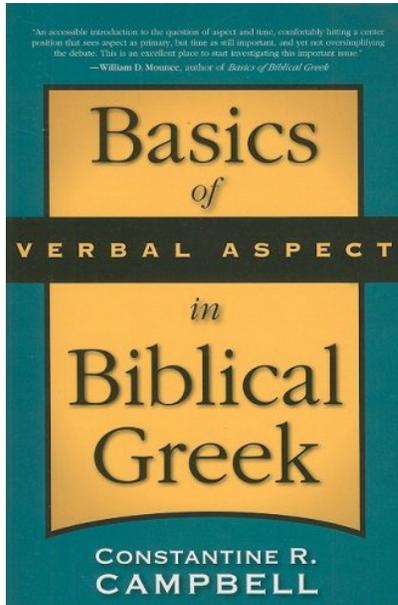


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Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek

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Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek, by Constantine Campbell (Ph.D., Macquarie University and lecturer in Greek and New Testament at Moore Theological College), is a long-needed introductory study of verbal aspect with special application to the Hellenistic Greek of the New Testament. Although the book is 159 pages long, 50 of those pages are front matter, introduction, "Concluding Postscript," "Verbal Glossary," "Answers to Exercises" and indices, making the text *a short 109 pages long*. This quantity is divided into the following chapters: (1) "What Is Verbal Aspect?" (eight pages); (2) "The History of Verbal Aspect" (eight pages); (3) "Perfective Aspect" (seven pages); (4) "Imperfective Aspect" (seven pages); (5) "The Problem of the Perfect" (ten pages); (6) "Verbal Lexeme Basics" (six pages); (7) "Present and Imperfect Tense-Forms" (twenty-three pages); (8) "Aorist and Future Tense-Forms" (twenty pages); (9) "Perfect and Pluperfect Tense-Forms" (fifteen pages); (10) "More Participles" (eleven pages), followed by "A Concluding Postscript: Space and Time" (six pages).

Such brevity can be the result of either careful, or careless, writing; this reviewer commends it strongly as the former. Also to be commended are the editors and publisher for a text nicely laid out with few typographical errors that I noticed (e.g. correctly Curtius on 27 n. 2 but incorrectly Curtis in one place in the text). The title sacrifices some

clarity, since many think *Biblical Greek* should include the language of the Septuagint, while others think it should not be used at all. The book treats only the texts of the New Testament, primarily narrative texts: the Four Gospels mostly, with some references to Acts and Romans and much less to remaining texts.

But this narrow scope does not diminish the value of the work. Let me be clear: this book fills a great need and should be read by every beginning (beginning classes should read it at the end of the course, since it assumes knowledge of a traditional approach to verb tenses), intermediate, or advanced student of New Testament Greek—and the sooner the better. This is so simply because it is the first systematic introductory treatment of a subject that is portentous in its importance but too ponderous in its primary current discussions to benefit beginning students. Debatable theory is not entirely eliminated by Campbell, but it is so skillfully introduced that the quick pace of effective learning never slows.

“Effective learning” is not a gratuitous descriptor here. The book aims at the uninformed, and both the strategy and the pedagogy are masterful. Repetitions of critical descriptions are frequent and well-placed. For example, on page 106 (ch. 9) under the heading “*Aktionsart* Interactions (Perfect Tense-Form),” Campbell begins with the sentence “*Aktionsart* refers to the way a verb behaves in the text when all features of the language and the text bear upon it.” Virtually the same sentence occurs on page 85 (ch. 8), and previous to that on page 62 (ch. 7). *Aktionsart* itself was first introduced to the student on pages 21–25. Thus does Campbell review and repeat a summary definition of an important concept three different times, in each of the three chapters that make up the bulk of his book.

Campbell does a similar service by beginning chapter 8 with a short paragraph reviewing perfective verbal aspect (the subject of ch. 3); the same is done for imperfective aspect at the beginning of chapter 9 (the subject of ch. 4). Teachers who spread out the reading of this book over weeks (or months) will appreciate such repetition, as I am sure the students will also. (If the student encounters a technical term but cannot remember how it has been explained, there is also a helpful four-page glossary of verbal terms at the back, as well as a subject index. Such things make the text very student friendly.)

Despite such reviews of material just described, brevity is another hallmark of this short study. Anyone minimally acquainted with the linguistic scholarship on verbal aspect will (should) tip their hat to Campbell for incorporating so much in so short a space, for doing justice to so many theorists and theories with such clarifying discussions and examples, and even for breaking new ground in the creative application of new ideas to complex problems.

An example of such a crux is “The Problem of the Perfect” (ch. 5). In seven pages Campbell discusses traditional explanations, summarizes difficulties, reviews a sampling of the more innovative aspect analysts of recent years, states problems that remain, and offers his own suggestion that the perfect may best be thought of as a “super present.” It is one of the more difficult and thought-provoking seven pages in the book, but it is done with clarity and examples.

Before I make some more critical comments and suggestions, there are a few things done in the book that I think were very helpful. The first was to have a discussion (ch. 6) about “Verbal Lexeme Basics.” Although Campbell’s discussion of such things as transitive, intransitive, ambitransitive, punctiliar, and stative (as verbal ideas) was very brief, it did open a door for the teacher to take the student further in thinking about verbal idea and context. All verbs are not the same.

Second, Campbell’s examples from New Testament narrative texts illustrate other things about context useful to beginning students. For example, some of his examples demonstrate that it is often the coordination of groups of tenses that help to elucidate differences and similarities between them (differences in viewpoint and similarities in aspect). Thus the student is able to observe that it is a combination of things *besides* tense-form that cooperate to effect a particular, predictable *Aktionsart*. And while context is always important (as, e.g., with the imperfect), sometimes it is context *alone* that will inform the reader of *Aktionsart* (e.g. with the conative imperfect [78]). Training students in beginning Greek to be context-sensitive is difficult, especially when all they normally translate are context-less sentences.

Third, I appreciated the way (especially in ch. 2) that Campbell juxtaposed classics, linguistics, and theology; while I think that more intense discussion for the student is necessary, to even bring it up allows the teacher to do just that—and they should. I concur with Campbell’s laments that there are too few scholars who can move with skill and grace from one of these fields to the others. Perhaps the reason that aspect has been a topic since the nineteenth century and yet has not penetrated the world of those whose primary interest is the New Testament (until recently) is that for too many their field of New Testament studies is overly provincial.

Fourth, students of this book will benefit from Campbell’s distinction of things “cancelable” and “uncancelable” (ch. 1 and throughout). Some things (semantic value) a verb carries with it and are uncancelable: “what the verb means at its core” (22). But there are other things (pragmatic value) that become attached because of context, or combinations, and are cancelable.

A few small things can be mentioned that could be repaired in a second edition (and I hope this book has a long life). First, although Campbell was astute at keeping technical discussion to a minimum, there are some things mentioned that could either be eliminated, or expounded. (1) An explanation of what a “deictic marker” is (24) would be useful, or at least a pointer to the verbal glossary where it is defined. (2) Perhaps the mention of “Comrie” (with no footnote or explanation) on page 30 could be removed. (3) The mention of the “fierce debate” caused by Porter’s position on tense (as temporal reference) could usefully be explained in a footnote. I would not remove the reference because of its relevance (and, after all, “fierce debate” is a great lure for inquisitive students), but neither would I leave it as is because only those who have read some of the literature will nod their heads. (4) A term that I liked in the text was “offline material” (e.g., 105). I think that this merits a reference in the glossary and the index. (5) Is there a way of training a student to assess context, since it is often such a critical datum? Perhaps just the sampling of texts used to illustrate its importance is enough.

Finally, a suggestion to the teacher preparing to use this text: I would propose that one read first the “Concluding Postscript” (129–33), then read it again after finishing this fine book. Of course, I recommend the book highly and applaud the author and all who may have provided him assistance.