

The Idiom of "Prolepsis"

Introduction

Every language contains "figures of speech"; that is, methods of speaking that are not *literally* true, but which are used to convey a point. For example, in the English language, the phrases "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse", and "He has two left feet", are very obvious idioms. That is, those statements are not literally true; rather they are colloquialisms used for emphasis.

One figure of speech that is used in Hebrew is called "prolepsis". With that idiom, events that will occur are spoken of as if they had already occurred. In other words, **future** events are referred to as if they were **past** events.

The idiom of prolepsis is used quite extensively in Scripture. As a result, when Scripture refers to an event as if it has already occurred, it is necessary to determine if prolepsis is being used in that verse – in order to determine if the verse is entirely *literal* or not.

Also note: the books of the New Testament were translated from Greek manuscripts; but almost all of those books (all but two of them) were written by Jews. As a result, the idiom of prolepsis is also present in the New Testament writings.

From what I can see, there are at least two different "types" of prolepsis used in Scripture. In other words, there are two different reasons *why* a writer will use the idiom of prolepsis, when he is referring to events.

Prolepsis type 1: "Writer's perspective"

In one case, a writer will speak of a future event in the past tense, simply because at the time the author *wrote* the passage, the event had already occurred. In other words, from the writer's perspective, the event is in the past. However, from the passage's perspective, the event is still in the future.

Here are a few examples of this type of prolepsis:

John 11:1-2 (ESV):

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.

The above passage states that Mary "anointed" the Lord, and "wiped" his feet. Since those verbs are in the past tense, that would seem to imply that Mary had *already* performed those actions, at this point in Scripture. However, that is not the case – Mary did not perform those actions until about three months after the events described. So, in order to be "technically correct", the passage could read: "Mary is the one who would anoint the Lord, and would wipe his feet, three months later".

This is a very obvious case of "type 1" of prolepsis. Basically, even though the events in question are still in the *future* from the standpoint of Scripture, they are in the *past* from the writer's perspective. So, the writer refers to those events in the past tense – because at the time he *wrote* the passage, the events were actually in the past.

Genesis 3:20 (ESV):

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

The above passage states that Eve was the mother of all living – but at this point in Scripture, Eve did not have any children yet. So, one could say that a more *accurate* rendering would be “Eve would become the mother of all living”. (This is especially true because Eve’s name in Hebrew – Chava – means “to cause to live”.) However, at the time that the author wrote that passage, Eve had already had children – and many generations had passed since then – so the past tense is used.

The reason why this type of prolepsis is important to understand is because if it is not understood, then it can lead people to incorrect conclusions. For example, consider the following passage:

Genesis 4:16 (ESV):

¹⁶ Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. ¹⁷ Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch.

The above passage states that when Cain left Eden, he settled in the land of Nod; and then he had a son (Enoch) with his wife there. Some groups assert that that passage tells us the following: At the time Cain left Eden, there was **already** a settled region called Nod – i.e., that Nod **already** had other people living in it.

In other words, some groups believe that other people – unrelated to Adam and Eve – were *already* present in the land of Nod; and it is from *those* people that Cain found his wife.

Of course, that belief contradicts Genesis 3:20, above – because that verse tells us that Eve was “the mother of **all** living”. That certainly appears to indicate that every human being is descended from Adam and Eve – including the people of Nod.

It appears to me that the above passage is another example of “type 1” of prolepsis. In other words, the passage states that Cain settled in the land of Nod – but of course Nod was not an *existing* community, *at the time* that Cain settled there. In other words, Cain was the “original resident” of Nod.

However, at the time that the author **wrote** this passage, Nod had *long since* been settled – so the author refers to “the land of Nod” as an established community. In other words, this passage contains another example of “type 1” of prolepsis – and it is important to *understand* that idiom, in order to avoid confusion when reading the passage.

Prolepsis type 2: “God’s Promise”

There is another, completely *different* reason why prolepsis is used as well. Basically, in some cases, a future event will be spoken of in the past tense, because God has explicitly promised that the event will occur. As a result, the Hebrews will refer to that promised event in the **past** tense – because since *God* has promised it, it is “as good as done”, so to speak.

In other words, since God is true to His word, when God promises an event, it is *guaranteed* that the event will occur. As a result, the Hebrews refer to that event in the **past** tense – to express their confidence that God *will* bring about the event in question.

Here are a couple of examples of this type of prolepsis:

Genesis 17:5 (ESV):

⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

In the above passage, God tells Abraham that He made – past tense – Abraham the “father of a multitude of nations”. Of course, at that point in time, Abraham did not have any children; so Abraham was not literally the father of *anyone* yet.

Not only that, but even from the writer’s perspective, Abraham was not yet the father of a “multitude of nations”. In other words, at the time that the author wrote that passage, Abraham was only the father of **two** “nations” – the Israelites (through Isaac) and the Arabs (through Ishmael).

Of course, after that passage was written, Abraham *did* become the father of a multitude of nations – through his *descendant*, Jesus. For example, in Genesis 22:18, God tells Abraham that “in your **offspring** shall **all the nations** of the earth be blessed”. In addition, Romans 4:16 refers to Abraham as “the **father** of us **all**” – which refers both to his faith, and to the fact that he eventually became the forefather of Jesus.

So, this passage is an example of “type 2” of prolepsis. That is, it refers to God’s explicit promise that a **future** event will occur – and as a result, the event in question is written in the **past** tense.

Ephesians 2:4-6 (ESV):

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

The above passage is an even more dramatic example of prolepsis type 2. As shown, that passage tells us that God has “made us alive with Christ”, and “raised us up with him”, and “seated us with him”. Of course, the followers of Christ have **not** been raised from the dead yet – that event is still in the *future*.

In other words, even at the time when the author *wrote* that passage, the event in question still had **not yet** occurred. However, since God has *promised* that the event will occur, the event is referred to in the past tense – as if it **had** already occurred. This is a *prime* example of the idiom of prolepsis.

“Hidden” Cases of Prolepsis

The idiom of prolepsis is very widespread throughout Scripture; it is a very common figure of speech. In some cases, though, that idiom is “hidden” in English translations of Scripture. In other words, in some cases a passage in Scripture will be written in the **past** tense – but the English translation of the passage will be written in the **future** tense! As a result, with *those* translations, the prolepsis in the passage will not be visible to English speakers. For example, consider the following English translation:

Genesis 17:15-16a (ESV):

¹⁵ And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her.

Almost all English translations of that passage are very similar. In particular, virtually all English translations render most of the *verbs* in that passage in the future tense. For example, the last part of that passage from the ESV, above, reads: “and moreover, I **will give** you a son by her.” In other words, in almost all English translations, God tells Abraham that *in the future*, He will cause Abraham to have a son with Sarah.

There is a significant *issue* with that translation, though. Here is the Hebrew in that phrase, along with its pronunciation:

וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵּן

v'gam natati mimenah l'cha ben

Now, here is a *transliteration* of the above phrase:

and moreover I **gave** from her to you (a) son

In other words, the Hebrew actually states that God **gave** - *past* tense – Abraham a son from Sarah. As mentioned, God made that statement **before** Isaac was born (even before he was conceived). So, that statement is not *literally* true – at least, not in the sense that *our* culture judges literal truth.

So, this passage is a very good example of prolepsis “type 2”. Basically, God promised Abraham that He would – in the **future** – give Abraham a son with Sarah. However, since it is God who made the promise, the Hebrew is *actually written* in the **past** tense – as if the son in question has *already* been born.

As mentioned, almost all English translations render the above passage in the **future** tense – and as a result, this example of prolepsis is “hidden” from English speakers. One of the very few translations that renders that passage accurately – in the *past* tense – is Young’s Literal Translation:

Genesis 17:16 (YLT):

¹⁶ and I have blessed her, and have also given to thee a son from her;

One Final Passage

There is one final passage that is important to mention – because that passage has *significant* theological implications. Here is the verse in question; in which Jesus is praying to our Heavenly Father:

John 17:5 (ESV):

⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

As listed above, Jesus refers to the glory that he had – **past** tense – with God, before the world existed. That particular verse has led many, *many* groups to conclude that Jesus personally existed with God, even before the world was created. In other words, many people reason that since Jesus used the past tense in that verse, that proves that Jesus must have *literally* existed before the creation of the world.

Of course, as noted above, the Hebraic idiom of prolepsis is *extremely* common in Scripture – and as a result, whenever Scriptural events are listed in the past tense, it is necessary to carefully examine *all* of the available evidence, to determine if the event *literally* occurred in the past or not.

So, rather than “jumping” to a conclusion about John 17:5 immediately, consider the two passages listed below first – because those passages *also* refer to Jesus, and they use *very* similar language:

Revelation 13:8 (KJV):

⁸ And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [the beast], whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

The above passage states that Jesus (the Lamb) was slain “from the foundation of the world”. So, was Jesus literally slain, all the way back at the foundation of the world? No, of course not – Jesus was not actually slain, until about 2,000 years ago. So, this passage is definitely not literal – instead, it is an example of prolepsis. In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus was part of God’s *plan of salvation* – and God **initiated** that plan all the way back at the creation of the world.

So, since the sacrifice of Jesus was part of God’s plan – and since God is true to His word – the sacrifice of Jesus is spoken of, **as if** it had occurred all the way back at the foundation of the world. As a result, this passage is certainly not a literal statement, but rather a figurative one.

(Also note: some English translations render Revelation 13:8 as “everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain”. In other words, those translations refer to the “names being written in the book of life” as the event that occurred from before the foundation of the world. Of course, that event did not literally occur before the foundation of the world, either – so even with those translations, prolepsis is still being used.)

1 Peter 1:20 (ESV):

²⁰ He [Jesus] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you

The above passage is extremely similar to the other two passages in this section. Basically, the above passage tells us that God “foreknew” Jesus, even before the foundation of the world – but that Jesus was made “made manifest” in the “last times”. In other words, God knew that He **would** create Jesus, even before the world existed – but He did not **actually** create Jesus, until about 2,000 years ago. That is, Jesus “existed” in God’s plan before the foundation of the world; but Jesus did not *personally* exist **until** God caused Mary to conceive.

So, from all of the information listed in this post, it appears that John 17:5 does **not** prove that Jesus *personally existed* before the world existed. Instead, it appears likely that this is another example of prolepsis. Basically, it appears that Jesus was referring to the glory that God had planned to give to him, from before the foundation of the world.

In other words, even before God created the world, He planned to glorify Jesus in the **future** – and it is that promise of future glory that Jesus is referring to. However, due to the idiom of prolepsis, the verse is written in the past tense – *as if* God had *already* glorified Jesus, before the world existed. That is, since God, Himself, *planned* to glorify Jesus, that glorification is spoken of as if it had *already occurred*.

Conclusion

This overall subject – of non-native speakers misunderstanding local jargon – reminds me of an old joke. A German citizen is visiting the United States for the first time; so he is not very familiar with the local lingo. At one point, he hears an American mention that he is going to have a hamburger for lunch. At that, the German exclaims – in *horror* – “**I** am a hamburger!” (Residents of the German city of Hamburg are known as *Hamburgers*...)

In any case, it is definitely necessary to understand Hebraic idioms, in order to properly understand Scripture – and the idiom of prolepsis is one of the most important of those idioms, due to its theological implications.