

Conditionals in the New Testament: Interpretation and Translation

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Preface

In March 2013 I was facilitating a workshop on hortatory and expository discourse analysis for translation teams in Ethiopia. As usual in such workshops, the translators immediately applied what they had learned about the discourse features of their languages to the translation of a biblical text, which in this case was 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Half way through the workshop we came to 1 Thessalonians 3:6–8.

⁶But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. (ESV)

Many of the translators were puzzled by this. In verses 6-7 Paul twice mentions the faith of the Thessalonian believers. Why, then, does he express doubt as to whether they are standing fast in the Lord in v.8? As we discussed v.8, it became clear that in some of the translators' languages, a direct translation of the *if* conditional expressed doubt or uncertainty.¹ The translators realized that using a conditional construction in their translations would convey a wrong impression, and one of them asked whether there was a checklist of conditional sentences in the New Testament, similar to the checklist of rhetorical questions in SIL International's *Translator's Workplace*. There wasn't, but a number of translators and consultants said that a checklist of conditional sentences would be a helpful resource.

Finally, with the help of a wonderful team of research assistants, a translator's guide to conditional sentences in the New Testament is available. Our hope and prayer is that it will lead to clearer, more natural, and more accurate translations.

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¹ Most English translations use *if* in v.8 (although the NIV uses *since* and the NLT translates this verse *It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord.*) In Koine Greek, as in English, conditional clauses can express information that is known to be true. In the Greek New Testament, most of these are expressed using the connective *εἰ* plus an indicative verb form; most of the conditionals that express doubt or uncertainty use the connective *ἐὰν* and a subjunctive verb form. However the conditional in 1Th 3:8 is a hybrid: the connective is *ἐὰν* but the verb is indicative. Determining the meaning of this conditional is therefore entirely dependent on looking at the context in which it occurs.

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1 Defining conditionals

Conditional sentences typically consist of two clauses: one ‘conditional’ clause “provisionally becomes the framework of reference” (Haiman 1978: 580) for understanding the other ‘consequent’ clause. In many (but not all) languages, the conditional clause is subordinate, meaning that it can’t form a sentence on its own; it needs to be followed by another clause, and so the consequent clause is typically a main clause. The conditional clause is called the PROTASIS, and is conventionally labelled *p*. The consequent clause is called the APODOSIS, and is conventionally labelled *q*.

Crucially, the truth of the protasis is not asserted, even if it is known to be true. (This distinguishes genuine conditional clauses from other reason clauses, such as those that in English are introduced by *since* or *because*.) The apodosis is understood in relation to the protasis; usually this means that the likelihood of the protasis being true determines the likelihood of the apodosis being true, or – for example in that case that the apodosis is a command or question – the likelihood of the protasis being true determines the appropriateness of the apodosis. In the case of ‘speech act’ conditionals, such as ‘If you’re hungry, there is food in the fridge,’ the apodosis is true regardless of the truth of the protasis (there’s food in the fridge whether you’re hungry or not), and the protasis merely establishes the condition under which the apodosis is relevant to the hearer.²

Conditional sentences are typically defined both formally and functionally. For example in English, conditionals are defined in formal terms as sentences that include an *if* clause and a main clause, often introduced by *then* (although in practice *then* occurs relatively rarely). Clearly, the formal part of any definition will be language-specific; different languages have different grammatical ways to mark conditional sentences, and in fact some have no dedicated grammatical marker of conditional sentences. In addition, as has been widely noted (see for example Comrie 1976: 77-78; Wallace 1996: 685-689), the formal and functional criteria do not always coincide, and the ‘conditional’ relationship between two clauses can often be expressed without using the typical conditional construction (compare, for example, “If you come any closer, I’ll shoot” and “Come any closer, and I’ll shoot”). To illustrate this, let’s look at some examples from 1 Timothy. First consider how 1Ti 1:8 and 3:1 have been translated in different English versions.

1Ti 1:8

Οἶδαμεν	δὲ	ὅτι	καλὸς	ὁ	νόμος,	ἐάν	τις	αὐτῷ	νομίμως	χρηται,
we know	but	that	good	the	law	if	anyone	it	lawfully	uses

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, (ESV)

We know that the law is good when used correctly. (NLT)

1Ti 3:1

Εἴ	τις	ἐπισκοπῆς	ὀρέγεται,	καλοῦ	ἔργου	ἐπιθυμεῖ.
if	anyone	overseer	aspires to	good	work	he desires

If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. (ESV)

whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. (NRSV)

² Speech act conditionals are not common in the NT; we have identified only the following: 2Co 2:10; Php 3:4; 1Ti 3:15; 1Jn 3:20.

In both of these verses the ESV translates the Greek particles *ἐάν* and *εἰ* (we'll come to the difference between these in a minute) as *if*. However, in 1Ti 1:8 NLT uses *when* and in 1Ti 3:1 NRSV translates *εἰ τις* 'if anyone' as *whoever*. Are these translations inaccurate? In English, *when* is used to describe a situation that occurs regularly or that is sure to occur in the future. This fits the context in 1Ti 1:8 exactly; there are some people who use the law correctly (presumably Paul and Timothy are among them), and so *when* is an acceptable translation of *ἐάν*. In 1Ti 3:1, by using *whoever* and *if anyone* respectively, the NRSV and the ESV both make a general statement about a person who aspires to be an overseer; both sound natural and both express essentially the same idea. Thus not all Greek conditional clauses are translated as conditional clauses with *if* in all English translations.

Next, consider 1Ti 3:10.

καὶ	οὗτοι	δὲ	δοκιμαζέσθωσαν	πρῶτον,	εἴτα	διακονεῖωσαν	ἀνέγκλητοι	ὄντες.
also	these	and	let them be tested	first	then	let them serve	blameless	being

And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. (ESV)

And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. (NRSV)

In this verse, both ESV and NRSV (and in fact most English translations) have used the conditional marker *if* where Greek just has a present participle verb (ὄντες 'being'). Here, two clauses function in the same way as clauses in a prototypical conditional sentence: the validity of one ('let them serve as deacons') depends on the validity of the other ('they prove themselves blameless'). However, they are joined without *εἰ* or *ἐάν* in Greek, even though English speakers prefer *if* in this case.

What the discussion of these three examples has shown is that Greek clauses containing the conditional conjunctions *εἰ* or *ἐάν* are not always translated using *if* in English, and conversely clauses that are translated using *if* in the majority of English translations do not always contain *εἰ* or *ἐάν* in the Greek. In the next section, we will look at the structures and functions of Greek conditional clauses with *εἰ* and *ἐάν*.

1.1 How many conditional sentences are there in the Greek New Testament?

Determining the number of conditional sentences in the Greek New Testament is not as simple as listing all the *εἰ* and *ἐάν* conjunctions. On the one hand, there are what Boyer (1983: 184) calls 'implied conditions', that is, "sentences or elements which are not in form or fact conditional, but which are judged from context to imply a conditional sense." 1Ti 3:10, discussed above, is an example. We have chosen not to include examples of implied conditions in the database, with a very few exceptions in which the majority of English translations use a conditional and there is strong contextual support for a conditional interpretation. One such example is 1Ti 5:9-10, which lists eight requirements for a widow to receive support from the church; the first three requirements are described in non-conditional clauses ('having lived not less than sixty years, having been the wife of one man, and having a reputation for good works'), and the remaining five requirements are described in conditional clauses. It is debatable whether the final five conditions are elaborations of the good works mentioned in the third requirement,

or separate conditions in their own right; however it is clear that the first three requirements describe conditions even though they contain no conditional conjunctions.

On the other hand, there are constructions which contain *εἰ* or *ἐάν* but which do not express a conditional relationship between clauses, or in which a conditional sense is debatable. Deciding which of these constructions to include or exclude from the database requires a certain amount of judgment, and we did not want to make a decision simply on whether a particular English translation used *if*. Those constructions that we deemed non-conditional have been included in the database but are listed separately at the end of each book. The constructions in question are discussed later in this resource (see §xx).

Because there is not a clear, one-to-one link between the conditional conjunctions *εἰ* and *ἐάν* and conditional meaning, different lists of conditionals in the New Testament do not match precisely. Boyer's four articles on the conditionals of the New Testament (1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983) list a total of 629 conditional sentences (Boyer 1982b fn 1), and a similar number are listed in Elliott (1981). However, these lists do not entirely overlap (see Entz 2020: 23 for a discussion). A "morph search" for "conjunction, adverbial conditional" in Logos Bible Software yields 750 results.³ Our database includes approximately 655 conditional sentences, plus approximately 230 non-conditional sentences which include some form of *εἰ* or *ἐάν*.

2 Types of conditionals in Greek

As we have seen, explicitly marked conditional clauses in Koine Greek (henceforth just Greek) are usually indicated by the conjunction *εἰ* or *ἐάν*. The different conditional constructions in the NT have traditionally been divided into three 'classes'; there is a fourth class that is found in classical Greek but not in the NT.

2.1 First class conditionals

First class conditionals have the conditional conjunction *εἰ* together with an indicative mood verb of any tense in the protasis. (If the protasis is negated, this is done using *οὐ*, or variants of this such as *οὐκ* or *οὐδέ*.⁴) The apodosis can be in any mood or tense. Wallace (1996: 690-694) characterizes the protasis in a first class conditional as "assumed true for the sake of argument." This does not mean that the speaker or writer is necessarily presenting the protasis as true (although he may be), but rather that he is asking the hearer or reader⁵ to suppose that the protasis is true and to then evaluate the apodosis on the basis of this. When the speaker and hearer both know and agree that the protasis is in fact true, we have what we will call a 'factual' conditional.⁶ The characterization of the content of the

3 To do this search, go to Tools > Search, and in a Greek New Testament type @ (to get part of speech), select 'Conjunction', and then 'Adverbial conditional' (which is the first option listed). Alternatively, just type @CAC in the search box of a Greek New Testament.

4 The construction *εἰ μὴ* also occurs, but this usually has the sense of 'except' (see discussion in §xx below).

5 From now on we will use *speaker* as shorthand for *speaker or writer*, and *hearer* as shorthand for *hearer or reader*.

6 In many such cases, *εἰ* could be translated into English with *since*. However Wallace (1996: 692), noting that the Greek NT has several words that correspond more closely to *since*, is adamant that it should not: "To translate *εἰ* as *since* is to

protasis as “assumed true for the sake of argument” is reflected in the high proportion of first class conditionals in argumentation; for example, Romans contains twice as many first class conditionals as second and third class conditionals combined. The following examples are typical (but note the two verbless clauses in Rom 8:31):

Rom 8:31

[εἰ ὁ θεὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν,]p [τίς καθ’ ἡμῶν;]q
 if God for us who against us
 [If God is for us,]p [who can be against us?]q

1Co 15:16

[εἰ γὰρ νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται,]p [οὐδὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται]q
 if for (the) dead not are raised neither Christ has been raised
 [For if the dead are not raised,]p [not even Christ has been raised.]q

2.2 Second class conditionals

Second class conditionals have the conjunction εἰ and an indicative imperfect or aorist verb form in the protasis. The apodosis takes the same verb form as the protasis, and is often, but not always, marked with ἄν. (If the protasis is negated, this is done using μὴ.) This construction presents the protasis – and by association the apodosis also – as contrary to fact;⁷ this is what we will call a ‘non-factual’ conditional. When the verb form is imperfect, the time reference is present;⁸ when the verb form is aorist, the time reference is past. This can be illustrated by the following examples (Wallace 1996: 695-6).

John 5:46a – present contrary-to-fact second class conditional (imperfect)

[εἰ γὰρ ἐπιστεύετε Μωϋσεϊ,]p [ἐπιστεύετε ἄν ἐμοί]q
 if for you were believing Moses you were believing would me
 [For if you believed Moses,]p [you **would** believe me,]q for he wrote about me.
 (Indicates: You do not believe me, therefore you do not believe Moses either.)

1Co 2:8 – past contrary-to-fact second class conditional (aorist)

[εἰ γὰρ ἔγνωσαν,]p [οὐκ ἄν τὸν κύριον τῆς δόξης ἐσταύρωσαν.]q
 if for they knew not would the Lord of glory they crucified
 [for if they had understood,]p [they **would** not have crucified the Lord of glory.]q

turn an invitation to dialogue into a lecture.” However, in languages that do not use conditional constructions when the protasis is known to be true, factual conditionals in Greek may need to be translated using a non-conditional construction.

7 Because the verb in a first class conditional is an indicative form of any tense, when there is no ἄν in the apodosis the difference between first and second class conditionals can only be determined on the basis of whether the protasis is presented as true or false. This can lead to some debate, as for example in Mrk 3:26, Rom 7:7, and 1Co 11:31. Boyer (1983: 173-5) discusses some examples of mixed conditions, such as Luk 17:6, in which the verb in the protasis is present tense but the apodosis contains ἄν.

8 The time reference of imperfect second class conditional sentences is the present, despite the facts that a) the imperfect and the aorist are both termed ‘past tense’ forms in traditional Greek grammars, and b) English translations of the imperfect usually use the past tense in the protasis and *would* in the apodosis (while English translations of the aorist use the past perfect in the protasis and *would have* + *en* in the apodosis).

2.3 Third class conditionals

Third class conditionals have the conjunction ἐάν (historically a combination of εἰ and ἂν); the verb in the protasis is in the subjunctive mood and can be in any tense. The apodosis can be in any mood or tense. (If the protasis is negated, this is done using μὴ, often with the sense of ‘unless’.) Wallace describes the meaning of the third class as follows: “The *third* class condition encompasses a broad range of potentialities in Koine Greek. It depicts what is *likely to occur* in the *future*, what could *possibly occur*, or even what is only *hypothetical* and will not occur.” (1996: 696 emphasis original) Wallace distinguishes two subclasses of third class conditionals: ‘probable future conditionals’ that denote specific situations in the future, and ‘present general conditionals’ that denote generic situations in the present (ibid 697). Boyer (1982: 172) rejects this distinction and prefers the term ‘future condition’ for all third class conditionals, arguing that even “gnomic or atemporal” apodoses include future time (ibid 174). We have found that the range of uses of third class conditionals is so wide, that it is impractical to try to divide them simply into ‘future’ and ‘present’; also, the term ‘future condition’ can be misleading. In our classification, we therefore indicate the perceived degree of hypotheticality or probability and the likely time orientation of each conditional that is listed, recognizing that these labels are interpretations only.

A good example of this is Jhn 8:31.

[Εάν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ,]p [ἀληθῶς μαθηταί μου ἐστε]q
if you(pl) remain in the word of me truly disciples of me you are
[If you abide in my word,]p [you are truly my disciples...]q

In Jhn 8:31, Jesus is speaking “to the Jews who had believed him,” and so it is currently true that they are Jesus’ disciples; abiding in his word can be seen as providing evidence for this. However, abiding requires ongoing commitment (NASB and NRSV translate μείνητε as *continue*) and so this is also applicable to the future; in fact v.32 continues, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The conditional has scope over v.32 as well, and expresses a cause-effect relationship (‘If you abide in my word, this will cause you to know the truth, which in turn will cause you to be free’).

Here are four examples from John’s gospel⁹ that demonstrate some of the range of functions of third class conditionals:

Jhn 12:24 (two conditionals, both are hypothetical and gnomic; the first is translated *unless*)

[ἐάν μὴ ὁ κόκκος τοῦ σίτου πεσὼν εἰς τὴν γῆν ἀποθάνῃ,]p1 [αὐτὸς μόνος μένει.]q1
if not the grain of wheat having fallen into the ground dies (SUBJ) it alone remains)

[ἐάν δὲ ἀποθάνῃ,]p2 [πολὺν καρπὸν φέρει.]q2
if but it dies (SUBJ) much fruit it bears

[unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,]p1 [it remains alone;]q1 [but if it dies,]p2 [it bears much fruit.]q2

9 John’s gospel is characterized by a high number of third class conditionals. While Matthew and Luke use roughly equal numbers of first and third class conditionals, John uses almost twice as many third class conditionals (64 compared to 23 first class). John’s gospel also contains more conditional sentences of all classes than either Mathew’s or Luke’s gospels, despite being shorter than both.

Jhn 14:3 (factual and future, because Jesus has just stated that he is going to prepare a place)

καὶ [ἐὰν πορευθῶ καὶ ἐτοιμάσω τόπον ὑμῖν,]p
and if I go (SUBJ) and I prepare (SUBJ) place for you(pl)

[πάλιν ἔρχομαι καὶ παραλήμψομαι ὑμᾶς πρὸς ἐμαυτόν ...]q
again I am coming and I will receive you(pl) to myself

And [if I go and prepare a place for you,]p [I will come again and will take you to myself...]q

Jhn 21:25 (non-factual and gnomic)

Ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ἃ ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ἅτινα

[ἐὰν γράφηται καθ' ἓν,]p [οὐδ' αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρῆσαι τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία.]q
if if it were written every one not itself I think the world to contain the being written books

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which [if they were written in detail,]p [I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.]q (NASB)

2.4 Mismatches between parallel passages

The form of a Greek conditional (first, second, or third class) does not entirely determine its meaning. This can be seen most clearly by comparing parallel passages in the gospels where different forms are used in identical contexts and with identical or almost identical meanings. We have identified 15 clear cases where the writers of the synoptic gospels used different conditional constructions, or conditional and non-conditional constructions, in identical contexts.

2.4.1 Different classes

Both first and third class conditionals can be used to describe hypothetical situations, and parallel passages do not always use the same form. Mat 18:8-9 uses first class conditionals (see also Mat 5:29-30) but Mrk 9:43, 45, 47 uses third class conditionals.

Mat 18:9

[καὶ εἰ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου σκανδαλίζει σε,]p [ἐξέλε αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ.]q
and if the eye of you causes to stumble you take out it and throw from you
[And if your eye causes you to sin,]p [tear it out and throw it away.]q

Mrk 9:47

[καὶ ἐὰν ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου σκανδαλίζῃ σε,]p [ἔκβαλε αὐτόν.]q
and if the eye of you cause to stumble (subjunctive) you take out it
[And if your eye causes you to sin,]p [tear it out.]q

Mat 5:46 uses a third class conditional but Luk 6:32 uses a first class conditional. (See also Mat 10:13b and Luk 10:6b, and Mat 17:20 and Luk 17:6.)

Mat 5:46

[ἐὰν γὰρ ἀγαπήσητε τοὺς ἀγαπῶντας ὑμᾶς,]p [τίνα μισθὸν ἔχετε;]q
if for you(pl) love those loving you(pl) what reward you(pl) have
[For if you love those who love you,]p [what reward do you have?]q

Luk 6:32

[καὶ εἰ ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἀγαπῶντας ὑμᾶς,]p [ποία ὑμῖν χάρις ἐστίν;]q
and if you(pl) love those loving you(pl) what kind to you(pl) credit is
[If you love those who love you,]p [what benefit is that to you?]q

2.4.2 Constructions without εἰ or ἐάν

There are a number of passages in Matthew that contain a conditional conjunction εἰ or ἐάν but where the parallel passages in Mark or Luke have no conditional conjunction. These can serve as examples for translators in cases where a conditional construction in the receptor language does not convey the same function as a conditional construction in Greek. The parallel passages without εἰ or ἐάν use a variety of alternative constructions: aorist participles, conjunctions meaning ‘when’, constructions meaning ‘whoever’, rhetorical questions, and imperatives. An example of each is provided below.¹⁰

2.4.2.1 Aorist participle. Mat 16:26 uses a third class conditional to describe a hypothetical situation in which a non-specific person gains the whole world but forfeits his soul. Luk 9:25 describes the same hypothetical situation using an aorist participle verb form, without any conditional conjunction (although most English translations use *if*).

Mat 16:26

[τί γὰρ ὠφεληθήσεται ἄνθρωπος]q
what for will be benefited man

[ἐάν τὸν κόσμον ὅλον κερδήσῃ τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ζημιωθῇ;]p
if the world whole he acquires the but soul of him he forfeits
[For what will it profit a man]q [if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?]p

Luk 9:25

[τί γὰρ ὠφελεῖται ἄνθρωπος]q
what for profits man

[κερδήσας τὸν κόσμον ὅλον ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἀπολέσας ἢ ζημιωθείς;]p
having gained the world whole himself but having lost or having forfeited
[For what does it profit a man]q [if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?]p

2.4.2.2 ‘When’. Mat 6:22-23 contains two third class conditionals to contrast two alternative hypothetical situations. The parallel passage in Luk 11:34 achieves the same effect using ὅταν ‘when’ and ἐπὶ ‘since, when’ instead of conditional conjunctions.

Mat 6:22-23

[ἐάν οὖν ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου ἀπλοῦς,]p1 [ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται.]q1
if therefore is the eye of you single (healthy) whole the body of you bright will be

[ἐάν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου πονηρὸς ἦ,]p2 [ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται.]q2
if but the eye of you evil is whole the body of you dark will be
[So, if your eye is healthy,]p1 [your whole body will be full of light,]q1 [but if your eye is bad,]p2
[your whole body will be full of darkness.]q2

¹⁰ In addition to the examples below, see Mat 12:11 and Luk 14:5; Mat 18:12-13 and Luk 15:4-5; Mat 21:21b and Mrk 11:23; Mat 22:45 and Mrk 12:37/Luk 20:44; Mat 24:23/Mrk 13:21 and Luk 17:23.

Luk 11:34

[**ὅταν** ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς ᾖ,]p1 [καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινόν ἐστίν·]q1
when the eye of you single (healthy) is also whole the body of you bright is

[**ἐπὶ** δὲ πονηρὸς ᾖ,]p2 [καὶ τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινόν.]q2
when but sick is also the body of you dark

[**When** your eye is healthy,]p1 [your whole body is full of light,]q1 but [**when** it is bad,]p2 [your body is full of darkness.]q2

2.4.2.3 ‘Whoever’. Mat 18:3 uses the negative third class construction ἐὰν μὴ ‘if not, unless’ whereas Mrk 10:15 uses ὅς ἂν μὴ ‘whoever not’:

Mat 18:3

[**ἐὰν μὴ** στραφῇτε καὶ γένησθε ὡς τὰ παιδιά,]p
unless you(pl) change and you(pl) become like the children

[οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃτε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.]q
never you(pl) will enter into the kingdom of the heavens
[**unless** you turn and become like children,]p [you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.]q

Mrk 10:15

[**ὅς ἂν** μὴ δέξηται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον,]p
whoever not receives the kingdom of the God like a child

[οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν.]q
never may enter into it
[**whoever** does not receive the kingdom of God like a child]p [shall not enter it.]q

2.4.2.4 Rhetorical question. Mat 15:14 has a third class conditional, but Luk 6:39 uses a pair of rhetorical questions.

Mat 15:14

[τυφλὸς δὲ τυφλὸν **ἐὰν** ὀδηγῇ,]p [ἀμφότεροι εἰς βόθυνον πεσοῦνται.]q
blind person and blind person if leads both into a pit will fall
[And **if** the blind lead the blind,]p [both will fall into a pit.]q

Luk 6:39

Μήτι δύναται τυφλὸς τυφλὸν ὀδηγεῖν; οὐχὶ ἀμφότεροι εἰς βόθυνον ἐμπεσοῦνται;
not is able blind person blind person to lead not both into a pit will fall in
Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?

2.4.2.5 Imperative. Mat 21:24 as a third class conditional, but Mrk 11:29 uses an imperative:

Mat 21:24

Ἐρωτήσω ὑμᾶς καὶ γὰρ λόγον ἓνα, ὃν [**ἐὰν** εἴπητέ μοι]p
I will ask you(pl) I also word one which if you(pl) tell me

[καὶ γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐρῶ ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ.]q
I also you(pl) I will tell in what authority these I do
I also will ask you one question, and [**if** you tell me the answer,]p [then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.]q

Mark 11:29

Ἐπερωτήσω ὑμᾶς ἓνα λόγον, καὶ ἀποκρίθητέ μοι
I will ask you(pl) one word and you(pl) answer me

καὶ ἐρῶ ὑμῖν ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ.
and I will tell you(pl) in what authority these I do

I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

3 Other constructions with εἰ / ἐάν

The conditional particles εἰ and ἐάν occur in a number of constructions with quite specific meanings. Some of these function as specific types of conditional, but others do not express typical conditional meanings. In this section, we discuss some of the more common constructions with εἰ and ἐάν found in the NT.

3.1 Concessive conditionals: εἰ καὶ, καὶ ἐάν etc.

Concessive conditionals are distinguished from regular conditionals by two features: First, the apodosis (q) is asserted regardless of the truth of the protasis (p); for this reason, they cannot receive an “if and only if” interpretation. In this respect, concessive conditionals are similar to speech act conditionals (see §1) in which the protasis merely establishes the situation in which the apodosis is relevant to the hearer. Second, the protasis describes a situation that would be expected to lead to a different outcome than the one asserted in the apodosis. Often this situation described in the protasis is extreme or unexpected, and may even appear incompatible with the apodosis; all of this serves to emphasize the assertion of the apodosis.¹¹ Concessive conditionals are typically expressed in English using *even if* or, when the protasis is known to be true (that is, when it is factual), *though*, *even though*, or *although*.¹²

Concessive conditionals in Greek are typically indicated by the presence of καὶ in the protasis. Not all conditionals with καὶ are concessive, however. In most of the places where καὶ co-occurs with a conditional particle, it is simply a conjunction or additive (‘and’/ ‘also’).¹³ The various constructions that are used to express concessive meaning in the NT, together with the verses in which they occur, are listed below:

εἰ καὶ: Mrk 14:29; Luk 11:8, 18:4, 2Co 4:3, 4:16, 5:16, 7:8a, b, c, 7:12, 11:6, 12:11; Php 2:17; Col 2:5; Heb 6:9; 1Pe 3:14

καὶ εἰ: 1Pe 3:1

11 The distinction between concessive conditionals and regular conditionals is reflected in the fact that some languages express concessives using grammatical forms that are entirely unrelated to conditionals. For example, Mandarin has a subordinator *juishi* which can be glossed as ‘even if’ but which is morphologically distinct from genuinely conditional morphemes. Similarly, Korean has conditional suffixes including *-(u)myen* ‘if/when’, *-tamyen/lamyen* ‘if; provided that’, and *-eya/aya* ‘if only’, and a number of unrelated concessive suffixes, including *-eto/ato*, *-telato*, *-(u)lcitato*, *-ulmangcen*, *-(u)ntul*, and *-(u)lciengcen*, all of which can be glossed ‘even if’ (Sohn 2009: 303-6).

12 *Though* etc. can be thought of as being the concessive counterpart to *since* and *because*, whereas *even if* is more clearly related to regular *if* conditionals. For further discussion, see Nicolle (2017: 11–12).

13 According to Boyer (1983: 187), in 66 cases καὶ does not add a concessive sense to εἰ/ἐάν, while 29 times it does. However, we have counted a few more of those in Boyer’s lists as concessive.

ἐὰν καὶ: Gal 6:1¹⁴

κἄν (reduced form of καὶ + ἐὰν): Mat 21:21, 26:35; Luk 12:38 (2 occurrences); Jhn 8:14, 10:38, 11:25; Heb 12:20¹⁵

καὶ ἐὰν: Jhn 8:16; Gal 1:8¹⁶

καὶ εἴπερ: 1Co 8:5

Boyer (1983: 187) claims that when καὶ follows the conditional particle (εἰ or ἐὰν) this refers to situations that are actually fulfilled (what we have been calling ‘factual’ conditionals), while when καὶ precedes the conditional particle this refers to unlikely situations or events.¹⁷ For example, in Mrk 14:27 Jesus states that all of his disciples will desert him, but in v.29 Peter responds that he is willing to accept the fact that all of the other disciples will desert Jesus, but he refuses (incorrectly, as it turns out) to accept that this is true of him. This is a factual concessive and is expressed with εἰ καὶ:

[**Εἰ καὶ** πάντες σκανδαλισθήσονται,]p [ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐγώ.]q
even though all will fall away but not I
[“Even though they all fall away,]p [I will not.”]q

The parallel passage in Mat 26:33 uses εἰ with no grammatical indication of a concessive. However, the meaning is clearly concessive. This illustrates how some conditional sentences that do not have καὶ in the protasis are interpreted as concessive simply based on the context.¹⁸

[**Εἰ** πάντες σκανδαλισθήσονται ἐν σοί,]p [ἐγὼ οὐδέποτε σκανδαλισθήσομαι.]q
if everyone will fall be offended in you I never will be offended
[“Though they all fall away because of you,]p [I will never fall away.]q

As the conversation continues, Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times before the cock crows, but Peter responds that he will die rather than deny Jesus. No-one has said that Peter will die, and he expresses this extreme eventuality using κἄν in Mat 26:35.

[**Κἄν** δέη με σὺν σοὶ ἀποθανεῖν,]p [οὐ μὴ σε ἀπαρνήσομαι.]q
even if must for me with you to die not not you I will deny
[“Even if I must die with you,]p [I will not deny you!”]q

14 It is debatable whether Gal 6:1 should be interpreted as a concessive conditional; out of 5 major English translations, only the NASB translates it as such. For a detailed discussion see ‘Conditionals in Galatians’.

15 Out of 17 occurrences of κἄν, 11 have a concessive sense. In addition to those just listed, there are 3 that are concessive but that may not be functioning conditionally: Mrk 5:28 – a separate ἐὰν is present, and thus κἄν is not used to modify the whole phrase; Act 5:15 – κἄν just modifies part of a non-conditional phrase; 2Co 11:16 – a separate εἴ is present in an εἰ δὲ μὴ γε ‘otherwise’ construction, and thus, κἄν is not used to modify the whole clause, which is arguably not conditional in any case.

16 1Co 7:11, 28 and 1Jn 2:1 could also be interpreted concessively, though most English translations interpret the καὶ simply as a conjunction. For a detailed discussion of Gal 1:8 see ‘Conditionals in Galatians’.

17 There are a few exceptions to this: Although most occurrences of εἰ καὶ express factual conditions (and are usually translated with *(even) though* in English), this is arguably not the case in 1Pe 3:14, “But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.” The previous verse states, “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” (NRSV) which suggests that Paul is not presenting the protasis as factual. Conversely, most occurrences of κἄν (καὶ + ἐὰν) refer to unlikely conditions, but a few in John refer to factual conditions (Jhn 8:14, 10:38, 11:25).

18 These include (but are probably not limited to) Mat 26:33; Mrk 14:31; Act 13:41; Rom 3:3, 9:7; 1Co 4:15, 9:2.

The parallel passage in Mrk 14:31 has just *ἐάν*, but a concessive interpretation is clearly justified by the context.

[**Ἐάν** δέη με συναποθανεῖν σοι,]p [οὐ μή σε ἀπαρνήσομαι.]q
if must for me to die for you not not you I will deny
[“Even if I have to die with you,]p [I will never disown you.”]q (NIV)

3.2 *ἐάν μή* (unless, if... not)

ἐάν μή is the negative form of the third class conditional. Compared to other Greek conditional constructions, the *ἐάν μή* construction has a few peculiarities:

- Of the 55 *ἐάν μή* conditionals in the NT, the apodosis precedes the protasis 30 times (55%). In contrast, only about 6% of affirmative conditional sentences in the NT have the order Q>P.
- The apodosis is negative in 28 of the 55 *ἐάν μή* conditionals, and in an additional 6 cases it consists of a rhetorical question that expects a negative response; that is, the apodosis is explicitly or implicitly negative 62% of the time. The protasis is also negative because of the negative marker *μή*, which means that most conditional sentences with *ἐάν μή* have two negative clauses.
- At the pragmatic level, the protasis usually describes the *only* situation or fact that would invalidate the apodosis.

Consider Jhn 3:2.

[**οὐδεὶς** γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς,]q
no one for is able these the signs to do which you do

[**ἐάν μή** ἢ ὁ θεὸς μετ’ αὐτοῦ]p
unless is God with him

[“**no one** can do these signs that you do]q [**unless** God is with him.”]p

1) The apodosis (“no one can do these signs that you do”) occurs before the protasis (“unless God is with him”); 2) both clauses are negative: the apodosis contains *οὐδεὶς* ‘no one’ and the protasis contains *ἐάν μή* ‘if not’ (these expressions are in bold); 3) the protasis describes the only situation that would make “no one can do these signs that you do” false, namely God being with that person.

The unusual clause order and the fact that both clauses are often negated mean that sentences containing *ἐάν μή* may be challenging to translate clearly and naturally in some languages. One way to rephrase such conditionals is to make both clauses affirmative and to make it explicit that the protasis describes the only situation that makes the now affirmative apodosis true. Jhn 3:2 could be rephrased in this way as follows:

[“a person can do these signs that you do]q [**only if** God is with him.”]p

Further discussion of the *ἐάν μή* construction, including situations in which this type of rephrasing would not be appropriate, can be found in Nicolle (2022).

3.3 εἰ μὴ (except, instead, but)

In contrast to the ἐὰν μὴ construction, εἰ μὴ does not express a conditional meaning, and is generally translated into English with ‘except’, ‘instead’, ‘only’, or ‘but’. The fact that εἰ μὴ typically modifies a noun phrase rather than a clause (with a verb) means that rather than containing a protasis and an apodosis, εἰ μὴ is part of a single clause.

Against this position, Boyer (1983: 178-179) claims that uses of εἰ μὴ are usually elided class 1 conditionals, and so in Mark 2:7 “Who can forgive sins but (εἰ μὴ) God alone?” the underlying proposition would be something like “If God cannot forgive sins, no one can forgive sins.” However this is not what the speakers meant at all: they were not doubting God’s ability to forgive, nor were they mentioning God’s ability to forgive to make a further point; they were merely asserting that only God can forgive sins. A similar use is found in Mat 14:17

οἱ δὲ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ, Οὐκ ἔχομεν ὧδε **εἰ μὴ** πέντε ἄρτους καὶ δύο ἰχθύας.
they but say to him not we have here except five loaves and two fish
They replied, “We have nothing here but (εἰ μὴ) five loaves and two fish.” (NRSV)

NRSV follows the structure of the Greek fairly closely, but most other English translations, including ESV, NASB, NIV, NLT and NET, replace “nothing... but” with “only”: “We have here only five loaves and two fish.” (NASB) This illustrates clearly how the disciples’ speech contains only one clause rather than two (an apodosis and a protasis).

Matthew 5:13b provides a somewhat different example of how εἰ μὴ can be used: “it [salt] is no longer good for anything except (εἰ μὴ) to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” Nolland (2005) notes that in this verse “εἰ μὴ points here not to a residual usefulness (‘no use, except’), but rather to the fate of the useless salt (‘no use. It can only’).” For further discussion, see BDAG entry εἰ definition 6ia.

There are a few occurrences of εἰ μὴ which are true conditionals, however; these cases are simply negative second class conditionals that are translatable as “if not”: Mat 24:22; Mrk 13:20; Jhn 9:33, 15:22, 24, 18:30, 19:11; Act 26:32; Rom 7:7, 9:29.

3.4 εἰ δὲ μή / εἰ δὲ μή γε (otherwise)

Unlike the εἰ μὴ construction, εἰ δὲ μή / εἰ δὲ μή γε introduces a reduced protasis (where the rest of the clause has been elided). There is a genuine conditional relationship between εἰ δὲ μή (γε) and the apodosis (though the content of the protasis has to be recovered from the preceding clause or sentence), and it can often be translated in English with ‘but if not’. Boyer (1983: 182) explains εἰ δὲ μή (γε) as follows: “In each case it is a compressed negative conditional clause; the verb of the protasis is left unexpressed but may be supplied from the preceding context. It is used to express an opposite alternative to the one in the preceding clause¹⁹: “If you don’t do that...” or “If that is not the case...” ‘Otherwise’ is a good English rendering.”

There does not appear to be any significant difference in meaning between εἰ δὲ μή and εἰ δὲ μή γε. There are 6 occurrences of εἰ δὲ μή and 8 of εἰ δὲ μή γε in the NT:

19 As we will see below, εἰ δὲ μή (γε) does not necessarily refer back to the preceding clause.

εἰ δὲ μή: Mrk 2:21, 22; Jhn 14:2, 11; Rev 2:5, 16

εἰ δὲ μή γε: Mat 6:1, 9:17; Luk 5:36, 37, 10:6, 13:9, 14:32; 2Co 11:16 (εἰ δὲ μή γε is followed by καὶν)

The range of ways in which εἰ δὲ μή (γε) can be translated into English can be seen in Rev 2:16.

μετανόησον οὖν· [εἰ δὲ μή,]p [ἔρχομαί σοι ταχὺ...]q
repent therefore if but not I am coming to you(sg) quickly
“Therefore repent. **If not**, I will come to you soon...” (ESV, NRSV)
“Therefore repent; **or else** I am coming to you quickly...” (NASB)
“Repent therefore! **Otherwise**, I will soon come to you...” (NIV)
“Repent of your sin, **or** I will come to you suddenly...” (NLT)

The clause that εἰ δὲ μή (γε) refers back to is usually the immediately preceding clause, but this is not always the case. In Luke 10:6 (below), εἰ δὲ μή γε refers back to the protasis of the preceding conditional sentence (“if a son of peace is there”), rather than to the apodosis (“your peace will rest upon him”), even though this is the immediately preceding clause. The meaning is, “If there is not a son of peace there, your peace will return to you.”

καὶ [ἐὰν ἐκεῖ ᾗ υἱὸς εἰρήνης,]p [ἐπαναπαύσεται ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ἡ εἰρήνη ὑμῶν.]q
and if there is son of peace it will rest on him the peace your(pl)

[εἰ δὲ μή γε,]p [ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς ἀνακάμψει.]q
otherwise / but if not on you(pl) it will return
“And [if a son of peace is there,]p [your peace will rest upon him.]q [But if not,]p [it will return to you.”]q

This is confirmed by a comparison of the parallel passage in Mat 10:13, which uses a negative third class conditional where Luk 10:6 uses εἰ δὲ μή γε:

καὶ [ἐὰν μὲν ᾗ ἡ οἰκία ἀξία,]p [ἐλθάτω ἡ εἰρήνη ὑμῶν ἐπ’ αὐτήν,]q
and if – is the house worthy let it come the peace your(pl) on it

[ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ᾗ ἀξία,]p [ἡ εἰρήνη ὑμῶν πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐπιστραφήτω.]q
if but not is worthy the peace your(pl) to you(pl) let it return
“And [if the house is worthy,]p [let your peace come upon it,]q [but if it is not worthy,]p [let your peace return to you.”]q

3.5 Indefinite reference

The Greek conditional particles are used in various constructions that describe non-specific individuals, things, times, and places. In the case of εἴ τις / ἐὰν τις ‘if anyone’ the conditional nature of the construction is clear, as the clause that it introduces functions as the protasis in a conditional sentence. In the case of ὅς ἐστιν ‘whoever’ and related constructions, the relation to conditionality is less obvious; these constructions are usually translated with relative pronouns, but can sometimes be expressed as conditional clauses (see 1Ti 3:1 below for an example).

3.5.1 εἴ τις / ἐάν τις (if anyone)

When τις or τι occurs as the subject of a clause on its own (i.e. not modifying another word), it is usually translated ‘someone’ or ‘anyone’. So when it is the subject of a conditional clause, we see sentences that begin with εἴ τις / ἐάν τις ‘if anyone’.

In the synoptic gospels, εἴ τις conditionals are almost always found in the speech of Jesus, where they sometimes introduce a new discourse topic. There are a few examples of ἐάν τις functioning this way in the synoptics. In John’s gospel, only ἐάν τις is used, with no occurrences of εἴ τις. In the rest of the New Testament, εἴ τις / ἐάν τις conditionals occasionally introduce discourse-topics. This is particularly noticeable in 1Ti. In 1Ti 3:1, the topic of the qualities expected of leaders in the church (overseers or bishops) is introduced:

[Εἴ τις ἐπισκοπῆς ὀρέγεται,]p [καλοῦ ἔργου ἐπιθυμεῖ.]q
if anyone office of overseer aspires to good work he desires
If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

NRSV and NIV have “Whoever aspires...”. Similarly, the εἴ τις conditionals in 1Ti 5:4, 8, and 16 introduce new sub-topics within the broader topic of caring for widows that was introduced in 5:3. There are also, however, many εἴ τις / ἐάν τις conditionals that do not introduce new discourse topics.

3.5.2 ὅς ἐάν (whoever), ὅς ἐάν, οὗ ἐάν, ὅσα ἐάν, etc. (whatever, whichever), ὅπου ἐάν (wherever)

Boyer (1983: 183-4) calls these “indefinite relative and temporal clauses”. They are often translated in English as ‘whoever’, ‘whatever’, ‘whenever’ or ‘anyone who’. They resemble third class conditionals as they use ἐάν with the subjunctive, and many occurrences could be translated in English equally well as ‘if anyone’ or ‘if anything’. Boyer (1983: 184) notes that this “suggests a relationship between indefiniteness and supposition or condition”. When ὅς ἐάν is used to compare two types of people, the second groups are often referred to using the relative pronoun ὅς and the particle ὅν rather than ἐάν, as in Luk 9:48.

Ὃς ἐάν δέξηται τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐμὲ δέχεται·
whoever receives this the child in the name my me receives

καὶ ὅς ὅν ἐμὲ δέξηται, δέχεται τὸν ἀποστείλαντά με·
and whoever me receives receives the he having sent me

“**Whoever** receives this child in my name receives me, and **whoever** receives me receives him who sent me.”

There seems to be little if any difference in meaning between ὅς ἐάν and ὁ (‘he, the one’) followed by a participle verb, and most English translations use ‘whoever’ for both. John’s gospel has no examples of ὅς ἐάν but instead uses ὁ plus a participle verb to express ‘whoever’. Occasionally this construction is preceded by πᾶς ‘every’ giving πᾶς ὁ ‘every one’ plus a participle verb; an example is Jhn 3:15 (see also v.16).

ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
So that every one believing in him may have life eternal
“...that **whoever** believes in him may have eternal life.”

In the database, unless the majority of English translations use an ‘if’ conditional to translate a particular case (as in Mrk 8:38, 1Jn 4:15, Jas 4:4), cases of ὅς ἐάν have been listed in the ‘non-conditional’ section of each book.

3.6 εἰ δυνατόν (if possible)

There are only 8 occurrences of εἰ δυνατόν ‘if possible’ in the New Testament: Mat 24:24 / Mrk 13:22; Mat 26:39 / Mrk 14:35; Act 20:16, 27:39; Rom 12:18; Gal 4:15.

In general, εἰ δυνατόν indicates that the proposition it accompanies is extremely unlikely. In addition to acknowledging the unlikeliness of an event, sometimes the speaker is also expressing doubt as to whether it is possible at all. It is debatable whether most of these occurrences are true conditionals. They typically consist of only a partial protasis (almost always simply ‘if possible’), and only some occurrences (Mat 26:39, Mrk 14:35, Gal 4:15) have a clear apodosis. In some cases, an implied apodosis could be reconstructed, but in others there is no clear apodosis – either explicit or implicit – in the text. For these reasons they have been listed in the ‘Non-conditional’ section of the database, with the exception of Gal 4:15 which has a clear apodosis that depends on the protasis for its fulfillment.

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