Review of Verbal Aspect Theory and the Prohibitions in the Greek New Testament

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Homerös och Bibeln
Homer and the Bible
question of how Paul could have included Jesus as Messiah and “son of God” into the story of Israel and his Jewish monotheism.

Moreover, I find it hard to follow Hill in his rejection of the term “binitarianism” in favour of “trinitarianism” in Paul. In particular so since Paul on many occasions seems more concerned to explicate the relation between God and Jesus than that between God, Jesus and the Spirit.

Despite these remarks, Hill’s book remains an important contribution to contemporary discussions about theology and christology in the Pauline literature. As such, I recommend Hill as a provocative and stimulating discussion partner.

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_Verbal Aspect Theory and the Prohibitions in the Greek New Testament_ by Douglas S. Huffman is a real page-turner, considering it is a volume on Greek linguistics. In an elegant and lucid prose Huffman provides the reader with a full tour through the world of New Testament Greek prohibition. Huffman’s focus is on identifying how prohibitions are expressed. However, his volume does indeed not offer more than exactly what the title promises. That is, it is not primarily a book on verbal aspect in Greek prohibitions but the two main parts are mostly – and that is the major drawback of the work – kept apart as two separate subjects. Rather than dealing with the difficult issues in New Testament prohibitions Huffman lists them in his conclusion as issues for future research.

Following the front matter (with table of contents, list of tables, editor’s preface, author’s preface and abbreviations), the volume consists of two main parts: ‘The Great Prohibition Debate’ (chs. 1–4) and ‘All the Prohibitions in the Greek New Testament’ (chs. 5–13). After rounding up his results in the concluding ch. 14, Huffman provides four appendices (appendix A traces Aktionsart views of prohibitions, appendix B compares different verbal aspect models, appendix C accounts for the guidelines for counting NT prohibitions and in appendix D perfect imperatives are covered), a bibliography, a Scripture index and an author index.

The first main part consists of four chapters, discussing the Aktionsart approach and its failures in relation to Greek prohibitions as well as the verbal aspect approach and its successful application to Greek prohibitions. This is the most substantial and important part of Huffman’s contribution.

In ch. 1 it is demonstrated that the traditional Aktionsart-based understanding of the negated present imperative, as a command to stop doing something, and the negated aorist subjunctive as a command not to start an action, is a distinction not as old as indicated by some scholars, but in fact only had its beginning with Gottfried Hermann in 1805 and was introduced into NT Greek studies as late as 1906 (Moulton). Huffman identifies three versions of the Aktionsart approach, ranging on a cline from harsh to soft, where the Cessative-Ingressive (CI) position is the harshest, the Durative-Punctiliar (DP) position is in the middle and the General-
Specific (GS) position is the softest. All three positions have had followers from the 1800s up to present time, whereas some scholars adopt mixed Aktionsart positions.

In ch. 2 Huffman demonstrates that the Aktionsart approach very unlikely was the rule that the NT writers used. He argues that none of the three Aktionsart approaches to prohibitions (CI, DP and GS) offers a good alternative, and moreover, the three versions are between themselves in agreement in only 16% of the cases. It is also noted that the Aktionsart approach cannot satisfyingly explain the different choices of verb form by the synoptic writers in parallel passages. The variation of prohibitions with the same reference within a pericope (e.g., Matt 6) is also difficult to explain on the basis of Aktionsart.

Ch. 3 introduces verbal aspect theory. Huffman provides a short overview of the history of verbal aspect from Smotritsky (1619) to the more recent contributions of Fanning, Porter and Campbell, and concludes that the prohibition debate is limited to the two tenses regarding which there is much agreement, i.e., the present and aorist. He then accounts for verbal aspect perspectives on prohibitions from 1845 (George Andrew Jacob) to 2008 (Constantine R. Campbell). Huffman concludes that the verbal aspect approach offers the best explanation of prohibitive use in the New Testament.

Parallel with the noted (in ch. 2) textual incongruence arising from the application of the Aktionsart approach with regard to synoptic parallels and within pericopes, Huffman repeats the same procedure in ch. 4, applying the verbal aspect approach to the same textual material. He concludes that verbal aspect has more explanatory power than the Aktionsart approach. He also shortly notes the continued difficulties how to understand the relationship between aspect and Aktionsart.

The second main part (chs. 5–13) of Huffman’s volume attempts a full account of all NT prohibitions. Huffman identifies 15 groups (with more than twice as many subgroups) of prohibitions: Negated present imperatives (175), negated aorist subjunctives (89), negated aorist imperatives (8), negated future indicative (21), negated hortatory subjunctives (8), negated optatives (17), negated infinitives (85), negated participles (39), negated object clauses (65), negated final clauses (101), lexical prohibitions (185), prohibitory emulation statements (123), prohibitory questions (156), warnings and promises as prohibitions (214) and other negatives expressions as prohibitions (130). Huffman places his categories along a scale, ranging from very explicit morphologically grammaticalised prohibitions to pragmatic categories where the prohibitions are expressed by implicatures. Between these end poles we find syntactically expressed prohibitions and lexical prohibitions. All in all Huffman lists 1416 prohibitions. In terms of frequency most of these groups have quite a few occurrences (see frequencies above). Huffman’s large set of categories demonstrates what is intrinsic to any language, viz. the manifold and varied possibilities of expressing a semantic value.

Each category in chs. 5-6 is introduced by a discussion regarding the prohibition in question and statistics are provided and commented on. Then examples are given first in Greek, followed by a comment whether the example makes sense from the viewpoint of the three versions (CI, DP, GS) of the Aktionsart rule. Then
a verbal aspect based translation into English is offered. If any of the seven major Bible translations (NASB, ESV, NKJV, NRSV, HCSB, NIV, NTL) is fit to serve this function one of these is used, if not, Huffman offers his own translation, which – since the rendition of the aspectual value is prioritized over smoothness – at times may be somewhat awkward. At the end of each section a (statistically based) assessment is offered, concluding that the Aktionsart rule does not fare well in the understanding and interpretation of NT prohibitions.

For the groups presented in ch. 7 (that deals with grammatical-syntactical prohibitive expressions) onwards, the fit with the Aktionsart approach is not taken into consideration since these prohibitive categories have not been part of the debate so far. Instead Huffman’s aim is ‘modestly limited to identification and classification’. For each prohibitive example Huffman first provides a translation that is close to the Greek and then another one that explicitly spells out the prohibitive element. Ch. 8 deals with prohibitions that use negated dependent clause constructions. Ch. 9 covers prohibitions expressed by lexical means, i.e. the lexical value communicates the prohibition as in α-prativve words and prohibitions that are implied by indirect discourse. In ch. 10 on prohibitory emulation statements the prohibitions are merely implicatures, where, e.g., ‘But you are not so’ ≈ ‘Do no have this behaviour among you’. The same function can be attributed to prohibitory questions discussed in ch. 11 and prohibitions communicated through warnings and promises ch. 12. In ch. 13 Huffman covers the prohibitory ‘leftovers’ that include four different manners by which prohibitions are expressed.

The value of Huffman’s contribution consists in his rejection of the Aktionsart rule in favour of the verbal aspect approach in his first four chapters (that make up the first main part), but also in chs. 5–6 (at the beginning of the second main part) as well as his comprehensive classification of prohibitions in the NT. But beyond that one would have expected much more verbal aspect theory applied to and discussed with regard to his categories. In particular, the vexed issue of the relationship between verbal aspect and lexis in prohibitive expressions is only shortly mentioned, but not really addressed in his analysis. Also, prohibitions could have been discussed in terms of markedness and in discourse settings. Huffman is already aware of these issues, mentioning them and several others in his section (in ch. 14) on prospects for future research.

Rather than making the classification of prohibitions his main point he could have placed these in an appendix as a resource to be consulted and instead focused on a couple of these more challenging issues. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that Huffman’s volume is a solid contribution with its particular fortes.

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