

## EVIDENCE THAT THE PERFECT TENSE IN JOHN 20:23 AND MATTHEW 16:19 IS MISTRANSLATED

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The perfect tense is the most difficult of Greek tenses to understand and to interpret. That is true chiefly due to the fact that it has been explained as being a combination of the two tenses, the aorist and the present. Burton, in his *Moods and Tenses*, gave this description of it: "It implies a past action and affirms an existing result."<sup>1</sup> A. T. Robertson quotes Gildersleeve as saying, "It expresses the continuance of completed action."<sup>2</sup> In every comprehensive Greek grammar that dual function is mentioned. It is to be found in Kuhner, Blass-Debrunner, Smyth, Hadley and Allen, Goodwin, Moulton *et al.* Disagreement among interpreters of the New Testament arises when one does not give due consideration to the dual function of the perfect, ignoring either its past action or its present results.

Two articles on the interpretation of Matthew 16:19; 18:18; and John 20:23 appeared in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LVIII (Sept., 1939).<sup>3</sup> Dr. Henry Cadbury of Harvard disagreed with my insistence on translating a perfect as portraying past action as well as present results. He advocated translating it as future in the above verses, overlooking the primary and basic function of past action in the perfect tense. He said, "In the three passages the simple future seems to me as adequate as any simple English translation can be."<sup>4</sup>

Research on the part of many during the past forty years has thrown much new light upon the interpretation of the above New Testament passages.

Dr. Wilber Thomas Dayton, President of Houghton College, wrote

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1. Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), p. 37.
2. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1914), p. 893.
3. J. R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Mt. 16:19, and Mt. 18:18," pp. 243-49. Henry J. Cadbury, "The Meaning of John 20:23, Matthew 16:19, and Matthew 18:18," pp. 251-54.
4. Henry Cadbury, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

his Th.D. dissertation on "The Greek Perfect Tense in Relation to John 20:23, Matthew 16:19 and 18:18." He decided on this subject after reading the con and pro articles by Dr. Cadbury and myself in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. A considerable part of his research in Koine Greek consisted of a contextual study of the use of the perfect tense in Strabo's *Geography*, the papyri, and many other sources. His research resulted in revealing conclusive evidence, which is cited in the latter part of this article.

Let us look at the record of how New Testament Christians interpreted John 20:22-23. "Receive the Holy Spirit: Whosoever's sins you may forgive, they have been forgiven; whosoever's you retain, they have been retained." The passage deals with what was still future to the disciples at that time. Even the full reception of the Holy Spirit did not occur until Pentecost, when Peter explained that all could be forgiven and receive the Spirit. When asked, "What shall we do?" he replied, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37). Verse 47 explains, "And the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved." The apostles considered and treated as forgiven only those whom Christ had forgiven. It is revealing that only "those that were saved" were added to their number, i.e., became church members.

While I was a seminary student a strange woman appeared on the campus saying she had cohabited with one of the students and that he should not be allowed to study for the ministry. The president of the seminary announced in a chapel service that the report was true, but that it happened prior to the student's conversion. He declared, "Whom God has forgiven we should forgive."

Scripture repeatedly states that God's forgiveness cannot be obtained without repentance, faith in Christ, confession of him as Savior, and a willingness to obey and serve him. There is no record of anyone gaining forgiveness by proxy. We quote:

You shall seek me and you shall find me when you search for me with all your heart (Jer. 29:13).

If we confess our sins (to Christ) he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9). (Peter to Simon Magus) Repent...and pray to the Lord that if possible the intent of your heart may be forgiven you (Acts 8:22). (Ananias to Paul) Rise and be baptized and have your sins washed away by calling on his name (Acts 22:16).

As evidence that the tide has turned toward a more accurate translation of John 20:23 and Matthew 16:19, we cite translators of the New Testament. There are at least six who render the perfect tense in John 20:23 as "have been forgiven." They are: J. B. Rotherham, 1893; Father R. E. Knock, 1944; George Swann, 4th edition, 1947; The Lockman Foundation, 1950; Kenneth Wuest, 1961; and the *New American Standard Bible*, 1963. In addition, Williams' translation and footnote implies that those who were

forgiven had previously accepted Christ. And there are thirteen that have translated the future perfect passive in Matthew 16:19 as "shall (or will) have been bound," or the equivalent: J. B. Rotherham; A. S. Worrell; B. W. Bacon in *Studies in Matthew*, p. 302; Jehovah's Witnesses; George Swann; Rev. A. Carr; C. B. Williams; Francis E. Siewert; *Amplified Bible*; Kenneth Wuest; J. B. Phillips; *New American Standard Bible*; and Gleason Ledyard in *The Children's New Testament*. This, I believe, is more than half of all New Testament translations in recent years. A number of commentaries give similar renderings. A. T. Robertson, commenting on John 20:23, wrote:

What he commits to the disciples and to us is the power and privilege of giving assurance of the forgiveness of sins by God by correctly announcing the terms of forgiveness. There is no proof that he actually transferred to the apostles or their successors the power in and of themselves to forgive sins<sup>5</sup>

J. W. Shepard wrote, when quoting Matthew 16:19, "If the sins of any ye may forgive, they have been forgiven. The right to forgive sins in the absolute sense belongs to God alone Mark 2:5-7)."<sup>6</sup> When Jesus said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins have been forgiven," the scribes were shocked and said "It is *blasphemy*! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The *Interpreter's Bible*, commenting on John 20:23 has these words: "The force of the tenses in the two independent clauses must not be overlooked. The perfect is used each time. . . . 'They have been forgiven;' 'they have been retained.'"<sup>7</sup> C. H. Cadoux wrote:

Taken by themselves, therefore, the words of Matt. 18:18 (cf. also 16:19) mean that the community...will in solution of its ethical problems, come only to such decisions as have already been sanctioned and approved by God. That is the meaning required, strictly speaking, by the future-perfect tenses used: it is somewhat doubtful whether we are entitled to treat them—as writers usually do—as if they were simple futures, for in that case why did not the author take the simple futures, *dethesetai* and *luthesetai*? Only if we are warranted in ignoring the distinction of tenses can we interpret the words as meaning whatever the community (or Peter) decides, God will subsequently as it were, endorse.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Anchor Bible* Commentary at Matthew, F. W. Albright and C. S. Mann give the following translation of Matthew 16:19: "I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been so released in heaven."<sup>9</sup> They explain:

5. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1932), p. 315.
6. J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), p. 622.
7. W. F. Howard, "The Gospel According to St. John, Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952), VIII, 798.
8. C. H. Cadoux, *Catholicism and Christianity* (New York: The Dial Press, 1929), pp. 386, 87.
9. W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), p. 191.

As for the sense of this passage, cf. the gift of the Spirit of truth as counselor, John XIV 16f, 26. The Latin Vulgate also translates as 'Will have been bound,' 'will have been loosed,' exactly corresponding to the Greek. It is the Church on earth carrying out heaven's decisions, communicated by the Spirit, and not heaven ratifying the Church's decisions. Periphrastic tenses, though necessary in English, are quite rare in Greek, and therefore the construction at this point must be given its due weight. Cf. the translation and note ad loc in Charles B. Williams, *The New Testament: A Translation in the Language of the People*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1949. . . .<sup>10</sup>

In a personal letter, Dr. Mann mentioned the following facts that led to their interpretation:

As far as I know, the majority of commentators prefer the sense in which most English versions translate the verses in Matthew even though Albright and I opted for the past perfect. Perhaps we are too clouded by Reformation controversies to deal with the thing dispassionately. Our concern (by which I mean Albright's and my own) was to do justice to several things: 1) the fact that the Lord founded a community of the Gospel, which had its own responsibility for inclusion or exclusion—which both Matthean texts (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18) reflect; 2) the fact that there evidently was a Petrine office among the twelve, and in the early community, however exercised or even challenged; and 3) that the whole movement of Matthean material was in the direction of the community responding to the demands of the risen Lord rather than in the direction of the Lord ratifying community decisions.

William Douglas Chamberlain, wrote:

The future perfect was never widely used, and is almost extinct in the New Testament. . . . There are a few future perfect periphrastics: *estai dedemenon* and *estai lelemenon* (Matthew 16:19). This is wrongly translated "shall be bound" and "shall be loosed," seeming to make Jesus teach that the apostles' acts will determine the policies of heaven. They should be translated "shall have been bound" and "shall have been loosed." This makes the apostles' acts a matter of inspiration or heavenly guidance. Cf. Matthew 18:18.

For good reasons we look to lawyers for dependable interpretations of laws, to medical doctors for diagnosis and treatment of diseases. Is it less reasonable to depend on grammarians for accurate interpretations of sentences?

Apparently the mistranslations of the Anglican translators of the Authorized Version have so influenced its readers that they are content to be misled. But in nearly every other version done by a group of translators the same mistranslation of Matthew 16:19 appears. Was the refusal

10. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

11. William Douglas Chamberlain, *As Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 80.

of the correct translation due to theological bias or to the lack of an adequate knowledge of Greek grammar?

For over 400 years the Germans have had a correct translation of both John 20:23 and Matthew 16:19, whereas we have incorrect ones in the AV, RV, RSV, NEB, and even in the TEV. Martin Luther's translation has the future perfect passive in Matthew 16:19, "shall have been bound," as it is in the Greek: *Alles was du auf Erden wirst, soll auch in Himmel gebunden sein.*"

John 20:23 also has the perfect passive, *sind erlassen*, in the independent clause in the German New Testament. The same type of construction is found in Luke 5:20, 23 and Mark 2:5, 9. These verses report the forgiveness of the paralysed man and the accusation that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy for forgiving him.

The Latin also has had the perfect passive in John 20:23, *remittuntur*, for over 1600 years. The same word and construction occur in Luke 5:20, 23; Mark 2:5, 9 and elsewhere where the Greek and the German have the perfect passive. Either Jerome's and Luther's translations are wrong or the above English language versions are.

From church history we learn that the first extant claim by any minister that he could forgive sins was not made until the third century. According to Hippolytus, Callistus (also known as Calixtus I), who was pastor of a church in Rome *Circa* A.D. 220, was the first person to claim he could forgive people's sins in behalf of God. Hippolytus wrote,

The imposter was the first to initiate making concessions to men's pleasures, saying to all that sins were forgiven by him (*legon pasin hup autou aphiesthai hamartias*), and that the ark of Noah was a symbol of the church, in which were dogs...and all things clean and unclean. Or, in other words, let those who in the church are guilty of sin remain in it.<sup>12</sup>

Another very interesting fact revealed in early church history is that in the first extant interpretation of Matthew 16:16-19, which was written by Origen (A.D. 185-254) in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Peter was not considered as the "foundation of the Church" as some later on claimed. Commenting on "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," he wrote:

Not as if flesh and blood had revealed it unto us, but by light from the Father in heaven having shone in our heart we became a rock (*petros*) and to us there might be said by the Word, "Thou art a rock" (*petros*)...For a rock is every disciple of Christ...but if you suppose that upon that one Peter only the whole Church is built by God, what would you say about John, the son of thunder, or each one of the Apostles?...Were the keys of the kingdom of heaven given by the Lord to Peter only, and will no other of the blessed receive them?

12. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, IX, 7.

...For all bear the surname of 'rock' (*petros*) who are imitators of Christ... But also as members of Christ, deriving their surname from him, they are called Christians.<sup>13</sup>

In agreement with Origen, Augustine of the fifth century, in a sermon on Matthew 16:18 surprisingly said, "Because Christ is the rock (*petra*), *petros* is the Christian people... *Petros* is from *petra*, not *petra* from *petros*." With such words he affirmed that Christ was the foundation of the church, not Peter.

In a study of every occurrence of the words for rock in the Old Testament, New Testament, Xenophon, Diodorus Siculus (vol. 2), Josephus, Philo, Strabo, and Plutarch we discovered that the most prevalent meaning for *petra* was a mass or cluster of rocks such as a cliff. It is used as a collective noun 52 times in the LXX. In about one third of its usages it meant either a huge boulder or bedrock, as in Matthew 7:24, "built upon rock." The only writer who ever used it of a rock as small as a man was Josephus in describing a large rock-throwing machine.

But *petros* always denoted a small rock or stone. It never had the connotation of *petra*. *Petroi* were used most frequently to throw at enemies, as the following citations show. "Assailed by fire, iron and stones (*petrois*) the soldiers... were propelling the ram."<sup>14</sup> "With these stones you will pelt and easily push your way through the Ligurian host."<sup>15</sup> "Amompharetus picked up a large stone (*petron*) and threw it down at the feet of Pausanias."<sup>16</sup> Although *petros* is here called large, nevertheless it was small enough to be thrown; we found no such statement anywhere about *petra*.<sup>17</sup>

With this evidence, Liddell and Scott agree. They give no example in good authors of *petra* with the significance of *petros*. They further speak of *petros* as "a stone (distinguished from *petra*)."<sup>18</sup>

In Genesis 30:33 we have an exact parallel, both in Hebrew and the LXX, of the type of periphrasis that we have in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. This is striking evidence that such a mode of expression was used by the Hebrews. The LXX of the Genesis passage reads: *Pan ho ean me e ranton kai dialeukon en tais aixin... Keklemmenon estai par' emoi* = Everyone that is not speckled or spotted among the goats... if found with me will have been stolen by me." This was part of the agreement Jacob had with Laban prior to the separation of his goats from the rest of the herd. Other future perfects occur in Genesis 43:9 and 44:32. Translating Matthew 16:19 literally and in accordance with unquestioned grammatical rules we have: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, but

13. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 10, 11.

14. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 3.7.23.

15. Strabo, 4.1.7.

16. *Plutarch's Lives, Aristides*, 17.3 (Loeb).

17. See also J. R. Mantey, *Was Peter A Pope?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1941).

18. H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 1397, 98.

whatever you may bind (*deses*) upon the earth *shall have been bound* (*estai dedemenon*) in heaven, and whatever you loose (*luses*) upon the earth *shall have been loosed* (*estai lelumenon*) in heaven."

We have an unquestionable periphrastic example in Matthew 16:19. Whenever a copula is used with a participle and no word except a post-positive occurs between them there is a genuine periphrastic structure. Sometimes in spite of words between them it is periphrastic, but very rarely. An example of this is found in BGU Papyri II 596:11, "*Touto oun poiasas ese moi megalen charitan katatetheimenos*, now if you do this you *will have bestowed* upon me a great favor."

The following are examples of future perfect periphrastics without words between the copula and the participle. "I feel that if I clear myself before you *I shall have cleared* (*apolelogemenos esesthai*) myself through you before the rest of the Greeks" (Lucian, *Philaris*, I, 1). "Now if you do this, you *will have bestowed* (*ese katatetheimenos*) a great favor upon me" (Papyri BGU 596,13). "And if you send them away scot-free, much security *will have been voted* (*epsephismenoi esesthe*) to them to do whatever they wish" (Lysias, XXII, 19). In the above examples, I have used the renderings of the translators of these authors. Other future perfects occur in Lysias XII, 100; Papyri Par. 14, 50:8.24.

Dr. Cadbury in advocating that a perfect tense may be translated as a future tense, especially in general conditions, quoted from the Blass-Debrunner Greek grammar, which in the translation by Dr. Funk reads: "The perfect tense in general assertions or imaginary examples is rarely used. . . ." <sup>19</sup> The references cited where an alleged future use of the perfect tense occurs in the apodosis only are: I John 2:5; James 2:10; Roman 14:23. (Notice that Matthew 16:19 and John 20:23 are not listed as examples of this use.) The future is not used to render the Greek perfect in any translation of the above examples that I have seen. Some have the English present for the Greek perfect, but no one has the future. A. T. Robertson explains the perfect tense *teteleiota* of I John 2:5 as meaning "stands completed." <sup>20</sup> TEV translates it "*has . . . been made perfect*." The perfect tense *gegonen* in James 2:10 is rendered by Robertson "has become," <sup>21</sup> as do the RSV and NASB. In the translation of *katakekritai* (Roman 14:23) C. B. Williams employs the present perfect "has . . . condemned." In each of these references we have an example of the use of the "intensive" perfect. <sup>22</sup>

In 1936 Dr. Morton S. Enslin's article on "The Perfect Tense in the Fourth Gospel" appeared. In it he stated that the perfect tense occurred

19. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 177.

20. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1933), VI, 211.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

22. Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 38. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 202.

over 195 times in this Gospel. He disagreed with those that would classify a few of these occurrences as "proleptics" or future. He said:

To be sure it is possible to call them vivid proleptics—a perfect for a present which in turn stands for the future, to emphasize the inevitableness of the prophesied event. It appears to me far simpler to call them theological. While the events had not taken place in the life-time of Jesus, they had for the later church. . . . They (these perfects) do not violate the proper nature of the tense; invariably *they stress the state* which has resulted from some previous act or from the conditions evolved from the past phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

On the use of the perfect in John 20:23 he wrote:

Is not the reason that the author uses the perfect in place of the natural future the fact that he is here describing the situation the church knows? Of course, whatever was at that moment in effect and blessed of God must always have been so, and must have been foreseen and ordained by Christ.<sup>24</sup>

It is a significant fact that Blass-Debrunner and Funk have not included John 20:23 or Matthew 16:19 in the "rare" references that imply a possible future use of the perfect. And just as significant is the fact that no other author of a Greek grammar has done so, to my knowledge. Could it not be that they did not believe that it belonged in that category? Expressing concern that none had done so, Dr. Cadbury said, "Why some grammarians entirely ignore the Johannine passage I do not know."

The Johannine author uses the perfect more frequently than any other New Testament writer—over 200 times. Are not advocates for translating the perfect as present or future in John 20:23 implying that John made a mistake in using it? Isn't it reasonable to assume that he used it to express a past action with "enduring results," as all Greek grammarians affirm? He could have used the present, the future or the future perfect. Since he did not, why not translate the perfect in its normal way? In all of the passages where the perfect occurs in John, it best fits the contexts when translated as a past tense. Then why cite one rare, abnormal, questionable verse to support a suspect teaching that conflicts with the whole body of New Testament teachings? Especially when approximately only 1/2 of 1%, *only one lone verse*, may seem to support it.

Since Jesus is quoted as speaking in both John 20:23 and Matthew 16:19, and since no Greek grammarian denies that he said "shall have been bound. . . shall have been loosed" instead of "shall be bound" and "shall be loosed" in Matthew 16:19, would Jesus not be considered inconsistent in saying the opposite in John 20:23 if he taught that clergymen can absolve sins against God?

23. Morton S. Enslin, "The Perfect Tense in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LV (June, 1936), 129.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 129.



And is it not a recognized rule in exegesis to first attempt to interpret a word or grammatical construction in accordance with its usual and normal meaning? And only after that procedure does not fit the context is it correct to try secondary use or meaning?

We conclude this article with some of the significant findings of Dr. Dayton as recorded in a Th.D. dissertation at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. He stated:

The marked absence of proleptical perfects in the volumes studied is significant, *the only clear instances (only two) noted being in the imperative mood* and hence on a very different basis from the figurative use which Dr. Cadbury urges for John 20:23. . . . It is the unanimous testimony of all Greek grammarians that the perfect tense in Greek does picture a past act, the result of which was present to the speaker or writer. This present result is so commonly described as "enduring" or "permanent" in connection with the above basic meaning that it is somewhat shocking to see Dr. Cadbury disassociate the ideas of permanence so completely from the past act that produced it and translate the tense figuratively by a simple future. . . .

Dr. Cadbury's case seems to be constructed on three things: First he builds on the indefiniteness of the general conditions in which it is difficult to limit the time to the past, present or future. In translating into English, he makes much of the fact that an apodosis (coordinate clause) according to the English idiom is usually either a present or a future. . . . The question must then be raised why the perfect was used here in Greek. And the passage cannot be translated accurately and interpreted correctly until the question is answered. The logical place to seek the reason for use of the perfect tense is in the meaning of the tense. The author must have desired to express some sort of past reference or he would have used one of the natural and regular tenses.

A second argument propounded by Dr. Cadbury is the fact that some authors grant that there are a few proleptical perfects in the New Testament. However, it should be said that these cases, if indeed they are to be conceded at all, are sufficiently rare and debatable that one should be very sure of his reasons before translating them proleptically at all. And the proleptical use of a perfect would at most have the meaning of a future perfect instead of a simple future.

The third argument is the fact that the future perfects are so rare in English and so commonly give way to the simple future in colloquial speech. On this basis he declares that the best translation would be a simple future. . . . On the contrary, when a rare, more complex form is used, it is proper to assume that there is a reason. That reason would logically be to express what could not be conveyed by the more simple construction. . . . Consequently it seems safe to say that, so far as any proof to the contrary is concerned, every perfect is, from a strictly grammatical standpoint, a true perfect. That is, it looks at both ends of the action or at least bears the marks of the

influence of both the past act and existing result. Otherwise the aorist or present tense would have been used.<sup>25</sup>

With all the information that is now available—the witness of many recent translations, the views of an increasing number of scholarly commentators, the unanimous testimony of Greek grammarians, the findings of Dr. Dayton in his survey of Koine Greek sources—it should become apparent that the literal translation of the future perfect tense is the only accurate rendering. No longer are there grounds to claim that in general clauses the perfect may be translated as a future. No longer is it reasonable for any translator to fail to translate the future perfect passive in Matthew 16:19 as an English future perfect passive.

The dictum of Patrick Fairbairn still stands: "Nothing should be elicited from the text but what is yielded by the fair and grammatical explanation of the language."

25. Wilber T. Dayton, "The Greek Perfect Tense in Relation to John 20:23, Matt. 16:19 and 18:18" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1945). Also see Wilber T. Dayton, "John 20:23; Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 in the Light of the Greek Perfect Tenses," *The Asbury Seminarian*, II (Summer, 1947), 74-89.

[Editorial note: The editor would welcome hearing from anyone who can cite a correct translation of the perfect tense in the verses discussed in the above article in any non-English language. Is there a correct translation of the perfect tense in any English versions that preceded the King James version?]