully and objectively, we can both test and refine current views about the meaning of the Greek tenses.

<sup>134</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>135</sup> Silva, “Response” 79, cf. Carson, *Fallacies* 71.

<sup>136</sup> See Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 41, 50, 84, 85, 195, etc., for his distinction between aspect treated *definitionally* and *functionally*; while some (including Porter) think he confuses aspect and *Aktionsart*, it appears that he clearly defines and respects the difference, at least at the theoretical level.

<sup>137</sup> Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, in addition to his full and helpful notes, he also lists (pp. xiv–xv) several special studies by others.