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THE VARIETY AND VALUE OF THE GREEK PARTICIPLE

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I. INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPLES

The Greek participle is certainly one of the unique distinctives of the Greek language. They are commonly called "verbal adjectives." The participle, as a verb form, is versatile, and this is clearly seen in the NT. The ingredients that compose this versatility lie in the fact that a participle has a tense and a voice. It also consists of gender, number, and case, which is fully inflectional. Therefore, when one comes to a participle in the NT, one is faced with having to identify its verbal and adjectival properties.

Understanding the function of participles in the NT is crucial for those who wish to properly grasp the meaning of the original text. The wide variety of usage available to the participle makes it a challenging task for the NT interpreter. Obviously, form does not identify function, and with the broad spectrum of functions, specific texts can literally hinge on one's understanding of the participial function(s). It is this variety that really gives the participle its value.

II. VARIOUS USAGES OF THE PARTICIPLE

Since the participle is in a sense a "verbal adjective," it can be categorized roughly according to its verbal properties or adjectival properties. The participle can be used adjectivally or substantively. It can also be used verbally and adverbially. Examples of each of these abound in the NT text. Participles can be articular or anarthrous, and they can even take an auxiliary

verb.

ADJECTIVAL PARTICIPLES

Substantival Uses

The substantival use of the participle is often categorized under the adjectival heading. However, there are a number of instances in the NT where an adjectival participle functions just like a substantive. The substantival participle can function as a subject. This pattern is identified by an article modifying a participle, without a noun being present. In John's gospel, he is fond of using "ὁ πιστευων," which translates as "the believer." Mark 4:3 gives another example, "εξελθεν ὁ σπειρων σπειρει," "the sower went out to sow."

A substantival participle can also function as a predicate nominative. A predicate nominative is any noun or substantive which completes the meaning of a copulative verb. An example of this usage is in Jn. 6:63, "το πνευμα εστιν το ζωωτικον," "The Spirit is the One making life."

The substantival participle can also function as a direct object. A direct object is any noun or substantive in the proper oblique case which completes the meaning of a transitive verb. In Jn. 6:37 there is an example of this usage, "τον ερχομενον προς εμε ου μη ερπω εγω," "The one coming to Me, I will absolutely not throw out."

The indirect object and the object of a preposition are also among the functions of a substantival participle. Due to the gender, number, and case properties of the participles, it is

evident that in each instance, the participle would be in concord with its respective case. For example, a substantival participle functioning as an indirect object would take the dative case. A substantival participle used as the object of a preposition would be in the proper governing case that corresponds to the preposition.¹

Adjectival Uses

The interesting quality about an adjectival participle is that it can modify a noun just like an adjective, and yet it maintains its verbal properties. The adjectival participle is mainly expressed three ways. The first way is to have Article + Participle + Noun;² the second way is Article + Noun + Article + Participle;³ the third way is Noun + Article + Participle;⁴ In each case, the adjectival participle is attributive in nature, modifying the noun.

The first scheme, A P N, is illustrated in Jn. 6:57, "ὁ σὺν τῷ τῆς." The second scheme, A N A P, is illustrated in Rom. 3:5, "μὴ δίκαιος ὁ θεὸς ὁ ἐπιδικᾶν τὴν ἁγίαν." The third pattern, N A P, is usually used with proper names, and the adjectival participle attributes a quality or description to that noun. Lk.

¹It is recognized that cases do not actually "govern" prepositions, nor vice-versa, but rather prepositions express case relationships.

²Boyer, using Grammcord, claims this pattern occurs 101 times in the NT, see "The Classification of Participles," *Grace Theological Journal* 5.2 (1984) 163-179.

³Ibid. 276 times.

⁴Ibid.. 97 times.

22:1 serves as an example, "ἡ ἔοψιν τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἡ λεγόμενη Πόρξια."

ADVERBIAL PARTICIPLES

Verbal Uses

Now that the adjectival functions have been briefly examined, it is time to look at the adverbial uses. Like the adjectival category, the adverbial category contains both verbal and adverbial functions. It has been doubted whether or not an adverbial participle can actually serve as a finite verb. However, more grammarians are indicating that the participle can take this function.

It is possible for an adverbial participle to be used without an accompanying verb, and provide the verbal idea for the clause or sentence. Two examples are cited: 2 Cor. 13:3, "ἔπει δόκιμῶν συνεκδοκιμῶν τοῦ ἐν ἡμῶν λαλοῦντος Χριστοῦ," and 1 Cor. 15:57, "τῷ δε αὐτῷ Χριστῷ τῷ ἡμῶν το κίρκος" Both of these examples exhibit how the adverbial participle can serve as an independent verb, while maintaining its adjectival properties.²

Adverbial Uses

By far, the most common usage of the adverbial participle, and participles in general, is the participle as a verbal modifier.⁶

²The genitive absolute construction also contains a participle that stands as an independent verb. However, this usage will be dealt with under another section.

⁶Boyer's research shows that this general, adverbial use is employed 2881 times in the NT, GTS, 178.

The uniqueness of this adverbial usage is that while the participle is dependent upon the main verb, it also maintains its relation to the subject of the sentence.

There are about ten different ways in which an adverbial participle can be understood. Although it is not necessary to list all the possibilities,⁷ it is necessary to state two main issues with adverbial participles, and give an example of their pertinence. The first item of necessity is the issue of time. Although this is a subject that requires much more attention, it is appropriate to note that the participle conveys relative time. In other words, the time reference of the participle cannot be established simply on the tense identified by its form. The second item of necessity relates to determining the adverbial significance of the participle. Although there may be clues as to the participle's function, context must determine participial function.

A key example of the importance of the participle, and properly identifying its adverbial function, is found in Heb. 6:4-6. Of course, this passage has been debated for centuries, but it is probable that the answer lies in deeper grammatical analysis, with special attention given to participial function. Although it is not appropriate in this short essay to go into detail concerning this example, as brief summary will do.

Presupposing a knowledge of the problems in the text, a possible solution lies in the following interpretation. The final

⁷Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, lists ten uses, 226-229.

two participles of verse 6, "ἀνασταυρωθέντες and παρουθευματίσαντες," should be taken as instrumental, thus indicating the means in which the action of the main verb is accomplished. Traditionally, these two participles have been taken causally, being translated "since they **recrucify** for themselves the Son of God and **put Him to open shame**." If these participles are taken instrumentally, the text should be rendered like this, "It is impossible to renew again to repentance, **by recrucifying** and **by putting to open shame** the Son of God."

There is much more to this interpretation, and context would seem to support the instrumental use of the adverbial participles. But nevertheless, this example shows how significant participles are in understanding the text. They certainly have variety and value.

III. TWO OTHER USES

Although these next two uses could be categorized under other headings, they are briefly mentioned here due to the difficulty that most students of NT Greek have with them. They are the genitive absolute and the periphrastic participle.

The genitive absolute is a noun in the genitive case and a participle also in the genitive case, which is grammatically independent from the rest of the clause or sentence. This construction simply gives an insight into the sentence, usually expressed temporally. Lk. 24:36 is an example, "ταῦτα δὲ αὐτῶν λέγοντας αὐτοὶ ἔσται ἐν ἡμέρᾳ αὐτῆ," "while they were speaking

these things, He himself stood in their midst."

The other use that causes some difficulty is the periphrastic construction. The periphrastic can substitute for a simple verb, it is comprised of an auxiliary verb, (usually a form of ΕΙΜΙ). The most common tenses used in this construction are the present and perfect, the aorist is rare. Jn. 1:41 is an example of a periphrastic present construction, employing "ΕΙΜΙ" and the present participle, "ΕΥΡΗΧΑΜΕΝ ΤΟΝ Μεσσαν, ὁ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΜΕΘΕΡΜΥΝΕΘΟΜΕΝ Χριστος."

CONCLUSION

The participle is certainly one of the unique aspects of the GNT. Its usages are broad, and many times difficult to determine. However, there are many important passages that reveal their utter significance in NT interpretation. Their variety and value have yet to be fully explored.