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‘Wenham’: An Appreciation of the Elements of New Testament Greek¹

From 1956 to 1970 the name of the Rev. J. W. Wenham appeared on the list of Editorial Correspondents of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY. John died early in 1995 after a period of illness. He will be remembered as a humble man who was one of the founding fathers of the current revival of evangelical scholarship, but also as a person with a gracious pastoral and evangelistic zeal. He was the author of several books and articles on the doctrine of Scripture and on the origins of the Gospels, but what has made ‘Wenham’ a household name (in the right kind of households!) is his textbook on New Testament Greek, here celebrated by one of the many whom it has helped. Dr Goodacre is a Lecturer in the University of Birmingham.

When I went up to Exeter College, Oxford to read Theology in 1985, one of the most daunting tasks seemed to be the requirement to learn Greek in matter of weeks. One arrives in October and takes the Preliminary Examination the following March, by which time one is expected to have mastered the language and to be able to translate and comment on Mark 1-6 with confidence.

I had done Latin at school and struggled with it. Greek looked even more forbidding; at least Latin had a normal looking alphabet. And I had had two years to tackle the Latin and then only up to ‘O’ Level standard. How could I possibly manage to master Greek in such a short time?

I confided such anxieties to a third year studying Theology at the same college. ‘Not to worry,’ he said, ‘there’s ‘Wenham’ to help you through’. He took a faded, pale blue, distinctly unmenacing looking paperback book from his shelf, *The Elements*

¹ J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). This article is written as a tribute to the book and as a token of affection for the memory of a man who will be greatly missed by many.

of *New Testament Greek* by J. W. Wenham, and during the weeks that followed I enjoyed steadily working my way through the book, coming to terms with the language with few of the problems I had feared at the start.

The book that has become known as 'Wenham' is a gem. It has, over the years since its first publication in 1965, rightly earned its place as by far the best introduction to Greek for those intending to study the New Testament. Among its many, great virtues is that it begins with an introduction to English Grammar to which the later chapters refer the needy reader, ideal for a generation that goes through school without clear knowledge of much basic grammar.

The book has plenty of exercises—more than one needs in fact—and they concentrate, from very early on, on translation. From the first, therefore, the student is encouraged to think about the language, and not merely to parse and reconstruct words in mechanical fashion. When the student begins to translate passages from the New Testament, the act of translation is not a new and threatening thing: it is rather something into which one has been steadily and gently trained, from one word at a time, to short sentences, to longer sentences and ultimately to full sentences incorporating participles and the rest.

As the student does his or her exercises, the vocabulary steadily builds. Each chapter gives a list of words to learn but even here, it need not be by rote. With each word goes a mnemonic. βαλλω (ballo) means 'I throw' and alongside this is given 'ballistic' as an aid to memory. Likewise, ἐσθίω (esthio) means 'I eat' and alongside we are given 'comestibles'.

As one progresses through these vocabularies, there are periodic notes on how many words one knows. The first of these occurs after Lesson Eight when we are told that we are now familiar with one-third of the 137,500 words in the New Testament. Only five lessons later, we find that we know 'more than half the words in the New Testament'.

It is matters like this that make the book popular. It is not an easy thing to incorporate encouragement into a grammar, usually the job of the teacher not the text book. By this and other means, though, 'Wenham' draws the reader on. 'It may cheer those who are starting on the course,' he says, 'to know how *little* there is to learn' (p. xi).

This is exactly right. What Wenham has done is to provide, as the title promises, *the elements* of the language. It is what the student needs to know and there is much useful simplification. I have found it useful in teaching New Testament Greek to tell the

students that all they need to know about the formation of nouns is contained on just one page of 'Wenham' (p. 229) which they might photocopy and put next to the mirror at home.

Further, the simplification often results in clarification of important issues. One might take the question of accents, for example. Wenham dispenses with almost all accents, and the resulting naked looking text has been enough to shock some traditional, classically trained minds into preferring a more conservative, complicated grammar. This kind of reaction is a shame, however, since, in my experience, the dispensing with accents has several positive knock-on effects: it encourages the proper use of breathings from early on; it helps students to spot iota subscripts; and it enables them to get used to the few instances where accents are genuinely helpful, as with the difference between $\tau\iota\varsigma$ (tis) and $\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ (tís) or $\epsilon\iota$ (ei) and $\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ (eí).

Such strengths proceed, no doubt, from the author's experience of teaching New Testament Greek. The book is based on the earlier one of the same name by H. P. V. Nunn, a book which John Wenham had utilised for years in teaching. The changes made are those which benefit the student, simplifying, clarifying and concentrating on the basics.

'Wenham' is not perfect, though. Each teacher will have his or her own qualms. Some will feel that the aorist tense is introduced too late on. Others will be concerned about the hasty way in which participles are introduced, *on mass*, all in one chapter, again quite late on. Others still will be unhappy about how little information is given about the 'meaning' of the middle voice.

Another common criticism concerns the content of some of the sentences, which, it is said, can verge on anti-Semitism and sexism. This criticism is, at best, only partly justified. It is true that the Pharisees come off pretty badly and, furthermore, the sentences are all heavily patriarchal, but it should be said in defence of Wenham that this is largely because he is apparently attempting to recreate the attitude of the New Testament writers. Moreover, it is not true, as is sometimes claimed, that one can find sentences like 'God hates the Jews'.

Yet it is a mark of the greatness of the book that legends about the sentences are in circulation. Contrary to popular belief, one does not actually find 'The prophets stone the virgins' (or vice versa). One does, however, find some quaint, almost charming sentences: 'Beautiful daughters will become like their mothers'; 'And that man marries the happy virgin'.

What then of the author himself? After I had completed my Theology degree I began post-graduate work in Oxford on the

New Testament and this involved a fortnightly Graduate Seminar, attended by several of the fellows and many of the students engaged in New Testament research. An elderly gentleman in a crumpled brown coat was usually present at these sessions and I was excited to discover, after some time, that this was the great John Wenham himself.

He was a man of uncommon humility. On one occasion Prof. Ed Sanders was giving a paper on Matthew 5 and the discussion was revolving around the translation of the repeated formula ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω (*ego de lego*), 'But I say to you . . .'. Everyone eagerly turned to John for illumination but he quietly, almost inaudibly, replied, 'I am not an expert in these matters'.

It was difficult to draw John Wenham on Greek. He tended to play down the success of his most famous book and was rather reluctant to talk about it. He would far rather engage in discussion of one of his several conservative evangelical books or, indeed, on any aspect of his Christian faith.

Yet this is another clue to the book's success. Its strength is that it knows its limitations. It is written not by an expert but by a talented and dedicated amateur with a keen grasp of what it is like to be a student tackling a difficult subject for the first time. *The Elements of New Testament Greek* is not an advanced grammar; it is not the book one turns to for help in unravelling difficulties when translating the text at a later stage. But by the end of 'Wenham', the student has grasped the basics and is confident about translation. The barrier has been broken and the elements have been mastered. With Wenham's help, many students have taken the first step to serious study of the New Testament with surprising ease. It is a wonderful achievement, a real triumph for which many will remain deeply grateful.