Book Review
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Exegetical Gems From Biblical Greek by Benjamin L. Merkle, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019, 171 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5409-6211-9. $16.99.

Benjamin Merkle (Ph. D) is professor of New Testament Greek at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has co-authored several books on the Greek language of the New Testament and desires that ministers use the Greek New Testament in their studies of the Scriptures.

Exegetical Gems is a refresher course for individuals who have studied New Testament Greek and need to be reminded of its functional importance in biblical interpretation and its overall value in communicating God's Word to others.

The book consists of thirty-five chapters each of which focuses on two main things: (1) an exegetical gem from the NT and (2) a review of some aspects of Greek syntax (viii). Each chapter follows the same basic format: (1) introduction, (2) overview, and (3) interpretation. The introduction states the biblical text to be discussed and raises questions that will be answered in the interpretation of the text. The overview gives an account of the relevant aspect of Greek syntax where the grammatical function is discussed. The interpretation applies the insight gained by the syntactical information and offers a solution or answer to the question raised in the introduction. This makes for a concise approach to the overall investigations of the exegetical gems selected.

The Greek gems selected illustrate some aspect of Greek syntax that the author desires to highlight. The passage given is not fully exegeted with a complete discussion of remote and immediate contexts, lexical function of words, and grammatical import of each word in the sentence or sentences that comprise the passage of Scripture.

Examples of the contents of the thirty-five chapters will be discussed in this review.

The first example is chapter three which focuses on the nominative case. The passage under consideration is John 1:1. The nominative case is used most frequently to designate the subject of the verb. Merkle reviews the various uses of the nominative case: (1) as the Subject (the subject of a finite verb) John 3:35; (2) as the Predicate Nominative (expresses a characteristic or state of the subject with a copulative verb) John 1:4; (3) in Apposition (provides additional information about a subject) Col. 1:1; (4) Absolute (grammatically independent and often used in greetings) 2 Thess. 3:18; (5) in Address (used instead of a vocative) Col. 3:19. Merkle states the various uses, defines them, and gives specific examples of each use.

With a predicate nominative, both the subject and the predicate nominative are in the nominative case. How can you tell which is the subject? Merkle cites Wallace who gives the following guidelines: (1) If there is a pronoun (whether stated or embedded in the verb) it is the subject. (2) If one of the nominatives is articular (has the article), it is the subject. (3) If one of the nominatives is a proper name, it is the subject (11).

In John 1:1, John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Merkle states, "In the example of John 1:1, because "the word" (*ò lógos*) has the article and "God (*theós*) lacks the article, "the word" is clearly the subject" (11). The question remains, "why does *theós* lack the article (i. e. is anarthrous)"? Merkle lists the following reasons that answer this question and affirm that *theós* should not be translated "a god" (Indefinite).

First, the Word was present in the beginning with God and was involved in the creation of the world. John 1:1 is parallel with Gen. 1:1 and identifies the Word with being the Creator.

Second, as a Jew, John was thoroughly monotheistic. It is highly unlikely that he would have referred to another person as "a god."

Third, the inclusion of the article would have stated something different than John intended. Merkle cites Carson as stating, "In fact, if John had included the article, he would have been saying something quite untrue. He would have been so identifying the Word with God that no divine being could exist apart from the Word" (12). There would be no distinction of person. Yet, John has already affirmed that the Word was with God indicating personal relationship.

Fourth, In NT Greek syntax, whenever the predicate nominative precedes the verb, it typically lacks the article whether it was considered indefinite or not (i. e. Colwell's Canon). The grammatical construction determines that the article is lacking, but only the context determines whether the noun should be considered indefinite. In this type of construction, the predicate nominative "is normally qualitative, sometimes definite, and only rarely indefinite" (Wallace 262) (12).

Fifth, the anarthrous use of theós is found in the immediate context and is still considered definite. Merkle provides four examples: John 1:6, 1:12, 1:13, and 1:18. In each of these passages the anarthrous use of *theós* is never translated "a god." This is true for the New World Translation as well (the New World Translation does translate John 1:1 as indefinite, "the Word was a god"). This inconsistency must be charged to the prejudice against the deity of Jesus by Jehovah Witnesses. It is an example of defective theology producing a misuse of grammar.

Sixth, If John wanted to communicate that Jesus was "a god" he could have used the Greek word *theios* (divine) Acts 17:29; 2 Pet. 1:3,4.

Seventh, The notion that Jesus is indeed God (possesses the perfections of God and is deity) is consistent with John's descriptions of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospel of John. The titles, works and attributes of Jesus affirm Jesus' deity (John 5:23, 8:58, 10:30). The articular use of *theós* of Jesus is found in John 20:28 where Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God" (*ò kúriós mou kaì ò theòs mou*).

Merkle concludes this discussion with this summary, "Thus John 1:1 'is very carefully constructed to refer to the personal distinctness yet the essential oneness of the Word with God'" (Rodney Whitacre as quoted by Merkle, 13).

Another example is found in chapter eighteen. Chapter eighteen develops the Greek grammatical aspects of Hebrews 13:5, "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Merkle focuses on the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood is described as the moon of uncertainty. While it is true that the subjunctive represents something that is uncertain, such is not always the case (80).

Merkle affirms that it is best to describe the subjunctive mood as the mood of probability (indefinite but probable).   He lists eight different uses for the subjunctive mood one of which is *emphatic negation* which expresses a *certainty.*   John 10:28 is used as an example along with Heb. 13:5. Merkle indicates that the subjunctive in Heb. 13:5 expresses something that certainly will not happen. Emphatic negation is expressed by the double negative *oú mé* (the indicative and nonindicative negative particles) plus the aorist subjunctive (or occasionally the future indicative) (82). This type of negative is emphatic and strongly denies that something will occur. Wallace (468) states that it "is the strongest way to negate something in Greek"). Turning to Heb. 13:5, Merkle states, "In context, the author claims that the basis of our contentment and freedom from the love of money is that God promises to always be with us and never to forsake us" (82). The passage actually contains five negatives! Two emphatic negations and one conjunction *oúdé,* "nor" which interpreted means never, never, never, no, never. Merkle states that Charles Spurgeon preached this text and titled his sermon, "Never, Never, Never, Never, Never" (83). Our English translations lose some of this emphatic force. Because of the heightened intensity supplied by the use of the five negatives in this passage, Merkle affirms that it is one of the most powerful passages in the New Testament. Knowledge of the Greek language is indispensable to a full understanding of the force of this passage.

A final example is found in chapter twenty-five, Pronouns. This chapter focuses on Luke 16:19-20 and whether or not this story is a parable or a historical narrative. Merkle focuses on the use of the indefinite pronoun *tis* (anyone). *Tis* is a pronoun that takes the place of a noun. The noun that the pronoun replaces is called the antecedent. Merkle lists eight types of pronouns in the Greek New Testament (112-113). They are: personal, demonstrative, relative, interrogative, indefinite, reflexive, reciprocal and correlative. Merkle does not believe that the story of the Rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is a real-life story. He affirms that it is a parable. He does so for the following reasons: (1) the Gospel writers do not always indicate that the story they are relating is a parable. Merkle gives Luke 16:1 as an example. (2) Merkle agrees that Jesus does not use proper names in parables and then states that Jesus does use details to make parables appear more true to life. For this reason, he gives the beggar a proper name. (3) the name Lazarus means "God has helped" and though other people did not help this poor man, God did. (4) the most important reason Merkle believes that this story is a parable is the use of *tis* (the indefinite pronoun) which Luke uses seven times to begin a parable (there was a certain man…Luke 10:30, 14:16; 15:11; 16:1, 19:12, 20:9 and Luke 16:19). Merkle affirms that Luke by using this pattern is signaling to his readers that he is introducing a parable (115). Merkle goes on to state that just because it is a parable, it is not any less valuable or authoritative.

In reply to Merkle, the following facts must be noted: (1) There is one example of Luke using *anthropos tis* that is **not** in the context of a parable, Luke 14:2, "And, behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy" (NKJV). Merkle notes this fact in a footnote (115) and states that a parable is always introduced with "He (Jesus) was saying/said," whereas 14:2 is clearly part of the narrative (115). However, Luke 16:19 is not preceded by the words, "Jesus was saying or said." (2) Jesus uses a proper name in the story which He **never** does in a parable. This fact is significant. The reason that Jesus uses the proper name is to emphasize the distinction between

the unidentified rich man (and so the use of the indefinite pronoun) and the known identity of the poor man (Lazarus). This is an important aspect of the reversal of fortunes that is the main teaching imparted by Jesus. The rich man stands for any rich man that trusts in uncertain riches. While Lazarus is the poor man known to Jesus and others who is elevated over the rich man spiritually. (3) This story is not called a parable either by Jesus or by Luke. (4) Ray Summers states that "it does not have the central idea of comparison characteristic of parables" *(Luke*, 194-195). (5) It does not have the form of a parable: introduction, analogy, story, and application (Summers, *Luke,*194-195). (6) Its form is that of an example story for the purpose of illustration. (7) It is not unreasonable that Jesus and His hearers were acquainted with just such a case of a rich man and a beggar who died at the same time. Full agreement is held with Merkle that the story is both valuable and authoritative. However, for the reasons stated, we steadfastly affirm that the story is a historical narrative and not a parable.

Merkle's work is a good review of New Testament Greek grammar. The book is brief which appeals to someone who wants to review what has been learned, but detracts from the ability of the author to give a full exegesis of the passages under consideration. Hopefully, Merckle's work will stimulate further study in the Greek New Testament and establish a pattern for exegesis of Scripture that includes the lexical and grammatical features of each word and sentence in God's Word.