

13. THE ANGEL'S VERBAL ASPECT

According to an article on Greek verbal aspect by Ellis, et al. (henceforth, authors),¹⁵ a question arises from the Greek text of Matthew 2:20, where the angel, upon appearing to Joseph in a dream, says to him regarding the infant Jesus:

ἐγερθεὶς παράλαβε τὸ παιδίον καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ πορεύου εἰς γῆν Ἰσραὴλ· τεθνήκασιν γὰρ οἱ ζητοῦντες τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ παιδίου.

“Arise, and take the child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life have died.” (authors’ translation and emphasis)

The question has to do with the present participle **ζητοῦντες** “(those) **seeking**.” Specifically, the authors contend that “[L]ogically, those who ‘have died’ (τεθνήκασιν) cannot now be ‘searching’ (ζητοῦντες) for the child at the time of the speech act. ... Moreover, neither can there be ‘contemporaneous time,’ as would typically be taught, given the fact that the searching necessarily occurred prior to dying” (34).

In other words, what the authors of said article are advocating is that the use of a “present participle,” which connotes “present time,” applied to a past action, i.e., to people already dead, cannot be semantically justified. The authors essentially conclude that the traditional nomenclature of the Greek tense system is “fundamentally flawed” (34).

At the end of their article, and following a discussion on tense prominence versus aspect prominence ideas in connection with the Greek verbal system, the authors return to Mat. 2:20, saying, “We asked previously whether the participle **ζητοῦντες** is better described by a tense-prominent system, with tense-prominent labels, or by an aspect-prominent system, with aspect-prominent labels”; whereupon the authors basically suggest that the label “imperfective participle,” rather than the traditional label “present participle,” is the preferred nomenclature, since “imperfective” can also “stand in place of either a past or non-past imperfective event” (61).

Let us then focus on the authors’ idea of doing away with the traditional name “present participle” and adopting the aspectual label “imperfective participle.” The authors’ reasoning behind the suggested change is that an imperfective participle “could stand in place of either a past or non-past event” (61). That is fine. In fact, the same is true of the English present participle as well. Taking a closer look at the text of Mat. 2:20 as an example, however, it can be shown that “present participle” is not an inappropriate name.

One way to show this is to form a plausible Chomskyan-based Deep Structure (DS) scenario (p. 296) that reflects what the angel related to Joseph in a dream, and its Surface Structure (SS), that is, what the angel actually said, and which eventually reached Matthew’s quill.

¹⁵ Nicholas J. Ellis, Michael G. Aubrey, and Mark Dubis, “The Greek Verbal System and Aspectual Prominence: Revising Our Taxonomy and Nomenclature,” *JETS* 59/1 (2016): 33–62. http://bm-cdn.biblemesh.com/mediacontent/images/INTRO/The_Greek_Verbal_System_and_Aspect_Promi.pdf (accessed April 2022).

To that end, we will form a DS “dialogue” between the angel and Joseph and see if the use of the “present participle” in reference to those already dead is semantically viable.

Scenario

Joseph: (Sleeping, in a state of anxiety, unaware that those seeking to kill the infant Jesus are dead.)

Angel: (Appearing in Joseph’s dream.) “Joseph, do not be afraid, for I am bringing good news to you.”

Joseph: (Thinking.) “Oh? What must I do to protect the child from those who are seeking to destroy him?”

Deep Structure

Angel: “Arise, take the child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those (who you think are still) seeking the child’s life have died.”

Surface Structure

Angel: “Arise, take the child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those seeking the child’s life have died.” (Lit., “for dead are those seeking...”)

This imaginary scenario is meant to portray the fact that at the moment the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, the threat of ζητούντες the child was fiercely alive and unresolved in Joseph’s mind. The angel assured Joseph that those whom Joseph still viewed as a present threat were those who were now dead. As long as Joseph remained uninformed about the death of those seeking to find the child, to him the imminent threat was ever so real, ever so *present*. This shows that the “present participle” ζητούντες is in harmony with the aspect of the speaker’s (and hearer’s) present, an aspect which Matthew effectively portrays (regardless of whether Joseph was consciously thinking about it at that exact microsecond).

Incidentally, as far as names go, there is no reason a present participle in Greek cannot be labeled aspectually imperfective, i.e., “imperfective present participle.” And if this sounds somewhat redundant, “imperfective” could be used in an aspectually explanatory sense. For it seems to me that when rightly applied, aspectual terminology regarding perfective or imperfective action, in conjunction with traditional terminology, should in actuality enhance exegesis.