

## *Time and Order in Participles in Mark and Luke: A Response to Robert Picirilli*

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I am grateful for Robert Picirilli's treatment of my work on participles and for the opportunity to respond to his article, "Time and Order in the Circumstantial Participles of Mark and Luke" (in this journal, pp. 241–59) I was asked on previous occasions to assess the article for possible publication and note that Picirilli has included many, if not most, of my suggestions into the latest form of his article.

I wish first to observe several points of basic agreement and commonality between us. One of these is that Picirilli accepts that verbal aspect theory as put forward by me and a number of other scholars is essentially correct (p. 242)—although I would not want to subscribe to every implication that he wishes to draw on the basis of aspect theory. A second observation is that context is the determinative factor for temporal reference of participles (p. 244). A third is that the notion of temporal relation is not the only, and in many instances may not be the primary, category for understanding the participle (p. 242). A final point of agreement is that a time-based view of the participles is untenable (p. 242). Nevertheless, despite these several agreements—and they are significant—there are still a number of problems worth noting.

The first is that, in essence, Picirilli admits that the general tendency that I identified and discussed—that participles that precede their primary verb tend to be used to indicate antecedent action to that of the verb, and those that follow their primary verb tend to be used to indicate contemporaneous or subsequent action to that of the verb—is correct.<sup>1</sup> Picirilli

1. Picirilli (p. 244) cites the statement that I make in my *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Biblical Languages: Greek 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 188. As an intermediate-level grammatical handbook (see, e.g., pp. 14, 17), this volume does not state my position as clearly as is stated in the foundational study upon which *Idioms* is based: *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (Studies in Biblical Greek 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 381: "Thus when the Participle is placed before the main verb, there is a tendency for the action to be depicted as antecedent, and when the Participle is placed after the main verb, there is a tendency for the action to be seen as concurrent or subsequent" (italics mine for emphasis). One of the emphases in the statement is that the syntax is used to depict the action in a particular way, not simply to reflect a supposed objective temporal order.

notes this when he points out that, concerning present-tense participles, they “*tend* [his emphasis] to be (but are not always) contemporaneous with their primary verbs . . . and many follow those verbs, which would fit well with Porter’s view” (p. 248).<sup>2</sup> In the ellipsis, he states “regardless of order,” but his statistics indicate (p. 247) that approximately two-thirds of present-tense participles in Mark and Luke follow their primary verb.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, concerning the aorist-tense participle, Picirilli states that “Mark and Luke nearly always place aorist circumstantial participles before their primary verbs [according to Picirilli, approximately 95% of the time for each], whether they are antecedent to (more often) or contemporaneous with their primary verbs” (p. 250). His statements and descriptions appear to be an admission that the “tendency” that I noted regarding participles is the case (see also p. 246, where he agrees that “when two actions are mentioned in the same sentence, the one mentioned first will often have occurred first”).

The main point that Picirilli wishes to make, however, is not just that this participle-ordering tendency is not the case (although he seems to admit that it is) but that “this should not be taken into account in interpretation” (p. 242). I would respond that, if it is a tendency (as he admits), then I believe that it should be taken into account, if even just as a starting point in interpretation, consistent with Greek aspectual verbal semantics and the linear ordering of Greek (I note that my analysis of this tendency of the participle is just one of several pragmatic conclusions that I have drawn regarding Greek).<sup>4</sup> One of Picirilli’s worries is that using this tendency will “tend to mislead the exegete” (p. 246). My contention is that the tendency provides an initial guidance for exegetes, one much better grounded than an ad hoc interpretation of each sentence as it is confronted or by playing off one interpreter or commentator against another.

An examination of many of Picirilli’s examples and explanations that he marshals in an attempt to refute my (and apparently his own!) theory indicates that some principle should be in play, because Picirilli does not appear to have one otherwise. I cannot treat every example but select a number (without lengthy citation) to illustrate my point. Concerning the perfect-tense participle, Picirilli contends that the “time of the state of affairs . . . in all instances . . . is contemporaneous with the primary verb whether it precedes or follows it in order” (p. 247). For some of his examples this may be correct, but it is at least arguably otherwise for two of them. In Mark 5:33, the woman knew what had happened to her before she came to Jesus (and the participle precedes the primary verb, her

2. Picirilli (p. 248) actually says that “by nature” the present participle functions in this way. I will return to this confusion of temporal and aspectual values below.

3. Picirilli (p. 249) attempts to qualify these statistics, but see my discussion below.

4. Contra some who have wanted to characterize my work as confined to the area of semantics.

“knowing” being rightly depicted as occurring before her “coming”). In Luke 18:13, the publican stood afar, before considering whether he was willing to lift up his eyes (and the participle precedes the primary verb, indicating his “standing” before his intended action). Picirilli provides no argument for his alternative understanding, except that the participles in these two examples are the same as those used in the other two examples he cites—but with the participles following their primary verbs. What he has not shown is that the action of the participle is contemporary in either set of examples. I contend that, in Mark 6:20, it is at least arguable that Herod’s fear was depicted as a result of knowing of John’s righteousness (even though the participle of “knowing” follows the verb of “fearing”). This is only a tendency that, I believe, one should begin with, but with the context being the decisive factor where determinable.

The examples that Picirilli cites with present-tense participles are no better for his case. Concerning Mark 1:10, Picirilli says that “surely this means that Jesus saw the vision *as he was going up*” (p. 248). This appears to be based more on a view of the present-tense participle as contemporaneous—and translated with “as” (a view that Picirilli explicitly claims to reject, p. 241)—than on the basis of context. I believe that there is a presumption that Jesus’ coming up from the water, even if he was not fully out of it, is meant to be seen as preceding any seeing of the rent heaven, and the syntax supports this (the quotation of Gundry [p. 248 and n. 27] in which “as” is also used does nothing to argue against this). Similarly with Mark 1:16, Jesus is depicted as passing by the sea before he can see Simon and Andrew—despite the use of “as” again in the translation (again, quotation of Bratcher and Nida [p. 248 and n. 30] merely illustrates the view of participles as indicating time of occurrence that Picirilli himself rejects; piling on more commentators does not necessarily add to the argument). The same analysis applies to Mark 11:20. Picirilli states that the meaning of Mark 9:43 “surely . . . is to enter Gehenna in contemporaneous possession of both hands” (p. 248). Perhaps, but I believe this understanding would have been more clearly stated by putting the participial clause after the primary verb. The syntax here “surely” indicates a person in possession of two hands, then entering into Gehenna, as the context supports. In Luke 7:38, Picirilli wishes for us to understand that it was as the woman was weeping that she began to wet Jesus’ feet. Or is it—as the syntax seems to indicate—that she was weeping, and it was her weeping that then allowed her to bathe Jesus’ feet? Contrary to Picirilli, Marshall’s comments (p. 249 and n. 36) seem to support this understanding (Fitzmyer’s comments [p. 249 and n. 37] are not entirely clear or germane to the matter). Picirilli notes in concluding discussion of the present-tense participle that half of the instances are of the participle λέγων introducing quotations. He contends that “the only logical position for this usage is after the verb” (p. 250). I am not sure what he means by this. If he means that the most logical syntactical position for a participle’s introducing a quotation

that in some way elucidates a primary verb of speaking is after that verb, then he is probably correct. If he means that there is no other place for a verb of speaking, then (as we shall see below) he is wrong. This is especially the case if the participle syntax is one of the linguistic means of depicting events, rather than simply being used to denote events.

The examples with aorist-tense participles fare no better. Picirilli begins with those that precede their primary verb. In Mark 6:22, Picirilli contends that “it makes better sense to take this to mean *when* she danced than *afterward*” (p. 250). Or does it make better sense to interpret the syntax as indicating that she had at least to begin dancing before Herod could be pleased with what he saw? I argue that the syntax indicates the latter (the comments from Lane and France [p. 250 nn. 41–42] only obscure the interpretation of the participles). In Mark 9:8, they look and then they see no one—or at least they are depicted as looking before they can be seen to conclude that no one is there (again, the comments by Gundry and France [p. 250 nn. 43–44] do not clarify the interpretation of the participles). Similarly, in Mark 16:4, they look up and then see the stone rolled away (in this instance, Lane’s comment [p. 251 and n. 46] seems at least as likely to support my interpretation). Concerning Luke 2:48, Picirilli seems to play one commentator against the other—although the one that he accepts actually seems to endorse what I would contend is the likely interpretation—Jesus’ parents take in the scene and then are astonished. In Luke 5:5, Picirilli contends that “it was during that night that their fishing was unsuccessful” (p. 251), whereas I believe that the syntax indicates just that—that an entire night’s work was done and the result was nothing (Bock’s interpretation [p. 251 n. 50] is at least compatible with this interpretation). Even clearer, I believe, is Luke 8:12, where, as Picirilli states, faith and salvation are linked. They are linked in succession, however—salvation comes about by or as a result of or after faith (as even Marshall’s comment [p. 251 and n. 52] seems to indicate). Perhaps it is that in Luke 11:27 the woman “spoke loudly, with her voice raised” (p. 251) or perhaps even better, as the syntax seems to indicate, she raised her voice (took whatever effort was required) so that she could speak from out of the crowd. Picirilli concludes the discussion of aorist-tense participles’ preceding their primary verb with a discussion of ἀποκρίνομαι, which as a participle, he contends, both is contemporaneous and restates the primary verb. This may be correct in some contexts, although Picirilli himself may give away a clue to understanding this verb. A neglected dimension of its usage is its passive voice causality. Picirilli states that this verb shows that “what is said is a response to something said or done” (p. 252). It is arguable that the participle here indicates that the speaker formulates an answer in response to what has been said or done. Hence, someone, “having formulated an answer” (or, to emphasize the passive voice, “an answer having been formulated”), then says or does something further. This analysis helps to explain both the voice and syntax of this participle formulation, in which the passive form is used and the participle is placed before its primary verb.

Concerning the aorist-tense participles that follow their primary verb, Picirilli cites a number of further examples. The highly problematic nature of his method of analysis is shown by the example in Mark 1:31. He endorses Cranfield's view that "grasping" is antecedent to raising the woman up (p. 252 n. 57). Taylor's view that "grasping" is concurrent with raising her—despite also the apparent endorsement of the commentator Swete and the grammarian Burton!—is simply dismissed as "not as convincing" (p. 252). Similarly, in Luke 7:29, Picirilli endorses Marshall's view that baptism preceded justifying God (p. 253 and n. 66). In response to Plummer's observation that the action of the participle is contemporaneous—the people justified God, being baptized (p. 253 and n. 67)—Picirilli finds this "not convincing" (p. 253), even though the commentators Green and Bock also hold to this position (p. 253 and n. 67). In both cases, it is plausible that the syntax is used to indicate concurrent action.

The final category of example that Picirilli handles involves multiple participles, several of them examples already treated earlier in the article. In Luke 5:22 (see above), it makes syntactical and discourse sense to see Jesus as knowing their thoughts, formulating an answer (*ἀποκρίνομαι*), and then speaking to his antagonists. Both participles precede the primary verb. In Luke 7:29 (see above), the hearing of the people and publicans precedes their justifying God. Picirilli thinks that this is a clear violation of Grice's maxim of orderliness, because the baptism occurred first of the three actions delimited—that is, before their hearing John. As already noted above, this is far from the only way to interpret this verse. Of Luke 7:37–38, Picirilli wishes to distinguish among the aorist-tense participles. It makes better syntactical and discourse sense if the action was depicted such that she knew, brought, stood, and wept, which then led to her wetting Jesus' feet. Finally, in Luke 23:48, Picirilli contends that the beating of their breasts is contemporary with their returning, but his citation from Marshall indicates otherwise: "beating their breasts as they begin to depart" (p. 256 and n. 76).

Picirilli suggests that, instead of the syntactical tendency identified above, a way forward is in terms of Robert Longacre's view of preposed participles as indicating background and postposed participles as indicating continuation. Here is not the place to go into a detailed response to Longacre's proposal, because Picirilli merely suggests it as a possible alternative. However, I do not believe that it is such a radical alternative. Instead, it is in many ways consistent with my syntactical proposal, in which temporal categories are extended to instrumental ones. As noted above in my exposition of examples, preceding participles are often used to depict preceding or "background" actions to the actions of the primary verb, with following participles used to elucidate that action.

Besides my questioning of Picirilli's interpretation of many of his examples, there are a number of examples he cites that simply do not count—some by his own criteria. Mark 11:8 and Luke 2:36 do not have primary verbs (pp. 252–253)—Picirilli's inferring them in his English translation

does not remedy the situation but only begs the question (or skews the analysis). Luke 3:1–2 (p. 254) are genitive absolutes, which Picirilli himself says he will not use (n. 7).

There are also a number of places where Picirilli seems to confuse important linguistic issues. For example, he states that the participles are “in form and function” (p. 243) verbal adjectives. Both verbs and adjectives are forms, not functions. Functions are such things as being used substantively or for modification. At another place, he refers to the “aorist aspect” (p. 250), again confusing morphology and semantics. Further, Picirilli uses the language of an article that Matthew Brook O’Donnell and I published regarding statistical probabilities in Greek verbal usage. Picirilli’s use of this statistically based model—especially its probabilities—to characterize his interpretations is not a legitimate application in terms of what we were proposing (see nn. 25, 39, 40).

The last concern to note here is that Picirilli, despite his protests to the contrary and what he claims he is trying to prove, seems to endorse a time-based view of the participles. Early in the article, Picirilli subtly chastises me for citing others who, he contends, do not clearly exemplify my view on participles (p. 245). What I state is this: “As a general syntactical rule it still requires that each context be analysed to establish temporal reference of the particular usage (this kind of a syntactic rule has been recognized at least in part by Moulton, 130–31; Rose, *Tenses*, 34; Robertson, 1113; Blass, 197).”<sup>5</sup> My citing of these scholars was not because they recognized the specific pattern of participle usage that I delimited but because they recognized to varying degrees that context must be determinative in understanding participle usage. Each one of them does this, including Rose.<sup>6</sup> Picirilli professes to take an aspectual view of the verb in Greek, but there are a number of places where he uses language that reveals otherwise. He refers, for example, to “the temporal tendencies of present, aorist, and perfect participles” (p. 246), the present-tense participle functioning in a temporal way “by nature” (p. 248), and a particular interpretation being “even more in accord with the tense” (p. 249).

In conclusion, while I appreciate Picirilli’s effort to clarify the meaning of the participle in relation to its primary verb, I am not convinced that he has made his case that the syntactical ordering of elements should be abandoned as a useful starting point in interpretation. There is sufficient problem with the examples he cites purportedly to refute the view—the examples either are not appropriate or advance no new argument or at the least are subject to another interpretation—that I believe that the principle of temporal ordering should remain as a useful syntactical tendency from which to begin exegesis, especially if one remembers that the syntax is

5. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 381. See Picirilli (nn. 18–22) for more specific references.

6. Rose takes an *Aktionsart* view of the meanings of the tense-forms but recognizes contexts in which the time of the event varies. I infer from what he says that he is indicating that context makes this difference, while retaining the kind-of-action semantics of the participle.

used to depict the ordering of the events. However, more than this, I sense that Picirilli is confused over the function of the participle. In some instances, he wishes to assert its aspectual nature, while in others, he maintains that a temporal interpretation on the basis of tense-form is most convincing. His confused understanding leads to questionable assertions and interpretations of a number of passages that, rather than proving his point, can be interpreted in support of the syntactical ordering principle.