SIL Global
Language and Culture Archives

Journal of Translation
ISSN 1558-7282 (online)
https://siljot.org

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Journal of Translation 10 (1), 2014: 24.
https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-FHD9M

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Short Note

Received…Perfected

By J. Harold Greenlee

Phil. 3:11–12 reads (my translation), "…if somehow I may arrive into the resurrection the-one from the dead. Not that I have already received, or am already perfected…"

Rarely have I heard the two principal points of this passage interpreted correctly, hence this brief note. To start with, the apostle is *not* stating, "I haven't arrived, and I'm not perfect"!

The verb ἔλαβον 'received' has no explicit object. It is a perfectly well-known principle, for the Greek New Testament as well as for English syntax that when a verb with its predicate is followed by a verb with no expressed object, the object of the previous verb is to be supplied as the object for the second verb. (For example, "I read that book but John didn't.") The object of the preceding verb, in verse 11, is, of course, "the resurrection from the dead." Therefore, the sense of verse 12 can only be, "Not that I have already received *the resurrection from the dead*."

The verb "perfected" is too often translated as the adjective "perfect." It is, instead, τετελείωμαι, the perfect passive indicative of the verb τελειόω. The Greek perfect tense implies a past action with continuing results. Over and over preachers have applied to this phrase the sense of the English slang expression, "Oh, I don't claim to have arrived!" ignoring the grammatical rule we mentioned above.

The verb τελειόω commonly means to arrive at maturity, and similar ideas. A special sense, however, is found in Hebrews 12:22–23, "But you have arrived at…the spirits of righteous men perfected," using the corresponding perfect passive participle of τελειόω. The reference is to men who have been perfected in death. "Perfected" in Phil. 3:12 has the same meaning. Paul states that he has not yet attained the resurrection from the dead nor has been perfected in death. And he continues by saying at length that he is pressing on to achieve the resurrection, which is the thing for which Christ has laid hold of him.

J. Harold Greenlee, a retired missionary of One Mission Society (formerly OMS International), is the author of more than a dozen books and more than 150 articles, mostly pertaining to New Testament Greek, including A Concise Exegetical Grammar of New Testament Greek *(1963, 1986), his classic textbook,* Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism *(1964, 1995), and his most recent book,* The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition *(2008).*