

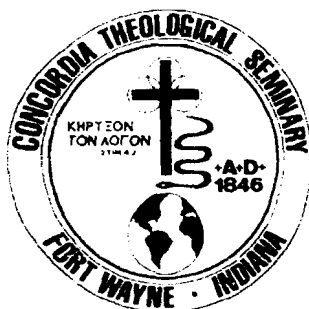
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# “The Word of My Patience” in Revelation 3:10

Theodore Mueller

A Greek text can be translated into English, that is, words can be arranged so as to follow the grammatical rules for a well-formed sentence. But such a transposition of words does not always convey the writer's intended message. What did St. John mean when he wrote in Revelation 3:10, “You have kept the word of my patience” (*eteresas ton logon tes hupomones mou*)? The problem centers around the two genitives *tes hupomones* and *mou*. The latter is usually interpreted as the possessive adjective “My,” referring to God, and together with the former is viewed as a single genitive phrase which qualifies *ton logon*: “The word of My patience” (Luther, King James, Vulgate), “My word of patient endurance” (RSV), or “The word of patient expectation.”<sup>1</sup> But what is meant when a word is characterized by patience or endurance, which is the interpretation of most translators? Morris calls it “a curious expression. It seems to mean ‘the teaching which was exemplified in my steadfastness.’”<sup>2</sup> In general, the commentators view the genitive phrase as indicating the content of the word and attempt several explanations — the patient endurance required of man to keep God's word, particularly in times of tribulation,<sup>3</sup> or the endurance of Christ, who silently suffered reviling and the cross in our stead.<sup>4</sup> While such an interpretation is possible grammatically, ascribing to a word the attributes of patience or endurance is rather strange when compared to other descriptions such as “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18), “of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), “of the truth” (2 Cor. 6:7), “of the Gospel” (Col. 1:5), “of Christ” (Col. 3:16), “of faith” (1 Tim. 4:16), qualifiers which emphasize the content of the word. A “word of patience” or “endurance” does not fit into this group of expressions.

The New International Version views the noun *hupomone* as a transformation of the verb *hupomeno* and as an object genitive to *ton logon*: “You have kept My commandment to endure patiently.” The New English Bible likewise interprets *hupomene* as a nominal transformation of the corresponding verb and coordinates the underlying verbal phrase with the main verb of the clause: “You kept My commandment and stood fast.” These translations try to solve the problem through semantic inter-

pretation, that is, by interpreting the semantic content of each word and reading into the genitive phrase what seems to be a plausible meaning: "God is patient," "Man should exercise patience," or "Christ endured in His tribulations."

The solution proposed in this paper consists of an analysis of the genitive phrase, an analysis of syntactic relationships proposed by the latest developments in linguistics. The concept of syntactic relationships will first be shown from English examples and then applied to the Greek phrase. In English a noun phrase frequently modifies a subsequent noun — "peace proposal," "car race," "charity ball," "home entertainment," "all-night sale." On the surface every one of these expressions has the same grammatical structure, a modifying noun phrase plus a noun. Every native speaker, however, is aware that at the deeper level a variety of relationships prevails. These expressions can be paraphrased to bring out the differing structures: in a "peace proposal" someone proposes peace - an object relationship; in a "car race" the car is the instrument by which the race is run - an instrumental relationship; in a "charity ball" the ball is held for the purpose of charity - a purpose relationship; "home entertainment" takes place at home - a locative relationship; an "all-night sale" lasts all night - a temporal relationship.

Linguists, therefore, differentiate between the surface structure, that is, the arrangement of the spoken or written words, and the deep structure, that is, the underlying syntactic relationships, such as agent, goal, instrument, source, manner, time, and place. On the surface level the governing nouns of the above examples are modified by a preceding noun phrase without any further indication of how they relate to each other (e.g., "all-night sale"). However, there is also an underlying deep structure of which the native speaker is aware and which can be expressed by a paraphrase (e.g., "selling throughout the night"). Failure to specify the deep structure relationship in these nominal expressions may result in ambiguity; a "truck sale" either sells trucks - an object relationship — or sells things from a truck - a locative relationship. Only the context in which the expression is used can provide the clues needed for the interpretation. A purpose or result relationship is the underlying deep structure of phrases like "peace process," which is interpreted as a process resulting in peace. A "health clinic" is a clinic for the purpose of providing health. A "death march" is a march resulting in death for some participants. Obviously, this particular syntactic relationship is uncommon, yet readily assumed by the native speaker.

The Greek genitive phrase is similar to the English subordinate noun phrase. On the surface level the genitive case indicates a modifying relationship to another noun, that is, a vague qualifying dependence. But the fact that there is a deep-level relationship has always been assumed when grammarians taught the concepts of subjective and objective genitive. The deep structure, however, is much more varied than these two. In *dikaiosune pisteos* (Rom. 4:13) the genitive *pisteos* indicates the means of righteousness - an instrumental relationship; in *ta pathemata tou nun kairou* (Rom. 8:18) the genitive indicates a time relationship — sufferings in the present time. A purpose or result relationship must be inferred in the following genitive phrases: *probata sphages* (Rom. 8:36), "sheep intended for slaughter"; *hodon soterias* (Acts 16:17), "the way resulting in salvation"; *hodous zoes* (Acts 2:28), "the ways resulting in life," a syntactic relationship which is spelled out in Matthew 7:14, *he hodos he apagousa eis zoen*. The *dikaiosune zoes* in Romans 5:18 is parallel to *he entole he eis zoen* (Rom. 7:10), where the relationship is spelled out through the preposition *eis*. Many genitive phrases, however, like the English subordinate noun phrase, become clear only in their context, and some can be interpreted in several ways.

The thought of keeping God's commandments and remaining in His love is expressed through an "if-result" (conditional) clause in John 15:10. Therefore, the result relationship is proposed for the genitive in Revelation 3:10 with this meaning: "You have kept the word with the result of perseverance in Me." The Lord often expresses the relationship between keeping His word and remaining in Him (John 8:31; 15:4-19). Likewise, in 1 John the Apostle repeats this idea: whosoever keeps God's word remains in Christ (2:5-6); whoever keeps His commandments remains in Him (3:24); anyone who confesses Jesus as the Son of God remains in God (4:15). This interpretation also fits the context of Revelation 3: "You have kept the word and thereby remained in Me; I will keep you from the coming temptation."

In accordance with this analysis, the genitive *mou* can no longer be interpreted as a possessive, but must be seen as the object to *hupomone*. The verb from which this noun is derived, *hupomeno*, takes as its complement the prepositional phrase *en* with the dative. In the transformation from a verbal phrase to a noun phrase, the same structure is assumed — *hupomone en*, of which the expression *hupomone en Iesou* is an example (Rev. 1:9). This underlying phrase is then further transformed to a

genitive in *hupomone mou* — a genitive on the surface level, but on the deep level an object relationship to the nominalized verb. Its meaning, of course, is determined by the deep structure — “perseverance in Me.”

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Walter Bauer, *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited and translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 854.
2. Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 80.
3. W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976). H. Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1976). Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1887), p. 466.
4. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), pp. 144-145.