SOME REMARKS ON THE AORIST ASPECT IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

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In a sense the aorist offers more problems than the imperfect or perfect aspects, and there is a greater resultant confusion about the function of the aorist.

The first and most important point to remember is that the aorist refers to a point in an action and not to a momentary action. Even the most momentary action referring to present time must inevitably go back into the past, however little, and in the same way must stretch to some extent into the future. Such momentary action can be expressed in any aspect, depending on which aspect the speaker wishes to emphasise. If the speaker wishes to emphasise the attempt to act, the duration of the act (however brief that duration may be), or the repetition of that act, the aspect is imperfect, while if he emphasises the point of inception or completion, the aspect would be aoristic, and if the aim is to state the resultant condition, the aspect would be perfect.

But it seems to be generally and even uncritically accepted, as Funk puts it\(^1\), that a complexive or constative aorist can be used ‘to describe linear actions which, having been completed, are regarded as a whole, as well as repeated actions, provided the repetition is summed up and has a terminus.’

To speak of an ‘ausdehnunglose Gegenwartspunkt’ as Eduard Hermann does\(^3\), and to give as an example ‘Ich bin’, which lies between ‘ich war’ and ‘ich werde sein’, is to give substance to what is purely imaginary. When I say \(\epsilon\iota\mu\iota\iota\) I refer to a state that essentially involves what is past as well as what is future. It would involve the present only in as far as the present is an imaginary link between the past and future. That imaginary link can never be expressed by a verb or in any other way, since any verb referring to present time must refer also to past and future time. The very statement ‘I am’ or ‘I eat’ is not without duration. A certain period of time is involved in which these words are said. Their real meaning is ‘I have been, I am, and I shall be’ and ‘I have been eating, I eat and I shall eat’, even though the period of time involving the past and future may be very brief.

This is true of Greek as well as of all other languages in the case of present tense verbs referring to present time. It would not be true of the historic present, which is normally aoristic, nor of the futuristic present.

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1. This article is an extract from a larger work on verbal aspect in the Greek New Testament, presently in the course of preparation.
Herman, as quoted by Koschmieder, is wrong also when he explains the absence of a punctiliar or aoristic present in Greek as merely a popular philosophic concept about past, present and future time and that in the Hebrew perfect the preterital and futurist parts of the present are abstracted, leaving an ‘ausdehnunglose’ punctiliar present. Hebrew has no ‘tempora’ in a strict sense, although in the Talmud the perfect is used for the past tense, the imperfect for the future, while the present is rendered with the help of a participle.

The reason why there is no aoristic or punctiliar present in Greek does not lie in the structure of the Greek language, but in all language. Any verb denoting present time must have its point of inception in the past and its point of conclusion in the future.

Brugmann, speaking of the complexive or constative aorist, writes: ‘Die Handlung ist in allen Fällen auf einem bestimmten Moment bezogen oder in einem Moment zusammengefasst.’ In the same paragraph he adds that while the imperfect aspect sketches the action in its process, the complexive or constative aorist reduces the whole action to a single point.

Moulton admits that the constative or complexive aorist is not punctiliar. Only a point in an action is punctiliar, while the constative aorist ‘is used for what is not point action, but is merely treated as such.’

Delbrück apparently realised that the aorist can indicate only a point in an action and that it is logically impossible to condense a durative action to a single momentary action. But his solution of the problem is not very helpful. He finds three points in an action, each of which is rendered by an aorist, namely the point of inception (ingressive aorist), the middle point, which is rendered by the constative aorist, and the point of conclusion, where we use the effective aorist, which is confusedly called by some writers the ‘perfective’ aorist.

But what would the middle point signify? If the οἰκοδομήθη of John 2,20, which is one of the instances of a ‘constative’ aorist in the New Testament, were to indicate the middle point, would it then refer to the end of the 23rd year of the building of the temple? But that was clearly not what the Jews wanted to say. The whole point of their argument was that from the time of beginning the building of the temple to its completion forty six years elapsed.

Thumb regards the constative aorist as a regular aorist portraying an event in the past. But that would fail to explain the difference between ἐλυεν, ἐλευςα and ἐλελύκειν.

5. IF LIII, p. 282.
Gildersleeve\textsuperscript{10} speaks of the constative aorist as the ‘aorist of long duration’, a total denial of the essential force of the aorist.

These views all imply, in my opinion wrongly, that the aorist can indicate a momentary action. Its function is not to indicate a momentary action, but a moment in an action. Even if the aorist could be complexive in the sense that it condenses a linear action into a momentary action, such momentary action could be expressed in any aspect, since it would have a preamble, duration (however brief) and a possible repetition, all of which calls for the imperfect aspect. It would have a point of inception and one of completion, calling for the ingressive and effective aorists respectively, as well as a resultant state, which would be expressed by the perfect aspect.

What is of importance is that in practically all the supposed cases of the constative aorist there is some adverbial phrase indicating duration. Funk\textsuperscript{11} gives as examples Acts 28,30 ἐνέμεινεν δὲ διετίαν ὀλὴν ἐν ἱδίῳ μυσθόματι; Acts 14,3, ἵκνων χρόνον διέτριψαν; Acts 18,11, ἐνιαυτὸν καὶ μήνας ἔξ ἐκκαθίσαν; Act. 11,26, ἐγένετο αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐνιαυτὸν ὄλον συναχθήναι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ.

Examples given by Brugmann\textsuperscript{12}, where an adverbial phrase adds the idea of duration to an aorist indicative, include Herodotus 2,133, ἥβιοσαν χρόνον ἐπὶ πολλῶν; Thucydides 5,5, ἐγένετο Μεσσήνη Λοκρῶν τινα χρόνον.

Robertson\textsuperscript{13} also gives New Testament examples of what he regards as constative or complexive aorists, e.g. John 2,20, τεσσάρακοντα καὶ ἔτειν τὸν οἶκον Μισσήμερα ὁ ναὸς οὐτός; Hebrews 11,23, ἐκρύβη τρίμηνον; Rev. 20,4, ἔξησαν καὶ ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη; Rom. 5,14, ἐβασίλευσαν ὁ θάνατος ἀπὸ Αδὰμ μέχρι Μωσῆς and many similar examples, all with some phrase indicating duration.

The solution of the problem may be a very simple one. One must remember that when a speaker emphasises a specific aspect of an action, his use of that aspect does not deny the factual reality of the other aspects involved in that same action. When one says ἔλυεν τοὺς ἵππους it is true that the action is seen as imperfect, in other words, either conative, durative or iterative. But that action also had a moment of inception and a moment of completion, where the aspect would be aoristic, and there would be a resultant state after the completion of the action, where the perfect aspect would be used if the speaker had wished to emphasise the resultant state.

This being so, it is quite natural that a speaker or writer might wish to emphasise more than one aspect of an action, since all the aspects would be factually true, and that is clearly the answer to all these so-called cases of the

\textsuperscript{10} B. L. Gildersleeve, \textit{Syntax of Attic Greek}, p. 105.
\textsuperscript{11} Funk, op. cit., par. 232.
\textsuperscript{12} Brugmann, op. cit., p. 545.
constative aorist where an adverbial phrase is added to indicate duration. That is true of all languages. If we say ‘He arrived for a visit of ten days’, we clearly emphasise the moment of inception (ingressive aorist), as well as the fact that the action begun at that moment lasted ten days. In other words, the speaker emphasises the aoristic aspect by using a certain form of the verb and the durative aspect by a phrase indicating duration.

In all the many cases in the New Testament of the double emphasis this rule holds good. In John 1,39, παρ’ αὐτῷ ἐμείναν τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην, the ἐμείναν indicates the point of inception (ingressive aorist), while the ἐκείνην ἡμέραν indicates the duration. All that has happened is that the writer has emphasised two aspects of the same action, both factually true. The one aspect is indicated by the aorist ἐμείναν, while the imperfect aspect is emphasised by an adverbial phrase indicating duration.

That is true also when the aorist form in the supposed constative aorist is effective, indicating the moment of completion, as in John 2,20, where the point of completion of the building of the temple is indicated by ὁ εἰσωδημάθης, an effective aorist, while the duration of the action leading to that completion is indicated by τασσόμενον καὶ ἐξ ἐκείνων.

Funk14 also speaks of a constative aorist indicating repeated action, which is then taken to be imperfect in its aspect, e.g. 2 Cor. 11,25 τρὶς ἐραβδισθην; Acts 11,26, ἐγένετο αὐτὸς καὶ ἐνιαυτὸν δὸλον συναχθῆναι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ; Mark. 12,44, πάντες ἔβαλον.

In the case of Acts 11,26 there does not seem to be any sign of repeated action. It is clearly a case of an ingressive aorist in ἐγένετο συναχθῆναι, with the durative nature of the action expressed by ἐνιαυτὸν. In the case of 2 Cor. 11,25 the effective aorist ἐραβδισθην emphasises the completion of the action, while the τρὶς emphasises the imperfect iterative nature of the action. In other words, it tells us that the act of whipping was completed on three occasions. Here also the aim is to draw attention to two separate aspects of the action, both of which are factually true.

This can happen also in a combination of the imperfect and perfect aspects, e.g. Mark 5,4, διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν πολλὰκις πέδαις καὶ ἄλλος τίνι δεδέσθαι, where δεδέσθαι is a true perfect indicating a state after an action, while the πολλάκις indicates that the state was not continuous, but that from time to time the man was in the state of having been bound after an act performed from time to time. It would be wrong to say that because of the πολλάκις the verb δεδέσθαι is imperfect iterative. All that has happened is that two aspects of the action (for which any aspect would be factually true) are emphasised, namely the perfect and the imperfect iterative aspects.

Funk15, Robertson16 and others also speak of a constative or complexive aspect.

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15. Funk, op. cit., par. 322.
aorist without any phrase indicating a conative, durative or iterative character, e.g. Mark 12,44 πάντες ἐβαλον. Robertson gives as examples of the constative aorist B.G.U., 423 (ii A.D.) διτι με ἐπάθιευσας καλῶς. But this seems to me to be an uncomplicated effective aorist. He also quotes Mark 5,17, ἤλθον, which he strangely calls 'a very simple constative aorist, just punctiliar and nothing more'. But if is just punctiliar, which in fact it is, why then call it constative at all? He also gives as examples of the constative aorist Acts 10,22–24, ἐγρηγορήσας, μεταπέμψασαι ἄκονθι, ἔξενισεν and συνήλθον.

But in all these cases the aspect is either ingressive aorist or effective aorist. In no instance is there an attempt to condense a durative action into a single point, which is supposed to be the function of the 'constative aorist'.

From another example quoted by Robertson it becomes clear where his fault lies. He quotes Hebr. 11,27 ἐκατηρήσασεν 'as a verb naturally durative in idea, but with a constative aorist.' The wrong presumption here is that verbal aspect attaches itself to the meaning of a verb, and that a verb which is naturally durative in idea cannot be expressed by an ordinary ingressive or effective aorist, in other words, that a durative action cannot have a point of inception or a point of completion. The ἐκατηρήσασεν of Hebr. 11,27 is clearly an ingressive aorist.

Another example given by Robertson is Rom. 5,12, ἔφο' ὅ πάντες ἠματητον, which he calls 'a striking example of the constative (summary) use of the aorist.' But unless we are to deny the possibility of an ordinary ingressive or effective aorist in a plural verb, the ἠματητον is clearly a simple aorist ingressive—in as much as they all fell into sin.

It seems to me to be clear that there is no constative or complexive aorist. The examples quoted with an adverbial phrase indicating duration are simply cases where the writer emphasises two aspects, while those without such adverbial phrases are simple cases of the ingressive or effective aorist.

The same arguments used in this rejection of the constative aorist also dispose of the fallacy that by prefixing a preposition to a verb, it becomes an effective aorist. The idea is, quite correctly, that with such a preposition added the verb has the meaning of completion.

This usage occurs in Greek and Latin (φεύγειν, ἐκφεύγειν facio and conficio). It is absent in English where such a prefixed preposition may change the meaning of a verb completely, e.g. set and upset, or it may make the verb figurative instead of literal (overlook as against look over). But English does not prefix a preposition to indicate a successful ending to an action. One cannot say that he 'through-pierced' him, or that a carpenter had 'through-drilled' the wood. Afrikaans, German and Dutch know the use, and that is why such composite verbs have to be translated into English.

17. Robertson, op. cit., p. 833.
18. Robertson, op. cit., p. 833.
by a sometimes very awkward circumlocution. The Afrikaans, *ek kruip onder die tafel deur*, could be rendered in English only by saying that I crawled on the floor towards the table, kept on crawling while I was under the table, and then emerged on the other side.

The view that by the prefixing of a preposition to a verb, that verb then automatically becomes an effective aorist, is closely associated with the name of Eleanor Purdie\(^{19}\), and although her views were not generally accepted, the principle itself was accepted by many, e.g. Brugmann\(^{20}\), Thumb\(^{21}\), Funk\(^{22}\) and others.

Paul Thumb\(^{23}\) refers to the statistical method of Schlachter\(^{24}\) in respect of this problem in Thucydides, where Schlachter found that in the composite verbs the aorist was more common than the imperfect. In the imperfect stem of composite verbs there are only 83 cases, as against 260 cases of the imperfect in the corresponding simple verbs, while for the aorist the numbers are 159 and 199.

Thumb himself investigated a number of verbs that occur both as composita and simplicia in the New Testament. He found that in the imperfect stem there were 1160 simplicia to 83 composita, while in the aorist stem the numbers are 885 and 226 respectively.

Although these figures are far from being impressive, Thumb nevertheless concludes that there is a direct relation between the prefixing of one or more prepositions to a verb, and the aspect or Aktionsart of such verb. He states that in this way Greek was able to express verbs referring to present time in an aoristic aspect.

As an example he quotes Mat. 6,2,5 and 16 ἡμὴν ἡμὴν λέγω ἡμὲν τὸν μισθὸν ἀπέχουσι, and adds that the Aktionsart of ἀπέχουσι (haben ihren Lohn weg) is aoristic, and that the aspect of ἀπέχουσι is therefore identical with that of ἔλαβον or ἔσχον.

I disagree with that view. In the case of ἔλαβον or ἔσχον the aspect would be effective aorist, the completion of the act of receiving, while ἀπέχουσι, like ἔχουσι, would mean that they have their reward, a clear case of a durative present imperfect.

That the aorist is more common in the composita than in the simplicia is natural, since the meaning of the composita points to a conclusion. But that is as true of simplicia where the meaning points to inception or completion. In the case of ἀρχόμενος ὡς ἦτον τριάκοντα—He was in his thirtieth year, was in the

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22. Funk, op. cit., par. 318.

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preamble of being thirty years old, an imperfect conative, and 2 Cor. 3,1, ἀρχόμεθα πάλιν ἐνυποψευ:—am I again busy recommending myself? which is a clear case of the imperfect durative.

The very fact that so many composita in the New Testament are rendered in the imperfect stem, shows that when a composite verb is rendered in the imperfect stem, its aspect is imperfect, since the aorist stem is used to emphasise the aorist aspect.

Space forbids an analysis of all these composita in the imperfect stem, but without exception I have found their aspect to be imperfect. I shall take two examples at random, both from the list of verbs treated statistically by Thumb. In Eph. 4,3 the συλλαμβάνω is a clear injunction to continued help, therefore imperfect durative. In the ἐπιγνωσκέω in I Cor. 14,37 the imperfect aspect is also clear—let him continually know.

The basic error of Purdie, Brugmann, Thumb, Funk and others is that they identify aspect with the meaning of a verb. An action or state can be momentary in the sense that it is of extremely short duration, or its meaning could point to completion, as in κατεσθάνω. But, to take the latter verb as an example, there must be the preamble, the ‘being for’ eating up. The eating up must take some time and could well be repeated at the next meal. These three facets are the imperfect conative, the imperfect durative and the imperfect iterative. And there would surely be a resultant state after the ‘eating up’, which would be perfect in its aspect. Only the moment of inception and the moment of completion of the eating up would be aoristic. And mutatis mutandis that would be the case also of verbs indicating so-called momentary action.

Our conclusion is that while prefixed prepositions can change the meaning of a verb, although that is not so common in the New Testament as in Polybius, it does not preclude the action being expressed in the aspect which the speaker wishes to emphasise.
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