"IF"

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The little word "if" is a very important word in the New Testament, as it is in other literature and in ordinary conversation. "If" introduces the condition upon which something is to be done; *e.g.*,"if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off" (Mark 9:43).

"If" clauses—that is, conditional clauses and clauses of concession—in the N.T. have not always been properly interpreted or understood. For example, the introduction to Wuest's *Expanded Translation of the New Testament* indicates that one type of conditional clause (*ei* with the indicative mood) implies that the speaker believes that the condition which he states is true, as when Satan says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God . . ." (Matt. 4:3); while another type of conditional clause (*ean* with the subjunctive mood) is "hypothetical" and therefore uncertain and undependable (*Gospels*, pp. 21-22). As a matter of fact, Satan doubtless did believe that Jesus was the Son of God; but it was not for this reason that the particular type of "if" clause was used. The distinction, moreover, between the meaning of these two types of conditional clauses is quite different from what Wuest says it is. For example, when Jesus says, "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub . . ." (Matt. 12:27), Jesus is hardly intending to imply that he does in fact cast out demons by Beelzebub! Yet *ei* with the indicative mood is used in this clause. On the other hand, Jesus' statement in John 14:3, "And if I go and prepare a place for you . . .," is anything but uncertain and undependable; yet it is expressed by *ean* and the subjunctive mood.

Wuest is not the only student of the Greek N.T. who has failed to grasp the distinction between the various types of "if" clauses. Yet the importance of these clauses for a correct understanding of many N.T. passages is considerable. Let us therefore examine the various types of conditional clauses in the N.T. in order to determine the proper distinction between them.

1. Conditions of fact

One very frequent type of conditional clause in the N.T. is expressed by *ei* ("if") and the indicative mood of the verb. Clauses of this type deal with events which are definite—most commonly, events which are happening now or which have happened already. For example, when Satan says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread" (Matt. 4:3), his assumption is, "You either are or are not the Son of God *now*." In John 15:20, when Jesus says, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you," his assumption is, "They either have or have not persecuted me in the past."

Clauses of this type, therefore, with *ei* and the indicative mood, deal with matters of *fact—i.e.,* with definite events. [1]

At the same time, it is important to observe that a condition of fact does *not* imply either that the speaker believes that the condition stated is true or that he believes it is not true. What the speaker believes in this regard may be learned from the context in many instances, but the "if" clause itself implies nothing concerning the speaker's assumption. For example, in Matt. 22:45 Jesus obviously assumes that the condition is true when he says, "If David thus calls him Lord . . ." In Rom. 4:2, on the other hand, St. Paul certainly assumes that the condition is *not* true when he says, "if Abraham was justified by works . . ." In John 15:20 Jesus first says, "If they have persecuted me . . .," which he recognizes is true; then he continues, "if they have kept my word . . .," which he just as surely assumes is not true. Yet all these "if" clauses are conditions of fact, expressed by *ei* and the indicative mood. In other instances the speaker may be uncertain as to whether the condition is true or not: *e.g.,* Mary's words in John 20:15, "Sir, if you have carried him away . . ."

To summarize, clauses of the type we have been discussing, using *ei* and the indicative mood, refer to definite events, not to mere possibilities or general truths. The condition involved may 1) be stated either negatively or affirmatively: "if he does . . ." or "if he does not . . ." Moreover, 2) the speaker may believe that the condition is true: "if they have persecuted me" (and they have done so); or 3) he may believe that the condition is not true: "if they have kept my word" (but they have not done so); or 4) he may be uncertain as to whether it is true: "sir, if you have carried him away" (she does not know whether he had or not); or 5) the speaker may even be mistaken in his assumption: "if he is sleeping" (John 11:12) (but he was in fact dead). All that the conditional clause itself tells is that the condition referred to is conceived of as being definite, not a mere generalization or a situation as yet undecided.

2. Contrary to fact conditions

There is another type of "if" clause which takes the indicative mood. In this second type of conditional clause a past actual event is referred to, but the sentence refers to what would have happened if the contrary had been true. A familiar example occurs in John 11:21 and 11:32: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." The actual fact is that Jesus had *not* been there

[1] These would ordinarily be events of the past and the present. Even a future event could, however, be expressed by *ei* and the indicative if the event, even though future, were assumed to be certain and therefore a settled *fact.* For example, in the sentence, "If tomorrow is Thursday, I must go to town," the "if" clause is a condition of fact because it is a settled fact that tomorrow either is or is not Thursday; there is no contingency involved. Future conditions of fact are rare in the N.T., but there is probably a futuristic sense to the present tense in 1 Cor. 6:2, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world *is to be judged* by you . . ."

and the brother *had* died. A similar example occurs in John 8:19 and 14:7: "If you had known me" (which you do not), "you would have known my father also" (which you do not). These "contrary to fact" clauses require the *past* tenses (imperfect, aorist, or pluperfect) [2] in both the "if" clause and the accompanying clause (protasis and apodosis); and the particle *an* generally, but not always, occurs in the apodosis. Other examples of contrary to fact clauses include Matt. 23:30: "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them . . ."; 1 Cor. 2:8, "if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory"; and 1 John 2:19, "if they had been of us they would have continued with us." In these contrary to fact conditions, then, the speaker assumes that the condition stated (the "if" clause) is the opposite of the actual fact.

3. Conditions of contingency

Both of the two previous types of clauses deal with definite events, and they therefore are expressed by *ei* and the indicative mood, the mood of fact. The third type of conditional clause which commonly occurs in the N.T. is expressed by *ean* ("if") and the subjunctive mood, which is the mood of contingency. This latter type of clause deals, not with a definite event, but with either 1) a general condition which may occur at various times (*e.g.*, "if it falls into a pit on the sabbath," Matt. 12:11), or 2) a future possibility (*e.g.*, "If I only touch his garment . . .," Matt. 9:21).

Just as in conditions of fact, so also in these conditions of contingency there is no assumption in the type of clause used either that the speaker believes the condition involved is true or that he believes the condition is untrue. This point is worthy of emphasis because it has sometimes been believed that conditional clauses of this type are "hypothetical" and therefore uncertain and undependable. Actually, a condition of contingency may refer to any one of various degrees of certainty: 1) the condition may be uncertain: "if you will fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9); 2) the condition may be an event which has happened often and which will likely happen often in the future: "if your brother should sin" (Luke 17:3), "if someone dies not having children" (Matt. 22:24); 3) it may refer to an event which is highly unlikely to occur: "if he should gain the whole world" (Matt. 16:26); 4) it may refer to an event which might easily be true somewhere either at present or in the future: "if a certain man should have a hundred sheep" (Matt. 18:12), "if I should touch his garment" (Mark 5:28); or 5) it may refer to an event which the speaker believes will actually happen: "if anyone says anything to you" (Matt. 21:3). Thus when 1 John repeatedly uses this form of conditional clause—"if we walk in the light" (1:7), "if we confess

[2] But not the *perfect* tense. The Greek perfect (or "present perfect") tense is not a past tense; it refers to a *present* condition resulting from a past event.

our sins" (1:9), "if we keep his commandments" (2:3), and many other instances—there is no question of either certainty or uncertainty of the condition involved but only the fact that the action referred to is a contingency rather than a definite event. Similarly, when 1 John 3:2 uses *ean* with the subjunctive mood, "we know that *if he appears* we shall be like him," there is implied no doubt or uncertainty of the appearance of Christ; the meaning is simply that the appearance referred to has not yet occurred, and that our being like Christ is contingent upon his appearing.

What, then, is the characteristic difference between conditional clauses which take *ei* and the indicative mood and those which take *ean* and the subjunctive mood? The difference is that the former has in mind a specific event, while the latter deals with general truths or possibilities.

At the same time, there is some elasticity in the use of these constructions in the N.T., as should be expected in a spoken language. Sometimes *ei* and the indicative is used where *ean* and the subjunctive might have been expected: *e.g.*, "But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart" (1 Cor. 7:15). Some of these exceptions may be accounted for as reflecting the looser usage of a spoken language. In other instances, a condition may be conceived of as being either a contingency or a definite event. For example, if the weather forecast predicts rain for tomorrow, one might assume that it therefore will definitely rain tomorrow and say, "If (it is true that) it is going to rain tomorrow . . .," using *ei* and the indicative mood; or he might assume that the rain is still only a contingency and say, "If it rains tomorrow . . ." or "If it should rain tomorrow . . .," using *ean* and the subjunctive mood.

The exceptions, moreover, should not blind one to the clear distinction between indicative and subjunctive which is generally to be observed. An obvious example is seen in John 3:12: "If I have told you earthly things" (*i.e.*, "told you already," *ei* and the indicative), . . . if I should tell you heavenly things" (*i.e.*, "in the future at some time," *ean* and the subjunctive). Another example is given by St. Paul: "although (it is true that) our outer nature *is* wasting away . . ." (2 Cor. 4:16), but "if our earthly house . . . *should be* destroyed . . ." (2 Cor. 5:1). In 4:16 the daily wasting away of the body is in view, which is a definite event and takes *ei* with the indicative mood. In 5:1 the contingency of death is in view, and the construction is therefore *ean* with the subjunctive mood.

4. Clauses of concession

A word may now be said concerning a related type of clause. Whereas a conditional clause sets up a condition favorable to the occurrence of an event, a clause of concession sets up a condition which is affirmed to be *inadequate* to bring about the event. Thus

one may say in English, "If you do this I will do that" (condition), or "Even if you do this I nevertheless will not do that" (concession).

Clauses of concession in the Greek N.T. rather closely parallel the construction of clauses of condition, as might be expected, but with *kai* ("even") often preceding or following *ei* or *ean*. The orientation is the same as for clauses of condition: *ei* and the indicative mood refers to an actual event, while *ean* with the subjunctive refers to a general truth or a contingency. For example, the unjust judge in Luke 18:4 says, "Even though (it is true that) I do not fear God" (*ei kai* and the indicative); while Peter in Matt. 26:35 says, "Even if it should be necessary for me to die with you . . ." (*kai ean* with the subjunctive).

5. Other constructions

Finally, it must be noted that there are other uses of *ei* and *ean* in addition to their use in clauses of condition and of concession. *Ean* often appears as an alternative to *an* in various constructions with the subjunctive mood: *hos ean, hote ean, heôs ean,* and the like. *Ei* is used in questions. In an indirect question *ei* is used in the sense of "whether", as in Matt. 27:49, "Let us see *whether* Elijah will come to save him." Probably by a natural extension of this sense, *ei* sometimes introduces a *direct* question, in which instances it will not be translated in English; for example, Luke 13:23, "Lord, (*ei*) will those who are saved be few?" This latter usage in a direct question is analogous to the use of *hoti* to introduce a direct statement or a direct question (*hoti* recitative). Finally, in a few N.T. instances *ei* is used with the implication of an oath, with *ei* making emphatic the negation (or, in Heb. 6:14, the affirmation); for example, Mark 8:12, "Truly I say to you, a sign shall surely not be given to this generation." The background of this class of expression may be an oath such as, "(May such and such happen) if there shall be given . . ."

6. Conclusion

In clauses of condition and concession, the important thing is to remember that *ei* and the indicative is related to facts or definite events, while *ean* and the subjunctive relates to general conditions, contingencies, and possibilities. The distinction has nothing at all to do with the speaker's belief that the condition involved is either true or untrue, and only the contrary to fact clauses of condition or concession make the speaker's assumption clear.