The dative case in Greek

In English, the dative case indicates that the object receives the indirect action of the verb for the purpose of showing direction or reception:

\[ I \text{ went TO the store; I gave the book TO the librarian;} \]

By comparison, the English accusative case also denotes that the object receives the action of the verb, but the verb’s action on the object is more direct:

\[ I \text{ shot the thief; I threw the ball.} \]

In Classical and Biblical Greek, however, the dative case is far more versatile. It may take on the role of other cases such as the genitive (possessive) case; or it may become prepositional by showing a relationship between things. For those unfamiliar with the subtleties of Greek, it is easy to misinterpret Scripture by leaning too heavily on an English understanding of cases. So here is a brief overview of the Greek dative case to consider.

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In addition to its main function as the *Dativus*, the dative case has different other functions in Classical Greek\(^1\):

**Dativus finalis:** The *dativus finalis*, or the 'dative of purpose', is when the dative is used to denote the *purpose* of a certain action. For example:

"τῷ βασιλεῖ μάχομαι" *I fight for the king*.  
"θνῄσκο τῇ τιμῇ" *I die for honour*.

**Dativus commodi (incommodi):** The *dativus commodi sive incommodi*, or the 'dative of benefit (or harm)' is the dative that expresses the advantage or disadvantage of something for someone. For example:

*For the benefit of:* "πᾶς ἄνηρ αὔτῷ πονεῖ" (Sophocles, Ajax 1366). "Every man toils for himself".  
*For the harm or disadvantage of:* "ηδὲ ἡ ἡμέρα τοῖς Ἑλλησι μεγάλων κακῶν ἄρξει." (Thucydides 2.12.4). "This day will be the beginning of great sorrows for the Greeks (i.e., for their disadvantage)".

**Dativus possessivus:** The *dativus possessivus*, or the 'dative of possession' is the dative used to denote the *possessor* of a certain object or objects. For example:

"ἄλλοις μὲν γὰρ χρήματα ἔστι πολλὰ καὶ ἵπποι, ἡμῖν δὲ εἴρημαχοι ἁγαθοὶ." (Thucydides 1.86.3). "For others have a lot of money and ships and horses, but we have good allies (i.e., To others there is a lot of money..)".
**Dativus ethicus:** The *dativus ethicus*, or the 'ethic or polite dative,' is when the dative is used to signify that the person or thing spoken of is regarded with interest by someone. This dative is mostly, if not exclusively, used in pronouns. As such, it is also called the "dative of pronouns." For example:

"τούτῳ πάνω μοι προσέχετε τὸν νοῦν." (Demosthenes 18.178). "Pay close attention to this, I beg you (i.e., please pay..)".
"ὦ μητέρ, ὃς καλός μοι ὁ πάππος." (Xenophon, Cyropaedia 18.178). "Oh, mother, how handsome grandpa is (I've just realized!)".

**Dativus auctoris:** The *dativus auctoris*, or the 'dative of agent,' is the dative used to denote the doer of an action. Note, however, that in Classical Greek, the agent is usually in the *genitive* after ὑπὸ (by, at the hands of). The agent is in the dative only with the *perfect* and *pluperfect passive*, and after the verbal *adjective* in -τέος. For example:

"πολλαὶ θεραπεῖα τοῖς ἱατροῖς εὐρηνται." (Isocrates 8.39) "Many cures have been discovered by doctors."

**Dativus instrumenti:** The *dativus instrumenti*, or the 'dative of instrument,' is when the dative is used to denote an instrument or means of a certain action (or, more accurately, as the *instrumental case*). For example:

"με κτείνει δόλῳ." (Homer, Odyssey 9.407) "He kills me with a bait (i.e., by means of a bait)."

**Dativus modi:** The *dativus modi*, or the 'dative of manner,' is the dative used to describe the manner or way by which something happened. For example:

"νόσῳ ἕστερον ἀποθανόντα." (Thucydides 8.84) "having died of (from) a disease."

**Dativus mensurae:** The *dativus mensurae*, or the 'dative of measurement,' is the dative used to denote the measurement of difference. For example:

"τῇ κεφαλῇ μείζονα." (Plato, Phaedo 101a) "taller by a head."
"μακρῷ ἄριστος." (Plato, Laws 729d) "by far the best."