

BOOK REVIEW

David L. Mathewson, *Verbal Aspect in the Book of Revelation: The Function of Greek Verb Tenses in John's Apocalypse* (Linguistic Biblical Studies, 4; Leiden: Brill, 2010). vi + 206 pp. Hbk. US\$131.00 (€93.00).

*Verbal Aspect in the Book of Revelation* constitutes the fourth volume in Brill's new series devoted to the linguistic study of the Bible in its original languages. Although the past two decades have seen the publication of several major works in the area of verbal aspect theory as it pertains to New Testament Greek (e.g. S.E. Porter [1989], B.M. Fanning [1990], K.L. McKay [1994], M. Olsen [1997], R.J. Decker [2001], T.V. Evans [2001] and C.R. Campbell [2007, 2008]), it has penetrated very little into the larger field of New Testament scholarship. In the light of this, Mathewson's work is an investigation into the role that verbal aspect plays in the study of biblical texts, as he specifically addresses the ongoing debate over the enigmatic tense-form usage found in Revelation.

As Mathewson makes clear in Chapter 1, the supposed problem of 'grammatical infelicities or solecisms', particularly the 'anomalous' tense-form usage in Revelation, has long perplexed scholars. While many different explanations have been posited, the most common has been to see a Semitic influence in Revelation's use of the Greek tenses. This view has led some scholars such as Mussies and Thompson to propose that the tense usage corresponds (to lesser or greater degrees) to either the Mishnaic or biblical Hebrew tense system. As a result, some assert, for example, that the Aorist tense-form in the Apocalypse corresponds to the Mishnaic or the biblical Hebrew Perfect, while the Greek Present corresponds with the Hebrew participle. Mathewson notes at the end of his study that this notion has further led Thompson to affirm that there is no inherent meaning whatsoever in John's use of the Greek tenses since they are merely derived from Semitic verbs.

Another major voice that Mathewson engages is that of Dougherty, who takes the discussion of tense usage in Revelation forward by leaving behind the concept of a 'semitized Greek'. However, Dougherty's work is more descriptive and classificatory as he attempts to catalogue the particular pragmatic functions of the tenses (e.g. Descriptive present, Futuristic present), which he views in terms of 'consistency', 'apparent inconsistency' or 'inconsistency' with regard to 'correct' Greek usage. Uses that fall into the category of 'inconsistency' are left as unexplainable.

Mathewson offers a critique of both of the above views. He points out that Mussies and Thompson are unable to explain the fact that the Apocalypse is still written in the Greek language, and that to assume that its readers, who lived in a thoroughly Hellenized region of the Roman Empire, would have been able to unwrap the text's Greek layers and get at its Hebrew meanings is unlikely. On the other hand, Dougherty's work reflects the abiding (mis)understanding of the essential semantic components of the Greek tense-forms, viewing them from a primarily temporal framework. As Mathewson notes, he blurs the line between semantics and pragmatics and as a result he sees, for example, the Aorist used in future contexts as an unexplainable inconsistency in Revelation.

In Chapter 2, Mathewson offers a favorable review of the major works on verbal aspect. He notes the failure of temporal approaches to the meanings of the Greek tenses as well the shortcomings of the theory of *Aktionsart*. He does this by illustrating the principle of contrastive substitution (working off of Porter) and by stressing the need to distinguish between the form of a verb (i.e. its morphological features, which realize the semantic category of verbal aspect) and its function in a given context (which may or may not establish its temporal implicature). Mathewson draws on the common components of the definitions of Porter, Fanning and McKay, stating that verbal aspect 'is the express emphasis on the way the author chooses to portray or represent the action by his/her choice of a particular tense form' (pp. 22-23). However, Mathewson distances himself from the views of Fanning and aligns more with the work of Porter, who is most adamant about the non-temporal character of the Greek verbal system.

In the same chapter, Mathewson offers standard definitions of the perfective and imperfective aspects as put forth by Fanning and Porter, although his terminology lacks some consistency (e.g. at times 'aorist

aspect' = 'perfective aspect'), making his discussion less clear than it could be. He then comments on the issue of a third aspect, which involves the Perfect tense-form. While there are three distinct perspectives (Porter and McKay, Fanning, and Campbell), Mathewson adopts Porter's view, seeing the Perfect tense-form as reflecting stative aspect, which an author can use to express their conception of an action as comprising a complex state of affairs. Consequently he offers a brief critique of Fanning, whose view is dismissed as being unnecessarily complicated and more in line with the theory of *Aktionsart*. Mathewson critiques Campbell's view of the Perfect more thoroughly, ultimately dismissing it for its lack of explanatory power for its usage outside of the indicative mood and its focus on spatial notions rather than aspect. Mathewson closes Chapter 2 with a section on methodology (pp. 41-47), choosing to analyze tense usage in Revelation by means of a discourse model that focuses on the various prominence values of the Greek aspects in narrative as they contribute to the structure of a discourse (i.e. Aorist = background; Present/Imperfect = foreground with the option of remoteness for the Imperfect; Perfect = foreground). At this point, one might hope for added discussion on markedness and prominence theory in order to establish more firmly the link between tense-form usage and discourse salience. Admittedly, this is not Mathewson's primary goal, and he does direct the reader to works that do just this (e.g. J.T. Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity* [JSNTSup, 136; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997] and C.L Westfall, *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship Between Form and Meaning* [LNTS, 297; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005]).

Chapters 3 and 4 provide the bulk of Mathewson's work. In Chapter 3, he gives an analysis of the pragmatic temporal functions of the major tense-forms in Revelation (Aorist, Present, Imperfect, Perfect, Future). Although the focus of his study surrounds verbs in the indicative mood, he does include discussion on such non-indicative forms as the Perfect participle. Mathewson's survey is helpful, although, as he admits, some of his examples could be called into question. For example, he classifies the Aorist forms in Rev. 19.7 as functioning with present temporal implicature, although it is difficult to see anything in the context that establishes this. Additionally, his listing of the Aorist in Rev. 5.9 as having a timeless function is difficult to argue, since the presence of

ἐν τῷ αἴματι σου could be acting as past-time deixis, something he himself recognizes.

Two points should be noted concerning Mathewson's analysis of the Future tense-form in Revelation. First, it is unclear why Mathewson says, 'The main function of the future in John's visions appears to be to add the notion of *certainty* and expectation' (p. 112, italics mine). However, in another place, Mathewson agrees that future temporal implicature is dependent on deictic indicators and the idea of 'certainty' should derive from the authority of the voice speaking (p. 60), not the use of a tense-form. Thus, it appears that Mathewson may not be entirely consistent in his view of the pragmatic function of the Future. And secondly, what would have been a significant support for the idea that a Present form can be used emphatically to 'cap off' a string of Future forms is nullified due to a mislabeling of φάγονται, which is a Future, not a Present. Nevertheless, his goal here in Chapter 3 is to demonstrate by means of contrastive substitution that in Revelation, different Greek tense-forms can be used in identical temporal contexts, and conversely, that identical tense-forms can be used in different temporal contexts. Mathewson believes that establishing this point leaves the door open for explaining John's 'odd' use of tense-forms in terms of normal Greek usage.

Having established the pragmatic flexibility of the tenses, Chapter 4 is devoted to analyses of tense shifting in selected texts (Rev. 5; 7.9-17; 11.1-13; 12-13; 17; 18.4-20; 19.11-21). Utilizing Porter's discourse prominence scheme, Mathewson demonstrates the consistent role that the three aspects play in creating levels of discourse salience for John's visionary episodes. The Aorist typically functions as a less marked backgrounding tense, advancing the narrative in summary form in light of its perfective aspect. The Present, being the more marked foregrounding form, is used to draw attention to and describe particular features, introduce new characters or highlight an action as in progress from the perspective of the writer/speaker. The Imperfect, being more marked than the Aorist but less marked than the Present, functions much like the Present in discourse with the added feature of remoteness (spatial or logical). The Perfect, being the most marked foregrounding form, highlights the most salient part of a discourse. The Future, while not grammaticalizing aspect, adds the semantic feature of expectation to an action. Mathewson then confirms these patterns by means of a brief analysis of tense usage in several extra-biblical Greek narrative

texts, in which he finds the same aspectual forces at work. As is fitting, Mathewson's findings led him to conclude that not only is John's tense usage not due to Semitic intrusion, but it is reflective of the normal Hellenistic Greek used around the time of the first century CE.

While he could have expanded upon several linguistic issues, such as the meaning of prominence and how it is determined, and although at times terminology is somewhat inconsistent, Mathewson's analysis of Revelation's tense shifting in terms of verbal aspect and discourse prominence is enlightening and provides a fruitful new way to view Revelation's use of the Greek tenses. Mathewson's work demonstrates that more steps need to be taken toward the integration of verbal aspect theory and biblical studies as a whole.

Wally V. Cirafesi  
McMaster Divinity College