

Thanks Matt for your thoughtful comments on the four contradictions I discussed in my opening post. I agree – this form of debate is much better than the oral back and forths I’m used to on a stage in front of an audience, where it’s so easy to say something unwittingly that is completely stupid or wrong. With this format I’m able to think about it a bit before saying something completely stupid!

I appreciate your attempts to reconcile the contradictions. For years I wished I could reconcile all the ones I found – and did my best to do so, using many of these kinds of arguments. I ended up thinking it just didn’t work. I’ll try to explain below why I think so, step by step. I’ve decided that it would be easier for readers of the blog to be able to compare your reconciliations with my responses directly, and so I have copied your comments and will be giving my responses in green so they will be easily distinguished.

Blog readers: this post will seem, as a result, twice as long as usual. But no need to read the whole thing if you don’t need to; my green responses are the only new ones. And so we begin:

Thank-you very much, Bart, for your opening gambit. It has given me a most enjoyable afternoon of delving deeply into the Gospel texts, and I really appreciate the written format of this debate, which allows space for considered reflection, study and learning, rather than the rhetorical tennis of some other formats of debate which, while they produce spectacle, rarely achieve deep insight either for the proponents or the onlookers.

I will now take the cases in the order in which you proposed them.

1. The case of Jairus’ daughter can, I think, be usefully looked at in terms of the Greek Text, Matthew’s practice of ‘telescoping’ stories about Jesus, and the emotional reality of the situation.

In Mark 5.23 we see that Jairus says ‘thugatrion mou eschatos echei.’ A wooden translation of this would be ‘my little daughter is at the end.’ In Matthew 9.18 we see that Jairus says ‘thugater mou arti eteleutesen.’ A wooden translation of this would be ‘my daughter just now died.’ But, the word ‘arti’ is not as rigid as one might think. It can mean ‘just now’ (immediate past), ‘now’ (immediate present), and it can also be used to suggest a sense of inevitable impending reality, as is the case in Matthew 3.15. This being the case, the word can be rendered ‘even now’. Also, while the word ‘eteleutesen’, being in the aorist tense, can simply be rendered ‘died’, it can also be used to create a sense of being at the very point of death, as is the case in Hebrews 11.22. So, a possible rendering of the sentence is ‘my daughter just now was at the point of death.’ So it seems to me that the Greek in both Mark and Matthew can be seen as creating a sense of impending inevitability.

This is a bit tricky since most blog members don’t read Greek. But let’s give it a shot! I’m afraid I don’t see how your explanation can work. Yes “now” (Greek ARTI) can indeed refer to something that has not yet happened, but that is only when it is used with certain verb tenses or moods. If you make a command “Now do this” then obviously the “now” does not refer to something that has happened already; and if you use it with a present or a future tense, same thing: “I’m driving now” or “Now I will wash the dishes.” But it does not mean that when used with a past tense: “Now I arrived.” Your arrival happened already.

Greek of course does not use verb tenses and moods in all the same ways English

does. It does have an imperative (making a command) and a future (referring to what will happen). The example you give of ARTI (“now”) not meaning something that is past (Matthew 3:15) is an imperative. So you’re right, it doesn’t refer to the past. But as you note Matthew 9:18 doesn’t use an imperative (or a future, or a present), it uses the aorist indicative, the tense normally used to refer to a past act that has been completed.

It’s right of course that the Greek aorist can be a bit complicated. But it almost always refers to a completed action; only in exceptional cases does that mean something other than what has happened in the past. How do you know when you have an exception? Only when the context strongly indicates the action is not past. Aorist indicatives almost always past actions over and done with. You can see hundreds and hundreds of examples of the standard use just in the Gospel of Matthew. If you say a girl “died” (aorist indicative) you mean she is already dead.

BUT, the most important point, this emphasis on a past action is especially strong if you have a *combination* of “now” (ARTI) with the aorist. “Now that has already happened.” There would be no other reason to combine the two, at least that I can think of. (I think your suggestion that “died” in the aorist can refer to something yet to happen based on Hebrews 11:22 must be a mistake? Hebrews 11:22 doesn’t use the aorist indicative of the verb. It is a *present* participle - “while he was dying”).

There is no instance in Matthew where ARTI is used with the aorist to mean anything other than a completed action. Or in the entire New Testament (I checked). I can’t imagine a Greek reader ever taking it this way. Do you have an example in mind?

Without it, there doesn’t seem to be an option: Matthew says the girl is already dead when Jairus comes to Jesus; Mark says she is sick and still living. That’s simply a factual difference, a contradiction.

To see my responses to the rest of Matt’s comments, you will need to belong to the blog. It’s all extremely interesting. Don’t you want to see it? Join the blog!

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