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## The “Genitive Absolute” in New Testament/Hellenistic Greek A Proposal for Clearer Understanding

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## Introduction

In every introductory Greek grammar book, there is a section, usually somewhere near the end, on the Genitive Absolute (GA). This is usually described as a construction consisting of a participle and a noun/pronoun in the genitive, not grammatically linked to the rest of the sentence.<sup>1</sup> Often it is noted that this construction is used when the noun/pronoun in the GA construction does not occur in the main clause, and so has no case to take from its function in the sentence. Some books also mention that there are GAs in the NT without a noun/pronoun, and that in the NT, the rule about the noun/pronoun not occurring as well in the main clause is not always followed.

## The Problem

Most Greek grammar books consider it to be the norm that a GA is “absolute” (from Latin *absolutus*, “loosed off”), that is, the noun/pronoun that agrees with the genitive participle does not normally also occur in the main clause. Thus, when the noun/pronoun also occurs in the main clause, whether in the genitive or in some other case, this is viewed as a sort of exception that needs to be explained. Some grammarians view NT and Hellenistic Greek as somehow inferior because of the high number of these “irregular” GAs. For example, C.F.D. Moule speaks of “the growing laxity of the Greek of the NT period, as compared with the Classical. It countenances the use of a clumsy Genitive Absolute where a phrase in agreement with an already present (or implied) Nominative, Accusative or Dative would be both correct and neat.” (Examples: Acts 21:34; 22:17).<sup>2</sup> Moule’s use of words like “countenances,” “laxity,” “clumsy,” and “correct” make his attitude clear. But he is just voicing a very common opinion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. W. D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek: Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 281. For a survey of a large number of Greek textbooks on this topic, see Steven L. Cox, “Are Genitive Absolutes Always Absolute?” a paper given at the SBL National Meeting in San Antonio TX, Nov 2004.

<sup>2</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. (emphases mine) James Hope Moulton, *Prolegomena: A Grammar of NT Greek* Vol. I, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1906), p. 74: “A violent use [of the GA] occurs in Heb 8:9”; A. W. Argyle, “The Genitive Absolute in Biblical Greek,” *The Expository Times* 69:9 (June 1958):285, “Its use is more lax in Hellenistic than in classical Greek”; M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1963), p. 18, “in Mt 5:1, instead of **kaqisanto** **aujtu proshlqon aujtw** it would have been *more elegant* to say **kaqisanti aujtw/proshlqon**”; J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of NT Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1965) p. 155, “This genitive use of the participle is *not suitable* when the noun that goes with the participle is also the subject, object or indirect object of the main verb, since the participle *should* then itself

When we look at actual use of the GA construction in the New Testament, however, we find that out of approximately 312 instances, over a quarter do not conform to “absolute” expectations.<sup>4</sup> They contain nouns or pronouns that refer to the same person or persons in the main clause, which are in Accusative, Dative, Genitive and even Nominative (see Figure 1). This is too high a proportion to be treated as “exceptions.” It is much more likely that the rule (expressing our understanding) is faulty.

A similar situation exists in the Septuagint. As Soisalon-Soininen says, “The rule of Classical Greek, that the subject of the Genitive Absolute cannot be in the main clause, is not adhered to; however this is very frequent in the Koine under consideration.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, a number of authors note that Classical Greek also has instances of GA use where the noun/pronoun reoccurs in the main clause. Goodwin states, “Yet this principle is sometimes violated...”<sup>6</sup> A. T. Robertson notes, “the older Greek did not always conform to the norm.”<sup>7</sup> Winer says, “Examples of this kind are also common in Greek authors” and give references in Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Plato and others.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the traditional understanding of the GA does not even fit the evidence of pre-Hellenistic Greek. When we get to Hellenistic Greek, in the LXX and even more

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take the case of the word with which it agrees”; Nigel Turner, *Syntax: A Grammar of NT Greek*, Vol. III (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), p. 322, “The *correct* use is becoming rarer in Hell. Greek and it is *misused* more often”; even Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*. 18 Auflage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), par. 423, “auch im NT *normalerweise* auf den Fall beschränkt, wo das Nomen oder Pronomen, auf das sich das Ptz. bezieht, im Satz weder als Subject noch als ein anderer Satzteil vorkommt...Der *härteste*... Fall ist der, dass das Subj. de Gen. abs. auch Subj. des Satzes ist.”

<sup>4</sup> The number of GA constructions in the NT is given in the literature as anywhere from 259 to 342, and the percentage of them that are “irregular” is similarly diverse. See summary in Cox, “Absolute,” p. 1 fn 1. My own count is 312 of which in 26% the noun or pronoun refers to something in the adjacent main clause. The count is affected by whether one counts constructions or participles, since some constructions have more than one participle, and a few instances are debatable. I have counted constructions. Some may also have counted verses, though some verses have more than one construction. Likewise, some count a use as “irregular” if any element in the GA, including its genitives, datives and accusatives, occur in the main clause, while others may count only those instances where the GA is about the subject of the main clause.

<sup>5</sup> Ilmari Soisalon-Soininen, *Studien zur Septuaginta-Syntax* (Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987), p. 177 (translation mine). He gives some examples: Job 22:27 ref. Gen.; Gen 18:1 ref. Dat.; 2 Ki 13:21 ref. Nom.; Gen 44:14 ref Acc. and others.

<sup>6</sup> William Watson Goodwin, *Greek Grammar*, revised by C.B. Gulick (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1930), p. 331. This is grammar of classical Greek is typical.

<sup>7</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914), p. 513.

<sup>8</sup> G. B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek*, trans. W. F. Moulton (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001[reprint of T & T Clark, 1882]), pp. 259-260.

in the non-literary papyri, GA use increases,<sup>9</sup> and there are very many GAs that do not follow the “rule.”

**Figure 1**  
**Statistical Table of Occurrence of Genitive “Absolute” Constructions in the New Testament**

The second column gives the total number of GA constructions. The third to sixth columns give the number of constructions where the GA refers to something in the main clause (by case of the thing referred to). The seventh column gives the percentage of referring GAs in the book. The last column gives the number of GA constructions that come after rather than before the verb of the main clause.

Book	Total GA	GA Ref Nom	GA Ref Acc	GA Ref Dat	GA Ref Gen	% ref	GA after
Matt	52	1	3	17	2	44.2	2
Mk	35	2	6	4	1	37.1	1
Mkend	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Lk	56	-	8	8	1	30.4	1
Jn	17	-	2	2	-	23	2
Acts	103	2	9	4	3	17.5	17
Rom	9	-	-	-	1	11.1	3
1Cor	4	-	-	1	-	25	-
2Cor	8	1	1	1	-	37.5	4
Gal	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Eph	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Phl	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Col	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1Th	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
2Th	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1Tm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2Tm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tit	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Phlm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Heb	14	1	-	-	-	7.1	6
Jas	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1Pet	6	-	-	-	-	-	4
2Pet	3	-	-	-	-	-	2
1Jn	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2Jn	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3Jn	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Jude	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rev	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	312	7	29	37	8	26%	45

<sup>9</sup> Moulton, *Prolegomena*, p. 74, “The rapid extension of the genitive absolute is a very obvious feature of Hellenistic Greek.” This may be due to a tendency to simplification of Greek for use by people from varied linguistic backgrounds.

## Explanations Offered

Since so many writers used a GA construction when they could have made the participle agree with an element in the main clause, various authors have tried to explain *why* they did this.

One suggestion is that writers were influenced by Semitic ways of expression. Zerwick blames it on “predilection of Semitic speech for juxtaposition of independent clauses in place of syntactic subordination.”<sup>10</sup> Moulton thinks the “violent use” of the GA in Hebrews 8:9 “was probably suggested immediately by the original Hebrew.”<sup>11</sup> Argyle, however, thinks that Semitic influence usually reduces the use of GA, because LXX books translated from Hebrew have fewer GAs than LXX books written originally in Greek.<sup>12</sup> Since we have so many examples of use of GAs that do not agree with the element in the main clause in the papyri, from people who are clearly Greek and Egyptian and unlikely to have been influenced by Semitic expression, this suggestion is inadequate.<sup>13</sup>

Another suggestion, from Winer, is that Greek writers ended up having “irregular” GAs when they started the sentence without knowing how they were going to end it. Since often the GA comes at the beginning of the sentence, the writer used it before he realized that he/she was going to introduce the noun/pronoun of the GA later in the sentence.<sup>14</sup> This is unlikely given the many examples we have from written work that was obviously carefully done. If this happened to an author, he or she had only to make a

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<sup>10</sup> Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Moulton, *Prolegomena*, p. 74. Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 513, says that Westcott shared this opinion.

<sup>12</sup> Argyle, “Genitive Absolute,” p. 285. Argyle uses this to argue that both Paul’s writings and the Apocalypse are the product of a Semitic mindset, though he has to note that James, which he feels is very Greek, does not use the GA either. (Semitic languages do not use participles generally to subordinate accompanying information as Greek does.)

<sup>13</sup> Coptic, however, has a much higher degree of parataxis than Greek, and a circumstantial form of the verb which can take any subject regardless of the main clause. See Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic* (Macon GA: Mercer U Press, 1983) pp. 95-97. The use of Greek in Egypt, from which most of our documentary evidence comes, may have been influenced by the Coptic linguistic substratum. However, the phenomenon of non-concordant GA occurs also in other areas (see note 22 below).

<sup>14</sup> Winer, *Treatise*, pp. 259-260. Cf. James L. Boyer, “The Classification of Participles: A Statistical Study,” *Grace Theological Journal* 5.2 (1984):170, “In most instances this occurs where the genitive absolute precedes the main clause, thus the word to which the participle refers would not yet be obvious to the hearer or readers.” This opinion could support the switch reference theory of Healey and Healey, below.

small correction. It appears more likely that authors actually intended to use GAs in this manner.

Winer also suggests that in some instances, the more regular construction would make the expression clumsy, though he gives no NT examples.<sup>15</sup>

Phyllis and Alan Healey suggest that the GA is a switch-reference device to show that the subject of the main clause is different from its own subject.<sup>16</sup> If this is true, it is hard to explain the GAs that do have the same subject as the main clause (e.g. Mt 1:18; Mk 8:1b; Acts 21:34; 28:6; Heb 8:9 and perhaps Mk 6:22 and 2 Cor 9:14).<sup>17</sup> One of the arguments the Healeys use is that GA constructions are in complementary distribution with Nominative circumstantial participles,<sup>18</sup> which I understand to mean that they never occur together in the same sentence with the same subject. This is not totally true in the NT (e.g. Acts 28:6, see discussion below), nor true at all in Hellenistic Greek as a whole. The Healeys mention that the switch-reference rule is violated in *Hermas Vision* 1.1.3, 1.2.2, and 2.1.1. The first and last of these references do have *both* GA and Nominative participles referring to the subject of the main clause.<sup>19</sup> Edwin Mayser reports that the most common “irregular” use of the GA in the Ptolemaic papyri is the GA with the same subject as that of the main clause. He says the use is so widespread that only a few examples can be given as illustration, and proceeds to give forty of them. Of these, in five

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<sup>15</sup> Winer, *Treatise*, p. 259.

<sup>16</sup> Phyllis and Alan Healey, “Greek Circumstantial Participles: Tracking Participants with Participles in the Greek New Testament,” *Occasional Papers in Translation and Textlinguistics* 4.3 (1990):188, 207-214. This theory is supported by Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Textual Connections in Acts* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), and *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek* (Dallas: SIL, 1992), and by Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 159. It does make some sense within the NT corpus, but either we have to propose that the NT is written in a dialect or register of Greek recognized by readers as different from that of the papyri (i.e. containing different grammatical conventions) or the theory must be revised.

<sup>17</sup> Levinsohn, *Discourse Features*, p. 178, says, “Even the apparent exceptions show changes consistent with the behaviour of switch-reference markers in other languages” i.e. a switch of the underlying subject even if not of the formal subject. However this is difficult to demonstrate in all cases, e.g. Mt 1:18 Mary is the patient of both verbs.

<sup>18</sup> Healey and Healey, “Greek Circumstantial Participles,” p. 188.

<sup>19</sup> Kirsopp Lake, *Apostolic Fathers II*, Loeb Classical Library no 25 (Cambridge Mass: Harvard U. Press, 1913), pp. 6, 10. The sentences read: **meta cronon tina poreuomenou mou eij' Kwma" kai doxazonto" ta" ktisei" tou qeou, w' megalai kai e'kprepei" kai dunatai eijsin, peripatwn afupnwsa. and poreuomenou mou eij' Kwma" kata ton kairon, oh kai perusi, peripatwn ajemhsqhn th" perusinh" o'rasew", ...**

there is also a nominative participle describing the same subject.<sup>20</sup> Basil Mandilavas likewise gives a number of examples of GAs that describe the subject in the later papyri.<sup>21</sup> The Acts of Paul, a second century document from Asia Minor, has a pattern of usage similar to the New Testament, and also features sentences in which both Genitive and Nominative participles describe the subject.<sup>22</sup> Thus the two constructions are not in complementary distribution in the language as a whole, which must be considered in our linguistic investigations, and it is extremely common in the papyri for the GA, rather than signalling a change in subject, to provide more information about the subject.

Some grammarians note the tendency away from subordination in Hellenistic Greek.<sup>23</sup> Instead of having one main verb with other actions around it all subordinated in participles, the tendency was to start giving each action its own independent clause, more like what is usually done today in English. An initial stage in this process could be to distance certain actions from the main clause by putting them into a GA construction. This might explain the more common use of the GA, but does not explain in which contexts this might be done.

In the Gospel of Mark, (with the exception of 16:9-20) every place where a dative adverbial participle could have been used there is instead a GA construction. This suggests that perhaps lack of concord in GA constructions is linked to the ongoing restriction of the Dative case progressing throughout the period. Though this may have contributed marginally to the use of GAs, it is not the whole story as we will see below.

Investigation of co-occurrence of “irregular” GAs and factors of proximity to the element to which it could have agreed, gender, number, case, tense and voice did not reveal any link between these factors and use of the GA.

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<sup>20</sup> Edwin Mayser, *Grammatik der Griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit*, Band II 3: *Satzlehre. Synthetischer Teil* (Berlin und Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1934 [1970 reproduction]), pp. 66-70.

<sup>21</sup> Basil G. Mandilavas, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri* (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sciences, 1973), p. 369, Par 909.

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt, Carl, ed. *Acta Pauli nach dem Papyrus der Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek* (Gluckstadt und Hamburg: J.J. Augustin, 1936), e.g. p. 32 (Side 3 lines 12-15) **kaivdiamarturomenou tauta Paulou eijshlqen pai" leian eupidh' ej cariti kaiVejusen taVdesmaVPaulou meideiasanto" tou paidoV kaiVeugew" ajecwrhsen.** (And while Paul was testifying [in prayer for his fetters to be removed] a boy came in, very beautiful in loveliness, and loosed Paul's fetters. The boy smiled and immediately disappeared.)

<sup>23</sup> Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, p. 18, sees Semiticism and the general Hellenistic Greek tendency reinforcing each other. Cf. A.N. Jannaris, *An Historical Greek Grammar* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 499. Another technique was increased use of Accusative plus infinitive. Blass-Debrunner, *Grammatik*, p. 352. Mandilavas, *Non-Literary Papyri*, par 909, links these two developments as part of the same phenomenon.

A more insightful explanation was suggested by Winer. In his comments on 2 Corinthians 4:18 he notes that the GA construction, though not following the “rule,” “brings out the participial member with more prominence and force.”<sup>24</sup> Goodwin noticed this also in Classical Greek examples, commenting, “this principle is sometimes violated in order to make the participial clause more prominent.”<sup>25</sup>

Richard Young suggests that the GA seems to have a discourse function at the beginning of paragraphs to indicate a change in setting.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Coleman surveys the use of absolute constructions in a good number of Indo-European languages.<sup>27</sup> Each case is used for the absolute in one or more languages. He concludes that in all the languages “the constructions can be easily related to the other functions of the case concerned. They are all normal noun phrases and are used like other noun-phrase types... they are in no sense ‘absolute’.”<sup>28</sup> Building on these clues, we will now suggest a better way of evaluating the evidence.

### **An Alternate Explanation**

As many grammarians observe, the GA is a type of adverbial or circumstantial participle.<sup>29</sup> Note the comments of Brooks and Winbery on circumstantial participles:

The action indicated by the participle constitutes a rather loose addition to that of the main verb. The participle indicates something else that happened, an additional fact or thought, an incidental fact. ... The genitive absolute is in fact a circumstantial participle although it also may express other ideas such as time.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Winer, *Treatise*, p. 260.

<sup>25</sup> Goodwin, *Greek Grammar*, p. 331.

<sup>26</sup> Young, *Intermediate*, p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Coleman, “The Rise and Fall of Absolute Constructions: A Latin Case History,” in *Subordination and Other Topics in Latin: Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Colloquium on Latin Linguistics, Bologna 1-5 April, 1985* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989), p. 354-358.

<sup>28</sup> Coleman, “Rise and Fall,” p. 358. Coleman concludes that the languages use different cases because they developed their “absolutes” out of the adverbial uses of different cases. Thus the choice of Genitive by Greek was not “arbitrary” as suggested by Boyer, “Classification,” p. 170.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. W. D. Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [reprint of Baker, 1941]), pp. 101-103.

<sup>30</sup> James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery. *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979), p. 137. They also, however, on page 16, describe the genitive absolute as a construction in which neither the noun/pronoun nor the participle has any grammatical relationship to the main clause.

Circumstantial participles are often described as giving attendant circumstances as to time, cause, purpose, manner, means, or giving conditions or concessions, which give the reader further information about the action of the main verb. GA constructions share this feature with other circumstantial participles that agree with elements in the main clause.

But here we also have a use of the genitive case. Genitive has many functions, but probably all stemming from the idea of restriction.<sup>31</sup> This manifests itself in such functions as defining or describing, showing possession, origin, apposition, comparison, value, time and space restrictions. The last two are generally seen as adverbial, and hence in a sense circumstantial elements. Winer comments in his section on the GA “In its original application this [the GA] is not an absolute case in the proper sense of the word, but depends on the use of the genitive for definitions of time.”<sup>32</sup> Mayser also comments that the use of the GA “is to be understood in single transparent instances as an expansion of adverbial Genitive function, e.g. as Genitive of time...”<sup>33</sup> Genitive expressions of time usually denote time “within which”, thus making the time cited a sort of frame within which the action occurs.<sup>34</sup>

The contention of this paper is that the so-called “Genitive Absolute” in the NT and in Hellenistic Greek generally is not really about being absolute. Whether or not it is absolute in the sense of not containing elements also contained in the main clause is irrelevant.<sup>35</sup> The function of the form of participle and noun/pronoun in the Genitive (without any other formal cause, such as a preposition) is to draw the reader’s attention to certain information in a more detached way than other circumstantial participles do because they are so integrated into the sentence. The information in the GA acts as a

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<sup>31</sup> See Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 92-97, who surveys various opinions and opts for this one, taken from J. P. Louw, “Linguistic Theory and the Greek Case System,” *Acta Classica* 9 (1966): 83-85. The idea of a “frame” which contributes to linguistic meaning has been put forward by William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 2004). They unfortunately do not take this concept further into the realm of discourse, but the Genitive “Absolute” as will be demonstrated below, often sets up a frame for the interpretation of a whole section of text.

<sup>32</sup> Winer, *Treatise*, p. 259.

<sup>33</sup> Mayser, *Grammatik*, p. 66. Translation mine.

<sup>34</sup> Porter, *Idioms*, p. 96, Moule *Idiom Book*, p. 39. Cf. genitive with **meta** for accompaniment. See discussion in Porter, *Idioms*, p. 165 and Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax*, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> This is clearly recognized by Healey and Healey, “Greek Circumstantial Participles,” p. 188, who say, “The occurrence of a GCP clause is totally unrelated either to the absence of a co-reference in the same sentence or to the presence or absence of a genitive co-reference.”

frame in which to interpret the information of the main clause, or of an even larger discourse.

It would be wise to drop the name “Genitive Absolute” as this is misleading. The Healeys use the term Genitive Circumstantial Participle (GCP). This is definitely an improvement, but their term includes Genitive adverbial participles which are Genitive for other reasons, such as in Luke 22:55 where the participles agree with a pronoun that is a partitive Genitive following **μεσο**".<sup>36</sup> In this paper I will henceforth call it the Genitive Construction (GC). The GC has a number of functions in the NT, as described below.

### **Prior Background Genitive Construction**

The GC is often a grammatical strategy for bringing an item of background into prominence as a piece of necessary prior knowledge, and alerting the reader that this information is important for understanding the impact of the rest of the sentence or even paragraph or discourse. This is especially true in the narrative parts of the NT.

This is something like what we do when we tell a story or a joke. First we set the scene. In a well told story, every piece of information given at this stage is important for the hearers to keep in mind if they are to get the full meaning and impact of the further details and the “punch line.” But it is important that these foundational pieces of information be somewhat detached from the story so as not to give it away beforehand. In some jokes, the hearer is intentionally misled with irrelevant pieces of information, but generally hearers expect the initial details to be important, and experience a sense of confusion if they are not. The GC is one of several devices in Greek for laying out this kind of background information.<sup>37</sup> Among other devices, however, its specialty is that it often gives background that is more foundational or more important to understanding everything else in the sentence or discourse.

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<sup>36</sup> Healey and Healey are actually not consistent in this. They include verses like Luke 22:55, 1 Cor 8:10 and 2 Cor 7:15 in their list of GCPs but not others like Mt 26:7, Lk 2:13, Acts 19:34; 2 Thes 1:8; Heb 11:12; 1 Pet 1:7, 2 Pet 2:4, Rev 1:15 and 17:8. My criterion has been that it only counts as a GC if there is a separate Genitive subject for the participle in addition to the Genitive item in the main clause. Some GCs also have unexpressed subjects, but if there is another explanation for the use of Genitive case, I have not counted the construction as a GC.

<sup>37</sup> Other devices include **ote** and **wj'** clauses, preposition with infinitive, and circumstantial participles in other cases. Healey and Healey “Greek Circumstantial Participles” have a detailed study of the use of **ote** and **wj'** clauses, Genitive and Nominative circumstantial participles.

In NT narrative, the remote background information to be noted is often a change in time or scene/location. Thus, GCs are often used to signal the beginning of a new pericope. In the Gospels and Acts, GCs note the time (e.g. “it was getting late in the day” **ojia" genomenh"** or similar time phrase) nine times in Matthew, twelve in Mark, four in Luke, four in John, six in Acts. Similarly, it is very often used to show a change of scene, such as in Mark 5:2 (and after he got out of the boat), 9:9 (while they were coming down from the mountain). In narrative situations in the NT where the participle could have agreed with something in the main sentence and is a GC instead, it is almost always demonstrable that the Genitive is used precisely to give prominence to foundational background information. Many of the GCs that do not refer to something in the main sentence also do this, of course.

### **Demonstrations of the Use of the Prior Background Genitive Construction**

In this section we will examine some of the passages that have appeared most problematic to grammarians to see how our theory works. We will finish by observing the principle in a papyrus document.

1. The first GC in the NT is found in Matthew 1:18. The part we are interested in reads thus:

**mhsteuqeish" th" mhtro' au'tou' Maria" tw/ jwshf, prih h! sunelqeih au'tou' eureqh ej gastrilecousa ej pneumato" agiou.**

The remote background information, which is essential but gives nothing away, is that Mary was engaged to Joseph. Another piece of background information, closer to the point, but requiring prior knowledge of the first piece of information to be properly understood, is that they had not yet come together. The Greek uses an infinitive and accusative construction for this second level of information. The punch line is that she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and this is given in a finite indicative verb form. The implications of this pregnancy cannot be understood without both the more remote and the closer pieces of background information.

Grammarians have been worried about the fact in this verse that Mary, who is the genitive “subject” of the GC is also the (nominative) subject of the sentence. But this really has nothing to do with why and how the GC is being used.

In contrast, the following verse (Mt 1:19) gives its background information in nominative participles (Joseph, *being* a just man and not *willing* to disgrace her). It is true that a GC is seldom used to give information about the subject of the sentence in the New Testament,<sup>38</sup> maybe because background about the subject is usually not remote background information but close-up background. The use of a GC in verse 18 is therefore clearly significant. As we will see below, there is a back-reference use of the GC in this verse as well.

2. Not all GCs come at the beginning of a sentence (in the NT about 86% do). When the GC comes after the main verb, it often adds a detail that still nuances the significance of the main action. For example, in Acts 5:2

**kaiVejosfisato apolvth" timh", suneiduih" kaiVth" gunaikoV'**

Ananias kept back part of the price. The further background that his wife knew about it too is given after the main verb. This makes the hearers or readers revise their first understanding of the full import of Ananias's action. If the GC had come before the main verb, one might think that Sapphira's consent had something to do with Ananias's action, but coming after, it forms the background not to his action but to the action that is to follow, that is, that Sapphira suffers the same fate as her husband.

3. Another example is the passage often noted as somewhat of a puzzle in discussions of the Genitive Absolute, Acts 22:17-18. Grammarians find it strange that the first person pronoun switches from dative, to genitive, to accusative and back to dative. This reads:

**Egeneto devmoi upostreyanti eij' Jerousalhh kaiVproseucomenou mou ejn tw/ ierw/genesqai me ejn ekstasei kai ijein aujtoh legontavmoi, Speuson kaiV ejelqe ejn tacei ek Jerousalhm, . . .**

This is almost the end of Paul's speech to the crowd at his arrest, as he stands on the steps of the barracks. He is about to get to the most sensitive part, his mission to the

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<sup>38</sup> My count is about seven times in the NT. The Healeys recognize Mt 1:18, Acts 21:34, and Acts 28:6. I would also add the following, which admittedly are not completely straightforward: Mark 6:22 (assuming that the subject of **hresen** is the girl rather than the dancing), Mark 8:1 (**mh ejcontwn tilfagwsin**), 2 Cor 9:13-14 (**aujtw** in v. 14 refers to the same persons as **doxazonte** in v 13; the two verses form a sentence that lacks a finite verb) and Heb 8:9, a quotation from the LXX. In the non-literary papyri, however, GCs referring to the subject of the sentence are very common.

Gentiles, so laying the background information is crucial. He wants to persuade his fellow-countrymen that he is still loyal to the God of their fathers. The most prior information is that he had returned to Jerusalem. This is in an aorist participle agreeing with a dative **moi** following **egeto** (it happened to me), an expression that emphasizes Paul's own passivity in the situation. The more *pertinent* remote information is that he was praying in the temple (in a GC). This forms the background to the fact that he went into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to him (accusative and infinitive construction). The temple situation makes this much more likely to be a genuine revelation. All of this is background to the Lord's command that he must go to the Gentiles (v 21). Therefore the Gentile mission was not Paul's choice, but God's, and in doing it, Paul was loyally obeying God. Here we see the same pattern as in Matthew 1:18 of a GC for remote information, followed by accusative and infinitive for less remote information which depends for its interpretation on the GC, cumulating in some fact that must be interpreted in the light of both. Seen in this light, Luke's/Paul's shifts of case in verse 17 make perfect sense.

4. A fourth example is Matthew 21:23.

**kai veiqonto" autou' eij' to ieroth proshqon autw/ didaskonti oi ajrcierei" kai oi presbuteroi tou' laou' legonte" . . .**

The remote background information is that Jesus had entered the temple. This is a scene change notification. The closer background is that Jesus was teaching. This is given in a participle agreeing with the dative pronoun that is the object of the main verb. The action that takes place against this backdrop is the approach of the chief priests and elders to ask Jesus who gave him his authority. It is obviously very significant that this even took place *in the temple*, and this significance is signaled by a GC framing the action in that location.

5. A fifth example is from the voyage/storm passage in Acts 27. Acts 27:7-32 contains 12 GCs. All occur before the indicative verb of the sentence, most start the sentence, and appear to be causal. The common pattern is that the GC gives a remote background and the nominative participles give close background. The remote background is usually time

or weather condition, the nominative participles and indicatives are the actions and reactions of the sailors and people in the boat. As an example we will look at 27:13 **υπονευσαντο" delnotou dokante" th" proqesew" kekrathkenai, arante" abson parelegonto thh Krhthn.**

The south wind blowing is the remote context background, the sailors having concluded that they had what they wanted and having putting up the sail is the nearer circumstance, and the indicative verb tells that they were sailing along the coast of Crete.

6. A sixth example is Acts 28:6. About this verse, Healey and Healey say, “this extraordinary instance remains unresolved.”<sup>39</sup> The sentence reads:

**epilpoluldelaujwh prosdokwntwn kaiVqewroutwn mhdeh atopon eij' aujtoh ginomenon metabalomenoi elegon aujtoh eihai qeon.**

The people expectantly waiting for a long time and their failure to observe what they expected are the context frame in which the people change their minds and declare that Paul is divine. Here, the same people are referred to both in the GC and in a Nominative participle, but this does not matter because the GC is remoter background to the Nominative participle and both ultimately to the main verb. This verse may be an apologetic for rumours that Paul at some time claimed divine honours.

7. A seventh example is that troublesome (to grammarians) quotation from the LXX in Hebrews 8:9. The sentence begins in verse 8:

**jdouVhmerai ercontai, legei kurio", kaiVsuntelesw epiltoh oikon jsrahV kaiV epiltoh oikon jouda diaqhkhkhn kainhn, ouj kataVthh diaqhkhkhn, hn epoihsa toi" patrasin aujwh ejn hmera/epilabomenou mou th" ceiroV aujwh ekagageih aujtouV ek gh" Aiguptou, oei aujtouVouk ejemeinan ejn th/diaqhkh mou, kajwV hmelhsa aujwh, legei kurio":**

Again, the GC information that God had taken Israel by the hand to bring them out of Egypt is needed to properly understand how bad Israel’s behaviour was in not remaining in the covenant, and to justify God’s abandonment. It also makes the reader re-evaluate or remember how gracious the declaration of a new covenant is.

<sup>39</sup> Healey and Healey, “Genitive Circumstantial Participles,” p. 213. It is only “unresolved” because they think the GC has to be a switch reference device.

8. And finally, we can see this principle at work in the papyri. Here is a papyrus from Egypt dated 195 to 192 BC.<sup>40</sup> Dionysius son of Zoilus, a tax official, is writing up a complaint for the chief guard (police chief) about how he was attacked at the bath-house by the soldier Philon and some others (See Figure 2). There are 26 short lines on the page, but lines 12 and 26 are missing. These lines have been plausibly reconstructed by the editor, S. R. Llewelyn.

<p><b>Fiłwni ajrcifulakithi para/Dionusiou          tou' Zwiłou tou' ajntigrafomenou par'          oikonomou thh apomoiran twh peril          Qeogonida topwn. Thfi ih tou'          ejestwto" mhnoV F(ame)nwł hdh          Iuwnn kaomenwn          Louomenou mou ejn twi kaloumenwi          Aristodhmou kainwi balaneiwi kaił          crwmenou sikuai ajrutainhi          periespasqhn upołFiłwnoł tino" twh          stratiwtwh wł' paracuthn .. me          (qerapeuein keleuonto". ejnou' d' oujdeh          eijponto" or apeijponto" prospdhsa"          moi met' alłwn, wł talojnomata ajnow,          etupton me pugmai" te kaił          Iaktismasin eij' oltucoi mero" tou'          swmato" kaiłekspasanteł me ek tou'          balaneiou hgon wł' epilthh katałtoł          Samoqraikion pulhn: epifanentwn del          tinwh fulakitwh paredwkan me          aułtoi"). epeilouh kleinopethł eiji,</b></p>	<p>To Philon the chief-guard from Dionysius son of Zoilus who acts as antigrapheus to the oikonomos for the revenue of the regions around Theogonis. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of the present month of Phamenoth when already the lamps were burning and I was washing in the new bath-house called Aristodemus' and was using a calabash bowl, I was dragged off by Philon, one of the soldiers, as a bath-attendant ... [(though) having said (nothing)] he set upon me with others, whose names I know not, and struck me with punches and kicks to whatever part of my body was available. They dragged me from the bath-house and led me to the gate in the vicinity of the Samothracian temple. When certain guards appeared, they handed me over to them. Since therefore I am bed ridden, I ask (you)</p>
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<sup>40</sup> S. R. Llewelyn, ed., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1986-87*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2002), pp 42. The document is 26 x 15 cm, from the Arsinoite nome. It came from mummy cartonnage, and was first edited by H. Zilliacus, *Papyri Helsingienses I, ptolmäische Urkunden* (Helsinki, 1986), pp. 23-25 (= P. Hels I 2).

<p><b>ajiw' suntaxai aʃfalɪsasqai toh Filwna kai touʃ meq' autou' mecri tou' epignwsqhhai talvat' ejnev Toutou del genomenou (teukomai th'' paralvou' bohqeia'').</b></p>	<p>to order the arrest of Philon and his fellows until my complaint is investigated. When this happens, [I will get help from you.]</p>
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In a document of about 120 words, there are six GCs. The writer is careful to lay the background information of this incident because it has bearing on the way the complaint will be treated. Llewelyn notes that in ancient Athens, offences committed in a public place were viewed as more serious, and there is evidence that in Egypt at this time, a crime committed after dark was considered worse than if it happened during the day.<sup>41</sup>

In a series of GCs, Dionysius lays out the background:

1. The lamps were burning (therefore, this happened after dark)
2. I was bathing in the bath-house (it was a public place)
3. I was using a calabash bowl (a flimsy thing, therefore I was unarmed)
4. I did not respond [or, I responded only with words] (therefore I was not violent)
5. Later, some guards happened along (maybe the background of how he got into police custody though innocent).

The offences themselves are listed in indicative verbs with some agreeing participles (not GCs):

1. I was dragged off, after he ordered me(?) and after he set upon me
2. They struck me all over my body
3. Having dragged me, they led me away
4. They handed me over to the guards

Dionysius concludes his petition with his present bedridden state, and a request that Philon and his friends be arrested and the matter investigated. The final GC is the fairly formulaic “this having been done” indicating (probably) the condition under which Dionysius expects to get redress.

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<sup>41</sup> Llewelyn, *Documents*, p. 43.

The second, third, fourth and fifth GCs contain genitive noun or pronoun elements that occur in the main clauses in other cases, but this is to be expected since these elements must be mentioned as part of the background being laid out. These are clear examples of GCs being used to highlight important background information which sets a frame for the action of the offense.

A comparable instance is given by Mayser, *Grammatik*, p. 69, in which there are five GCs referring to the *subject* of the sentence, preceding the main verb as background to a case being petitioned, and also as a narrative of the events in it.<sup>42</sup> Kephalos son of Dionysius appeals to king Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra for justice against a cavalry commander called Lysicrates: “For in the 28<sup>th</sup> year, as I purchased (**wjhsamenou mou**) from the aforementioned person 300 measures of wine, and the price of these altogether was 24 brass talents, I having misplaced (**proemenou mou**) the debt-paper, which indicated to make the down payment to him at the bank at the places of Sotion within the specified time, therefore even in the month of Pachon of the same year, after I had written down (**diagrayantov' mou**) at the aforesaid bank of Sotion [to pay] from the formerly set apart difference of 13 talents [i.e. the down payment], and with whom I subsequently had dealings, from whom also I, having received (**labonto" mou**) the receipt of the bank, but after these things I having paid (**apodonto" mou**) to Lysicrates the rest of the price of the wine, 11 brass talents, and having effected (**prosedreuonto"**) the cancelling of the debt-paper, and he having mildly agreed, I had (**eijon** – this is the concluding finite verb) no thought to have problems with him. But ...” (unfortunately for Kephalos, Lysicrates later made trouble, claiming that the full payment had not been made). Here an entire narrative is told in GCs in one huge sentence. According to Mayser, in some instances in the papyri, there is not even any concluding finite verb in this type of construction.

Both these papyri follow a typical petition outline of Introduction (address to the official and identification of the petitioner), Background (the context in which the offense or problem occurred), Complaint (the offense or problem suffered by the petitioner), and Appeal (the petitioner tells the official what he wants him to do). In both these papyri, the background section is laid out in a series of GCs. I suspect that this is quite standard for

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<sup>42</sup> The full text is in Ludwig Mitteis, *Grundzüge und Grestomathie der Papyruskunde, Zweiter Band: Juristischer Teil: Zweite Hälfte: Chrestomathie* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963), p. 11, from which I have translated the text below, which actually has an additional genitive participle not noted by Mayser.

petitions, and would account for the high incidence of GCs generally, and of GCs that describe the subject of the sentence, in the non-literary papyri. In this usage, it is clear that the GC is being used to create a frame within which to interpret the details of the offense or problem.

#### 9. Further considerations:

It does seem to be true that when various background constructions are used together, they are layered in order of backgrounding, that is, the most remote background comes first, followed by the next most remote, and so on. This can be seen in Matthew 1:18 and Acts 22:17. The GC usually comes first, (e.g. Mt 9:10), but there are instances where it does not. In Luke 3:21, the most prior background, that all the people were being baptized, comes first in an **ejn** + infinitive + accusative construction, followed by a double GC linked to it by **kai** (that Jesus was baptized and praying). Although the infinitive construction is prior, the weightier item is the double GC by its sheer bulk, and arguably, by its contents. Mark 6:21-22 has a GC time notice, followed by a **ote** clause, then a double GC before the main clause. In 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 we have a Nominative circumstantial participle (when I came to Troas), followed by the GC (and a door was open for me in the Lord), then the main clause. The Nominative participle is aorist, while the GC and main clause are perfect tense, often seen as a foregrounding tense.<sup>43</sup> It does seem that the GCs are the more significant background even in the few cases where they are not strictly most prior.

#### Other Uses of the Genitive Construction

A number of NT books do not use the GC at all. Some have been mentioned above under Paul's use, and to these can be added James, 1 and 2 John, Jude, and probably the book of Revelation.<sup>44</sup>

There are certainly, however, places in the NT, particularly in non-narrative,<sup>45</sup> where GCs seem to have other functions than the one treated above.

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<sup>43</sup> E.g. Porter, *Idioms*, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> Unless we count Rev 17:8 as a GC without noun/pronoun. The participle refers to the subject of the main clause, but it is also referred to by a gen. pl. relative pronoun in the intervening clause. The participle provides remote background information.

### *Confirming Circumstance*

An example is Mark 16:20, which, although probably not written by Mark and having a more formal style of Greek, is certainly part of Hellenistic Greek. It reads **εκεινοι δε λεγοντες "εκhruxan pantacou, tou kuriou sunergouhto" kai ltoh logon bebaiouhto" dialtwn epakolouqountwn shmeiwn.**

The Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs does not seem to be background information that makes us understand the importance of their going out and preaching. We do not usually understand that God was in the process of working signs when the apostles came along and preached in that context. Instead, the working and signs followed the preaching of the apostles. In this case, the genitive construction gives further rather than background information. GCs used for *confirming circumstances* are also found in Romans 2:15; 9:1; Hebrews 2:4; 7:12; 9:8a; 11:4; and 2 Peter 1:17. Most of these GCs come after the main clause.

### *Dialect Sensitive?*

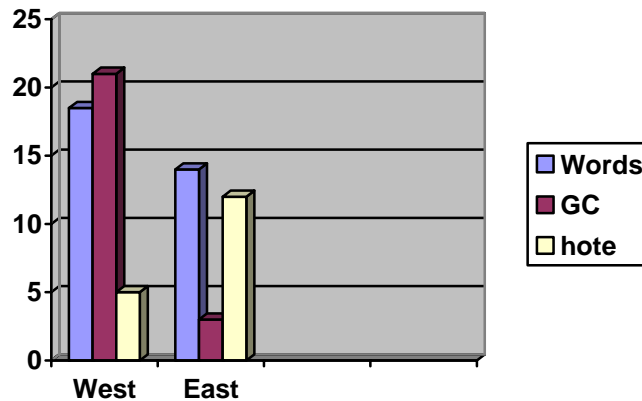
Paul often seems to use a genitive construction to do the same thing as a clause beginning with **ote**. Both constructions, of course, give a circumstantial frame for the sentence. Paul never uses **ote** in 2 Corinthians, but has eight GCs there. 1 Corinthians has only one **ote** and four GCs. Romans has four **ote** clauses and nine GCs. But Galatians has only one GC and six uses of **ote**. (In the historical section Galatians 1:11-2:10 he uses **ote** and **epeita** and so on to push the narrative action forward rather than participles). There are no GCs in Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and the Pastoral Epistles, but **ote** is used once each in all these books except Philemon and 1 Timothy. 1 and 2 Thessalonians have one **ote** clause each, but only one GC in 1 Thessalonians. Although the GCs do give background information in Paul's work, their temporal character is strong (accompanied by, e.g. in Rom 5:6,8 **eti**, 7:9 **potey** 9:11 **mhpw**; 2 Cor 12:21 **palin**). It may be that Paul uses different Greek strategies (due to different registers) for different audiences, based on his knowledge of regional dialectal differences (Asia Minor and Macedonia vs Achaia and Rome). It may also explain why

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<sup>45</sup> Healey and Healey, "Greek Circumstantial Participles," have divided their study into uses in narrative and non-narrative and demonstrate considerable difference in the use of the constructions they treat in these two environments.

his GCs in Romans follow a more Latin-style pattern of not referring to anything in the main clause except for Romans 5:8 with a reference to a genitive in the main clause. (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Comparison of use of GC and *ote* in Paul's Eastern and Western corpus**  
 The words are in thousands.



Hebrews is another NT book where GCs are common. The register of Greek used here is much more literary than that of other epistles, and the style definitely not paratactic. It is interesting that a document with such Jewish content is written in such unsemitic style. Apart from the GC quoted from the LXX, discussed above, no GC refers to elements in the main sentence, and readers have to be alert to figure out the logical relations between the elements in each sentence. Some GCs highlight prior background (8:9; 9:6,19) but others are causal, concessive, result or conditional. GCs are used here with subtle adverbial effect that requires some reader sophistication. Interestingly, in Hebrews 11:4 it is the *participle's* verb rather than the noun that is also found in the main clause. God as unnamed agent in the main clause is subject of the same verb as participle in the confirming GC. In Hebrews 19:11 Moses is agent in the GC and subject of the main clause. These usages demonstrate the fact that main clause grammar really does not determine that of the GC.

### *An Example to Follow*

In I and II Peter GCs are also relatively common. Besides the uses already discussed, 1 Peter 4:1 has a GC used to highlight an *example* or model for believers to follow.

### *Back Reference*

Another important function of GCs is to provide cohesion on the discourse level by providing back reference (head-tail link). This is a device whereby a new sentence or paragraph mentions items at the end of the previous sentence or paragraph to tie the two together. Many devices can do this, such as conjunctions that show a specific kind of relationship between two clauses, or words or clauses that refer back to previous material or persons already presented. According to Healey and Healey, in narrative most subordinate clauses or equivalent function either to establish setting or create back reference, and some do both. GC constructions with no reference to anything in the main clause usually create setting of time or scene.<sup>46</sup> Scene and situation change can also be combined with back reference as seen in the following example from the birth narrative in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 1-2 contains six GCs, and all have back reference function. Some also contribute setting. They are used at the beginning of sections to tie the narrative together. The first section is 1:1-17, the genealogy. Verse 16 refers to Mary as mother and Joseph as her husband. The second section, 1:18-19 begins with a GC telling us that Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. The back reference is to Mary and Joseph from verse 16, and the new information is the engagement. Verse 18 ends with the pregnancy. The third section, verses 19-25 starts with a GC in which Joseph is thinking about **tauta**, i.e. the pregnancy and its embarrassing circumstances. These thoughts are background to an **ipoulvaggel o**" bringing a message about the child, and the section ends with the birth and naming of Jesus. The fourth section 2:1-12 begins with a GC reiterating the birth of Jesus, and adding the new information that it was in Bethlehem in the days of Herod, as the background to **idoulmagoi**. The section continues with the journey and worship of the wise men, and their departure. The fifth section begins with a GC reiterating the

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<sup>46</sup> Healey and Healey, "Genitive Circumstantial Participles," pp. 226-228.

departure of the wise men, as prelude to another **ijlouVabgel o**" with a message that makes the holy family flee to Egypt. The section ends with Herod's slaughter of the babies. The sixth section 2:19-23 begins with a GC mentioning Herod again, giving the new information that he has died, which is background for yet another **ijlouVabgel o**" with the message that they should return to Nazareth. Thus the GCs in this birth narrative function clearly to tie the narrative together and provide background for the entrances of the wise men and the angel. Interestingly, this back reference use of the GC is not continued in Matthew, nor is it used in the other Gospels. As Matthew moves into material shared by the other Synoptics in chapters 3 and 4 there are no GCs until we get to 5:1, and even in the Sermon on the Mount itself there is only one GC (6:3). Mark has no GCs in the material covered by Matthew 3 and 4, but Luke does (Lk 3:1, 21; 4:2,40,42). It would be interesting to continue tracing GC use in the Synoptic material but space does not permit it here. The final GC in the papyrus about the attack in the bath house is also this kind of back reference GC, as the **toutou** refers back to the action Dionysius is asking for in the previous sentence.

### **Applications of a Clearer Understanding of Genitive Constructions**

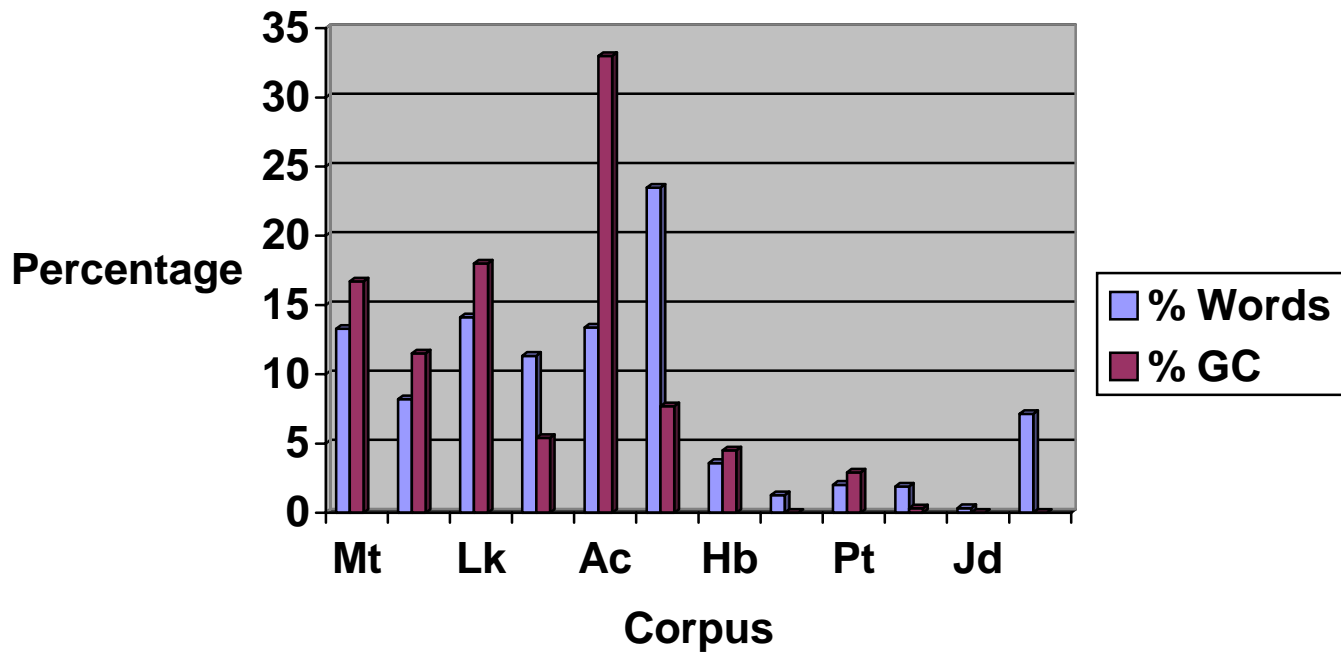
There are two major areas of application of the ideas presented above. The first is in the area of New Testament Introduction, dealing with issues of sources, authorship and readers, the second is in the area of interpretation, having to do with discourse analysis, exegesis and translation.

*1. Sources:* It is interesting to note that in the Synoptic Gospels, GCs almost always precede the main clause. Luke in his Gospel puts GCs first in all but one instance (Lk 2:2, in a section unique to Luke), while in the Acts, only 83% of the GCs come at the beginning of the sentence. It looks as though when Luke is composing his own work, he is more flexible in where he puts the GC in the sentence, and this also may indicate that in the Gospels he is following sources that always put the GC first, as Matthew and Mark do. We have also seen that Matthew uses GCs in his birth narrative as a cohesive device to link paragraphs but the following two chapters do not do this. They are moved forward with nominative participles and **tote**. These two different cohesion styles may reflect different sources.

2. *Authors:* Mark 16:20 is not typical of Mark in that a GC ends a sentence (the only other instance is 16:2, a time reference). And unlike the other GCs of the Gospel, it gives confirming and following circumstances, not prior background. This is not the only peculiarity of the style of Mark 16:9-20 as compared to the rest of the Gospel. As noted above, Mark never uses dative circumstantial participles, always using GCs instead. But in this section there are five of them (vv 10,12,14). This is one more bit of evidence that the same hand did not write the Gospel and the long ending.

GC usage is also fairly consistent in the Johannine corpus. The Gospel uses GCs only 17 times, all for prior background information, and the only other two in the corpus, (2 Jn 3 and maybe Rev 17:8) are also prior background GCs. The corpus as a whole is poor in circumstantial participles of any kind including GCs. (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
**Percentage of GC use Proportionate to Corpus Volume**



The chart shows the percentage of the total number of words (approximately) in the Greek NT that each corpus has, compared to the percentage of the total number of GCs that corpus uses. Note the high proportion of GC use in Acts, and the low proportion in Paul. (The key across the bottom should read Mt, Mk, Lk, Jn, Ac, Paul, Hb, Jas, Pt, 123Jn, Jd, Rev).

3. *Readers:* As we have seen in the Pauline corpus, GC usage may be linked to dialect or register. Paul’s use seems to fall into two clearly discernible spheres: greater use in letters to Rome and Achaia, lower in those going to Macedonia and Asia Minor. The letter to Rome, although going to a Greek speaking community, uses GCs in perhaps a more Latin manner. Mark’s Gospel, however, usually deemed to have been written first for an audience in Rome, appears to pay no attention to such a consideration. This may be because of their different genres (treatise style vs narrative), because Mark being from Palestine does not adjust his style, or any other number of factors, including a re-evaluation of the idea of a Roman provenance. The book of Hebrews by content is aimed at a Jewish-Christian audience, but the style is very unlike LXX “Semitic” Greek. Which

Jewish-Christians would appreciate this register of Greek? They probably did not live in Palestine or Asia Minor. John's Gospel is increasingly being recognized as a very Jewish document, and the paucity of GCs there supports the thesis of a Palestinian Jewish setting for that Gospel. Paul's avoidance of GCs in his letters to Asia Minor and Macedonia match the lack of GCs in the book of Revelation written to the seven churches of Asia.

*4. Discourse analysis:* As noted above, GCs are often used in NT narrative to signal changes in time and scene at the beginning of a new pericope. They also often signal remote as opposed to closer background, and more important (or framing) versus less important background. This is not just at the sentence level. In the Acts 5 story of Ananias and Sapphira we noted that the GC gave background information needed to understand the whole story. The same is true of Mark 6:22. There, the GC information that Salome danced (together with its result that it/she pleased Herod) is remote background for his oath, and both then are background for the order to execute John. Luke 3:1 gives four prior background GCs needed for the entire Gospel. In Matthew's birth narrative we saw how GCs were used to provide cohesion to the entire section. Thus noting GCs and their function is important to understanding the overall structure of a discourse.

*5. Exegesis:* The recognition that GC gives remote important background essential for understanding the point of a story helps exegetes to pay attention to GC information and how it relates to the later action. Exegetes need to realize the special use of GCs in narrative, and be alert to various other uses of GCs (such as confirming information) and how to recognize them. For example, in Acts 22:17, it is useful to realize that the message is validated by the trance/vision, and the trance is validated by the setting (temple). The order of the relationships is signalled grammatically not just semantically.

Also, since the usual order in GCs is participle first, when other items come first, they are likely being emphasized.

*6. Translation:* Since GC is a strategy for additional information, and in narrative, especially for important but remote background information, translators will realize that they need to find out what grammatical strategies do the same thing in the target language so as to translate GCs effectively. In some languages, there may be no way to convey the

distinction grammatically between remote background and close background or more important background versus less important as there is in Greek, so other devices must be used, but in some languages there are grammatical ways of showing the distinction and they should be used. For example, in Matthew 21:23, to translate into English, the GC information may need to be put in a separate sentence to distance it from the closer information: *Then he entered the temple. The chief priests and elders of the people came to him while he was teaching there, and said ...*

Translators also need to pay attention to the discourse functions of GCs and the way they sometimes provide cohesion, and use equivalent strategies in the receptor language.

### **Conclusion**

Our study of the use of Genitive Constructions in the NT has demonstrated that being “absolute” is not one of their essential characteristics. Thus, there is no need to explain why they are often not absolute. They are adverbial constructions, and their main uses in narrative are to signal important prior background information that provides necessary context for the action, and to provide cohesion. Another relatively common use in exposition is to give accompanying confirming circumstances. They have various other adverbial functions as they combine the work of circumstantial participle and genitive adverbial phrase. How frequently they are used may in some cases be linked to regional dialect or writing conventions (e.g. in the petition form). When Genitive Constructions are seen in this way, many passages that seemed to be grammatical anomalies can be understood as following understandable principles.