

hereafter, and whatever undeserved sufferings produce, no present fruit of happiness shall bear a richer harvest in the world to come: when we have said all this, what more or better has even the wisest of us to say?

THE GREEK AORIST, AS USED IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT.

SECOND PAPER.

IN a former paper I stated, on the authority of several first-rate grammarians, that when a Greek wished to say that at some point, or during some period, of past time, known or unknown, an event had taken place, he used the aorist; and that he used the perfect only when he wished to direct attention to the abiding result of the past event. This distinction of the tenses I shall now attempt to illustrate by examples from the New Testament; and I shall at the same time discuss the correctness of some of the renderings adopted in our Authorized Version.

I shall begin by calling attention to four cases in which the Greek aorist is correctly used, but in which we are compelled to use the perfect.

1. Wherever the time is not in any way defined. For instance: in Luke xiv. 18, a man says that at some past time, which he does not further specify, he "*has bought* a field." The aorist is here sufficient. For, although the past purchase influences the man's present conduct, this is so plainly stated in the following words that it need not be expressed by the tense, as it would be if the perfect were used. Similarly, in Romans iii. 12, 23, St. Paul tells us that every man

has, at some time or times, *turned away* from God, and *sinned*. Equally unlimited in time is the mention, in Romans iv. 7, of those "whose iniquities *have been forgiven*, and whose sins *have been covered*." In Philippians iv. 11, St. Paul says, without considering when or how, that he "*has learnt* to be content." The indefiniteness of the aorist is very conspicuous in negative sentences. For in these it is quite clear that it covers the entire past up to the present moment. So Matthew viii. 10, "Not even in Israel *have I found* so much faith;" 1 Corinthians ii. 9, "Eye *hath not seen*, and ear *hath not heard*;" 1 Timothy vi. 16, "Whom no one of men *hath seen*;" 1 John iii. 2, "It *hath not yet been made manifest*;" and innumerable similar passages. It is equally conspicuous in questions. So Matthew xii. 3, "*Have ye not read* what David did?" John xii. 38, "Who *hath believed* our report?" John vii. 26, "*Have the rulers ever known*?" Similar is the use of the aorist in the apodosis of conditional propositions. So John xv. 6, "If any one abide not in me, he *hath been cast* outside like the branch." In this last case the perfect is equally appropriate, as in Romans xiv. 23, "If he eat he *is condemned*," and differs in signification from the aorist only inasmuch as it directs attention to the lasting results of the supposed event. But in the former passage the finality of the punishment is sufficiently indicated by the mention of fire and burning, and therefore the perfect is needless.

2. Because of its indefiniteness, the aorist is used for events which have occurred frequently and for states which have lasted during a longer or shorter period of the past up to the present moment. So Mark x. 20, "All these *I have kept* from my youth;"

1 Corinthians xv. 49, "We *have borne* the image of the earthy." These quotations and others similar prove that the aorist does not, as the English preterite does, imply that the action or state has ceased, any more than it implies, like the English perfect, that it continues to the present. This can be determined in Greek only by the meaning of the words used and by the context.

3. The aorist is also used for **events** which have **just taken place**. So Mark v. 35, "Thy daughter *has died*." We should say, "Thy daughter is dead," for English thought prefers to look at the state which the dead one has entered; whereas the Greeks thought chiefly of the event of death. Of this use of the aorist we have numberless instances. "A friend of mine *has arrived*;"¹ "The hour *has come*;"² "Thy alms *have gone up*;"³ "The gods *have come down*;"⁴ "Babylon *has fallen and has become*," &c.⁵ In these cases the aorist leaves the time of the event altogether undetermined. The correct rendering of Revelations xix. 6 is, "The Lord God *has become king*;" according to the constant classic use of the aorist in verbs denoting a state. So Kühner says: "Because the aorist expresses the simple occurrence of an action in the past, it describes very often the commencing of an action, and indeed not only in the indicative, but also in all other forms. . . . This use is very conspicuous in verbs of which the present tense denotes a state, as βασιλεύω, I am king; ἐβασίλευσα, I became king."⁶ Similarly, Mark iii. 21 should be, "He has gone out of his mind." We notice that in every one of the foregoing passages

¹ Luke xi. 6.² Mark xiv. 41.³ Acts x. 4.⁴ Acts xiv. 11.⁵ Rev. xviii. 2.⁶ *Greek Grammar*, 386. 5.

we are unable to translate the aorist by the English preterite.

4. The indefiniteness of the aorist permits it to be joined, and it is very often joined, to adverbs of absolute present time. Hence we read, in Matthew xxvi. 65, "Now ye *have heard* the blasphemy;" John xiii. 31, "Now *has* the Son of **Man** *been glorified*;" Romans v. 11; vi. 22; vii. 6; xi. 30; **Matthew** ix. 18; Revelations xii. 10: also Matthew v. 28, "He *has* already *committed adultery*;" 1 Corinthians iv. 8; 1 Timothy v. 15: Matthew xxvii. 19, "Many things *have I suffered* to-day;" Luke ii. 11. In all these we are compelled by English idiom to use the perfect; and we feel that in all of them the English perfect reproduces very accurately the sense of the Greek aorist.

I shall now call attention to a passage in which to render the aorist by a preterite would make good English, but would give a wrong sense. To translate Romans xi. 1, "Did God cast away his people?" would limit the reference of the question to the times of Isaiah mentioned in the previous verse; whereas it is quite evident that St. Paul refers to the men of his own day. The English perfect reproduces the indefiniteness of the Greek aorist, and leaves the reader's mind at liberty to revert to the unbelieving Jews, who are the chief matter of this part of the Epistle. This passage warns us not to assume that because an English preterite gives good sense as a rendering of an aorist, it therefore reproduces correctly the Greek writer's meaning. And, even where the preterite is the best rendering of the aorist, we must be careful lest we put into the aorist a limitation be-

longing only to the English tense. For instance, in Ephesians ii. 5, 6, St. Paul has in mind, doubtless, the resurrection and ascension of Christ; and we may therefore correctly translate his aorists by our preterite. But this reference is indicated, not by the tense used, but by the context; and it by no means exhausts the Apostle's meaning. Our quickening together with Christ is not complete until, by personal spiritual contact with the dead and risen Saviour, we become ourselves spiritually dead and risen. The translator has no more difficult work than to decide whether in cases like this the aorist is better represented in English by a preterite or a perfect. For, by using the preterite, he is in danger of saying more, by using the perfect, of saying less than the Greek writer intended.

The aorist in Matthew iii. 17 and parallel passages was suggested probably by the Hebrew perfect in such places as Isaiah lxii. 4, Malachi ii. 17, where the Seventy correctly use the aorist. It may be rendered, "In whom I *have taken pleasure.*" An instructive but not exact parallel is found in Colossians i. 19: "Because in Him [the Son] He [the Father] was pleased that all the fulness should make its abode." Each passage refers to a mental act, in the eternal past, of the Father contemplating the Son. To speak of an act in eternity may seem to be a contradiction in terms; but only thus can we finite ones conceive the eternal inward activity of God.

We now consider the perfect tense. We have already remarked that, whereas the Greek aorist signifies less, and therefore covers more ground than our preterite, the Greek perfect signifies much more, and has, therefore, a narrower use than the English tense. Only

very imperfectly can its double sense of past event and present result be reproduced in our language. Frequently, in translating, we have to choose which of these elements we will allow to fall into the background. For example, we may translate 1 Corinthians i. 2, with equal correctness and equal imperfection, either "To them that are sanctified," or, "To them that have been sanctified," according as we choose to make prominent the present state, or past event, of sanctification. In such cases the decision rests with the tact of the translator. But the careful student will observe and appreciate the full Greek sense, even when unable to reproduce it in translation.

In Acts iii. 12 the perfect, *πεποιηκόσω*, points to the permanence of the work wrought on the lame man. In Galatians iii. 18, the same tense calls attention to the abiding result of the promise given by God's favour to Abraham. And innumerable similar cases may be quoted.

The fuller significance of the perfect as compared with the aorist is very conspicuous in 1 John iii. 6, where, if we replace the perfect by the aorist, the assertion ceases to be true. "Every one who sins" either "hath not seen him," or the effects of the vision have passed away. For *έώρακεν* and *εγνωκεν* denote a vision and a knowledge of which the effects abide. These words are, indeed, an exposition of those foregoing: "Every one that remaineth in him doth not sin."

When the mind is occupied with the results of an event, as is always the case when the Greek perfect is used, we are comparatively indifferent to details of time and circumstances. Consequently, it is but seldom

that this tense refers evidently and conspicuously to a definite time at which the event took place. But it does so sometimes. And, in these cases, we are almost compelled to render it by our preterite. But, so great is the loss of significance involved in this, that we may well doubt whether this loss be not a greater evil than the uncouthness of using the English perfect. For, although the aorist is often accurately and fully represented by an English perfect, the full significance of the Greek perfect, which is but poorly reproduced even by our perfect, is reproduced still more imperfectly by our intensely matter-of-fact preterite. Yet, if we wish to write idiomatic English, we are compelled, at any sacrifice, thus to translate it. For instance, in Matthew i. 22, our idiom seems to require, "All this was done," as in the Authorized Version; but this rendering leaves out of sight the great truth, indicated by the Greek tense, that the event narrated made an abiding mark on the history of the world. In Matthew xiii. 46, the Greek perfect, which we are also compelled to render by our preterite, depicts the abiding effect upon the man's commercial position of selling all that he has. And the force of the perfect is increased by contrast with the aorists around. The midnight cry in Matthew xxv. 6 is in the perfect tense, because it completely changed the aspect of affairs. The perfect of the verb "to have" denotes the event of entrance into a state of possession (which is the ordinary sense of the aorist of verbs denoting a state), together with the abiding state of possession. In 2 Corinthians i. 9, *ἐσχήκαμεν* tells us that the sentence of death pronounced in the inner consciousness of St. Paul and his companions had left its abiding mark in them. In a similar sense

the same word is found in 2 Corinthians ii. 13, and more likely than not in Chapter vii. 5. The words of Christ to St. Paul, recorded in 2 Corinthians xii. 9, and introduced by the word, *ἔρρηκεν*, became an abiding voice within him. The woman's transgression, recorded in 1 Timothy ii. 14, *ἐν παραβίσει γέγονεν*, left its deep and abiding mark on the whole race. The blood shed at the inauguration of the tabernacle, to which reference is made in Hebrews ix. 18, *ἐνκεκαίνισται*, had an abiding significance. In all these cases our Authorized Version uses the preterite; and in all, our idiom demands either a preterite or a circumlocution. But whatever translation we adopt, we must carefully observe the full force of the Greek tense.

In the former paper I quoted John xi. 44 in proof that the Greek perfect does not imply that all the consequences of the past event remain. Another interesting proof of the same is found in the first of the three conspicuous perfects of Mark v. 4: "Because of his having been bound often with fetters and chains." No one who thought of the maniac could forget that he had been bound; and that therefore his present freedom was a proof that he had torn asunder his chains.

Sometimes the extra significance of the perfect as compared with the aorist is hardly perceptible. But it is doubtful whether it is ever altogether absent. It is perhaps least observable in Hebrews vii. and xi. But the tithes laid upon Abraham may¹ be looked upon as having a permanent result in the teaching therein embodied. So may the fact that Christ sprang from the tribe of Judah,² and that of that tribe no one ministered

¹ Heb. vii. 6, 9.

² *Ibid.* Verse 14.

at the altar. ¹ The perfects in Hebrews xi. 17, 28, may perhaps be explained by the abiding importance of the teaching involved in the actions of Abraham and Moses. In short, the perfect is used as being the more significant tense.

The foregoing examples confirm a remark made in the former paper, that the choice between the aorist and the perfect lay frequently with the writer's mode of viewing the event, and even with his habit of mind. St. John's conspicuous fondness for the perfect arose evidently from his contemplative disposition, prone to look at results. A similar fondness for the same tense, arising from a similar cause, may be noticed in the writings of Aristotle.

Very instructive is the combination in one sentence of aorist and perfect. In Romans xiii. 12 the night is beautifully represented as an active procession of dark moments which has nearly gone by; and the aorist is accurately used to denote its progress up to the present moment, as of something of which soon no trace will be left. The following perfect tells us that the day has drawn near, and that its brightness will continue. We may translate: "The night has advanced far, and the day is near," or, "has drawn near." In 1 Corinthians iv. 8, the perfect tense, which comes first, speaks in irony of the supposed fulness as abiding; and, since it is needless to repeat the idea of permanence, which is clearly understood, the following verbs are aorists. We may translate: "You are made full; you have become rich." In Philippians iii. 12, *ἔλαβον* looks merely at the spiritual act or acts, sudden or gradual, by which St. Paul might be supposed to have obtained a realisa-

¹ Hebrews vii. 13.

tion of Christ's purpose touching him; the following perfect tense looks at what would be the abiding result of such spiritual acquirement. The distinction of tenses is admirably reproduced by Dr. Ellicott thus: "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect." In James i. 24, the man's contemplation of himself in the glass was momentary and without result: his removal from the glass was permanent. The relation of tenses in 1 John v. 18 is similar to that in 1 Corinthians iv. 8. In Revelation v. 7; viii. 5; xi. 17, the extra significance of the perfect as compared with the aorist, which might have been used, is slight. But that the writer prefers the less common *εἰληφεν* rather than the very common *ἔλαβεν* suggests that he had a reason for doing so. And the perfect tense indicates that the Lion of Judah, whose act of coming was over in a moment (hence the aorist *ἦλθεν*), retained the book which he took; and that the angel kept in his hand the censer, whereas the act of filling it and casting its contents to the earth was done and done with at once. After the perfect in Chapter xi. 17, denoting the permanence of the power then assumed, the aorist was sufficient, as in 1 Corinthians iv. 8, 1 John v. 18.

So far we have spoken only of the indicative mood. But it is worthy of notice that in Greek the distinction of aorist and perfect continues throughout all the moods. In the English tenses such continuance not only does not exist, but is inconceivable. But in all the Greek moods the aorist represents the action as already done; the present tense, as now being done; the perfect, as already done, and now continuing in its results. This distinction is very conspicuous in the

participle. We are usually obliged to render both aorist and perfect participles by the English form, "having done." And in doing so, we feel that this form reproduces fully and accurately the aorist participle, whereas it falls far below the full significance of the perfect participle. In the imperative, optative, and subjunctive moods the best way to bring out the force of the Greek tenses is to transpose the sentence, by circumlocution, into the indicative mood. For example, the aorist imperative in Mark i. 44 bids the man so to act that he may be able to say, "I have shewn myself," "have offered." We have an equivalent to the aorist imperative, as distinguished from the present, in the colloquial form, "Have done." The rarity of the perfect imperative is easily accounted for by the fact that in most commands, if the act commanded be done, the results will follow of themselves, and therefore need not be expressly referred to. The aorist is therefore sufficient. But in Mark iv. 39 it was needful to bid the raging sea both to become calm and to remain so. Hence the perfect *πεφίμωσο*. The same tense, used in the sense maintained in this article, is frequent in the writings of Aristotle; *e.g.*, *Nicom. Ethics*, I. iii. 8; vi. 16; vii. 17. In classic Greek the same distinction of the tenses is maintained in the subjunctive and optative moods. For instance, Plato, *Republic*, 614a: ἵνα . . . ἀπειλήφῃ τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ κ. τ. λ.:—"That each one of them may receive, and thus be permanently richer." And Xenophon, *Anabasis*, I. ii. 21: λέγων ὅτι λελοιπῶς εἶη Σύνενης τὰ ἄκρα—"That the heights had been, and were still, deserted by Syennesis." The comparative rarity of these forms is accounted for in the same way as the rarity of the

perfect imperative in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the existence of them confirms the results obtained above by our study of the aorist and perfect tenses in the indicative mood.

The classic distinction of the aorist and present tenses in the indicative, subjunctive, and infinitive moods is strictly maintained in the New Testament, and affords further support to the foregoing explanation of the significance of the aorist. The present tense contemplates the action as still going on, the aorist as already complete. So John xvi. 21: a woman in actual labour, *ὅταν τικτη*, is in pain (note the aorist, *ἤλθειν*); but when she has borne the child (*γεννήσῃ*), she forgets her pain. The present infinitive, as being less common, is always emphatic. It affords a key to the difficult passage, Hebrews vi. 6. The writer asserts that *renewing* and *crucifying again* cannot be in process together. The distinction of tenses harmonizes 1 John ii. 1 (*ἐάν τις ἀμάρτη*) with Chapter iii. 9 (*οὐ δύναται ἀμαρτάνειν*).

To sum up, the Greek aorist simply says that an event has taken place, without giving us any idea whatever about its time, duration, frequency, or effect. The perfect says also that its results abide. Whenever it is evident that the event took place at some definite time present to the speaker's thought, or at some time altogether past, the sense of the aorist may be fully and accurately reproduced by the English preterite, which, like the aorist, is essentially a matter-of-fact tense. But, if the time be not definite, or not altogether past, we must generally use the English perfect. And in not a few cases the translator's best judgment is taxed to determine whether the Greek aorist will be

better rendered by the English perfect or preterite. The sense of the Greek perfect may sometimes be fairly reproduced by the English forms, "I am come," "I am made." But in very many cases, especially transitive verbs in the active voice, its force can be made apparent only by a circumlocution.

The difference between the Greek and English languages in their use of the perfect tense is found equally in the pluperfect. This the Greeks used only when they wished to say that, previous to some time mentioned or suggested, an event had taken place of which the results still continued at the time referred to. Of this Luke xvi. 20 may serve as an illustration. Lazarus was laid (an event), and continued to lie (a consequent state), at the rich man's gate. Like the perfect, the Greek pluperfect signified more, and was therefore less frequent, than the English tense. Unless they wished to direct attention to the abiding result of the event, the Greeks contented themselves with the "unlimited" past tense, leaving the reader to infer from the context that the event took place earlier than some other event mentioned or implied.

I cannot forbear to add, as a convenient summary of the view advocated in these papers, a few lines just received from a friend whose name is not unknown to the readers of this journal, the Rev. G. G. Findlay, who writes: "I am accustomed to speak of the aorist as the tense of *events*; the present and imperfect of *proceedings*; and the perfect of *results*."

In another paper I hope to discuss the rendering and exposition of the Greek aorist and perfect in some of the best known English commentaries.