

Luke 23:43

The adverb *σήμερον* in relation to its verb in Biblical Greek when found in Direct Discourse

There is perhaps no passage that contains *σήμερον*¹ which is more exegetically controversial² than Luke 23:43 and the question raised as to which verb in Luke 23:43 does *σήμερον* modify?

English renderings of this verse signal their position on the underlying Greek grammar by their placement of a comma.³ For example the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*⁴ takes the word “today” as modifying the first⁵ clause⁶ of Jesus’ statement at Luke 23:43, placing a comma after the word today.⁷ The most frequent rendering found in English translations places a comma before the word today thus interpreting the adverb as modifying the

¹ The Greek adverb which is rendered in English “today.”

² Evangelical apologist Rob Bowman criticizes the rendering found in the New World Translation and offers his own “exegesis” by statistically comparing the word order and placement of commas in 74 English renderings of Jesus’ *ἀμὴν λέγω* sayings (e.g., Matt. 5:18; 16:28; Mark 3:28; Luke 4:24 and Matt. 5:26; 26:13,21,34; Mark 8:12; 14:9,18,25,30; Luke 11:51; 21:32; John 1:51; 21:18). While none of the 74 English renderings (e.g. “Truly I tell you”) on the surface look different than Jesus’ saying at Luke 23:43 an analysis of the Greek shows that order of the verb and personal pronoun is reversed only at Luke 23:43. (Compare *ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν; ἀμὴν δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν; ἀμὴν λέγω σοι; ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν; ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν; ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι* with the *ἀμὴν σοι λέγω σήμερον* of Luke 23:43.) If the words of Jesus at Luke 23:43 conformed to the 74 examples Robert Bowman provides, the adverb “today” (Greek *σήμερον*) would follow the verb which would then confirm his conclusion. The evidence that the word order in Luke 23:43 of *ἀμὴν σοι λέγω σήμερον* places the verb in the first position in its clause relative to *σήμερον* thus distinguishing it from the 74 examples is overwhelming. Additionally this paper documents that when Greek word order is considered there is overwhelming evidence against Rob Bowman’s conclusion. (Quotations from Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Understanding Jehovah’s Witnesses, Why they Read the Bible the Way They Do* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991], 97-108.)

³ In English, commas separate clauses within the same syntactical structure. Periods, semicolons and question marks mark boundaries between sentences. There is no syntactical difference between a semicolon and a period. The semicolon shows that two sentences are considered more closely coordinated semantically than if a period was used.

⁴ New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, Rendered from the Original Languages by the New World Bible Translation Committee – Revised 1984 – Published by Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, INC. International Bible Students Association, Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A.

⁵ “Truly I tell you today,”

⁶ Clause: a complete grammatical construction consisting of one or more phrases. In Greek a clause may consist of anything from a single verb, noun or adjective (one-word phrase) to an intricate complex of phrases. Clauses may be independent (free-standing) or dependant (subordinate). Dependant clauses may be linked in a variety of syntactical and semantic relations to their independent clauses. (E.g. time, cause, inference, and the like). – Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Porter’s Idioms), Second Edition (Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1995), 309.

⁷ “Truly I tell you today, You will be with me in Paradise.”

second clause of Jesus' statement,⁸ while yet others agree with the punctuation as found in the *New World Translation*.⁹

However, it is generally understood that the earliest Greek manuscripts were Uncial and therefore did not generally have the punctuation marks which would settle this matter. So, where does the comma go?

A General Rule

Greek grammars are not silent on the subject. In Koine Greek sentences¹⁰ an adverb which further defines a verb takes second position.¹¹ Thus when an adverb directly follows a verb it generally modifies the verb it follows¹².

If we apply this general rule to the exegesis of Jesus' statement at Luke 23:43 the adverb σήμερον in second position to the verb λέγω should indicate that the adverb "today" modifies the first part of Jesus' saying, thus supporting the rendering of the *New World Translation* at Luke 23:43.

Exceptions to the Rule

The grammars also indicate the Greek has a very flexible word order, certainly more so than English so that there are many exceptions to rules such as this. The Blass-Debrunner-Funk Grammar of NT Greek gives as it's example of the rule that adverbs take "second position" the adverb λίαν at Matthew 4:8 and 2:16 where the verb is in first position and the adverb is in second position with no intervening words.¹³ However they also indicate that the rule is not without exceptions and list two in note number two.¹⁴

⁸ "today you shall be with Me in Paradise." -- In this rendering the adverb σήμερον is taken as having first place in it's clause. Of the 19 other examples in Luke-Acts where σήμερον is found it never is found in the first place in it's clause. (Lk. 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32f; 19:5, 9; 22:34, 61; Acts 4:9; 13:33; 19:40; 20:26; 22:3; 24:21; 26:2, 29; 27:33)

⁹ Rotherham's Emphasized Bible, "Verily I say unto thee this day: with me shalt thou be in Paradise." (Kregel publications, 1959)

¹⁰ Sentence: a syntactical unit consisting of one or more clauses, at least one of them an independent clause. – Porters Idioms, 313; A dependant clause is a clause with a finite verb which cannot stand alone (i.e. it is not an independent clause), but it enters into a definable grammatical and semantic relationship (one of dependency) with another clause (often, though not always, an independent clause). – ibid. 230

¹¹ *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDF), F. BLASS AND A. DEBRUNNER, A Translation and Revision of the ninth-tenth German Edition incorporating supplementary notes of A. Debrunner by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: CAMBRIDGE AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, The UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1961), §474. **The position of nouns and adverbs.** ... (2) An adverb which further defines an adjective (or verb) also takes second position.

¹² An adverb which follows a verb which belongs to a different sentence or syntactical unit is not intended to be included in the rule.

¹³ In Matthew 4:8 ὑψηλὸν λίαν and 2:16 ἐθυμώθη λίαν the adverb is in position number two relative to the verb, illustrating what BDF means by "second position."

¹⁴ In Mk 16:2 λίαν follows the conjunction καί and is followed by another adverb. At 2 T 4:15 LIAN precedes the conjunction γάρ, which "never comes first in its clause; usu. second" (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), Revised by F. W. Danker and F. W. Gingrich, Translated into English by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, Third Edition [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 189 – γάρ); λίαν is therefore really in position #3 relative to the verb which precedes it.

On the other hand Greek word order is not so free that there are no patterns whatsoever. BDF indicates that “closely related elements in the sentence” are “usually padded together in simple speech.”¹⁵

To what extent should this general rule be applied to *σήμερον* in general, and specifically how can it aid our understanding of the direct discourse (simple speech) of Jesus’ statement in Luke 23:43?

The Empirical Evidence

An examination of all occurrences of the adverb *σήμερον* in the Greek bible, from the Greek Septuagint up to the Greek New Testament indicates that this general rule does indeed apply to the adverb *σήμερον*.

A computer aided search of the Greek uncovers some 332 instances of *σήμερον* found in 314¹⁶ verses. Of these there are 68¹⁷ verses where the adverb *σήμερον* follows a verb 72 times in the same sentence of direct discourse¹⁸.

These examples are the subset which parallels the syntax found in Luke 23:43 where *σήμερον* also follows a verb in direct discourse. When these are analyzed it is apparent that when *σήμερον* takes second place to a verb in the first position

¹⁵ BDF §473 Closely related elements in the sentence, e.g. noun and attributive, noun and dependant gen., several subjects or objects connected by *καί*, etc., are usually padded together in simple speech.

¹⁶ Gen. 4:14; 19:37f; 21:26; 22:14; 24:12, 42; 25:31, 33; 26:33; 30:16, 32; 31:43, 46; 35:4, 20; 40:7; 41:9, 41; 42:13, 32; 47:23; 50:20; Exod. 2:18; 5:14; 13:4; 14:13; 16:25; 19:10; 32:29; Lev. 9:4; 10:19; Num. 22:30; Deut. 1:10, 39; 2:18; 4:1f, 4, 8, 26, 38ff; 5:3; 6:2, 6, 24; 7:11; 8:1, 11, 18f; 9:1, 3, 6; 10:13; 11:2, 4, 7f, 13, 22, 26ff, 32; 12:8, 11, 14; 13:1, 19; 15:5; 19:9; 20:3; 26:3, 17f; 27:1, 4, 10; 28:1, 13ff; 29:9, 11, 14; 30:2, 8, 11, 15f, 18f; 31:2, 21, 27; 32:46; Jos. 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:19, 25; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:10f; 22:3, 16, 18, 29, 31; 24:15, 27, 31; Jdg. 6:17; 9:18; 11:27; 21:3, 6; Ruth 2:19; 3:18; 4:9f, 14; 1 Sam. 4:3, 7, 16; 9:12, 19f, 27; 10:2, 19; 11:13; 12:5, 17; 14:28, 30, 38, 41, 44f; 15:28; 16:5; 17:10, 36, 45f; 20:27; 21:3, 6; 22:15; 24:11f, 19f; 25:10, 32ff; 26:8, 19, 21, 23f; 27:10; 29:6; 30:13, 25; 2 Sam. 3:8, 39; 6:20; 11:12; 14:22; 15:20; 16:3; 18:31; 19:6ff, 21, 23, 36; 1 Ki. 1:25, 48, 51; 2:24, 31; 5:21; 8:15, 28, 56; 18:15, 36; 21:13; 22:5; 2 Ki. 2:3, 5; 4:23; 6:28, 31; 1 Chr. 29:5; 2 Chr. 6:19; 10:7; 18:4; 35:21, 25; 1 Es. 8:74, 86; Neh. 1:6, 11; 5:11; 9:36; Est. 1:18; 5:4; Jdt. 6:2; 7:28; 8:12, 18, 29; 12:18; 13:11, 17; Tob. 6:11; Tbs. 7:12; 1 Ma. 2:63; 3:17; 4:10; 5:32; 6:26; 7:42; 9:30, 44; 10:20, 30; 13:39; 16:2; 3 Ma. 5:20; 6:13; Ps. 2:7; 94:7; Odes 7:37, 40; 11:19; Prov. 7:14; Sir. 10:10; 20:15; 38:22; 47:7; Isa. 10:32; 37:3; 38:19; 58:4; Jer. 1:10, 18; 41:15; Bar. 3:8; Ezek. 2:3; 20:29, 31; 24:2; Sus. 1:55; Dan. 3:37, 40; Dat. 3:37, 40; Matt. 6:11, 30; 11:23; 16:3; 21:28; 27:8, 19; 28:15; Mk. 14:30; Lk. 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32f; 19:5, 9; 22:34, 61; 23:43; Acts 4:9; 13:33; 19:40; 20:26; 22:3; 24:21; 26:2, 29; 27:33; Rom. 11:8; 2 Co. 3:14f; Heb. 1:5; 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7; 5:5; 13:8; Jas. 4:13 – **332 instances in 314 verses.**

¹⁷ Gen. 24:42; 30:16; 41:9; Exod. 2:18; 16:25a; Deut. 1:10, 39; 2:18; 4:38,39; 5:3; 9:1, 3, 6; 11:2; 20:3; 26:3, 17; 31:2; Jos. 14:11; 22:16, 18ab; Jda. 11:27; 21:3, 6; Jdg. 11:27; 21:3, 6; Ruth 2:19ab; 1 Sam. 9:20; 10:2; 14:44; 17:36, 45; 21:6; 24:12, 20; 26:8; 27:10; 2 Sam. 3:39; 6:20ab; 19:6ab; 19:7, 21, 36; 1 Ki. 1:25, 48; 2:31; 2 Chr. 35:21; Neh. 9:36; Est. 5:4a,b; 1 Ma. 3:17; 5:32; 6:26; 9:30, 44; Jer. 41:15; Matt. 21:28; 27:19; Lk. 12:28; 13:32; 22:34, 61; 23:43; Acts 22:3; 24:21; 26:2 – **72 instances in 68 verses.**

¹⁸ For this study a separate sentence of direct discourse is a syntactical unit consisting of a clause or group of clauses, spoken by a single individual which are related grammatically (not merely semantically) and which are not contained within another clause of direct discourse. Indicators of grammatical relationship include coordinating or subordinating conjunctions and/or subordinate clauses within the sentence of discourse. While there is not universal agreement among linguists as to the definition of sentence in language the syntactical distinction is being made in this study because the relationship being tested, that of a verb and its adverb is related to syntax and not merely semantics. This definition fits the profile of the unit of direct discourse found at Luke 23:43.

in the same independent Greek sentence¹⁹ of direct discourse, the relationship between this verb[1]-adverb[2] pair is not flexible. The adverb σήμερον in position two always modifies the verb in position one so long as they are in the same sentence.²⁰

A Specific Rule

When the Greek adverb σήμερον takes second position to a verb in a separate sentence of direct discourse²¹ it always further modifies the verb in the first position, without exception, in the corpus of the Greek Septuagint and Greek New Testament.²²

Or, simply: When σήμερον follows a verb in Koine where Greek syntax allows for it to modify²³ the verb it follows, it always does.

¹⁹ The discourse pyramid consists of “word, phrase (or group), sentence (clause), pericope (or paragraph) and discourse. (Porter’s Idioms 298-299)

²⁰ In four of the verses (2Sam 16:3; Heb. 3:15; 4:7; Jas. 4:13) while “today” follows a verb in the Uncial Greek text, the verb is not part of the direct discourse and are therefore excluded from being compared to Luke 23:43. Genesis 22:14, while it conforms to the rule is found in indirect discourse and is therefore not counted. In Proverbs 7:14 both the verb ἔσται and σήμερον are in separate independent sentences which are semantically but not syntactically coordinated, therefore it is excluded from the study. In Luke 19:5 the postpositive γάρ moves σήμερον to position #3 relative to the verb and is thus not an exception. (See earlier footnote on γάρ in BDAG). In Matthew 21:28 and Acts 26:2 σήμερον is found between two verbs both of which it likely modifies. The latter two verses thus conform to the observation “Closely related elements in the sentence... are usually padded together in simple speech” (BDF §473; see earlier footnote) Thus all examples in the simple speech of direct discourse conform to the rule.

²¹ See earlier footnote.

²² There have been no studies performed on other Greek writings as of 8/14/2009.

²³ The adverb must be able to modify the action of a verb (“further define”, see BDF §474) according to Koine Greek grammar. For example, the adverb from a direct quote cannot modify the verbal action of a verb in the narrative introduction which precedes it (e.g 2 Sam. 16:3; Heb. 3:15; 4:7; James 4:13.)