

Engaging the Periphrastic Participle: an Introduction to Information Structure and Periphrasis in the Greek New Testament

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How do we know when a verbal construction is periphrastic? Skipping the debates among grammarians about what verbs can serve as an auxiliary in Greek and focusing only on εἰμί, there still is a very real question about how we can know when a given instance of εἰμί + participle is periphrastic or not.¹ Observe a “pair of periphrastics” from *The Epistle of Barnabas*:

- (1) 14.2 Καὶ ἦν Μωϋσῆς νηστεύων ἐν ὄρει Σινᾶ
- (2) 4.7 Καὶ ἦν Μωϋσῆς ἐν τῷ ὄρει νηστεύων ἡμέρας τεσσαράκοντα καὶ νύκτας τεσσαράκοντα

English translators (and all the German ones I could get my hands on) unanimously handle 14.2 as periphrastic. The translation is some variation of: “And Moses was fasting on Mount Sinai.” This is a sensible interpretation and I deem it unlikely to find anyone who would quibble with this reading.

Of interest is that the same translators handle (2) as non-periphrastic. Thus, the translation is some variation of: “And Moses was on the mountain, fasting 40 days and 40 nights.” Sentences (1) and (2) are extremely similar, with the most important exception being that in (2) the locative prepositional phrase occurs between εἰμί and the participle, instead of following it as in (1). What justifies such unanimous agreement that (1) is periphrastic and (2) is not? Is it simply a case of translators availing themselves of the ability of English (and German) to follow the Greek word order here with respect to the placement of the spatial adjunct?

This “pair of periphrastic” raises a variety of familiar, and less familiar, issues in assessing and describing periphrastic constructions. In this paper, I will walk through the core set of considerations for identifying periphrastic constructions, the basic meanings, and then move into less charted territory—an attempt to describe the significance of constituent order variation in periphrastic constructions.

To move forward with thinking about periphrasis, we need some language and tools to discuss how it is that the copula and participle relate to each other and how to assess this relationship.

¹ Grammarians debate whether it is just εἰμί, or other verbs like ἔχω, γίνομαι, ἔρχομαι, and not to mention constructions which use an infinitive rather than a participle, which should be considered periphrastic. Part of this debate is simply an issue of naming. My own view is that there are a wide variety of “periphrastic” constructions which crop up at different times throughout the history of Greek.

Participle and Verb: Syntactic Centers of Gravity

Stephen Levinsohn made an astute observation which has generally been assumed but, so far as I have been able to tell, never actually stated in description of periphrastic constructions. Periphrasis contains two distinct parts: a copula and a participle phrase.² These two elements have a fairly elastic relationship, allowing many different sentence elements to come between them, but it is not a free for all. The elements which occur between the copula and the participle are either 1) the subject (which belongs to the copula), or 2) elements which syntactically belong to the participle. One does not find, for instance, an embedded subordinate clause between the copula and the participle in periphrastic constructions. Having tested Levinsohn's observation on a large corpus of texts outside the NT, I am convinced it is fundamentally sound. This syntactic observation about how periphrastic constructions are ordered can serve as the basis for a helpful way to think about periphrastic constructions. There is a certain difference between the way the participle relates to the verb in periphrastic and non-periphrastic sentences.

To conceptualize these relationships, we will use the image of planets and orbit. In a sentence, the main center of gravity around which everything orbits is the main verb—it is like the sun in our solar system. Other elements may have their own orbiting objects as well, like how planets have moons.

Verb + predicate participle: non-periphrastic sentences

The normal relationship of a participle to its verb can be visualized as shown in Figure 1:

² He makes this point in Stephen H. Levinsohn, "Functions of Copula-Participle Combinations ('Periphrastics')," in *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch (Bellingham (WA): Lexham Press, 2016), 307–27. See also the important prior work (published later), "Constituent Order in and Usages of εἰμί: Participle Combinations in the Synoptics and Acts," in *From Ancient Manuscripts to Modern Dictionaries: Select Studies in Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek*, ed. Tarsee Li and Keith Dyer, Perspectives on Linguistics and Ancient Languages 9 (Piscataway (NJ): Gorgias Press, 2017), 423–41. While he has his own theoretical reasons for this distinction between copula and participial phrase, which I do not claim to fully understand but which I have a strong inkling of what they are, the basic insight is helpful for conceptualizing periphrasis. It is noteworthy that he derives this view of periphrastic constructions from an observation made by Stanley Porter, who works with a different theoretical orientation to Greek, Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, Second, Biblical Languages: Greek 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 45.

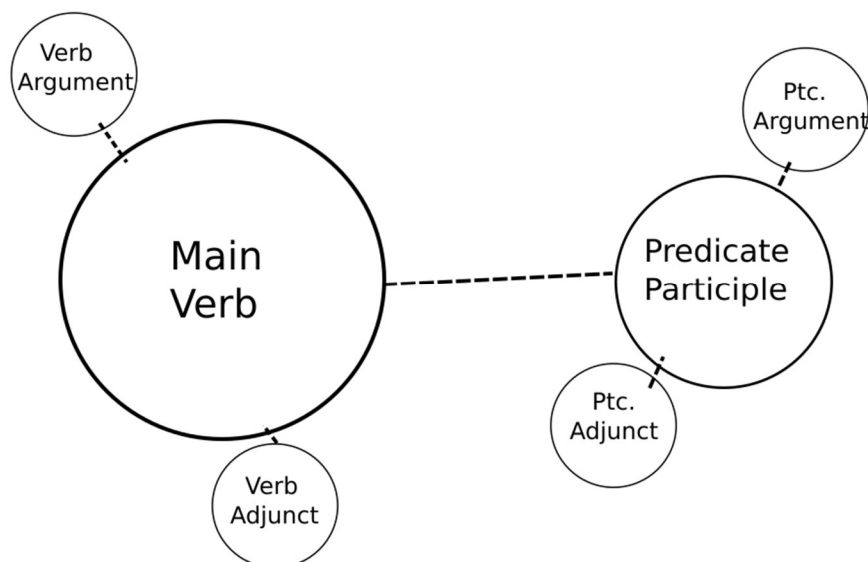


Figure 1: Main verb + predicate participle

In a standard sentence the main verb is the syntactic center of gravity around which everything else is held in orbit. The predicate participle (also commonly called an “adverbial” participle) is subordinate to the main verb.³ As evident in the above figure, the main verb has its own arguments and adjuncts and the predicate participle has its own arguments and adjuncts. The participle functions like a quasi-independent clause, though subordinate to the main clause, modifying it in some way. The key point is that both the main verb and the participle make a predication. The predication of the particle is subordinate to that of the main verb, but is its own complete predication nonetheless.

As an example of this normal usage, consider Ephesians 1.4:

καθὼς **ἐξελέξατο** ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου ... [**προορίσας** ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ]

Just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world ... [having predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ]

In this example the main sentence is “just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world...” The main verb ἐξελέξατο is further modified by the predicate participle phrase headed by προορίσας. It is in the orbit of the main verb, but it is distinct, making its own predication about the subject “he.” This predication modifies the assertion of the main clause. A periphrastic construction, by contrast, looks quite different.

³ Technically, it sits in the position of a predicate adjective modifying a noun in the main clause, usually the subject, thus the participle is nominative case. Participles sit on a continuum regarding the degree they modify just the noun which they are subordinate to and how much they modify the entire main clause, see Anna Pompei, “Participles as a Non-Prototypical Word Class,” in *Word Classes and Related Topics in Ancient Greek*, ed. Emilio Crespo, Jesús de la Villa, and Antonio R. Revuelta, Bibliothèque Des Cahiers de L’Institut de Linguistique de Louvain. Antiquité 117 (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 2006), 361–88. For the purposes of the present discussion, thinking of them as simply subordinate to the main verb is sufficient.

εἰμί + periphrastic participle: periphrasis

We can envision periphrastics as the collision and merging of two centers of syntactic gravity: the copula and the participle phrase. This is shown in Figure 2:

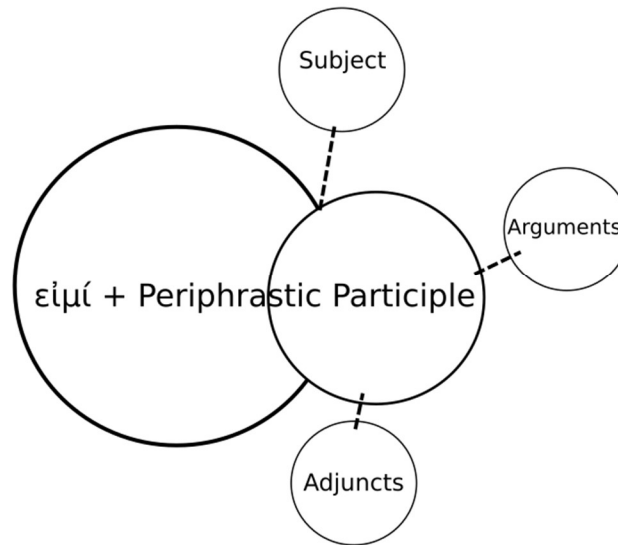


Figure 2: εἰμί + periphrastic participle

As seen above, in a standard clause both the copula and the participle are syntactic centers of gravity capable of holding various syntactic elements in orbit. The relationship traditionally called *periphrasis* is when these two fuse into one semantic unit, no longer making two predications, but just one.⁴ As an example, consider Matthew 7.29:

ἦν γὰρ **διδάσκων** αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν.

For he *was teaching* them like one having authority and not like their scribes.

Here the copula and the participle are not making separate predications but work together to make just one. As εἰμί and the participle “fuse together,” their syntactical gravitational force affects one another, changing how the two pieces relate to each other as they fuse into one. The fusion of copula and participle into one syntactic center of gravity is possible due to special properties of the verb εἰμί which

⁴ There is good reason to view periphrasis as more of a continuum than an either/or situation, as is often the case in grammars. This point is argued in Klaas Bentein, *Verbal Periphrasis in Ancient Greek: Have- and Be- Constructions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). In this paper, I will only be addressing what is traditionally called *periphrasis*, that is, instances of total semantic integration between the copula and the participle. However, it should be noted that the approach which I will develop here draws into question the ability to make this sharp distinction as it demonstrates that the syntax of εἰμί + participle constructions is the same regardless of whether they are periphrastic or not. This was first argued in Stephen H. Levinsohn, “Constituent Order in and Usages of εἰμί: Participle Combinations in the Synoptics and Acts,” in *From Ancient Manuscripts to Modern Dictionaries: Select Studies in Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek*, ed. Tarsee Li and Keith Dyer, Perspectives on Linguistics and Ancient Languages 9 (Piscataway (NJ): Gorgias Press, 2017), 423–41. Nevertheless, it can profitably be used in conjunction with traditional grammar categories as well. I will draw out the further implications of this model in my forthcoming dissertation.

allow it to become an auxiliary, mostly that it is aspectually wishy-washy and has little semantic might of its own.⁵

What is the pay-off of such a model? It helps us ask focused syntactic and semantic questions of how periphrastic constructions are put together and how they function.

Syntactic limitations of εἰμί

In identifying periphrasis, we can focus attention on the role of εἰμί in the sentence, which is the easiest part to isolate.

What is so helpful about εἰμί is that it has a rather limited set of syntactic functions where it makes a distinct predication. As the key to periphrasis is that the two parts make one, rather than two, predications, if we isolate those instances where εἰμί makes a complete predication, we can decide with reasonable clarity when periphrasis occurs, and when not.⁶ The participle half of the equation has varying degrees of syntactic complexity, dependent on the participle. Incidentally, when the two fuse together, the syntax of the resulting periphrastic construction is driven primarily by the participle, not the copula. On its own εἰμί has a short list of ways it functions to make a complete predication. If there is no compelling reason for εἰμί to be in a clause with a participle on its own, periphrasis is underway.

εἰμί makes a complete predication in the following ways: 1) bare existential, 2) presentational, 3) subject + predicate nominative, 4) dative of possession, and 5) spatial or temporal adjunct. In each of these uses, εἰμί is a syntactic center of gravity that is complete, that has its own arguments and adjuncts, and is at syntactic peace with the world. In such instances, periphrasis is ruled out as εἰμί is not available to fuse together with a participle phrase. It can have a predicate/adverbial/conjunct participle as a further modifier, but it won't blend together with one.⁷ Following is a brief description and example of each of these categories.

⁵ I am non-committal on the exact aspectual properties of εἰμί. At the very least, εἰμί does not have any contrastive aspectual forms (that is, there is no aorist or perfect of εἰμί). I think Stanley Porter's name for it, "aspectually vague," is a useful way to conceive of this verb, Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, Studies in Biblical Greek (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), chap. 10. There are auxiliaries which are not aspectually wishy-washy, like ἔχω "I have", but it is easy to see how εἰμί can come to function as an auxiliary. Incidentally, forms of "to be" and "to have" are exceedingly common in usage as auxiliaries in multi-verb constructions across languages, especially in the Indo-European family. Consider English "I am running" or "I have seen the truth". For an outline of key properties of verbs which can serve as auxiliaries cross-linguistically, see Daniel Kölligan, "From Discourse to Grammar? ἔρχομαι + Future Participle in Greek," in *Groupe Aspect* (Paris, 2012), 1–2.

⁶ Often the distinction is obvious, though there are always boarder cases (which relates, I believe, to the fact that periphrasis is actually part of continuum and that certain constructions are more and others are less "periphrastic." Even among scholars with the same basic understanding of periphrasis, the lists of instances of periphrastic constructions in the New Testament never agree with one another. Subjectivity is an inherent part of the analysis.

⁷ The one major modification to this is the common instances in which εἰμί has a subject and is predicating a variety of adjectival modifiers to that subject, e.g., "the dog is brown and lazy." A participial phrase can also occur in this sort of context, e.g., "the dog is brown, lazy, and drooling on the floor." I would argue, contrary to many traditional representations of periphrasis, that the common Greek equivalent of these instances is a case of periphrasis. Klaas Bentein has argued this most vociferously and effectively in *Verbal Periphrasis in Ancient Greek*:

Bare Existential

On occasion, εἰμί functions to make a bare existential predication. That is, it can say “I am” in the sense of “I exist.” This usage is quite rare in the New Testament. One example can be found in Heb. 11.6:

πιστεῦσαι γὰρ δεῖ τὸν προσερχόμενον τῷ θεῷ ὅτι ἔστιν

“For the one coming to God must believe that *he is/exists*.”

The emphasis here is on the existence versus non-existence of God as opposed to any attributes God might have, or simply introducing God as an entity into the discourse.

Presentational (aka “Thetic”)

εἰμί is frequently used to present a new entity (often a person) into the discourse.⁸ Rarely is the existence or non-existence of an entity an actual topic of interest in a discourse, outside of speculative philosophical discussion. When you say, “There is this guy that I know” in a conversation, you are usually not asserting the existence of someone as opposed to their non-existence—“a man that I know exists”—rather, you are introducing a new person into the discourse. This usage is common and often is paired in Greek with the indefinite pronoun τις. For example, Luke 16.9:

Ἄνθρωπος δέ τις ἦν πλούσιος

“now *there was* a certain rich man.”

Here Jesus introduces the new character of a rich man into his story.

Subject and Predicate Nominative

εἰμί can work with a subject and predicate nominative to make a predication. Whenever there are two nominative arguments in a clause with εἰμί, this is the way it is being used. For example, John 1.49:

σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ

“You the Son of God, you are the king of Israel”

Possessive Dative

εἰμί can also pair with a possessive dative to make a complete predication: “It belongs to me.” This usage appears in Acts 8.21:

οὐκ ἔστιν σοι μερὶς οὐδὲ κληρὸς ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ

“there is neither part nor inheritance *to you* in this word” (which we would more normally say in English, “You don’t have a part or inheritance in this word”).

The copula can easily be elided in such situations, resulting in a passage like John 1.6: ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης (“*there is*) a name to him, John,” or more normally, “his name is John.”

Have- and Be- Constructions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). It is not periphrasis of the same degree as the “traditional periphrasis”, but it is periphrastic nonetheless.

⁸ This usage usually goes by the cryptic name “thetic” in the literature. The best study of thetic constructions in Greek is Nicholas Andrew Bailey, “Thetic Constructions in Koine Greek with Special Attention to Clauses with εἰμί ‘be’, γίνομαι ‘occur’, ἔρχομαι ‘come’, ἰδοὺ/ἴδε ‘behold’, and Complement Clauses of ὁράω ‘see’” (Academisch Proefschrift, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, 2009).

Spatial or Temporal Adjunct

Lastly, εἰμί can pair with a spatial or temporal adjunct to make a complete predication: “he is there,” “it is morning.” In John 11.10 we find an example of this use:

ὅτι τὸ φῶς οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν αὐτῷ

“because the light is not in him.”

The spatial preposition ἐν, here used in an abstract sense picturing a body/person as a container in which something else can be held, makes a complete predication with εἰμί.

Summary of Syntactic Uses of εἰμί

If you come across εἰμί and a participle in the same sentence, considering whether εἰμί can be accounted for via one of these functions is the crucial test in discerning whether it is periphrastic or not. Usually, the choice is obvious once put in this clear way, though there are cases where it is still quite difficult to discern. First, though, an overview of the meaning of periphrastic constructions is in order. It will help us to see both what is helpful and what is lacking in traditional accounts of periphrasis.

What does an Instance of Periphrasis Mean?

Once we decide that an instance of εἰμί + participle is periphrastic, we now need to consider what it means. Traditional grammatical explanations offer the following pieces of information: periphrastic tense equivalencies and general semantic categories.

Periphrastic Tense Equivalencies

Table 1 shows the general equivalencies between a periphrastic construction and the “normal” verb forms which are formed via morphological means. As verbal aspect is the central organizing principle of the Greek verbal system, I have organized this table by aspect rather than by the tense forms of εἰμί.⁹

Table 1: Periphrastic Tense Equivalencies

Participle Aspect	εἰμί form	Synthetic “tense” equivalency
Perfect (“perfect” participle)	εἰμί present	Perfect
	εἰμί imperfect	Pluperfect
	εἰμί future	Future Perfect
Imperfective (“present” participle)	εἰμί present	Present
	εἰμί imperfect	Imperfect
	εἰμί future	Future

⁹ Compare this chart to the one found in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 648. Periphrasis with an aorist participle exists outside the New Testament, being reasonably common in early Christian literature, but is ignored here do to my focus on the New Testament.

The literature on the centrality of verbal aspect in Greek is now vast and grammars—both those aimed at teaching and at being reference works—are even beginning to catch up in how they discuss the verbal system. For a recent work showing this centrality focused on New Testament Greek, see Nicholas J. Ellis, Michael G. Aubrey, and Mark Dubis, “The Greek Verbal System and Aspectual Prominence: Revising Our Taxonomy and Nomenclature,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 1 (2016): 33–62.

To read this table, begin with the aspect category of the participle, find the appropriate tense category of εἰμί and those taken together results in a verbal concept which is roughly equivalent to the synthetic/morphological tense listed in the final column.¹⁰ This table shows how the pieces of the construction work together to position a periphrastic construction within the normal parameters of the Greek verbal system: aspect, tense, and mood.¹¹ From this point, we can move to what a periphrastic construction means, in terms of its semantics.

Core Meaning(s) of Periphrastic Constructions

As a general rule, periphrastic constructions bring a more specific, more pointed meaning to an utterance than the synthetic form.¹² Thus, they tend to realize with greater specificity nuances which the synthetic equivalents already have among their possible meanings.¹³

Copular Imperfectives (periphrasis with imperfective aspect [aka, present] participle)

Periphrastic forms with an imperfective aspect (aka “present”) participle tend to emphasize the continuous nature of an event.¹⁴ There are three main nuances:

¹⁰ The equivalence is a product of the compositional nature of the periphrastic construction, where aspect comes from the participle and tense and mood from the form of εἰμί. Thus, all the pieces of a normal verb are present, just spread out over the two elements. That periphrasis works this way has generally been assumed, and Green has argued clearly that this is the case in his dissertation, Robert E. Green, “Understanding Eimi Periphrastics in the Greek of the New Testament” (Ph.D., Clarks Summit (PA), Baptist Bible Seminary, 2012). There are instances where this compositionality leading to equivalence does not work, most notably with the aorist participle where, for example, an aorist participle plus a future form of εἰμί can be “equivalent” to a future perfect, despite the fact that the aorist and perfect have different aspect. This gets into a variety of complexities which will not be explored here as there are no aorist periphrastic forms in the New Testament.

¹¹ Periphrasis does occur in non-indicative moods, though much rarer. Periphrasis can also occur in the non-mood participle and infinitives, though this is quite rare.

¹² This is a cross-linguistic generality. Periphrastic forms tend to emerge to specify possible meanings of other verbal constructions, Paul J. Hopper and Elizabeth Closs Traugott, *Grammaticalization*, Second Edition, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7–9; Joan Bybee, Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca, *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 133. Balancing this is the realization that often native speakers have a very difficult time articulating the difference in meaning between forms which partially overlap in their usage. For example, English speakers tend to feel certain distinctions in meaning between the present and the present progressive tense, which generally have clearly distinct uses, but they overlap in messy ways that are difficult to articulate. It is reasonable to assume that native Greek speakers felt a certain degree of difference in meaning between periphrastic forms and their synthetic “equivalents,” but a difference of a type that in many cases is probably unrecoverable to us.

¹³ The exact distinctions in meaning are elusive to describe in many cases, though quite obvious in others.

¹⁴ This tendency is just that, a tendency. Green warns that it is not an inevitable meaning and that a variety of other factors, such as the meaning of the verb and context, must be taken into account and together result in a variety of *Aktionsart* values, Green, “Understanding Eimi Periphrastics,” 340. Another approach, taken by Bentein, is to outline the main domains of the different aspectual uses of the imperfective and assign the periphrastic constructions to those. This is useful and adequate for his purposes, however it avoids entirely the question most exegetes of the New Testament are interested in: is there something unique about the meaning of the periphrastic construction used for realizing the progressive function of imperfective aspect, for example, as opposed to the simple Imperfect form?

First, conveying ongoing states (stative sub-domain of imperfective aspect). Consider Acts 18.7:

οὗ ἡ οἰκία ἦν συνομοροῦσα τῇ συναγωγῇ

“whose house *was next to* the synagoge”

The position of the house vis-a-vis the synagogue is profiled as unchanging and on-going. This is not a widely used nuance of the morphological Imperfect form.

Second, imperfective periphrastics are used to highlight iterative events. There may be a special meaning within iterativity which they profile, namely, that an event is iterative over the time-period in question without implying that it is consistent. Consider the following example from Luke 4.44:

Καὶ ἦν κηρύσσων εἰς τὰς συναγωγὰς τῆς Ἰουδαίας.

“And he was teaching in the synagogues of Judea.”

Jesus’ teaching is presented as iterative—he is teaching in many different places over an unspecified period of time. The periphrastic usage probably is used to present an iterative event without implying that it exhaustively describes what Jesus was doing over the time period in question. He was also traveling, eating, sleeping, etc.¹⁵

Finally, imperfective periphrastics are used to present background scene-setting events at beginning of pericopes. This is especially common in the writings of Luke.¹⁶ Consider this example from Luke 13.10:

Ἦν δὲ διδάσκων ἐν μιᾷ τῶν συναγωγῶν ἐν τοῖς σάββασι.

“Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.”

This verse presents the background against which the rest of the pericope plays out. This background holds for the rest of the pericope (through v. 17 at least, and probably all the way to v. 22 where there is a change of scene).

Copular Perfects (periphrasis with perfect aspect [aka, perfect] participle)

Periphrastics form with a perfect participle typically emphasize the ongoing state (which results from completed events). As seen with copular imperfectives, emphasizing an ongoing state is a possible nuance of the Perfect by itself (the other being emphasizing the action which resulted in the ongoing state).¹⁷ Consider the following from Luke 23.15:

καὶ ἰδοὺ οὐδὲν ἄξιον θανάτου ἐστὶν πεπραγμένον αὐτῷ

¹⁵ Iterative in this sense—happening reasonably regularly over the period of time being profiled—is a different nuance of the imperfective aspect than to say, “While Mary was eating a sandwich, Todd was sleeping.” In this sentence, the imperfective profiles a situation that is coextensive with the time-period profiled. The sentence would be infelicitous if Todd only was sleeping for a brief period of the time during which Mary was eating.

¹⁶ This was first pointed out by Gudmund Björck, *HN ΔΙΔΑΣΚΩΝ: Die periphrastischen Konstruktionen im Griechischen* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri-A.-B., 1940). While I have not counted it carefully, for a variety of reasons, I have noticed that such usage of periphrastic imperfectives to present background scene-setting actions/events/states is quite common in a wide swath of Judeo-Christian narrative literature from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD.

¹⁷ There is a tendency for active Perfects to emphasize the action and middle-passive perfects to emphasize the ongoing state. This is likely do to the detransitivizing nature of the middle-passive voice. As MP deemphasizing the presence of an Actor, it stands to reason that the action in the past also is de-emphasized, with the focus instead falling on the resultant state.

“indeed, nothing worthy of death was done by him” => “he has done nothing worthy of death”
=> “he is in a state of innocence”

This passage functions as a legal proclamation of the (current) state of innocence of Jesus. The issue in the text is not so much any of the possible things he has done in the past, but whether there is any legal culpability leading to punishment in the now.

Future Periphrastic

Finally, the future periphrastics appear to make an aspectual distinction at times. This is the most controversial of all the categories of meaning of periphrastic constructions. The controversy has to do with the uncertainty of how the future fits into the aspectual system of Greek.¹⁸ There are times where imperfective periphrastics appear to be used to give an imperfective aspect emphasis to a future event, in place of the neutral-leaning-perfective aspect of the future. Consider Mark 13.25:

καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες ἔσονται ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πίπτοντες,

“and the stars will be falling from the heavens”

In contrast to the surrounding futures, which are all morphological futures, this appears to view the event of stars falling as imperfective, thus on-going over a period of time rather than as a simple event with stative emphasis, as the rest of the verbs do.

Summary and next steps

The categories of tense equivalency and different meanings found in traditional grammars is useful. Tense equivalency and meaning categories are essential pieces of information for understanding the use of periphrastic constructions. However, merely identifying periphrasis and working through the main categories of meaning for the different periphrastic constructions misses some key questions that ought

¹⁸ A great deal of discussion has been carried out on this topic. For my part, I like the tidiness of viewing the future as a non-past perfective aspect, sharing the morphological markings of the aorist in many respects, so Stephen H. Levinsohn, “Gnomic Aorist: No Problem! The Greek Indicative Verb System as Four Ordered Pairs,” in *In Mari Via Tua: Philological Studies in Honour of Antonio Piñero*, ed. Israel M. Gallarte and Jesús Peláez, Estudios de Filología Neotestamentaria, II (Córdoba: Ediciones el Almendro, 2016), 183–96; John Hewson, “The Verbal System of Ancient Greek,” in *Tense and Aspect in Indo-European Languages: Theory, Typology, Diachrony*, by John Hewson and Vit Bubenik, vol. 145, Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science v. 145, IV-Current Issues in Linguistic Theory (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997), 24–45; Ellis, Aubrey, and Dubis, “Greek Verbal System and Aspectual Prominence.” On this view, the future is perfective (presents the event as a bounded whole, that is, profiles the event boundaries. The future periphrasis, by virtue of using imperfective participles (almost always imperfective participles, but not exclusively), provides a way to profile future events with imperfective aspect. That there was some felt need for making aspectual differences in future time referring expressions finds some support in the proliferation of future time referring periphrastic constructions which could, at least theoretically, make these distinction. Various future time referring periphrastic constructions with the infinitive, for instance, become very common in this period, however it cannot be assumed that making these aspectual distinctions was their main usage, Sandra Lucas, “Aspect in Greek Future Forms,” *Journal of Greek Linguistics* 14 (2014): 163–89; Theodore Markopoulos, *The Future in Greek: From Ancient to Medieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). This finds a ready analogy in Modern Greek, which has systematized the aspectual opposition into the future. This description is far from controversial.

to be asked of periphrasis.¹⁹ What these approaches fail to address is a very real complicating factor: things appear in different places in different periphrastic constructions.

Information Structure and Periphrasis: a Primer

Consider the following three examples of periphrastic constructions from Luke:²⁰

- Luke 1.21 Καὶ ἦν ὁ λαὸς προσδοκῶν τὸν Ζαχαρίαν
 “and the people were waiting for Zachariah”
- Luke 5.16 αὐτὸς δὲ ἦν ὑποχωρῶν ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις καὶ προσευχόμενος
 “Now he was in the wilderness and was praying”
- Luke 21.37 Ἦν δὲ τὰς ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ διδάσκων,
 “Now he was teaching during the days in the temple”

A close look at these passages reveals that the order of constituents differs in all of them. Luke 5.16 has a subject before the copula while it is after the copula in 1.21; Luke 21.37 has a temporal and locative phrase between the copula and the participle, as opposed to it occurring after the participle in Luke 1.21. How do we account for these differences? Do they mean anything? Are they a result of that oft-appealed to but ever-illusive creature “style difference”? Traditional accounts leave us empty-handed trying to explain why these examples differ in terms of constituent order.

Accounting for these differences requires that we have a way to talk about what is going on here. For this we will bring into play an important emerging area of Greek grammar: Information Structure.

Information Structure

Information Structure is a description of the way that information is packaged in sentences so that the reader can understand how each sentence connects to and expands the discourse. As Nicolas Bertrand writes, “The basic assumption at the core of any theory of information structure is that it is impossible to fully understand language without taking its use into account: participants and their psychological conditions play a role in shaping discourse, as does the context of the discourse.”²¹ To say it differently, the basic insight of IS is that information is structured in such a way that it fits the context of the utterance and what the reader (is assumed to) know about the world.²² Basically, authors shape each sentence based on what has already been said and what they can assume the reader already knows.

¹⁹ One of these key questions, which I will not be addressing at all in this paper, is that of suppletive periphrasis. Some periphrastic forms are obligatory—they fill slots in the verbal paradigm for which there is no morphological verb equivalent. Many periphrastic forms are not obligatory. Important further work on the relationship between these different types of periphrasis is in order, some of which I undertake in my forthcoming dissertation.

²⁰ It is no accident that I have mainly taken examples from Luke in this paper. Luke uses lots of periphrastic constructions in the Gospel of Luke and a fair amount in Acts as well.

²¹ Nicolas Bertrand, “Information Structure and Greek,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics*, ed. Vit Bubenik (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 238.

²² Given the focus of this paper on Koine Greek, for which there are only readers and writers, I will skip the usual initial step of talking about a speaker and hearer first in describing the theoretical points.

They spool out information in ways that make it clear—at least reasonably clear, most of the time—how the new information they are writing relates to the old information already active in the discourse.²³

A helpful way to get a handle on this is to use the analogy that *a discourse is a house*. A house is built on a foundation, which here is the assumed shared background between the author and reader—the cultural knowledge, things specific to their relationship and worldview, etc. The author precedes to build the house of discourse on this foundation, one sentence at a time. These sentences, in turn, group into larger themes which belong together. The author builds and furnishes one room of the discourse-house at a time. Until there is some signal given—change of topic, transition word, etc.—the reader assumes that every new sentence belongs in the current room and connects it in their mental model of the discourse accordingly. The author then moves on to the new room, and so on and so forth, until the entire house is built. In order for the reader to follow along, the author has to give directions on how each new sentence connects with the preceding discourse.²⁴ These cues come in the form of many different features of the language. The way these features of the language work together to structure the discourse is the prime study of Information Structure.

The two main categories of information we will deal with, briefly, are *topic* and *focus*.²⁵ Topic and Focus are variously defined in the literature. I will use *Topic* to refer to the “aboutness” of a sentence and *Focus* to refer to “that part of an utterance which is intended to make the most important change in the hearer’s mental representation.”²⁶ Thinking of our house analogy in terms of Topic and Focus, we can put things this way. The Topic of the sentence is the particular part of a room which the sentence is doing work on and the Focus is the important piece of work that the author wants to do on that piece of the room. In Greek, the Topic is almost always the subject of the sentence and the Focus is almost always found in the Comment section of the sentence—that is, the predicate/non-subject portion of the sentence. This is a rough and ready grasp of Topic and Focus.

In Greek, one of the key ways that information is structured is through *constituent order*. This is especially the case for Topic and Focus. To see this, we will make a brief comparison between English and Greek.

²³ The information active in the discourse always includes things which belong to the cultural background of the interaction. In the US, for instance, when we talk about George Washington everyone knows the specific individual mentioned because he is part of the cultural encyclopedia. If you intend to talk about a different person named George Washington, you have to make that clear. The exact shape of the cultural background varies widely depending on many factors, such as the ages and relationships of the people communicating, whether the discussion is technical in nature, and so forth. Thus, when talking about trees it makes a great deal of difference whether the immediate context is forestry or computer programming.

²⁴ That is, assuming the author is intending to communicate clearly. People are able to make sense out of a great deal of poorly connected ideas. Most of our communication is underspecified. Even information which bears no obvious relationship to prior information can be integrated through enough assumptions. It is quite difficult to write an incoherent discourse, since humans are incredibly skilled at making the assumptions necessary to derive coherent meaning from underspecified communication.

²⁵ The main parameters in information structure are: focus-background, topic-comment, and given-new, (Zimmermann). For this brief paper, plucking the key ones for our purpose and leaving the others as part of the intuitive process of interpretation (which for most Greek Bible students has been taught to a reasonable degree anyway), is necessary.

²⁶ Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2000), 294.

Example of Information Structure: English vs. Greek

In English, Information Structure is heavily reflected in prosody (changes in emphasis and pitch). Consider the following question and answer pairs (capital letters indicate vocal stress):²⁷

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Q. Who gave the book to Paul? | A. JOHN gave the book to Paul. |
| 2. Q. What did John do with the book? | A. John GAVE the book to Paul. |
| 3. Q. What did John give to Paul? | A. John gave the BOOK to Paul. |
| 4. Q. To whom did John give the book? | A. John gave the book to PAUL. |

In one sense, each Answer sentence is the same. In another, important sense, they are all different sentences and are not interchangeable—they only sound right in specific discourse contexts. From the perspective of traditional grammar, these four answer sentences are identical: they all have the same subject, object, verb, and direct object. By contrast, in terms of Information Structure, each one is unique. They only work naturally in a specific context and, used outside of that context either sound wrong or have a variety of implications beyond simply answering the question.²⁸

Greek Information Structure, by contrast, is heavily reflected in the order of constituents.²⁹

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. τίς ἔδωκεν τὸ βιβλίον τῷ Παῦλι; | ὁ Ἰωάννης ἔδωκεν τὸ βιβλίον τῷ Παῦλι. |
| 2. τί ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰωάννης τῷ βιβλίῳ; | ὁ Ἰωάννης τὸ βιβλίον τῷ Παῦλι ἔδωκεν. |
| 3. τί ἔδωκεν ὁ Ἰωάννης τῷ Παῦλι; | τὸ βιβλίον ἔδωκεν ὁ Ἰωάννης τῷ Παῦλι. |
| 4. τίτι ἔδωκεν ὁ Ἰωάννης τὸ βιβλίον; | τῷ Παῦλι ἔδωκεν ὁ Ἰωάννης τὸ βιβλίον. |

Note here that in the Greek answers each sentence has a unique order. While the semantic content of each is the same—_{sub}[John] _{verb}[give] _{argument1}[book] _{argument2}[Paul]—the shape of the sentence conveys the way the information is structured. In each sentence the *Focus* element is first (with the exception of number 2, where the default position of the verb is on the left of the clause, thus moving it to the right

²⁷ These are all examples of *focus-presupposition* articulation sentences where “the sentence has a presupposition that is known to the hearer,” Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek*, 7. Lambrecht calls them “identificational sentences” because “they serve to identify a referent as the missing argument in an open proposition,” Knud Lambrecht, *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*, Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 71 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122. In each case, the presupposition is the question word from the question. Due to this articulation, the subject is focal when answering questions of the form: “who did X?” In the more common topic-comment sentence articulation, the subject is rarely ever focal. Most Greek sentences are Topic-Comment sentences, so they do not have a focal subject/topic. However, these question answer pair are the easiest way to see IS in action, so I use them here.

²⁸ For instance, answering the question “Who did Paul give the book to?” with the answer “JOHN gave the book to Sarah” allows the answerer to make a correction to the presupposition (that it was Paul who gave the book) and also answer the open presupposition (that a book was given to someone) in one convenient sentence. An answer like “PAUL gave the book to Sarah” would come across as odd. I would likely interpret such an answer as implying that the answerer had not heard the question well and had not observed that I already named Paul as the giver. The point being, the position of emphasis matters in English. The implications of what is communicated vary depending on how the answer is emphasized.

²⁹ I have made up all these sentences based on widely observed principles of Information Structure evident in Ancient Greek texts. This is more convenient than tracking down scores of actual examples to illustrate the same simple point.

of the clause brings emphasis via departure from the normal). These orders reflect the basic Information Structure of Greek evidenced in constituent order: (Topic) – (Focus) – Verb – Remainder.³⁰

Constituent Order vs. Word Order

Adding the last piece before getting to the actual periphrastic constructions, we have one final concept to clarify: constituent order vs. word order. While *word order* seems self-evident, the label *constituent order* may be opaque. What exactly does *constituent order* mean?

You may have come across discussions of Greek “word order.” Grammarians and commentators periodically make some comments in that direction. Often when people talk about word order what they are discussing is what linguists now call constituent order (but sometimes they are actually talking about word order). A constituent just means an element of the sentence which is filling a slot in a sentence—like a subject, object, prepositional phrase, and so forth. Constituents range in size from single words, through phrases, up to complex clauses in their own right. For example, compare the following two sentences:

The dog is barking.

The black and white dog with droopy ears, a lot of slobber, and a fear-inducing snarl which has on more than one occasion nearly given me a heart attack, is barking.

In both examples the italicized text is a constituent, namely, the subject of the clause. These sentences show that constituents fill a slot in the sentence and can vary widely in size and complexity. Indeed, in sentence (2) there are even constituents within the subject constituent.

A *word order* observation would be to note that the adjectives “black and white” stand before the noun they modify instead of after:

“black and white dog”

not

“dog black and white.”

A constituent order observation would be to note that the subject constituent precedes the verb in its entirety. You can’t say, for example,

“*The black and white dog* is barking *with droopy ears*”

and have it mean quite the same thing or sound quite right. A summary way of stating this constituent order observation is that in English constituents stay together. When you move “with droopy ears” it ceases to be part of the subject constituent. This is also the case in Greek as well. Greek has various possible word order variations within a phrase, but constituents stay together.³¹

³⁰ This is to be read as follows. The initial two words are in parentheses to mark out that these are optional positions which a Topic or a Focus element can be moved to. In a default sentence, the Topic and the Focus element follow the Verb. They are only moved to the pre-verbal positions under certain conditions.

³¹ The one relatively common exception is *hyperbaton*, which is addressed in standard grammars.

As we have already seen, in Greek constituent order varies in periphrastic constructions. Let's look at those three examples from Luke again, only this time with the constituents marked out (square brackets set off each non-verbal constituent):

Luke 1.21 Καὶ ἦν subject[ὁ λαὸς] *προσδοκῶν* object[τὸν Ζαχαρίαν]

Luke 5.16 subject[αὐτός] δὲ ἦν *ὑποχωρῶν* spatial adjunct[ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις] καὶ *προσευχόμενος*

Luke 21.37 Ἦν δὲ temporal adjunct[τὰς ἡμέρας] spatial adjunct[ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ] *διδάσκων*,

In terms of constituents we can say that the subject constituent is in three different locations: post-copula, pre-copula, and null. We find an object constituent following the participle. We see a spatial adjunct both pre- and post-participle. There is also a temporal adjunct which precedes a participle. All these are points of observation which require some thought, given that we have seen IS in Greek is heavily reflected in the constituent order.

Putting our observation that constituent order varies in periphrastic constructions with the above point that in Greek Information Structure is marked in constituent order, we are now in position to see that we need a way to account for why different constituents appear where they do in periphrastic sentences.

A Template for Periphrastic Constructions

Thinking back to the two models we started with—the verb and participle relating to each other as syntactic centers of gravity—it should make sense that the standard IS template for Greek sentences is inadequate for periphrastic constructions. Unlike most sentences, they have two pieces to the central verb and these two pieces can occur in a variety of relationships vis-a-vis each other: the participle is most often after the copula, but it can come before, and there can be nothing or several things between the participle and copula. The default template for periphrastic constructions has to account for the nature of periphrastic constructions.³² The default template as worked out by Levinsohn appears in Figure 3:³³

εἰμί + (subject) + participial phrase
or, in more detail
εἰμί + (subject) + participle + (object) + (adjuncts)

Figure 3: default IS template for periphrastic constructions

³² Periphrasis has been memorably defined as “syntax where we expect morphology,” Dunstan Brown et al., “Defining ‘Periphrasis’: Key Notions,” *Morphology*, no. 22 (2012): 272.. This describes the state of affairs with the traditional category of periphrasis in Greek.

³³ Levinsohn, “Constituent Order in and Usages of εἰμί.” I have tested this template on a broad swath of non-New Testament Jewish and Christian Greek texts and am convinced that it is a good representation of the state of affairs. Some qualifications and modifications are in order, but all the basics are accounted for.

A couple notes are in order regarding this template. First, items in parentheses are optional.³⁴ In fact, it is abundantly common for there to be a null subject (no over subject present), resulting in the common situation where copula and the participle are adjacent to each other. Second, “default” does not necessarily mean the most commonly occurring pattern.³⁵ “Default” means the order which conveys minimal meaning beyond the semantics of the clause. In other words, the “default” is the order an author would use if they were not trying to emphasize anything in particular beyond the core contribution of the clause to the on-going discourse.

Knowing this default template turns out to be exegetically valuable. If “default” means there is nothing in particular emphatic in the sentence beyond the ordinary addition of new information to the discourse, then deviations from default are, by definition, exegetically significant.³⁶ When the author departs from the default order it signals instances where the author has intentionally highlighted some element by the way they chose to write it, making the most important point more obvious.

The main takeaway from this brief model is that the basic sentence schema gets used when there is no pragmatic motivation to convey anything beyond the bare semantics of the periphrastic construction. Translating that into more normal sounding English, whenever a writer puts one of these elements in a different position than the proposed model there is a pragmatic motivation. The order communicates something about how the elements in the sentence relate to the discourse. Some of the orders denote different emphasis, some indicate how different parts of the clause/sentence relate to the context, and so on. It follows from this model that if we see an order like,

subject + copula + participle + (arguments and adjuncts)

or

prepositional phrase + object + participle + copula

that the writer is conveying some sort of pragmatic goal through these orderings.

³⁴ Technically, the form of εἰμί can be absent as well, which almost only happens in cases where one periphrastic participle is connected to a prior one with καί. Such as Acts 12.12: οὗ ἦσαν ἱκανοὶ **συνηθροισμένοι** καὶ **προσσευχόμενοι**. Note that the second participle technically does not have a copula; rather, it “borrows” the copula from the prior clause in forming periphrasis. There are debates about whether periphrasis can occur in an implied form of εἰμί where there is no such form in the context to “borrow” from in the manner seen in Acts 12.12.

³⁵ Though, in both the New Testament and in my large non-New Testament corpus, the statistically most common order of elements follows the default template—if an element is present, it will most often be in the position predicted by the default template.

³⁶ A brief word is in order about “emphasis.” New Testament exegetes notoriously use “emphatic” to mean any number of things. I am following a more restricted sense here. Emphasis is the result of moving a constituent out of its expected place in the clause, drawing extra attention to it. A focal constituent is, by definition, the most important element of the sentence as it is the new information added to the mental model. Authors can choose to move a focal element to the emphatic pre-verbal position which draws extra attention to it. This extra emphasis is what I call “emphatic”—making the most important element even more obvious, on this notion of *emphasis* see Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody (MA): Hendrickson, 2011), 269ff.

Using the notion of “emphasis” as the movement of an element from its expected place could also result in calling *Topics* which are moved to the clause-initial *Topic* slot “emphatic.” This is fine, so long as it is clear that “emphatic” *Topics* are emphatic for different reasons than “emphatic” *Focal* elements.

Two most common patterns to note

Of the various deviations from the default pattern, two appear most often. These merit special comment to guide exegetical engagement of periphrastic participles.

subject + copula + participial clause

It is common to see a subject before the copula. Putting the subject before the copula is most often used to indicate a change of Topic from the preceding sentence.

Example: Luke 5.16

αὐτὸς δὲ ἦν ὑποχωρῶν ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις καὶ προσευχόμενος

“Now he was in the wilderness and was praying”

Pre-copula αὐτός signals a resumption of Jesus as the topic. The final comments in the pericope modify the mental model of the discourse regarding Jesus, not the crowd or the person he just healed, which are the immediately prior subjects.

Example: Luke 12.6

οὐχὶ πέντε στρουθία πωλοῦνται ἀσσαρίων δύο; καὶ _{Topic}[ἐν ἐξ αὐτῶν] οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπιλεησμένον ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two coins? And not one from them is overlooked by God.”

The most basic function of marking contrast is to select one of the possible discourse topics as the topic for the current clause. In this example, the prior topic is a group of sparrows; the contrastive topic is a single sparrow. The position of the topic in the pre-copular slot syntactically tells the reader that the topic has changed from the group to singular. The whole proverbial expression is set up as a contrastive pair in which the value of the one to God is emphasized over against the economic worthlessness of the group.

object/adjunct + copula + (subject) + participial clause

Object or adjunct before the copula is used to put focal emphasis on the element which has been moved forward. This order takes the most important contribution of the sentence and makes it even more emphatic.

Example: Ephesians 2.5³⁷

καὶ ὄντας ἡμᾶς νεκροὺς τοῖς παραπτώμασιν συνεζωοποίησεν τῷ Χριστῷ, - **χάριτί** ἔστε σεσωσμένοι

³⁷ Note, Eph. 2.8 Τῇ γὰρ χάριτί ἔστε σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως, differs in that τῇ χάριτι is not focal/emphatic. It follows the pattern for a different reason. At this point it is discourse-old/given, and thus *topical* not *focus*. It is basically a *Setting* element, or what Levinsohn calls a *Point of Departure*, Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek*, 8. It serves as an orientation point, anchoring the clause to what is already present in the context to serve as the basis for the new communication. The *Focus* of this clause is διὰ πίστεως and it occurs in the default position for focal material.

“and although we were dead in our trespasses he made us alive together with Christ—by grace you are saved”

The pre-copula χάριτι is Focus. “By grace” is already the Focus (most important part) of this sentence and moving it to the pre-copula position draws heightened attention to it. That fact that “you are saved” is already known in context. The key addition of this sentence is “by grace.” Not only is “by grace” the most important part of this sentence, but it is moved to before the copula to make it even more emphatic. This position highlights the point which Paul is making.

Attention to Information Structure allows us to put the emphasis where the emphasis is in the text when we teach.

Example: James 1.17³⁸

Topic[πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δῶρημα τέλειον] Focal Adjunct[ἄνωθεν] ἐστὶν καταβαῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν φώτων

“Every good give and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of Lights.”

First, we see that the Topic here is in the pre-copula *Topic* slot indicating change of topic. Such a usage is common at seams in the discourse. There is also a Focal spatial adjunct ἄνωθεν in the pre-copula position. James singles out “from above” as emphatic in this clause, making it clear that the spatial origin of the good gifts is the key point here. The prior section of verses, 12-15, discusses the origin of sin as from within. James’ emphatic “from above” here draws a sharp contrast between the source of sin and the source of blessing.

Concluding Remarks

When we exegete a text with periphrastic participles in it, we have two things to attend to. The traditional grammars hold part of the key: the meaning and tense “equivalent” of the periphrastic construction. A further level of inquiry is in order, though. We also must consider the Information Structure of the construction. The very way the author wrote a given passage may have something further to communicate. Knowing the basic template (or keeping it on hand) gives us the opportunity to consider more closely what the author is communicating with his way of writing.

“But I’m not an expert in Information Structure”

That’s okay, hardly anyone is. I’ve put together an assortment of resources to help out here:

<http://ntgreeketal.com/periphrasis-resources/>

³⁸ Many translations understand this passage as non-periphrastic, giving some variation of, “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights.” This is a defensible reading in that ἄνωθεν can be used to indicate a static place “above,” as an opposite of κάτω “below.” εἰμί can make a complete predication with a spatial adjunct indicating a stable point in space, thus “is above/from above” as a translation. The main uses of ἄνωθεν, though, indicate motion through space, rather than a stationary location. If understood this way, then εἰμί is unable to make a predication with ἄνωθεν and the result is that the passage is periphrastic with ἄνωθεν in the focal position.

Resources include this presentation, lists of periphrastic constructions in the NT, and some important help on the basics of Information Structure which can guide you and keep you from going astray.

Appendix: What about *Epistle of Barnabas* passages?

As I began with two passages from *The Epistle of Barnabas*, I will finish here with some thoughts on how to understand them.

(1) 14.2 Καὶ ἦν Μωϋσῆς νηστεύων ἐν ὄρει Σινᾶ

This passage is certainly periphrastic. There is no reason to understand it otherwise.

2) 4.7 Καὶ ἦν Μωϋσῆς ἐν τῷ ὄρει νηστεύων ἡμέρας τεσσαράκοντα καὶ νύκτας τεσσαράκοντα

4.7 remains difficult. The single largest reason this is the case is that 4.7 is an embedded quotation from the Septuagint (probably a loose citation from memory as it does not correspond to anything in any extant LXX manuscript). This is difficult in that it is hard to assess, in the context given, whether the point of the sentence is to predicate “Moses was on the mountain, fasting for 40 days and nights,” or to make an emphatic statement of the order, “Moses was fasting *on the mountain* for 40 days and nights.”

The argument in the passage in *Epistle of Barnabas* seems to put less weight on his location on the mountain than on the broader complex of receiving the covenant on the stone tablets, which Moses subsequently breaks. In other words, there seems slight weight in favor of taking this prepositional phrases as non-emphatic, which leaves two options: 2) either the text is non-periphrastic, or, to introduce a new option in the middle of an argument, 3) the prepositional phrase serves as an anchor to the context. In option 3) the prepositional phrase occurs between the copula and participle as an anchor to the context, which is not uncommon in periphrastic constructions. Such a construction is not focal, but rather topical and similar to clause-initial setting elements in that they belong mainly to the structure of the text. The possible trigger for such a reading would be the common knowledge that Moses, when he received the covenant, was on Mt. Sinai. As the receiving of the covenant is mentioned at the end of the preceding clause, “on the mountain” could be considered accessible and topical. This reading is quite possible in the context from which this quotation was “lifted,” wherever that happens to be. I lean towards this reading: periphrastic with a spatial anchor to the context.