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New Testament Circumstantial Participles

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Abstract

Participles in the Greek NT have a great variety of meanings or functions. One important meaning is to express a circumstance: the aorist tense expressing a circumstance prior to the action of the leading verb; the present tense, a circumstance concurrent to or occasionally subsequent to that of the leading verb. Unfortunately, various grammars fail to distinguish the circumstantial function from other functions. English versions of the NT likewise often render participles incorrectly. The present article seeks to clarify these distinctions and to enable the reader of the Greek NT to determine the function of the participles he encounters.

1. Introduction

In the New Testament, both the present and aorist tense of predicate participles may express a circumstance. However, each of these tenses expresses a very different type of circumstance, and the difference is too often not made clear in grammars. For example, Burton (1900:173) gives examples of both tenses together without distinguishing between them. The difference, with which we will deal further, is that the aorist tense circumstantial participle describes an action or state *preceding* that of the leading verb, while the present tense circumstantial participle describes an action or state *accompanying* and often *following* that of the leading verb. Burton continues (ibid.:173–174) with two paragraphs of discussion of these participles but still fails to make the important distinction between the two tenses. In the recognized grammar of Blass and Debrunner (1961:215–216) four distinct functions are apparently lumped together:

> The conjunctive participle is used most frequently to indicate the *manner* in which an action takes place, what *precedes* it and what *accompanies* it (modal and temporal). In some instances a *temporal* clause may be substituted…; in others not, namely when the assertion is of too little importance. (italics mine)

This statement fails to distinguish between the functions of manner, time, coordinate circumstance, and attendant circumstance!

2. The aorist tense circumstantial participle

Let us discuss first the aorist circumstantial participle, since it is the more subject to misunderstanding and mistranslation. Actually, as Burton (1900:173–174) correctly states, "It is…often equivalent to a coordinate verb with καί ['and']." It differs from a temporal participle in that it gives new information, whereas a temporal participle implies that the information is known and uses that information to give a time relationship for the leading verb. The aorist circumstantial participle "[n]ormally precedes the leading verb in word order [and] describes an action coordinate with, prior to, and of the same mood semantically as the leading verb.…It gives new information." (Greenlee 1986:58).

2.1 Distinguishing the circumstantial from other participial functions

The circumstantial function of the participle is most commonly confused with the temporal function. One example of the circumstantial participle is in Matt. 2:7, καλέσας…ἠκρίβωσεν 'having called…he ascertained', which means 'he called…and ascertained'. It gives new information; it is not temporal (as KJV renders it), which would state the obvious fact that it was only after he had called the Magi that Herod made his inquiry of them. Similarly, in Mark 5:40 ἐκβάλων…παραλαμβάνει 'having put out…he took' is to be rendered 'he put (them) out and took (the parents)'. In Luke 1:39 most versions, including KJV,

correctly render ἀναστᾶσα…ἐπορεύθη ‘having arisen…she went’ as ‘(Mary) arose…and went’, not ‘after she had arisen she went’ (although that is true!). In John 2:15 the meaning of ποιήσας φραγέλλιον…πάντας ἐξέβαλεν is ‘he made a whip…and drove them all out’, obviously not the temporal sense that it was only after he made a whip that he drove them out.

Green (1912:332–333) clearly confuses and combines the temporal and circumstantial functions in his reference to Acts 9:39, which he lists under the temporal function but renders ἀναστάς…συνῆλθεν as ‘arose and went…’ and states that such participles and their leading verb may be rendered either “by two verbs…or by some such preposition as *after, upon*…or by a temporal clause with *when*” (ibid.; italics are Green’s).

2.2 The implied semantic mood of the circumstantial function

Participles expressing the circumstantial function partake semantically of the mood of their leading verb. The examples in the preceding section are semantically in the indicative mood in harmony with their leading verb. However, they may be semantically any mood. An important instance of this is in Matt. 28:19: πορευθέντες…μαθητεύσατε ‘having gone…disciple (all the nations)’; a number of versions correctly render the participle here as a finite imperative verb ‘go (and disciple)’ in agreement with the imperative mood of μαθητεύσατε ‘disciple’. To interpret this participle as temporal would be to urge the disciples to ‘disciple’ people ‘after you have gone’. In John 12:24, πεσών…ἀποθάνῃ the leading verb is subjunctive, so the meaning is ‘(unless the grain of wheat) should fall…and die’. In Luke 11:7 the leading verb is an infinitive, so the participle in the phrase ἀναστάς δοῦναι is rendered as an infinitive, ‘(I am not able) to arise and to give…’. The leading verb is an infinitive in the single example quoted by Blass and Debrunner (1961) in the lumping together referred to earlier: Mark 1:7, κύψας λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα ‘having stooped down to loose the sandal’, meaning ‘to stoop down and loose…’.

There may even be a series of these circumstantial participles, such as the two in Luke 5:28, καταλιπὼν πάντα ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθει αὐτῷ ‘he left everything and arose and began following him’, and the three in Mark 15:36 (cited in Greenlee 1986:58), δραμὼν…γεμίσας…περιθεὶς…ἐπότιζεν αὐτόν ‘he ran…and filled…and placed…and gave it to him to drink.’

I have called these participles ‘coordinate circumstance’ since they are interpreted as the same mood as their leading verb. However, the action that they express is normally and perhaps always subordinate to the action of the leading verb, like the first verb in the English expression *Come and eat dinner*, which could represent the Greek form ‘Having come, eat dinner’. We have a similar participial expression in English, for example, using the present participle: *Grabbing his hat, he ran outside,* which is the equivalent of *He grabbed his hat and ran outside.*

There are, of course, doubtful instances that could be interpreted as either temporal or circumstantial. An example is Matt. 1:24: ἐγερθεὶς…ὁ Ἰωσὴφ…ἐποίησεν ‘Joseph having arisen…did ’ could be understood as either ‘After Joseph arose…he did’ or ‘Joseph arose…and did’. The latter interpretation would be based on the fact that ἐγερθεὶς ‘having arisen’ is new information; the temporal interpretation would imply that Joseph’s having arisen is understood even though not stated overtly.

Perhaps it should be pointed out that in the idiom ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν literally ‘having answered he said’, the aorist participle is not a circumstantial participle. It does give new information, but the information is the same information as the following verb εἶπεν ‘he said’, and its function is therefore apposition.

3. The present tense circumstantial participle

While the aorist tense circumstantial participle is most likely to be confused with only the temporal function, the present tense participle of attendant circumstance may be confused with even more functions, such as time, manner, or subject complement. (For a list of the various functions of participles, see Greenlee 1986:56–59.)

As I stated at the outset, the present tense circumstantial participle describes an additional action or state accompanying or following the time of the leading verb. It normally follows the leading verb in word order.

It can be introduced by a phrase such as 'and in addition'. Like the aorist participle, the present circumstantial participle shares the mood of its leading verb.

An attendant circumstance participle is found in Luke 4:15, ἐδίδασκεν…δοξαζόμενος… 'he was teaching…and (also) was being glorified'. Although 'being glorified' is simultaneous in time with 'he was teaching', the participle is clearly not intended to express a time relationship, 'he was teaching while he was being glorified'. Luke 2:20 includes two of these participles: ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεόν 'the shepherds returned, (and they were) glorifying and praising God'.

In John 19:5, ἐξῆλθεν…φορῶν… 'he went out…wearing (the crown of thorns)', the participle describes an additional fact, 'and he was wearing'. In John 19:17, βαστάζων…τὸν σταυρὸν ἐξῆλθεν 'carrying…the cross he went out', the participle precedes the verb in word order, which is less common, but it nevertheless expresses an attendant circumstance: 'he went out and he was carrying the cross'. One might ask whether this participle expresses manner, but manner would be more closely related to the verb, such as 'he went out limping'. Nor is it temporal, 'he went out while he was carrying the cross', which is true, but the author is not here intending to state when it was that Jesus went out. Rather, βαστάζων 'carrying' simply gives additional information.

4. Conclusion

The distinction between the numerous functions of participles is not absolute; at times more than one function could be reasonably understood. The test of the exegete or translator is to determine as nearly as possible which function is most likely the sense intended by the author.

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