

## *Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in the New Testament*

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### **We Have a Problem**

As a young theology student, the present author learned New Testament Greek from a very good teacher using a traditional beginning grammar. He has continued studying the Greek grammar as both a student and a teacher for over fifty years, and has come to realize a great deficiency exists in the common approach to the teaching of voice in Greek. Something has been virtually ignored in the usual way Greek has been taught, namely the very nature of the verb itself.

As in English, Greek verbs are by nature either action or state-of-being. Unlike English, Greek has only three regular state-of-being verbs (though a few others sometimes indicate state-of-being), whereas English has several such verbs. Action verbs make up the rest of the Greek verb system.

Also unlike English, Greek changes the spelling of verbs to indicate person and number. First year Greek students memorize charts of verbs with different forms, and in different tenses and moods, because of the highly inflected nature of the Greek verb. This is well and good. Such memorization must take place for the student to read and study the language in the text of the New Testament.

However, one aspect of the verbal system is rarely if ever studied concerning the true nature of action and state-of-being verbs, that is, whether such verbs are *transitive* or *intransitive*. Both beginning and advanced Greek grammars virtually ignore the transitive and intransitive nature of the verb, resulting in some serious errors in the analysis of the Greek New Testament. Commonly, the verb conjugations are labeled either active, passive, or middle. But are they? No, they are not, because many verbs in all forms are neither active nor passive. And the words *middle voice* indicates something that is questionable at best.

### **Transitive and Intransitive**

For the discussion of the terms *transitive* and *intransitive*, we will revert to English 101. The following is basic English grammar, taught from the fifth grade forward in American schools. Or, at least it was so taught when the author was a student in such schools. If the reader is aware of the following information, consider this a review.

The word *transitive* refers to whether a verb transfers action from a subject to a direct object, which is called an active voice verb, or transfers action by an agent back upon the subject, which is called a passive voice verb. If an action verb does not transfer action forward to a direct object, or back upon the subject, it is called *intransitive*. Action verbs that do not transfer the action in such a manner are, like state-of-being verbs, voiceless, but this is almost never stated in beginning or advanced Greek grammars. Indeed it is usually ignored altogether, and if the transitive or intransitive nature of the verb is mentioned at all, it is almost an after-thought.<sup>1</sup>

The basic natural classification of verbs, without reference to form, is between the *transitive* and *intransitive* uses. For example, “John painted the house,” has a *transitive active* verb *painted* because it has a direct object. The subject, *John*, performs the action, and the direct object, *house*, receives the action. This can be in any tense, such as the *present* “paints” or “is painting,” the *past* “painted,” or the *future* “will paint,” or the perfect “has painted.” Tense makes no difference as long as the subject

1 In some Greek dictionaries or lexicons one finds verbs listed as either transitive or intransitive, especially when the transitive translation into English differs from the intransitive. But this is not sufficient, for it still does not speak to the basic nature or classification of the verb grammatically.

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performs the action upon an object *that is stated within the sentence*. All such verbs are, as to their nature, transitive active.

A transitive passive verb also transfers the action, but the subject does not perform the action. In the statement, “The house was painted by John,” the subject *house* does nothing, but receives the action of being painted. The one painting, *John*, is the object of the preposition *by*. But even if the agent of the painting were not stated, the verb is still passive if the subject is receiving the action of being painted, as illustrated by the sentence, “The house was painted last year.” In that sentence, we do not know who painted the house because the agent of the painting is not stated. However, in both cases the verb is *transitive passive*.

Now, active and passive verbs are the *only* two types of transitive verbs. *But they are not the only types of action verbs*.

Did you note the difference between an *action* verb, and the *active* voice? Greek grammarians generally confuse the two terms *action* and *active*. If a verb is an action verb, and has a certain form, it is called *active* by Greek grammarians, whether it actually is or not. Many verbs indicate action, but not all action verbs are active, because sometimes they are intransitive. The following sentence contains an *action* verb that is not *active* voice: “During the winter, the man painted inside his house.” The verb “painted” is the same form as the transitive active use in the previous paragraph, but in this sentence, it is intransitive. There is action, but the sentence does not tell what the man painted. It tells when he painted, “during the winter,” and it tells where he painted, “inside his house,” but *there is no direct object* and the verb is not passive because the subject did the action of painting. Therefore the action verb “painted” is no longer active voice or passive voice. *It is intransitive and therefore voiceless*.

This kind of verb is called an “intransitive complete.” The emphasis of the sentence is solely on what the man was doing, not on the thing he was painting. In fact, the thing he was painting is not even stated in the sentence. Maybe he was painting the walls, or maybe he was painting a portrait. We do not know, and only if another sentence tells us, will we find out. Obviously, this is vitally important in understanding the sentence, for many verbs are complete of themselves, and for a very good reason. Specifically, if the thing receiving the action is named, it weakens the statement, because the attention of the reader is moved away from the action, either back to the subject (passive voice) or forward to a direct object (active voice).

### **The State-of-Being Verb**

There is another kind of verb that is *intransitive*, and it is not an action verb at all. As noted, a verb is a word that shows *either* action or state-of-being. State-of-being verbs cannot be transitive active, because there is *no action* involved. Only action verbs with direct objects can be transitive active, and only action verbs can be transitive passive. *So all state-of-being verbs are intransitive* by definition.

Now sometimes, they are intransitive complete, and as such are similar in emphasis to action verbs that are intransitive complete. But often they are not complete, but copulative. That is, the verb has a noun, a pronoun, or an adjective following it which either identifies the subject (a noun or pronoun), or describes the subject (an adjective). Such state-of-being verbs are called “intransitive copulative.” Sometimes, especially when teaching grammar to children, these are called *linking verbs*.

In the sentence, “His name is Fred,” the subject “name” is linked to the noun “Fred,” by the verb *is* which identifies the subject in a particular way. So the verb *is* is an intransitive copulative verb. The word *Fred* in this use is called a *predicate nominative*, which is one kind of subject complement.

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Another example, this time with an adjective is, “Fred is small.” Here the subject *Fred* is connected to the adjective *small* by the verb *is*. The verb is again intransitive copulative. The word *small* is called a predicate adjective, another kind of subject complement.

In Greek, the three verbs which are regularly considered state-of-being verbs are εἰμί, γίνομαι, and ὑπάρχω. All three of the verbs, if parsed according to form, would be considered either active voice or, in the case of γίνομαι, passive voice (or middle, about which more later). But, in fact, none of them have any voice at all. And, while they are the most common state-of-being verbs, they are not the only ones. A few other Greek verbs also function on rare occasions as state-of-being verbs.

Grammar is rarely as cut and dried as grammars want to make it. Such phrases as “rules of grammar,” should be avoided, because there is almost always an exception to each supposed rule. Such rules are not rules at all, but simply accepted uses that can, and do, suffer violation. Usage determines grammar, not the other way around.

### **Verbs in the “Passive Form” that are Actually Active**

Many examples can be produced from the New Testament that violate the supposed rules of Greek grammar. Notice the case of βουληθῆ in James 4:4. It is traditionally parsed as an *aorist passive* of βούλομαι, but is an active voice verb with the infinitive direct object εἶναι. The author translates this sentence, “Therefore, whoever decides to be *a* friend of the world is shown *to be* an enemy of God.” The word *decides* translates the verb βουληθῆ, a transitive active verb. Its direct object is the infinitive *to be*.

This particular form of βούλομαι occurs only here in the N.T. But it is actually a *transitive active* and should be so parsed, not as a passive, even though the form with the -θη ending is regularly used with an aorist passive verb. *But not here*, and not in several other cases. Form DOES NOT DETERMINE FUNCTION. Function is an independent state recognized by use, not by form. Most modern English versions of James 4:4 translate this word as an active voice verb with the infinitive *to be* as a direct object. Even the NIV, which is notorious for paraphrasing some forms, translates it as a transitive active verb. Some older translations attempted to make it passive voice, but their attempts are not convincing.

Obviously, the so-called passive endings are nothing of the sort. The most that can be said is that they are used regularly on passive voice verbs. It is the sense of the sentence which determines if a verb is active, passive, copulative, or complete, not the form of the verb. The verb form can, and often does help determine the function, but it is not the ultimate factor in that determination.

There are many other illustrations of the form that is usually called passive, either in the present or the aorist, that are transitive active or intransitive complete. Matthew 15:23 is a good example, ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῇ λόγον, “But He did not answer her *a* word.” The verb ἀπεκρίθη, “did answer” is universally parsed as an aorist passive because it has the -θη ending, even though it is not passive. It has a direct object, λόγον and must be parsed as an active voice. See Matthew 27:14, where the same verb is intransitive complete, and is certainly not passive.

Of the 82 times ἀπεκρίθη occurs in the Greek New Testament, *it is never passive*. Sometimes it is complete, but usually it has a direct object, often a clause. Nevertheless, parsing guides continually, and ignorantly, parse it as an aorist passive! Sometimes they beg the question and call it a “deponent middle.” This is just silly. Such a designation tells you nothing about how the author uses the verb in its context.

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The importance of noticing whether a verb is actually transitive active or passive versus intransitive cannot be overstated. The form simply will not tell the student what the emphasis of the sentence is. Intransitive complete verbs are ignored at the peril of the exegete.

So, we provide an illustration of the importance of intransitive verbs taken from the first chapter of James: Of the 79 verbs or verbals (infinitives and participles) in James one, 21 that are usually parsed as active or middle are actually intransitive completes. Count them! The verbs are voiceless, and should not be parsed as active or middle (a meaningless term if there ever was one).

### **Identifying the Four Kinds of Verbs**

When studying the New Testament in its original language, the careful student of grammar will always determine the transitive or intransitive nature of the verb in context. Here are the four possibilities that should be considered *each time a verb is analyzed* (the author learned these first in elementary school, and good English teachers discussed them during his high school years.)

1. *Transitive Active Verbs*: Most action verbs can be transitive active, but are only so if they have a direct object.
2. *Transitive Passive Verbs*: Most action verbs can be transitive passive if the subject receives the action of the verb rather than an object. In Greek, the inflectional form of the verb helps determine this, whereas in English, auxiliary verbs indicate the passive function. Often, but not always, an agent of the action will be identified in a prepositional phrase, or by a noun in the instrumental case, often following, but sometimes preceding the Greek verb, depending on emphasis.
3. *Intransitive Complete Verbs*: Any action verb and any state-of-being verb can be intransitive complete. a) If the action verb has no direct object, and if it is not transferring its action back upon the subject, it is intransitive complete, and should be so parsed. b) If the state-of-being verb has no subject complement, that is, either a predicate noun or adjective following the verb, it is an intransitive complete verb.
4. *Intransitive Copulative Verbs*: Any state-of-being verb that has a complement, either a predicate noun or adjective, referring back to the subject is an intransitive copulative verb. The complement can be a substantive (a noun, infinitive, or noun clause) or an adjective.

Remember, transitiveness or intransitiveness can never be determined by the form of the verb. Such forms may, in many cases, point to a particular use, but form never determines the function. Verb forms are sometimes indicators, but never determiners.

### **The Supposed Middle Voice**

This author is not the first to ask, “Is the middle actually a voice at all?” Indeed, many have expressed the view that the term “middle” is an aberration, and cannot refer to voice. Evidently, some early grammarians thought that the middle falls “between” the active and passive, but this is not the case.

In fact, the so-called middle voice should probably be considered a non-voice altogether, and the term middle abandoned. It is true, that there are verbs that have no so-called active “form.” But what that really means is that their vocabulary form, or lexical form, is simply different than other verbs. Some of these, such as γίνομαι, for example, probably have no active “form” because they are, by nature, intransitive, and never active at all. The same could be said of ἔρχομαι and πορεύομαι, as well as other verbs that have an -ομαι ending as their vocabulary form.

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Another term Greek students could easily do without is *deponent*, which actually makes no grammatical sense at all. Some have suggested substituting defective for it, which is not really any better. What actually is, then, the situation? Simply stated, some verbs have a lexical form (that is, they have an -ομαι ending as their vocabulary form) which can be transitive active, transitive passive, intransitive copulative, or intransitive complete, depending on the sense of the verb, and its use in the context. As far as this author can tell, its lexical form really doesn't make any difference to its function.

But, one may ask, what about the "middle reflexive?" Is that not a true voice? We would answer, "No, it is not." Such a use can only be determined by context, much like the passive. It is not determined by the form at all. The actual function is probably an apocopated or elliptical reflexive. The form does not determine whether it actually is a reflexive, it only allows for it, just as it allows for that form to be a passive, active, complete or copulative.

But, unlike the passive, there is another way to express the reflexive, and that is with the use of the reflexive pronoun. Since the "middle" form is regularly used with a reflexive pronoun, it is much more likely that the original use was as a *transitive active* with an expressed accusative reflexive pronoun, which, sometime during the process of the language development, began to be considered redundant when the reflexive use was the only logical choice of the -ομαι form. This may have been a literary affectation. Why waste papyrus or parchment when the reflexive pronoun was obviously to be understood?

Again, our recommendation is to drop the terminology "middle" as unnecessary and misleading. What is much more important is whether the form is being used as a transitive or intransitive, or as an elliptical reflexive.

### **The Importance of this Issue**

How important is it to recognize the transitivity or intransitivity of a particular use? Refer to Matthew 15:27 mentioned above. The verb ἐσθίει occurs there as an intransitive verb, even though it is always parsed as an active voice, as though it were transitive active. Here is how various versions translate that sentence:

1. KJV: And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.
2. ASV: But she said, Yea, Lord: for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.
3. Darby: But she said, Yea, Lord; for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from the table of their masters.
4. NASB: But she said, Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

In fact, of most of the major recent translations (since 1880), only three treat the verb ἐσθίει as an active voice verb, and in so doing, they ignore the prepositional phrase of which the word "crumbs" is a part. Unfortunately, the New King James Version, a fairly careful translation, does so. The others are the New International Version, a notoriously inaccurate translation, and the Revised Standard Version, a translation the quality of which inconsistently varies from quite good to very poor.

The Greek sentence in Matthew 15:27 has no direct object, and the verb cannot be considered active voice: ἡ δὲ εἶπεν, ναὶ κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιχίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν.

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Note the preposition phrase ἀπὸ τῶν ψιχίων, “from the crumbs,” which follows the verb ἐσθίει, “eats.” The woman does not say, “The small dogs eat the crumbs,” for that would miss the emphasis of what she was saying. She was emphasizing that the Gentile “dogs” could also benefit *from* some of the teachings of Jesus, even though they were not able to eat the main meal, nor even all the crumbs. They could eat “from the crumbs.”

To make the word “crumbs” the direct object of the verb, which is an intransitive complete verb, misses the whole meaning of what the woman was saying, and as a result Christ’s statement to her in verse 28 becomes less accurate. In this case, the intransitive nature of the verb becomes quite important as it does in many situations.

So, to answer the question as to the overall importance of this issue, we must say that it can, in many places, be very important, even speaking to the correct interpretation of the sentence. We readily agree that, just as not all sentences are equally important doctrinally in a narrative, conversation, or didactic passage, not all occurrences of intransitiveness or transitivity are equally important.

But the point is this: all occurrences of these constructions should be noted, considered, and evaluated as to their meaning and importance. To do less is to possibly miss an important point, or an important emphasis.

To teachers and professors of *Koine* Attic Greek I make this encouragement. Abandon teaching the various verbal conjugations as active, passive, or middle forms. It is better to simply teach the possible functions of each conjugation right from the beginning. Begin using the terminology transitive active, etc., right from the beginning, and continue regularly throughout the course you are teaching.

Rather than using the phrase “Present Active Indicative Endings,” refer to the -ω verb conjugations as such. They are Present Indicative -Ω verb endings. Likewise, verbs that have the -ομαι endings are not Present Middle/Passive Indicative endings. They are simply Present Indicative -ΟΜΑΙ verb endings. Then explain various ways such endings are actually used in the New Testament, illustrating with various passages.

Also abandon parsing according to form, and parse according to function. It will enliven your presentations to your students when done consistently, and you may even find nuances that you have previously missed.

I suggest the following format:

1. If the verb is truly active voice in function, parse it as a *transitive active*, i.e. *present transitive active indicative*, or *aorist transitive active indicative*, etc.
2. If the verb is truly passive voice in function, parse it as a *transitive passive* as in the above examples.
3. If the verb is complete, abandon the statement of voice, and parse it as an *intransitive complete*: i.e. *present intransitive complete indicative*, or *aorist intransitive complete indicative*, etc.
4. Likewise, if the verb is copulative, abandon the statement of voice, and parse it as an *intransitive copulative* as in the above examples.

And always include the vocabulary form for each verb parsed, which will point out its pattern of conjugation.

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### **Conclusion**

The teaching of New Testament Greek is greatly important. Within that teaching, the understanding of the transitive/intransitive function should be taught, and emphasized. The lack of this emphasis has eliminated a great thesaurus of exegetical gems of much value ready to be realized.

Anyone who regularly studies and translates the New Testament, and anyone who regularly teaches the truths of the New Testament, should be aware of the grammatical importance of the very nature of the Greek verb, including its relationship to voice, or voicelessness. A careful observation of the transitive/intransitive function of the verb in its various contexts will lend a richness to any student's understanding of the message of the New Testament documents.