

The Preposition EN + the Dative, in Which  
A Dative of the Agent Results, in the New Testament:  
Brief Suggestions and Samples

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After again encountering an associate's question concerning the translation of a Greek sentence in which a dative is preceded by the preposition  $\epsilon\nu$ , I felt it expedient to gather together some notes elucidating the agentive factor seen in the Greek New Testament. No attempt is made to create any new Greek grammatical canons, but it seems that most folks today simply quote past estimates as concerns the preposition  $\epsilon\nu$  + the dative case = agent. New research seems lacking, and thus everyone seems immobilized in concrete, not sure of the use and abundance of this construction.

It is well known that in modern Greek the dative has all but disappeared. The preposition  $\epsilon\nu$  has also melted away into oblivion. In fact even in the Byzantine era,  $\epsilon\nu$  was giving way to the more modern  $\epsilon\zeta$ ,  $\sigma\epsilon$  (or  $\epsilon\iota\zeta$ ). Sophocles<sup>1</sup> shows the decay and semantic drifting of  $\epsilon\nu$  as it is sometimes even followed by the genitive in the Byzantine era. During the period of the NT,  $\epsilon\nu$  was known to have greatly engulfed numerous semantic domains held by other prepositions. In the earlier Attic, agency was signaled via  $\nu\pi\omicron$  with the genitive, or  $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\pi\omicron$ ,  $\epsilon\chi$ ,  $\delta\iota\alpha$  and even  $\pi\rho\omicron\varsigma$  in poetry. In Attic,  $\epsilon\nu$  was restricted to the dative case with these functions: locative, temporal, instrumental (including: means, cause, and manner).<sup>2</sup> In some Greek dialects it also indicated the function of "into" with the accusative.

In the NT era, it has expanded to include the following:

1. Dative of association (using "with")
2. Dative of measure/degree (using "by")
3. Dative of the agent (using "by", or "through")
4. Dative of the sphere (using "in") this is also seen in ancient Greek<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this preposition with the dative, stretches very thin, too thin to hold all of this semantic baggage. Eventually it implodes, but not after leaving its expansive semantic features on the landscape of the Greek New Testament. In this landscape we find a few examples of *εν* + dative = agency.

Many grammarians see it occurring in its agentive role only with a perfect tense verb (Wallace<sup>4</sup>, McKay [who also adds the aorist tense]<sup>5</sup>), et al. These common limitations are too restrictive, the dative of the agent seems to not be limited by any particular tense or voice [concerning voice, see below at the Ephesians 5:18 discussion] of the verb associated with it.

Before illustrating various NT examples, two issues need clarification.

- In an active sentence, the subject may also be the agent. In a passive sentence, the agent is not the subject, and the agent may not even be expressed.
- Ambiguity seems prevalent in many of the examples from the NT, and I am not about to dogmatically insist that each must be a dative of the agent (or agency). Several factors are involved in the semantic determination of each: syntax (type verb used, animate agent), context (the meaning generated by the sentence/paragraph, and even the writer's style).

Within the pages of the New Testament, as mentioned, we note the expansive use of the preposition *εν*. Careful attention should be given when the dative of the instrument involves a person or an animate object. For example, note this passage:

#### **Matthew 12:24**

οἱ δὲ Φαρισαῖοι ἀκούσαντες εἶπον, Οὗτος οὐκ ἐκβάλλει τὰ δαιμονία εἰ μὴ *εν τῷ Βεελζεβούλ* ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων.

ἐκβάλλει = present, active. The subject "this One" is using Beelzeboul as the instrument whereby He supposedly casts out demons. What requires attention is the fact that the instigator of the action is not Beelzeboul, but rather the subject is the instigator. Consequently the definition required for agency is not present. (s.v. Frawley<sup>6</sup>). Since instruments can also be "beings", one must exercise caution when exegeting the passage. The context of Matthew 12:22-28 supplies valuable clues!

If the object of  $\epsilon\nu$  is personal (a being) instigating the action, then the object is an agent. But if the personal object is not instigating or willing the action, then the object/person may be being used by another who is doing the willing or instigation. In the above, the Pharisee's declare that Jesus is using Beelzeboul to cast out the demons—Beelzeboul's will is not even considered—it is the initial determination, the will, the intent of Jesus Christ Who initiates the action (according to the Pharisees, and verse 28). Thus, Beelzeboul is a *personal instrument*. Sadly some grammars and dictionaries list this (and its parallel passages) as probable uses of  $\epsilon\nu$  indicating a dative of the agent!<sup>7</sup>

Upon perusal of the fields of Greek grammar and New Testament textual criticism, it is clear that most scholars have not yet perceived the reality of the existence of this construction, with  $\epsilon\nu$  + a dative = a dative of the agent, or rather this particular criterion which I emphasize:

- When the action of the main verb is initiated by the personal dative object of the preposition  $\epsilon\nu$ , then we should consider this personal/animate object as a dative-of-the-agent construction.
- The criterion is: is the dative object controlling, willing or instigating the action of the verb? This is the primary identifier or requirement.

I repeat, that the object must be animate (able to express a will, even an animal can fulfill this slot), and must be generating the action of the verb. Currently, nearly all Greek grammars have not yet seen this aspect. Yet it is certainly within the nature of the dative, especially the personal dative; and it certainly is within the nature of the expansive NT usages of the preposition  $\epsilon\nu$ . Most grammarians accept the obvious instrumental use, however, if they think about the difference between the types of actions involved—that is the action as being willed, then they should be able to agree that mere instruments cannot always function as depicted in some Biblical texts. Instruments cannot instigate nor will. Obviously some adjustments need to be made in our definitions (and in our grammars) of the dative and the preposition  $\epsilon\nu$  when a personal or animate object is involved.

Below are what I would call datives of the agent as signaled by: the preposition *εν* + a personal dative; and perceiving who (agents are animate) instigates the action of the verb. In each case I also parse the necessary elements of the verb involved. You be the judge.

### **Matthew 22:43**

λέγει αὐτοῖς, Πῶς οὖν Δαυὶδ *εν πνεύματι* καλεῖ αὐτὸν κύριον λέγων,

καλεῖ = present, active. The subject "David" via the Person of the Holy Spirit calls Him Lord. If the Spirit is a mere instrument, then explain how He apparently acts upon David. We know David had the Holy Spirit (Psalms 51). The Spirit moved David, in a supernatural way, to say what he said. Again volition is expressed by this Spirit, this commonly results in inspiration. This is not the act of a mere tool.

### **Luke 2:27**

καὶ ἦλθεν *εν τῷ πνεύματι* εἰς τὸ ἱερόν· καὶ ἐν τῷ εἰσαγαγεῖν τοὺς γονεῖς τὸ παιδίον Ἰησοῦν τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτοὺς κατὰ τὸ εἰθισμένον τοῦ νόμου περὶ αὐτοῦ

ἦλθεν = 2nd Aorist, active. The subject "Simeon" of verse 25, was physically moved by the Holy Spirit into the Temple. Had he come in (sphere) the Spirit, then he would probably still not be visible. The Spirit moved him, perhaps causing him to walk (or run), again the Spirit expressed a will. This is something which an instrument cannot do, nor a means.

### **John 13:31**

Ὅτε οὖν ἐξῆλθεν, λέγει Ἰησοῦς, Νῦν ἐδοξάσθη ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐδοξάσθη *εν αὐτῷ*.

ἐδοξάσθη = aorist, passive. It seems best to me to see the actions of Jesus here, the deeds and obedience; all of which via Him glorify God. Thus, I favor the Subject "God" as being glorified by the Person of Jesus Christ. These actions and obedience

are not the traits of an instrument or means. Same for the next verse as well, verse 32. Ευθυσ (verse 32) can mean "forthwith" and Jesus in a short time was glorified by the Father in or via another willful act, note John 17:4, 5 and John 21:19.

### **Romans 9:1**

Αλήθειαν λέγω ἐν Χριστῷ, οὐ ψεύδομαι, συμμαρτυρούσης μοι τῆς συνειδήσεώς μου ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ,

συμμαρτυρούσης = present, active participle. We know that Paul is a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit is within him, always. (1 Corinthians 6:19). In Romans 9:1, it appears that Paul's conscience is being volitionally witnessed to by the indwelling Holy Spirit. This type of communication or conviction happens to each of the elect. [It was gratifying to note, that after I had made the above observations, I discovered that H. A. W. Meyer in his commentary upon Romans 9:1, also connects συμμαρτυρούσης, the participle, with the dative ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ].

### **1 Corinthians 6:2**

ἢ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι οἱ ἅγιοι τὸν κόσμον κρινούσιν; καὶ εἰ ἐν ὑμῖν κρίνεται ὁ κόσμος ἀνάξιοί ἐστε κριτηρίων ἐλαχίστων;

κρίνεται = present, passive. The subject "the cosmos" is judged by saints. The saints do so willfully. As personal agents they are doing that which an instrument or means cannot do, they are on their own volition, acting. Again we should note that internal animation seems to be a trait of the agent, instruments (and means) need to have external action driving them. (Frawley<sup>8</sup>).

### **1 Corinthians 12:2, 3**

Οἴδατε ὅτι ὅτε ἔθνη ἦτε πρὸς τὰ εἰδωλα τὰ ἄφωνα ὡς ἂν ἠγεσθε ἀπαγόμενοι. διὸ γνωρίζω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ λαλῶν λέγει, Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς, καὶ οὐδεὶς δύναται εἰπεῖν, Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, εἰ μὴ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

λεγει = present, active. The subject phrase "no one speaking" can say such-and-such via the agency of the Spirit. Verse 2 is included as it shows a context in which pagans were "led"; in verse 3 the same concept seems to be in force, the Agency of the Spirit leads saints to speak. Spheres cannot lead. When deceivers and or liars say that Jesus is Lord (or GOD, LXX) they do so NOT via the Holy Spirit. When we saints say it, it is by the meaningful and conscious will of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This act is not a gift, it is a fact.

### **I Corinthians 12:13**

καὶ γὰρ ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἓν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν, εἴτε Ἰουδαῖοι εἴτε Ἕλληνες εἴτε δούλοι εἴτε ἐλεύθεροι, καὶ πάντες ἐν πνεύμα ἐποτίσθημεν.

ἐβαπτίσθημεν = aorist, passive. The subject "we" was "put into" one body. This was accomplished by (agency) the Person of the Holy Spirit. The body is a locative, place. In Mark 1:8 "water" and "Holy Spirit" are both spheres, and it is a promise to future Kingdom church members, part of their Messianic promises. Different churches and different baptisms. How can a mere instrument place an elected person into a heavenly body? (unless it itself is being used as an instrument). This seems to function as the means, yet who or what is energizing the Spirit, is He not self energized? Therefore I posit that He is the Agent (the Holy Spirit). The clause "were made to drink of one Spirit", may contain several variants in the original Greek text. It could read, "were made to drink of one **cup**"; another reading has it as, "were **illuminated** (or enlightened) by one Spirit". Regardless of which you prefer, it makes no sense to view Christ as an unnamed agent here using the Spirit as a means to place saints into the body. (as per Wallace<sup>9</sup>). The Spirit is not a mere instrument or vehicle such as a wheelbarrow or helicopter. Indeed, God may use the Spirit as a tool, but their wills are not to be separated! The Person of the Spirit did this act Himself! Just as He acted in Mark 1:12.

### **Ephesians 4:30**

καὶ μὴ λυπεῖτε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἐν ᾧ ἐσφραγίσθητε εἰς ἡμέραν ἀπολυτρώσεως.

ἐσφραγίσθητε = aorist, passive. The subject (built into the verb) "you" are again the recipients of another facet of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, here "you" were

"sealed"; that is, the indwelling Holy Spirit seals and assures us of God's love and that He has secured and paid for us. This is comforting assurance. Ephesians 1:13 reinforces the action of the Holy Spirit here. It is to be noted the the Holy Spirit is also a mark or pledge, as per Ephesians 1:14. In one case He is the Seal (1:14), in another (4:30) He does the sealing (convincing). Both guarantee eternal security.

### **Ephesians 2:5**

καὶ ὄντας ἡμᾶς νεκροὺς τοῖς παραπτώμασιν συνεζωοποίησεν **ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ**,  
χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι

συνεζωοποίησεν = aorist, active. The subject "God" from verse 4, made us/you alive-together BY Christ. Without the variant reading (adding the ἐν per MSS P<sup>46</sup>, 03, 33, several lectionaries, some Coptic and Old Latin MSS) we have a simple dative, which is often translated as: "...made us alive together with Christ". Certainly, the dative of the agent is permissible here, and yet on the surface it may seem that God uses Jesus Christ as a personal instrument here. Personally, I see two wills united as one will within the Godhead here, something like... the subject God is also the agent Jesus Christ! There are numerous other passages in which we find similar variations with this preposition, which if included, could alter or even improve our interpretations. Luke 23:15 (per a variant ἐν also) presents us with another variable case for a dative of the agent with ἐν.

### **Matthew 14:2**

καὶ εἶπεν τοῖς παισὶν αὐτοῦ, Οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής· αὐτὸς ἠγέρθη ἀπὸ τῶν νεκρῶν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο αἱ δυνάμεις ἐνεργοῦσιν **ἐν αὐτῷ**.

ἐνεργοῦσιν = present, active. The subject of our clause "powers" are enervated by John. Typically this passage is rendered as "...powers are at work in him". These folks think John the Baptist may have been resurrected, and thus he has these powers. It seems clear that they suppose that John is performing, or willing these miracles to occur! In light of this, it seems reasonable to consider a dative of the agent here. Perhaps some mistake the "prefix" of this verb as an influence upon the meaning of the preposition, when actually this verb stands on its own as a word without an affixed prefix. In this text we also have an active voice verb, with no expressed object.



### **Romans 14:14**

οἶδα καὶ πέπεισμαι ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ ὅτι οὐδὲν κοινὸν δι' ἑαυτοῦ, εἰ μὴ τῷ λογιζομένῳ τι κοινὸν εἶναι, ἐκείνῳ κοινόν.

οἶδα καὶ πέπεισμαι = perfect, passive. Paul is convinced not "in the Lord Jesus", but most likely "by the Lord Jesus". Yes, Paul is in Christ, and is a member of the Body of Christ. Christ is the Head of the Body, and in this instance Christ is seen as personally convincing Paul. At least to me, this is a much more personal relationship expressed with the dative of the agent, more personal than the common "in Christ".

### **Hebrews 1:1, 2**

Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ, ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας·

ἐλάλησεν = aorist, active. In olden times God spoke to the Hebrews via or by the prophets. A probable personal instrument is meant. But in verse two, in these last days God has spoke to the Hebrews by Jesus Christ. The whom, who is speaking, was: (1) first the prophets commanded by God to speak, did they initiate the act of speaking? they cooperated via their volition, but II Peter 1:21 adds another will also at work! (2) Jesus Christ spoke as well, yet He acted on His own volition. Thus, in the second case the dative of the agent can apply, especially if a parallel is seen with the preposition δι (δια) with the "also".

### **Colossians 1:16**

ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα· εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτισται·

ἐκτίσθη = aorist, passive. "Because (or, since) by Him all the [humans] were created...". A good example of the dative of the agent. Τα παντα does not mean "all things", rather it means all of the elect or all humans, and spiritual realms (for trees and rocks and birds do not need their sins covered nor need redemption). Παντα is neuter as it encompasses both males and females.

The above examples are fairly clear, more examples could be shown but in some of them the degree of ambiguity rises; as for example I Timothy 3:16. In Ephesians 5:18 I suggest perceiving the verb as *middle voice, present tense, indicative mood*, and would translate as follows:

...be ye being filled by (agent) Spirit. Or,  
...rather, be in a state of being filled by (agent) Spirit.

As such, per the middle voice, (note: the passive voice may be acceptable here as well) the subject "ye" participates in the action, just as they would if they were drinking. Though the "wine" is obviously a means, I perceive the Spirit as a personal instrument. If the imperative mood was correct, then we have a command type of statement, which would move too much of the responsibility upon the subject. Confession, repentance and obedience equal the degree of filling. However, when the lampshade of sin (unconfessed sin), is removed from within the bosom of the believer (via confession), then the internal, ever present Holy Spirit (like a light bulb which is always on) can FILL the obedient saint, consistently (present tense); He fills not from without! This  $\epsilon\nu$  + dative, clearly presents to me as a dative of the instrument, because the person (the vessel) chooses to submit, he/she expresses a will. Their will initiates the action, thus middle voice verbs can alter the semantics of the  $\epsilon\nu$  + dative = agency, as the subject participates in the action of the verb.

I am also hesitant to ascribe Hebrew origins or Semitic contaminations as a cause for numerous dative constructions with the preposition  $\epsilon\nu$ . If Semitic contamination is valid, then the examples would most likely be found outside the Pauline corpus; Matthew, John, Peter, James and portions of the LXX would seem to be possible contenders. In these texts the intended audiences are primarily Jewish readers, and many of these inspired authors appeared to have had a Semitic language as their primary language. Thus, it is assumed that when they wrote Greek, the Hebrew (or Aramaic) prepositions may have had an influence. The samples I displayed have no Semitic underpinnings, as far as I can perceive. In fact Diessmann, Moulton, Milligan and Robertson have shown the utter Greekness of the instrumental use of  $\epsilon\nu$  with the dative.

In the Nestle/Aland text, there are about 2,752 occurrences of our preposition with the dative case. In the vast majority of cases, a personal agent is not indicated. However, I hope that the above examples may generate serious consideration as to the validity of our preposition with a personal dative in

expressing the agent. I agree that some of my samples can be interpreted in various ways, and that some ambiguity exists. *Yet even if **one** of the above samples is valid*, then we need to consider adding to our Greek grammars this concept of volition and agency as regards this preposition and the dative.

Most readers should have noted that the primary criterion which I utilized in identifying  $\epsilon\nu$  + dative as = agency, was the internal energy or activity of the dative word in question. Animation is a strong signifier. The agent is that one which initiates the action of the verb; others label the agent as the instigator of the action of the verb. Longman's dictionary presents a rather poor definition:<sup>10</sup>

...the noun or noun phrase which refers to the person or animal which **performs** the action of the verb.

"Performs" differs from "volition" or "instigates" and does not add any clarification. Whereas an instrument requires another person or animal\* to use it, to supply the energy, it lacks its own internal energy, or will, or volition. A true agent does not require another energy source. As Frawley has it, "agents are the direct instigators of the predicate."<sup>11</sup> A dative of means is similar to the instrument, means are not self activating, nor are they animate; they are utilized and activated by another. A "personal instrument" is that personal/animate dative which is used as an instrument via the will of another (usually the subject). One must simply find the source of the energy for the verb, when it differs from the expressed agent, then we have a "personal instrument" as seen above in Matthew 12:24.

Though probably generating some controversy, nevertheless, I trust that this brief essay will motivate others to examine the Holy Writ, and to mine clearer meanings. Fortunately English and Greek are similar in respect to voice, moods and agency, which similarity can help speed analyses.

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\* In the sentence; "Clarence was lifted by the robot to new heights." "Robot" is not an agent, it is an instrument, even though its source of energy is not stated, we know its animation is generated, controlled or maneuvered by another. Thus "robot" is an instrument or tool and could be seen as a means. The actual agent is not declared, but this agent is that one who is expressing a will and who is supplying the original source of energy.

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