

Aspectual Prominence in Matthew

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Introduction

In a recent article, Robert Picirilli summarized the current state of verbal aspect theory in New Testament scholarship, concluding that in order to “test and refine current views about the meaning of the Greek tenses” we must shift our attention from focusing only on the theoretical level and the whole and “now focus on the parts as a way of testing and fleshing out the basic theory.”¹ One of the constituent parts of the new paradigm in need of such testing is that of Porter’s prominence theory for aspectual choices.² According to the theory, verbal aspect is used by an author to differentiate three “planes of discourse” – background, foreground, and frontground.³ The Gospel of Matthew offers us the opportunity to take up detailed examples and to seek to test and apply Porter’s theory.⁴ In this paper, we will do just that. But first, we will suggest that the category of aspectual prominence needs further refinement in order to help us understand how it functions in Matthew. We will suggest two subcategories or types of aspectual prominence that can be called Structural Prominence and Emphatic Prominence. We will then turn to three passages in Matthew which will provide us with working examples of these two types of aspectual prominence within narrative. In conclusion, we will offer several suggestions for further research.

Authorial Choice of Tense-Forms

When an author selects a particular tense-form from the Greek verbal system, whether subconsciously or deliberately, it is assumed that he does so in a reasonable way. The primary reason for selecting one tense-form over another appears to be for the purpose of conveying

¹ Robert Picirilli, “The Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek” JETS 48/3 (Sept 2005), 555.

² Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 22-24, 302-303.

³ “The aorist is the background tense, which forms the basis for the discourse; the present is the foreground tense, which introduces significant characters or makes appropriate climactic references to concrete situations; and the perfect is the frontground tense, which introduces elements in an even more discrete, defined, contoured and complex way.” Porter, *Idioms*, 23.

⁴ Comparatively little has yet been done in testing this component of verbal aspect theory in Matthew. The nearest study in Matthew to the present one is Stephanie Black’s investigation into the use of the so-called “historic present,” which calls out for “a fuller study of the interaction between aorist, imperfect and present tense-forms in Matthew’s narrative from an aspectual approach which takes into account planes of discourse.” Stephanie Black, “The Historic Present in Matthew: Beyond Speech Margins” in Jeffrey T. Reed and Stanley E. Porter, *Discourse Analysis and the New Testament: Approaches and Results* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 133.

verbal aspect – the authorial perspective from which the action is conceived. The perfective aspect, grammaticalized by the aorist tense-form, is selected to convey action conceived of as complete; the imperfective aspect, grammaticalized by the present and imperfective tense-forms, is selected to convey action conceived of as being in progress; and the stative aspect, grammaticalized by the perfect and pluperfect tense-forms, is selected to convey action conceived of as reflecting a given state of affairs.⁵

This view of verbal aspect has now gained widespread though not undisputed acceptance. We are following it here because we have found it to provide the best explanation of the use of tense-forms, better than a time-based or *Aktionsart* or other aspect theory-based explanation.

While this understanding of verbal aspect appears to be the primary reason Matthew or any other author would choose a particular tense-form, in some cases there are other mitigating factors that limit true aspectual choice. We can identify at least three situations in which this limitation may occur.

(1) First, the lack of aspectual choices for a given lexis can limit authorial choice. In such cases, Porter labels the verbs as “aspectually vague”⁶ since the semantic force of the aspect grammaticalized by the tense-form dissolves. Matthew 27:6 is illustrative of tense-form selection limited by lack of aspectual choice:

οὐκ ἔξεστιν βαλεῖν αὐτὰ εἰς τὸν κορβανᾶν, ἐπεὶ τιμὴ αἱματός ἐστιν.

It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is the price of blood.

Verbs such as εἰμί and ἔξεστι, where perfective and stative forms are non-existent in the language, are aspectually vague. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to view the two present tense-forms above as conceived of by Matthew as being in progress based on their form.

⁵ Porter, *Idioms*, 21-22. There is little consensus on where the future tense-form fits. Some scholars have classified it as a mood, citing evidence that it developed from a subjunctive. [E.g. C.F.D. Moule *An Idiom Book of NT Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1959) 21-23.] Others suggest that it is aspectual in that it “grammaticalizes the semantic feature of expectation,” but not fully aspectual in that “it does not enter into a meaningful set of oppositions” with the other tense-forms. [E.g. Stanley Porter *Idioms*, 43-44; cf. K. L. McKay *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994) 7-8; 34.] Others further contend that the future tense-form joins the present and imperfect tense-forms in signaling aspectual prominence. [E.g. Jeffrey T. Reed and Ruth A. Reese, “Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude” in *Filiologia Neotestamentaria* 9 (1996) 189.]

⁶ Porter, *Idioms*, 25.

(2) Another reason Matthew's ability to select a certain tense-form may be limited comes from dependence on or conformity to his literary sources. For example, at times he chooses to carefully follow the LXX:

Isaiah 6:9 ἀκοῆ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε καὶ βλέποντες βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε
Matthew 13:14 ἀκοῆ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε καὶ βλέποντες βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε
You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.

It is interesting to note that Matthew will frequently use a verb that is different from the one found in the LXX passage from which he is quoting and yet the verbal aspect is consistently preserved even when the lexis is changed:

Psalms 77:2 ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου φθέγξομαι προβλήματα ἀπ' ἀρχῆς
I will open my mouth in parables: I will utter dark sayings which have been from the beginning.

Matthew 13:35 ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου, ἐρεύξομαι κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς
I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.

Isaiah 42:3 κάλαμον τεθλασμένον οὐ συντρίψει καὶ λίνον καπνιζόμενον οὐ σβέσει
A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoking flax he will not quench

Matthew 12:20 κάλαμον συντετριμμένον οὐ κατεάξει καὶ λίνον τυφόμενον οὐ σβέσει
He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick

In such cases, the exegete should be cautious in giving too much significance to aspect since Matthew's inclination to follow his literary source carries much less semantic weight than a choice to alter the aspect would carry.

(3) A third reason for the limitation on Matthew's selection of tense-forms can be explained in terms of grammatical convention. Biblical Greek language conventions, such as introducing Scripture quotations with γέγραπται,⁷ help explain why certain forms appear. Here, as with conformity to his sources, Matthew's decision to follow expected convention is less exegetically significant than a break from convention would be.

⁷ Matthew 2:5, 4:4, 4:6, 4:7, 4:10, 11:10, 21:13, and 26:31

Aspectual Prominence

To sum up what has been said thus far: normally the appearance of a certain tense-form communicates how an author is choosing to perceive an action (what is called aspectual choice), while sometimes, for a variety of reasons, an author's ability to do so is limited. However, we can see that at times there is another reason why an author may choose one tense-form over another. This reason can be called aspectual prominence. Prominence refers some element in a discourse standing out from another element. Prominence in a discourse conveys meaningfulness of some kind.⁸ Lest there be any misunderstanding, it is important to note that aspectual prominence is a pragmatic function of grammar and, thus, is not conveyed every time a tense-form is selected.⁹ Nevertheless, the use of different tense forms does often communicate prominence. Porter discusses aspectual prominence in terms of background, foreground, and frontground. "Items which are placed in the background tense (aorist) comprise either the backbone (in narrative) or supporting illustrative material (in exposition) against which more prominent items are set," explains Porter, whereas "the foreground (present) and frontground (perfect) tense-forms are used to mark prominent features."¹⁰

Within this understanding of aspectual prominence, we can identify two related ways in which it functions. Though they have not been categorized this way before, it is helpful to label these as Emphatic Prominence and Structural Prominence. Structural Prominence is used to structure narrative discourse by drawing attention to a new paragraph, new scene, or a new subject.¹¹ It is most frequently accomplished by using present-tense forms in past time contexts. Emphatic Prominence is used to highlight or emphasize a key theme, action, or element within the narrative. The imperfective and stative tense-forms are utilized for this purpose. The balance of this paper will provide examples where Matthew's choices of tense-forms do appear to be selected for the purpose of indicating either Emphatic or Structural Prominence.

⁸ Prominence conveys greater or lesser meaningfulness based on the reader's expectation. To quote Lyons' oft-repeated maxim: "The 'meaningfulness' of utterances (and parts thereof) varies in inverse proportion to their degree of 'expectancy' in context." J. Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968), 415.

⁹ Since "prominence is not a function of morphology proper but is a result of morphological forms as they are used in discourse ... in one context of discourse particular morphological forms (e.g. tense-forms) may be used to indicate prominence whereas in another they may play a different functional role." Jeffrey T. Reed and Ruth A. Reese, "Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude" in *Filiologia Neotestamentaria* 9 (1996) 188.

¹⁰ Porter, *Idioms*, 302.

¹¹ This is often done with the so-called 'historic present'. Cf. Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 110; Buist Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 232; Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 196.

Examples of Emphatic and Structural Prominence

1. *Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15; 2:19-23*

A clear example of Matthew's use of Structural Prominence is found in his deliberate use of the verb φαίνω in the three-fold appearance of an angel of the Lord to Joseph within three of the earliest Matthean fulfillment-formula passages (1:18-25; 2:13-15; and 2:19-23). The circumstances surrounding each appearance could hardly be more similar; these three passages clearly parallel each other:

- 1:20** ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου κατ' ὄναρ ἐφάνη αὐτῷ λέγων·
Behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying
- 2:13** ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου φαίνεται κατ' ὄναρ τῷ Ἰωσήφ λέγων·
Behold an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying
- 2:19** ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου φαίνεται κατ' ὄναρ τῷ Ἰωσήφ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ λέγων·
Behold an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in Egypt in a dream, saying

In each case, the interjection ἰδοὺ introduces the action, an angel of the Lord (ἄγγελος κυρίου) is the one appearing, the appearance is specifically to Joseph, the medium of the appearance is by way of a dream (κατ' ὄναρ), and the purpose of the appearing is a speech-act (λέγων) by the angel to Joseph, commanding him to do a certain action which subsequently is obeyed and leads in each case to the fulfillment of scripture (πληρωθῆ τὸ ρηθῆν).

The single most striking difference between the first and the latter two sections of the Matthean triad is the tense-form of φαίνω. We may ask why Matthew would break his initial pattern of κατ' ὄναρ ἐφάνη and instead front the main verb before κατ' ὄναρ and change from an aorist tense-form to a present tense-form for the latter two occurrences. Clearly, neither a distinction between time of action nor between type of action is being drawn. Furthermore, verbal aspect alone is insufficient to explain the reason why near-identical actions would be conceived of by Matthew in aspectually different ways. This leads to the question of whether or not some type of prominence might best explain these tense-forms. Since the action in all three cases is by the same agent to the same person for the same basic purpose, it seems unlikely that the latter two actions are any more key or thematically significant to the narrative than the first. Therefore, Emphatic Prominence does not fit here.

However, when the larger structure is considered, a clear pattern emerges. The present tense-form φαίνεται is used in Matthew 2:13 and 2:19 in order to mark the beginning of new narrative scenes, whereas the aorist tense-form ἐφάνη is used in 1:20 simply to convey aspect

alone (viewing the complete action) rather than prominence. This can be seen because of the different role that this verb plays in 1:18-25 than it does in 2:13-15 and 2:19-23. In 1:18-25, verse 20 is part of the flow of the story, still concerning Joseph. In 2:13 and 2:19, however, we have a major scene change, with a new setting and new participants. Thus, the shift in tense-form from the aorist in 1:18 to the present forms in 2:13 and 2:19 is part of the structure of the discourse, indicating a clear and significant scene change. Hence it is best understood as an example of Structural Prominence.

2. Matthew 4:1-11

The three-fold temptation of Jesus in Matthew provides another example of aspectual prominence. In this case, it will be shown that Matthew is underscoring the mounting tension within the story through his increasing use of Emphatic Prominence. As with the example above, many of the tense-form choices in 4:1-11 are inexplicable under either the lens of *Aktionsart* or under that of a predominantly time-based model. This is most evident in the alternating use of the aorist and present tense-forms of λέγω throughout this passage, but it can be demonstrated from other verbs as well. For instance, why is the main action surrounding the first temptation rendered with aorist tense-forms (ἀνήχθη, πειρασθῆναι, ἐπέινασεν, προσελθῶν, εἶπεν 2x, εἶπὲ) while the main action surrounding the final temptation is portrayed primarily with present and imperfect tense-forms (παραλαμβάνει, δείκνυσιν, λέγει, ὕπαγε, ἀφίησιν, διηκόνου)? In order to make sense of this data, it is necessary to read the narrative in light of aspectual markedness.

Stephanie Black, who has carefully analyzed this passage with an eye toward Matthew's use of the so-called "historic present" apart from direct speech, rightly observes that "Matthew increasingly uses the historic present, intermixed with other tense-forms, to convey the growing tension as the narrative builds to a climax in the third temptation."¹² This observation is solid, but its strength is even increased when full consideration is given to all the tense-forms within and without the speech margins. In the first temptation (4:1-4), only one present tense-form is used while ten aorist tense-forms are used¹³:

¹² Black, "The Historic Present in Matthew," 132.

¹³ Verbs whose tense-forms were determined by limited choices (vague verbs), conformity to literary sources, or grammatical convention were ignored in the statistics of all three temptations.

Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνήχθη εἰς τὴν ἔρημον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος πειρασθῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου. ² καὶ νηστεύσας ἡμέρας τεσσαράκοντα καὶ νύκτας τεσσαράκοντα, ὕστερον ἐπείνασεν. ³ καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ πειράζων εἶπεν αὐτῷ· εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰπέ ἵνα οἱ λίθοι οὗτοι ἄρτοι γένωνται. ⁴ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· γέγραπται· οὐκ ἐπ' ἄρτω μόνῳ ζῆσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ παντὶ ῥήματι ἐκπορευομένῳ διὰ στόματος θεοῦ.

All of the main action is conveyed with aorist tense-forms. The lone present tense-form is the substantival participle ὁ πειράζων (the tempter). Clearly, there is not much being highlighted in the narrative surrounding this first temptation. In the second temptation (4:5-7), however, there are only three aorist tense-forms and two present tense-forms:

Τότε παραλαμβάνει αὐτὸν ὁ διάβολος εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν καὶ ἕστησεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὸ περὺγιον τοῦ ἱεροῦ ⁶ καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, βάλε σεαυτὸν κάτω· γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ ἐντελεῖται περὶ σοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ χειρῶν ἀρουσίῃ σε, μήποτε προσκόψῃς πρὸς λίθον τὸν πόδα σου. ⁷ ἔφη αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· πάλιν γέγραπται· οὐκ ἐκπειράσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου.

The main action is evenly divided between aorist (ἕστησεν, ἔφη) and present (παραλαμβάνει, λέγει) tense-forms as the tension builds. The emphasis is on the devil taking Jesus from the desert up to Jerusalem and tempting him with words from scripture. Finally, in the concluding temptation (4:8-11), there are four aorist tense-forms, five present tense-forms, one imperfect tense-form, and one future tense-form:

Πάλιν παραλαμβάνει αὐτὸν ὁ διάβολος εἰς ὄρος ὑψηλὸν λίαν καὶ δείκνυσιν αὐτῷ πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν ⁹ καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ταῦτά σοι πάντα δώσω, ἐὰν πεσῶν προσκυνήσῃς μοι. ¹⁰ τότε λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ὕπαγε, σατανᾶ· γέγραπται γὰρ· κύριον τὸν θεόν σου προσκυνήσεις καὶ αὐτῷ μόνῳ λατρεύσεις. ¹¹ Τότε ἀφίησιν αὐτὸν ὁ διάβολος, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄγγελοι προσήλθον καὶ διηκόνουν αὐτῷ.

Whether or not future tense-forms join the present and imperfect tense-forms in signaling aspectual prominence,¹⁴ the aspectually imperfective verbs dramatically outnumber the aorist tense-forms. The main action is almost entirely conveyed by the imperfective aspect as the narrative reaches its climax and resolution. The emphasis here is on the devil taking Jesus from the pinnacle of the temple up to a very high mountain, the devil showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, Jesus telling the devil to depart, the devil departing from Jesus, and the angels ministering to Jesus. Black's observation concerning the function of the so-called "historic present" in this pericope – that it "both confirms established exegetical insights about the climactic structure of the pericope, and answers questions about seemingly random use of

¹⁴ As suggested by Reed and Reese, "Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude," 189.

tenses by Matthew in this passage”¹⁵ – is all the more true of the function of Matthew’s broader use of aspectual prominence. Therefore, we both affirm and build upon Black’s astute analysis, having demonstrated how Matthew underscores the mounting tension within the temptation narrative through his use of Emphatic Prominence.

3. *Matthew 26:36-46*

In Matthew 26:36-46 we find a clear and good example in one passage of both Structural Prominence and Emphatic Prominence at work through the pattern of alternating tense forms. Traditional understandings of time and *Aktionsart* clearly do not have the ability to interpret the tense-form usage here. At the same time, the use of different verbal aspects in this text does communicate both Structural Prominence (by indicating scene changes) and Emphatic Prominence (by showing some elements of the narrative to be foregrounded and others to be backgrounded).

Matthew chapter 26 begins the highly important Passion Narrative. This whole chapter provides us with an interesting example of how a pattern of alternating tense-forms seems to function in a prominence-indicating way. Interestingly, this aspectual markedness is most apparent in and draws attention to verses 36-46, the story of the three-fold failure of the sleepy disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is particularly through an examination of the two very common Greek words ἔρχομαι and λέγω that we get a useful vantage point on how the different tense forms convey different kinds of prominence in this passage. These words are particularly good candidates for examination because both are frequent enough to provide a large enough amount of data to enable recognition of distinctions and patterning.

In the case of ἔρχομαι (including in compound forms) across all moods we find that Matthew predominantly prefers aorist tense-forms (perfective aspect) of this verb to present forms (imperfective aspect) by nearly 4 to 1.¹⁶ There are only a total of sixteen present tense

¹⁵ Black, “The Historic Present in Matthew,” 135. Black gives a fitting example from Davies and Allison’s commentary: “The three temptations exhibit a spatial progression, from a low place to a high place. The first takes place in the desert, the second on a pinnacle in the temple, the third on a mountain from which all the kingdoms of the world can be seen. This progression corresponds to the dramatic tension which comes to a climax with the third temptation.” Dale C. Allison Jr. and W. D. Davies, *Matthew International Critical Commentary*, Vol. I (New York: T&T Clark, 1991) 352.

¹⁶ In non-compound forms of ἔρχομαι, in all moods there are 114 occurrences. This is comprised of 84 Aorists (74%), 28 Presents (25%) and 2 Futures (1%). There are an additional 178 occurrences of ἔρχομαι in compound

indicative forms of ἔρχομαι in all of Matthew – a small number, especially in light of Matthew’s tendency to use the so-called ‘historic present’.¹⁷ Not only are these forms infrequent in usage, we also find that thirteen of these sixteen occurrences are found in direct speech. As Stephanie Black has discovered in analyzing tense-forms in Matthew, the ‘speech margins’ often stand apart from other elements in the discourse.¹⁸ Strikingly, the only three occurrences of ἔρχομαι in the imperfective aspect which are used to introduce action and carry along the narrative are found concentrated here in Matt 26:36-46. This alone is noteworthy, but its significance is highlighted by the fact that there are many occurrences of ἔρχομαι and its compounds throughout Matthew 26 and that, as we will see below, they reveal a clear and consistent pattern that indicates scene changes while also showing some elements of the discourse are primary (foregrounded) while others are summary and backgrounded.

In the case of λέγω, it has long been recognized that the so-called ‘historic present’ is especially associated with verbs of speaking. It has also been observed that in Matthew the use of verbs of speaking in the present tense form is particularly noticeable, accounting for more than three-fourths of the total uses.¹⁹ Again, this backdrop makes the alternating pattern in 26:36-46 stand out in sharp relief.

forms. This figure consists of 154 Aorists (87%), 18 Presents (10%), and 6 Futures (3%). When combined together, the figures are: total of 292 occurrences, 238 of which are Aorists (82%), 46 Presents (16%), and 8 Futures (3%).

¹⁷ Black, “The Historic Present,” 122.

¹⁸ Black, “Historic Present,” 121. Black defines a speech margin as a “sentence in which λέγω or φημί introduces quoted speech.”

¹⁹ Black, “Historic Present,” 124, quoting Hawkins.

Below is the text of 26:36-46 laid out in a structured way:

³⁶ Τότε ἔρχεται μετ' αὐτῶν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς χωρίον λεγόμενον Γεθσημανὶ καὶ λέγει τοῖς μαθηταῖς· καθίσατε αὐτοῦ ἕως [οὔ] ἀπελθῶν ἐκεῖ προσεύξωμαι.

³⁷ καὶ παραλαβὼν τὸν Πέτρον καὶ τοὺς δύο υἱοὺς Ζεβεδαίου ἤρξατο λυπεῖσθαι καὶ ἀδημονεῖν.

³⁸ τότε λέγει αὐτοῖς· περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἕως θανάτου· μείνατε ὧδε καὶ γρηγορεῖτε μετ' ἐμοῦ.

³⁹ καὶ προελθὼν μικρὸν ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ προσευχόμενος καὶ λέγων· πάτερ μου, εἰ δυνατόν ἐστιν, παρελθάτω ἀπ' ἐμοῦ τὸ ποτήριον τοῦτο· πλήν οὐχ ὡς ἐγὼ θέλω ἀλλ' ὡς σύ.

⁴⁰ καὶ ἔρχεται πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς καὶ εὕρισκει αὐτοὺς καθεύδοντας, καὶ λέγει τῷ Πέτρῳ· οὕτως οὐκ ἰσχύσατε μίαν ὥραν γρηγορῆσαι μετ' ἐμοῦ; ⁴¹ γρηγορεῖτε καὶ προσεύχεσθε, ἵνα μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς πειρασμόν· τὸ μὲν πνεῦμα πρόθυμον ἡ δὲ σὰρξ ἀσθενής.

⁴² πάλιν ἐκ δευτέρου ἀπελθὼν προσηύξατο λέγων· πάτερ μου, εἰ οὐ δύναται τοῦτο παρελθεῖν ἐὰν μὴ αὐτὸ πῖω, γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου.

⁴³ καὶ ἐλθὼν πάλιν εὗρεν αὐτοὺς καθεύδοντας, ἦσαν γὰρ αὐτῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ βεβαρημένοι. ⁴⁴ καὶ ἀφείς αὐτοὺς πάλιν ἀπελθὼν προσηύξατο ἐκ τρίτου τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον εἰπὼν πάλιν.

⁴⁵ τότε ἔρχεται πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· καθεύδετε [τὸ] λοιπὸν καὶ ἀναπαύεσθε· ἰδοὺ ἤγγικεν ἡ ὥρα καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου παραδίδοται εἰς χεῖρας ἀμαρτωλῶν. ⁴⁶ ἐγείρεσθε ἄγωμεν· ἰδοὺ ἤγγικεν ὁ παραδιδούς με.

This passage is clearly structured on a three-fold pattern of ἔρχεται plus λέγει (both in the imperfective aspect) in verses 36, 40, and 45. In each case Jesus is the subject of this verb combination and the objects or participants are his disciples (μετ' αὐτῶν in v.36; πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς in vv. 40 and 45). Indications of intentional structure are also found in the typical

Matthean transition word τότε²⁰ and in the fact that the verse following this pericope (v47) is demarcated by a genitive absolute phrase.²¹

A few other observations can be offered. First, as is common in Matthew, λέγω is used to introduce speech and in all moods is employed in the imperfective aspect or the ‘historic present’.²² The notable exception is verse 44, which uses the unexpected aorist εἰπών.²³ More on this below. We may also observe that, as in the rest of Matthew, there are many occurrences of ἔρχομαι, by itself as well as in a number of compound forms. Each of the ten occurrences of ἔρχομαι in this short passage occurs in the aorist tense form, with the exception of the three instances already pointed out, those in verses 36, 40, and 45. As stated above, the use of aorist forms of ἔρχομαι far outweighs that of present forms, and the use of the present indicatives to carry along the narrative, as in these verses, is itself quite uncommon.

Having laid this groundwork, we may now query as to why these verbs alternate as they do in this passage. It is clear that time is not a factor, and type of action also provides no help in understanding why the very same verbs are used in an alternating pattern. Do verbal aspect and prominence help us understand this text?

We are not, in fact, the first ones to examine this text in light of aspect. In her insightful essay “The Historic Present in Matthew: Beyond Speech Margins”, Stephanie Black chose Matt 26:36-46 as one of two passages to analyze through the lens of prominence and aspect. Black first provides a number of helpful statistics on tense form patterns in Matthew before turning to a detailed analysis of two passages: 4:1-11 and 26:36-46. She concludes that Matthew intentionally “alternates the historic present with other tense forms to help create the narrative’s structure and make his storytelling more engaging to his readers”.²⁴ What this looks like is different in the two Matthean passages in her purview. In 26:36-46 Black argues that the

²⁰ Cf. Stephanie Black, *Sentence Conjunction in the Gospel of Matthew* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002). This text does match Mk 14:32-43 quite closely, though evidence of Matthew’s hand can be seen in a number of points, including his common use of τότε.

²¹ There is a striking pattern of Matthew using genitive absolute phrases to demarcate breaks. He is so fond of this technique that at times he even uses the dative case in the same way, what we may call the ‘dative absolute’ (e.g., 8:23; 9:27, 28; 14:6)!

²² The present indicative in vv. 36, 38, 40, and 45. The present participle in vv. 36, 39, and 42.

²³ Aorist participles of λέγω occur only 15 times in all of Matthew, 13 of which are in the formulaic aorist passive form ῥηθεν, always referring back to Scripture. Besides 26:44, the only other occurrence is in 17:26, and there it is a far from certain reading. The variants are quite diverse (at least six entirely distinct readings) and include a significant number of disagreements within the major uncials and miniscules. Thus, 26:44 is the only clear example of an aorist participle being used to report speech in Matthew. We will see below why this is the case.

²⁴ Black, “Historic Present,” 124.

juxtaposition of different tense forms is used to distinguish between two interwoven story lines. She suggests that Matthew has used the historic present forms to present the elements of the story that focus on Jesus' interactions with his disciples, while on the other hand, he uses the aorist tense forms to depict the elements of the story in which Jesus is in isolation.

This essay has much to commend it, though her study is certainly limited by its focus on the so-called 'historic present'. Moreover, while her theory that the use of different tense forms communicates two different elements of the story is a vast improvement over time-based or *Aktionsart* views, it ultimately proves unconvincing for 26:36-46. She is right to observe that there is indeed some pattern of alternating tense forms, but her theory fails to account for all of the data. Contrary to her stated thesis, we do find aorist tense-forms used to apply to Jesus' interaction with his disciples in 26:43a, in noticeable contrast to present tense-forms of the same verbs used for the same reason in 26:40b. Thus, her theory proves untenable.

However, Black is right to examine this passage for aspectual markedness and to observe that some pattern is at work. But rather than indicating the different elements of the stories in this text, the alternating pattern of tense-forms communicates both Structural Prominence (here, scene changes) and Emphatic Prominence (backgrounding and foregrounding). As observed above, the use of the ἔρχεται plus λέγει combination clearly sets out verses 36, 40, and 45 as indicating a change in scene, thus what we are calling Structural Prominence. This stands in marked contrast to the aorist tense-forms used (especially for all forms of ἔρχομαι) in between these structural indicators.

At the same time, the alternating tense forms indicate Emphatic Prominence by bringing the actions and dialogue of the three scene changes to the foreground. The greatest evidence of this is seen in the striking change of tense-forms that occurs in verses 43-44. In the second major scene (vv 40-44) Jesus comes (ἔρχεται) to the disciples and finds (εὕρισκει) them sleeping. He instructs them to watch and pray and then returns a second time to pray to the Father. In verses 43-44 Jesus comes again to find the disciples sleeping and returns for a third time to pray. What is noticeably different in verses 43-44 is that all of the tense forms have switched to aorists, including a conspicuous change of the identical verbs used earlier (ἔρχεται → ἐλθὼν; εὕρισκει → εὔρεν) and the especially-odd aorist form of λέγω (here the one-time only aorist participle, εἰπὼν). This change is noteworthy on its own, but its significance is made clear when we observe that unlike the other identically parallel scenes, here Matthew is not really depicting

a scene, action, or dialogue at all, but is instead offering a rehashed narrative summary statement. That is, unlike each of the other times when Jesus interacts with his disciples and when he prays to the Father, no dialogue at all is given in verses 43-44. Instead, these verses are summed up and treated cursorily with three summary occurrences of *πάλλιν*. Thus, we can see that the aorist tense-forms fit perfectly as the forms used to communicate backgrounded, summary narration, in contrast to the present tense-forms which are used (with the very same lexemes) to depict 'live' or foregrounded action.

In this way, the pattern of tense-forms in Matt 26:36-46 fit precisely into an understanding of the Emphatic Prominence use of the present and aorist verbal forms. At the same time, as observed earlier, the pattern of tense-forms communicates Structural Prominence by indicating major scene changes. Thus, we have in these verses an excellent example of how a discourse prominence understanding of aspectual markedness finds exegetical support.

Conclusion

The perpetual problem hanging over much discussion of aspect and its meaning is that it often remains at the level of theory and taxonomy, with few detailed exegetical examples. We also have begun at this level and we have offered some refinement to the theoretical notion of Prominence. We have suggested that there is benefit in distinguishing at least two types or sub-categories of Prominence in narrative literature, what we are calling Structural and Emphatic Prominence.

But while we have necessarily also begun with a theoretical discussion, we have tried to move beyond this by examining three particular passages in Matthew. We have chosen these passages because they seem to supply easily discernible examples of both Structural and Emphatic Prominence at work. In fact, these labels and categories have been derived from a close examination of the passages, rather than vice versa.

Picirilli astutely points out that much discussion of aspectual prominence leaves us with no way to independently verify what is being argued. That is, examples that are typically given for aspect at work usually leave one wondering whether there is any way to test whether what is being argued is true or not. And unfortunately, it seems that usually there is not, thus we are not truly testing the theories, but simply positing their existence. We have observed this same impasse in much discussion of aspect. However, in each of the cases presented here, we believe

that we are able to get beyond this vicious circularity because in each case the interpretation of Prominence is confirmed by other elements in the text. Moreover, it is clear in each case that the data in the text is not explicable in terms of *Aktionsart* or time, even in the case of the indicative mood.

Additionally, when authors have tried to apply aspect and aspectual prominence to exegetical examples, the result has often been little by way of actual exegetical help. In each of the examples we have given in this paper we can offer real clues to the exegetical understanding of the passage regarding both structure and emphasis. In these ways we hope we have made a small but real contribution to the continuing discussion of verbal aspect.

We may conclude by offering some suggestions for further study. There is need for a more detailed study of prominence in Matthew at the macro level, incorporating not only Matthew's usage of tense-forms but also other indicators of prominence (transitivity-based, lexically-based, emphatic particles, word order, repetition, superlatives, redundant pronouns, etc.). Also, working under the assumption that different authors employ the Greek tenses in subtly different ways, we have selected the Gospel of Matthew and his tense-form choices as our testing ground for Porter's prominence theory; it would be interesting to see what a similar study of a different author, such as Luke, would yield. It would be worthwhile and interesting to examine whether our ideas of Structural and Emphatic Prominence work well in another Gospel, and whether there are other subcategories of Prominence that are at play.