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Revelation 9:15 and the Limits of Greek Syntax

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Since the translation of the King James Version in 1611, our knowledge of New Testament Greek has expanded greatly. This has far reaching implications not only for translation but also for the interpretation of the text. This paper seeks to explore some of these implications. I propose here that there is a distinction between a syntactical relationship and a statement about objective reality. Some syntactical relationships are objective, meaning that they express how the speaker or writer sees objective reality. Others are subjective, meaning that they express perspective, rather than pure objective reality. I would like to use Revelation 9:15 as an example for our discussion. This present study does not attempt an interpretation of this passage, but rather focuses on the proper (and improper) use of Greek grammar in translation and interpretation. Thus, my focus is on methodology, rather than interpretation. Let us begin with a brief comparison between the King James Version and some modern translations.

KJV	And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year , for to slay the third part of men.
NEB	"... They had been held ready for this moment, for this very year and month, day and hour. "
Amplified	"... who had been in readiness for that hour in the appointed day, month and year "
NIV	"... who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year "
TEV	"... for this very hour of this very day of this very month and year "

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What is at issue here is a rule of Greek syntax known as the Granville Sharp rule.¹ It is generally understood that when two or more nouns are connected by the conjunction *kai*/, and only the first one has the article, they refer to the same person or thing. For example, Brooks and Winbery explain it as follows:

Sharp's rule states: if two substantives are connected by *kai*/ and both have the article, they refer to different persons or things ...; if the first has an article and the second does not, the second refers to the same person or thing as the first Of course the rule could also be applied to a series of three or more.²

In the original, the expression in Revelation 9:15 literally reads "the hour and day and month and year."³ Most translations and commentaries, therefore, take it as a point in time (i.e., the hour = the day = the month = the year) rather than a sequence of time periods. In fact, one commentator goes so far as to use Revelation 9:15 to disprove the historicist method of prophetic interpretation.

Some historicist pillars are easily dislodged. For example, Rev. 9:15 is taken as a period of time involving the year-day principle. But the Greek points to a point, not a period of time.⁴

We could cite other commentaries who hold the same opinion. However, our focus here is not on how Revelation 9:15 has been or should be interpreted. Rather, my purpose is simply to use this text as an example of the need to distinguish between subjective syntax and objective reality.

Subjective vs. Objective

Before discussing our passage directly, I should note here that the distinction which I am proposing is already recognized in the use of the verb tenses in the Greek New Testament. This is sometimes called the distinction between aspect and *Aktionsart*.⁵ Aspect refers to a speaker's perspective of the action. *Aktionsart* refers to the nature of the action itself. To use an example from English, let us consider two sentences, both of which are true and refer to the same event.

1. "I flew to Jackson yesterday."
2. "I was flying to Jackson yesterday."

In the first sentence, the verb I used was punctiliar, whereas in the second it was continuous, implying a period of time. So, the same action can be viewed from two different points of view, which is what the word "aspect" means. However, regardless of whether I use sentence number

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1 or number 2, the nature of the action itself was still the same. The plane trip itself took exactly the same amount of time, regardless of how I choose to describe it.

We can find similar examples in Greek. John 2:20 uses the aorist tense for the building of the temple. The syntactical function of the aorist is punctiliar (that is, indefinite or unqualified). But the very same text tells us that the actual event took forty six years! Another example is Philippians 2:12, “as ye have always obeyed” (aorist tense). Obviously, Paul did not mean that they obeyed once-for-all. Nor did he mean that their obedience occurred at some unspecified point in time!

Now, let us consider two more English examples:

3. “John used to fly from Boston to London every week.”

4. “John flew from Boston to London.”

Sentence 3 tells us something about objective reality. John’s action was habitual or customary. However, sentence 4 is neutral. One cannot infer from sentence 4 that John did not fly from Boston to London every week. It says he flew once. And that is all it says, no more. It does not say that he did not do it every week.

We may summarize the four sentences as follows:

Sentences 1 and 4: neutral

Sentence 2: subjective (aspect)

Sentence 3: objective (Aktionsart)

Thus, we need to distinguish between syntactical relationships that imply something about objective reality from those that are subjective or neutral.

Sharp’s Rule and Revelation 9:15

Now, returning to the topic of Sharp’s rule and its relevance to Revelation 9:15, the question we need to answer is: What kind of syntactical relationship is Sharp’s rule? Is it objective, subjective, or neutral?

Let us look at some examples. In the Greek, Matthew 16:1,6 lumps Pharisees and Saducees together under one article. Did Matthew think that these were different names for the same group? Hardly (see Matthew 22:23,34). But the two groups functioned together as a syntactical unit in those verses. They both opposed Jesus. Acts 23:7 is even more interesting. Here, Pharisees and Saducees, lumped under one article, both had a “dissension.” They functioned as one in the syntax of the sentence, but not in real life.⁶

Examples from Revelation would also be useful. Revelation 14:7 lumps the “earth,” “sea,” and “fountains of waters” under one article. They are grouped together as a unit in the structure of the sentence.

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But obviously, they are not all the same thing.⁷ Also, in Revelation 5:12 heavenly beings ascribe a sevenfold blessing to Christ, all lumped together under one article. Yet, we cannot automatically conclude that these seven items refer to the same thing. Notice that in Revelation 7:12 the same heavenly beings ascribe a similar sevenfold blessing to God, but each of the seven items is preceded by its own article.

Due to these and other examples, some scholars (including Sharp himself!) prefer to place limitations on the application of Sharp's rule. Note Turner's caution:

In Hell., and indeed for practical purposes in class. Greek the repetition of the art. was not strictly necessary to ensure that the items be considered separately."⁸

Blass-DeBrunner is also cautious.⁹ The latest German edition is especially noteworthy: "Der Artikel scheint (naturgemäß) zu fehlen, wenn das letztere von zwei durch kai/ verbundenen Attributen eine Apposition bei sich hat" (p. 226). Thus Blass-DeBrunner-Rehkopf applies Sharp's rule only *if* an apposition is actually intended (the implication is that an apposition may not always be intended).

However, rather than to give many "exceptions" to the rule, a simpler solution is to define Sharp's rule as a subjective syntactical relationship. Notice for example Greenlee's definition:

Granville Sharp's rule: When the article is used before the first member only of a series, the members are to be considered as a connected whole. When the article is used before each member, each is to be considered separately.¹⁰

I like this definition. Sharp's rule tells us only how a series of items should be considered, whether separately or together. It does not tell us whether they are identical. Therefore, given a series connected by the conjunction kai/, if each member of the series has the article, then we should consider them separately. Of course, we then could deduce that they are separate persons or items, because otherwise they could not be separated. But that is a matter of logic rather than grammar. However, the opposite is not true. If only the first item in a series has the article, we cannot automatically conclude that they are all identical. For Sharp's rule says only that we should consider them together, no more. Thus, Sharp's rule is a subjective syntactical relationship, not an objective one.

This distinction is crucial to exegesis and interpretation. For, if we are dealing with objective syntax, it is important not to miss it.

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Otherwise, we may miss an important exegetical or even theological clue. However, if we are dealing with subjective syntax, then we must be careful not to read into the Greek more than is actually there.

Let us now return to Revelation 9:15. According to Sharp's rule, the hour, day, month, and year in this passage are viewed as one unit. However, that does not tell us whether that unit is a point in time or a period of time. The distinction here is not between a point in time and a period of time, but between one unit and four units (i.e., one "package" of four items instead of four separate items). In other words, the Greek syntax may simply indicate one total time period instead of four separate time periods. Therefore, the question of whether Revelation 9:15 refers to a point in time or a period of time is not resolved by the Greek, and the best translation is one that allows for the ambiguity, such as, "the hour and day and month and year" (NKJV).

Once we have established the translation of the passage, we may proceed to interpret it. However, as I mentioned at the beginning, the interpretation of our passage is not the focus of this paper. That must remain for another occasion. Suffice it to say here that regardless of how one may interpret Revelation 9:15, the Greek syntax alone does not allow a translation to prejudge the question of whether it refers to a point in time or a period of time.

Notes

¹Sharp originally published it in 1798. The third edition was also the first American edition. It was entitled, *Remarks on the Uses of the Definite Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament: Containing many new proofs of the divinity of Christ, from passages which are wrongly translated in the common English version* (Boston: Fry and Kammerer; Philadelphia: B. B. Hopkins, 1807). I understand there is also a reprint edition by Original Word, which I have not had a chance to see. As can be seen from the title, his primary interest was in proving the divinity of Christ. This specific argument, however, did not gain unanimous acceptance. See, for example, Nigel Turner, "Syntax," in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, ed. James Hope Moulton, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), p. 181.

²James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), p. 76.

³Both the Textus Receptus and the UBS/NA texts agree. However, several mss. insert a second article before the second noun.

⁴Desmond Ford, *Crisis—A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, vol. 2 (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982), p. 402.

⁵Perhaps the first one to make this distinction was S. Agrell, *Aspektänderung und Aktionsartbildung beim polnischen Zeitworte: ein Beitrag zum Studium der indogermanischen Präverbia und ihrer Bedeutungsfunktionen*, Lunds Universitets Arsskrift NS 1, IV.2 (Lunds, 1908). This distinction was also made by H. Jacobsohn, "Aspektfragen," *Indogermanische Forschungen* 51(1933)292-318 and his review of J. Wackernagel [*Vorlesungen über Syntax mit besonderer Berücksichtigung von Griechisch, Lateinisch und Deutsch*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Basel: Emil Birkhäuser, [1926]), *Gnomon* 2(1926)369-395. See also, Bernard Comrie, *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems*, *Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Although Comrie does not formally make this distinction, his definition of aspect appears to distinguish it from Aktionsart. For recent discussion on its application to New Testament Greek, see Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with*

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Reference to Tense and Mood, Studies in Biblical Greek vol. 1, revision of author's thesis (New York: P. Lang, 1989); Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, Oxford Theological Monographs, revision of thesis (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, JSNT Supplement Series 80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) for the interaction between Porter and Fanning, as well as some reactions by others.

⁶For another example, see Ephesians 3:18.

⁷The meaning of this clause is that God is called the Creator of two things: 1) "the heaven"; and 2) the various aspects of this world, summarized by "the earth and sea and fountains of waters."

⁸Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, p. 181.

⁹F. Blass and A. DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, A Translation and Revision of the ninth-tenth German edition incorporating supplementary notes by A. DeBrunner by Robert W. Funk (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), § 276 (pp. 144-145). See also the latest German edition, F. Blass and A. DeBrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, Bearbeitet von Friedrich Rehkopf, 16th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), § 276 (pp.226-227).

¹⁰J. Harold Greenlee, *A Concise Exegetical Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 5th ed. revised (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 23 (sec. I.B.11).