

Present Middle/Passive Verbs

Mastering New Testament Greek Textbook

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CHAPTER 9

Present Middle/Passive Verbs

You will be able to—

1. write the present middle and passive verb forms,
2. parse and translate middle and passive verbs,
3. recognize and translate deponent verbs,
4. recognize when the middle or passive verb is followed by a preposition or case that helps to complete the verb's meaning, and
5. master ten more high-frequency vocabulary words.

Definitions

There are two voices in English. The active voice is where the subject of the sentence does the action.

Zach hit the ball.

The passive voice is where the subject is acted on by the verb.

Zach is hit by the ball.

Greek adds a third voice, the middle voice, which we will look at shortly.

Identifying Traits

A passive verb often can be identified by placing a “by what?” after the verb.

Zach is hit by the ball.

Zach is hit by what? The ball.

Zach is the subject being acted on. The ball is the agent doing the action.

Translation

The present tense may describe progressive/immediacy action (single point in time: He hit the ball) or continuous action (He is hitting the ball). When the passive is used, a helping verb expresses the verb in English.

- He is hit by the ball (present progressive punctiliar).
- He is being hit by the ball (present progressive continuous).

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Aktionsart:

How the action happens (punctiliar, continuative/durative, omnitemporal, timeless—usually discovered from the lexical meaning of the verb or the context)

- Punctiliar (single point in time): Zach is hit by the ball.
- Continuous: Zach is being hit by the ball.
- Omnitemporal: The quarterback is protected by the tackles.

Aspect:

How the author seeks to portray the action. The present tense form is used when the action is foregrounded, in process, sense of immediacy.

The present middle and passive have exactly the same form in Greek. Historically the middle was first but in the koine period the passive is used more frequently with modern Greek having only a passive with no middle. The context must be examined to determine which is being used. There are approximately three times as many passive verbs as there are middle verbs in the New Testament. When translating passives, a helping verb is used. Context will determine which is the best option. In Greek, as in most languages, “Context determines meaning” is an important concept to grasp. As in the present active, the present middle/passive can be translated present, past, future, omnitemporal or timeless depending on the contextual pointers like adverbs, prepositional phrases, conjunctions and narrative sequencing. Immediacy, process, description and foregrounding is the major thrust of the present aspect.

Middle Voice:

The middle has several functions:

1. It emphasizes the participation/involvement or interest of the subject in the action of the verb which often is translated actively (Tanya, herself, ran the mile). It often intensifies in some manner or degree the relationship between the subject and the action of the verb.
2. It expresses self-interest or benefit (e.g. She hid the fork for herself).
3. Rarely it is used reflexively (Tanya hit herself with the golf club) or reciprocally (They love one another).
4. Stylistically, one writer may favor the middle (cf. Mark) over the active (Matthew).

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Many arrive at the active translation by calling many of these “deponents.” Mounce (224) says that 75 percent of the middles are deponent (no active form present; middle in form, active in meaning) and should be translated as active: Tanya splashed Rebekah. We will understand many of them as true middles (stressing the subject’s involvement, interest, intensification or reflexivity) realizing many may be deponent.

Thus the middle may impact the subject’s relationship to the verb in many ways (involvement, interest, intensification, reflexivity, stylistic, et al.). The translator must be sensitive to the context, the writer’s style and the particular verb’s usage to determine how it should be translated. Remember also that historically the passive is taking over more and more ground from the middle in the koine period. For now, translate most of them active but be aware of the various functional options may come into play.

You should be able to chant through this middle/passive paradigm. Note that this is the second set of primary endings. These endings will reappear when you learn the future tense. Thus, learn the endings well because this hits two birds with one stone.

Present Middle Indicative Paradigm λύω

Singular		Plural	
1.	λύομαι I am loosing (for myself)	λύόμεθα	We are loosing (for ourselves)
2.	λύῃ You are loosing (for yourself)	λύεσθε	You are loosing (for yourselves)
3.	λύεται He/she/it is loosing (for himself/herself/itself)	λύονται	They are loosing (for themselves)

Present Passive Indicative Paradigm

Singular		Plural	
1.	λύομαι I am being loosed	λύόμεθα	We are being loosed
2.	λύῃ You are being loosed	λύεσθε	You are being loosed
3.	λύεται He/she/it is being loosed	λύονται	They are being loosed

Present Middle/Passive Indicative Primary Endings

Singular	Plural
1. -ομαι	-όμεθα
2. -ῃ (-σαι)	-εσθε
3. -εται	-ονται

Chant the following: Present Middle/Passive

λύομαι -ῃ, -εται, -όμεθα, -εσθε, -ονται

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“Deponent” Verbs

Summers (Essentials, 51) notes that the word “deponent” comes from the Latin root “deponere,” meaning to “lay aside.” It is used for these verbs because they have “laid aside” (dropped) their active verb forms.

Those that see most middles as deponent take “deponent” verbs as middle in form but active in meaning. They have no active form and are easy to tell in vocabulary lists or a lexicon because they have the middle ending -ομαι (e.g., ἔρχομαι) rather than the normal -ω (e.g., βάλλω) ending. Thus ἀποκρινόμεθα means “we answer” instead of “we are being answered.”

Mounce notes that in the New Testament about 75 percent of the middle forms are “deponent” (Basics, 149). Because of the deponent phenomenon, middle forms may frequently be translated as actives (three to one) or better yet translated active as true middles emphasizing the subject’s participation in the action of the verb.

Frequently Used “Deponent” Verbs

ἀποκρίνομαι	I answer (231)
εἰσέρχομαι	I come in (194)
ἔρχομαι	I come, go (634)
ἐξέρχομαι	I go out (218)
γίνομαι	I become (669)
πορεύομαι	I go (132)

Accompanying Cases

Often with passives there is a need to express the agent, instrument, or means by which the subject is acted on.

This is accomplished by—

1. using ὑπό or διά with the genitive to express agency (e.g., Elliott was hit by Zach.), or
2. using the dative case to indicate means or instrument. The translation will use “with” or “by” (e.g., Elliott was hit by the ball).
3. Impersonal agency is expressed by ἐν + dative (Porter, Idioms, 64, Stevens, 112).

Compound Verbs

As with other verbs, prepositions are often prefixed to “deponent” verbs to form a compound. This is a handy way to build vocabulary since you know the basic verb and the

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prepositions and thus you have a good clue for guessing the combined meaning, although often this combination may reflect an intensification of the original verbal idea. This leverages the vocabulary you already know.

ἔρχομαι	I go, come
εἰσέρχομαι	I go in, enter (εἰς prefix).
ἐξέρχομαι	I go out, leave (ἐκ prefix).
διέρχομαι	I go through (διά prefix).

Translation Examples

ὅτι ἐγὼ πρὸς τὸν πατέρα πορεύομαι
because I am going to the father (Jn. 14:12; deponent)

ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔρχεται
the Son of Man comes (Mat. 24:44; deponent).

λέγω ὑμῖν, γίνεται χαρὰ
I tell you, there is joy . . . (Lk. 15:10; deponent)

καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται
and into a fire s/he is cast (Mat. 3:10; true passive)

εὐρισκόμεθα δὲ καὶ ψευδομάρτυρες τοῦ θεοῦ
but we also are found [to be] false witnesses of God (1 Cor. 15:15; true passive)

Vocabulary

ἀποκρίνομαι	I answer (231)
ἀποστέλλω	I send (132)
βάλλω	I throw (122)
γίνομαι	I become (669)
εἰσέρχομαι	I come in (194)
ἐξέρχομαι	I go out (218)
ἔρχομαι	I come, go (634)
θέλω	I wish (208)
οὕτως	thus, so (208)
πορεύομαι	I go (153)