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COLOSSIANS 1:23

A CASE FOR TRANSLATING ἐπιμένετε (CONTINUE) AS
IMPERATIVE, NOT INDICATIVE¹

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Summary

This paper presents a morphological observation about a verbal form in Colossians 1:23 that potentially has several significant implications. The paper is, first, a foray into an important new methodological approach, namely the study of the divisions displayed in the earliest Greek manuscript witnesses. Second, it is an exploration of the meaning of εἰ γέ (traditionally translated here as ‘provided that’ or ‘if indeed’), and whether in this context the particle γέ modalises εἰ in such a way that the meaning of this composite form is ‘if so’, or ‘this being the case’, or ‘accordingly’, followed by the imperative. Third, the paper argues that interpreting ἐπιμένετε (continue) as imperative, not indicative, is a less problematic way of reading Colossians 1:23, both linguistically and theologically, than the traditional reading.

1. Introduction

Colossians 1:21-22 continues a long grammatical unit that begins in v. 9 and which incorporates the Christ Hymn in vv. 15-20. In v. 9, the verbal construction establishes all that is to follow by means of a finite verb and ἵνα clause: οὐ παύομεθα ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι καὶ αἰτούμενοι, ἵνα πληρωθῆτε τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν (we have not ceased to pray

¹ I acknowledge with thanks the expertise and insights generously offered by Dr Patrick James, Senior Research Associate (Codex Climaci Rescriptus Graecus: astronomica), Tyndale House, in developing and strengthening this proposal. I also acknowledge the generous scholarly advice of Drs Geoffrey Jenkins and David Instone-Brewer.

for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge ...). There follows a lengthy series of clauses that sets out the content of the writers' prayer and places this prayer in the context of what God has done in and through Christ. In v. 22 we finally have another finite verb (ἀποκατήλλαξεν – reconciled), which rounds off this long rhetorical unit. Then in v. 23 we have a new finite verb (ἐπιμένετε – continue, remain, persevere), which is notable after the preceding long rhetorical unit.

The generally accepted interpretation of the morphology of Colossians 1:23 is as the protasis of a conditional sentence dependent upon the previous statement:

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds

²² he [God] has now reconciled (ἀποκατήλλαξεν) in his [Christ's] fleshly body through death

so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him

²³ *provided that you continue in the faith ...* (εἴ γε ἐπιμένετε τῇ πίστει)²

All standard translations concur:

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ *if indeed you continue in the faith ...* (ESV)

²¹ And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,

²² yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach ²³ *if indeed you continue in the faith ...* (NAS)

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,

²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him –

²³ *provided that you continue* securely established and steadfast *in the faith ...* (NRSV)

However, v. 23 cannot strictly be a conditional dependent on the previous finite verb (ἀποκατήλλαξεν – reconciled), as the reconciliation achieved through Christ's death is not dependent upon the believers' perseverance.

² NRSV modified. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine, or those of Dr Patrick James.

The conditional seems logically to refer to the latter phrase in v. 22: ‘to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him’ (παραστήσαι ὑμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους καὶ ἀνεγκλήτους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ). It is of course plausible to state that Christ has reconciled believers (aorist with a perfect sense) with a view to a still future outcome dependent on its intended beneficiaries’ present conduct; this is the way that these verses have mostly been understood. Grammatically, however, that is problematic, and this grammatical problem is not visible in English translations.

The grammatical function of v. 23 is not nearly as clear as we assume. The subordinate clause in v. 22 clearly points back to the finite verb ἀποκατήλλαξεν. When we turn to v. 23, if εἴ γε is the protasis of a conditional sentence, we would expect a subsequent apodosis, as in εἰ clauses we expect the apodosis to follow. However, it is absent, since v. 22 cannot be the apodosis.

If we relate v. 23 back grammatically to the previous clause, and understand v. 23 as stipulating a condition based on the previous clause, we would expect ἐάν and a subjunctive form, as we find in Romans 11:22 and 1 Timothy 2:15 (or perhaps ἐάνπερ, as in Heb. 3:6,14; 6:3, though this conjunction is not used in the Pauline corpus). So, while it seems logically plausible to relate the finite verb ἐπιμένετε in v. 23 to the subordinate clause in v. 22, grammatically, such a relationship would be unusual.

These considerations raise the possibility that there may be a different way of understanding the morphology of v. 23, and this possibility is raised more emphatically when one notes that among our most ancient Greek manuscripts there is some sort of break envisaged between vv. 22 and 23.

2. A New Paragraph?

It is notable that in the paragraph division of ancient manuscripts v. 23 is separated from v. 22 and may therefore be read as a distinct unit.³ In the six oldest manuscripts, we find the following evidence.⁴

³ See the paragraph division in Tyndale House, Cambridge, *The Greek New Testament*, ed. Dirk Jongkind et al. (Wheaton, IL; Cambridge: Crossway; Cambridge University Press, 2017): 422. While ancient paragraphs do not always function in quite the same way as modern paragraphs, in the epistles they do mark divisions of some kind. Research into textual divisions and delimiters is currently being pioneered,

P46 has a little space before the words εἰ γέ, despite the fact that, in general, P46 does not do much in terms of paragraphing or interpunction (the insertion of a point between words or sentences that could signal a new paragraph).

Alef(01) Sinaiticus isolates v. 23 from vv. 21-22 with ecthesis, indicating a new paragraph. Prior to εἰ γέ, there is a gap of half a line, and the letter ε protrudes into the margin. 01 also isolates v. 24 (a division which is recognised as standard across editions and translations) and shows relatively frequent divisions of the text: vv. 15, 16-18a, and 18-20b.⁵

A(02) Alexandrinus indicates a new paragraph at v. 23 by means of an enlarged initial and ecthesis as well as space at the end of the preceding ‘section’. There is no visible comparable separation prior to v. 23. The next comparable divisions are after NYN XAIΠΩ in v. 24 and then at the start of 2:6.⁶

In B(03) Vaticanus εἰ γέ begins a new line; there is no obvious new paragraph here (nor are there other new paragraphs indicated elsewhere on the page). Nevertheless, there is interpunction (a Greek semi-colon) that could signal a new paragraph after the preceding αὐτοῦ· (of him).⁷

C(04) Ephraemi rescriptus clearly signals a division between v. 22 and v. 23. 04 separates v. 23 with ecthesis, but keeps vv. 21 and 22 together as one (by ecthesis at the start of v. 21). As with 03, there is a Greek semicolon after αὐτοῦ·. An enlarged initial ε protrudes into the margin.

In D(06) Claromontanus, as a rule, there are no paragraphs at all, as it is written in sense lines. Nevertheless, 06 starts a new line for εἰ γέ and ends a line after πίστει (faith). Verse 21 is marked by ecthesis.

particularly in Cambridge. See for example Jesse R. Grenz, ‘Textual Divisions in Codex Vaticanus: A Layered Approach to the Delimiters in B (03)’, *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* (2018): 1-22. <https://cambridge.academia.edu/JesseGrenz> (accessed 4 October 2018).

⁴ The following information was supplied by Dr Dirk Jongkind, Senior Research Fellow in New Testament Text and Language, to whom I express my gratitude, and also by Dr Patrick James. The information can be accessed via TinyURL.com/TB70-Bal-4a (accessed 5 October 2018).

⁵ For the scribal practices of 01, see Dirk Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus, Texts and Studies 5* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007).

⁶ TinyURL.com/TB70-Bal-6a (accessed 5 October 2018).

⁷ TinyURL.com/TB70-Bal-7a (accessed 5 October 2018).

This means that in various ways all the early Greek manuscripts indicate some sort of a pause/break before εἰ γέ.⁸ Although the earliest Greek witnesses show a diversity in their practice, and we do not yet know much about what particular practices mean, there is a consensus that there should be some kind of division before εἰ γέ, such that v. 23 is separated from v. 22.

If v. 23 were understood to be conditional upon v. 22, we would not expect the early scribes to have indicated any break between this sentence and the previous one. I consider this cumulative manuscript evidence to be a weighty indication that the earliest Greek witnesses considered this to be a new thought, not dependent upon the previous verse either grammatically or logically.

Given this strong early evidence for a break between Colossians 1:22 and 1:23, it is legitimate to explore the possibility that we have not fully understood v. 23.

3. Possible Meaning of εἰ γέ

Verse 23 opens with εἰ γέ. The conditional particle εἰ means ‘if’ or ‘since’ and can express with the indicative a condition of fact regarded as true or settled (‘since’, ‘because’), as we find, for example, in Romans 2:17. More problematic is the significance and nuance of the particle γέ in this phrase. J. D. Denniston writes:

But γέ is one of the subtlest and most elusive of particles, and any classification must necessarily be approximate. It will be convenient to adopt a two-fold division, between Determinative and Intensive γέ (which may be grouped together as Emphatic) on the one hand, and Limitative γέ on the other.⁹

If γέ is determinative, as it often is after connecting particles,¹⁰ it would specify the idea, and mean ‘so’. εἰ γέ would then mean ‘If this is so’, or ‘Since this is so’.¹¹

⁸ This indication does not appear to be reflected in the versions.

⁹ J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (2nd edn; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954): 115.

¹⁰ Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, 119.

¹¹ Compare also the comment in T. Muraoka’s *A Syntax of Septuagint Greek*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2016): Section 89 (Conditional Clauses), and especially 769-70, about the ambiguity of the particle γέ.

The verb ἐπιμένετε is here generally understood as indicative. However, the form could be imperative. Given the considerations set out above, I propose that taking ἐπιμένετε (continue/remain) as an imperative results in a better reading. I think that it is very likely that we have the directive that follows the statement of the reality of the work of Christ. The phrase in Colossians 1:23 could then be translated ‘Since this is so, remain in the faith ...’ and the passage would read as follows:

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds

²² he [God] has now reconciled (ἀποκατήλλαξεν) in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

²³ *Since this is so, continue in the faith* (εἴ γε ἐπιμένετε τῇ πίστει)

The comparative material in the Pauline corpus is relatively sparse: 2 Corinthians 5:3;¹² 11:16; Galatians 3:4; Ephesians 3:2; 4:21. Each of the uses has an exclamatory, often elliptical quality. Perhaps the closest Pauline parallel usage to the verse under discussion is 2 Corinthians 11:16, though it is framed in the negative:

Πάλιν λέγω, μή τις με δόξη ἄφρονα εἶναι· εἰ δὲ μή γε, κἄν ὡς ἄφρονα δέξασθε με, ἵνα καὶ γὰρ μικρὸν τι καυχῆσωμαι.

I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. (NRSV)

This is a highly elliptical sentence.¹³ Even so, the εἴ γε phrase clearly introduces a protasis – ‘if it is not so’, or ‘since it is not so’ [that I am foolish] – that is followed by an imperative. In this parallel, it is helpful to note that δέξασθέ (accept/receive) can only be an imperative (unlike the formally ambiguous ἐπιμένετε of Colossians 1:23).

It is a recognisable characteristic of the Pauline style in Colossians that imperatives followed by participles also have imperatival force (‘not shifting’ = ‘do not shift’) (e.g. 3:12-13,16). This gives some

¹² Margaret Thrall’s discussion of εἴ γε relates specifically to 2 Cor. 5.1-10, giving particular attention to whether it expresses assurance or doubt. See her *Greek Particles in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1962): 82-97.

¹³ ‘Let no one think me foolish. But, if that is not to be so (i.e., if you do think me foolish)’; or, ‘if, let’s suppose, no-one thinks me a fool (but you all do), you should welcome me as a fool’. See also K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994): section 21.1.8 on p. 166.

further weight to the possibility that we are dealing with an imperative rather than an indicative in v. 23.¹⁴

εἰ δὲ μή γε is an idiom meaning ‘otherwise’, if <that is> (not) <the case>: cf. Mark 2:21, Matthew 9:17, Luke 10:6.¹⁵ On the basis of that idiom, εἴ γε can mean ‘if in that way’ as the positive counterpart of the negative εἰ δὲ μή γε.

4. The Argument Against ἐπιμένετε as an Indicative

A key problem in mounting the case for the traditional analysis, which reads ἐπιμένετε as indicative, is showing how a conditional sentence that consists of an aorist indicative in the apodosis and a present indicative in the protasis would function logically.¹⁶

There are, to be sure, five examples of such conditional sentences in the New Testament (plus two synoptic parallels) in which an aorist indicative constitutes the apodosis, but a present indicative forms the protasis. However, none of the five is comparable in function with the example in Colossians 1:23.

The five such conditionals (plus two parallels) are:

Matthew 12:26

καὶ εἰ ὁ Σατανᾶς τὸν Σατανᾶν ἐκβάλλει, ἐφ’ ἑαυτὸν ἐμερίσθη: πῶς οὖν σταθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ;

and if Satan casts out Satan (and that is not what is going on here; cf. Matthew 12: 28 and see below), he has become divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? (Answer presumed: it will be destroyed.)

// Luke 11:18: εἰ δὲ καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς ἐφ’ ἑαυτὸν διμερίσθη, πῶς σταθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ;

And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? (ESV)

¹⁴ I acknowledge with thanks this observation by Professor Francis Watson, Durham University.

¹⁵ BDAG, p. 278 s.v. εἰ 6 d alpha-beta; cf. LSJ s.v. εἰ B VII 3 b; γε I 3; F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, English ed. Madeleine Goh and Chad Schroeder, s.v. 2 c, emphatic, sometimes with imperative (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 419.

¹⁶ D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996): 689 claims that first-class conditionals can have any tense of the indicative in their protasis, but seems not to consider the combination of tenses that is normally seen in Colossians 1:23. (Wallace’s own discussion of this verse concerns the relative pronoun.)

This conditional is of a different kind: an aorist indicative followed by a future indicative in a question that expects the answer ‘His kingdom will not stand.’

Matthew 12:28

εἰ δὲ ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (ESV)

// Luke 11:20: εἰ δὲ ἐν δακτύλῳ θεοῦ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.

But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (ESV)

If I (Jesus) cast out demons by the spirit (or finger) of God (as Jesus maintained he was doing), in that case the kingdom of God has come upon you (as Jesus maintained was the case: compare Matt. 4:17, but also 3:2 and 10:7, which are less directly relevant). (N.B. Matthew departs from his characteristic use of ‘kingdom of heaven’ here.)

1 Corinthians 8:2-3

εἴ τις δοκεῖ ἐγνωκέναι τι, οὐπω ἔγνω καθὼς δεῖ γινῶναι· (3) εἰ δέ τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, οὗτος ἔγνωσται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ.

If anyone thinks that he knows something, he has not yet become aware, just as it is necessary to become aware. But if someone loves God, this one is known by him (God).

2 Corinthians 12:11

Γέγονα ἄφρων· ὑμεῖς με ἠναγκάσατε· ἐγὼ γὰρ ὄφειλον ὑφ’ ὑμῶν συνίστασθαι. οὐδὲν γὰρ ὑστέρησα τῶν ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων, εἰ καὶ οὐδὲν εἰμι·

I have become irrational. You compelled me. For I ought to be put forth in commendation by you. For in no way did I fall short of the over-the-top apostles, even though I am nothing.

Galatians 2:21

εἰ γὰρ διὰ νόμου δικαιοσύνη, ἄρα Χριστὸς δωρεὰν ἀπέθανεν.

For if righteousness ... through the Law, then Christ died for nothing.

Here, of course, there is no explicit verb form in the protasis. Although a present ἐστὶ (is) needs to be supplied (since the verb ‘to be’ has no aorist that could be supplied), the sense is along the lines of ‘if righteousness ever came in the past or could ever come in the future through the law, there was and would be no need for Christ to die’. That is, this is not a first-class conditional with a present tense, but a kind of counterfactual. Paul’s point is that Christ had to die because there was no alternative source of righteousness in the law (or elsewhere). Instead of a present indicative, we could have εἰ γὰρ <ἦν> διὰ νόμου δικαιοσύνη, ἄρα Χριστὸς δωρεὰν ἀπέθανεν <ἄν> (For if righteousness was through the Law, in that case Christ died for nothing).

Both the examples in Matthew and the one in Galatians deal with logical inferences for the sake of argument, which is not so in the case of Colossians 1:23, unless the proof that God reconciled the Colossians is the fact of their ongoing perseverance. (For the thought, not expressed by such a kind of conditional sentence, compare 2 Thess. 1:5 and, with ἐάν, Rom. 11:22, and ἐάνπερ Heb. 3:6,14; 6:3.) 1 Corinthians 8:2-3 is of that kind: the proof that one does not understand is that one claims to be a somebody. 2 Corinthians 12:11 with postponed εἰ καὶ (even though) is different again.

There is a difference of form between these examples and Colossians 1:23, in that Colossians 1:23 as traditionally analysed has a protasis after its apodosis. That does not support either the traditional analysis or the proposal here, but it does contrast with the arrangement of the elements in the five examples and the norm for (unmarked) conditional sentences.

5. Conclusion

Given these considerations, it is grammatically plausible that the formally ambiguous present ἐπιμένετε in Colossians 1:23 is an imperative, with the conditional particle εἰ meaning ‘since’, and the particle γὰρ specifying what has gone before (so).

It is also logically and theologically plausible, and indeed more persuasive than the alternative, that ἐπιμένετε in Colossians 1:23 is an imperative.

This case has been guided by the divisions displayed in the earliest Greek manuscript witnesses. This has prompted an examination of the meaning of εἴ γε and has led to the conclusion that the particle γε modalises εἰ in such a way that the meaning of this composite form is ‘if so’, or ‘this being the case’, or ‘accordingly’. By examining how a conditional sentence that consists of an aorist indicative in the apodosis and a present indicative in the protasis would function logically, this article has concluded that interpreting ἐπιμένετε as imperative, not indicative, is linguistically a less problematic way of reading Colossians 1:23 than the traditional reading.

Theologically, this is a significant insight. Colossians 1:23 no longer needs to be understood to claim that our salvation is predicated on our own actions, which is indeed a thought that is foreign to Paul’s confidence in the gospel (Rom. 5:1-11). God is the God of steadfastness and encouragement (Rom. 15:5) who enables us to live accordingly, and calls us, through Paul’s witness, to continue to do so (imperative).

Colossians 1:23 can then be translated as a new and further development of the preceding material:

²³ Since this is so, remain securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the Gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.

It is of this Gospel that I, Paul, became a servant.