ANALYSIS OF THE MEANING AND TRANSLATION

OF THE HISTORICAL PRESENT

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Introduction

Sometimes in the narratives of the New Testament, the author will use a present tense indicative verb in a place where the reader would anticipate an aorist. Such a verb is called a "historical present." While English also has a historical present, it is not clear that the purpose of the historical present in biblical Greek was the same as it is in today's English.

Scholars have argued over how to view the Greek historical present and what its purpose might be. To a lesser degree, there are questions about how to translate it. The most important question is what information the author was trying to convey by using the historical present. If we cannot discern this, then we are missing out on part of the message of the New Testament author, and risk interpreting the passage less accurately. A second question is how we should define the historical present tense verb itself. How we portray its syntactical functionality will affect how students understand it in the biblical text. A third question is how we should translate the Greek historical present into English. If the Greek form differs in utility from the English form, we risk the reader inferring the wrong information from a present tense translation, but if we translate like the expected aorist we fail to provide the English reader with all the information of the New Testament text.

This paper attempts to answer those three questions preliminarily, based on a survey of the literature with some forays into the biblical text. First, the historical present in the New Testament always signals something important about its context, but what it signals varies and it is not always clear to what the signal is pointing. Second, the historical present accomplishes its signal by differing in both time and aspect from the anticipated aorist, so we should view the historical present as a true present tense indicative, with continuous aspect and present time [it is the fact that this aspect and this timeframe do not fit the context that make the signal noticeable].

Third, because the purpose of the Greek historical present differs from the purpose of the English version, we should not merely translate it as a present tense verb in English. What would be ideal would be to accomplish the goals of the author with better structuring, titling, highlighting, and annotating of the translated text.

The Temporal and Aspectual Nature of the Greek Historical Present

What is termed the "historical present" is a present tense indicative verb that describes a past event.[1] In the New Testament, the historical present always occurs in the third person [thus differing from English usage], almost always with action verbs, and never with εἰμι or γίνομαι as an equative verb.[2] In the New Testament, the historical present only occurs in connection with the interaction of two or more characters.[3] Generally, in New Testament narrative the historical present occurs only if there has been a preceding subsection of a larger episode; for example, there might be a discussion and then a historical present would introduce a new character to the discussion.[4] In such situations, the new character must have an active role to play in Matthew, not so in John.[5]

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[1] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 526, 529; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament, in Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 866, 868; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §321; Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (1898; repr., Charlston, SC: BiblioBazaar, n.d.), 9; Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 110; Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1990), 226, 229.

[2] Wallace, 528-529.

[3] Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2000), 203.

[4] Levinsohn, 204-205, 208.

[5] Levinsohn, 204-205, 208.

There is disagreement over the temporal and aspectual nature of the historical present. Some argue the aspect is suppressed into being external or punctiliar, so that the verb functions like an aorist.[6] These scholars think the temporal indication of the present tense is what causes whatever effect the historical present has on the reader.[7] For example, Wallace argued that while the aspect was suppressed, the use of time was not, though the time frame was rhetorical.[8] In English usage, one does suppress the internal or continuous aspect of the present tense when using it in this way.

Others say the aspect can be durative, like the imperfect,[9] and even could be translated like an imperfect.[10] Some of these scholars emphasize the aspectual indication of the present tense as what causes whatever effect the historical present has on the reader.[11] Porter believed that "different tense-forms can obviously be used in similar temporal contexts," and that it is the fact that an imperfective aspect is used that draws the reader's attention.[12] However, he admitted an author could have used an imperfect in those contexts,[13] and never answered why the author would choose the present over the imperfect.

Proponents of both the temporal and aspectual views seem to focus on how the verb functions in the sentence: since it replaces an expected aorist [or imperfect], most translate it

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[6] Blass and Debrunner, §321; Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, begun by James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 60; Wallace, 527.

[7] E.g., Fanning, 227.

[8] Wallace, 527.

[9] Robertson, 867.

[10] Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood,* Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 193-194.

[11] Porter, *Aspect*, 189, 193-195; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 31. In both volumes, Porter attributed this theory to McKay.

[12] Porter, *Idioms*, 31.

[13] Porter, *Aspect*, 193.

like an aorist [or imperfect], and thus focus on describing the verb in terms of that translational functionality [perhaps because English usage of the historical present is in mind as a guide], even if they see a greater discourse purpose for the use of the present tense verb in these situations.

Other scholars think both the temporal and aspectual elements are a shock to the reader, and part of the effect of the historical present.[14] Given that the present tense indicative differs from the anticipated aorist in both represented time and aspect,[15] it makes sense to see both deviations as part of the effect. This view sees the verb as a true present tense indicative, with its temporal and aspectual characteristics.[16] The fact that it replaces an expected aorist is what makes it an effective signaling device, but that fact does not change how one should think of the aspect and temporal characteristics of the verb. If the present tense indicative attracts the attention of the reader because it is not the tense expected in an aorist-driven narrative, then its use as a signaling device [to be further discussed momentarily] preserves its true present tense indicative nature; in fact this use is the result of that nature being so different from the aorist. The verb is not functioning like an aorist, it is sitting in the slot of an aorist to signal to the reader that something deserves extra attention.

The Function of the Greek Historical Present

There is disagreement on what exactly is accomplished by usage of a historical present. The traditional view was that the historical present provided greater vividness to the

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[14] Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 128-129.

[15] Not all scholars agree that time is represented in the tenses of the indicative mood: see, e.g., Porter, *Idioms*, 30; Porter, *Aspect*, 189.

[16] Runge, 142.

narrative.[17] The idea is that the narrator conceives himself to be present in that moment[18] or writes as though the reader is present at the scene.[19]

Porter was critical of this view, saying it was based on an "outdated view of tense functions," because he viewed tense as non-temporal.[20] However, even if one adopted Porter's view of tense, one could still argue for vividness as the function of the historical present. Porter also said there were no textual clues as to this shift in perspective and an awkward result if viewing the verbs temporally.[21] However, this objection seems to stem from trying to see [or accusing others of seeing] the historical present as a substitute for an aorist [or imperfect], rather than merely as a signaling device. One stronger objection to this view which Porter offered was that it was difficult to quantify the dramatic effect.[22]

Runge was critical of this view because it "seems to be based more upon modern vernacular usage in English than on premodern [Greek] usage."[23] He believed this vividness effect derives more from the English tense form itself than from the fact that its occurrence is a deviation from the default form. We can see that the usage in Greek is different from the usage in English. In English, someone might relate an entire scene in the present tense, either out of sloppy form exacerbated by excitement or out of a conscious desire [particularly in literature] of

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[17] Robertson, 866, 868; Blass and Debrunner, §321; Burton, 9; Wallace, 526; Fanning, 226-227; Turner, 60; Wilbert Francis Howard, *Accidence and Word Formation*, vol. 2 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, begun by James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 456, noting especially when not at the beginning of a paragraph.

[18] Blass and Debrunner, §321; Burton, 9; Wallace, 527; Fanning, 228; Turner, 60.

[19] Wallace, 526; Fanning, 228; see also Runge, 126.

[20] Porter, *Idioms*, 30; Porter, *Aspect*, 189.

[21] Porter, *Idioms*, 30.

[22] Porter, *Aspect*, 190; though that might be in part because he included λέγω in his analysis.

[23] Runge, 126.

trying to bring the reader more experientially into the story. This does not seem to be the pattern

or purpose in the New Testament; rather the context usually is one in which the circumstances

and secondary issues of the story are portrayed with aorist indicatives, as are the concluding

events of the passage, with just the main action or selected actions represented with the historical

present.[24] There are some examples of strings of historical present verbs in the New Testament,

but it is not clear that they were to provide vividness in the sense of which we think in English.

Runge asserted that vividness alone cannot explain adequately the variety of usage situations in

the New Testament.[25]

Some scholars believe the Greek historical present functions like a Hebrew preterite,

an imperfective form that functions as a simple past-time sequential form, in which case it would

be used merely for stylistic variation.[26] But in Hebrew, the preterite is the default form for

sequential narration, so there is no expectation of it signaling anything other than standard

narration continuing, whereas in Greek the historical present is not the default form in narration –

neither in general nor in most of the contexts in which the historical present occurs – rather, the

aorist is.[27] Also, this theory would not explain the situations when the present tense indicative

begins the sequence or the many sequences that do not have any present tense verbs at all.[28] On

the other hand, some extra-biblical authors tended to use the historical present so repeatedly in

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[24] Blass and Debrunner, §321; Turner, 61, noting John especially.

[25] Runge, 126.

[26] Runge, 127, attributed this view to Battle, though he noted Battle also discussed other theories. Fanning, 229-230, attributed this to Kiparsky, as did Porter, *Idioms*, 30-31; Porter, *Aspect*, 190-191.

[27] Runge, 129. See also Fanning, 230; Porter, *Idioms*, 30-31.

[28] Porter, *Idioms*, 30-31.

narration that it does appear to have represented to them simply a narrative tense.[29] Fanning pondered whether this might be the case when John used clusters of historical presents.[30]

Some scholars see both a result of vividness but also a signaling effect when a historical present occurs. For example, the historical present can mark a change in topic or rhetorical focus.[31] When not a speech verb, the historical present verb can signal the beginning of a scene or paragraph [e.g. Mark 1.40], the introduction of new characters [Mark 2.3], or a change in setting [Mark 1.21].[32] The purpose in these situations would be to draw the attention of the reader.[33] This explanation of signaling value still falls short of explaining the full usage of the historical present we find in the New Testament.[34] Levinsohn said the historical present was not used to mark these changes, but rather occurred at these boundaries incidentally in its role of pointing forward to something important that was coming up in the story or argument.[35] On the other hand, he backed off that a bit when he said the historical present sometimes could have such forward pointing overtones and mark significant new information.[36]

In the case of λέγω and other speech verbs, many believe there is no sense of vividness or signaling function, because this was a stereotyped idiom by this time.[37] However, Levinsohn purports to show that when Matthew combined a speech historical present with

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[29] Fanning, 233-234.

[30] Fanning, 234-235.

[31] Wallace, 526.

[32] Fanning, 231-232; Young, 110; Porter, *Idioms*, 31; Turner, 62-63, quoting Thackeray; see also Howard, 457.

[33] Young, 110; Porter, *Aspect*, 196.

[34] Runge, 128; Porter, *Idioms*, 31; Porter, *Aspect*, 192.

[35] Levinsohn, 202.

[36] Levinsohn, 204.

[37] Wallace, 527; Young, 110; Fanning, 231-232.

connectors such as καί, δέ, or τότε, then the historical present was signaling something important coming after the speech.[38] Sometimes, Levinsohn found a speech historical present marked the speech itself as important.[39] However, in his example of Matthew 14.8, the historical present might not be highlighting the girl's demand for John's head so much as the actual taking of it in 14.10. Sometimes it is hard to see what could be the focus of the signal: e.g. for the speech historical present in Matthew 8.4, Levinsohn believes the highlight belongs on the narration in 8.17,[40] but there are intervening scenes and that verse is the narrator's interpretation of the events, not an event itself. Levinsohn himself wondered at the fact that Matthew would combine a speech historical present with asyndeton, because he used asyndeton when the response in the dialogue was predictable and thus did not develop the conversation or plot.[41] However, in his major examples, we can find forward signaling, so even if the words associated with the historical present were not important, that verb might have signaled something important coming up. For example, after the historical present in 16.15, Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God in 16.16. After the historical present in 17.25, Jesus said something important about sons being free in 17.26. After the historical present in 20.33, Jesus performed a miracle in 20.34. After the historical present in 22.42, Jesus identified himself with the Psalm 110 Messiah in 22.43-44.

       Porter believed the historical present could mark a transition or a whole discourse as important.[42] This could include forward signaling to mark what is coming as important.[43]

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[38] Levinsohn, 240.

[39] Levinsohn, 242.

[40] Levinsohn, 243.

[41] Levinsohn, 235.

[42] Porter, *Aspect*, 196.

Recalling that Porter's theories are based on the aspect differences, it is interesting that

Levinsohn speculated that the imperfect aspect might contribute to a forward pointing effect by

implying the event is not complete[44] [though that still leaves unexplained why the author did not

resort to an imperfect tense verb instead of a present tense verb]. Porter thought the historical

present could mark as important specific events or dialogue within a discourse, including

climactic turning points, or to highlight final events in a discourse.[45] Yet, Porter argued that the

explanation of forward signaling by itself was too vague, in that sometimes many verses came

between the present tense verb and the important event, and that many uses found in the New

Testament did not seem explained by this theory.[46]

There could be a case made that sometimes the historical present was used for a

vividness effect, and the theories of the historical present that emphasize its role in signaling

transitions or in highlighting a particular section of text as important both seem to have some

evidence in the New Testament. Runge has attempted to develop one comprehensive theory to

better explain the entirety of the New Testament evidence.

Runge's Theory of the Greek Historical Present

The use of a present tense indicative in a past time setting is a distinct choice of the

author, and this decision to deviate from the expected time and aspect must represent

something.[47] Discourse analysis suggests that such deviation from default usage usually signals

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[43] See also Wallace, 527.

[44] Levinsohn, 203.

[45] Porter, *Aspect*, 196.

[46] Porter, *Aspect*, 193.

[47] Runge, 128-129.

something the author wants the reader to note about the text.[48] Runge's theory is that if an author wanted to use a verb form as a signaling device in the midst of a past-time narrative, there were few choices: the aorist was the default tense in such contexts; the perfect and pluperfect would not be clear as signaling devices, because of their existing roles in such contexts for connecting past actions with existing states [present and past, respectively]; the imperfect already functioned in such contexts to signal narrative background information; the participle already functioned in such contexts to provide background action with respect to the main verb of the clause if occurring before the main verb, or to modify the main verb if occurring after it; so the present tense verb is an obvious choice for signaling something else, offering both a deviation in time and aspect from the expected, without any other usage in such contexts.[49] Runge did not mention the future tense indicative or the infinitive, but it is easy to see that they could confuse the reader more than help in such situations, and the future would not have as obviously dramatic an aspect difference.

If Runge is correct in his reasoning, then both the temporal and aspectual elements of the historical present would be useful for such a signaling purpose. This strengthens the argument made earlier that we should not see the historical present as an instantaneous present with a temporal meaning that reduces the aspectual force or as a continuous present with no temporal element. It is not that the historical present has little aspectual force, but that its aspectual force is out of place, just as for its temporal force.

Runge developed an encompassing theory which states that while an item such as the historical present always conveys its inherent semantic properties, it might also serve a function

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[48] Runge, 129, 131.

[49] Runge, 129-130.

to help the reader process the story, or might also serve a more pragmatic discourse function.[50] The use of the historical present in situations such as transitions is part of the author's attempt to signal discontinuities, to reveal the segmentation of the narrative, for easier processing by the reader.[51] When the historical present occurs in clusters or in contexts where it is unnecessary for signaling discontinuities, then it serves a specific pragmatic discourse function of highlighting [of signaling the need to pay close attention to] the events or speeches that follow it.[52]

Levinsohn perceived an overlap in the functions of the historical present, saying that when it signals a new location for the story, it often will highlight the following events to take place at that location or highlight the location itself because of what will happen there.[53] Still unclear is whether the lack of a historical present at certain other changes of location means the subsequent events are not as important or that the location does not play a role in what is about to happen.[54] For Levinsohn, the pointing forward function is primary: even if the historical present was used in connection with the conclusion of an episode, it still would be acting to point forward to what comes next in the story instead of highlighting the event just concluded.[55]

Runge saw evidence for overlap in functions as well. He gave as an example Matthew 15.1, in which the use of the historical present προσέπχονται helps signal to the reader that the introduction of the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem marks a boundary in the narrative; but also attracts attention to what is following as important, namely the question from

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[50] Runge, 132.

[51] Runge, 132-133, 142.

[52] Runge, 133, 142. See also Levinsohn, 200; Fanning, 232-233; Porter, *Idioms*, 31.

[53] Levinsohn, 205.

[54] Levinsohn, 206.

[55] Levinsohn, 206, 208.

these new participants which forms the basis for the next scene.[56] Robertson cited John 20, especially the excitement of Mary in vv.13-17, as evidence for vividness.[57] According to a BibleWorks search, there are ten historical present verbs in these five verses. Runge's theory is that the clustering of historical presents dramatically builds suspense by indicating that something special is about to happen in the narrative, each one signaling a transition or the need to highlight the next event, but – through continuous deferral of the resolution with another historical present – collectively they effectively slow the reader and build anticipation.[58] There is a vividness effect here, of building suspense and signaling there is something special, but it is not vividness as we think of it when the historical present is used in English, of speeding up the processing of ideas and bringing the reader into the story.

Levinsohn concluded that when John combined a speech historical present with an articular speaker, then the purpose was to point forward to something significant, but when John combined a speech historical present with an anarthrous speaker, then the purpose was to highlight that scene and discussion.[59] Thus Levinsohn saw this passage of John 20 differently. He said the historical present verbs in verses 14b and 18 were to reactivate specific characters [signal transitions], while those in verses 15 through 17, because they were combined with anarthrous references to Jesus, suggested that the exchange between Jesus and Mary was what needed highlighting.[60]

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[56] Runge, 135.

[57] Robertson, 868.

[58] Runge, 139-141.

[59] Levinsohn, 251.

[60] Levinsohn, 250-251.

Runge's attempt to explain all the biblical evidence with one comprehensive theory seems a valid and worthy effort. Unfortunately, there are still uncertainties. For example, we still have to wonder why other seemingly important events in passages with clusters of historical presents are narrated with past tense verbs.[61] Another question, with regard to signaling discontinuities, is why an author will sometimes use the historical present and sometimes rely on other features,[62] though perhaps this has to do with when there is both a discontinuity and a need to signal something important coming up.

Translation of the Greek Historical Present into English

Those who saw the effect of the historical present in Greek to be like that in English sometimes argued for translating with the present tense in English to give the same effect of vividness.[63] Others, perhaps because of their view of the aspect, always translated the Greek historical present into a past tense English verb.[64] Runge gave an example of using the historical present in English "just before something surprising happens,"[65] but I have to admit that it seemed to me the present tense verbs were themselves the surprising elements, and the overall effect was more of vividness than signaling. As Runge pointed out, such devices function differently in various languages.[66]

This means we cannot translate a Greek historical present into an English one with the same effect for the reader. A reader of English who is not aware of the discourse features of

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[61] Fanning, 234-235.

[62] Fanning, 233.

[63] Robertson, 868.

[64] See, for example, the illustrations in Wallace, 529-530.

[65] Runge, 125.

[66] Runge, 125.

New Testament Greek will not process the signals in the correct way. In the New Testament, it is not the verb itself that is highlighted, the verb is acting as a signal – either to notice a discontinuity or for something to be especially highlighted – so we would not get this effect from the English reader if we merely translated these verbs present tense; such a reader would be focusing on the vividness of the present tense verbs themselves instead of what followed. Also, in English the effect of such historical presents is to make the narration seem more frenetic, but in Greek the function is to slow the reader down like a "yield" or other traffic warning sign.[67]

Helping the reader will require framing the text well in presentation, rather than doing anything specific in translation. We can help the reader realize discourse boundaries by better sorting the text into paragraphs and larger sections, and inserting subtitles to guide the reader into transitions. We can accomplish highlighting of what is important [in our judgment] with highlighting of the text, by italicizing or giving it a yellow background. We also might focus on better use of sidebar notes to explain what is happening at the discourse level of the text.

That still leaves the question of how to translate the present tense verb. If there is to be no explanation, I think it best to translate the verb as a past tense English verb, because a present tense translation will only confuse the uninitiated reader. But I would rather see present tense translation with notes as to why we think each verb is in that tense, to explain to the reader what we think the author is signaling in each case.

Conclusion

Most likely, the authors of the New Testament intended for the historical present to signal something about its context. Where the historical present occurs, there almost always are evident aspects of the narration the author might have desired to highlight. However, because of

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[67] Runge, 134.

the variety of the types of things apparently highlighted, because of the different ways the historical present functions to signal, and because of the existence of some contexts in which other discourse features are used instead or none are used where we would expect something, analysis of the usage of the historical present in the New Testament is still developing.

If Runge's discourse analysis theory is correct, then one implication is that the historical present does not represent a semantic sub-purpose of the present tense; rather it is the case that the author uses the present tense in this out of the ordinary context precisely because the semantic attributes of the present tense [present time and continuous aspect, in the indicative] will stand out and signal to the reader.[68]

Because the historical present in Greek functions differently from the historical present in English, simply translating as a present tense in English will not convey the same information to the reader, omitting what is valuable and including something false. The best way to help the English reader understand the signals of the historical present in the New Testament would be to structure the paragraphing of the text well, use subtitles, highlight in some way what the author was trying to highlight, and use sidebar notes to explain the discourse features we can see in the Greek text, and what we think they are signaling.

These conclusions come from a survey of readings with some verification of the concepts in the New Testament text, using BibleWorks. A more thorough analysis would entail more direct exegetical work in the New Testament.

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[68] Runge, 142.

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