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Short Study

The Perfect Tense-Form and the Son of Man in John 3.13: Developments in Greek Grammar as a Viable Solution to the Timing of the Ascent and Descent*

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The perfect tense-form verb ἀναβέβηκεν in John 3.13 is usually interpreted in light of traditional verb theory, as a 'past action with present results'. This interpretation introduces an apparent problematic chronology in that the Son of Man ascends before descending; however, recent developments in Greek grammar, particularly verbal aspect theory, provide a viable solution to this grammatical 'problem' and indicate that the Son of Man's descent precedes his ascent.

Keywords: Gospel of John, verbal aspect theory, Greek grammar, Son of Man, ascent, perfect tense

The ascent and descent of the Son of Man in the Gospel of John has long been a *crux interpretum* for the Johannine Jesus and, more particularly, for the Johannine Son of Man. Wayne Meeks began his famous essay by making reference to Rudolf Bultmann's assertion that the ascent and descent of the Son of Man is the starting point for understanding the Gospel.[1] In a recent *NTS* article, John Ashton presented 'a new proposal' for understanding the Son of Man's ascent and descent,[2] which adds to the numerous proposals that have already been made. Much of the discussion of ascent and descent hinges on one verse,

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1 W. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972) 44–72.

2 J. Ashton, 'The Johannine Son of Man: A New Proposal', *NTS* 57 (2011) 508–29.

John 3.13, where the perfect tense-form[3] ἀναβέβηκεν is understood in the traditional grammatical sense as a past action with on-going results in the present. This grammatical understanding suggests that the ascent of the Son of Man takes place prior to his descent. Almost all attempts at a solution to this verse assume 'past ascent with present results'. The argument of this short note is that these previous discussions of John 3.13 have not taken into account developments in Greek grammar, particularly regarding the verbal aspect of the perfect indicative ἀναβέβηκεν and the relative time value (and by extension the verbal aspect) of the aorist participle καταβάς. In the following, we argue that consideration of these developments with regard to John 3.13 indicates that the Son of Man's ascent need not be understood as a past action, particularly as a past action that precedes his descent.

1. The State of the Question

In John 3.13, Jesus says: καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Considering the traditional grammatical understanding of the Greek perfect tense-form, ἀναβέβηκεν seems to indicate a previous ascent of the Son of Man. The subject in the second clause, ὁ καταβάς, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ('the one who descended, the Son of Man'), therefore, places an emphasis on the Son of Man's descent. By filling in the ellipsis in the second clause with ἀναβέβηκεν, the verse is generally understood to mean: 'No one has ascended to heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man[, has ascended to heaven]'.

The majority of scholars have understood the perfect tense-form ἀναβέβηκεν to indicate past action,[4] not least because the classic grammatical definition of the perfect tense-form is that it indicates a past action with present results.[5] For example:

> The perfect tense, ἀναβέβηκεν, is puzzling since it seems to imply that the Son of Man (= Jesus) had at the moment of speaking already ascended into heaven.[6]

3 The use of the term 'tense-form' (in place of 'tense') is common among grammarians. This language is considered more accurate because tense, as we will argue, is more likely located in the context than the verb's form. Additionally, we will avoid the use of 'tense' when dealing with the time value of the verb in order to eliminate any possible confusion.

4 See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 150 n. 2. Cf. U. C. von Wahlde, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Gospel and Letters of John, vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010) 143.

5 F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. R. W. Funk; Cambridge University Press, 1961) 175 (§340): 'The perfect combines in itself, so to speak, the present and the aorist in that it denotes the *continuance* of *completed* action…' (emphasis original).

6 P. Borgen, 'Some Jewish Exegetical Traditions as Background for Son of Man Sayings in John's Gospel (Jn 3, 13–14 and context)', in *L'Évangile de Jean: sources, rédaction, théologie* (ed. M. de

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> The perfect tense 'has ascended' (ἀναβέβηκεν) implies that Jesus had already ascended to heaven at the time of his dialogue with Nicodemus.[7]

> Taken literally, the pronouncement implies that Jesus has *already* 'gone up to heaven' …[8]

Ashton argues that most scholars avoid this 'straightforward interpretation' of John 3.13, stating: 'Armed, or blinkered, by our knowledge of the rest of the Gospel, we can easily miss the natural reading of vs. 11–13.'[9]

Some of this avoidance can be seen in the five suggested solutions to this grammatical 'problem'. The first view understands ἀναβέβηκεν as a future perfect or proleptic perfect, in which case the perfect looks forward to Jesus' ascension (20.17; cf. 6.62).[10] A second option understands the verb as a general example[11] or a 'gnomic perfect'.[12] These first two views attempt to argue that the perfect tense-form in 3.13 has a future sense or is intended generally rather than being understood as a past action with continuing results in the present.

The third, fourth and fifth views all define the perfect tense-form in the classic grammatical sense. The third view understands the ascent as a past action, but rather than taking the Son of Man as the exception of the past action, the previous ascent is not understood to apply to the Son of Man. This contrast between 'no one' and 'the Son of Man' is achieved by translating εἰ μή as 'but' and not 'except'.[13] Fourth, the most common response has been to understand the

Jonge; Gembloux, Belgium: Duculot, 1977) 243–58, at 248. Cf. also C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd edn; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 213.

7 D. Burkett, *The Son of the Man in the Gospel of John* (JSNT Suppl. 56; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991) 82.

8 J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010) 195 (emphasis original).

9 Ashton, 'A New Proposal', 513–14. Cf. Ashton's earlier view in *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (2nd edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 257–9.

10 J. Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie* (3 vols.;WUNT 96, 110, 117; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997–2000) 2.130–1, notes the possibility of a proleptic perfect for 3.13, yet he does not take this view.

11 Bultmann, *Gospel*, 150–1. Note that R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29, 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1966–70) 1.132, in discussing the perfect of 3.13, speaks of a Johannine 'indifference to normal time sequences'.

12 H. N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997) 136; B. E. Reynolds, *The Apocalyptic Son of Man in Gospel of John* (WUNT II/249; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 115–16.

13 J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark) 1.111; F. J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 14; 2nd edn; Rome: LAS, 1978) 55.

previous ascent in 3.13 as a post-Easter statement of the early church and thus to see Jesus' ascension as a past event.[14] Those holding the fifth and final view are the minority who view Jesus' ascent as prior to his descent, whether as a pre-existent ascent to or within heaven before his descent[15] or as an ascent to heaven during Jesus' lifetime.[16] Each of these five views is wrestling with the perfect tense-form of the indicative verb in its pairing with the aorist participle, yet none of these options takes into account recent grammatical developments.

2. Developments in Grammar as the Way Forward

Developments in understanding NT Greek grammar provide a viable way forward in explaining the issues concerning John 3.13. Traditionally, each tense-form of the Greek verb was thought to encode a time value and an *Aktionsart.*[17] This view considers the time value a primary morphological feature (e.g. the present tense-form almost necessarily denotes a present time value).[18] Recently, proponents of verbal aspect theory have challenged this understanding. For these critics of traditional verb theory, the time value is neither primary nor encoded in the verbal form at all – the time value is derived *after* the verb is placed in its context.[19] The aspect, which is the author's viewpoint of the

14 Barrett, *Gospel*, 213; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (3 vols.; Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1967) 1.393; Frey, *Eschatologie*, 2.133, 254; U. Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (THKNT 4; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1998) 73.

15 Borgen, 'Exegetical Traditions', 250–2; W. Roth, 'Jesus as the Son of Man: The Scriptural Identity of a Johannine Image', in *The Living Text: Essays in Honor of Ernest W. Saunders* (ed. D.E. Groh and R. Jewett; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985) 11–26; Burkett, *Son of the Man*, 85–6; followed by H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 203.

16 F. H. Borsch, *The Son of Man in Myth and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 273; J.-A. Bühner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium: Die kultur- und religionsgeschichtlichen Grundlagen der johanneischen Sendungschristologie sowie ihre traditionsgeschichtliche Entwicklung* (WUNT II/2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977) 374–99; Ashton, 'A New Proposal', 519–20.

17 *Aktionsart* is usually translated 'type of action'. While *Aktionsarten* were previously thought to be encoded in the verbal form, recent grammatical discussions suggest that *Aktionsart* is a helpful category of *pragmatic* values (see n. 18).

18 This misconception about the verbal form demonstrates a confusion of semantics ('values that are encoded in the verbal form') versus pragmatics (values that are encoded by combining the semantic value of a form with the context and other factors). C. R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008) 22–3.

19 Buist Fanning argues that the traditional view is deficient and that the aspectual value of the verb is more important than the time value; however, Fanning in contrast to Porter and Campbell (below) contends that time is still encoded in the verbal form and that the aspect of the perfect tense-form is 'condition resulting from an anterior occurrence' (*Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 12–20, 291).

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action, is instead considered the primary feature of the verbal form. As a result, from this perspective, the aspect of the verb is the starting point for translation and interpretation rather than the time value assumed to be encoded in the tense-form.

From a non-aspectual perspective, the perfect tense-form has been described as encoding 'past action with present results',[20] but this description does not account for all occurrences of the perfect tense-form.[21] Aspect theory hopes to find the grammatically encoded feature that is 'uncancelable', or that which is consistent across all uses of the perfect.[22] For Stanley Porter, one of the first major proponents of aspect theory, the perfect tense-form encodes stative aspect, which 'views the action of the verb as reflecting a given (often complex) state of affairs'.[23] More recently, Constantine Campbell has argued that the perfect tense-form encodes imperfective aspect, which he argues views the action as on-going spatially.[24] Though the aspectual value for the perfect is currently debated,[25] the consensus among proponents of verbal aspect is that time value is *not* the primary feature of the verbal form. Porter contends: 'The perfect tense[-form] does not primarily refer to the time when an event occurs but can be used to speak of past, present, and even occasionally future

20 Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar*, §175; D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996) 573. See also C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 6; J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908) 3.81; J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 34. The majority of these grammarians referred to this meaning of the perfect tense-form as the *Aktionsart*, but more recently Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 263) has called this the *aspect*.

21 Many grammars, after providing this as the basic meaning, also provide several exceptions (e.g. Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar*, §§341–6: the present perfect, the extensive perfect, the perfect for the aorist, the perfect in general assertions or imaginary examples, the perfect used to express relative time; Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 582) adds 'perfect of allegory').

22 See Campbell, *Basics*, 134.

23 S. E. Porter, J. Reed and M. Brook O'Donnell, *Fundamentals of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010) 315. Also, R. A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 126.

24 Campbell argues that each tense-form encodes an aspect, but then each also has a distinguishing feature. In the case of the perfect tense-form, it is 'heightened proximity' – the author invites readers to view the action from a closer perspective spatially and also implies that the action is spatially on-going (i.e. that it might extend beyond what is in view). See C. R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative* (SBG 10; New York: Peter Lang) 210–11.

25 While Porter's is the more popular view, Campbell and other grammarians, who insist that stative is an *Aktionsart,* argue that perfective or imperfective aspects are more likely values for the perfect tense-form. This debate was the topic of the Greek Language and Linguistics section at the Society of Biblical Literature 2013 Annual Meeting in Baltimore.

actions.'[26] Campbell similarly demonstrates several instances where the perfect tense-form should be translated as present time (e.g. Matt 27.43; John 11.11; 2 Tim 4.6–7).[27]

Considering this evidence, the assumption that the perfect verb form ἀναβέβηκεν in John 3.13 describes a past action is less likely. In fact, as noted above, a present time value is just as reasonable for most perfect tense-form verbs, and even more so for translating John 3.13. Thus, from the perspective of grammar, this verse may legitimately be translated: 'No one ascends to heaven', expressing what earlier grammars have called a 'timeless perfect',[28] and therefore the verse describes a unique quality of the Son of Man. To this point, interpreters have seemed hesitant in assigning the label 'gnomic' or 'timeless' because of the deep-rooted sense of the perfect's time value as 'past action with present results'. If this past time value is not the primary meaning of the perfect, as we contend, all possible time values must be assessed in light of the immediate and broader contexts. In the case of John 3.13, present is the most plausible time value to associate with ἀναβέβηκεν.[29]

Moreover, even if one considers the verbal aspect of the perfect verb unconvincing in this regard, there is another grammatical feature that compounds the likelihood of this interpretation: the aorist participle καταβάς. Even though this participle is substantival, it still retains its verbal force, and thus has an aspectual value.[30] Participles usually express a time value relative to the finite verb. Porter argues that word order is a predictable indicator for the time value of a participle's action. If the finite verb has been ellipsed in the dependent clause in John 3.13 ('except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man[, has ascended to heaven]'), then this participle should be treated as if it precedes the finite verb in position. 'If the participle occurs *before* the main or finite verb, there is a tendency for it to refer to action that occurred before the action of the main verb.'[31] Additionally, even though the semantic value of the participle does not encode antecedent action, the pragmatic value of aorist participles often includes action antecedent to the finite

26 Porter, *Fundamentals*, 319. Young (*Intermediate Greek*, 126) also notes the flexibility of the perfect tense-form's time value and adds the possibility of an 'omnitemporal' or 'timeless' reference.

27 Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 193–5.

28 See nn. 11–12 above and Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar*, §344.

29 Further evidence for a present time perfect is noticeable in the thirteen other perfect tense-form verbs in John 3.1–21. Of these, the NRSV translates seven with a present time value (γεννάω: 3.6 (x2), 8; κρίνω: 3.18; and, obviously, οἶδα: 3.2, 8, 11), and two more examples (ὁράω: 3.11; πιστεύω: 3.18) may arguably refer to a present action (or a gnomic or timeless reference).

30 Porter, *Fundamentals*, 108: '[The participle] conveys verbal aspect, giving it a dynamic verbal force not found with the normal noun or other substantive.'

31 Porter, *Fundamentals*, 110 (emphasis original).

verb.[32] Thus, the Son of Man's descent likely precedes his ascent. Considering that this is the most reasonable conclusion from the grammar, one would need to have sensible cause for opposing the participle as antecedent action.

3. Conclusion

Previous discussions of the Son of Man's descent and ascent in John 3.13 have relied upon a traditional grammatical understanding of the perfect ἀναβέβηκεν. This perspective has caused some scholars to conclude that Jesus ascended prior to his descent. Many other scholars have attempted to find a way around the assumption that the perfect tense-form must refer to past action. When the verbal aspect of ἀναβέβηκεν is considered primary (and not the time value), the 'problem' of the perfect is removed. The grammatical arguments of verbal aspect and the relative time value of the participle καταβάς make it reasonable to translate ἀναβέβηκεν with a present time value and thus conclude that Jesus, the Son of Man, did not ascend prior to his descent nor must ἀναβέβηκεν indicate a past ascent.

32 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1934) 1111; J. L. Boyer, 'The Classification of Participles: A Statistical Study', *Grace Theological Journal* 5, no. 2 (1984) 166; S. E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (London: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 187–8; C. R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect and Non-Indicative Verbs* (SBG 15; New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 41–3; cf. Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 614), who cautions that this is mainly with adverbial participles.