[*BAGL* 11 (2022–23) 101–29]

If You Can't Read, You Can't Exegete: The Importance of Reading Skills for Greek Exegesis

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Abstract: While all scholars agree that responsible interpretation of the Greek New Testament requires the use of a variety of exegetical tools, it is exceedingly rare to find treatments of hermeneutics or exegesis that address the importance of being able to actually read, rather than simply decode, the biblical text in its original languages. This study considers the ramifications of this gap in exegetical training and practice primarily through illustrating how a lack of fluid reading skills may lead modern exegetes to misread the biblical text in a variety of ways. (Article)

Keywords: Koine Greek, exegesis, reading skills

1. *Introduction*

All of us who claim to be serious students of the Greek New Testament make use of a wide variety of tools from our exegetical toolbox in an attempt to ensure that we are accurately interpreting it.[1] Depending on the text in view, we might lean heavily on careful analysis of Greek syntax or Greek discourse structure, perhaps applying a variety of linguistic theories. Or we might turn to rhetorical criticism, social-scientific criticism, textual criticism, or any number of other common exegetical

1. This paper, along with the one before and the one that follows in this volume, was first delivered in the session on "What Is Lacking in Exegesis?" of the New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis section of the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX, on 14–16 November 2023.

tools depending on the exegetical issues we are facing. I want to suggest in this article, however, that in our efforts to make our exegesis as robust as possible, we must not neglect one of the most important tools for ensuring that we are rightly handling the Greek: fluid reading skills.

I freely acknowledge that the title of this article is hyperbolic. There is much that can be accomplished at an exegetical level without the ability to fluidly read through a text. What I want to do in what follows, however, is illustrate how a lack of fluid reading skills can *compromise* our exegetical abilities, sometimes in significant ways. Given the nature of this article, I will begin by providing some important context for what I will argue. I have been a student of Koine Greek for more than forty years. Much of my thinking about Greek has been significantly shaped by my study of linguistics. My first degrees were in linguistics and I had the privilege of teaching linguistics in a university graduate school in Thailand and doing linguistic field work along the Burma border long before I shifted my focus to biblical studies. Linguistics, then, was my "first love." And I continue to find great value in applying linguistic theory to the Greek language in an effort to better understand the Greek Bible, in large part because I have found so much value in applying linguistic theory to analyzing many other languages. Having spent a significant amount of time working as a field linguist, however, I know from experience that it is not uncommon for careful linguistic analysis of an oral or written text to reveal apparent ambiguity, only to discover that native speakers see no ambiguity in that text whatsoever! And if the meaning of a text is unambiguous to a native speaker, but ambiguous to a linguist (or exegete) who is *not* a native speaker of the language, whom should we trust?[2]

2. I have observed the same mismatch between linguistic analysis and native speaker perception in regard to discourse prominence. It is not difficult to ask the right questions of mother-tongue speakers of a language to determine what parts of a text they view as prominent without using linguistic jargon to do so. Often, the disconnect between linguistic analysis and mother-tongue speaker perception relates to failure on the part of the linguist to take into

I would suggest that the problem of positing ambiguity in a text that no mother-tongue reader of that text would recognize is fairly common among those who write about the Greek New Testament. Many New Testament commentators fail at times to distinguish between what is *grammatically* possible and what is *communicatively* possible. In other words, they look at how a particular grammatical construction *can* be used, according to reference grammars, and then conclude that two or more interpretations are possible in a given context, when someone who is reading through that text fluidly would see cues within the text and quickly identify the one possible interpretation. Ultimately, what New Testament exegetes should be concerned with is what is communicatively possible, rather than wasting time debating interpretations that native speakers would never even consider viable alternatives.

The challenge, of course, is that just as some of us are set in our theological ways, so also many of us have exegetical habits that are so ingrained that we never even consider that they might be quite illogical or completely inconsistent with how readers process texts. For example, many New Testament commentators, when faced with a question of what a particular word in the Pauline Epistles means, will rely heavily on how Paul has used that word elsewhere in his extant writings. Although this might sound logical, the original readers (or listeners) of the text in question would have never considered how Paul had used that term in his other letters. Instead, they would have brought to the text their knowledge of how that word was used in their shared first-century context. And knowing that word's range of meaning at that time, it would have typically been quite obvious which of the possible meanings was in view as they read fluidly through the text.

Consider how this same scenario might play out in exegeting an English text. Suppose you have read several sports

account variables that the mother-tongue speaker naturally factors into their "analysis" of the text. This phenomenon is typically indicative of the complexity of human language, rather than carelessness on the part of the linguist.

commentary essays that I wrote a century ago before my untimely demise. In these essays, I frequently used the English word *run*. In seeking to interpret those texts, you quickly recognize that I used the word *run* in the sense of moving quickly from one point to another. That, however, is the *only* use of the word *run* that you have encountered in my extant writing corpus. When you discover a new short text that I wrote, which has the clause *he ran for mayor*, you need to decide what I mean in this instance by *ran*. Following common exegetical practice, you might conclude, "Culy only uses the verb *run* to refer to athletic activity elsewhere. Therefore, his meaning here must be, 'He ran a race *in place of someone named* Mayor.'" Even if *he ran for mayor* were the full extent of this literary fragment, however, a mother-tongue reader would quickly conclude that *run* refers to seeking political office, given its use with the political term *mayor*. And no fluid reader of English should ever hesitate to assign that meaning to this text, because it invokes a common use of the term *run* in the period during which I wrote and there is a contextual marker that almost unequivocally points to that usage here. Whether or not we have additional extant texts showing that I was familiar with this particular use of the verb *run* is completely irrelevant. While the interpretation, 'He ran a race in place of someone named Mayor' may be a linguistically possible interpretation, in communicative terms it is highly dubious, to say the least. If you know how to read English, you will almost certainly not see any ambiguity in the wording *he ran for mayor*.

Although lexical blunders of this nature are not uncommon in commentaries on the Greek New Testament, in what follows we will focus our attention primarily on other matters of exegesis, providing a number of examples of how fluid reading of a particular text might influence our understanding of it. I cannot avoid the fact that there are no native speakers of Koine Greek living today with whom we can test what I am claiming, and as far as I can tell there are no early Greek writers who address the issues that I will deal with below.[3] Nevertheless, I hope to raise

3. Very few of the limited number of examples of robust exegesis

enough questions to spur readers of this article to take more seriously the need to become competent readers of the Greek Bible as a critical step in becoming competent exegetes, rather than assuming that if they learn the basic mechanics of Greek grammar, have a good lexicon and reference grammar on hand, and can read critical commentaries, they are good to go.

2. *1 John 2:12–14*

Since I am going to critique other scholars' treatments of several passages below, perhaps the best way to begin is by critiquing my own published work. In my 2004 Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament volume on 1, 2, 3 John, I attempted to resolve the well-known tense shift issues in 1 John 2:12–14 through reference to current thinking on verbal aspect and how Greek aspect impacts discourse prominence.[4]

> Γράφω ὑμῖν, τεκνία, ὅτι ἀφέωνται ὑμῖν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι διὰ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.
> γράφω ὑμῖν, πατέρες, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.
> γράφω ὑμῖν, νεανίσκοι, ὅτι νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν.
> ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, παιδία, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν πατέρα.
> ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, πατέρες, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.
> ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, νεανίσκοι, ὅτι ἰσχυροί ἐστε καὶ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν μένει καὶ νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν. (1 John 2:12–14)

The tense shift in this passage is striking as John moves from three uses of the present tense γράφω to three uses of the aorist tense ἔγραψα.[5] In the intervening twenty years since I wrote the handbook, I have read through 1 John repeatedly in Greek, much like I would read any other book in English, and I would now suggest that understanding the significance of the tense shift in this passage depends less on the intricacies of Greek grammar and more on reading competence. In one sense, what I am about to suggest about 1 John 2:12–14 may be discovered by anyone

among the early Greek fathers show interest in the same types of questions that modern exegetes tend to ask.

4. Culy, *I, II, III John*, 41.
5. Later scribes tended to change the aorist to present.

who looks very carefully at the context. I would suggest, however, that fluid reading of the Greek text would *quickly* lead to what I am about to suggest as at least a plausible understanding of the tense shift in 2:12–14, *without* careful analysis of the context. In other words, those with reading skills will quickly see things in the text that exegetes may only eventually discover.[6]

Let me illustrate by providing a bit of running commentary. First John 2:7–14 forms a discourse unit. In 2:7, John informs his readers that he is not writing (γράφω) a new command to them, but (he is repeating) an old command with which they are very familiar. They have already heard that message (ὁ λόγος ὃν ἠκούσατε). What he does not say explicitly, because he does not need to, is that they had heard it from him. In other words, 2:7 implies that John had written this command to them before (ἔγραψα). He then introduces the contrastive statement in 2:8 with the adverb πάλιν, and essentially says, "On the other hand, I *am* writing a new command to you." That new command is the same command, which is never explicitly stated here: "Love one another!"[7] It is old because John had written it to them before and they had heard it from him from the very beginning of their relationship with Jesus Christ. What is new, at this point, is John's explication of the significance of this command. John had previously written to them (ἔγραψα), commanding them to love one another. And now, he writes to them again (γράφω), reminding them of that command and urging them to follow that command by telling them what is at stake: "The one who claims

6. As a linguistics professor in the early 1990s, I had many students who carried out rigorous discourse analysis of a corpus of texts, spending countless hours carefully charting discourse features of those texts as they worked on a research paper or their MA thesis. After reading through their analyses and comparing them to the texts they had worked with, it was not uncommon for me to think how obvious their conclusions were after simply reading through the texts, without the painstaking analysis. In such cases, discourse analysis was still useful in confirming what a fluid reader would quickly notice, but it was not necessary for interpreting the text effectively.

7. In 1 John, the love command is closely connected to the gospel itself (see 1 John 3:23).

to be in the light but hates his brother is still in darkness" (2:9). And he fleshes this out further in vv. 10–11: "The one who loves his brother remains in the light, and there is no cause of stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and he walks in the darkness and he does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes." And to drive home the importance of what he has just said in 2:7–11, John reinforces it with the highly stylized passage we find in 2:12–14, but he does so in reverse order this time. He is writing (γράφω) to all of them—children, parents, and young people—because they have been forgiven by God, they have come to know God, and they have been living lives of victory over the evil one. All of these are ways of spelling out the significance of the fact that "the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining" in their lives (2:8). It is also evidence that the love command has already found expression or been "seen to be true" not only in the life of Jesus but also in their lives (ὅ ἐστιν ἀληθὲς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, 2:8).[8] Then, John reiterates the importance of the love command by reminding them that he had written to them before (ἔγραψα) for the very same reasons. As children, parents, and young people, many years ago they had come to know the Father; they had come to know him who was from the beginning; they were strong; the word of God remained in them; and they had overcome the evil one (2:14).

So, what is the point of John using the highly stylized language of 2:12–14, which moves from three uses of the present γράφω to three uses of the aorist ἔγραψα? John's words in this passage remind us that when someone becomes a follower of Jesus, they need to be instructed about the importance of Jesus' command to love one another; but that is not enough. Even those who have been followers of Jesus for some time need to be reminded of the absolute necessity of living in obedience to this foundational command. This is why John was writing to them again (γράφω) to reinforce what he had written to them before

8. Cf. Culy, *I, II, III John*, 33–34.

(ἔγραψα).[9] This, I would suggest, is a natural way of reading the tense shift in 1 John 2:12–14 when we take the crucial context of 2:7–11 into account. And recognizing that crucial context is much easier when we simply read through the passage at the same pace and with the same competency with which we would read an English text. It was thus an error to separate 2:7–11 from 2:12–14 in my handbook, unfortunately implying that they were not part of the same discourse unit and obscuring what John was doing in 2:12–14. And yes, Greek scholars should be willing and eager to change or revise their views after twenty years when necessary!

3. *1 John 3:11*

Let us now consider a second example from the same letter: 1 John 3:11. We will focus on the conjunction ὅτι in 3:11, but let me include the context to illustrate the importance of reading skills.

> Παιδία, μηδεὶς πλανάτω ὑμᾶς· ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην δίκαιός ἐστιν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιός ἐστιν· ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν, ὅτι ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει. εἰς τοῦτο ἐφανερώθη ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα λύσῃ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου. Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει, καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται. ἐν τούτῳ φανερά ἐστιν τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου· πᾶς ὁ μὴ ποιῶν δικαιοσύνην οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ. Ὅτι αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἠκούσατε ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, οὐ καθὼς Κάϊν ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἔσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ· καὶ χάριν τίνος ἔσφαξεν αὐτόν; ὅτι τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ πονηρὰ ἦν, τὰ δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ δίκαια. (1 John 3:7–12)

Many scholars treat 1 John 2:28–3:10 as a unit and see a discourse break at 3:11. Raymond Brown, Hall Harris, and

9. This analysis, of course, does not presume that that the present tense points to present time, while the aorist tense points to past time. The aspectual nature of the aorist tense, however, makes it a natural tool for referring to events that took place in the past, barring contextual features that point to a non-past event.

Daniel Akin, for example, all assume a major break at 3:11 and treat 1 John 3:11–5:12 as the second major part of the letter.[10] Gary Burge also suggests that "a natural break in the letter occurs at 3:11."[11] Burge, Brown, Harris, Jobes, and others acknowledge the presence of ὅτι at the beginning of 3:11, but tend to downplay its significance in determining the structure of the letter, with each opting to begin a new unit at 3:11.[12] It is important to note that many of these scholars, and others, point to BDF §456(1) for support.[13] The rationale is that, since BDF says that the connection that ὅτι indicates is often "very loose," a loose connection could be the case here. In reality, BDF says that "Subordination with ὅτι . . . is often very loose so that it must be translated 'for'." Any argument, then, that suggests that the ὅτι in 3:11 points to a "very loose" connection and can therefore be ignored altogether is a misreading of BDF, who clearly acknowledge that ὅτι marks *subordination*.

If we shift to scholars who tend to be more linguistically informed, we often find a very different view.[14] Longacre, a linguist, for example, points out that ὅτι connects 3:11 to 3:10.[15] Similarly, more traditional Greek scholars like Westcott and Hiebert treat 3:10–12 as a unit.[16] Smalley also treats 3:10–24 as a unit and recognizes the subordinating function of ὅτι, while Westcott appears to treat 2:28–3:24 as a unit. Finally, Plummer

10. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 437, 440; Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*, 152; Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 47.

11. Burge, *Letters of John*, 159.

12. Burge, *Letters of John*, 159; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 440; Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*, 152; Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 152. Colin G. Kruse (*Letters of John*, 132) notes the grammatical importance of ὅτι, but still treats 3:11-24 as a new sub-unit. Similarly, Georg Strecker (*The Johannine Letters*, 107) recognizes the ὅτι as causal, but treats 3:11-18 as a sub-unit.

13. Yarbrough (*1–3 John*, 197), for example, views 3:9–18 as a sub-unit, but points to BDF to suggest that the ὅτι at the beginning of 3:11 "loosely relates" 3:11 to what precedes.

14. I do not mean to imply that none of the commentators I have mentioned above is "linguistically informed."

15. Longacre, "Towards an Exegesis of 1 John," 271–86; "Exhortation and Mitigation in First John," 3–44.

16. Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 95; Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 150.

and Elledge in their forthcoming volume in the EGGNT series affirm that the ὅτι indicates a "tight connection with the preceding verse" and it provides "an additional reason why Christians should love their brothers and sisters."[17]

I would suggest that what this latter set of commentators point out should be obvious to every scholar who reads 1 John fluidly. Unfortunately, the edition of the Greek New Testament that we work from can lead us astray even if we are fluidly reading through 1 John. The NA28 puts a paragraph break at 3:11, while the UBS5 goes a step further by including a heading above 3:11. In contrast, the Tyndale House Greek New Testament rightly formats 1 John 3:7–12 as a single paragraph, the ὅτι at the beginning of v. 11 is not capitalized, and there is no period at the end of v. 10.

If we follow most commentators, or even just follow the most popular editions of the Greek New Testament, we are likely going to miss the point of what John is saying in 1 John 3:11, a point that is clear when we translate it something like this, modifying the ESV:

> By this the children of God and the children of the devil are evident: everyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother, *because* this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. (3:10–11)[18]

Why, then, do commentators, modern English versions, and even editions of the Greek New Testament tend to treat the ὅτι, and thus the segmentation of 1 John 3:11, differently?[19] I would

17. Plummer and Elledge, *1–3 John*, 84.

18. Culy, *1 John: Teacher's Manual*, 75. In other words, "the *reason* that John can claim that someone who does not love his brother is not a child of God is because that claim is consistent with what they had been taught from the beginning. Jesus requires those who claim to belong to him to love other Christians. This is Christianity 101. When we embrace the gospel, we are made part of the *family* of God. We now have new brothers and sisters and God expects us to relate to them as brothers and sisters. He does not give us an option of whether or not we will love other members of his family" (Culy, *1 John: Teacher's Manual*, 75).

19. The SBLGNT uses the same punctuation as the NA28 and the UBS5.

suggest that they illustrate a tendency among scholars that most of us too often fall victim to: relying uncritically on earlier scholars' claims or traditional understandings of a passage. In other words, this is an example of scholarly group think, where it is assumed that if enough earlier scholars have approved a particular view or we can appeal to a respectable (though fallible) Greek reference work, that view must be correct or at least plausible. I would suggest, to the contrary, that it is unlikely in the extreme that a native speaker of Greek, when fluidly reading through this part of John's letter, would fail to connect 3:11 to what precedes given the presence of ὅτι. Should there even be exegetical debate regarding a paragraph break at 1 John 3:11?[20] If we bring the tool of fluid reading skills to the table, our answer almost certainly will be, "No."

4. *Revelation 3:7*

Continuing in John's writings, we find two good examples of the importance of fluid reading skills in Rev 3:7–8. Consider v. 7:

> Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Φιλαδελφείᾳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἅγιος, ὁ ἀληθινός, ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυίδ, ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει καὶ κλείων καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀνοίγει· (Rev 3:7)

In the messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3, Jesus chooses titles to introduce himself to each church that are particularly relevant for that church.[21] In 3:7, addressing believers in Philadelphia, he begins by identifying himself as ὁ ἅγιος ὁ ἀληθινός. Most major English versions translate this expression as two appositional noun phrases: "the holy one, the true one" (CSB, ESV, NASB, NET, NRSV).[22] This way of

20. Fluid readings skills could help to resolve a number of exegetical debates regarding how texts in our Greek New Testament should be segmented.

21. Culy, *The Book of Revelation*, 26, 56–57, 86–87, 114–15, 144–45, 175, 206–207.

22. The NIV and NLT, on the other hand, render the phrase as if we are dealing with two conjoined predicate adjectives: "him who is holy and true" (NIV), "the one who is holy and true" (NLT).

rendering ὁ ἅγιος ὁ ἀληθινός has likely been influenced by the KJV's "he that is holy, he that is true." Although these translations certainly follow the consensus found in major editions of the GNT (NA28, UBS5, THGNT, SBLGNT), which place a comma between ὁ ἅγιος and ὁ ἀληθινός, I would suggest that they do not reflect the most natural way that someone reading the text fluidly would understand it and they easily lead English readers to miss the point of the title. Reading through Revelation fluidly, without the punctuation that has been added by Greek New Testament editors, one would be far more likely to understand ὁ ἅγιος ὁ ἀληθινός as "the true Holy One." Using this title makes perfect sense, given both the literary and historical context. Jesus' choice of this title is intended to reassure Christians in Philadelphia who had been denounced by "the synagogue of Satan" (local Jewish opponents) as heretics who embraced a *false* messiah or a "false holy one." Contrary to such misguided claims, Jesus presents himself as "the true Holy One," the true Messiah who had been foretold by the prophets. And his identity as the true Holy One is reinforced by what follows in v. 7: he is "the one who holds the key of David" (ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυίδ) and he has absolute authority to admit or refuse to admit to his kingdom whomever he chooses; he is "the one who opens and no one will shut and who shuts and no one opens" (ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει καὶ κλείων καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀνοίγει).

5. *Revelation 3:8*

Now consider Rev 3:8:

> οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα, ἰδοὺ δέδωκα ἐνώπιόν σου θύραν ἠνεῳγμένην, ἣν οὐδεὶς δύναται κλεῖσαι αὐτήν, ὅτι μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν καὶ ἐτήρησάς μου τὸν λόγον καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου. (Rev 3:8)

> I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. *I know that* you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. (Rev 3:8, ESV)

Comparing the ESV to the Greek text, we see that the ESV translators have assumed that οἶδα, from the beginning of the

verse, is implied before the ὅτι, which then introduces its clausal complement (what Jesus knows). The NIV and NRSV reflect this same analysis:

> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. (Rev 3:8, NIV)

> I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. (Rev 3:8, NRSV)[23]

One might certainly come to this conclusion by decoding or dissecting the verse to see what grammatical analyses are *possible*, but I would suggest that simply reading through the text fluidly would lead to a far more natural and obvious interpretation of the ὅτι clause, which we see reflected in the NASB:

> I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, *because* you have a little power, and [yet][24] have followed My word, and have not denied My name. (Rev 3:8, NASB)

This reading conveys the idea that the Philadelphians' diligence in keeping Jesus' word and not denying his name, despite their limited power, has caused Jesus to grant them an

23. The NLT appears to ignore the presence of ὅτι altogether: "I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can close. You have little strength, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me." The NET takes a similar approach, but also proceeds to disconnect Jesus' blessing of an open door from the Philadelphians' actions by presenting the statement about the "open door" as parenthetical: "I know your deeds. (Look! I have put in front of you an open door that no one can shut.) I know that you have little strength, but you have obeyed my word and have not denied my name." To be fair, the NET translators explain that they are taking the ὅτι as epexegetical (introducing the content of οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα at the beginning of the verse). While this is a grammatically *possible* reading, however, it is very difficult to believe that someone reading the text fluidly would even consider it as an option. Not surprisingly, the NET includes a comment indicating that the ὅτι could be causal.

24. Added for additional clarity.

open door.[25] This is completely consistent with the pattern we see throughout the seven messages in Revelation 2–3 as Jesus responds to each church in accord with their level of devotion to him. What is important here, once again, is that although most of our English translations reflect an interpretation that is grammatically possible, only the NASB in this case reflects what is almost certainly the way a fluid reader of the text would understand it.

6. *Romans 11:22*

Consider now a lexical example found in Rom 11:22:

> ἴδε οὖν χρηστότητα καὶ ἀποτομίαν θεοῦ· ἐπὶ μὲν τοὺς πεσόντας ἀποτομία, ἐπὶ δὲ σὲ χρηστότης θεοῦ, ἐὰν ἐπιμένῃς τῇ χρηστότητι, ἐπεὶ καὶ σὺ ἐκκοπήσῃ. (Rom 11:22)

> Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. *Otherwise you too will be cut off*. (Rom 11:22, ESV)

Notice how the ESV handles the end of the verse (ἐὰν ἐπιμένῃς τῇ χρηστότητι, ἐπεὶ καὶ σὺ ἐκκοπήσῃ), which might be more woodenly translated as follows: "if you remain in kindness, since you also will be cut off." The final clause is typically rendered something like what we see in the ESV: "*Otherwise* you too will be cut off" (see, e.g., CSB, GW, KJV, MEV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, NRSV). Indeed, some scholars maintain that in this passage "ἐπεί means 'for otherwise.'"[26] While a translation that uses "otherwise" may be a valid way of capturing the overall meaning of the passage in natural English,

25. This, of course, fits with the promise at the beginning of Revelation: "Blessed is the reader and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it" (1:3).

26. Schreiner (*Romans*, 608n13) cites BDF §456.3 for support, as do Dunn (*Romans 9–16*, 665) and Fitzmyer (*Romans*, 616). Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 706n5) cites Turner (*Syntax*, 318) for support for the translation "otherwise," but accurately clarifies what is going on in the grammar in his discussion of this clause (706).

this is not the meaning of the term ἐπεί. BDAG (360.2) rightly cites this passage as an example in which ἐπεί is a "marker of cause or reason" and goes on to note that where there is ellipsis, as here, it may be rendered "for" or "for otherwise."[27] This is certainly more accurate, but it still leaves the impression that these glosses represent the meaning of the word. They do not. The word ἐπεί here means, "since," as it quite commonly does. The fact that there is ellipsis does not change that fact. Fluid readers of Greek would quickly notice that something is left implicit in this construction:[28]

> Focus, then, on the kindness and the severity of God. On the one hand, severity upon those who have fallen. On the other hand, the kindness of God upon you, if you continue in his kindness, since you also will be cut off, *if you do not continue in his kindness*.[29] (ellipsis in italics)

This example points to several issues that exegetes need to be aware of: (1) too few commentators are reading the Greek text fluidly as they work through the issues within the text; (2) reference works may be wrong at times and can be easily misused; and (3) exegetes must beware of imposing new meanings on Greek words that conform to how we might conceptualize or translate a passage in English, rather than interpreting the vocabulary in terms of actual Greek usage.

27. BDAG notes that "W. ellipsis *for* (if it were different) *for otherwise*" and then lists Rom 3:6; 11:6, 22; 1 Cor 14:16; 15:29; Heb 10:2 as examples.

28. Of the twenty or so commentaries on Romans that I consulted while writing this article, Stanley Porter's (*Romans*, 214–15) was the only one that gave attention to the syntax at the end of 11:22. I found Porter's argument that the conditional structure has been inverted intriguing, but would suggest that the passage makes use of ellipsis, rather than inversion.

29. The same is true in 11:6, for example, where information is once again left implicit: εἰ δὲ χάριτι, οὐκέτι ἐξ ἔργων, ἐπεὶ ἡ χάρις οὐκέτι γίνεται χάρις = "And if by grace, it is no longer from works, since *if it were from works,* grace would no longer be grace."

7. *Romans 13:6*

We will examine one additional example from Romans, before turning to two final examples from 1 Peter. Each of these examples is particularly important, since in each case I will suggest that a fluid reading of the text leads to a different interpretation than we typically find in English commentaries and translations. We begin with Rom 13:6. In the context, Paul is urging Christians in Rome to "be subject to governing authorities" (13:1), even when it comes to paying taxes (13:6). Our focus will be on the end of v. 6, but vv. 4–5 provide important context:

> θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν. ἐὰν δὲ τὸ κακὸν ποιῇς, φοβοῦ· οὐ γὰρ εἰκῇ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ· θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν ἔκδικος εἰς ὀργὴν τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι. 5 διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν. 6 διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε· λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες. (Rom 13:4–6)

This part of Romans 13 begins by describing governing authorities as servants of God (θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν, 13:4). This title is then repeated in the second part of v. 4, once again with the genitive θεοῦ fronted to highlight whom the pagan authorities are serving. We are then told in v. 5 that the obvious implication of this reality is the necessity for Christians to submit to such authorities. Paul then further explains that such subjection also includes paying taxes (v. 6a). And that brings us to the clause that I want to us to consider. The second part of v. 6 is consistently interpreted and translated in a manner similar to what we find in the ESV: "for *the authorities* are ministers of God, attending to this very thing." This assumes that λειτουργοὶ . . . θεοῦ has the same referent as the two uses of θεοῦ . . . διάκονος in v. 4. Notice, however, that θεοῦ is no longer fronted, which would have made it much clearer that the two expressions were coreferential. Instead, by placing the nominative element λειτουργοί first in the clause, it is natural to read it as the subject of εἰσιν, rather than as a predicate nominative. And when we do that, it is no longer clear that λειτουργοὶ . . . θεοῦ has the same referent as θεοῦ . . . διάκονος in v. 4. In fact, I would suggest that anyone who has read the Greek

Bible widely will tend to read it differently, because they will know, as Moo points out, that the word λειτουργός "was used frequently in the LXX to refer to people who served in the temple, and in the NT it always refers to those who are 'ministering' for the sake of the Lord."[30] So, it would be natural for a fluid reader of Greek, particularly in light of both common Greek Bible usage and the structure of Rom 13:6, to read v. 6 as a reference to Christians, rather than a reference to pagan authorities. We might, then, translate Rom 13:5–6 something like this:

> Therefore, the need to be subject (to authorities), not only on account of (their) wrath, but also on account of conscience—indeed, because of this you also pay taxes—for ministers of God are devoted to this very thing.

What I am suggesting with this translation is that Paul first uses the reference to paying taxes as a parenthetical comment on what it means for Christians to be obligated to submit to authorities, then drives his point home by saying that those who are ministers of God, i.e., followers of Jesus, are devoted to this very thing (being subject to those whom God has placed in authority). What such devotion looks like is then further spelled out in v. 7. I would suggest that this is not only a natural interpretation when reading the text fluidly, but it also avoids the problem of determining what "this very thing" refers to that authorities are supposedly devoted to (εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες). While using λειτουργοί to refer to civil authorities is certainly well within the term's range of meaning, both the structure of the clause and the consistent use of this term in Jewish–Christian circles (illustrated by Greek Bible usage),

30. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 804. Moo goes on to point out in a footnote (804n71) that "λειτουργός refers specifically to cultic 'ministry' in Heb. 8:2; 10:11 and (probably) Rom. 15:16; and to 'ministry' more generally in Phil. 2:25 and Heb. 1:7. The cognate λειτουργία (from which we get the word 'liturgy') denotes cultic service in Luke 1:23; Heb. 8:6; 9:21; and 'ministry' generally in 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17 (with sacrificial allusions); Phil. 3:20. The verb λειτουργέω refers to ministry in general: Acts 13:2; Rom. 15:27; cf. also the adjective λειτουργικός in Heb. 1:14."

makes such a usage here less likely. And to claim that pagan authorities are devoted to ministering to God is an unusual use of the language, at the very least. Whether you find this reading convincing or not, it is important to ask why apparently no commentators even consider this reading.

8. *1 Peter 1:1–2*

Look now at 1 Pet 1:1. We will focus on the first verse, but v. 2 provides important context:

> Πέτρος ἀπόστολος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς Πόντου, Γαλατίας, Καππαδοκίας, Ἀσίας καὶ Βιθυνίας, 2 κατὰ πρόγνωσιν θεοῦ πατρὸς ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος εἰς ὑπακοὴν καὶ ῥαντισμὸν αἵματος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη πληθυνθείη. (1 Pet 1:1–2)

The key phrase for our purposes is ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις. Notice how this expression is often translated, as illustrated in the CSB and the NIV:

> *To those chosen, living as exiles* dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, *chosen* 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. (1 Pet 1:1–2a, CSB)

> *To God's elect, exiles* scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, 2 *who have been chosen* according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. (1 Pet 1:1–2a, NIV)

The ESV is better here:

> *To those who are elect exiles* of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. (1 Pet 1:1–2a, ESV)

And the CEB is likely the best English translation of v. 1, though it falters, in my view, at v. 2 by including, "decided to *choose you as his people*":

> *To God's chosen strangers* in the world of the diaspora, who live in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. God the Father *decided to choose you as his people.* (1 Pet 1:1–2a, CEB)

The tendency among commentators is to state with little or no rationale that the wording ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις is "best understood as substantives in apposition," as Jobes claims.[31] Commentary users, however, will be hard pressed to find any grammatical rationale for such assumptions. Nevertheless, this analysis of the grammar is reflected in English versions like the CSB and NIV. It is far more natural, however, when reading the text fluidly to take ἐκλεκτοῖς as an adjective modifying παρεπιδήμοις, a substantive, and thus translate the phrase something like, "the chosen resident aliens." In this case, we can check and discover that παρεπίδημος is typically (or perhaps always) elsewhere used as a substantive without an article, while ἐκλεκτός typically (or perhaps always) has the article elsewhere when it refers to "the elect." And those who have immersed themselves in reading the Greek Bible fluidly would almost certainly naturally recognize this in 1 Pet 1:1.[32] The semantic structure of the expression, ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις, then, is very similar to Paul's use of the expression κλητοῖς ἁγίοις in Rom 1:7, which is translated something like "called to be saints" in virtually all English translations (see, e.g., ESV, KJV, MEV, NET, NRSV, CSB, CEB, NASB, etc.).

What are the implications of reading ἐκλεκτοῖς as an adjective modifying a substantival παρεπιδήμοις? English speaking Christians typically read v. 1 as being about "the elect" and then take v. 2, following the NIV and other English versions, as

31. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 67. One scribe, the original hand of Codex Sinaiticus, points to this reading by inserting a καί between ἐκλεκτοῖς and παρεπιδήμοις. The scribe actually only wrote κ in the manuscript (an abbreviation for και), which was later erased.

32. It is true that when ἐκλεκτός modifies an anarthrous noun, it often follows the noun (e.g., LXX Exod 14:7; 30:23; Jdg 20:15–16; 1 Kgs 2:50; 2 Esd 5:8; Isa 49:2; Jer 3:19). We also find, however, a number of examples in the LXX with ἐκλεκτός preceding an anarthrous noun that it modifies (e.g., LXX Prov 17:3; Jer 31:15; 38:39; Jdt 2:15; Sir 49:6). When it modifies an articular noun (2 Sam 8:8), it typically comes between the article and noun. Jeremiah 31:15 is an example of two contiguous adjectives where the first one is naturally read as an adjective modifying a second adjective, which is substantival.

indicating that the elect have been "*chosen* according to the foreknowledge of God," and so forth. By comparison, when we read ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις as "to the chosen resident aliens" or "to those chosen to be resident aliens," following the same pattern as κλητοῖς ἁγίοις in Rom 1:7, the meaning of 1 Pet 1:1–2 changes significantly. Let me suggest a translation of this passage, leaving out the long phrase about "the Dispersion" to make clearer the connection between ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις and the three prepositional phrases that follow:

> Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To those chosen to be resident aliens . . . in accord with the foreknowledge of God, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 1:1–2a, author's translation)

Reading the text fluidly, we see that the focus of vv. 1–2 is not on the reader's status as God's "elect," but rather on God's *choice* for them to currently have the status of resident aliens. And v. 2 tells us that their status as resident aliens is consistent with God's eternal plan (κατὰ πρόγνωσιν θεοῦ πατρός); it is the *context* in which the Spirit is sanctifying them (ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος);[33] and God's goal in choosing for them to live as resident aliens in this world is: (1) for them to learn obedience (εἰς ὑπακοήν), and (2) for the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ (εἰς . . . ῥαντισμὸν αἵματος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). The first goal is a reminder that followers of Jesus only learn obedience as we face challenging situations in a world where we do not belong and have to choose to follow God's path for us regardless of personal cost. The second goal, I would suggest, points to the parallel purpose of learning to live in obedience to Jesus' commands (Matt 28:19–20) by using language ("the sprinkling of blood") that was connected to the consecration of priests in the Old Testament (e.g., LXX Exod 29:21; Lev 8:30). The idea, then, is that as followers of Jesus struggle as resident aliens in this world where they do not belong, God uses that struggle to

33. The point of ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος may be that God has brought about their status as resident aliens *by the Spirit setting them apart* for that very status in this world (i.e., ἐν introduces means).

equip them or consecrate them for the priestly work to which he has called them in this world.[34] In summary, then, in 1 Peter the apostle Peter is addressing Christians who were dispersed among the nations and suffering in a land where they did not belong. What he wants to convey in the first two verses, and throughout his letter, is that this reality is not some cosmic mistake. God has *chosen* for them to be resident aliens.

9. *1 Peter 1:5*

Finally, let us consider 1 Pet 1:5. Our focus will be on the phrase διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν in v. 5, but the surrounding context is important:

> Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὁ κατὰ τὸ πολὺ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος ἀναγεννήσας ἡμᾶς εἰς ἐλπίδα ζῶσαν δι᾽ ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐκ νεκρῶν, εἰς κληρονομίαν ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀμίαντον καὶ ἀμάραντον τετηρημένην ἐν οὐρανοῖς εἰς ὑμᾶς τοὺς ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ φρουρουμένους διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν ἑτοίμην ἀποκαλυφθῆναι ἐν καιρῷ ἐσχάτῳ ἐν ᾧ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὀλίγον ἄρτι, εἰ δέον ἐστὶν λυπηθέντες ἐν ποικίλοις πειρασμοῖς, ἵνα τὸ δοκίμιον ὑμῶν τῆς πίστεως πολυτιμότερον χρυσίου τοῦ ἀπολλυμένου, διὰ πυρὸς δὲ δοκιμαζομένου εὑρεθῇ εἰς ἔπαινον καὶ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν ἐν ἀποκαλύψει Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. (1 Pet 1:3–7)

Notice how the ESV translates v. 5: “who by God’s power are being guarded *through faith for a salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time” (ESV). This is consistent with the vast majority of English translations, including the following:

> You are being guarded by God’s power *through faith for a salvation* that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (CSB)

34. Peter will go on to identify these “chosen resident aliens” as “a chosen race, *a royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Followers of Jesus have been entrusted with the priestly service of proclaiming the gospel and the marvelous works of God to the world around them. And God has consecrated them to that priesthood, in part at least, by *choosing* for them to have the status of mere resident aliens in this world.

> . . . who are being protected by the power of God *through faith for a salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time. (NRSV)
>
> . . . who by God's power are protected *through faith for a salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time. (NET)

In each case, the preposition εἰς in the phrase διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν is taken as introducing the purpose of God's "guarding": he guards us *for* salvation.[35] Many scholars look at the supposed structure of the passage and conclude that εἰς ἐλπίδα ζῶσαν (1:3), εἰς κληρονομίαν (1:4), and εἰς σωτηρίαν (1:5) are parallel and function in essentially the same way.[36] We have been born again (ἀναγεννήσας ἡμᾶς, v. 3) *for* a living hope, *for* an inheritance, and *for* salvation, though English translations vary in how they express this. If we are dissecting the text, as it were, this would be a plausible conclusion. The question we need to ask, however, is whether anyone fluidly reading through the text in Greek would likely understand it that way.

Look at v. 5 again: τοὺς ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ φρουρουμένους διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν ἑτοίμην ἀποκαλυφθῆναι ἐν καιρῷ ἐσχάτῳ. If we read this verse fluidly within the context of 1:3–12, its discourse unit, and if we have read widely in the rest of the Greek New Testament as well, then as *readers* we will not only notice a very common collocation (two words that frequently appear together as a set phrase), but our first inclination will be to read them in that typical way. The noun πίστις and the preposition εἰς are often used together, with the preposition εἰς introducing the object of faith. Consider the examples from Acts and Colossians below:

> διαμαρτυρόμενος Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἕλλησιν τὴν εἰς θεὸν μετάνοιαν καὶ πίστιν εἰς τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν
>
> testifying to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and *faith in our Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 20:21)

35. A similar idea is communicated in the NIV's and NLT's use of the temporal "until."

36. So, e.g., Forbes, *1 Peter*, 19. Dubis (*1 Peter*, 8) presents a more plausible reading in which εἰς σωτηρίαν modifies φρουρουμένους.

> εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῇ σαρκὶ ἄπειμι, ἀλλὰ τῷ πνεύματι σὺν ὑμῖν εἰμι, χαίρων καὶ βλέπων ὑμῶν τὴν τάξιν καὶ τὸ στερέωμα τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως ὑμῶν.
>
> For even if I am absent in the flesh, I am in fact with you in spirit, rejoicing and seeing your order and the firmness of *your faith in Christ*. (Col 2:5)[37]

The use of πίστις with εἰς to introduce the object of faith should not surprise us, since the cognate verb πιστεύω is *very* commonly used in this way.[38] I do not intend to imply that we cannot find examples of πίστις followed by εἰς with the preposition indicating something very different.[39] What I want to suggest, however, is that if we are simply reading through 1 Peter 1, as we would fluidly read through any text in English, when we come to the phrase διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν, our first inclination will likely be to take the preposition εἰς as introducing the *object of faith* (σωτηρίαν) in this passage: "through faith in the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." The idea in v. 5, then, would be that God guards his people through their faith in the imminent return of Jesus. That, of course, is not the only way that God guards his people, but I would suggest that that is the point that Peter is making here.

I would also suggest that this is not only the most likely way a native speaker would have heard this when reading fluidly or when listening to someone else read through the letter to their congregation, but that this reading both makes perfect sense in the context of 1 Peter 1 and also reflects a common theme found elsewhere in the New Testament. We see in 1 Thessalonians 1,

37. Acts 24:24 is another example: καὶ ἤκουσεν αὐτοῦ περὶ τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν πίστεως.

38. See, e.g., Ὃς δ' ἂν σκανδαλίσῃ ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων τῶν πιστευόντων εἰς ἐμέ (Matt 18:6); ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ (John 1:12); καὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ (John 2:11); πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ (John 2:23); Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον (John 3:16).

39. A good example of another usage is found in Rom 10:10: καρδίᾳ γὰρ πιστεύεται εἰς δικαιοσύνην, στόματι δὲ ὁμολογεῖται εἰς σωτηρίαν.

for example, that "waiting" for Jesus' return is portrayed as a central part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus:

> For they report about us what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God *and to wait for his Son from heaven*, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1 Thess 1:9–10, NRSV)

In Col 1:4–5, we read that the living out of the Colossian's faith takes place "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven" (ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). Hope of heaven is presented in this passage as a major fuel that drives the Christian life. Moreover, this hope of heaven is a significant part of the gospel message, as Col 1:5 makes clear with its modifying relative clause (ἣν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). And this critical connection between the gospel and heaven seems also to be in focus in 1 Peter 1. In other words, hope of heaven or "faith in the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" is presented as a primary means by which God keeps his people firm in the faith in the midst of being grieved by various trials for a little while in this short life (1 Pet 1:6). This also seems to be the point of Paul's language in 1 Thess 5:8, where he speaks of the need for Christians to clothe themselves with "the helmet of the hope of salvation" (περικεφαλαίαν ἐλπίδα σωτηρίας), as they await Jesus' return.[40]

40. The correlation between heaven and faithful perseverance likely comes up twice more in the immediate context of Colossians 1: "being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col 1:11–12, ESV); "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard" (Col 1:21–23, ESV). The presentation as holy comes when we enter into heaven, which happens "if indeed we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from *the hope of the gospel*" we heard. This appears to be

If we continue reading through 1 Peter 1, we discover that the idea in this reading of 1:5 is reinforced in 1:13 and the verses that follow:

> Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. (1 Pet 1:13, NRSV)

All of this reinforces the view that a fluid reading of 1 Peter 1 will naturally lead to the conclusion that God is essentially telling us through Peter in v. 5 that "setting our hope" on what we will receive at the Second Coming is one of the ways that God guards us. Peter's language thus serves as an implicit call to live with an eternal perspective and a reminder that such a perspective is necessary for standing firm in the faith.

I freely admit that my reading of 1 Pet 1:5 appears to be novel. This, by definition, should make people suspicious of my proposal. Whether or not other scholars agree with this reading, however, is ultimately less important than asking why no commentator appears to even identify it as a possible reading of the passage. Once again, I ask: Is this because many commentators are not reading the Greek text fluidly as they seek to understand its message? Has commentary writing become more about dissecting a passage, checking reference grammars and lexicons to see what are possible ways of interpreting grammatical constructions and words, and engaging with others who have done the same before us? I want to suggest that when we develop our reading skills and begin to experience the biblical text as *actual readers*, our exegesis of the text will be greatly improved, as some perceived ambiguity is quickly seen to be imaginary, while on rare occasions we may also notice something that has been missed by scholars in the past.

equivalent to Peter's "faith in the salvation ready to be revealed." Indeed, we find that Peter's statement in 1:5 sets up the reference to "for a little while" in the next verse: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials" (1 Pet 1:6, ESV).

10. *Conclusion*

Any field linguist will readily attest to the fact that you can know the mechanics of how a language works without actually *knowing* the language. Parsing verbs and nouns and knowing something about Greek grammar is not equivalent to knowing Greek, nor is being able to "use Greek tools." Orthodox Jews and Muslims recognize the non-negotiable importance of learning to read their sacred texts in Hebrew and Arabic, but too many students of the New Testament are quite content to achieve a basic understanding of Greek and then to rely on Greek reference works when they are forced to deal with the Greek text directly at some level. The counter-intuitive nature of such a mindset should be obvious and our hearts should cry out, Μὴ γένοιτο 'May it not be so!'[41]

Τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν; 'What, then, should we do?' The simple answer is to adjust our priorities so that we can regularly read significant portions of the New Testament in Greek.[42] Practically speaking, this is best accomplished by using a reader's edition of the Greek New Testament, which will include glosses for less common vocabulary in footnotes, as well as limited grammatical

41. If we affirm the inspiration of the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16) and are committed to rightly handling the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), we need to recognize that the Greek New Testament and Hebrew Old Testaments are inspired in a way that no English translations can ever be. This does not mean that we do not have some high-quality English translations. Rather, it recognizes that all translations, without exception, are limited by the translators' exegetical abilities. And perhaps even more important, all translations can easily be misread, since the possible ways of interpreting the English version often do not correspond to the possible ways of interpreting the original Greek text. An accurate English translation will convey the most likely interpretation of the Greek text, but the English words, phrases, and clauses that it uses will only correspond in *one* way to the original text and will often open up alternative readings that are simply not present in the original. In other words, apparently possible interpretations of the English Bible will be *impossible* interpretations of the Greek original.

42. Most students of Greek who want to improve their language

helps in some cases.[43] As you develop reading proficiency, be careful to ban English from your mind during the reading process as soon as possible and as much as possible. Begin to experience the biblical text in the language in which it was written, rather than translating it into English in your mind as you read. When you have read through the New Testament several times, you might read through the canonical books of the LXX.[44] After that, you might move on to the Apostolic Fathers, early Greek fathers, non-canonical LXX books, Josephus, and other Koine literature, though many will be content to read and reread the Greek Bible repeatedly. The more you read, the more your mind will become attuned to how Greek works and how Greek authors expressed themselves. This sort of investment will pay huge dividends for scholars, preachers, and teachers of the Bible, as greater reading competence leads to more efficient and

competency will find courses that use communicative language teaching invaluable. Such courses are typically conducted in Greek in a way that facilitates becoming an actual user of the language. There are a number of programs available today, thanks to the pioneering work of Randall Buth and others. Although enrolling in a seminary program where communicative language teaching is used may be feasible for some, there are also courses that can be taken online or curricula that can be followed independently. See, e.g., https://www.biblicallanguagecenter.com/; https://www.omilein.org/.

43. Reader's editions have been produced by Zondervan (based on decisions made by the NIV translation committee regarding the original text), the United Bible Societies (using the UBS fifth edition of the Greek New Testament), and Crossway (using the Tyndale House Greek New Testament).

44. A reader's edition of the LXX has been published by Hendrickson (*Septuaginta: A Reader's Edition*). There are also reader's editions of the Apostolic Fathers and a variety of graded readers that include portions of various Koine texts.

more effective exegesis and sermon preparation.[45] Although a wide range of exegetical tools will always be critical for rightly handling the word of truth, one's tool box will never be complete until it includes the ability to read the Greek New Testament fluidly.

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45. Diligent students may eventually find what they are looking for by consulting a stack of commentaries, grammars, lexicons, etc., but what might take minutes for someone with fluid reading competency will take many hours for those scouring such resources and trying to sort through all of the scholarly arguments. Preachers who lack reading competency will waste huge amounts of time week after week and be distracted from focusing on what God is saying to their congregation through the text in view and on how they can best communicate that message.

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