

A Little Bit of Greek

Session 2: The Importance of Tense in John 1

In person at Wai 'alae Baptist Church

Online via Zoom:

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What is the tense of the verbs in the following sentences?

He buys a cookie.

He is buying a cookie.

He has bought a cookie.

He has been buying a cookie.

He will buy a cookie.

He will be buying a cookie.

He will have bought a cookie.

He will have been buying a cookie.

He bought a cookie.

He was buying a cookie.

He had bought a cookie.

He had been buying a cookie.

In Greek and English, verb tense tells us two things. Most people know the first one but typically do not think about the second.

- _____ something happened
- Whether what happened is _____ or _____

Greek has fewer tenses, but they are like the English tenses, but in some cases have different names. We will focus on the two that are important in John 1. These two have different names from their English counterparts: Imperfect and Aorist.

He bought a cookie.

He was buying a cookie.

An important difference is that

One tense refers to something happening at a particular point in time.

One tense refers to something ongoing in past time.

One more thing before we look at the text. Greek and English have regular ways to show the tense of a verb. For example, in English, past tense can be shown in different ways.

Rain rained
Buy bought
Drink drank
Read Read

Greek also indicates past tense in different ways. However, in both English and Greek there are irregular verbs that do not follow patterns. These verbs are the ones for “to be” and “to go.” What pattern do you see here?

To be is are was were
To go go goes went

It’s almost like they are different words. Two different words are used in Greek for the aorist and imperfect “to be” verb.

ειμι – Used for imperfect and present

γινομαι – Used for aorist

The first word is a lot like our “to be” verb. The second word has a much wider range of meaning. Some of which are used in the passage below. The form of the verbs highlighted below are

3rd person singular imperfect active indicative of ειμι

3rd person singular aorist middle indicative γινομαι

Ἐν ἀρχῇ **ἦν** ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος **ἦν** πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς **ἦν** ὁ λόγος.

In the beginning the word **was**, and the word **was** with God, and the word **was** God.

² οὗτος **ἦν** ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν.

This one **was** in the beginning with God.

³ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ **ἐγένετο**, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ **ἐγένετο** οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ **γένονεν**

Everything **was made** through him, and without him nothing **was made** which **had been made**.

⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ **ἦν**, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ **ἦν** τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων·

In him **was** life, and the life **was** the light of all people.

⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not understand it.

⁶ **Ἐγένετο** ἄνθρωπος ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης·

A man sent from God **came**, by name John.

⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι’ αὐτοῦ.

This one came to witness so that he would witness regarding the light.

⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός.
That one **was not** the light, but would witness regarding the light.

⁹ ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον.
The true light, which will shine upon/enlighten all men, **was** coming into the world.

¹⁰ Ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω.
He **was** in the world, and the world **was made**, through him, and the world did not know him.

¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον.
He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

¹² ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ,
But to the ones who did receive him, he gave to them the power **to become** children of God, to the ones believing in his name.

¹³ οἱ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.
They were not born from blood nor the will of the flesh nor the will of man, but from God.

¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας·
And the word **become** flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as the only one of the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· Οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον· Ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν·)
John witnesses regarding him and having cried out saying: This **was** of whom I said: The one coming behind me **ranks (has been/become)** before me because he **was** before me.

¹⁶ ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν, καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος·
Because of his fullness we all receive, even grace upon grace.

¹⁷ ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο.
Because the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth **came/became** through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.
No one has ever seen God; the one of a kind God, the one being at the bosom of the Father, this one has made (him) known.

In every case but one, John uses the imperfect to speak about _____ and the aorist to speak about _____.

What are some of the reasons he would do that?

What is the exceptional case?

What is John communicating in how he uses the verb tenses?

This is even more important when we look at the structure of the prologue, especially the first five verses.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος,
καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,
καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν,
καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων·
⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει,
καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

What do these structures look like? What are some reasons John would have written these this way?

A pre-formed tradition shows how this was not just the belief of one person, but one held by the church as a whole.

IF WE HAVE TIME, here are some other important points about this passage.

S Prep V
ὅτι (ὁ νόμος) (διὰ Μωϋσέως) (ἐδόθη),
S Prep V
(ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια) (διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) (**ἐγένετο**).
Because the law was given through Moses,
but grace and truth **came/became** through Jesus Christ.

Notice how John writes two sentences that have the same structure, but treats law and grace and truth differently. The parallel structure makes us focus on the difference in Greek. What is the difference and what is the significance of it?

¹⁸ Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς Θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

This entire prologue has presented major themes in John, which are also major characteristics of Jesus and his mission. Much of that is captured here in this one verse.

Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· *No one has ever seen God.* This would have rung true with Jewish and Gentile believers alike. Then, John makes the very unexpected, even scandalous, statement.

μονογενὴς Θεὸς *the one of a kind God.* Not shocking yet.

ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς *the one being at the bosom of the Father.* Shocker number one – the one of a kind God is not the Father, but he is with the Father, who is God.

ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο. *that one has made (him) known.* Shocker number two – the one of a kind God who is very close to the Father but not the Father, has revealed who the Father is.

John will devote the rest of the gospel to showing how Jesus revealed who God truly is. Compare this to 1 John 4:12 for a third shocker.

¹² Θεὸν οὐδεὶς πώποτε τεθέαται· *No one has ever seen God.* John uses a different word for “see” but with the same sense as in the gospel. Again, no shocker here.

ἐὰν ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὁ Θεὸς ἐν ἡμῖν μένει καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη αὐτοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν τετελειωμένη ἐστίν. *If we love one another, God abides/remains in us and his love is perfected in us.*

How does John 1:18 help us understand the shocking statement Paul is making here?