

## A Reply to James White Concerning His Faulty Treatment of the Greek and Context of Acts 13:48

James White responded to my brief article, “James White’s Faulty Treatment of the Greek and Context of Acts 13:48” (<http://evangelicalarminians.org/brian-abasciano-james-whites-faulty-treatment-of-the-greek-and-context-of-acts-1348/>) on his “Dividing Line” radio program of March 8, 2015. As a minister and biblical scholar, I welcome review and critique of my writings. This allows all of us to refine our thinking and scholarship as we move forward in our own spiritual and scriptural understanding. As the saying goes, “Theology is done in community,” and as a community we engage each other for correction and sharpening of our understanding of God’s word and discovery of aspects of the text of Scripture and its background that we might not have considered before. However, I have to confess that I found White’s response to be disappointing and weak, long on rhetoric and short on substance. One of White’s main tactics was to pepper his comments with ridicule and expressions of shocked incredulity. Moreover, he called my motives into question, accusing me of both abusing scholarly information to hide not having a positive case and political salesmanship. And he charged me with exhibiting the heresy of Pelagianism. White’s response was simply not respectful or charitable dialogue as befitting scholarly discussion or exchange with a brother in Christ (and I regard White as brother in Christ). My plan here is to largely leave aside the ridicule and accusations in his response and to respond to anything he did say that had some substance to it. But I would urge anyone who watches his response to be alert to how often he makes disparaging comments in place of substantive arguments.

The first issue that calls for comment is perhaps White’s most prominent criticism of my brief article, viz. that it does not make a positive case for taking *tasso* in Acts 13:48 in the sense of “disposed,” but only raises criticisms of White’s case against it and for the meaning “appoint.” That is quite a surprising objection and an unfair one. There is a positive case to be made for taking *tasso* as disposed in Acts 13:48, but that was not the purpose of my article. It is perfectly legitimate to write an article with a limited scope, such as showing the deficiencies in an argument for one position and against another. And it makes little sense to criticize such an article for *not* being something it was never intended to be. Nor does such an article even come close to implying that there is not a positive case to be made. There are any number of reasons why one might choose to write an article of limited scope rather than being more comprehensive. The question is not whether I provided a positive case for a position I was not trying to provide a positive case for, but whether my contentions concerning White’s arguments are true.

Second, White takes issue with my denial of his claim that there is a mountain of argumentation against understanding the Greek word *tasso* as meaning “disposed” or the like in Acts 13:48. In his reply, he identified the fact that all the major English translations agree in translating *tasso* in Acts 13:48 as “appoint” or something similar as a mountain [of argumentation]. But translations do not count as argumentation concerning the meaning of a word as if each translation is actually an argument for or against a particular meaning. A translation merely counts as a majority judgment of a translation committee (and not even necessarily the whole committee) about how a word should be translated. Saying all the major English translations translate a word in the same basic way amounts to citing a bunch of scholars who agree with you on the meaning of a word, but in a less significant way than when one cites scholarly agreement from scholarly treatment of

a word or even commentaries, because translation committees do not give intense attention to every word or exegete every context of every word they translate. As Douglas Stuart mentions in his esteemed exegetical guidebook, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2009), pp. 39-40, when cautioning against relying on translations found in major modern versions,

All the modern translations (and all the ancient ones for that matter) have been produced either by committees working against time deadlines or by individuals who cannot possibly know the whole Bible so well in the original that they produce flawless renderings at every point. Moreover, in the modern business of Bible publishing, the more “different” a translation is, the more risk there is that it will not sell. Thus there is a pressure on translators, committees, publisher’s, and others responsible to keep renderings conservative in meaning, even though, happily, usually up-to-date in idiomatic language. Finally, most people hate to go out on a limb with a translation in print. Many translation problems are matters of ambiguity: there is more than one way to construe the original. But space limitations do not permit translators to offer an explanation every time they might wish to render something from the original in a truly new way. So they almost always err on the side of caution. As a result, all modern translations tend, albeit with perfectly good intentions, to be overly “safe” and traditional. In the working of a translation committee, the lone genius is usually outvoted by the cautious majority.

Therefore, every so often you might actually produce a better translation than others have done, because you can invest much more time exegeting your passage than the individuals or committees were able to afford because of the speed at which they were required to work.

So White's citation of the major English translations is like citing a bunch of scholars as supporting his view, but in a much lighter way than if he said all the scholarly treatments of the word agree. Scholars do not typically consider other scholars' opinions in and of themselves as “argumentation.” It is a point to consider for or against a position. It matters what other scholars think. But argumentation for word meaning is not typically thought of as what other scholars think of the word, but concrete data such as lexical range of meaning, word usage, and context. The major modern translations agreeing cannot be said to count as a mountain of argumentation for a word meaning. An academic scholarly work would never make such a claim. I cannot imagine a commentary saying there is a lot of argumentation for a word meaning such and such based on how modern translations translate the word.

The bottom line on the issue of modern translations is that their agreement cannot be considered decisive. I would be surprised if White claimed it could be. He might agree but complain that a positive case for *tasso* meaning disposed in Acts 13:48 is necessary. I agree. I think that the modern translations agreeing puts the burden of proof on those who claim it means “disposed.” But my article was not seeking to make a positive case, but exposing White’s faulty argumentation for “appointed” and against “disposed.” But as pointed out in my article, the scholars White cites (Buswell and Alford) as advocating the “disposed” view give good

contextual reasons for their view that White ignores. In response, White claims he did not see any good contextual reasons in their treatments, yet he still does not even show awareness of what their reasons are and why he thinks those reasons specifically are to be cast aside.

Moreover, in my article, I pointed out that the most authoritative lexicon for New Testament studies (BDAG) translates *tasso* differently than all the major translations that White cites. But White seems confused by this. Yet it is a relatively simple matter. To simplify the details, BDAG lists 2 main meanings of *tasso*, which can be summarized as (1) “to put in place” (“dispose” would be one nuance of this meaning), and (2) “appoint.” It mentions various nuances under these main meanings. It lists Acts 13:48 *not* under the meaning of “appoint,” but under the meaning of “to put in place,” with a nuance of “belong to, be classed among.” Now I do not think that is the most accurate nuance of *tasso* in Acts 13:48. But the point is that a major lexical work, indeed, the most authoritative lexical reference work for New Testament Greek, translates *tasso* differently in Acts 13:48 than the major English translations.

Third, on the issue of Luke’s usage of the word *tasso*, White denies the relevance of my point that Luke’s usage of the word is limited. That is surprising. It also is a simple matter. The smaller a sample of an author’s usage of a word, then the less reliable that usage is for a judgment about how the author would use the word in any given instance. If an author uses a word once, does that mean we can assume that if he were to use it again in a different context, he would use it in the same way? Of course not. If he uses it twice, or three times in a certain way, can we assume that if he were to use it again in a different context he would use it in the same way? Hardly. Even if we were to let such a limited usage guide us, Luke uses *tasso* four times outside of Acts 13:48, and BDAG lists 1 of these under the meaning of “to put in place” and 3 under the meaning of “appoint.” Going by BDAG, that means that outside of Acts 13:48 Luke uses *tasso* 25% of the time with a meaning of “to put in place” rather than “appoint.” That gives no certainty for how we should expect Luke to use the word in Acts 13:48. General word usage is hardly ever determinative for meaning in a specific occurrence. It is even less significant when the word usage is minimal. As Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s “Reference Manual for Interpreting the New Testament” states, “Many commentators and pastors rely too heavily on simple word statistics to determine the meaning of a word in a given context. Often people will often assume that if a word is used 25 times to mean one thing and twice to mean something else, then the 28th use of it in the passage under consideration most probably conforms to the majority meaning. This may or may not be true. *The context in which the word in question is being used is all-determinative* (p. 96; emphasis original). All in all, Luke’s word usage weighs in favor of “appoint.” But its weight is rather light.

Thus, as I stated in my article, White’s points concerning modern translations and word usage do favor the meaning of “appoint” in Acts 13:48, but minimally. They have little to do with the specific context of Acts 13:48 and are not much by way of positive evidence for White’s view or against the “disposed” view against which White tries to argue.

Fourth, White objects to my claim that he carried out a misleading argument in which he points out how ridiculous it would be to think *tasso* means “disposed” in the places in Acts where it clearly means “appoint.” I said that this comes off as naïve since scholars know that a word’s meaning is determined by context. Bafflingly, in his reply, White implies that he made that

argument because many people *do* assume that a word means the same thing wherever it occurs, and he was countering that. But the argument in his book actually seems to be operating on that very lexical fallacy – that is what I was pointing out. In his book, White claims that there is nothing in the text to motivate interpretations like the “disposed” view, and then immediately says, apparently in contradiction to such allegedly errant interpretation, “Luke uses this verb, in the passive, to clearly mean ‘appoint’ elsewhere.” He then points out 2 places in Acts where *tasso* clearly means “appoint,” and comments on how ridiculous it would be to think *tasso* means “disposed” in those places. The implication of White’s argument there would seem to be that since *tasso* means “appoint” in those places, then it means “appoint” in Acts 13:48. Why else would he make these comments as he does? They clearly are meant to support the meaning of “appoint” in Acts 13:48. But as I stated in my article, word usage elsewhere by the same author is to be considered, but is not necessarily determinative. White mocks that statement (he found it to be making use of weasel words), but that goes hand in hand with the basic lexical principles that context determines meaning and therefore that a word does not necessarily mean the same thing wherever it occurs.

Fifth, we come to my criticism of White’s grammatical argument. There is more than one problem with White’s handling of the Greek grammar. The first thing I pointed out was that White’s claim that the periphrastic construction “must be translated as a ‘pluperfect’” (*Potter’s Freedom*, 189) is false. White asks if I am asserting that the grammars are wrong and the construction is not equivalent to a pluperfect. No, not at all. He made a claim about *translation*, that the construction must be translated as a pluperfect, and I pointed out that Greek pluperfects are frequently *translated* with the simple past tense, citing Wallace’s grammar. Now perhaps White misspoke and meant to say that the construction must be construed as a pluperfect. That is true. But as it is worded, his statement is false. Indeed, half of the major English translations White cited in his book as supporting the translation “appoint” translated the construction with a simple past tense rather than as an English pluperfect. Now I was careful to note that that is a relatively minor error that bears little on the substance of the issue. But my original comments were assessing White’s handling of the Greek grammar in the verse, and so I thought it worth pointing out.

The next problem I identified in White’s handling of the Greek grammar of Acts 13:48 is that he *seemed* to assume/treat the pluperfect as if it means something that it does not, viz. that the past action does *not* continue into the present. White *seemed* critical of my use of the word “seem” in his reply, but I was trying to indicate that it was possible that I was taking him wrongly, yet that the flow of his argument suggested this significance to his comments. And I later stated that it was possible White did not mean what I was taking him to mean, but that it would be an unobjectionable point (i.e., it would not weigh against the “disposed” view).

White claims in his response to me to have said [in his book] that the pluperfect does not make a statement of whether the past action continues into the present or not. But that is false. Here is what he said in his book (already noted in my article): “A pluperfect sense speaks of a completed action in the past, but unlike the perfect tense, the pluperfect does not contain the idea of continuation of the past action into the present time” (*Potter’s Freedom*, 189). White then draws this inference from that statement: “Therefore, the meaning of ‘appointed’ refers to a past action” (ibid.). But does not the perfect tense, which White contrasted with the pluperfect and speaks of

a completed action in the past with continuing results in the present, also speak of a past action? Yes. So then what was the point of mentioning that the pluperfect does not indicate continuation of action into the present? That point is not necessary to show that the action under consideration was past. This is why I said he seemed to be implying that the pluperfect indicates that the action does not continue into the present, but acknowledged that he might not be making such an implication and that if he was not, then the point was unobjectionable. I am happy to accept that White did not incorrectly imply that the pluperfect indicates that the past action of the verb does not continue into the present. But then the point that he does make does not weigh against the “disposed” view. This problem becomes more pronounced when White applies his understanding of the grammar to the context of Acts 13:48.

But before turning to that, I should note a further grammatical mistake, now in White’s reply to me concerning the pluperfect. He complains that I referenced Wallace’s treatment of the finite pluperfect tense rather than his treatment of periphrastic constructions as if there is a difference in meaning between the finite pluperfect and the pluperfect periphrastic construction. But there is not. As Wallace states in his section on periphrastic constructions, such constructions “form a finite verbal idea” and “constitute a single finite verbal tense” (Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], p. 647). While Wallace does give examples of the various periphrastic constructions, he does not explain their various meanings because those are already covered by the finite verb tense explanations. Moreover, I already pointed out above that half of the major English translations that White cites in his treatment of Acts 13:48 translate the construction there with a simple past tense.

The final problem I identified with White’s appeal to the grammar of Acts 13:48 was how he applies it to the context of the verse. As I stated in my article, he argues that on the “disposed” view, *tasso* would have to refer to “something that takes place at the very point where the Apostles quote from Isaiah and proclaim that the Gentiles can receive the blessings of the gospel” (ibid.). But I pointed out that this is not true. The pluperfect construction places the disposing prior to the belief of the subjects of the verbs in Acts 13:48, which means that it could have happened any time before they believed. But strikingly, White does not contest this point, which shows a concrete error on his part, but sidesteps it by attacking my suggestion that the people in view could have been disposed to eternal life by various means, including the preaching of the gospel the previous week, and he does so on the basis of Calvinist theology as opposed to exegetical points drawn from the context of Acts 13. Ironically, he accuses me of eisegesis at this very point when his reply is a vivid display of it.

White characterizes my view as the subjects “disposing themselves,” which is not the view I presented. I spoke of them being disposed by means such as the preaching of the gospel and God’s word (certainly the working of the Holy Spirit in hearts would be another). He also classified my view as Pelagian and literally hand waved away the Arminian position of prevenient grace (which keeps Arminianism from being Pelagian), exclaiming “Get out of here with your prevenient grace.” That sort of argumentation simply cannot be taken seriously. (More careful Calvinists recognize that Arminianism is not Pelagian; see <https://arminianperspectives.wordpress.com/2009/09/28/are-arminians-semi-pelagian/>. For resources that show definitively that Arminianism is not Pelagian, see

[http://evangelicalarminians.org/illegitimate-insistence-on-arminius-thought-being-semi-pelagian-in-w-robert-godfreys-review-of-jacob-arminius-theologian-of-grace/.](http://evangelicalarminians.org/illegitimate-insistence-on-arminius-thought-being-semi-pelagian-in-w-robert-godfreys-review-of-jacob-arminius-theologian-of-grace/)) White goes on to claim that such a view makes it “not grace, but you.” But that is not how Arminians perceive it and it uses Calvinist theology to judge what the meaning of the text can be. That is not “letting the text speak for itself” as White claimed he is doing, but conforming the text to Calvinist theology.

Even if the disposing had to be at the very moment of the Apostles quoting Isaiah and proclaiming that the Gentiles could receive the blessings of the gospel (and it is undeniable that the grammar neither requires nor suggests it to be; I am just granting that point for the sake of argument), it would still be irrelevant because the pluperfect places the disposing prior to the belief. They could have been disposed to eternal life by God’s work in and with and through the preaching of the gospel that day, and so believed. At one point, White implies that this cannot fulfill the pluperfect. But that is simply incorrect since the pluperfect merely places the disposing prior to the belief. So this is another grammatical/context error (i.e., in application of the grammar to the context). I have identified two: White contends that (1) on the “disposed” view, the pluperfect construction would have to refer to “something that takes place at the very point where the Apostles quote from Isaiah and proclaim that the Gentiles can receive the blessings of the gospel,” and now from White’s reply, (2) the pluperfect means that the disposing could not have happened when the Apostles spoke the word to those gathered on the day in view. Both of these points are false because the pluperfect merely places the disposing prior to the belief referred to in Acts 13:48.

In conclusion, I found James White’s reply to my article concerning his faulty treatment of the Greek and context of Acts 13:48 to be thoroughly flawed, vindicating most of my original comments. He did correct my false impression that he implied that the pluperfect positively indicates that the action of the verb does not continue into the present. But from criticizing my article for not making a positive case for *tasso* meaning “disposed” in Acts 13:48 when that was not its purpose (its purpose was to document some errors in White’s case for it meaning “appointed” and against it meaning “disposed”), to overestimating the amount and force of the argumentation in favor of his view, to denying the misleading (though not intentionally so I am sure) character of his comments that gave the impression that *tasso* means “appoint” in Acts 13:48 because it means “appoint” at a couple other places in Acts, to multiple grammatical errors, to answering grammatical points raised against his argument with Calvinist theology rather than Greek grammar, all the while ridiculing my views and accusing me of eisegesis, White’s response misfired at almost every level. To reword the conclusion to my article a little, White’s argument is very weak. There is a danger that some might be convinced by arguments like his because an author gives concrete reasons and mentions Greek when those arguments are not correct. In the midst of White talking about the mysterious sounding Greek pluperfect, he says it would have to apply to such and such a point in the narrative, though without any foundation for doing so, and those who do not know Greek might be inclined to believe it. But the argument is not sound. Neither is White’s reply to my article.