

John 20:23; Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 In the Light of the Greek Perfect Tenses

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I THE PROBLEM

Commenting on the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament, W. D. Chamberlain of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary cites Matthew 16:19 as an example of an error which the revisers failed to correct. He quotes and comments as follows:

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." The words 'bound' and 'loosed' in the original Greek are in the future perfect tense and should be translated 'shall have been bound' and 'shall have been loosed.' The difference in the two meanings is of theological importance—it is a question whether Jesus means that Heaven determines the policy for Christian ministers, or whether the ministers have authority over Heaven. I don't know whether the translators perpetuated this mistake through ignorance or by choice.¹

The importance of this reference is seen in the fact that the authority back of one of the most prevalent and most significant errors in Christendom is found in the current translation and interpretation of the Greek future perfect tense in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 and the Greek perfect tense in John 20:23. On this basis over half of the professed Christians in the world believe in sacerdotalism—that is, that

certain men have been divinely authorized to forgive sins in behalf of God.²

The verses in the Authorized Version in English read as follows: (In parentheses the suggested corrections of tense are made.)

John 20:23—Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted (perfect tense: have been remitted) unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained (perfect tense: have been retained).

Matthew 16:19—And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound (future perfect tense: shall have been bound) in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed (future perfect tense: shall have been loosed) in heaven.

Matthew: 18:18—Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound (future perfect tense: shall have been bound) in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed (future perfect tense: shall have been loosed) in heaven.

The problem of translation and interpretation involves the whole question of man's place in the Divine Economy. Are the servants of God to act upon their own judgment and initiative and bind Heaven to ratify their own exclusions from, and inclusions in, the kingdom of heaven (as seems to be a fair interpretation of the implications of sacerdotalism as so commonly practiced by the Roman Catholics and some other bodies)? Or are

¹ *Louisville Courier Journal*, Feb. 17, 1946. Quoted in *The Union Seminary Review*, May, 1946 by P. Frank Price, "The 1946 version of the New Testament—from a Reader's Point of View," p. 209.

² J. R. Mantey: "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* LVIII (1939), p. 243.

the ministers of God sent forth as ambassadors who carry the terms of peace and forgiveness — doing what God has authorized and has Himself done, and declaring what God has declared? That is, are the men of God judges who decide the salvation or reprobation of their hearers or are they preachers, "proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord" and offering salvation on Divine terms?

Evangelical Protestantism has always held to the latter while sacerdotalism has generally if not always involved the former through the priestly insistence upon selecting the recipients of its saving sacraments. It should be said, however, that the evangelical view need not be interpreted as minimizing the high calling of the Gospel ministry. What could be a more exalted position than that of an ambassador of Christ beseeching men in Christ's stead to be reconciled to God and declaring the terms of reconciliation? Man's function is necessary and in a limited sense decisive. But God trusts no human being to give the ultimate verdict in any soul's salvation. God Himself by the Holy Spirit applies redemption personally. Man is authorized only to carry the tidings and to intercede. That seems to be the implications of the Greek tenses. In all of the leading English Versions, at least, there is either considerable ambiguity or the positive implication of the opposite view: namely, that man, in God's stead, forgives sin and God ratifies the act, making it His own.

Part of the confusion may lie in the fact that there is no exact equivalent in English of the Greek perfect tense and that at best one can only use an English tense and leave the untranslatable element to the commentators. But it was, in the writer's opinion, unfortunate to use a rendering in these passages that makes no suggestion of a past action that has come to

completion and has abiding results.

With Chamberlain, the writer does not fully understand why no revision has been made of the translation of these passages. The wonder is increased by the fact that at least three or four times this matter has been called to the attention of the scholars.

In 1922, J. R. Mantey had an article published in *The Expositor* in London under the title "Perfect Tense Ignored in Matthew 16:19; 18:18, and John 20:23." Later he read before the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis in America a paper entitled "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Matthew 16:19, and Matthew 18:18." In 1939, this article was published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.⁴ In the same issue a rebuttal appeared under the title "The Meaning of John 20:23, Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18."⁵ The author was Henry J. Cadbury of Harvard University, a member of the newly selected committee on revision. He expressed strong disagreement with Dr. Mantey at several crucial points of the discussion. In 1941 W. D. Chamberlain produced *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament*⁶ in which he commented on Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 in words similar to those already quoted.⁷ He agreed essentially with Mantey.

This difference of opinion that existed among these scholars and that involved a member of the committee on the new revision attracted the attention of a doctorate candidate who was majoring in the field of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. He continued the research in consultation with Professor Mantey and compiled the results in the dissertation which is being

⁴ Volume XXIII, pp. 470-2.

⁵ Volume LVIII, pp. 243-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-4.

⁷ Macmillan Company.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

summarized in this article. The final copies were presented to the seminary in May, 1945, and the conclusions were sent to Professor Cadbury. It was found, however, that the work of revision had already been officially terminated and the material had reached the publisher. Hence no action was taken—either favorable or adverse.

Briefly stated, the aim of the research was to clarify the problems of the controversy and, if possible, to find the correct translation and interpretation of the verses. More explicitly, the purpose of the dissertation was to ascertain the basic meanings of the *Koiné* Greek perfect and future perfect tenses and to determine the proper divergent meanings, and to bring this information to the translation of John 20:23, Matthew 16:19, and Matthew 18:18 with a view to finding a correct translation and interpretation and removing the grounds for the erroneous doctrines and corrupt practices connected with sacerdotalism. With this objective, the work is naturally a sequel to and extension of Mantey's articles.

II

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

As strong collateral evidence against the common translations of these passages Mantey points out in his articles that it was not until the torch of learning and theology passed from the Greek-speaking and Greek-writing Ante-Nicene Fathers to the Latin-writing Fathers that these passages were used to support such a doctrine as sacerdotalism. The inference is of course that Greek-speaking theologians would have known their own language well enough to realize that the Greek tenses would permit no such interpretation.

Mantey further states that not only did some Latin Fathers quote these passages to prove that priests, as

successors of Peter, can forgive sins, but that it was in the Latin versions that erroneous translations appeared and that these errors have been repeated in all languages up to the present time. That is, of course, quite natural in view of the fact that the perfect tense in Greek is far from identical with that in the Latin, English, and modern European languages. Allen and Greenough point out the loss of the distinction between the two uses in Latin (i.e., perfect definite and the historical or aoristic perfect).⁹ Goodwin and Gulick also state that, unlike the Latin and English perfects, the Greek Perfect is not properly a past tense, but rather represents a fixed condition in the present.¹⁰ That this does not exclude a past reference also is, however, clear in their further statement that "the perfect represents an action as finished at the time at which the present would represent it as going on."¹¹ Dana and Mantey add that the "Greek aorist is much wider in range than the English simple past, while the Greek perfect is more restricted in use than the parallel English tense."¹² They add that "the confusion arises from the effort to explain the Greek in terms of our own idiom."¹³

To these perils confronting the translators must be added the uncertainty that arises from the fact that ancient scholars did not adequately use the inductive and historical methods and were too little aware of the value of the study of comparative languages. It was not until the nineteenth century, in the days of Winer and Bopp, that these methods really began

⁹ J. R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:36, Matthew 16:19 and 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LVIII (1939), p. 244.

¹⁰ *Latin Grammar*, Article 279 (Note) p. 296.

¹¹ *Greek Grammar*, Article 735, p. 172.

¹² *Op. cit.*, Article 1273, p. 272.

¹³ *Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

to come into their own."

Furthermore it is known that by the time of Latin Christianity there was already a marked tendency to shift the function of the ministry from the more evangelistic and prophetic work to the more formal and liturgical. Simultaneous with the resultant obscuring of Christian experience and the passing of creeds from genuine confessions to mere symbols, there was a definite strengthening of the outward organization of Christendom. This was accomplished in part by increasing the authority of the clergy and assuming that the priests were divinely authorized to forgive sin.

If, then, the Greek-speaking Fathers did not support their ecclesiasticism and sacerdotal tendency by these verses and the Latins did, the circumstances being what they were, it would seem reasonable to question the accuracy of the Latin translation and application until it could be firmly established. The same would apply to the subsequent translations into the languages affected by the Latin tongue, traditions and theology.

But the central argument against the current translations is the fact that, as Mantey says, "according to the unanimous testimony of all Greek grammarians, the perfect tense pictures a past action, the result of which was present to the speaker or writer." Regardless of which phase of meaning is dominant, he insists that the perfect tense always implies past action, even though the emphasis is on the continuance of the results. There are, he admits, a few rare usages where for rhetorical or dramatic effect a perfect may be used to imply immediate future action, but he considers such an irregular translation a most unsafe foundation for a doctrine. The future perfect tense also, he argues, carries the idea of action completed at the

¹⁴ A. T. Robertson, *Greek Grammar in the Light of Historical Research*, pp. 3, 10.

time of the leading verb. Finally, the general trend and tenor of the New Testament was invoked as confirming the conclusion that an accurate translation of the perfect tenses precludes the possibility of any sacerdotal teaching in these words of Jesus.

In the rebuttal, Cadbury grants that the perfect tenses usually indicate a situation already existent at some time contemplated in the sentence but denies that the time contemplated is necessarily that of the other verb in these sentences. He argues that the influence of the general conditions in which these verbs occur makes it difficult and unnecessary to limit them as to past, present, and future. Four verses are quoted which he considers proof that the perfect in the apodosis does not always indicate an action or condition prior to the time in the protasis.¹⁵ Various New Testament grammarians are cited to show that the perfects used are not regular but are variously termed futuristic (Blass-Debrunner),¹⁶ vivid use for event yet future (Moulton),¹⁷ gnomic present perfect (A. T. Robertson) and proleptical (A. T. Robertson).¹⁸ Cadbury lists John 20:23 with these and treats it similarly.

Permanency and certainty rather than prior time seem to him to be the significance of the future perfect tense as used in Matthew. He cites Goodwin¹⁹ and Stahl²⁰ in confirmation of his opinion. In view of the difficulty of rendering the Greek idiom adequately into English and because of the influence of the general condition, he feels that the future tense is as good

¹⁵ I John 2:5; James 2:10; Romans 14:23 and Romans 13:8.

¹⁶ 6 Aufl. 1931, Article 344.

¹⁷ *Prolegomena*, p. 271.

¹⁸ *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 1914, p. 897.

¹⁹ *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses*, 1890, Article 77, 78, 79.

²⁰ *Kritischhistorische Syntax des griechischen Verbums*, 1907, p. 143f.

a translation as any.

Cadbury then seeks by the case of the paralytic to clinch his rebuttal of Mantey's assertion that the perfect tense would place the act of forgiveness prior to the time of the conditional clause. He points out that Jesus used the perfect tense in Luke 7:47 and obviously meant "thy sins have been hereby forgiven by me." He objects to allowing an authority to Jesus which we do not allow to his disciples and urges that for consistency the cases must be treated alike.

He implies, finally, that Mantey stakes his whole argument against priestly absolution on the past reference in the perfect tense and adds that the case for or against sacerdotalism does not rest upon disputed points of Greek grammar. Though there is some truth in these last two statements, it is the writer's opinion that they do not do justice to Mantey or to the issue at stake.

Though many branches of knowledge have something to contribute to a subject of this sort, the chief point in question here appears to be linguistic and grammatical. Therefore the major emphasis in this investigation is placed upon this phase in an attempt to remove the seeming contradictions among the scholars concerning the meaning of the perfect tenses.

However, the linguistic findings should be tested, substantiated, and supplemented by facts from theology and church history. This is in harmony with Mantey's example, and even Cadbury went on record against the advisability of deciding the matter of sacerdotalism on grammatical grounds alone.

The first step in the method of approach is to seek the basic meaning of the perfect tense. This is done by reference to the standard grammatical works and by examination of the Greek texts, themselves. Then it is

necessary to examine, classify, and evaluate the alleged variations in relation to the basic meaning of the tense. Finally, the findings are applied to John 20:23 with the aim of estimating the degree of probability or discovering the certainty of the translation and interpretation that emerges. To check the results, brief reference is made to church history and theology.

This same process is repeated with the future perfect tenses in the Matthean passages and the resultant renderings of all three verses are compared with the sacerdotal system to see if there is any real basis in Scripture for the priestly claims.

III

BASIC MEANING OF THE PERFECT TENSE.

A. T. Robertson declares that:

Each tense has its specific idea. That idea is normal and can be readily understood. Various modifications arise, due to the verb itself, the context, the imagination of the user of the tense. The result is a complex one, for which the tense is not wholly responsible.²¹

In this chapter it is our concern to find this one specific idea of the Greek perfect tense. After it has been located, it is illustrated and confirmed by references from the classical and *koine* writings.

A survey of the opinions of scholars on the basic meanings of the perfect tense reveals a general agreement on certain essential points, though there may be considerable variety in expression and application of the principle. In the writer's opinion, Mantey's statement still stands that "According to the unanimous testimony of all Greek grammarians, the perfect tense pictures a past action, the result of which was present to the speaker or writer." The following serve as examples:

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 830.

Burton: The reference of the tenses is thus double: it implies a past action and affirms an existing result.²²

Davis: The perfect indicative generally expresses the present result of past action. It then has to do with the past and the present.²³

Moulton: The perfect action is a variety by itself, denoting what began in the past and still continues.²⁴

Goodwin and Gulick: Perfect, action finished in present time and so denoting an accomplished state.²⁵

Kuhner: Das griechische Perfect . . . nicht bloss eine gegenwärtig vollendete Handlung, sondern die vollendete Handlung zugleich auch als in ihren Wirkungen und Folgen noch fortbestehend bezeichnet. The Greek Perfect . . . not merely marks a present fulfilled act, but the completed act also as in its operations and results continuing to exist.²⁶

Blass: Das Perfecum (sammt dem Plusqu.) vereinigt in sich gleichsam Präsens und Aorist, indem es die Dauer des Vollendeten ausdrückt. The perfect (along with the plupf.) unites in itself as it were present and aorist, in that it expresses the duration (continuance) of the completed act.²⁷

In all of these instances there is a variety of expression but a single central fact described harmoniously by all. It is clear that the basic function of the tense is to picture both a past action and a result that is present. A close observation of the word 'present' in these quotations would convince one that the grammarians mean in each case 'present to the speaker or writer.' In fact, several writers were very explicit in this detail.

Examples are numerous in the Greek texts to substantiate this principle.

In the Anabasis 2.1.4 Bevier translates the per-

fect of die, τετελεύτηκεν, "He has died (is dead)"

In Lysias XII, 22 the perfect tense is used in the statement that they have done nothing bad or shameful to denote the guilt that would have existed.²⁸

Galatians 3:1—Jesus Christ was set forth as crucified (perfect tense, implying that he remains a propitiation).

Space does not permit one to multiply examples, but both past action and present result are seen in each.

This is a significant point because it makes Mantey stand on the literal basic use of the tense while Cadbury is found championing a figurative or irregular usage. The latter may occupy his position by choice but by so doing he must assume the burden of proof, for it is an accepted principle of hermeneutics that the literal meaning of a passage is the correct meaning unless some necessity for a figurative interpretation can be found in modifications arising due to the verb itself, the context, or the imagination of the user of the tense.

IV APPLICATIONS AND MODIFICATIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE PERFECT TENSE

It is in the study of the various applications and modifications of the basic idea of the perfect that the grammarians express a great variety of opinions and multiply terms to express their views. Here one meets such expressions as extensive perfect, intensive perfect, intensive present, perfect with present meaning, perfect of existing state, entered state, result, presents of resulting condition, aoristic perfects, gnomic or empiric perfects, iterative perfects, dated past action, dramatic historic present perfects, proleptical perfects, vivid for future perfect, futuristic present perfects, future action vividly expressed, permanent state, and duration.

²² *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, article 74, p. 37.

²³ *Beginner's Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, article 368, p. 152.

²⁴ *Prolegomena*, p. 109.

²⁵ *Greek Grammar*, Article 1250c, p. 267.

²⁶ *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache*, article 384, pp. 146-7.

²⁷ *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, p. 194.

²⁸ C. D. Adams, *Lysias, Selected Speeches*, p. 78.

Therefore the task at hand is to discover from a study of the various grammars which of the many uses of the perfect tense are but specific applications of the basic meaning and which, if any, are distinct variations from it. For the purposes of the present paper the simple applications will be called regular or literal usages and the distinct variations will be called irregular or figurative. When the more or less figurative uses have been isolated, analyzed, classified, and accounted for as well as possible, John 20:23 will be studied in the light of the comparative frequency or scarcity of the figurative use.

What A. T. Robertson calls the extensive perfect presents no problem because it is the usual and most natural use of the tenses.²⁹ Because of the overlapping it is possible to group together under the intensive perfects the perfect with present meaning, perfects of existing state, presents of resulting condition, and perfects of entered state and result. These are comparatively confusing if one tries to find consistency in the grammars concerning them. The same men frequently come so near to contradicting themselves that one must study closely to grasp the real meaning.

Burton says that no sharp line exists between the perfect of completed action and the perfect of existing state and adds:

To the latter head are to be assigned those instances in which the past is practically dropped from thought, and the attention is turned wholly to the existing result.³⁰

He³¹ also quotes Goodwin to the effect that:

The perfect, although it implies the performance of the action in the past time, yet states only that it stands completed at the present time.³²

Robertson classifies the perfect of existing result with the intensive perfect and defines the latter as "perfects where the punctiliar idea is dropped and only the durative remains"³³ but remarks that "it is questionable if the difference does not lie in the nature of the verb rather than in a special modification of the tense."³⁴

It becomes at times a bit difficult to harmonize all of the statements of the same writers so that they are consistent with themselves, but if there is no sharp line between the two functions and if it is not grammatical considerations that eclipse the past reference and make these perfects "almost purely durative,"³⁵ it would seem proper to call these instances true perfects. That is, the reason for the use of the perfect tense instead of present could be traced to the fact that the action which was completed and which produced the continuing result was not wholly lost from consideration.

The grammars contain a number of references in which the writers make very broad statements about the loss of the punctiliar force or past reference and then hasten to qualify their statements as did Burton and Robertson.

Concerning verbs of senses, emotion, etc., Smyth says "The intensive perfect apparently denotes an action rather than a state resulting from an action, and is translated like a present."³⁶ But then he hastens to state that "most if not all such verbs may be regarded as true perfects, i.e., they denote a mental or physical state resulting from the accomplishment of the action; as *πέφρικα*, 'I have shuddered and am now in a state of shuddering'."³⁷

Moulton, in his edition of Winer's

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 894.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 895.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 288, article 1135.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 893.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, article 76, p. 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40, article 85.

³² *Moods and Tenses*, p. 44.

work, states the issue clearly. He says:

The perfect is used for the present, only in so far as the perfect denotes an action or a state the commencement and establishment of which belong, as completed events to past time.³⁸

Kuhner illustrates this use by τέθνηκα "ich bin gestorben, und bin nun tot (I have died and am now dead)."³⁹

In these uses it should be kept in mind, as Enslin points out, that though occasionally the emphasis is almost wholly on the result, the action which produced it is not overlooked. It is actually more taken for granted than consciously emphasized.⁴⁰

Again there are those instances where the grammarians say that the past act is dropped from thought but by the very wording of their statement they imply that there was such a past act in the background which was in some sense responsible for the occurrence of the tense. Burton mentions this phenomenon in relation to a "few verbs which use the perfect in this sense only."⁴¹ He illustrates with γέγραπται, is written, stands written. Nunn illustrates the verbs in which "the past action of which it is the result is left out of account by γέγραπται, πέποιθα, οἶδα, ἔγνωκα and μέμνημαι."⁴² Smyth illustrates *those that* may be properly translated by the English present tense with κέκτημαι (I have acquired) possess, κέκλημαι (have received a name) am called, etc.⁴³

Moulton refers to the perfects with present meanings and accounts for them on the basis of "the mode of action belonging to the root, and on that exhibited in the present." He

illustrates by the conative present πείθω "apply persuasion" with its intransitive early perfect πέποιθα "I trust"⁴⁴: It is worthy of note that Moulton accounted for the phenomena by other than grammatical means even in this verb which Thackeray remarks has "so much come to be regarded as a present that a new first aorist ἐπεποίθησα is formed from it."⁴⁵

Kuhner gives a list of forty-one verbs as not deriving the present meaning out of the concept of fulfilled action in the usual sense.⁴⁶ Many of these have already been discussed under other headings and one of them, οἶδα, is used by Moulton to illustrate the peculiar genius of the Greek perfect tense. He translates it "I discovered (εἶδον) and still enjoy the results," i.e., "I know."⁴⁷

In view of all of these considerations it would not be presumptuous to state that even though the intensive perfect and the uses grouped with it do emphasize the entered result instead of the past act, it is to be seriously doubted that the influence of the past act is ever lost. And even if it should be lost, the nature of the verb would account for it instead of the significance of the tense itself. But in any case, the verbs in Matthew 16:19; 18:18, and John 20:23 do not even fall in this marginal class of words. Hence a concession here, even if necessary, would not be damaging to Mantey's position.

Another usage of the tense is called the aoristic perfect. In this use the emphasis is primarily on the punctiliar force, and it is the durative force that is in danger of eclipse. It might be said in passing that the aorist would normally have been used instead if there had not been a subtle

³⁸ Section 40, pp. 340, 1.

³⁹ *Ausführliche Grammatik*, p. 148.

⁴⁰ "The Perfect Tense in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LV (1936), p. 124.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, article 75, p. 37.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, article 96, p. 70.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, article 1134, p. 286.

⁴⁴ *Prolegomena*, pp. 146, 7.

⁴⁵ *A Grammar of the Old Testament in Greek*, Vol. I, p. 287.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 148, 9.

⁴⁷ *Prolegomena*, p. 109.

recognition of the result of the act. But whatever one concludes, the results are irrelevant since this paper is concerned only to note the preservation of the past reference.

Gnomic or empiric perfects appear to emphasize sense instead of the past but the past act may still be implied. Smyth says that the empiric perfect "may set forth a general truth expressly based on a fact of experience."⁴⁸ If so, there is nothing particularly irregular about this use of the perfect. At least, it is always safer to assume that there was a reason for using the perfect instead of the present tense. And that reason would normally be some sort of past reference.

Iterative perfects express a broken continuity, according to Robertson.⁴⁹ The perfect of dated past action to which Smyth refers⁵⁰ clearly has past references and so is irrelevant to the present study.

The existence of the dramatic historical present perfect is debated. Burton says there are no certain New Testament instances and says of possible instances that "This idiom is perhaps rather rhetorical than strictly grammatical."⁵¹ Robertson defines this use as one in which "an action completed in the past is conceived in terms of present time for the sake of vividness."⁵² However the past reference is not completely lost whether for the sake of vividness one by reflection throws himself back into the vivid past or by imagination draws the past up to the vivid present.

Proleptical perfects are also variously called prophetic-perfects, futuristic present perfects and futuristic perfects. From the foregoing discussions it is obvious that this future reference is rare and that it can hardly

be said to be due to grammatical considerations but rather to dramatic and rhetorical demands of the context. As Kuhner says:

The perfect, and to be sure in all forms, will with rhetorical stress be so used, that a not yet entered act will be anticipated as already fulfilled.⁵³

He illustrates from Xen. *Cyr.* 7. 5, 23 (so that it is necessary that they either flee swiftly from the houses or be swiftly burned up.) Here the perfect is more forceful and dramatic than a simple future since it contemplates not the beginning of the calamity but its awful consummation as completed. This is a use that can hardly be denied. Nor is it denied in the classical writings by Mantey.⁵⁴

Kuhner explains it as follows:

To the futuristic present (article 382, 5) corresponds consequently a futuristic perfect. The connection of the future comes either out of the construction of the sentence or out of the whole context of the speech before.⁵⁵

Robertson also remarks that since the present tense is so often used in a futuristic sense, it is not strange to find the present perfect so used also as equal to the future perfect.⁵⁶

Cadbury is right that a few New Testament grammarians do cite instances of a perfect implying future action. Robertson and others do grant a proleptical reference in a few passages such as I John 2:5, James 2:10, Romans 14:23 and 13:8.⁵⁷ But Burton states concerning his example (James 2:10) that "this is rather a rhetorical figure than a grammatical idiom."⁵⁸

While it would likely be going too far to deny the possibility of such occurrences of proleptic perfects, it is

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, article 1136, p. 287.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 893.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, article 1137, p. 287.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 38ff.

⁵² *Op. cit.*, p. 896.

⁵³ *Op. cit.*, article 384, p. 150.

⁵⁴ *Journal Biblical Literature*, *op. cit.*, pp. 243ff.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 898.

⁵⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 898; Moulton, *Prolegomena*, p. 271; Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

necessary to exercise due caution against using this figurative interpretation more freely than the facts demand. Good hermeneutics demands that the literal translation be used if practical before the figurative be considered. To grant a figurative use in one situation for sufficient reasons does not mean that it would have to be conceded elsewhere for insufficient reasons.

Furthermore, a number of examples cited fall short of certainty. Enslin says of instances in the Fourth Gospel that it is far simpler to call them theological. That is, though the events had not taken place in the lifetime of Jesus, they had for the later church.⁵⁹

It should also be made clear that the issue in the proleptical perfect is not whether they should be considered simple futures in significance but whether or not they were used vividly for future perfects which will be discussed later.

Finally there is the perfect of permanent state or duration, which Cadbury also emphasizes. This meaning lies close to the genius of the tense as it has been described in this paper. The only caution that needs to be expressed is against so completely dissociating this permanent result from the past act which produced it and proceeding still farther to a figurative future translation as Cadbury does.⁶⁰ Permanence is not a substitute for the past act but rather a result of it.

That the Scripture writers did not mean simple future time seems quite obvious from the fact that they did not use the simple future tense. At least it should be assumed that they used the perfect tense consciously and literally until adequate ground for a figurative translation can be found in either the verb itself, the context, or the imagination of the writer.

In conclusion, it may be said that no conclusive proof has been found of any use of the perfect tense in Greek where, due to grammatical considerations, the significance of past action was lost. Consequently, so far as any proof to the contrary is concerned, every perfect is, from a strictly grammatical standpoint, a true perfect. That is, it looks at both ends of the action or at least bears the marks of the influence of both the past act and existing result. Otherwise the present or aorist tense would have been used.

And it is seriously doubted that even the influence of the meaning of the verb itself, contextual elements, or the imagination of the writer ever completely removes all traces of either the past reference or the existing result from the perfect tense. Modification is common but eclipse has not been proven.

One might conclude that the literal is never wholly lost even in the figurative but is simply modified under varying influences. And there is a point beyond which a tense cannot go in departure from its literal use and still maintain even its symbolic value. If it goes beyond that point it is useless even as a figure. Another tense would have to be used.

IV

PERFECT TENSE IN THE KOINE' GREEK

To verify the findings of the preceding studies and to estimate more accurately the comparative frequency of the figurative and obscure uses, special attention was given to Colwell and Mantey's *Hellenistic Greek Reader* and Strabo's *Geography*, Vol. I.

In the former volume the writer located some 258 examples of the uses of the perfect tense (exclusive of pluperfects and future perfects). After those with quite obvious past reference were eliminated, 27 occurrences were left—less than ten and one-half per cent of the whole. These passages

⁵⁹ "The Perfect Tense in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LV (1936), p. 129.

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 252.

contained only 10 different verbs with their compounds and were of the type that has already been discussed at length. No reason was found to modify the previous conclusions.

In Strabo's volume, 363 examples of the perfect tense were studied. Here, if allowance be made for certain technical expressions such as the words for torrid, frigid, etc., some 43 instances were worthy of special attention, or less than 12 per cent. 29 of these uses involve only 4 common verbs and their compounds which have already been treated. Careful study only confirmed the former findings.

The marked absence of proleptical perfects in the volumes studied is significant, the only clear instances noted being in the imperative mood and hence on a very different basis from the figurative use that would be needed to translate John 20:23 proleptically.

Neither from the Greek grammars, nor the classical illustrations, nor the Koiné studies has any reason been found to deny Mantey's statement that "the perfect tense pictures a past action, the result of which was present to the speaker or writer."

V

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF JOHN 20:23

In the foregoing discussion, it has been amply shown that the normal use of the perfect tense is to indicate a past act with its result still present to the speaker or writer. And it has appeared that this implication of past action persisted even in the various modifications and applications. Therefore, it would be quite presumptuous to insist on grammatical grounds that one should leave this literal use of the perfect tense and use a figurative rendering that ignored the prior past act.

Since the perfect tense is used, there is a past action implied that would

normally be reckoned from the time of the speaker. Thus a literal translation would seem to rule out the origination of the forgiveness in the human agent and demand that the forgiveness be an already accomplished fact (at least in the Divine purpose) at the time to which Jesus referred. In other words, the human agent must treat as forgiven none except those whom God had already forgiven. The forgiveness would then be a divine act simply proclaimed by the human agent but not in any real sense accomplished by him. Man's function would be that of interpreting and applying the will of God to man instead of intruding into the mediatorial office of Christ and deciding man's salvation. As Christian scribes and interpreters they were warned only to apply the divine will.

This literal use will stand unless some reason for a figurative sense can be found due to the verb itself, the context, or the imagination of the user of the tense!"

In the first place the verbs used here are not of the type that needed such full disposition because of a loss of emphasis on the past act. Secondly, there is nothing in the context or the inherent logic of the statement that would make the literal translation improbable. In fact, if one grants the supernatural, as he must if he hopes to understand the Bible, it would be far more logical that God in His eternal purpose would, on the basis of His foreknowledge of repentance, forgive the penitent than that He would leave the decision to fallible man. As it has been said, "It is logical that the remitting of sin and retaining of sin would, as prophetically ministerial acts, rest upon corresponding acts of God, already accomplished in the Spirit."²¹ Or as Wesley says, "Are not the sins of one who truly repents and unfeignedly believes in Christ, remit-

²¹ A. T. Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 830.

²² Lange, *Commentary*, John 20:23.

ted without sacerdotal absolution? And are not the sins of one who does not repent or believe, retained even with it?"⁶³

Thirdly, the imagination of the writer, if we grant the Divine inspiration of the writer and the consequent theological consistency of the Scriptures, would support the literal use instead of the figurative. Jesus constantly warned against the assumptions and excesses of the Pharisees. How unthinkable that he should now commission such extravagances. Romans 8:28-30 seems to make it very clear that the idea of forgiveness is God's; the purpose is God's; the knowledge is God's; the predestination is an act of God; the pattern is God's; justification and glorification are acts of God. All is of God in a final sense though there are human conditions to be met. Man proclaims but God has final authority. It is God's gospel proclaimed by human beings, and as Matthew Henry says, "God will never alter this rule of judgment, nor vary from it; those whom the gospel acquits shall be acquitted, and those whom the gospel condemns shall be condemned."⁶⁴

VI

OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

It has been objected that these perfect tenses stand in general conditions and hence are very difficult to classify as to time. One must concede that the problem is complicated by this fact and surprise may even be expressed that the perfect tense should even occur in these conditional sentences. But the very fact that the perfect tense did here displace the more regular present is evidence that the writer had a reason. Might not the reason be the normal function of preserving a reference to prior action?

If relatives, participles and the like are also considered, the present writer has located 17 cases where the perfect is so used besides the Johannine passage.⁶⁵ In some of these examples it is not wise to assert dogmatically that the action expressed by the perfect is always necessarily past to the speaker or previous to the action of the protasis. Romans 6:7 and 7:2, in fact, seem to imply that the action of the protasis makes a contribution to the completion of the act or state of the apodosis. The action is of course past from some point but sometimes in a general condition that seems to be a moving point as it applies to each of the particular cases on which the generalization was based. Thus these verses can be translated "For the one who died finds himself freed from sin" and "If the husband dies, she is in a state of having been freed from the law of the husband."

The remaining 15 passages vary considerably, sometimes emphasizing the permanent state and sometimes exhibiting a proleptical tendency. But they are all true perfects. It simply is not always possible, because of the nature of a general condition, to fix the point of the completion of the action as previous to the time of the speaker or of the protasis.

However there is a new element that must be considered in John 20:23. In the other cases only one agent had to be considered and the nature of the construction often demanded that this sole agent aid in bringing about the result in the apodosis. However in John we have a double agency. Both God and man are pictured as acting. It is simply a question of who has priority. The literal use gives precedence to God and the figurative to man.

⁶³ Romans 2:25; 6:7; 7:2; 13:8; 14:23; John 3:18; 5:24; I Cor. 7:39; Jas. 2:10; I John 2:5; I Esdras 3:21; Xen: *Anab.* i, 8, 12; Xen: *Mem.* i, 2, 21; Xen: *Cyr.* iv, 2, 26; Demosthenes 24, 139; Plato: Protagoras 328b; Thucydides 2, 45.

⁶⁴ John Wesley, *Notes*, John 20:23.

⁶⁵ *Commentary*, John 20:23.

Since the literal makes sense, the figurative is, from a grammatical standpoint, highly improbable.

Another question arises from the words "ye remit." The clear implication is that man has a part in the remission. However, the logic of the situation would be satisfied by the "prophetically ministerial" act of proclaiming God's will and the conditions of pardon.

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Then there remains Cadbury's final objection to allowing a "sacerdotalism" to Jesus that we do not allow to his disciples. That is a theological question that must be answered theologically, in part. The present writer feels that there is adequate evidence for the unique character and deity of Jesus Christ to warrant such a distinction, but space does not permit prolonged doctrinal discussion. It can only be stated in passing that Jesus in assuming the "sacerdotalism" of forgiving sins was attempting to establish his unique claim to Deity with all of its prerogatives. Nothing in the situation warrants the assumption that the divine prerogatives were shared by the apostles. Hence it is concluded that the literal interpretation is grammatically probable, logically reasonable and in harmony with the facts of the rest of the Scripture.

For similar reasons it is held that the figurative translation, as authorizing priestly absolution, is from a grammatical standpoint highly conjectural, from logical considerations preposterous, from the viewpoint of theological consistency impossible, and from the records of the apostolic practice historically untenable.

Therefore the evidence appears to be

preponderantly in favor of the literal translation "Whose soever sins ye remit, they have been remitted to them; whose soever sins ye retain, they have been retained" and the corresponding interpretation that man's act was preceded by God's act and that men were warned to avoid any scribal or priestly assumptions and treat as forgiven only those whom God has already forgiven.

VII

THE MEANING OF THE FUTURE PERFECT TENSE

In contrast to the abundance of material on the perfect tense there stand the few fragmentary references to the future perfect tense in Greek grammars. One gains the impression from the paucity and inadequate nature of the treatments that very little is known about the subject. This is quite natural in view of the rare occurrence of the tense in literature.

The situation can be more fully appreciated when it is realized that the writer upon examination of Strabo's *Geography*, Vol. I; Plutarch's *Lives*, Vol. I; Philo's *Works*, Vol. I; the *Hellenistic Greek Reader*⁶⁶; *Papyrus Reader*⁶⁷; *Catalog of Greek Papyri in John Rylands Library*, and part of Plutarch's *Lives*, Vol. II for future perfects, found only two clear cases of the use of the tense.⁶⁸ However he found 1100 examples of the perfect tense in only the first volumes mentioned. As Robertson and Davis say, the "future perfect was always a rare tense and nearly extinct in the New Testament."⁶⁹ They attribute this to the fact that such a tense is not often necessary.

The present method is to study the

⁶⁶ Colwell and Mantey.

⁶⁷ Goodspeed and Colwell.

⁶⁸ Plutarch's *Lives*, Vol. I, p. 66; Philo, Vol. I of *Omnia Opera*, p. 358.

⁶⁹ *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament*, article 403b, p. 305.

opinions of the various grammarians and also to make a first-hand analysis of the sources used by these writers together with such other examples as can be found in the texts themselves.

Kuhner says that the Greek "futurum exactum" marks an action which is fulfilled in the future and lasts on in its effects so that it is the future of the perfect.⁷⁰ He is one of the few to treat the matter with any degree of thoroughness. His 45 illustrations comprised by far the longest list of future perfects that the writer had seen prior to his own list of 95 which incorporated Kuhner's work.

Whereas the perfect tense contemplates an action that is complete at the time of the speaker, the future perfect simply projects the whole unit into the future and conceives an act which will have been completed at the time contemplated in the future and of which the results will abide. If the analogy of the perfect can be followed in this manner, a way has been found to compensate for the paucity of illustrations. Thus the hypothesis is suggested that the future perfect will not likely completely lose its implication of completed action or its reference to abiding results any more than the perfect tense did. However this must be tested.

As far as the basic, literal use of the tense is concerned, at least the grammarians seem to agree with Kuhner and with this hypothesis. And there appears to be no necessity of assuming that Goodwin and Gulick are contradicting these views when they speak of the permanent state depicted in the future perfect tense.⁷¹ As in the perfect tense, the permanent state is simply the result of the completed action.

Examples include Plato, *Gorgias*,

⁷⁰ Anthon, *A Grammar of the Greek Language*, p. 230; Bevier, *op. cit.*, p. 48; Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb*, p. 43.

⁷¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 172.

506c "You will have been enrolled as the greatest benefactor"⁷² and Dem. 14, 2 "All the present fear will have been dispelled."⁷³

However, as there were specialized and figurative uses of the perfect, so there are of the future perfect. Goodwin says that "when the perfect is used in the sense of a present, the future perfect is used as a regular future; e.g. κεκλήσομαι, μεμνήσομαι, ἄφεστήξω."⁷⁴ But for the same reasons that the perfect tense was used instead of the present, the future perfect is used instead of the future. That reason must be found in some vestige of the idea of completed action of which the existing state is a result. Hence it would be difficult to deny that they are futures of true perfects even though the desire for rhetorical or dramatic effect has modified them considerably. Likewise there are intensive future perfects that correspond to intensive perfects. They express the same idea in the future time.

It can then with fairness be concluded that there is no necessity of interpreting the scholars as totally excluding all implication of completed action from the future perfect tense any more than from the perfect tense.

VIII

THE 95 EXAMPLES

The writer is of the opinion that of the 95 examples of the future perfect which he has examined, the literal significance of an act already completed in the future with enduring results is quite clear in 58 instances. In 16 more cases it seems necessary for one reason or another to reckon with an intensive element. And in the remaining 21 usages there are problems that deserved special consideration. These include such matters as threats, point-

⁷² Goodwin, *p. cit.*, p. 43.

⁷³ Bevier, *p. cit.*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

ed warnings, strong affirmations of certainty and other decisive sayings where the dramatic and rhetorical demands make a figurative use either possible or probable. However that is not the same as proving that the basic significance of the tense is wholly lost.

The regular future perfects have already been illustrated. The figurative is seen in such passages as Aristophanes, *Plutus*, 1027 "Speak and it shall have been accomplished" (or shall be fully achieved at once), and *Iliad* B, 257, "and this word shall have been brought to pass (shall verily be brought to pass)."

The periphrastic problem was also investigated and 33 of the 95 were so classified besides 8 more that were compound non-periphrastics. The other 54 were simple forms. It was observed that these were distributed somewhat evenly between the figurative and literal passages. Though there are interesting trends observable in such a study there appears to be nothing about the periphrastic idea, *per se*, that would determine the translation of a given passage as figurative, though it might conceivably increase the likelihood of such a use. In any case the figurative interpretation is dangerous unless necessary. And if necessary, the context will point the way and safeguard it from wild speculation.

Thus it appears that the literal use of the future perfect tense is as a future of a true perfect to express an act that will be already completed at the time contemplated in the future and that will have abiding results. Since this use appears to outnumber the figurative by a safe margin, since some of the figurative uses are granted on such uncertain grounds, since even the figurative examples maintain a solid ground of literal fact to support the analogy, and since the periphrastic construction does not materially change the translation, a figurative

translation would be highly conjectural from a grammatical standpoint.

IX

THE TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 16:19 AND 18:18

The literal rendering of the Matthean passages would then be "whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." And as has been indicated, the literal translation ought, from a grammatical standpoint, to be used unless it is shown to be awkward or impossible.

The meaning of the passages, then, would be that the apostles were elevated to the same rank and privileges which the scribes enjoyed, but they were cautioned against the abuses common to the scribes.¹⁵ They were not to exceed their authority but were to forbid what God would have already forbidden and permit what God would have already permitted. They were to be heralds, preachers, ambassadors—not priests with authority to bind God by their acts of priestly absolution.

As in the case of the perfects in John 20:23, the future perfects of the Matthean passages occur in general conditions. The same problems arise with the future perfects in these conditions as were considered in connection with the perfect tense, and the same methodology finds similar answers. Though contextual and logical demands do in some cases force one to grant that the action described by a perfect or future perfect tense in the apodosis is not always prior to that of the protasis in a general condition, there is no such necessity in these passages. The double agency of God and man relieves any pressure that might otherwise occur. And since there is no emergency that demands a figurative

¹⁵ J. R. Mantey, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

use, it is unsafe to depart from the literal. At least any doctrine that is based on such a translation has a foundation of sand.

Since all three passages are parallel in meaning, the same logical, theological and historical arguments apply in favor of the literal translation and against the figurative. Therefore it can be concluded that sacerdotalism, as based on these three passages, is

highly conjectural grammatically, preposterous logically, impossible theologically and untenable historically. Priestly absolution must have grown up without Scriptural sanction until it found a good hiding place in a misleading translation of these passages. If that is so, it is regrettable that no way has been found in the recent translation of the New Testament to improve the rendering.