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SECOND CLASS CONDITIONS IN
NEW TESTAMENT GREEK

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Less frequent than other types of conditional sentences, second class conditions are also more specialized in their meaning and more restricted in their grammatical format. In these alone the verb tenses used provide the formal key to their identification. The major exegetical question, and the only serious divergence on the part of grammarians, centers around these tenses. This study concludes that the tenses used were determined by normal aspectual considerations, not by arbitrary rule of grammar.

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S ECOND class conditional sentences occur less frequently than other types in the NT; there are only 47 examples.[1] Called by some "Contrary to Fact" or "Unreal,"[2] by others "Determined as Unfulfilled,"[3] they enjoy more agreement on the part of the grammarians than the other types and are less problem for the exegete.

[1] As compared with more than 300 first class and about 250 third class. There are no complete fourth class conditions in the NT. A listing of these 47 examples may be had by combining the lists given in notes 16-19, plus the two exceptions listed in the text below.

[2] So commonly in the grammars of classical Greek: W. W. Goodwin, *Greek Grammar*, rev. by. C. B. Gulick (Boston: Ginn, 1930) 296, Hadley and Allen, *Greek Grammar* (New York: D. Appleton, 1890) 283, Adolph Kaegi, *A Short Grammar of Classical Greek* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1914) 143, and H. W. Smyth, *A Greek Grammar* (New York: American Book Co., 1916) 342. Among NT Greek grammars also: F. Blass and A. DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. by Robert Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 182, H. Dana and J. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan) 287, W. S. LaSor, *Handbook of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) B223, H. P. V. Nunn, *A Short Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1951) 117, and Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, Vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 91.

[3] J. H. Moulton, *An Introduction to the Study of New Testament Greek* (New York: Macmillan, 1955) 211, S. G. Green, *A Handbook of the Grammar of the Greek Testament* (New York: Revell, n.d.) 283, A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 1012, W. D. Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1941) 195.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE TYPE

Second class conditions are more formally structured than either of the other types. Both first and third class show a characteristic structure only in the protasis, but the second class shows a distinctive pattern in both the protasis and apodosis; indeed, it is the apodosis which clearly identifies it.

The protasis uses the conditional conjunction εἰ with the verb in the indicative mood. In this it is like the first class. But the second class uses only *past* tenses,[4] whereas the first class may use *any* tense. Thus, theoretically, there can be ambiguity in the form of the protasis, but in few cases does this cause confusion of identification.[5]

The apodosis of second class conditions also uses a past tense of the indicative, usually[6] with ἄν. In almost[7] every instance, the apodosis is a simple statement of a non-fact; what would be or would have been but was not. This contrasts strongly with the great variety of apodosis forms occurring in the first and third classes.

The negative in the protasis is almost always μή, with only two instances of οὐκ.[8] This gives many examples of εἰ μή coming together where μή is simply the negation of the clause. There are a few instances where it seems to be εἰ μή = "except" or "unless."[9] The negative of the apodosis is always οὐκ.[10] Both μή in the protasis and οὐκ in the apodosis are what we would expect. In the protasis, which states a potential circumstance, that which *might* have been, μή is used. Οὐκ is

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[4]These are the secondary or augmented tenses of the indicative: the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect.

[5]In about one-sixth of the first class conditions a past tense indicative verb is used in the protasis, but the identification is unambiguous because the apodosis is not compatible with the second class form. In a few instances (Acts 11:17, Rom 5:15, Eph 4:21, Rev 20:15) the *form* of both the protasis and the apodosis *could* be second class, but the sense is clearly not contrary to fact. Of course, this is not unnatural; a simple condition (first class) can be used of the past as naturally as of the present and future time.

[6]Ἄν occurs in 36 examples; it is omitted in 11 instances. This tendency to omit ἄν is characteristic of *koine* Greek.

[7]In one instance (Luke 19:42) the apodosis is not stated. In two instances (1 Cor 12:17, 19) the apodosis is a rhetorical question implying the simple statement, "There would be none."

[8]Μή occurs 11 times. The two occurrences of οὐκ (Matt 26:24, Mark 14:21) are actually parallel passages duplicating a single occurrence.

[9]This phenomenon of εἰ μη = "except" or "unless" will be dealth with separately at another time.

[10]There is a negative apodosis in 23 of the 47 examples. Οὐκ is used in 22 of them, οὐδ᾽ (οὐ δέ = "not even") in one (Heb 8:4).

natural in the apodosis, which expresses nothing doubtful or subjective, but states matter-of-factly what actually would have been if the condition had been true.

RELATION TO REALITY: CONTRARY TO FACT

There seems to be no debate on the essential meaning of the second class conditional sentence. It states a condition which as a matter of fact has not been met and follows with a statement of what would have been true if it had. An extended paraphrase in English would be, "If this were the case, which it is not, then this would have been true, which as a matter of fact, is not." The term "contrary to fact" therefore is an accurate descriptive name for this type.[11]

It must be kept in mind in the use of this descriptive term that "contrary to fact" has to do with the *statement* of the fact, not the actual fact itself. The speaker *states* it as being contrary to fact; he may or may not be correct in that statement. Of the 47 NT examples, 39 are by Christ or by inspired writers of scripture; in every case, the statement is also contrary to fact in actuality. In each of the other 8 examples, where the speakers were men liable to error, they spoke what they *believed* to be contrary to fact; in two instances they were wrong.[12]

A very significant comparison must be made here. In dealing with the significance of the first class condition, this distinction between fact and statement of fact sometimes has been used to explain those many examples where the first class is used in obviously false or uncertain statements.[13] However, there is a drastic difference in this respect between first and second class. In the first class examples where there is a discrepancy between the actual fact and the statement of it, it is *not* a matter of error or ignorance; it is almost always a deliberate statement of what is known or considered by the speaker to be false. But in the second class, there is not a single instance of stating something as contrry to fact which is not so in the judgment of the speaker. He is making what he considers a contrary-to-fact statement. There is no

[11]A. T. Robertson's designation "Determined as Un-Fulfilled" seems also to be a valid characterization. The problem with his system of classifying conditional sentences lies in his designating the first class "Determined as Fulfilled," which understandably has been misinterpreted as the opposite of the second class, therefore "True to Fact." See my preceding article: "First Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?", *GTJ* 2 (1981) 79-80.

[12]Luke 7:39, John 18:30.

[13]See the discussion in my preceding article, "First Class Conditions," 77-78.

such thing as "assuming for the sake of argument" that a statement is contrary to fact. To put it in another way, the first class condition is *not* the opposite of the second class. It is *not* "true to fact" in the sense that the second is contrary to fact.

SIGNIFICANCE OF TENSES

In dealing with the significance of the tenses used, two factors require consideration: first, the fact that only past tenses of the indicative are used, and second, the question of the time relation involved.

Only Past Tenses

Contrary-to-fact conditional sentences are the only type which has tense limitation. Why? And why *these* tenses? The answer will help to explain and support the meaning assigned to this type of construction.

All conditional sentences by their very nature involve statements which may or may not be true. That is what "if" means. The uncertainty involved may be due to ignorance, supposition, choice, course of events (I call it providence), or simple futurity. If the *time* involved is either present or future, there is always this element of uncertainty from the viewpoint of the human speaker (both Greek and English are human languages). Only in past time has the uncertainty become certainty by actual occurrence, and even then it is not certain to the speaker until and unless he *knows* about it. The second class condition is one which expresses the "would be" results of a *past* condition *known* (or thought) to be unfulfilled or contrary to fact. Very naturally, then, it uses only past tenses.

It is instructive to note that this usage is but one example of what grammarians have called the "potential" or "unreal" indicative. This idiom includes, beside the unreal conditional sentence, such other uses of the augmented tenses of the indicative, with or without ἄν, as in courteous or polite language (Acts 25:22, Gal 4:20), in expressions of necessity, obligation, possibility, and propriety (Luke 24:26, Acts 24:19, 1 Cor 5:10), and in cautious statements and impossible wishes (Rom 9:3). Even in English we use "ought," "would," "could"—past tense forms which are used in many of these unreal statements.[14]

[14]For a discussion of the idiom, consult the grammars: (classical) Goodwin and Gulick, *Greek Grammar*, 283, 297, Kaegi, *Short Grammar*, 136, 137, Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 296; (NT) Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, 169, A. T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 918-23, Turner, *Syntax*, 90-93.

Time Reference

Some grammarians have distinguished two time references in second class conditions, indicated by the tense used in the protasis.[15] It is claimed that the imperfect tense is used for a statement which is *presently* contrary to fact, the aorist and pluperfect for a *past* contrary-to-fact condition. Is this a valid distinction in NT Greek?

It should be noted that this, like *all* considerations dealing with Greek tense, is more a matter of *aspect* or *aktionsart* than of *time*. By the very nature of the case *all* contrary-to-fact conditions are to some extent past in time. The decision that it is not fulfilled has already been made *before* the sentence is uttered or written. "If you believed Moses you would believe me" (John 5:46) is speaking of a *present* situation which is not true; they are not at that moment believing. The imperfect tense used is a durative tense. They are in a state of unbelieving which is presently continuing but of course it has already been in existence long enough to be known as untrue. If the aorist had been used in this protasis the sense might have been, "If you had (sometime in the past) exercised faith, you would have (now) believed me."

Most NT examples fit well into this distinction. All of those using the aorist[16] and the pluperfect[17] are past in time reference, properly expressed in English with a past perfect: "If it had been . . . it would have been. . . ." The case is not quite so clear-cut with the imperfect, but even here two-thirds of the examples fit the pattern,[18] indicating a present time reference, "if it were . . . , it would be. . . ." Of the nine apparent exceptions, seven[19] are instances of the imperfect of the verb εἰμί. Since this verb has only one past tense (apparently

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[15]Dana and Mantey [289] make the strange assertion that "a contrary to fact condition dealing with *present time* has the imperfect tense in both protasis and apodosis . . . a contrary to fact condition dealing with *past* time has the aorist or pluperfect tense in both protasis and apodosis," even though two of the examples they cite show a mixed use, with different tenses in the two clauses. In view of the fact that 16 of the NT examples actually show such mixed tenses (9 examples have the imperfect in the protasis with aorist or pluperfect in the apodosis; 7 have the reverse situation; all but one seem to be *past* in time reference) this statement obviously is an overstatement. If there is any relation between tense and time reference, it is the tense of the *protasis* which must be the determining one.

[16]There are 16 examples: Matt 11:21, 11:23, 12:7, 24:22, 26:24, Mark 13:20, 14:21, Luke 10:13, 19:42, John 4:10, 15:20, 15:24, Rom 9:29, 1 Cor 2:8, Gal 3:21, Heb 4:8.

[17]There are 4 examples: Matt 24:43, Luke 12:39, John 8:19, Acts 26:32, John 19:11 is questionable. Cf. my treatment of this verse below.

[18]15 out of 24 examples: Luke 7:39, John 5:46, 8:42, 9:33, 9:41, 15:19, 18:36, 19:11 (?), Acts 18:14, 1 Cor 11:31, 12:17, 12:19, Gal. 1:10, Heb 8:4, 8:7.

[19]Matt 23:30, John 11:21, 11:32, 18:30, Gal. 4:15, 1 John 2:19. Also, in John 14:2 the verb is unexpressed but most naturally it would be ἦν, the imperfect of εἰμί.

the instrinsically durative aspect of this verb rendered unnecessary the development of an aorist and pluperfect conjugation) it is conceivable that grammatical constructions which normally called for those tenses may have been met by substituting the imperfect. However, aside from this rationalization, the basic aspect of the imperfect tense fits perfectly in each of the seven cases. While the sense demands that the time reference is past, the kind of action is *durative* in that past time.

The remaining two apparent exceptions to the general rule under consideration may be explained in a similar way. In John 14:28, "if you loved me, you would have rejoiced," it seems clear that the time reference is past. Earlier in the verse Christ reminded them of his impending departure and return and follows that statement with this condition. He was clearly thinking of love as a durative state of being, "if you were (at that time) loving me," rather than a specific act of love. His use of the imperfect emphasizes this.

In Rom 7:7 the case is not quite so clear. First, it may be seen as a *present* contrary-to-fact condition: "I would not (now) know lust if the law were not continually saying. . . ." This would probably be easiest grammatically. Even the verb in the apodosis is in sense an imperfect, since the verb οἶδα is a perfect form with a present meaning and its pluperfect form is the corresponding imperfect. But the sense resulting is impossible. Or, second, it may be seen as a *past* contrary-to-fact condition: "I would not have known lust if the law had not said. . . ." If this is the sense, then the imperfect verb would be calling attention to the durative aspect: "If the law were not continually telling me. . . ," emphasizing the persistent influence of Paul's exposure to law-teaching.

In summary, it seems generally to be true that an imperfect verb in the protasis of a second class condition indicates a present-time condition and an aorist or pluperfect verb indicates a past-time condition. The few apparent exceptions are examples where the durative nature of the past-time condition is emphasized by the use of the imperfect. But the existence of a considerable number of exceptions points rather to the conclusion that this "rule" works because of the durative sense of the imperfect rather than because it was a required structural pattern. It is better to approach the meaning by giving attention to the aspect of the tenses used rather than to an imagined rule.

Other Noteworthy Examples

Individual consideration needs to be given to a few examples which show some unusual characteristics.

Luke 17:6. "If you have faith . . . you would be saying . . ." The protasis has εἰ with a present indicative verb and is therefore a first

class condition. But the apodosis has ἄν with an imperfect verb, which fits the second class pattern. Thus it is cited as an example of what grammarians sometimes call a "mixed condition."[20] There is nothing inherently unlikely about such a situation, and Nigel Turner well explains its peculiar appropriateness in this instance[21] as expressing a subtle politeness which avoided the harshness of saying, "If you had faith (which you do not) . . . ," the blunt meaning which would have resulted if he had used the full second class form.[22] However, it is possible to see an entirely different solution to this unusual construction. It is clear that the protasis is first class, a simple condition implying nothing as to whether Jesus' hearers actually had faith, and thus neither congratulating them nor criticizing them. Furthermore, it is clear from multitudes of examples that the apodosis of a first class condition may be of any form (declarative, hortatory, command, promise, rhetorical question, wish, etc.). A normal usage of ἄν with the imperfect which is not a second class apodosis does exist; it may well be the "potential" use of past tense indicatives for courteous or polite language or to express present necessity, obligation, possibility, or propriety.[23] Applying this grammatical usage to this passage, the sense becomes, in expanded paraphrase, "If you have faith, you *could* say to this mountain. . . ," or, "it would be right and proper for you to say. . . ," or, "if you have faith there is nothing you cannot ask for."

John 8:39. "If you are Abraham's children, you would be doing the works of your father" may also be an example of a mixed condition, with a first class protasis to soften the harshness of the statement. The textual tradition would suggest this understanding, whether the United Bible Society preferred reading ἐποιεῖτε or the Byzantine text ἄν ἐποιεῖτε is followed. In this instance, the explanation of the apodosis as a potential indicative, suggested for the preceding example, is not agreeable to the sense. Another reading, the imperative ποιεῖτε, followed by the NASB, would be a regular first class condition.

Heb 11:15. "If they were remembering the place from which they went out, they would have an opportunity to return" also involves a textual variation. The apodosis is clearly of the second class. In the

[20]A. T. Robertson, *Grammar,* 1022.

[21]N. Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. &. T Clark, 1965) 51-52.

[22]See my note on Turner's questionable understanding of the significance of the first class condition as reflected in his treatment of this passage in my preceding article, "First Class Conditions," 81, n. 17.

[23]See my discussion of this idiom earlier in this article. Also, R. Law, "Imperfect of 'Obligation' etc., in the N.T.," *ExpT* 30 (1919), 330ff.

UBS text the protasis has its verb in the present indicative and is thus of the first class. But the Byzantine text, accepted here by Westcott and Hort, has the imperfect tense, making the whole a normal second class condition. Here the time reference is actually past, even though imperfects, according to the rule discussed earlier, would be considered by some to signal a *present* contrary to fact. Perhaps the writer uses this "present" form from the same vantage point as in the preceding verse, which uses the "historical present" to express vividly a past situation. Or perhaps the present time reference in both verses is the "gnomic present"; it is *always* or characteristically true that if someone keeps looking back there are opportunities to go back. The use of the durative imperfect stresses the continuing situation: "if they were remembering . . . they would be having continuing opportunity to return."

John 19:11. "You would have no authority over me if it had not been given you from above." The problem here also is the time reference. If the verb of the protasis is taken as ἦν δεδομένον, a periphrastic pluperfect, then the time reference would be past, "If it had not been given . . ." If the verb is understood to be ἦν alone, with the perfect participle functioning as a predicate adjective, then the imperfect verb might be signaling a present contrary to fact: "if it were not (now) an authority which has been given you. . . " It is probably a distinction without a difference. In either case, the imperfect in the apodosis indicates the present situation.