The Aorist Tense

The Greek aorist expresses action primarily as the English simple past tense. The aorist is sometimes called a timeless tense because the time aspect is only found in the indicative and the participle. The aorist denotes the action simply as occurring without reference to it progress. The aorist denotes the action as an event without defining the manner of its occurrence or its completeness. It expresses the fact of the action or event without regard to its duration.

Dr. Young presents the aorist this way: “It would be better to view the aorist as grammaticalizing the speaker’s perception of an event in its entirety or as a single whole… the difference between the perfective aspect (aorist) and the imperfective aspect (present and imperfect) is the difference between viewing an entire parade from a helicopter (perfective) and viewing one float at a time pass by from the curb or grandstand (imperfective). The event does not have to be objectively completed in order to be perceived as a whole (e.g., futuristic aorists).”¹

Uses of the Aorist

Constantive aorist. The constantive aorist describes the action or event as a whole without regard to the internal working of the action. That is to say, it takes the occurrence as a single whole without regard of its duration. This is the basic usage and idea of the aorist.

Examples are found in Rom. 5:14: ἀλλὰ ἐβασπέλεσεν ὁ θανάτος ἀπὸ Ἁδαμ μεχρὶ Μωσέως καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς μὴ ἁμαρτήσαντας ἐπὶ τῷ ὁμοιωματί τῆς Ἁδαμ ὡς ἐστὶν τυπὸς τοῦ μελλόντος. (But the death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam).

Acts 11:26: καὶ εὗρον ἤγαγεν εἰς Ἁτιοχειαν. ἐγενετο δὲ αὐτὸς καὶ ἐναντιον ὅλον συναχῆναι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ διδάσκαλον ἵκανον, χρηστίσαι της πρώτως ἐν Ἁτιοχειᾳ τοὺς μαθηταὶς Χριστιανουσ. (And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch).

Acts 18:11: ἐκαθαίρευ ὅ ἐν αὐτού καὶ μήνας ἐξ διδασκόν ἐν αὐτῶς τον λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ. (And he [Paul] continued a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them).

Ingressive aorist. The ingressive aorist expresses the action or event from its inception, from its beginning or entrance of the action or state. An example is found in 2 Cor. 8:9: γίνοσκετε γαρ

(For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich). Matt. 22:7: ὅ δὲ βασιλεὺς ὠργίσθη καὶ πέμψας τα στρατεύματα αὐτοῦ ἀπώλεσεν τοὺς φονεῖς ἐκείνους καὶ τὴν πόλιν αὐτῶν ἐνέπεσεν. (But the king became angry and he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city).

**Culminative aorist.** The culminative aorist expresses the action from the point of view of its cessation or completion. Thus, it is normally translated as the perfect tense. The culminative aorist is normally used with verbs of effort or process where the end result is attained. Examples are found in Phil. 4:11: οὐχ ὅτι καθ’ ὑστερησίν λέγω, ἐγὼ γαρ ἔμαθον ἐν οἷς εἰμι αὐτάρκης εἰναι. (Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am). 1 John 2:11: ὁ δὲ μισόν τοῦ ἀδέλφου αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ σχοτίᾳ ἔστιν καὶ ἐν τῇ σχοτίᾳ περιπατεῖ καὶ οὐκ οὐδὲν ποῦ ὑπαγεῖ, ὅτι τὸ σχοτῖα ἔτυφλωσεν τοὺς ὄρθωλομος αὐτοῦ. (But the one who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes).

**Gnomic aorist.** The gnomic aorist is used to express a generally accepted fact. Examples are 1 Peter 1:24: διὸ τὰ πᾶσα σαρκὶ ὡς χορτὸς καὶ πᾶσα δοξὰ αὐτῆς ὡς ἀνθός χορτὸν ἔξηρανθη ὁ χορτὸς καὶ τὸ ἀνθὸς ἐξεπέσεν (For, all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower fades away). Gal. 5:24: οί δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τὴν σαρκὰ ἐσταυρώσαν τόις παθημαῖ καὶ ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις. (Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires).

**Epistolary Aorist.** An epistolary aorist is used by the author to place himself at the viewpoint of his reader to express an act or event that is present or future. Dr. Wallace clarifies, “This is the use of the aorist indicative in the epistles in which the author self-consciously describes his letter from the time frame of the audience.” An examples is Phil 2:28: σπουδαστήρῳ ὅν ἐπέμψα αὐτὸν, ἵνα ἴδοτες αὐτὸν παλιν χαρῆτε καγω ἀλωποτέρῳ ὁ. (Therefore I have sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful).

**Dramatic aorist.** The dramatic aorist is used as a device for emphasis to express a present reality with the certitude of a past event. The English translation can be expressed using the word “just,” or “just now.” An example is found in Mark 5:35: Ἔτι αὐτὸῦ λαλοῦντος ἔρχονται ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρχισυναγωγοῦ λεγόντες ὅτι ἡ θυγατὴ σου ἀπέθανεν τι ἐτὶ σκληρίς τον διδασκάλων (While He was still speaking, they came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, “your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?”). Another example is Matt. 26:65: τοτε ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς διερρήσει τα ὅµατα αὐτοῦ λεγὼν ἐβλασφήσεν. τι ἐτὶ χρειαν ἐχομέν μαρτυρών ἰδε νῦν ἐκουσατε την βλασφημίαν (Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, “He has

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blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy.”).

Futuristic aorist. The futuristic aorist is used to describe an event that has not taken place yet is seen as already completed (sometimes called proleptic). Examples are found in John 13:31: Οτε οὖν ἔξηλθεν, λέγει Ἰησοῦς νῦν ἐδοξάσθη ὁ ήιος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ ο θεος ἐδοξάσθη ἐν αὐτῷ (Then when he had gone out, Jesus said, “now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him.”) Rom. 8:30: οὺς δὲ προσώπες, τούτους καὶ ἐκάλεσεν καὶ οὐς ἐκάλεσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδικαίωσεν. οὐς δὲ ἐδικαίωσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδοξάσεν. (and whom He predestined, those He also called, and whom He called, these He also justified, and whom He justified He also glorified).