

EXEGETICAL GEMS FROM BIBLICAL GREEK

A REFRESHING GUIDE
to Grammar and Interpretation



BENJAMIN L. MERKLE

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INTRODUCTION

Why This Book?

In one sentence, I wrote this book as a tool to help current and former students of New Testament Greek prosper and ultimately succeed in using the Greek they worked so hard to acquire. Because there is currently no book like this one, allow me to explain its uniqueness. The 2017 book that I coauthored with Robert Plummer offered practical strategies for acquiring Greek, maintaining it, and getting it back if it becomes rusty.¹ That book is intended to encourage and inspire without getting too deep into the details of Greek grammar and syntax. It also offers some powerful testimonies from pastors who use their Greek in ministry, and it presents a few devotional reflections from the Greek New Testament.

In one sense the present book has the same ultimate goal as *Greek for Life*, but it pursues it very differently. As the title indicates, this book offers a collection of “exegetical gems,” loosely defined as substantial insights from NT passages gained by a proper knowledge and use of Greek. Knowledge of NT Greek does not answer every exegetical or theological question that people raise. It does, however, make a significant difference in many key passages, providing exegetical answers to debated texts. Seeing such examples is encouraging to current and former students of NT Greek and provides motivation for continued use of the language.

There is another practical outcome of reading this book. Let’s face it, reviewing Greek can be difficult and tedious. Even if you have

1. Benjamin L. Merkle and Robert L. Plummer, *Greek for Life: Strategies for Learning, Retaining, and Reviving New Testament Greek*, with a foreword by William D. Mounce (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

INTRODUCTION

already taken Greek, reading through an 800-page grammar can be daunting and even discouraging. But what if there were a way to review the basics of Greek syntax without needing to reread a reference grammar? What if there were a tool that not only reviewed such syntax but also demonstrated the exegetical payoff along the way? What if the content of a massive grammar were condensed into less than 200 pages, with dozens of exegetical gems uncovered in the process? That is precisely what this book seeks to accomplish.

What Is This Book?

This book consists of thirty-five chapters, each of which offers two main things: (1) an exegetical gem from the NT and (2) a review of some aspect of Greek syntax. By the time you finish reading through this book, you will have reviewed all of the basics typically covered in a second-year (or second-semester) Greek syntax and exegesis course. The order in which topics are presented generally follows that of a book I coauthored with Andreas Köstenberger and Robert Plummer.²

Each chapter follows the same basic format: (1) introduction, (2) overview, and (3) interpretation. The introduction presents the biblical text containing the exegetical gem for the chapter. It also raises a question that can be answered with a sufficient knowledge of Greek, especially knowledge of the topic covered in the chapter. Then the overview offers a brief account of the relevant aspect of Greek syntax and, within the broader topic, helps situate the precise insight needed to answer the exegetical question. The final, interpretation section applies the newly acquired insight to the exegetical question and offers a solution.

For Whom Is This Book?

This book can be used in various contexts by a variety of readers, but I will highlight the most obvious audiences:

2. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2016). Hereafter cited as KMP.

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1. *College or seminary students.* This book will be helpful whether you are first learning Greek or are in a more advanced course. For example, if you are currently taking Greek syntax, this book provides numerous examples of how knowing Greek makes a difference in the way we interpret the Bible. Reading this book alongside your main textbook will provide a condensed summary of the material in an accessible format.
2. *Former Greek students.* If you took Greek many moons ago and are a bit rusty, or if you are looking for helpful tools so you don't get rusty, then this book is for you. Although some of you might enjoy casually reading a book on Greek grammar or syntax, most won't find that very appealing. Most grammars are designed as reference tools rather than as classroom textbooks.³ This book offers you a way to glean new insights from knowing Greek *but at the same time* enables you to review all the basics of Greek syntax.
3. *Greek teachers.* If you teach Greek, you know how difficult it can be to keep students motivated to press on with the hard work of acquiring the language. Students need encouragement along the way, and the best way to motivate them is to show them how knowing Greek makes a difference in understanding and interpreting the Bible. This book gives you thirty-five examples you can use to instruct and inspire your students.

Who Helped with This Book?

I should mention several people who in some way contributed to this book. First, I thank my good friend Chip Hardy, who was integral in coming up with the concept of this book. Indeed, Chip is the author of *Exegetical Gems from Biblical Hebrew*, the companion volume to this book, also published by Baker Academic. Second, thanks are due to Baker editor Bryan Dyer, who offered valuable feedback along the way and has been a great encouragement to me from the beginning of this project. Third, I am grateful for Alysha Clark, Alex Carr, and David Moss—students at Southeastern Baptist Theological

3. Our *Going Deeper* (KMP) is a notable exception.

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Seminary—who helped edit drafts of the manuscript. Fourth, I am thankful for my colleagues at Southeastern who continually challenge me to pursue a deeper love for Christ. Fifth, I am grateful for my supportive wife and my loving children. Finally, I give thanks to my Savior, Jesus Christ, because I once was lost but now am found.

δι' ὑμᾶς ἐπτώχευσεν πλούσιος ὢν, ἵνα ὑμεῖς τῇ ἐκείνου πτωχείᾳ
πλουτήσητε.

Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by
his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

1

KOINE GREEK

Matthew 18:8

Introduction

It is commonly thought that the most literal translation of the Bible is the best version. In other words, whatever the Greek says should be rendered straightforwardly and without addition or subtraction in the receptor language. But translating the Bible with such a wooden understanding of translation theory is doomed to produce less than ideal results. Because language is complex and ever changing, we must allow for a more nuanced view of how the Bible should be translated. For example, Matthew 18:8 states, “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.” The Greek term translated “better” (καλόν) is the positive adjective ordinarily meaning “good.” But is Jesus really stating that it is “good” to enter eternal life maimed or lame?

Overview

In the early part of the twentieth century, it was common for Christians to claim that the Greek of the NT was a special Spirit-inspired Greek and thus different from the typical Greek of the first century.

Then scholars compared NT Greek with the Greek found in various papyri of the time and discovered that the NT used the common (colloquial or popular) Greek of the day.¹ That is, the Greek of the NT is closer to the language of the ordinary person than to that of the educated person who wrote literature for others to read (e.g., Plutarch).² And yet the Greek of the NT is still somewhat unique.³ Its uniqueness is probably due to at least two factors. First, the NT authors were heavily influenced by the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek translation of the OT). This influence is seen not only when the Septuagint is quoted but also in the syntax and sentence structure. Second, the NT authors were influenced by the reality of the gospel, and along with that came the need to express themselves in new ways. Machen explains: “They had come under the influence of new convictions of a transforming kind, and those new convictions had their effect in the sphere of language. Common words had to be given new and loftier meanings.”⁴

The Greek language used during the time of the writing of the NT is known as Koine (common) Greek (300 BC–AD 330). Before this era, the Greek language is known as Classical Greek (800–500 BC) and Ionic-Attic Greek (500–300 BC). Many significant changes occurred in the transition from the Classical/Attic Greek to Koine Greek. Here are some of those changes:

- The increased use of prepositions rather than cases alone to communicate the relationship between words (e.g., Eph. 1:5, προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν, κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ, “He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, ac-
cording to the kind intention of His will,” NASB), as well as a lack of precision between prepositions (e.g., διά/ἐκ [Rom. 3:30], ἐν/εἰς or περί/ὑπέρ).

1. See esp. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995; German original 1909).

2. J. Gresham Machen states, “Undoubtedly the language of the New Testament is no artificial language of books, and no Jewish-Greek jargon, but the natural, living language of the period.” *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1923), 5.

3. Wallace (28) summarizes, “The *style* is Semitic, the *syntax* is conversational/literary Koine (the descendant of Attic), and the *vocabulary* is vernacular Koine.”

4. Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners*, 5.

- The decreased use of the optative mood (found only 68 times in the NT). Most occurrences are found in formulaic constructions such as *μὴ γένοιτο* (“May it never be!” NASB; used 14 times by Paul and once by Luke) and *εἴη* (“could be”; used 11 times by Luke and once by John).
- The spelling change of certain verbs such as first-aorist endings applied to second-aorist verbs (*εἶπαν* instead of *εἶπον*, “they said”) and omega-verb endings found on some *μι* verbs (*ἀφίουσιν* instead of *ἀφιεασιν*, “they allow/forgive”).
- The increase of shorter, simpler sentences and as well as the increase of coordinated clauses (parataxis).

And the change that we will focus on in this chapter:

- *The increased use of positive and comparative adjective forms used to express a superlative or relative idea.*

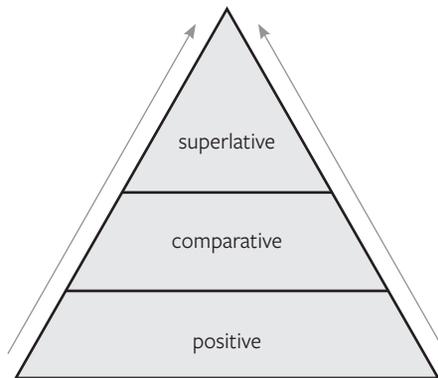
Interpretation

This last change in Koine helps us understand a number of passages, particularly why they often are not translated “literally.” In Matthew 18:8, is Jesus really stating that it is “good” (*καλόν*) for someone to enter eternal life maimed or lame? The answer is obviously no, since it is not necessarily “good” for a person to enter eternal life that way, but it is “better” to enter that way than not at all. Thus, here a positive adjective is used in place of a comparative adjective, a common feature in Koine Greek. This interpretation is confirmed by comparing this passage with a similar saying of Jesus earlier in Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew 5:29–30, *συμφέρει* (it is profitable, it is better) is used instead of *καλόν . . . ἐστίν* (it is good).

Another reason we know that the positive adjective can function as a comparative (or superlative) and that a comparative can function as a superlative is that it is fairly common and is sometimes found in contexts where the adjective *must* function in a way that is different from its “normal” meaning. For example, in Matthew 22:38 we read, *αὕτη ἐστίν ἡ μεγάλη καὶ πρώτη ἐντολή* (literally, “This is the great and first commandment”). Although there is not consistency among the English Bible versions in translating this verse, it seems

best to translate the positive adjective *μεγάλη* (great) as a superlative adjective (greatest). This interpretation is derived from the fact that it is one commandment among many (as is confirmed by the use of “first” and “second” in the context). So, for example, the NRSV translates the verse as follows: “This is the greatest and first commandment” (see also CSB, NET, NJB, NLT).⁵ Another example is found in 1 Corinthians 13:13, where Paul writes, *συνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα· μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη*, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Here Paul uses the comparative adjective *μείζων* (greater). The problem, however, is that a comparative adjective is normally used where there are only two entities and one is given a greater degree than the other. So, for example, love is considered *greater* than faith. But in 1 Corinthians 13:13 Paul offers three concepts: (1) faith, (2) hope, and (3) love. When more than two concepts are compared, a superlative adjective becomes necessary (at least in English). But because Paul uses a comparative adjective when a superlative is typically used, this clearly demonstrates the use of a comparative for a superlative.

One more item should be mentioned here. It was common for a positive adjective to function as a comparative or superlative and for a comparative adjective to function as a superlative. It was *not* common, however, for a comparative adjective to function as a positive or for a superlative adjective to function as a comparative or positive. The diagram illustrates that an adjective could perform the function of the adjective degree above it, but not (usually) below it.



5. So also Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H, 2017), 265.

2

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Romans 5:1

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome is arguably the greatest letter ever written.¹ As John Stott declares, "It is the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament."² And while there is no doubt that the apostle Paul is the author of the epistle, there are a few places where there is some debate as to precisely what Paul wrote. For example, in Romans 5:1 we read, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have [ἔχομεν] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." But some scholars, such as Stanley Porter, have argued that this verse should be rendered, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, let us have [ἔχομεν] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." On what basis does Porter make this claim?³

1. See Benjamin L. Merkle, "Is Romans Really the Greatest Letter Ever Written?," *SBJT* 11, no. 3 (2007): 18–32.

2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 19.

3. Stanley E. Porter, "Not Only That (οὐ μόνον), but It Has Been Said Before: A Response to Verlyn Verbrugge, or Why Reading Previous Scholarship Can Avoid Scholarly Misunderstandings," *JETS* 56, no. 3 (2013): 577–83.

Overview

The answer to Porter’s claim has to do with textual criticism. Textual criticism is the study of determining which textual variant is most likely the original reading. Because the original manuscripts (autographs) have not survived, we are dependent on copies of the originals. The problem arises when the copies have slight differences (i.e., variants). Today we have access to nearly 6,000 NT Greek manuscripts that date from AD 125 to the sixteenth century. In seeking to determine the most likely reading, it is important to consider both external and internal evidence.

External evidence relates to the age, location, and quantity of the manuscripts that support a particular variant. Below are a few general principles for judging the external evidence:

- *Prefer the older manuscripts.* It is assumed that the older a manuscript is, the less time it had for errors to creep in. Conversely, the younger a manuscript is, the further separated in time it is from the original and thus the more chance it had for errors to be introduced into the manuscript. Thus manuscripts often favored include \aleph (Sinaiticus, 4th cent.), A (Alexandrinus, 5th cent.), B (Vaticanus, 4th cent.), C (Ephraemi Rescriptus, 5th cent.), and the portion of D containing the Pauline Epistles (Claromontanus, 6th cent.).
- *Prefer the reading that is supported by the majority of (significant) manuscripts.* Because the majority of manuscripts come from the Byzantine tradition, this criterion must be qualified by the term “significant.” Most of the manuscripts we possess today are labeled “Byzantine” since Greek continued to be used in the East while Latin remained dominant in the West. Hence the great majority of these manuscripts follow the Byzantine reading, but they are often relatively young manuscripts (8th–15th cent.). These later manuscripts are often not considered significant since they come from an earlier exemplar.⁴ Thus manuscripts must be weighed and not merely counted.

4. An exemplar is a text used to produce another text.

- *Prefer the reading that is best attested across various families of manuscripts.* There are three main families of manuscripts based on geographic provenance: (1) Byzantine, (2) Alexandrian, and (3) Western. The manuscripts in these families often display a family resemblance, which indicates a common source. The Alexandrian family (which includes \aleph , A, B, C)⁵ is often considered the most reliable. A disputed reading that includes manuscripts from several families is considered significant.

Internal evidence relates to the context of where the disputed variants are found. That is, how do the variants relate to the author's style, theology, and argumentation in the larger context? Below are a few general principles of how to judge the internal evidence:

- *Prefer the reading that best corresponds with the style and theology of the author.* Because various authors tend to use somewhat predictable stylistic patterns and embrace certain theological motifs, it is important to take those characteristics into account. We must remember, however, that these features can change due to differences in (1) an amanuensis (ancient secretary), (2) purpose, or (3) recipient.
- *Prefer the reading that best explains the origin of the other variants.* This is perhaps the most important internal criterion since it leads us to examine what might have caused the variant in the first place. Thus it is helpful to ask, "Which reading might have caused the variant reading?" Knowing scribal tendencies helps answer this question.
- *Prefer the more difficult reading.* Because scribes tended to "fix" or "improve" texts, it is best to choose the harder reading. In other words, it is more likely that a scribe sought to clarify a text rather than introduce confusion and difficulty into a text.
- *Prefer the shorter reading.* Because scribes tended to clarify or explain a text, it is best to choose the more abbreviated

5. The Gospels in Codices A and B are considered part of the Byzantine textual tradition.

reading. This is especially true when investigating parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels.⁶

Interpretation

Based on the above information, which reading is to be preferred in Romans 5:1? Let's review the text: δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως εἰρήνην ἔχομεν [ἔχωμεν] πρὸς τὸν θεὸν διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have [let us have] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The difference between the two variants is that some manuscripts have an indicative form (ἔχομεν), whereas others have a (hortatory) subjunctive form (ἔχωμεν).

Based on the external evidence, the subjunctive form should be preferred. It is found in the majority of the earliest manuscripts (Ⲛ*, A, B*, C, and D)⁷ and is represented by various families (Byzantine: K, L; Alexandrian: Ⲛ*, A, B*, C, 33, and 81; and Western: D). In contrast, the indicative reading is supported by Ⲛ¹, B², F, G, P, and Ψ.⁸ With external evidence this strong, why is it that virtually no English version opts for the subjunctive reading? The answer is that the internal evidence in this case is seen to outweigh the external evidence.⁹

6. For a standard work on textual criticism, see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also David Alan Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Black, ed., *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Michael Holmes, "Textual Criticism," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 100–134; KMP 24–35; Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, and Canon*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 229–47; Daniel B. Wallace, ed., *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).

7. An asterisk (*) next to the letter of the manuscript indicates the original reading (since the manuscript was later "corrected").

8. The superscripted ¹ and ² indicate successive correctors of a manuscript.

9. Bruce M. Metzger notes that although the subjunctive form has better external evidence, "a majority of the Committee judge that internal evidence must here take precedence." *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 452.

Based on the internal evidence, the indicative form is preferred.¹⁰ Although the subjunctive is considered the more difficult reading, for many it is viewed as too difficult. In addition, the indicative best corresponds with the context and with Paul's theology. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 452) explains: "Since in this passage it appears that Paul is not exhorting but stating facts ('peace' is the possession of those who have been justified), only the indicative is consonant with the apostle's argument." In this case, the internal evidence is given priority because the difference between the two readings is probably due to the similar pronunciation between the omicron and the omega in the Hellenistic age. Additionally, Metzger and Ehrman assert that the more difficult reading should be viewed as "relative, and a point is sometimes reached when a reading must be judged to be so difficult that it can have arisen only by accident in transcription."¹¹

In the end, the difference between the indicative and the subjunctive is small in light of the entire epistle. As Verbrugge summarizes, "Regardless of whether Paul makes a statement ('we have peace with God'), or . . . an outright exhortation ('let us enjoy the peace we have with God'), the truth remains that through the saving work of Christ, who is our peace (Eph. 2:14), we do have peace with God."¹²

10. For a defense of this position, see Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "The Grammatical Internal Evidence for "EXOMEN in Romans 5:1," *JETS* 54, no. 3 (2011): 559–72.

11. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 303.

12. Verbrugge, "Grammatical Internal Evidence," 572.