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**THE CLASSIFICATION**

**OF OPTATIVES: A**

**STATISTICAL STUDY\***

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*The optative mood is relatively rare in the NT and follows usage*

*patterns of Classical Greek. Though most NT occurrences are voli-*

*tive, some are clearly potential; the oblique optative, however, does*

*not occur in the NT. Careful analysis suggests that the optative*

*implies a less distinct anticipation than the subjunctive, but not less*

*probable.*

\* \* \*

THE student who comes to NT Greek from a Classical Greek

background notices some differences in vocabulary, i.e., old

words with new meanings and new words, slight differences in

spelling, and some unfamiliar forms of inflection. But in syntax he is

on familiar ground, except that it seems easier. He may hardly notice

one of the major differences until it is called to his attention, and then

it becomes the greatest surprise of all: the optative mood. Its surprise,

however, is not that it is used differently or strangely; it just is not

used much.

Many of the old optative functions, particularly its use in subor-

dinate clauses after a secondary tense, seemingly do not occur at all in

the NT. On the other hand, the optatives which do occur follow the

old patterns rather closely. What changes do occur are in the direc-

tion of greater simplicity.

Grammarians have pointed out that "the optative was a luxury

of the language and was probably never common in the vernacular. . .

\* Informational materials and listings generated in the preparation of this study

may be found in my "Supplemental Manual of Information: Optative Verbs," Those

interested may secure this manual through their library by interlibrary loan from the

Morgan Library, Grace Theological Seminary, 200 Seminary Dr., Winona Lake, IN

46590. Also available are manuals of information supplementing previous articles of

this series covering participles, infinitives, subjunctives and imperatives.

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a literary mood.”1 In the NT it is found almost solely in the writings

of Luke and of Paul, with the more complex literary patterns in

Luke. Paul's use is almost limited to the expression of a wish. There

are four instances in the epistles of Peter, two in Jude, and one each

in Mark and John. Surprisingly there is only one in the literary

epistle to the Hebrews.

INFLECTIONAL COMPARISONS

The optative is so rare that most grammars of NT Greek do not

include the paradigms for the optative forms. The inflectional ele-

ments of the Greek verb in all the moods consist of three basic parts:

(1) the verb or tense stem, (2) a thematic or connecting vowel, and

(3) a set of inflectional endings indicating person and number. The

optative uses the same verb or tense stems as the other moods. It adds

a mood suffix (ι or ιη) to the thematic vowel, ο / ε, resulting in a

distinctive i-sound (-οι-, -ει-, -αι- or -οιη-, -ειη-, -αιη-) before the

ending. The optative uses the secondary endings in all its tenses (just

as the subjunctive uses the primary endings). The actual resultant

endings may be found in the major grammars.2

FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION

*The Optative of Wish (Volitive)*

The name optative (from the Latin *optari* = to wish) points to

one major use of the mood, to express a wish or a choice. It accounts

for the majority of NT optatives (39 out of 68, or 57%). These may be

grouped into six categories.

Μὴ γένοιτο

Best known of optative uses, and one of the most frequent,3 the

phrase μὴ γένοιτο is an example of the volitive optative. In form it is

a wish, "may it not happen." But it has become a stereotyped,

idiomatic exclamation indicating revulsion and indignant, strong

rejection. For this reason it is given a separate classification. The

common English translation, "God forbid!" (King James Version) is

1 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of*

*Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 935-36.

2 For Classical forms, see W. W. Goodwin, *Greek Grammar*, rev. by C. B. Gulick

(Boston: Ginn, 1930); for NT forms see J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A Grammar*

*of New Testament Greek, Vol. II Accidence and Word Formation* (Edinburgh: T. & T.

Clark, 1920).

3 It occurs 15 times, all but one is in Paul: Luke 20:16; Rom 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7,

13; 9:14; 11:1, 11; 1 Cor 6:15; Gal 2:17; 3:21; 6:14.

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not, of course, a literal translation (there is no word for God, and the

verb does not mean "forbid"), but it expresses the sense accurately.4

Gal 6:14 is the only place where this phrase occurs as part of a

longer sentence rather than standing alone as a two-word exclama-

tion. In every other Pauline usage, it is an appropriate negative

answer to a rhetorical question. In Luke 20:16 it is also a strong

reply, this time to a threat of judgment.

This phrase indicating strong rejection is not limited to NT

writers. It was used in classical,5 and in LXX.6 Some have identified it

as the only remnant of the optative in modern Greek.7

Formal Benediction

This group and the next are actually indirect prayers, since,

although addressed to someone else, they express a wish that God

might do something. They are rather formal "benedictions" in which

the spiritual leader, here Paul, invokes divine favor upon his readers.

Their formal character is indicated also by two somewhat

standardized patterns of expression: (1) God (ὁ θεός or ὁ κύριος or

both) is named first, usually rather formally described in terms

appropriate to prayer, with the aorist active optative following: for

example, Rom 15:5, ὁ δὲ θεὸς τῆς ὑπομενῆς καὶ τῆς παρακλήσεως

δῴη ὑμῖν. "Now the God who gives perseverance and encouragement

grant you. . . ."8 (2) The optative is in the passive voice, the items

wished for constitute the subject, and the agent or doer is unnamed,

although clearly understood as God; 1 Pet 1:2, χαρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη  
πλειθυνθείη "May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure" (also

2 Pet 1.2, Jude 2, and 1 Thess 5.23b).

Attention needs to be called here to the very large number of

such benedictions in the NT where the verb is unexpressed and needs

4 The NASB uses "May it never be!" The New King James version uses "Certainly

not!" in every instance except one, where it preserves the KJV "God forbid!" The NIV

uses a variety of phrases: "Not at all!" (4 times), "By no means!" (4), "Absolutely not!"

(2), and once each, "May it never be!," "Certainly not!," "Far from it!," "Never!" and

"May I never. . . ! ."

5 W. W. Goodwin, *Grammar*, 279 (#1321).

6 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) 194.

7 J. T. Pring, *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek* (Oxford, 1982) 43; Robertson,

*Grammar*, 939. But others have doubted this; cf. J. H. Moulton; *Grammar of*

*New Testament Greek, Vol. 1 Prolegomena* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906) 240;

Vincent A. Heinz, "The Optative Mood in the Greek New Testament," unpublished

Master of Theology thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1962,20.

8 Also, Rom 15:13, I Thess 3:11, 12 (two optatives involved), 5:23 (first optative),

2 Thess 2:17 (two optatives), 3:5, 16; Heb 13:21. English translations are given from the

NASB unless otherwise stated.

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to be supplied. In most cases that verb, if it were used, would be the

optative of the copulative verb, εἴη.

Non-formal Blessing

A second group of indirect prayers is less formal, expressing a

wish for some specific blessing for someone else (Acts 26:29, 2 Tim

1:16, 18, 4:16) or for oneself (1 Thess 3:11, Phlm 20). In these the

optative stands before the reference to the Lord, and no descriptive

words are used; 2 Tim 1:16, δῴη ἔλεος ὁ κύριος. "The Lord grant

mercy" (also 1:18, Jude 9).

Simple Request

Not all wishes are specifically addressed to God; sometimes they

relate to providence. Only two optatives are included in this category:

2 Tim 4:16 is a gesture of Paul's forgiveness reflected in his wish that

others will do the same; and Philemon 20 is a simple personal request.

However, several of the wishes in the categories following might also

be included here.

Imprecations

The optative mood can be used for an adverse wish, or a curse.

Only two that use the optative are usually listed for the NT, Mark

11:4, Acts 8:20; another, Jude 9, probably also belongs here. In

imprecatory sentences Classical Greek normally used the optative,

but in the NT the imperative is used more often (cf. Gal 1:8, 9

ἀνάθεμα ἔστω. "Let him be accursed," also 1 Cor 16:22 (with a

colloquial form, ἤτω); in Acts 1:20, Luke uses the imperative λαβέτω  
instead of the LXX optative λάβοι quoting from Ps 108[109]:8).

The close kinship between the optative of wish and the imperative of

command is seen also in Mark 11:4.

Permission

One example uses the optative in a passage which seems to

express permission or acceptance rather than the eager hope which

the English word 'wish' conveys. Luke 1:38 γένοιτό μοι κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά  
σου "Be it done to me according to your word." It is possible that

Mary's attitude toward the announcement she had just received may

have been strong anticipation and desire, but it seems more plausible

that these words express deliberate choice and willing submission on

her part.

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*The Potential Optative*

The term "potential" is used in grammar to describe action which

is dependent on circumstances or conditions, that which would or

might happen if circumstances are right or if conditions are met. In

Greek there is a potential indicative used to express a past action as

dependent on past circumstances or conditions, and the potential

optative used to express such actions in the future, as well as

potential uses of the subjunctive in third class conditions and de-

liberative questions. Usually these constructions use the modal par-

ticle ἄν. Concerning the potential optative, the Classical grammarian

Wm. W. Goodwin says,

The limiting condition is generally too indefinite to be distinctly present

to the mind, and can be expressed only by words like *perhaps,*

*possibly, or probably, or by such vague forms as if he pleased, or if*

*he should try, if he could, if there should be an opportunity*, etc.

Sometimes a general condition, like in any possible case, is felt to be

implied, so that the optative with ἄν hardly differs from an absolute

future. . . . 9

The NT potential use of the optative is in accord with the

Classical usage, except it is much less frequent and does not include

all the facets found in Classical Greek. These have been summarized

into four groups.

Potential Optative in Questions

Certainly one of the characteristics of the NT use of the optative

mood is its strong tendency to occur in questions and in connection

with questions. As noted above, 13 out of 15 occurrences of μὴ  
γένοιτο serve as answers to rhetorical questions. Even more surpris-

ing is the fact that 20 of the 29 potential optatives in the NT occur

within questions.

No indication has been found of such a tendency in older

Greek,10 nor any suggestion as to the reason for and significance of

this phenomenon in the NT. It may be that it is related to the basic

idea of potentiality that belongs to the mood. At a time when the

optative was becoming archaic and other forms of expression were

replacing it in ordinary speech, the added "potentiality" which

9 Goodwin, *Grammar*, 282 (#1327).

10 H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1976) 407-8

mentions the use of the optative in questions, but no indication is given that this is a

special feature of the mood.

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inherently is involved in a question may have made it more likely that

the optative should survive there.

*Potential Optative in Direct Questions.* Two examples are

found in this category: Acts 8:31 and 17:18. Both have the particle ἄν

and the sense is clearly potential. They express puzzled curiosity. Like

those following, they are within a quotation, but it is a direct quota-

tion, which would require that the original forms be preserved.

*Potential Optative in Indirect Questions*. The difference be-

tween these and the preceding category is that they are in indirectly

quoted questions rather than direct. This raises the question (to be

discussed below) whether they should rather be classified as "oblique"

optatives. They are grouped here, however, on the basis of their

sense.

This group is the largest, with 17 examples. All but one are in the

writings of Luke.11 The indirect question is introduced by the inter-

rogative pronoun τίς, τί 11 times, 8 of them12 with the particle ἄν; by

the interrogative εἰ (= whether) 4 times, by μήποτε (= whether) and

ποταπός, once each. When ἄν is present the potential quality is

obvious. Those introduced by εἰ are not conditional in meaning;

rather they are interrogative, reflecting a direct question that is

potential.13 Most are introduced by governing verbs which suggest the

element of uncertainty and perplexity, διαλογίζομαι (3), διαπορέω

(2), διαλαλέω, ἐπερωτάω, πυνθάνομαι, συζητέω. They may be sub-

divided into several types, illustrating different potential factors:

1) What does it mean? (Luke 1:29,8:9,15:26,18:36, Acts 10:17)

2) Which of many? (Luke 1 :62, 6: 11, 9:46, 22:23)

3) Yes or No? (Luke 3:15, Acts 17:11)

4) Who are you? / Who is he? (John 13:24, Acts 21:33)

5) What will come of this? (Acts 5:24)

6) Are you willing? (Acts 25:20)

7) Shall we try? (Acts 17:27 twice)

A crucial question here is whether or not these questions would

be in the optative if they were standing alone or quoted directly.

11 Luke 1:29, 62; 3:15; 6:11; 8:9; 9:46; 15:26; 18:36; 22:23; John 13:24; Acts 5:24;

10:17; 17:11, 27 (two optatives), 21:33; 25:20.

12 One, Luke 18:36, has ἄν as a textual variant, as noted in Nestle's Greek

Testament, edition 26.

13 There may be another example in Acts 27:12 if we understand the sense to be

that they put to sea [to see] whether they could spend the winter in a safe harbor (the

direct question involved would be "Can we possibly do it?"). But it seems better to

understand it to mean that they went "thinking that they might reach. . .", or "in order

to, if possible, reach. . . ." If that is the meaning it becomes an example of a parenthetic

fourth class protasis.

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Whether they are optative because they are potential, or because they

are being quoted indirectly after a past tense main verb (i.e., oblique

optatives), will be discussed below.

Potential Optative in Protases

There is no complete example in the NT of the Classical Future

Less Vivid condition (often referred to as fourth-class conditions),

which used the potential optative in both the protasis and the

apodosis. In a few places, the protasis uses the potential optative, but

the apodosis does not follow the pattern. Either it is incomplete, with

the verb left to be understood (1 Pet 3:14, 17), or it takes a different

form (Acts 24:19), or it is totally absent (Acts 20:16, 27:39, 1 Cor

14:10, 15:37).

One group poses no problem of identification: some form of the

verb εἰμί is to be supplied and the whole is a mixed condition. If, as is

likely in 1 Pet 3:14, the indicative ἐστέ is supplied, the fourth-class

protasis is combined with a first-class apodosis. In 1 Pet 3:17, if an

indicative ἔστιν is supplied, the result is the same. If, as is presumably

possible, an optative εἴη is supplied, it becomes a full fourth-class

condition. In both cases, the optative in the protasis is a potential

optative.

Acts 24:19 has a potential optative in the protasis, and an

imperfect indicative in the apodosis, ἔδει. Classical grammar provides

a suggestion: "The imperfects ἔδει, χρῆν or ἔχρην, ἔξην, εἰκὸς ἦν,

and other impersonal expressions denoting obligation, propriety,

possibility, and the like, are often used without ἄν to form an

apodosis implying that the duty is not or was not performed, or the

possibility not realized.”14 Thus ἔδει, even without ἄν, is in effect a

potential indicative and this example comes close to being a full

fourth-class condition.

Another group is quite different. There is no apodosis, nor is one

to be mentally supplied. The sentences are not conditional sentences

at all. In each case a brief stereotype phrase15 in the form of a

protasis is attached almost as a parenthesis to some element of the

sentence, not to the sentence itself. This seems especially clear in

1 Cor 14:10 and 15:37, where εἰ τύχοι is translated "perhaps" in

14 Goodwin, *Grammar*, 297 (#1410a).

15 Horn several times calls attention to the frequent appearance of the optative in

set phrases or expressions; "The optatives that do occur frequently (wishes, potential,

possible protases) occur for the most part in certain well defined phrases and

expressions", and "certain fixed phrases occur, some of which. . . are rather paren-

thetical." (R. C. Horn, *The Use of the Subjunctive and Optative in the Non-Literary*

*Papyri*, Westbrook Publ. Co., [Philadelphia, 1926] 143, 161.

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NASB; "it may be" and "it may chance" in KJV; literally, "if it should

turn out so". The other examples are very similar. In Acts 20:16 the

phrase εἰ δύνατον εἴη does not go with ἔσπευδεν ("he was hurrying if

he were able"), but with γενέσθαι ("he was hurrying to be in

Jerusalem, if possible"). In Acts 27:39, essentially the same phrase,

δὔναιντο, goes with ἐξῶσαι ("they resolved to drive, if they could, the

ship onto it"). Probably Acts 27:12, using the same phrase, belongs

here also (cf. footnote 13). In all these the optative is potential.

The Oblique Optative

One of the commonest of Classical usages of the optative was the

change of the mood of a verb in a subordinate clause from indicative

or subjunctive to optative following a governing verb in a secondary

or past tense, or the change to optative when the sentence was

included in indirect discourse after a secondary tense. This use has

been referred to by various terms;16 here it will be called the Oblique

Optative.

The almost total absence of this construction in the NT may in

part reflect that in the NT, direct discourse is preferred over indirect,

and that even in the Classical the change was not required. It is

apparent that the general decline of the optative was more severe in

this usage than in the volitive and potential. This is not surprising, for

the extreme complexity of the practice, as reflected by the multiplicity

of "rules" generated by the Classical grammarians in their effort to

describe it, would have tended toward its abandonment.

In discussing this usage Blass-Debrunner includes the examples

listed above under the heading, Potential Optatives in Indirect

Questions. It is true that indirect questions could in Classical Greek

use this oblique optative. The optative then could be representing an

indicative or subjunctive in the direct question. But an examination

of the actual examples points strongly to the conclusion that the

optative is what we should expect in the original question. Blass-

Debrunner recognizes this in at least some of the examples, saying

"[Luke's] examples usually have ἄν with the optative and accordingly

correspond to the potential optative of the direct question."17

Robertson expresses the same evaluation, speaking about Acts 17:18,

16 Blass-DeBrunner (*Grammar*, 195) calls it the Oblique Optative. Several gram-

marians, for example, Robertson (*Grammar*, 1030), Smyth (*Grammar*, 379), Goodwin

(*Grammar*, 314), refer to it as Optative in Indirect Discourse. This designation,

however, only partially describes the practice, which includes not only clauses in

indirect discourse but many other subordinate clauses after secondary tenses, and is

therefore somewhat misleading.

17 Blass-Debrunner, *Grammar*, 195.

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"Why not rather suppose a "hesitating" (deliberative) direct question

like τί ἄν θέλοι ὁ σπερμολόγος οὖτος λέγειν; . . . As already

remarked, the context shows doubt and perplexity in the indirect

questions which have ἄν and the opt. in the N. T."18 If that is the case

they should be so classified, rather than assigned to the oblique

category. The same may be said of all the examples, as has been

shown in the discussion above.

Aside from these indirect questions there is only one other

example claimed of the oblique optative. It is in Acts 25:16, involving

two optative verbs in a temporal clause after a secondary tense, thus

in form fitting the definition of the oblique optative. But again, it

need not be so if there is reason to think that the mood would have

been optative in the direct form. Here again Classical grammar helps.

Πρῖν was used with an infinitive chiefly when it meant before, and

when the leading clause was affirmative. It was used with the indica-

tive, and with the subjunctive and optative only after negatives.19

Several examples are given where πρῖν is followed by the optative. So

it is possible that the optative verbs after πρῖν are not the oblique

form, but the original form. The potential character of the sentence is

obvious. It should then be listed as the only example of another

category, Potential Optative in Subordinate Clauses.

Therefore, it may be concluded that there are really no oblique

optatives to be found in the NT. All the possible instances are

explainable as potential optatives apart from the fact that they occur

in a subordinate clause after a secondary tense.

DEGREES OF POTENTIALITY

The concept of degrees of potentiality has been discussed else-

where20 as it relates to the comparison of third and fourth class

conditional sentences. There the claims and comments of the gram-

marins on the concept in general as well as its application to that

specific question were reviewed. That discussion is assumed when

application of it is made to the optative mood and its two major NT

functions.

The optative is generally, and properly, called a potential mood,

as are also the subjunctive and the imperative. It speaks of something

as being contingent, depending on conditions or circumstances,

involving some degree of uncertainty or doubt. The problem arises

when the choice of moods is made whether some well-defined scheme

18 Robertson, *Grammar*, 940.

19 Goodwin, *Grammar*, 311 (#1485 a.,b; #1486 b.).

20 See James L. Boyer, "Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions," *GTJ* 3 (1982)

167-70.

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of graduated degrees of potentiality is reflected, so that the sub-

junctive becomes the mood of probability, the optative of improba-

bility. As the earlier study showed, the subjunctive in third class

conditions does not fit into any such pattern, but rather runs the

whole spectrum from certainty to impossibility with the vast majority

showing no indication at all as to probability. The same is also true

with the optative. There are degrees of potentiality within the moods,

but not *between* the moods.

Goodwin's comment on the potential optative cited above21

continues:

The potential optative can express every degree of potentiality from the

almost absolute future. . . to the apodosis of a future condition ex-

pressed by the optative with ἄν. The intermediate steps may be seen in

[a number of] examples. . . ."22

He uses almost the same words to describe the potential indicative:

The potential indicative may express every degree of potentiality from

that seen in [# 1336: 'what would have been likely to happen, i.e., might

have happened (and perhaps did happen) with no reference to any

condition.'] to that of the apodosis of an unfulfilled condition actually

expressed. . . . The intermediate steps to the complete apodosis may be

seen in [a number of] examples. . . .“23

As indicated elsewhere, this same latitude is present in the

subjunctive third class conditions and in other uses of the subjunctive

as well. Also, the imperative expresses ideas ranging from commands

to requests, from ultimatums to permissions.24

Thus, degree of potentiality is a factor within all the moods, but

it is not a distinguishing factor between the moods. It is not correct to

say that the subjunctive is "more probable" or that the optative is

"less probable." The mood used does not in any sense indicate how

confident one can be that something will or will not happen. A fairer

explanation of the distinction is to be found in the terminology used

in Classical grammars to distinguish between conditional protases

with the subjunctive and with the optative, calling them respectively

"Future More Vivid" and "Future Less Vivid.”25 The distinction is

not in an evaluation of the degree of potentiality, but in the distinct-

21 Footnote 9 above.

22 Goodwin, *Grammar*, 282 (#1328).

23 Ibid., 284 (#1339).

24 See James L. Boyer, "A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study" *GTJ* 8

(1987) 36-40.

25 Goodwin, *Grammar*, 298-99 (#1418); Smyth, *Grammar*, 522-23 (#2322). Smyth

expresses it especially well: "The difference between the More Vivid Future and the

Less Vivid Future, like the difference between if I (shall) do this, and if I should do

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ness and vividness with which the speaker or writer chooses to

express the potentiality.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF EXPRESSING A WISH

While one of the most common uses of the optative is to express

a wish, it should not be concluded that this was the only, or even the

most common, way of doing so. It is beyond the scope of this article

to examine these other ways, but it may be helpful to mention some

of them. Particularly, it will be helpful to compare NT Greek with the

Classical patterns to see what changes actually occurred.

One very obvious way to express a wish is a simple statement

using the word "wish" or "want" or "desire." Many NT wishes are

expressed by using the verb θέλω or βούλομαι. These words are

capable of expressing many degrees of appeal to the will, from the

slightest expression of hope or desire (as the English word "wish"

does) to a strong request or demand.

There was a tendency in NT Greek to use the imperative mood

where the older Greek would probably have used the volitive optative.

For example, in imprecations or adverse wishes, for which the

Classical used the optative, the NT sometimes substitutes the impera-

tive: Gal 1:8, 9 ἀνάθεμα ἔστω "let him be accursed," also 1 Cor 16:22.

In Acts 1:20 the imperative λαβέτω is used in quoting from a text

which in the LXX (Ps 108[109]:8) had the optative λάβοι.

ὄφελον with the indicative is used four times in the NT to

express a wish, in a construction which in Classical used an infinitive

instead of an indicative following.

The protasis of a conditional clause, with the apodosis omitted,

may be a way of expressing a wish, as in Luke 19:42 εἰ ἔγνως . . . , "If

you had known . . . !”

*this*, depends on the mental attitude of the speaker. With the Vivid Future the speaker

sets forth a thought as prominent and distinct in his mind; and for anyone or more of

the various reasons. Thus, he may (and generally does) regard the conclusion to be

more likely to be realized; but even an impossible (2322c) or dreaded result may be

expressed by this form if the speaker chooses to picture the result vividly and distinctly.

The More Vivid Future is thus used whenever the speaker clearly desires to be graphic,

impressive, emphatic, and to anticipate a future result with the distinctness of the

present.

"The Less Vivid Future deals with suppositions less distinctly conceived and of less

immediate concern to the speaker, mere assumed or imaginary cases. This is a favorite

construction in Greek, and is often used in stating suppositions that are merely possible

and often impossible; but the form of the condition itself does not imply an expectation

of the speaker that the conclusion may possibly be realized. The difference between the

two forms, therefore, is not an inherent difference between probable realization in the

one case and possible realization in the other. The same thought may often be

expressed in either form without any essential difference in meaning. The only

difference is, therefore, often that of temperament, tone or style."

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Εἴθε, a dialectic variant of εἰ and εἰ γάρ, which was used in

Classical Greek with the optative to express a wish, is not found in

the NT.

CONCLUSION

Of the 28,121 verbs in the New Testament there are 68 optatives,

less than one quarter of 1%. The optative had practically disappeared

from the common language, and only later received a temporary

revival by Atticizing purists who were attempting to restore the

literary language of Greece's golden age. Why did it appear at all in a

book written in the κοινή of the people? It is a needless question,

and probably unimportant. But Turner26 makes a very interesting

suggestion:

. . . the old potential optative--admirably suited to Christian aspira-

tion and piety! Indeed, one must not reject too lightly the possibility

that the optatives in the NT owed their preservation in some measure

to their incidence in the pompous and stereotyped jargon of devotion.

These optative phrases are decidedly formal. . . . The retention of the

optative at a time when everywhere they were diminishing need not

surprise us in view of their value for the liturgy, Jewish [in the LXX]

and Christian.

26 Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 3; Syntax (Edinburgh:

T. & T. Clark, 1963) 131-32.

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