

The Syntax of ἰδίων in Hebrews 7:27

Rodney J. Decker, ThD

Professor of NT, Baptist Bible Seminary

www.NTResources.com

Dec 2007

Q: Why do some translations use the singular “he” for ἰδίων in Heb 7:27 and others a plural “their”?

ὃς οὐκ ἔχει καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀνάγκην, ὥσπερ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς, πρότερον ὑπὲρ τῶν ἰδίων ἀμαρτιῶν θυσίας ἀναφέρειν, ἔπειτα τῶν τοῦ λαοῦ· τοῦτο γὰρ ἐποίησεν ἐφάπαξ ἑαυτὸν ἀνευέγκας.

NASB: who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for **His own** sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.

NET: He has no need to do every day what those priests do, to offer sacrifices first for **their own** sins and then for the sins of the people, since he did this in offering himself once for all.

This is an interesting difference in translation. Although *most* English translations use the singular (and that tradition goes back to KJV and even before it to the earliest English translations), some do use the plural, e.g., NET, HCSB.

Remember that adjectives (yes, ἰδίων is an adj, see BDAG, s.v. ἴδιος) must agree with their noun in gender, *number*, and case—and the noun modified is ἀμαρτιῶν, which is plural. Part of the perplexity is that the governing verb is an *infinitive* rather than a finite form. Infinitives don’t have number. If this expression were used with a finite form, we’d know immediately whether it should be translated as singular or plural.¹ This construction occurs 17 times in the NT (i.e., article > ἴδιος > plural noun)² and this is the only time the governing verb is an infinitive; most are finite forms, a few are participles (and participles have number!). So, the issue is not Greek, but English since we have to decide which pronoun to use: “his” or “their.” ἴδιος = “own”/“one’s own”—but that is clumsy here (“to offer sacrifices for one’s own sins”—I’m not sure how you’d reflect a plural of “one’s own” in English), so English prefers a possessive pronoun.

But which one? The next complexity is, does this phrase refer to *Jesus* or to one (or more) of the human priests? The preceding clause referred to Jesus (“who did not have need”), but that clause is interrupted by a comparative clause (ὥσπερ...). Where does the comparative clause end? Is it only:

1. ὥσπερ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς

¹ If the main verb is singular, ἴδιος is translated singular; e.g., Mark 4:34, τοῖς ἰδίους μαθηταῖς ἐπέλυεν πάντα (to his own disciples he explained everything). But with a plural verb, it becomes their; e.g., 1 Cor 14:35, ἐν οἴκῳ τοὺς ἰδίους ἀνδρας ἐπερωτάτωσαν (let them ask their own husbands at home).

² If number is not specified, there are 57 instances of article > ἴδιος > noun.

Or is it the longer phrase:

2. ὥσπερ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς, πρότερον ὑπὲρ τῶν ἰδίων ἀμαρτιῶν θυσίας ἀναφέρειν, ἔπειτα τῶν τοῦ λαοῦ

If it is #1, then the rest of the clause refers to Jesus: *he* does not have need (as the priests) to offer sacrifice for *his* sins.

But if it is #2, it all goes together and the reference is to what the *priests* do, thus, “*he* does not have need (as the priests, to offer sacrifice for *their* sins”).

It is interesting that none of the commentaries I checked (13 on my shelf that might be expected to comment on something in the Greek text) say anything about this. Everyone assumes the *he* without comment. Perhaps that means this should be so obvious that it doesn’t need comment, but what is obvious to a commentator is not always obvious to a beginning student, thus this explanation.

This construction should be translated as a singular in English in this passage. Although the plural sounds attractive initially, and seems to match the plural reference to οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς, the deciding factor is how you read the larger syntax. If you make the comparative clause the longer option (#2), then the first part of the verse is left hanging: “who did not have daily need....” One wonders, need of what? But if you take the shorter comparison (#1), then there is a complementary infinitive to complete the statement: “who did not have daily need (...) first to offer sacrifice for his own sins, then for the [sins of] the people.”

The translations that use the plural *their* have to supply something to fill out the first clause. E.g., NET: “He has no need [to do] every day what those priests [do], to offer sacrifices first for their own sins and then....”³ Such a reading isn’t inconceivable, and Greek does leave things hanging at times, but the usual solution is simpler.

HCSB actually turns the clauses around and translates as if the infinitive is in the first clause: “He doesn’t need {to offer sacrifices} every day, as high priests [do]—first for their own sins, then for those of the people.”⁴

Note, too, the decision of the editors of most (all?) published Greek texts (Tisch., W-H, Souter, NA, UBS, H-F, ByzT). They suggest option #1 by placing commas before ὥσπερ and after οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς.

³ I’ve inserted the [brackets] to mark what NET supplied.

⁴ I’ve marked the transposed phrase with {braces} and supplied words with [brackets].