

## SOME ASPECTS OF CONDITIONAL SENTENCES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

The great Gildersleeve once said that conditional sentences constitute one of the most important phenomena of Greek Syntax.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare had one of his characters say that 'if' is a 'peacemaker' and that there is much virtue in 'if'.<sup>3</sup> If virtue here means importance, one is inclined to agree. But Shakespeare, when he said that the word 'if' is a peacemaker, did not anticipate the involved controversy between Greek grammarians of the nineteenth century over the word.

The New Testament, like other collections of Greek documents, makes frequent use of suppositional statements. There are, according to this writer's count, 339 examples of complete periods using *ei* and the indicative in what are called 'conditions of reality', 51 using *ei* and the indicative in 'contrary to fact' conditions, 332 using *ean* and the subjunctive in 'anticipatory' conditions, and 12 examples of *ei* and the optative in the New Testament (though the latter are not all true conditions, nor are they complete conditional sentences). This makes a total of 734 or an average of about 1.2 per page in a late edition of Nestle's Greek text. Considering the fact that there are an even larger number of mixed conditions and quasi-conditionals or conditional equivalents such as participles and indefinite relatives which behave like conditionals and must be so interpreted, one can see how large this construction looms in the Bible. The construction is also important exegetically because Greek sentences express their shades of meaning oftentimes more precisely than their English counterparts.

This paper will offer a survey of the results of a more detailed study of conditional sentences in the New Testament. The original investigation was entitled 'The Use of Conditional Sentences in the Greek New Testament as Compared with Homeric, Classical, and Hellenistic Uses'.<sup>4</sup> The study was made comparatively because of the conviction that the Koiné (of which the New Testament is a part) must be studied from the larger context of the historical language, and also because the voluminous controversy against which these sentences must be interpreted involves the longer history of their use in the language.

The temperament of the nineteenth century seemingly was more conducive to purely grammatical study than our own. The older masters of the classics like Goodwin, Gildersleeve, and Sonnenschein gave minute attention to the study of the language. The results appear in the great works like Goodwin's *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb*,<sup>5</sup> Gildersleeve's articles

<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in *Restoration Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1960

<sup>2</sup> B. L. Gildersleeve, 'Studies in Pindaric Syntax. 1. Conditional Sentences', *The American Journal of Philology*, III (1882), p. 434 f.

<sup>3</sup> *As You Like It*, Act V, Scene IV.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. Roberts, Unpublished Dissertation (University of Texas Library, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> William Watson Goodwin. (Rewritten and Enlarged. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1930.)

in the *American Journal of Philology* (A.J.P.) and the *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (T.A.P.A.), in the descriptive grammars like that of Smyth<sup>1</sup> and of Goodwin-Gulick<sup>2</sup> and others.

The conclusions set forth in recent New Testament grammars such as Burton's *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*,<sup>3</sup> H.P.V. Nunn's *Syntax of New Testament Greek*,<sup>4</sup> both the large and short grammars of A. T. Robertson,<sup>5</sup> Dana and Mantey's *Manual of the Greek New Testament*,<sup>6</sup> and Blass-Debrunner's *Grammatik des Neutestamentlichen Griechisch*,<sup>7</sup> reflect one side or the other of the discussions carried on between the classical scholars in a heated debate among English and American grammarians in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

That debate concerned the best scheme of classifying and describing conditional sentences and what the actual meaning of some of them is.

The background of the discussion lies in the fact that there are several ways to classify conditionals. It is possible to classify as to form (either of the protasis or of the apodosis; the protasis with *ei* or *ean*, the apodosis with or without *an*), or as to time (whether the condition is past, present or future), as to whether the condition is particular (speaking of the specific action of some person or persons) or is general (speaking indefinitely of any act of a given class which may be supposed to occur), or finally as to the meaning (whether the condition implies the determination or non-determination, the fulfilment or non-fulfilment, anticipation or vividness of the condition).

All grammarians admitted that it is not so much a matter of one system being wrong or right as a question of which classification best summarizes the different classes of sentences, or which will aid the student to grasp the significance of the types and make them his own. However, there was serious disagreement as to the exact significance of some forms.

A. Sonnenschein, an English grammarian, preferred a system of classification based solely on form.<sup>8</sup> But he found little following in his idea in the U.S.A.

*Goodwin's Classification.* The system of classification best known to American students is that of Goodwin, which combines several features mentioned above. His four main divisions are:

#### I. Present and Past Suppositions Implying Nothing as to the Truth or Untruth of the Protasis.

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Weir Smyth, *A Greek Grammar for Colleges*, New York: American Cook Co., 1920.

<sup>2</sup> William Watson Goodwin and Charles Burton Gulick, *Greek Grammar*, Boston: Ginn & Co., 1930.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest de Witt Burton. (Fifth Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1903.)

<sup>4</sup> H. P. V. Nunn, Cambridge University Press, 1938.

<sup>5</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, fourth edition, Nashville: Boardman Press, 1934; with W. Hersey Davis, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament*, New York: Harper, 1931.

<sup>6</sup> Dana and Mantey, New York: Macmillan Co., 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Blass and Debrunner, eighth edition, Göttingen: Vanderhoek & Ruprecht, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> A. Sonnenschein, 'Horton Smith's Conditional Sentences', *Classical Review*, IX (1895), pp. 220-3. He was supported by C. D. Chambers, 'The Classification of Conditional Sentences', *ibid.*, pp. 293 ff.

(a) Chiefly Particular, *ei* and the Indicative.

(b) General.

1. Present General, *ean* and the Subjunctive—Present Indicative.
2. Past General, *ei* with the Optative—Imperfect Indicative.

II. Present and Past Particular Implying that the Protasis is not True and that the Condition is not Fulfilled (Contrary to Fact).

III. Future More Vivid Conditions, *Ean* with the Subjunctive, usually with the Future Indicative.

IV. Future Less Vivid Conditions, *ei* with the Optative, optative with *an*.

In addition to Goodwin's grammars (including the revision by Gulick) this is basically the system in Smyth's *Greek Grammar* and also that of the New Testament grammars by Burton and by Nunn.

But this system (though adopted by these grammars) was violently attacked in the last century as being unscientific and untrue to the real meaning of the Greek constructions. The frontal attack was made by B. S. Gildersleeve (of John Hopkins). He objected, for example, to making the distinction between general and particular sentences the chief norm. He demonstrated that all types of protases may be general (not just those using *ean* and the subjunctive with a present tense in the apodosis, which Goodwin called 'present general', and those using *ei* and the optative with the imperfect in the apodosis, which Goodwin called 'past general') and that all types are usually general when they contain the indefinite *tis* ('anyone'). Next he objected to making time the second major classification basis because it left no place for particular or general future conditions using *ei* with the future indicative (which Gildersleeve called minatory and monitory because they often expressed threats or warnings).<sup>1</sup>

Gildersleeve further objected (as did many others) to the assertion of Goodwin that the first class condition does not 'imply anything as to the truth or untruth of the protasis'. He argued that when it is understood that all use of mood has to do with the *manner of affirmation*, that is, with the *statement* of fact or uncertainty and not fact or uncertainty itself (which must always be determined from context or prior knowledge), it will be then understood that the protasis of the first class condition does state its hypothesis as a fact or reality from which the apodosis naturally follows. Furthermore, it was suggested that the term 'vividness' in the expressions 'more vivid' and 'less vivid' does not represent the true distinction between the *ean* and the subjunctive, and *ei* and the optative in these two types of future conditions. The large majority of American and British grammarians argued that the former expressed 'anticipation' while the latter expressed 'possibility' or a lesser degree of 'probability' rather than vividness.

<sup>1</sup> Besides the references given above, compare Gildersleeve, 'Reviews and Book Notices', *A.J.P.* IX (1888), p. 491 f.; 'On *ei* with the Future Indicative and *Ean* with the Subjunctive in the Tragic Poets', *T.A.P.A.* VII (1876), pp. 2-23; 'Brief Mention', *A.J.P.* XXXIII (1912), p. 490. See also E. B. Clapp, 'Conditional Sentences in Aischylus', *T.A.P.A.* XVIII (1887), pp. 48-53 and 'Conditional Sentences in the Greek Tragedians', *T.A.P.A.* XLII (1911), pp. 8-92.

Gildersleeve preferred the division of all conditions on the basis of whether the protasis is determined or undetermined, subdividing the determined into those determined as true (which he called 'logical') and those determined as untrue (which he called 'unreal'), and subdividing the undetermined into the 'probable' (which he called the 'anticipatory') and the 'less probable' (which he called the 'ideal'). He pointed out that each of these four types of protases could be either general or particular and that the time falls naturally into the pattern of meanings, the logical being past, present or future; the unreal being by its meaning limited to past and present; the anticipatory being either present (fact uncertain) or future; and the ideal being future except for those put in the past by the use of the imperfect indicative in the apodosis.<sup>1</sup>

This system goes back to the analysis of the German grammarian Hermann, according to A. T. Robertson. It is the system adopted by Robertson in both his large and short grammars, and by the grammars like Dana and Mantey and W. H. Davis which depend upon Robertson's work. Those interested will find the section on conditional sentences in Robertson's *Historical Grammar* one of the more able sections of the book. He vigorously defends the fourfold system basic to Gildersleeve's treatment, but claims to have arrived at the conclusions through his teachers independently of Gildersleeve's work. His analysis is marred only by some confusion over the optative mood as discussed below.

A fairly recent article by W. Kendrick Pritchett<sup>2</sup> in the *American Journal of Philology*, laments that this analysis of conditionals of Gildersleeve, which once found acceptance in respectable quarters, is now generally neglected, and that the analysis of Goodwin is taught to most classics students.

Mr Pritchett largely replies in his article to a work by Miss E. A. Hahn entitled *The Subjunctive and the Optative*<sup>3</sup> in which she had re-examined and restated the position of Goodwin. He argues against the view of Goodwin, that the optative condition is merely a 'less vivid' form of the future condition. He further argues that Goodwin's limitation of general conditions to two types is confusing, and cites Goodwin's admission in Liddell and Scott (7th Edition)<sup>4</sup> that he had made too extensive an application of this principle.

The study of New Testament conditions reveals interesting facts, only a few of which can be given in the limits of this paper. New Testament usage conforms generally to the same basic types and the same constructions within those types as the Attic dialect, the dialect in which the earlier variety became more fixed and the dialect which served as the basis of the Koiné structure. New Testament variations from classical usage are either to be accounted for in origin by the LXX or the papyri or the Koiné in general.

The principal differences in New Testament usage are:

(1) Use (though infrequent) of forms not considered standard in the

<sup>1</sup> For Goodwin's reply to criticism of his analysis see 'On the Classification of Conditional Sentences in Greek Syntax', *T.A.P.A.* IV (1873), pp. 60-79 and 'On "Shall" and "Should" in the Protasis, and Their Greek Equivalents', *T.A.P.A.* VII (1876), pp. 87-107.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kendrick Pritchett, 'The Conditional Sentence in the Greek', *A.J.P.* LXXII (1955), pp. 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> Emma Adelaide Hahn, *Subjunctive and Optative: Their Origin as Future*, American Philological Association, 1953.

<sup>4</sup> Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th edn., New York: 1882.

Classical language: *ei* and the subjunctive (some seven times in the New Testament), *ean* with the indicative (some twelve possible examples, texts uncertain), and *ean* instead of *an* in indefinite or conditional relatives (this last rather infrequent). All these occasionally are found in the Classical language just as in the New Testament. The frequency is about on a par with that of the LXX and Papyri.

(2) The use of *ou* instead of *me* ('not') as a usual negative of the logical or first class conditional. This is a major change from Classical, though again in line with the use in the Koiné generally. In participles the Classical usage, whereby the conditional participle takes *me* and the others *ou*, no longer is the rule, *me* greatly predominating as negative with all types of participles.

(3) The New Testament has a few examples (mostly in quotations, but see Mark 8: 12) of the use of *ei* with the future indicative to express an oath (Cf. Heb. 6: 14). This construction is seemingly unique in Biblical Greek, having originated in the LXX where there are some 74 examples of it.

(4) The major variations of conditions in the New Testament are in the loss or infrequency of use of certain forms:

(a) *Ei* with the future indicative (other than in oaths) is sparingly used in the New Testament. (There are only some twenty examples.) Only one of these (2 Tim. 2: 12) has the minatory-monitory force observed by Gildersleeve in its Classical usage (especially in the Tragic Poets). So the generalization has little meaning for the New Testament. This construction was found to be quite common in Attic.

(b) The unreal condition is comparatively infrequent in the New Testament, there being only 51 occurrences as compared with over 300 for real and anticipatory conditions. The Gospel of John has 18 of these. This lack of use does not seem to be due to any process of decay, but merely to the accident of use. The imperfect here usually places the time of the condition in the present, though it may have the past continuous meaning. Some 14 examples of this condition occur where the context shows the condition to be unreal, but where the particle *an* (the usual sign) does not occur in the apodosis. However, this state of affairs is not uncommon in other Greek. The potential indicative is used in the New Testament much as in Classical Greek.

(c) The Ideal Condition (in line with the general loss of the Optative in the Koiné) does not occur in the New Testament in complete form. There are 12 uses of *ei* with the optative in the New Testament. Of these only 1 Peter 3: 14, 17; 1 Cor. 14: 10 and 15: 37 probably belong to the ideal condition. The others (Acts 17: 11, 27 bis, 20: 16, 24: 19, 25: 20, 27: 12, 39) seem to be uses of Logical or Anticipatory Conditions turned into *ei* with the optative in indirect discourse. (This is a Classical usage; note that all instances are found in Luke.) Several commentators (Lenski, for example) take A. T. Robertson severely to task for calling passages like Acts 17: 11, 27 fourth class conditions instead of recognizing them as indirect discourse. As in Attic Greek, the optative with *an* in a potential sense occurs some nine times in the New Testament; these are significant mostly as relics of the former style. The complete Ideal Condition seemingly is replaced in the New Testament by the Real or Anticipatory conditions. The 'past general' type (which many grammarians consider a mixed condition anyway) does not occur.

As to the controversy over the meaning and classification of conditional sentences, the following should be noted:

(1) The logical or First Class Conditions which Goodwin-Gulick call 'past or present particular' conditions are not by any means wholly or even mostly particular in the New Testament. Many of this type are general. This fact has generally been recognized by New Testament grammarians (Moulton, *An Introduction to the Study of New Testament Greek*<sup>1</sup>; Burton, p. 107). Examples are 1 Cor. 15: 32; Luke 14: 26; Rom. 8: 25; Jas. 1: 26; Rev. 11: 5; Luke 19: 8. On this point the New Testament evidence supports the objection of Gildersleeve and his followers to Goodwin's scheme.

(2) In the New Testament (contrary to the statement of most grammars) the third class ('Future More Vivid') does not usually have the future tense in the apodosis. The most frequent construction in the apodosis is the present indicative (111 instances to 105). Of course, other constructions like the imperative (24), *ou me* with the Aorist Subjunctive (26), add strength to the assertion that the future idea is the logical apodosis for use with *ean* and the subjunctive. It is the apodosis with the present tense which most interests us. The New Testament examples do include some of the type meaning, 'If he ever does this, he is always punished' (Goodwin's Present General). But this by no means exhausts the meaning of the construction. As some New Testament Grammars have noted, *ean* with the subjunctive followed by the present indicative often has a future sense or the sense of something now true and thought of as enduring or continuous. The idea need not be general. See Matt. 18: 13; 2 Cor. 5: 1. The future is often so real that it is spoken of as being vividly present. Many conditions of this type are not general. What, for example, is general about John 19: 12, 'If you should loose this man, you are no friend of Caesar'? Or about Matt. 8: 2, 'If you wish, you can heal me'? It is possible to think of these as mixed conditions. But they are really very common. The truth is that Goodwin's classification has no place for such conditions.

The New Testament evidence, then, seems to support the contention of Gildersleeve and Pritchett: (1) that all four types of protases are either particular or general according to subject and context and hence it is a mistake to isolate two of these general types and give them special classes while the others are ignored; and (2) that, since the Logical or First Class condition may also be future, it is illogical to make time a major basis of classification.

There are too few Ideal fragments in the New Testament to throw any light on the further controversy over the terms 'more' or 'less vivid' as a means of expressing the difference between the third and fourth class supposition in Goodwin's classification. My own study of the relevant literature and analysis of the sentences in a wide range of authors from Homer down, has led me to think that here also Goodwin's terminology is not the best.

The discussion as to whether the First Class Conditional protasis states the assumption as fact cannot in this writer's opinion be settled by an appeal

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Moulton, *An Introduction to the Study of New Testament Greek*, London: Epworth Press, 1930 (p. 210) and 1955 (p. 135).

to examples; so the New Testament evidence helps but little. Good grammarians may be found on both sides of the question. It really seems to be merely a matter of viewpoint. Burton claims that it is the context which shows whether the statement is actually true or false. Others point out that even the contrary-to-fact statements may be shown by the context not to be untrue. It seems to this writer that Robertson is right that such discussion confuses *fact* with *statement of fact* and that the mood does have to do with the statement of the verb as to reality or non-reality. Many New Testament examples are 'statements for sake of argument' (Matt. 12: 28) or premises in *ad hominem* arguments. Many others are the type used when one accepts a fact just uttered at face value which had not previously been understood, as when the Pharisees said to John the Baptist, 'If you are not the Christ' (as John had just denied) 'then why do you baptize?'

In summary, the review of the whole study and examination of New Testament conditions has led this writer to think that the simple four-class division of Gildersleeve is much to be preferred to that of Goodwin, and to agree with Mr Pritchett in lamenting that Gildersleeve's classification has not met with wider adoption.

HAROLD W. FEHDERAU

## 'A TRANSLATOR'S HANDBOOK ON MARK' IN ACTION

We used the United Bible Societies' *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*<sup>1</sup> for our translation of that book of the Bible into Kituba (Kikongo ya Leta), a lingua franca of the south-western region of Congo-Léopoldville and the southern half of Congo-Brazzaville. This is an appraisal of its help to our work.

### Praise

This Handbook does indeed provide 'helps for translators', as the series of which it is a part is called.

Probably the greatest help we experienced was the tremendous saving in time and increased efficiency in the preparatory work for the translation. Clear *exegetical help* is provided in a compact way. Hours of searching for the pertinent information in commentaries and lexicons were no longer necessary. When further research was required, we did, of course, consult other works; but much of the material gained previously only by constant, time-consuming research is presented in the Handbook in summarized form. In addition it is helpful because the material is slanted to deal with the translator's specific problems and needs. The *translation section* with its lexical and syntactic help was also a time-saver in a similar way. It presents in a summarized form the experience and suggestions of some of those

<sup>1</sup> For details see under 'Helps for Translators' at the back of this magazine.