

Verbal Aspect in Recent Debate:
Objections to Porter's Non-Temporal View of the Verb*

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Introduction

Verbal aspect of the Greek of the NT has received considerable attention in the last dozen years. Three major studies in particular have caught the attention of New Testament scholars. This work, done by K. L. McKay, Buist M. Fanning, and Stanley E. Porter, asserts that verbal aspect has been misunderstood and inadequately appreciated in previous work, often being confused with *Aktionsart*.¹ Although seemingly innovative (and to some, unorthodox), the key proposals build on the foundation of twentieth-century linguistics across a wide range of languages. These ideas are not idiosyncratic if judged by contemporary linguistic standards and theory, though they often appear such to biblical scholars unacquainted with work outside their field.² The implications of these theoretical conceptions of grammar are far-reaching, particularly for exegesis of the New Testament text.³

* This paper is an adaptation of one section of my recently published *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, Studies in Biblical Greek, v. 10, ed. D. A. Carson (New York/Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), 38–49 [hereafter *TDM*]. A web page devoted to the topic (& the book) is available at: <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/deixis.htm>>.

¹ K. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach*, SBG, vol. 5, B. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, OTM [hereafter *FVA*]; and S. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, SBG, vol. 1 [hereafter *PVA*]. McKay's work extends back to the mid-1960s, but it did not receive adequate attention until Porter and Fanning brought the issue to the attention of NT scholarship. For an introductory survey of the issues involved in aspect theory, see D. Carson, "An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics* [hereafter *BGLL*], ed. S. Porter and D. Carson, JSNTSup, vol. 80 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 18–25; see also *TDM*, 5–28. For an extensive summary and review of both Fanning's and Porter's volumes, see F. Weißgruber, "Zum Verbalaspekt im Griechischen des Neuen Testaments," *Studium zum Neuen Testament und Seiner Umwelt* 16 (1991): 169–77.

² A. Robertson anticipated such developments in his comment that "it is not possible then to write the final grammar of Greek either ancient or modern" (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 32 [hereafter *ATR*]). He explains that this is because we are continually learning more about ancient Greek. Linguistic study contemporary with and subsequent to Robertson has continued to expand such knowledge. Aspect theory, with which this study is concerned, is one part of that expansion. As S. Porter has observed, "most ancient languages are greatly understudied, since the results of 'modern' linguistic study have not yet been applied to them. It is here that much resistance has been found to appropriating the best insights of recent linguistics. Just because the languages are called ancient does not mean that the methods for studying them must be ancient also" (*Studies in the Greek New Testament*, SBG, vol. 6 [New York: Peter Lang, 1996], 18).

³ For summaries of some of this work and its implications, see: P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989); M. Turner, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. J. Green, 146–74 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); E. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 73–89; S. Porter, "Greek Language and Linguistics," *Expository Times* 103 (1991–92): 202–8; and M. Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading*

Porter's work is the most extensive and has generated the most debate. His work has been described as "breath-taking," "ground-breaking," "epoch-making," "revolutionary," "eine Fundgrube und ein Nachschlagewerk," "meticulously researched," "a veritable gold mine of linguistic information," and a "major scholarly contribution to NT studies."⁴ One of Porter's major arguments is that Greek does not grammaticalize time in the form of the verb, but relies on deictic indicators to signal temporal relationships.⁵ The significant semantic factor connected with the form of the verb is not time but aspect.

Porter's Temporal Thesis

Porter's temporal thesis can be stated quite simply: "Greek does not grammaticalize tense in any of the three major tense categories."⁶ Or, at greater length:

I am in no way saying that time is unimportant. I am saying two things. The first is that when Greek speakers used a verb they had something other than temporal categories in mind with regard to what the verb form itself meant.... The second is that users could speak of when processes occurred, but they did not use verb forms alone to do so. They instead used various other tools in their language. For example, they would use deictic indicators such as temporal words or they would use discourse features such as the type or kind of discourse.⁷

This differs from most twentieth-century treatments of the Greek verb in that it denies any temporal reference to the form of the verb, even in the indicative mood.⁸ Although this is not an idea original with Porter, his advocacy of it has received greater attention and made a greater

the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990; reprint as part of *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. M. Silva, 193–280 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996]).

⁴ Silva, "A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect," in *BGLL*, 75; Gignac, of *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, by S. Porter, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1992): 367; Young, review of *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, by S. Porter, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994): 145, 146; Weißengruber, "Verbalaspekt," 170; Carson, preface to PVA, ix; J. Voelz, "Present and Aorist Verbal Aspect: A New Proposal," paper presented at the Society for New Testament Studies, Madrid, Aug. 1992, 4 [later published in *Neotestamentica* 27 (1993): 153–64]; and M. Turner, "Modern Linguistics," 174.

⁵ It is perhaps helpful to refer to verb *forms* rather than to verb *tenses* to avoid the (often unconscious) association of temporal reference with the morphological categories of present, aorist, perfect, etc. Voelz has made a similar proposal for the same reason ("Verbal Aspect," 3). Carson has observed the same problem, and although he continues to use the term *tense*, makes it very clear that by doing so he refers only to the morphology of the verb form, not to any temporal meaning (*Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 67).

⁶ PVA, 78. This seems somewhat confusing to those trained in traditional Greek terminology since it says, in essence, that the Greek "tenses" are not true tenses. Unfortunately the terminology is not likely to succumb to change after several millennia of use. Terminology has been viewed as problematic for some time (ATR, 825–6; and Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 67).

⁷ Porter, *Studies*, 38.

⁸ Porter's claim is a bold one and therefore one to be made or defended with due caution. Silva argues that "regardless of one's theoretical approach to this issue, however, it is indisputable that, in fact, temporal reference is at least associated with the indicative forms in the overwhelming majority of cases, and it makes no sense whatever to ignore that element when analyzing the text" ("Discourse Analysis and Philippians," in *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics in Biblical Greek*, ed. S. Porter and D. Carson, JSNTSup, vol. 113 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995], 105). Even assuming Porter's theory to be correct for the moment, it could be agreed that "temporal reference is at least associated with the indicative forms"—but the question is, do these indicative forms grammaticalize that temporal reference? Or is the temporal reference so widespread in the indicative due to conventional, temporal implicature? Is it a matter of semantics or of pragmatics?

impact than others.⁹ Porter's major contribution is his massive treatment of verbal aspect, but the temporal implications of his system have probably raised the greatest objections—perhaps even to the point that some fail to appreciate his work on aspect because of his temporal thesis.

A temporally ungrammaticalized view of the Greek verb does not at all mean that Greek cannot express temporal relationships, only that it does not do so by means of the grammatical/morphological form of the verb. To express time reference, Greek uses a variety of contextual features including various deictic indicators and discourse features.¹⁰ If temporal coordinates are contextually based in Greek, it could be said that “the sentence is tenseless, while the proposition is tensed.”¹¹ In other words, Greek does not express time by the form (“tense”) of the verb, so the sentence may be considered tenseless grammatically.¹² But since Greek can and does express time through contextual means, it can be said that the proposition (the content of what is communicated as opposed to the grammatical form in which it is coded) is “tensed” (i.e., expresses time). This distinguishes between the semantics of the form and the pragmatics of the context—between what specific meaning is conveyed by the grammatical form (i.e., what is traditionally called “tense”) and what meaning comes from the context.¹³ This means that “the interpreter's task is to consider all of the relevant information—including verb tenses, discourse type and so forth—before deciding *when* an event is to be conceived of as occurring.”¹⁴

⁹ McKay, e.g., has advocated a very similar position (“The Use of the Ancient Greek Perfect down to the Second Century A.D.,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 12 [1965]: 1–21 [see esp. 2, 4–5]; *Syntax of the Verb*, 39; “Repeated Action, the Potential and Reality in Ancient Greek,” *Antichthon* 15 [1981]: 46; “Aspectual Usage in Timeless Contexts in Ancient Greek,” in *In the Footsteps of Raphael Kühner*, ed. A. Rijksbaron, 193; and “Syntax in Exegesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 [1972]: 45, 57). D. Schmidt refers to Porter's temporal thesis as “the most distinctive feature” of his work (“Verbal Aspect in Greek,” *BGLL*, 70).

¹⁰ Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, BLG, vol. 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 25–6 and PVA, 81–2. These contextual features are discussed extensively in *TDM*.

¹¹ PVA, 82, referring to Lyons' statement that “it is important to distinguish between the tenselessness of sentences and the tenselessness of propositions” (*Semantics*, 2 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 2:679).

¹² A linguistic form such as “present tense” can function to indicate a variety of temporal perspectives. This assumes that there is not an invariant, isomorphic link between verbal morphology and time reference (cf. D. Carson, “Introduction,” 18, and J. Hewson and V. Bubenik, *Tense and Aspect in Indo-European Languages: Theory, Typology, Diachrony*. Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, series 4: Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, vol. 145 [Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997], 1–2).

¹³ Comrie refers to “the distinction between a context-independent meaning and interpretation fostered by specific contexts” (*Tense*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 19). This contextual meaning is often referred to as implicature.

¹⁴ Porter, *Idioms*, 26. This summary of the exegete's task points to the importance of the present study, especially in light of the fact that the various contextual factors pertaining to temporal deixis have not been adequately examined in the context of NT studies and linguistics. The best discussion available is G. Lovik's dissertation, “Expressing Time in the Gospels” (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1973), but the bulk of his work focuses on the meanings of words related to time (*αἰών*, *ἔτος*, etc.); he does not address the relationship between verb forms and time, nor is attention given to verbal aspect, pragmatics, or temporal implicature. He does include a grammatical section with helpful discussions of the infinitive, conjunctions, and adverbs related to time; discussion of the temporal participle is less complete.

Objections to Porter's Theory

Given the significance of Porter's theory, it is somewhat surprising that there have not been more numerous and more extensive interactions with it. Only a handful of scholars have published substantive responses, and only one of them has focused on the temporal question to any extent. The primary purpose of this paper is to summarize some of the major objections that have been raised regarding Porter's contention that the verb does not grammaticalize time and provide a response to those objections. The outline follows Wallace's discussion¹⁵ and incorporates the comments of others as relevant.

Methodology

Porter is frequently charged with basing his theory on exceptions rather than on normative usage. This is a methodological objection, but one that has not yet been pressed with any rigor. Fanning suggests that Porter's methodology is too simplistic—that his contrastive pairs need to be examined more carefully. Additional study is certainly not objectionable, but this does not challenge the method of contrastive substitution at all; indeed, Fanning himself uses a variation of it. The issue becomes one of how the method is used. Does it merely isolate a few highly selective anomalies, or does it point out more widespread issues? Fanning suggests that Porter's "examples are exceptional and ... hard cases make bad law."¹⁶ If Porter's system were built on such instances as gnomic aorists and historic presents (as Fanning charges), then the argument would have some weight. But the argument is more extensive and more rigorous than that. Porter does not simply cite counter examples and assume his case proven,¹⁷ but systematically demonstrates that in a wide variety of contexts there are numerous examples of form alteration and equivalent temporal reference using divergent forms.

Mateos is also critical of Porter's temporal thesis at this point because it is a "solución extrema" based on a desire to present a theory without exceptions. The temporal variations evident are exceptions due to contextual factors, says Mateos, not to the inherent atemporal nature of the verb.¹⁸ It is agreed that contextual factors determine temporal reference, but Porter's point is well taken: there are simply too many anomalies to be handled by appeal to exceptions.¹⁹

¹⁵ D. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 504–12 [hereafter *GGBB*].

¹⁶ B. Fanning, "Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek," in *BGLL*, 80:58. The same objection is made by Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect," 72; Silva, "Response," 78–9; and *GGBB*, 506–7.

¹⁷ This is what C. R. Smith did in his article on the aorist: "Errant Aorist Interpreters," *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (1981): 205–26. See the criticism of this by Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 70–3. Wallace's criticism of Porter on this same issue makes the same assumption as Fanning (*GGBB*, 506).

¹⁸ "El deseo de encontrar una hipótesis sin fisuras desemboca en una solución extrema, que no considera las complejidades del sistema de la lengua" (Mateos, *recensión de Biblical Language and Linguistics*, 222). Fanning also expresses impatience with "grand solutions worded in complicated linguistic jargon which claim to solve all problems" ("Approaches to Verbal Aspect," 47, echoing G. Caird; he applies these sentiments specifically to Porter's model on p. 62).

¹⁹ One of the purposes of my book (*TDM*) is to demonstrate this in Mark. A systematic examination of extended passages is more persuasive than examples that may appear to be cited on a selective basis with insufficient regard to context.

If temporal reference is part of the semantic value of the form, then it is not cancelable (even though pragmatic implicature may be canceled).²⁰ Proposing a semantic system that predicts numerous exceptions (instances in which the semantic meaning is canceled) results in a subjective approach that generates numerous exegetical ambiguities which cannot be resolved on a principled basis. Thus an approach which attempts to minimize semantic exceptions and which simplifies grammatical explanation (without sacrificing precision) is to be preferred. At the level of pragmatics, the disagreements are not as significant.²¹ It is at this level that work such as that done by Fanning and Mateos make their major contribution: what are the pragmatic factors that influence the meaning of the verbal complex? Porter's thesis regarding the lack of grammaticalized temporal reference in the verb relates primarily to the level of semantic definition. Distinguishing these two levels is a key to the discussion.²²

Augment

One of the most persistent criticisms of a timeless view of the Greek verb is that it ignores the force of the augment. It is asserted repeatedly that the augment is a clear marker of past time.²³ Despite this widespread assumption, it does not appear to have been formally argued. None of the grammars cited in the preceding note give any reason why this is so. It appears to be an assumption predicated on a temporal view of the verb. If so, then the argument is circular: the Greek verb expresses time because the augment is a past time marker; the augment is a past time marker because it is used on past time verbs.

When NT use is considered, it will be noted that there is less consistency than the textbook often implies. First, it may be noted that not all past-referring forms have an augment. This is true not only of such forms as the "historic present," but also of a number of aorist, imperfect,

²⁰ PVA, 104; cf. M. Olsen, "A Semantic and Pragmatic Model of Lexical and Grammatical Aspect," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1994 (reprint, Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics Series, New York: Garland Press, 1997) [citations from the dissertation], 22. Definitions may not be based on statistical probability (i.e., just because a form is used in a particular way more than 50% of the time it should not be concluded that this is the meaning of that form). On this point see Olsen, "Model," 37 (where she quotes from R. Jakobsen, *Zur Struktur des russischen Verbums*) and her well-turned paraphrase of Jakobsen: "we must take care not to make the statistical preference the grammatical requirement" (post on B-Greek, 29 Oct 1996, s.v. "Re: 'default' aorist": <<http://sunsite.unc.edu/bgreek/archives/96-08/1460.html>>).

²¹ This may in part explain why both Porter and Fanning reach similar exegetical conclusions. See D. Carson's comment in this regard ("Introduction," 22).

²² Carson emphasizes the importance of this distinction, pointing out that Porter needs to develop pragmatic factors to a greater extent (something that *TDM* attempts to do in one area) and that Fanning needs to develop the semantic/pragmatic distinction with greater rigor (Carson, "Introduction," 24–5).

²³ Schmidt is representative: "The heavy price to be paid for such a powerful theory is the complete disregard of the augment as morphologically significant" ("Verbal Aspect," 71)—as if rejecting a temporal value for the augment denied the augment any morphological significance! Likewise Mateos: "es difícil negar que el aumento, marca morfológica, no tenga nada que ver con una determinación temporal" (recensión de *Biblical Language and Linguistics*, 222). See also Silva, "Response," 77 n. 1; and *GGBB*, 509. This function of the augment has been consistently asserted by the grammars, e.g., G. Curtius, *The Greek Verb* (London: John Murray, 1883), 72–3; H. Dana and J. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 177–8; R. Funk, *A Beginning-Intermediate Grammar of Hellenistic Greek*, SBL Sources for Biblical Study, 3 vols., 2d ed. (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1973), 1:238; W. Goodwin, *Greek Grammar*, rev. C. Gulick (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1958), § 533; J. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* [hereafter MHT], 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908–76), 1:128–9, 3:59–60; ATR, 365; H. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. G. Messing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), § 428; and G. Thompson, *The Greek Language* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1960), 22; see also D. Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 78, 81–2.

and pluperfect forms.²⁴ The pluperfect is frequently not augmented in the NT (δεδώκει, Mark 14:44; πεποιήκεισαν, παραδεδώκεισαν, Mark 15:7, 10).²⁵ Imperfect (εὐκαίρουν, Mark 6:31) and aorist (ἄφεθῆ, Mark 13:2) forms are also at times not augmented.²⁶ Second, it is also significant that some non-past referring forms (including some non-indicative forms) *do* have an augment

²⁴ J. Brooks and C. Winbery, *A Morphology of New Testament Greek: A Review and Reference Grammar* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), 119–23; J. Moulton, *MHT*, 2:188–91; W. Mounce, *The Morphology of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 65–71. It may be that the omission of syllabic augment is more significant than the temporal augment in this regard since there is some degree of euphonic change involved with the temporal augments. It would probably be going too far, however, to exclude all data involving temporal augments in this regard, even if the syllabic forms are weighted more heavily.

A large number of examples from the papyri that are missing syllabic augment in aorist (and a few imperfect and pluperfect) forms are cited by B. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri* (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sciences, 1973), § 250. He comments that “in the case of the aorist, where its stem and endings determined the tense sufficiently, the augment was an inessential complication, and as such was often neglected” (§ 274). Likewise F. Gignac, who discusses the use or nonuse of the augment in the papyri, notes that the augment was largely a “superfluous morpheme” in the “past tenses” (“Morphological Phenomena in the Greek Papyri Significant for the Text and Language of the New Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 [1986]: 506–7; see also his *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, 2 vols. [Milan: Instituto Editoriale Cisalpino-La Goliardica, (1975–7)], vol. 2, *Morphology*, 224–5).

This phenomena in the papyri contrasts with that of the Attic prose inscriptions cited by L. Threutte, who comments that in contrast to frequent omission in metrical inscriptions, “the augment is virtually never omitted in Attic inscriptions in prose” (*The Grammar of Attic Inscriptions*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1980–96), 2:502. See also the discussion on B-Greek by D. Wilkins, 1 May 1997, s.v., “Re: Augment revisited (was: NUN+Verb.Aorist),” archived at <<http://sunsite.unc.edu/bgreek/archives/97-03/1066.html>>. As C. Conrad comments, however, “I would not disregard the evidence of inscriptions but I’m not sure that I would give them too much weight, particularly over against the evidence of papyri. I think that there’s a fundamental conservatism about the diction and usage of words that one chisels upon a stone that makes inscriptions a less significant piece of evidence for current practice than one might want to claim” (post on B-Greek, 2 May 1997, s.v., “Re: Augment revisited (was: NUN+Verb.Aorist),” archived at <<http://sunsite.unc.edu/bgreek/archives/97-05/msg00005.html>>). K. McKay also warns of the formalism and “officialese” that often characterizes the inscriptions (“The Use of the Ancient Greek Perfect,” 3). Hewson also suggests that the augment in the second aorist is redundant (and may therefore be omitted) since the aorist form is adequately indicated by the aorist (ablauted) stem (Hewson, *Tense*, 29–30).

²⁵ F. Blass notes that this is often true in Herodotus (*A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. A. Debrunner and R. Funk [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], § 66 [hereafter BDF]). Robertson says that it is more frequently not augmented than it is augmented (ATR, 366). He suggests that this “is true of the papyri and the late Greek generally.” Wallace challenges this statement (*GGBB*, 509 n. 38) as well as Porter’s statement that the pluperfect *occasionally* has the augment (*Idioms*, 42, emphasis added). Of the 85 canonical instances of the pluperfect, 64 do have an augment (thus Wallace is correct). It should be noted, however, that οἶδα makes up 33 of these instances; if that use is omitted, the proportion is more nearly even (31 forms with the augment, 21 without). The four references from Mark above account for more than half of the pluperfects in Mark (seven total; the remaining three are forms of οἶδα). Any of these figures suggest that there is a substantial and significant portion of pluperfects in the NT that do not have an augment. Many of those with omitted augment are syllabic augment (10 of the 21 instances), but these comprise all but one of the lexical forms used (7 of 8 total, counting compound forms together as a single lexical item). Words with syllabic augment omitted include γίνομαι (1 × without, 1 × with), δίδωμι (4 ×), θεμελιόω, κρίνω, μένω, ποιέω, and πιστεύω (1 × each); temporal augments are omitted only from forms of ἔρχομαι (11 ×). (Not included as an omitted-augment form is εἴωθα [2 ×] since ε + εἰ = εἰ; i.e., the augment is present in the diphthong.)

Contrary to what Wallace seems to imply in his critique of Porter’s view of the augment, however, it is not just the pluperfect forms that are significant (*GGBB*, 509). The information presented here (regarding forms other than the pluperfect that exhibit lack of augment in the “secondary” tenses and that have an augment in the “primary” tenses and in the oblique moods) suggests that the issue is much broader, even if the pluperfect is one of the more noticeable instances.

²⁶ Forms beginning with εϋ- can augment as εὐρίσκω > ἠϋρίσκον illustrates (Mark 14:55). Brooks and Winbery list a number of other examples of unaugmented secondary forms outside Mark (*Morphology*, 122).

(as is also true in the Hellenistic papyri).²⁷ The future form κατεάξω (> κατάγνυμι) in Matthew 12:20 contains an internal augment.²⁸ The subjunctive possess an augment in John 19:31 (κατεαγῶ > κατάγνυμι) and the infinitive has one in Luke 3:21 (ἀνεωχθῆναι > ἀνοίγω). It is true that some of the instances noted here do not occur frequently and in some cases might be treated as exceptions (the examples given are only representative, not exhaustive).²⁹ Nevertheless they serve to caution against dogmatic statements regarding the past reference of the augment.

If it were to be argued that the augment is usually (but not always) a past time marker, then it would be necessary to ask, “How does one know when it is or is not functioning in this way?” The only likely answer is, “from the context.” But that establishes the point at hand: it is ultimately the context that provides the temporal reference, not the form alone.

It is possible that McKay’s explanation is correct:

By the classical period [the augment] was simply a formal feature of the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect indicative. By the Hellenistic period it was so devoid of special significance that it ceased to be attached to the pluperfect, and in later centuries it disappeared altogether except when accented.³⁰

That the semantics and morphology of a language diverge is not exceptional.³¹ The augment in Greek may perform only a formal role in specifying which personal endings are to be used (secondary rather than primary) and also identifying a specific form as well as mood, not in and of itself, but as one morpheme that is incorporated in specific forms of the indicative.

²⁷ BDF, § 66; a number of imperative and participle forms with augment are cited from the papyri by Mandilaras, *Verb in the Papyri*, §§ 240, 272–3.

²⁸ This word also occurs in the aorist three times in John 19:31–3, always with the same augment as the future form above.

²⁹ One explanation views the augment as irrelevant when the aorist is not used of past time (D. Armstrong, “The Ancient Greek Aorist as the Aspect of Countable Action,” in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 14: *Tense and Aspect*, ed. P. Tedeschi and A. Zaenen, 1–12 [New York: Academic, 1981], 10). But perhaps this is backwards. Perhaps the augment is only a traditional morphological feature and is always irrelevant to time reference.

³⁰ K. McKay, *Greek Grammar*, 223. In one of his earliest articles he had speculated that the augment was originally “an adverb of remoteness, signifying either past time or reduced actuality, as required” (“Ancient Greek Perfect,” 19 n. 22). The idea was apparently abandoned as it does not reappear in his later writings. That the augment was already only a formal feature by classical times is substantiated by A. Platt, “The Augment in Homer,” *Journal of Philology* 19 (1891): 211–37, who argues strongly against any notion of the augment being a marker of past time. J. Drewitt also rejects past time reference as the meaning of the augment in Homeric times (“The Augment in Homer,” *Classical Quarterly* 6 [1912]: 44–59, 104–20). Evidence from Homer is offset somewhat due to the metrical requirements and allowances of the poetic genre involved. The more significant factors, however, are neither morphological (whether instances of morphological irregularity or regularity) nor diachronic, but the pragmatic use of many imperfect and (especially) aorist forms in non-past contexts as well as “non-present” uses of present forms (see previous section). This is McKay’s point when he says that “the common assumption that [the augment] signifies pastness seems to be contrary to the linguistic facts observable in the extant texts” (“Aspectual Usage in Timeless Contexts,” 193).

³¹ Olsen, “Model,” 308 n. 57. She suggests the perfect in Southern German as an example. The perfect form is synonymous with the simple past and no longer carries perfect meaning, despite the persistence of the perfect morphology.

Redundancy of Tenses

If a “tenseless” theory such as Porter’s is accepted, argues Wallace, then the present and imperfect forms become redundant, as do the perfect and pluperfect forms.³² He suggests that since the imperfect occurs only in the indicative, and since only the indicative forms express time, and since the paired indicative forms each carry the same aspect values, then the distinction between them must be a temporal distinction. The present is thus imperfective aspect, present time, and the imperfect is imperfective aspect, past time. This argument is supported by an appeal to the historical present, which Wallace argues has zero aspectual value and is thus equivalent to the imperfect, the present being used in past contexts for vividness, the time reference being retained rhetorically.³³

In response to the argument based on the historical present, it may be noted that this argument is only valid if time is the sole linguistic way to make something vivid. Porter contends that the historical present retains its aspectual value of imperfectivity.³⁴ It may be that the historical present does convey vividness. Porter suggests that this is so, but he bases that conclusion on the marked nature of the present form rather than on a “wrong” use of the time; that is, an aspectual basis rather than a temporal one. There may be other functions for this use as well.³⁵

The objection that a progressive aspect is not evident in the context, and thus that “the historical present has suppressed its aspect,”³⁶ confuses aspect with lexis or *Aktionsart*. There may not be any contextual indication of the actual progress of the action intended—but that is not the meaning of imperfective aspect (which describes the author’s view of the situation).³⁷

The appeal to the non-occurrence of the imperfect outside the indicative is also intelligible in terms of aspect. As the less heavily marked form, the imperfect is distinguished from the present on the basis of remoteness according to Porter.³⁸ This is a broader concept than past time, although it may (and often does) include remote time as part of its range of use. The remoteness may also be remote from a logical or narrative perspective. That is, events not on the main storyline (which is usually carried by the aorist) but important to the author in communicating his message may be included using the imperfect. The present, by contrast, is more heavily marked and is used for more significant narrative elements for which the speaker wishes to employ imperfective aspect. The function of this remoteness may account for the nonuse of the imperfect outside the indicative mood. Since the oblique moods inherently carry a much greater

³² *GGBB*, 507–9. Wallace, following Fanning, uses the terminology internal/external for aspect; these terms have been transposed to the perfective/imperfective terminology for consistency. For the sake of brevity this section will focus primarily on the present and imperfect forms. The perfect and pluperfect relationships are similar and the arguments given above apply there also.

³³ Wallace also includes under this heading another argument regarding the use of aorist and present forms in certain contexts. It does not relate, however, to redundancy of forms, and so is considered separately here.

³⁴ “Since the tense-forms in Greek are essentially aspectually based (and nontemporal), the fact that what is called a Present tense appears in past-referring contexts inherently poses no grammatical problems, merely the potentially misleading problems of nomenclature” (*PVA*, 195).

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 196 for vividness. The historical present is considered in greater detail in *TDM*, ch. 4.

³⁶ *GGBB*, 508 n. 36.

³⁷ See *PVA*, 195–8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 207–8.

degree of remoteness, the use of an additional remote element may have been considered unnecessary. The subjunctive, for example, is often described in terms of potentiality or projection—both remote ideas in comparison with the assertion found in the indicative mood.³⁹

Unexpected Usage

Wallace poses two hypothetical problems for a “tenseless” system. He suggests that “if the aorist indicative is not linked to time, we should expect to see the aorist indicative regularly used for an instantaneous present event.... Further, we would not expect to see an instantaneous present (in which the aspect is entirely suppressed and the present time element is all that remains).”⁴⁰

The two examples of instantaneous presents that Wallace cites in his argument (Matt. 13:19; John 10:29) both depend on lexis (ἀρπάζω, snatch), not form, for the instantaneous element.⁴¹ The aorist indicative can and often does refer to instantaneous events, but the normal use of the aorist, particularly as the tense which usually carries the storyline in narrative, is to describe past events from the perspective of the narrator. Wallace gives no explicit reason why he expects to find aorist forms regularly used for instantaneous present events. Presumably it is because he considers it logical for a perfective form to be used for such events. But few situations call for reference to “instantaneous” events in any case. The most common examples are perhaps performative-type statements,⁴² and these are usually in the present. By their nature, however, true performatives would normally be considered marked statements, so the unmarked aorist would not be expected.⁴³ The most frequent phrase that fits the broader category is the

³⁹ The concept of remoteness is discussed further in *TDM*, ch. 4 in connection with the examination of Mark’s use of the imperfect form.

⁴⁰ *GGBB*, 509. Many of Wallace’s verb categories in his grammar are only appropriate at the level of *Aktionsart*, and many times the entire context of the verbal web is needed. This results in his characteristic tendency to create many new categories. If classification is based on the semantics of the form, then far fewer categories are needed. If, instead, pragmatic, functional categories are employed, then there is potentially no limit to the number of categories that are possible—but the result more closely resembles a commentary than a grammar. This is not illegitimate (and his subtitle suggests that this is his real goal: *An Exegetical Syntax of the NT*), but it may mislead students who conclude that this is grammar. A clearer distinction between form and function is needed. It is instructive to contrast Wallace’s *Grammar* with Porter’s *Idioms* in this regard.

⁴¹ *GGBB*, 509 (he lists other examples of the instantaneous present in his discussion of that category, but does not repeat these forms there [ibid., 517–8]). Matt. 13:19, παντὸς ἀκούοντος τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας καὶ μὴ συνιέντος ἔρχεται ὁ πονηρὸς καὶ ἀρπάζει τὸ ἐσπαρμένον ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ (when anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart); John 10:29, οὐδεὶς δύναται ἀρπάζειν ἐκ τῆς χειρὸς τοῦ πατρὸς (no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand). Note that these examples do not express present time, but are temporally unrestricted. The second example is also an infinitive (which Wallace says elsewhere has no time reference [ibid., 498]), not an indicative form.

⁴² The classic discussion of performatives is found in J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. Urmson and M. Sbisà. 2d ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); his definition of *performative* is found on 5–6.

⁴³ *FVA*, 187–90; the only aorist in the NT that may fit this category is Luke 16:4, and it is debatable if this is a true performative or if it should be classed as a dramatic aorist (thus *FVA*, 276). For a discussion of performatives using the perfective form in Hebrew, see B. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), § 30.5.1d.

standardized formula λέγω ὑμῖν (and variations of it) which occurs about 180 times in the Gospels.⁴⁴

If there is a discourse-level explanation for this pattern, then there is no particular significance to the comparatively infrequent use of the aorist in this way. Texts that do include aorist forms in references similar to those that Wallace classes as instantaneous present forms include John 3:7, μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι· δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν (*I say to you*);⁴⁵ and Luke 16:4, ἔγνω τί ποιήσω (*I know what I will do*). The instantaneous present element is particularly noticeable in Luke 16:4. The statement does not relate to a past situation at all (even rhetorically), but reflects the man's statement at the moment he realizes the appropriate course of action—a “flash of inspiration” is pictured.⁴⁶

Complexity

Occam's razor has been invoked against a timeless view of the Greek verb. Wallace argues that the simpler of two theories is to be preferred when two theories equally explain the data. The views of McKay and Porter are said to be too complex and too subtle, containing too many problems and inconsistencies to meet Occam's criteria.⁴⁷

The razor, however, cuts both ways. If it invalidates the proposals of McKay and Porter, it would doubly invalidate Fanning's approach (which is the model that Wallace follows most closely) with the complex web of relationships between aspect and procedural character. Although in his grammar Wallace does not implement Fanning's Vendlerian categories of procedural character, the theoretical underpinnings are perhaps more complex than Porter's. Despite the technicality of Porter's *Verbal Aspect*, the system at the level of exegesis is probably cleaner and more straightforward than the opposing system of aspect proposed by Fanning.⁴⁸

Wallace raises particular objections to McKay's summary of the exegetical factors that are involved in understanding a text. McKay writes:

Ultimately we need to weigh up the evidence of the whole context, verb forms, time markers, sentence structure, the nature of the paragraph, the chapter, even the book, and beyond that the personal, social, political and other assumptions which the writer brought to the task. It is obvious that we sometimes lack crucial information, and likely that some of our reconstructions are not

⁴⁴ An Accordance search of the Gospels for {"λεγω" <FOLLOWED BY> <WITHIN 2 Words> [PRONOUN dative]} within the clause results in 183 hits and includes variations such as: [ἐγὼ δὲ/ἡμῖν] λέγω δὲ/γὰρ ὑμῖν/σοί.

⁴⁵ This might be taken as a past reference to the statement recorded earlier in 3:3, but the form of the statement is different (ἐάν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν—third person in contrast to the second person address in v. 7) and is probably better understood as a reference to what Jesus was speaking at that moment. The use of the aorist form in v. 7 is parallel with the present form used in v. 3 (ἡμῖν ἡμῖν λέγω σοι) which Wallace cites as an example of an instantaneous present (GGBB, 518).

⁴⁶ Since this form occurs in a parable and is therefore best classed as temporally unrestricted, the force of this example is somewhat diminished. Since Wallace probably would not classify it as temporally unrestricted, however, the explanation suggested in the text above retains its force in terms of his argument.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 510.

⁴⁸ A related issue that carries greater weight (though it does not relate to the validity of the theory) is the criticism by Silva that both Porter and Fanning need to be more specific regarding how their respective theories relate to exegesis. He concludes that “exegetes and pastors are well advised to say as little as possible about aspect” (“Response,” 82; cf. his comments on 78–9 and his *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 73–9).

accurate, so we need to be sensitive and careful.... [W]e need to achieve an awareness of the whole work.⁴⁹

Wallace's specific protest is that this approach is too complex, requiring "massive doses of context and preunderstanding" for the temporal reference to be understood correctly.⁵⁰ This objection is considerably overstated. McKay's statement is no different from the tone expressed by most good books on exegesis that rightly emphasize the magnitude of the interpretive task.⁵¹ Only if McKay were read in a very narrow way as saying that all these factors are necessary to determine if a particular statement is past, present, or future would the criticism have some credence. But McKay specifically phrases this in terms of "ultimately." And at that point, yes, the full scope that he describes is important for as complete an understanding of the text as possible.

Furthermore, to charge that a timeless view of the verb must result in ambiguity and temporal misunderstanding⁵² is to ignore the multitude of factors other than the form of the verb that serve to specify temporal reference. For a language to be as temporally incompetent as the objection suggests, the language would have to be nearly devoid of any temporal indicators. Greek, however, has a great many. The distinction between L- and M-tense is also relevant here. Wallace's objection appears to assume that the view of McKay and Porter relates to M-tense, whereas in reality their theory is that Greek does not grammaticalize L-tense.⁵³

Root Fallacy

One of the more significant arguments raised against an aspectual approach (and by implication against a timeless view of the verb) is Silva's protest against the root fallacy. He suggests that the biblical theology movement's illegitimate infatuation with root meanings of words and the historical approach to the cases, both popular earlier in this century, ought to caution against a similar methodological error in regard to the verb.⁵⁴ "If we recognize that semantic information

⁴⁹ K. McKay, "Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek," *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992): 227–8.

⁵⁰ *GGBB*, 510.

⁵¹ See for example, S. McKnight, *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) especially the editor's preface, 9–13; also G. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); and Silva, *Exegetical Method*. The perceptive essay by D. Carson is also pertinent: "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. J. Woodbridge and T. McComiskey, 39–76 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

⁵² *GGBB*, 510, particularly n. 43.

⁵³ These last two points are examined in detail in *TDM*, 31–2. Levinson's M-tense refers to theoretical, semantic, metalinguistic tense that has a strictly temporal meaning. This is the past, present, future reference and is a deictic category expressed by a wide range of deictic indicators, including (in some languages) verb forms (i.e., tenses). On the other hand, there are the verbal inflections that have traditionally been called tenses—the language tense (L-tense). In any given language, M-tense may be expressed by the same forms that are used to express L-tense or there may be formal differences between them (S. Levinson, *Pragmatics*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 77–8).

⁵⁴ Regarding the lexical root fallacy, see the classic volume by J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) as well as Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 27–64; P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, 106–25; Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, 86–97; and idem, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 17–51. Regarding the historical approach to the cases as evidenced, e.g., in *ATR*, 446–543, see J. Louw, "Linguistic Theory and the Greek Case System," *Acta Classica* 9 (1966): 73–88; E. Nida, *Linguistic Interludes* (Glendale, Calif.: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1947), 78–9; Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, 102–11; and Porter, *Idioms*, 80–3.

conveyed by the cases can be strikingly diverse, can we expect to come up with a definition of verbal aspect that is invariant or unexceptionable?"⁵⁵

This is a significant caution, though not an insoluble problem. Louw has discussed the matter carefully in relation to the cases and the parallel situation of the verb forms may be handled in the same fashion. Louw begins by observing that traditional discussions of the cases endeavored to find either the basic meaning of the case form (*Grundbedeutung der Kasusformen*) or the range of uses (*Gebrauchsumfang*). This was done diachronically by examining the various contextual uses and assuming that the most common use of the case was the basic meaning of that case. The disagreements regarding this basic meaning arose due to this attempt to use diachronic data to explain synchronic facts. By contrast, structural linguistics, although employing the terminology "fundamental meaning" in relation to the cases, seeks something quite different. The goal here is to define the *potential* of the case: "defining the essence of a case in terms of a principle or a conception within the range of which the various usages ... can be explained.... This 'essence of a case' is not a meaning of the case, but its *semantic function in the sentence*." The goal is to define the semantics of the case, not its syntactic or contextual function (i.e., pragmatics). Most grammars, however, offer syntactic descriptions when defining each case; that is, they make pragmatic statements where a semantic one is needed.⁵⁶

In grammar, the root fallacy is a matter of pragmatic not semantic definition. As the cases may legitimately have a semantic value despite diverse pragmatic functions, so the verb forms may be defined in similar fashion.⁵⁷ The semantic value of the aorist form is that of perfective aspect; of present and imperfect forms, imperfective; and of perfect and pluperfect, stative. This aspect value is the semantic potential which the verb form contributes to the statement. The pragmatic function of these forms adds temporal implicatures and *Aktionsart* values based on lexis and context. These additional factors explain why no "root meaning" is possible at this syntactic level. This accounts for the "exceptions" which are necessary in traditional approaches to the verb. Since the verb forms were often defined in terms of temporal and syntactic function, no consistency of meaning was possible. Values were assigned on the basis of the most common use, necessitating exceptions to explain those that did not conform to the definition. A semantic definition based on verbal aspect avoids this problem.

Cancelability

In many ways Olsen's work is compatible with Porter's theory. She focuses on lexical aspect (essentially *Aktionsart*) more than grammatical aspect. As a result she interacts more extensively with Fanning than Porter. Her approach to the temporal reference of the verb is very similar to Porter's, especially in regard to the present and aorist forms. She argues that neither of these forms grammaticalize time, expressing only aspect. This is demonstrated on the basis of cancelability, a principle that Porter also accepts.⁵⁸ A key difference, however, relates to the other

⁵⁵ Silva, "Response," 79. Wallace echoes the same sentiment (*GGBB*, 510–2).

⁵⁶ J. Louw, "Linguistic Theory," 73–88, the quote is from p. 76; the German terminology is from Brugmann's *Griechische Grammatik*, § 436.

⁵⁷ Porter explains his approach in similar fashion: "I am primarily concerned with defining the essential semantic component(s) of tense usage in Greek, i.e. use of the tense forms at the level of code or network which allows various pragmatic manifestations at the level of text" (*PVA*, 82).

⁵⁸ *PVA*, 104; cf. Olsen, "Model," 22.

forms (imperfect, perfect, pluperfect, and future), which Olsen contends *do* encode temporal reference: “Porter’s claim that they lack temporal reference comes from an overly simplified tense model.”⁵⁹

In response to Olsen’s argument, this section will examine the imperfect and perfect forms. An example of either form that clearly expresses a time reference other than what Olsen gives (past for imperfect, present for the perfect) will, on the basis of cancelability, disprove the theory. This is true because she argues that the past reference of the imperfect, for example, *cannot* be canceled. A counter-example would demonstrate that temporal reference can be determined pragmatically rather than semantically in these forms just as they are in the present and aorist. That is, the semantic meaning which Olsen proposes can be canceled. If so, this would suggest that the true semantic meaning of the imperfect and perfect is not to be equated with temporal reference, but with aspect. Temporal values are pragmatic for the imperfect and perfect just as they are for the aorist and present.⁶⁰

There are not many examples of nonpast referring imperfect forms, but there are some that appear to be legitimate.⁶¹ The imperfect in Galatians 4:20, ἤθελον δὲ παρεῖναι πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἄρτι, is probably best understood as expressing primarily present time: “I wish I could be with you now.” This analysis can be supported by the deictic indicator ἄρτι (now),⁶² as well as the thrust of the context. Paul is not describing a previous desire (though likely this had been his desire earlier as well), nor a possible desire, but a present one, as πάλιν in v. 19 indicates.⁶³ Just as Paul had previously labored for them (implied by πάλιν ὠδίνω), he emphasizes his present labor. Likewise a previous desire is not the point of Paul’s statement here; the thrust is focused on the desire that Paul senses as he writes this letter. Attempts to introduce a potential idea here seem to confuse the potential (but improbable) situation of Paul being with the Galatians with his wish that he could do so.⁶⁴ That is, any potentiality should be focused on παρεῖναι, not on ἤθελον.

Likewise in Acts 25:22, ἐβουλόμην καὶ αὐτὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀκοῦσαι, the idea is: “I would like to hear this man myself.” A statement in this context that Agrippa at one time would have liked to have heard Paul makes little sense—the statement expresses to Festus a request to hear Paul. The remote imperfect form may be used instead of the present in order to express a “reticent

⁵⁹ Olsen, “Model,” 255. Porter would not disagree with Olsen regarding the future form which he views as an anomaly in the verb system of Greek that is not fully aspectual, expressing expectation (see PVA, 403–39).

⁶⁰ This section is longer than previous ones due to the importance of Olsen’s argument. Olsen not only objects to Porter’s view, but also proposes an alternate theory that requires a more lengthy response.

⁶¹ In addition to Gal. 4:20 and Acts 25:22 (discussed in the text above), see also Rom. 9:3 and 2 Cor. 11:1. Porter classes the use of the imperfect form ἔπρεπεν in Heb. 7:26 as timeless (“The Date of the Composition of Hebrews and Use of the Present Tense-Form,” in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. S. Porter, P. Joyce, and D. Orton [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 308).

⁶² The adverb ἄρτι modifies παρεῖναι πρὸς ὑμᾶς, not ἤθελον, but the present force of the total statement still remains. J. Mateos and J. Pelaez note that “con formas verbales de presente, ἄρτι sitúa el hecho en el presente del hablante (sema: simultaneidad)” (“El Adverbio ἄρτι en el Nuevo Testamento,” *Filología Neotestamentaria* 8 [1995]: 90).

⁶³ Contra E. Burton: “In all these cases, however, what is strictly stated in the Greek is merely the past existence of a state of desire; the context alone implies what the present state of mind is” (*Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898], § 33). It would seem more accurate to say that the context makes the present desire most obvious with only possible implications regarding any past desire.

⁶⁴ E.g., R. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41. (Dallas: Word, 1990), 196.

curiosity.”⁶⁵ Olsen’s explanation that “Agrippa had desired to hear Paul and implicates that the desire continues to the present”⁶⁶ shifts the focus from his statement (which functions as a request) to his previous desire. Although possible, it does not seem as likely in this context.

Robertson, who cites both of these examples, classes such uses as potential imperfects and suggests that they should be translated “I was just on the point of wishing.”⁶⁷ But this seems to miss the point of the statement altogether. In both instances the wish is actual and would be inappropriate to the context if only incipient or hypothetical. It is significant, however, that Robertson recognizes these as nonpast uses of the imperfect.⁶⁸ Fanning’s treatment is very similar to Robertson’s. He lists these two texts as examples of the desiderative imperfect (a subclass of conative) and says that with verbs of desiring or wishing the imperfect may have the “sense of ‘to be on the verge of wanting’, ‘to contemplate the desire, but fail to bring oneself actually to the point of wishing’.” He explains the time reference rhetorically: “a present situation is portrayed as though past, in order to make it more *remote* and thus reduce the force of the statement” although the time is actually present.⁶⁹ It is not clear why a temporal rhetorical shift is necessary to explain these uses; the remoteness is adequately explained by the imperfect itself and the time is better understood in these contexts as present.

A third example is found in Matthew 23:23 where a temporally unrestricted reference (perhaps more specific, omnitemporal use) is probably in view: ἀποδεκατοῦτε τὸ ἡδύσσιμον καὶ τὸ ἄνηθον καὶ τὸ κύμινον καὶ ἀφήκατε τὰ βαρύτερα τοῦ νόμου, τὴν κρίσιν καὶ τὸ ἔλεος καὶ τὴν πίστιν· ταῦτα [δὲ] ἔδει ποιῆσαι κακεῖνα μὴ ἀφιέναι (*it is necessary* to do these things). Jesus describes a standing obligation by use of the imperfect—the perpetual relevance makes better sense of this interchange than merely reflecting a past obligation, even if continued relevance is suggested.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ This is Porter’s suggestion, PVA, 210. Similarly, J. Alexander describes the imperfect here as referring to “an actual and present wish” which expresses a courteous request (*A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Geneva Series Commentary [1857; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963], 401).

⁶⁶ Olsen, “Model,” 291.

⁶⁷ ATR, 886.

⁶⁸ Despite an unsatisfactory explanation, it is significant that Robertson did see the problem with making this a past time reference. At another place Robertson also cites this text and says that “Paul is speaking of present time” (ATR, 919). Here he is discussing the indicative mood and proposes that sometimes the imperfect indicative is used as a “polite idiom” (ibid.). L. Morris also notes the present desire (*Galatians: Paul’s Charter of Christian Freedom* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 142).

⁶⁹ FVA, 251. Wallace, likewise, classes these two examples as voluntative imperfects (a subclass of his conative imperfect), and explains that the action so described was almost attempted, but was not carried out. “Often,” he says, “the notion conveyed is that the action was contemplated more than once.” The same objections applies to this suggestion as to Robertson’s. It is interesting, though, that Wallace lists this as portraying present time: “what is portrayed with this usage frequently is *present* time in which the action is entirely unrealized in the present. The imperfect seems to be used to indicate the unreal present time” (GGBB, 551–2). This confuses the unfulfilled realization of the content of the wish with the reality of the desire itself. The imperfect in this text does not indicate “unreal present time,” but a very real present desire at the time of the speaker. The element that is unrealized is expressed by the infinitive in both of these examples.

⁷⁰ Continued relevance is Olsen’s explanation (“Method,” 290). It seems strained, however, to understand these statements as meaning “it was necessary” and “I was desiring” and to limit to a pragmatic implicature from the context the notions “it is still necessary” and “I am still desiring.” Other relevant texts (discussed in TDM, 192–3 n. 109) include Eph. 5:4 (ἀνῆκεν); Col. 3:18 (ἀνῆκεν); Acts 22:22 (καθῆκεν); Acts 1:16 (ἔδει); Luke 15:32, (ἔδει); and Acts 24:19.

These examples point to the significance of factors beyond the verb form to determine temporal reference. These include explicit deictic indicators, lexis, and the overall contextual setting. In all three instances cited, the choice of an imperfect form is both unusual and therefore probably significant since the three words involved almost always appear in the present form.⁷¹

The perfect form functions in a similar way. There are not many significant differences between Olsen and Porter at this point, despite divergent terminology. Their exegetical conclusions would frequently come to the same or similar end. Porter classes the perfect form as grammaticalizing stative aspect with no inherent time value.⁷² Olsen employs perfective aspect (“a situation has reached its coda by the RT”), but contends that the perfect grammaticalizes present relevance.⁷³ Although linguists may disagree, it would seem that stative aspect is essentially the same as this: present relevance of a situation (state) based on the implication of a completed event. The only minor differences are that Porter’s stative aspect only implies the preceding event rather than explicitly stating that an event has reached its coda, and second, Porter allows for the perfect to refer to future states.

Two examples will suffice to demonstrate reference to a past state of affairs, the present reference of which is irrelevant.⁷⁴ John 6:32, οὐ Μωϋσῆς **δέδωκεν** ὑμῖν τὸν ἄρτον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, ἀλλ’ ὁ πατήρ μου δίδωσιν ὑμῖν τὸν ἄρτον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τὸν ἀληθινόν (Moses *did* not *give* you the bread). Here personal deixis (“Moses”) precludes a present reference. The reference is simply to a past historical event. Galatians 3:18, τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ δι’ ἐπαγγελίας **κεχώρισται** ὁ θεός (God *gave* [the inheritance] to Abraham). Personal deixis (“Abraham”) is also relevant here in indicating past reference. In both examples the state is past. The statements about those states may still have present relevance (indeed, they would not have been mentioned if they didn’t!⁷⁵), but the state expressed by the perfect form has long since passed. Person deixis here certainly appears to be adequate to cancel any supposed present reference.

The best example of a perfect with future reference (an infrequent use to be sure) is James 5:1–3.

Ἄγε νῦν οἱ πλούσιοι, κλαύσατε ὀλολύζοντες ἐπὶ ταῖς ταλαιπωρίαις ὑμῶν ταῖς ἐπερχομέναις. ὁ πλοῦτος ὑμῶν **σέσηπεν** καὶ τὰ ἱμάτια ὑμῶν σητόβρωτα **γέγονεν**, ὁ χρυσὸς ὑμῶν καὶ ὁ ἄργυρος **κατίωται** καὶ ὁ ἰὸς αὐτῶν εἰς μαρτύριον ὑμῖν ἔσται καὶ φάγεται τὰς σάρκας ὑμῶν ὡς πῦρ.

⁷¹ For θέλω, present = 159 ×, imperfect, 23 ×, aorist, 26 ×, βούλομαι, present 27 ×, imperfect, 6 ×, aorist, 4 ×; δεῖ, present, 85 ×, imperfect, 16 ×. See the comments in this regard in S. Baugh, “Twelve Theses on Greek Verbal Aspect” (post on B-Greek, 27 March 1997, s.v., “RE: Aspect Theses,” archived at <<http://sunsite.unc.edu/bgreek/archives/97-03/0484.html>>) and Silva, *Exegetical Method*, 78.

⁷² PVA, 245, defended and elaborated on 245–90.

⁷³ Olsen, “Method,” 296–9. There are some similarities of this with the traditional definition that explains the perfect as a combination of aorist and present (e.g., BDF, § 340). Olsen’s explanation, however, is nuanced with considerably greater care and avoids some of the objections that Porter raises (PVA, 251–9). Fanning defines the perfect as a complex verbal category that includes external (i.e., perfective) aspect, stative *Aktionsart*, and a dual time reference (anterior action, present results) (FVA, 290, see also 103–20).

⁷⁴ Porter cites many more examples: more than 60 representative texts are listed from fifteen NT books (and some texts have multiple perfect forms with past reference) (PVA, 260–5). Even if one takes exception with some of these examples, many of them are still valid.

⁷⁵ Olsen acknowledges this and suggests that the result is that her statement regarding present relevance is therefore unfalsifiable: “everything uttered is relevant at the ST” (“Model,” 298, referring to Grice’s maxim of relevance). If present relevance is so broad and vague, one wonders if it has sufficient value to provide a cogent explanation of the perfect form.

ἐθησαυρίσατε ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις (your riches *will rust* and your garments *will become* moth-eaten, your gold and silver *will rust*).

Although English translations have traditionally translated these perfects as having past reference (have rusted, have become moth-eaten), this does not do justice to the flow of the argument in the context. The miseries of v. 1 are not present, but future (they are coming, not here). The opulent lifestyle of greed and persecution of the poor is still in force. James warns the rich of the consequences of this if they continue; he is not interpreting present calamity as a sign of God's judgment. The future forms that follow continue the same time reference.⁷⁶

Two additional references are worth noting. John 17:22, κἀγὼ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωκάς μοι **δέδωκα** αὐτοῖς (*I will give*). The context of the Upper Room implicates future reference here. The disciples did not then possess this glory; it is a promise of a future boon.⁷⁷ A timeless reference is found in John 1:18, θεὸν οὐδεὶς **ἑώρακεν** πώποτε (no one ever *sees* God). The point is not that none have done so in the past (but may do so in the future). This is a categorical denial that the Father is visible to human eyes.⁷⁸

If these instances are legitimate examples of past, future, and timeless reference using the perfect form, then it appears that a postulated present time may be canceled. Porter's explanation would then be a more consistent approach to the perfect than Olsen's.

Conclusion

Of the objections that have been raised against Porter's tenseless view of the Greek verb, none is unanswerable. Many of these arguments do not pose major obstacles to the theory. Even for the more substantive objections (the augment, the root fallacy, and cancelability), there are adequate responses available.

⁷⁶ J. Adamson says that these "perfect tenses are of prophetic anticipation rather than 'historical record'" (*The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 185); cf. P. Davids, "prophetic anticipation" (*The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 175) and J. Mayor, "prophetic perfect" (*The Epistle of St. James*, 3d ed. [(London): Macmillan, 1913; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977], 154). Porter suggests that the reference to the last days in v. 3 "implicates future reference" (PVA, 267), but this ignores the fact that the NT views the last days as having already begun (Heb. 1:2).

⁷⁷ Carson refers to this statement as proleptic (*The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 569). Fanning lists a number of other texts which display what he calls a proleptic perfect (FVA, 304–5). These are statements which include or imply a conditional element; the perfect in the "apodosis" specifies the future state that will exist if and when the condition is fulfilled (John 20:23; Rom. 13:8; 14:23; Jas. 2:10; and 1 John 2:5).

⁷⁸ See also 1 John 4:12, θεὸν οὐδεὶς πώποτε τεθέαται, which would gloss the same way. The traditional English translation, "no one has ever seen God," may be preferable for stylistic reasons, but that should not determine the meaning of the statement. This takes πώποτε as a broader reference than simply past time (Burton seems to limit it to past time in this text [*Moods and Tenses*, § 88]); that it can also refer to the future may be seen in John 6:35 (W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3d ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 900).