OBSERVATIONS ON THE EPISTOLARY AORIST IN 2 CORINTHIANS

by

K.L. MCKAY
Canberra

In 2 Corinthians 8:17, 18 and 22 aorist verbs are translated with past reference in the KJV (he went, we have sent, we have sent), but with present time reference in many modern versions (e.g. he is going/coming/now leaving, we are sending, we are sending). The change is no doubt partly in response to increased awareness among modern scholars of the possibility of the use of the epistolary aorist, and partly due to the efforts of some to demonstrate that the letter we have is not a unity, but that chapters 1-9 and chapters 10-13 are from two different original letters. The following comments arise from a request I had from a colleague interested in the unity problem to clarify the grammatical situation for him, and I have been encouraged to make them more widely available,\(^1\) since there seems to be an assumption in some quarters that the modern translations must be more definitive of Paul’s intended meaning, especially as the various translations give no marginal indication of possible ambiguity.

The first point to make is the obvious one that the circumstances at the time allowed Paul to write as he has without any suspicion that the Corinthians would be confused: the movements of Titus and the two anonymous brothers were known, and are part of the already established context. We, on the other hand, do not have this knowledge, and can only deduce details from what has been preserved in this letter, using some general knowledge gained from the New Testament and other ancient world sources, with a little more specific help from 1 Corinthians and Acts.

It is increasingly being recognized that the aorist is not a past tense but an aspect denoting the activity of the verb as complete action in relation to its context. Thus the aorists ἐγραμάτευον,

---
\(^1\) I am grateful to the Rt. Rev. Dr. P.W. Barnett not only for asking for clarification of my explanation of the epistolary aorist, but also for his helpful comments on my original reply and a subsequent draft of this article.

© E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1995
Novum Testamentum XXXVII, 2
συνεπέμφασεν and συνεπέμφασεν in 2 Cor 8:17, 18 and 22 basically represent complete actions in relation to their contexts. If it is known that Titus with two companions was taking the present letter to Corinth, there is no problem about translating all of them with present time reference, as the aorist is commonly found used of the details of writing and sending letters, representing the situation as it would appear to the recipient of the letter. Similarly, if this is the known background, ἔπεμψα in 9:3 may also be epistolary, as most modern versions appear to translate it, although it could be taken as historical, referring mainly to the decision to send, which has been represented as a series of whole actions in 8:17-22, as if it were the complete act of sending.

The epistolary use is not very different from that of the aorist in past narrative, for the effect is essentially a distancing of the writer from the event, and because this is done by forward projection, the time of the event (more important to us than to speakers of ancient Greek) becomes relatively past. It has a quite different effect from the use of the aorist indicative in narrative that is timeless or set in present or future time, for in these contexts the present and future indicative are normal, and by overriding them to signify completeness the aorist has a certain emphasis which is not inherent in its epistolary use.

If, on the other hand, it is known that Titus with two companions had already left for Corinth before the writing of the letter, the four aorists under reference need to be translated as past tenses in English (and the English perfect is sufficiently past-oriented to

---

3 The NEB goes closer to admitting an ambiguity by translating My purpose in sending these friends is ..., but still clearly follows the epistolary aorist theory. At this point, of course, τωι ἀδελφωι includes Titus, so it is not clear whether they number two or three, or even whether the reference is only to those already mentioned.
4 Cf. New Syntax §4.2.3. In my Greek Grammar for Students: A concise grammar of classical Attic with special reference to aspect in the verb, Department of Classics, The Australian National University, Canberra 1974, 1977, I have cited in Appendix A (§23) classical examples of the aorist indicative used of attempts (to kill and to expose) which failed, although the preparations for them had apparently been completed; and in §22 of the same Appendix I draw attention to the fact that διδομεν in Greek terms means I am giving even when the absence of acceptance makes I offer a more idiomatic English rendering.
5 New Syntax, §4.4.3, 4.4.5.