Grace Theological Journal 9.2 (1988) 233-56.

[Copyright © 1988 Grace Theological Seminary; cited with permission;

digitally prepared for use at Gordon College for Biblicalelearning.org]

**RELATIVE CLAUSES**

**IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT:**

**A STATISTICAL STUDY**

JAMES L. BOYER

*Relative clauses form one of the two main forms of subordinate*

*clauses in NT Greek. Relative clauses may function adjectivally,*

*nominally, or adverbially. A special use of the relative clause is found*

*alternating clauses connected by μέν and δέ. A relative clause is*

*introduced by a relative pronoun that relates the clause to an ante-*

*cedent. Generally, the relative agrees with the antecedent in gender*

*and number, but its case is determined by its function in its own*

*clause. Examination of its use in the NT, however, reveals several*

*categories of exceptions to this general rule. The use of moods in*

*relative clauses is governed by the same principles as those in effect*

*for independent clauses. Generally, there is little confusion over the*

*use of relative pronouns and their antecedents. However, there are a*

*few problem passages (e.g., Matt 26:50,. 2 Pet 1:4, 3:6; and 1 John 3:20).*

\* \* \*

INTRODUCTION

STRUCTURALLY there are two main forms of subordinate clauses in

NT Greek: those introduced by relatives and those by conjunc-

tions. The relative clauses are the subject of this article.1

A relative clause is introduced by a relative word, either a rela-

tive pronoun or adjective or adverb. The statement made by the

1 (Statistical information used in the preparation of this article was generated using

GRAM CORD, a computer-based grammatical concordance of the Greek NT (see my

article, "Project Gramcord: A Report," *GTJ* 1 [1980] 97-99). The present article is part

of the following series of my articles based on GRAMCORD published in *GTJ*: "First

Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?" *GTJ* 2 (1981) 75-114; "Second Class Con-

ditions in New Testament Greek," *GTJ* 3 (1982) 81-88; "Third (and Fourth) Class

Conditions," *GTJ* 3 (1982) 163-75; "Other Conditional Elements in New Testament

Greek," *GTJ* 4 (1983) 173-88; "The Classification of Participles: A Statistical Study,"

*GTJ* 5 (1984) 163-79; "The Classification of Infinitives: A Statistical Study," *GTJ* 6

234 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

relative clause might stand alone as an independent sentence, but the

speaker chooses to "relate" it subordinately to some noun or other

substantival expression in the main clause by using a special relative

word for that purpose. The element to which it is related is called the

antecedent.

The relative pronouns that will be under consideration in this

study are the regular relative, ὅς, ἥ, ὅ, the indefinite relative ὅστις,  
ἥτις ὅ τι, the correlatives ὅσος, οἷος, ὁποῖος, and ἠλίκος. The last

four sometimes also function adjectivally and the last only as an

adjective. Clauses introduced by relative adverbs could also be in-

cluded in a study of relative clauses, but they are sufficiently distinc-

tive to merit separate consideration as adverbial clauses.2 However,

those clauses introduced by an adverbial phrase that incorporates the

relative pronoun (such as ἀνθ'ὦν or ἕως οὗ) will be included here

since they involve a relative pronoun directly.3

CLASSIFICATION OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

Clauses may be analyzed on the bases of structure (main, coor-

dinate, or subordinate), grammatical function (nominal, adjectival, or

adverbial), and semantical function. Relative clauses are subordinate

and may function in any of the grammatical categories listed. Seman-

tically, relative clauses may be classified as temporal, conditional,

causal, modal (manner), purpose, or result.

*Adjectival Relative Clauses*

The primary, basic significance of the relative clause is adjectival.

In a sense all relative clauses are adjectival. Like the substantive use

of an adjective, a relative clause by the omission of the antecedent can

become a substantive or noun clause and by association with various

words and with prepositions the adjective may become adverbial. But

(1985) 29-48; "The Classification of Subjunctives: A Statistical Study," *GTJ* 7 (1986)

3-19; "A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study," *GTJ* 8 (1987) 35-54; and

"The Classification of Optatives: A Statistical Study," *GTJ* 9 (1988) 129-40. Infor-

mational materials and listings generated in the preparation of this article may be

found in my "Supplemental Manual of Information: Relative Clauses" (available

through interlibrary loan from the Morgan Library, Grace Theological Seminary, 200

Seminary Drive, Winona Lake, IN 46590). Information about GRAM CORD is avail-

able through my co-developer Paul R. Miller, Project GRAM CORD, 18897 Deerpath

Road, Wildwood, IL 60030.

2 I plan to undertake a statistical study of adverbial clauses in the future.

3 There is one use of the relative pronoun that does not always involve a clause,

and thus does not fall strictly within the scope indicated by the title of this paper.

However, since it usually does so, it will be included. See "The Alternating Use of the

Relative," below.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 235

the true adjectival use is by far the most frequent (1079 [64%] out of

1680).

Adjectival relative clauses may be descriptive or restrictive (identi-

fying), just as other adjectives. Adjectival clauses are descriptive when

they ascribe a quality or attribute to the antecedent, and restrictive

when they define or identify the antecedent. The two categories are

not mutually exclusive, and they may overlap, requiring subjective

judgment on the part of the interpreter. For example, ἐξ ἧς ἐγεννήθη  
Ἰησοῦς = 'from whom Jesus was born' (Matt 1:16) could be describ-

ing Mary as Jesus' mother, or it could be distinguishing her from

others of the same name (i.e., the Mary who bore Jesus). The context

seems to suggest the descriptive sense. But in spite of the subjectivity,

the distinction is real and useful. In Matt 2:6 the sense is clearly

descriptive ("a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel”).4 In Matt

2:9 the relative clause is clearly restrictive ("the star, which they had

seen in the East"). There are, based on my judgment, 225 descriptive

and 432 restrictive relative clauses in the NT).5

Another category needs to be recognized which goes beyond the

functions of regular adjectives. Blass, in his treatment of sentence

structure, speaks of two types of Greek prose; the periodic style,

characterized by artistically developed prose, and the running or

continuous style, characterized by plain and unsophisticated language.

The running style is found in two patterns. One pattern has a series of

separate sentences, usually connected by καί. The other pattern ex-

tends the first statement by means of participial phrases, clauses

introduced by ὅτι, or relative clauses. Blass defines this 'Relative

Connective' as "a loosening of the connection of the relative clause to

the preceding complex sentence; something intermediate between a

relative clause and a demonstrative clause: ὅς = and this, but this,

this very thing."6

The relative connective use of the relative clause becomes quite

obvious when modern speech English versions of the NT are com-

pared with older translations that follow the grammar of the Greek.

Long sentences are broken down into many shorter ones in con-

formity to modern style. In many instances the break occurs where

the Greek has a relative. For example, Paul's "long sentence," Eph

1:4-14, is divided by the KJV into three sentences; the last two

sentences open with a relative clause. The NASB and the NIV break

it into six sentences; after the first sentence all but two breaks come at

4 Translations will be given from the NASB unless otherwise stated.

5 Lists of these and many other helpful details which cannot be included in this

article are available in the supplementary manual listed in n. 1.

6 BDF, 239.

236 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

a relative. Even the Nestle26 Greek text divides the passage into four

sentences; after the opening one each begins with a relative.

Another indication that the Greek relative serves as a connective

is seen in an examination of the ways in which the NASB, which

follows the Greek syntax more closely than other modern versions,

translates the relative in the NT. In approximately 10% of all occur-

rences (160 out of 1680) it translates the relative by using a personal

or demonstrative pronoun, even on occasion inserting a noun, thus

removing the "relation" supplied by the relative.

Such relative connectives are still adjectival and could probably

be classified as either descriptive or restrictive, but the consideration

that has prompted their separate treatment is the fact that they move

the thought of the sentence into a new area. By my count, there are

422 relative connectives in the NT.

*Nominal Relative Clauses*

There are 473 relative clauses in the NT for which the antecedent

of the relative pronoun is lacking, left to be supplied, or understood.

The relative pronoun is usually translated by "the one who," "that

which," or "what" (= "that which," not the interrogative). Actually, it

is better to consider the relative as containing in itself its antecedent,

and the entire clause becomes in effect a substantive.7 The clause itself

becomes the subject or object of the sentence, or fills some other

function in the sentence.

When a nominal relative clause comes at the beginning or early

in a sentence, it sometimes happens that a redundant personal or

demonstrative pronoun is used later in the sentence. The redundant

pronoun is called a pleonastic pronoun. This construction was found

in Classical Greek, but it is much more common in biblical Greek,

due probably to the influence of a similar Semitic idiom.

A nominal relative clause may be categorized according to its

function in a sentence. The two most common functions are subject

or direct object of a verb, but other noun functions are found as well.

Subject of the Verb

Of the nominal relative clauses, 139 (29%) serve as subject of a

sentence. Examples are Luke 7:4; ἄξιος ἐστιν ᾧ παρέξῃ τοῦτο, "the

7 Grammarians describe this situation differently. For example, BAGD (p. 583)

says, "A demonstrative pron. is freq. concealed within the relative pron." But W. W.

Goodwin (*Greek Grammar*, rev. C. B. Gulick [Boston: Ginn, 1930] 219) says, "In such

cases it is a mistake to say that ταῦτα ἐκεῖνοι, etc. are *understood*. . . . The relative

clause here really becomes a substantive, and contains its antecedent within itself."

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 237

one to whom you should grant this is worthy" (my translation; the

*NASB* alters the sentence structure, "He is worthy for you to grant

this to him") and John 1:33: ἐφ' ὃν ἂν ἴδης τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον  
καὶ μένον ἐη'αὐτόν, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ βαπτίζων, "He upon whom you

see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one

who baptizes." The last example illustrates also the pleonastic pro-

noun, οὗτος, which repeats the subject. Eleven subject clauses use a

pleonastic pronoun.

Direct Object of the Verb

The largest number of the nominal relative clauses, 222 (47%),

function as direct object of the verb; in 31 instances a pleonastic

pronoun is also used. Mark 1:44 illustrates this object clause: προ-

σένεγκε περὶ τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ σου ἃ προσέταξεν Μωϋςῆς, "offer for

your cleansing what Moses commanded." In Rom 7:15, 16 this con-

struction occurs four times, three of them with the pleonastic pro-

noun (e.g., ἀλλ' ὃ μιςῶ τοῦτο ποιῶ, "the thing I hate, this I do" [my

translation]).

Other Nominative

Other than as subject, the nominal relative clause is found in a

nominative case relationship most frequently as a predicative nomina-

tive in a copulative sentence (19 times). An example is found in John

1:30: οὗτος ἐστιν ὑπὲρ οὗ ἐγὼ εἶπον, "This is He on behalf of whom I

said." In four instances there may be a nominative absolute construc-

tion (Matt 10:14; 23:16, 18; and 1 Tim 3:16).

Other Accusative

Other than as direct object, the nominal relative clause is in an

accusative relationship 17 times: as object of a preposition (10 times);

as the complement of a direct objective (twice); and once each as

accusative of person, of thing, and of respect; in apposition to a direct

object; and subject of an infinitive. For example, in 2 Cor 12:20 μή

πως ἐλθὼν οὐκ οἵους θέλω εὕρω ὑμᾶς κἀγὼ εὑρεθῶ ὑμῖν οἷον οὐ  
θέλετε, "afraid that. . . I may find you to be not what I wish and may

be found by you to be not what you wish," the clause οὐχ οἵους φέλω

is the complement to the direct object ὑμᾶς. In the latter part of the

sentence the same construction is somewhat obscured by the verb

changing to passive. Col 3:6 is an example of a nominal relative

clause as accusative object of a preposition: δι' ἃ ἔρχεται ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ  
φεοῦ, "on account of which things the wrath of God comes" (my I

translation).

238 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Genitive Substantive

The nominal relative clause occurs in a genitive relation to the

sentence 31 times: as genitive object of a preposition (17 times), as a

partitive genitive (6 times), as an epexegetic genitive (4 times), as a

genitive of comparison (twice), as a genitive of relationship (once),

and as a genitive of content (once). An example of a partitive genitive

is found in Rom 15:18: οὐ γὰρ τολμήσω τι λαλεῖν ὧν οὐ κατειργά-

σατο Χριστὸς δι' ἐμοῦ, "For I will not presume to speak of anything

except what Christ has accomplished through me." A genitive of

comparison is found in John 7:31: ὁ Χριστὸς ὅταν ἔλθῃ μὴ πλείονα  
σημεῖα ποιήσει ὧν οὗτος ἐποίησεν; "When the Christ will come, He

will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?"

Dative Substantive

The nominal relative clause is dative 41 times (13 with a pleon-

astic pronoun): as indirect object (19 times), as object of a preposition

(15 times), as dative of possession (5 times), and once each as dative

of respect and of instrument. An example of an indirect object is

found in Gal 3:19: τὸ σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπήγγελται, "the seed. . . to whom

the promise had been made." A dative of possession is found in Mark

11:23: ὃς ἄν εἴπῃ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ . . . ἔσται αὐτῷ "whoever says to

this mountain. . . it shall be granted him [literally 'it shall be to him',

or, 'it shall be his']." Here the pleonastic pronoun αὐτῷ helps to

identify the case and the construction.

*Adverbial Clauses*

Ninety times in the NT the relative, together with a preposition

or some specific word expressing an adverbial idea, or both, becomes

an introductory phrase for a clause functioning adverbially. The

adverbial sense does not derive from the relative but from the preposi-

tion and the antecedent of the relative. Fuller treatment of adverbial

clauses (including those introduced by a relative) is planned for a

future study, but a brief discussion is included here for the sake of

completeness.

Temporal Clauses

Of the approximately 420 subordinate temporal clauses in the

NT, 57 are introduced by a relative phrase. The temporal sense is

indicated by the antecedent of the relative, sometimes expressed but

more commonly omitted. When it is not stated it can be determined

reasonably by the gender of the relative and the analogy of instances

where it is used. The antecedent most frequently is χρόνος in its

proper case form (47 times, 5 of them actually expressed), then ἥμέρα

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 239

(9 times, .7 expressed), and ὥρα (once only, understood from the

context). The simple relative ὅς; is used in 36 instances, ὅστις is seen 5

times in the phrase ἕως ὅτου, and the correlative ὅσος 6 times.

The actual phrases and the number of occurrences in the NT

are listed here. Brackets indicate that the antecedent is left to be

understood:

ἀφ' ἧς ἥμέρας 3

ἀφ'μ ἧς [ἡμέρας 2

ἀφ' ἧς [ὥρας 1

ἀφ' οὗ [χρόνου 4

ἐν ᾧ [χρόνῳ 4

ἐφ' ὅσον χρόνον 2

ἐφ' ὅσον [χρόνον 1

ὅσον χρόνον 3

ἄχρι ἧς ἡέρας 4

ἄχρι οὗ [χρόνου 4

ἄχρις οὗ [χρόνου 5

μέχρι οὗ [χρόνου 2

ἕως οὗ [χρόνου 17

ἕως ὅτου [χρόνου 5

Causal Clauses

There are 16 clauses classified as causal clauses introduced by

relative phrases. The causal sense is indicated by the prepositions

used, by the antecedent, or by both. The phrases and number of

occurrences are:

δι' ἧν αἰτίαν 5

δι' ἧν 1

ἧν αἰτίαν 1

ἀνθ' ὧν 5

ἐφ' ᾧ 2

εἴνεκεν οὗ 1

οὗ χάριν 1

Διά with accusative, εἵνεκεν and χάριν all mean 'on account of',

or 'because of'. Ἀνθ' ὧν 'in exchange for these things' may be

understood as "because of these things." Ἐφ' ᾧ may be contracted

from ἐφ' ᾧ τούτῳ ὅτι 'for this reason that' or 'because.8 Six times the

causal sense is shown by αἰτία as the antecedent, one time without a

preposition. Once (2 Pet 3:12), δι' ἥν clearly has ἡμέρας as its ante-

cedent, not αἰτία, yet the sense is causal rather than temporal, as διά

8 Cf. BAGD, 287.

240 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

with the accusative requires. Nine times the relative is neuter with no

antecedent, pointing to the general context for the reason or cause.9

Clauses Expressing Degree or Measure

Ten adverbial relative clauses express degree or measure, in each

case introduced by the correlative ὅσος, a word involving the idea of

quantity or measure. The adverbial clause answers the questions, how

much? or to what degree?

In three of these clauses the relative has an adverb as its ante-

cedent (μᾶλλον in Mark 7:36, and μικρόν (twice) in Heb 10:37).

Actually the last two do not involve a clause at all, functioning as

simple adverbs. These are unusual constructions, but not improper.

Clauses Expressing Manner

The phrases ὃν τρόπον (5 times) and καθ' ὃν τρόπον (twice)

both mean "according to the manner which." These phrases clearly

introduce a clause of manner.

Other Adverbial Clauses?

Mention should be made here of certain relative clauses, called

by some grammarians "conditional relative clauses" and "relative

purpose clauses" (and a few others which, if valid, should be included

here but are not). I have previously discussed "conditional relative

clauses," and concluded that, while the clauses may contain a sugges-

tion of condition, they are not, and should not be, classified as

conditional sentences.10

The situation is much the same with the so-called "relative pur-

pose clause," or other clauses that may suggest other adverbial senses.

As A. T. Robertson says,

Almost any sentence is capable of being changed into some other form

as a practical equivalent. The relative clause may indeed have a resul-

tant effect of cause, condition, purpose or result, but in itself it expresses

none of these things. It is like the participle in this respect. One must

not read into it more than is there. . . 11 As in Latin, the relative clause

may imply cause, purpose, result, concession or condition, though the

sentence itself does not say this much. This is due to the logical relation

in the sentence. The sense glides from mere explanation to ground or

9 Some see a similar causal or instrumental sense in some of the occurrences of

ἐν ᾧ (Rom 8:3; 14:21; Heb 2:18: 6:17). Cf. BAGD, 261.

10 See my article, "Other Conditional Elements in New Testament Greek," 185-86.

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

*Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 956.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 241

reason. . . . 12 The indefinite relative like ὃς ἐὰν θέλῃ (Mk. 8:35) or

ὅστις ὀμολογήσει (Mt. 10:32) is quite similar in idea to a conditional

clause with ἐάν τις or εἴ τις. But, after all, it is not a conditional

sentence any more than the so-called causal, final, consecutive relative

clauses are really so. It is only by the context that anyone inferentially

gets any of these ideas out of the relative.13

*Alternating Use of Relative with Μέν, Δέ*

The relative pronoun is used with the particles μέν and δέ to

express alternatives, such as are expressed in English by "the one. . .

the other" or "some. . . others." This is about the only remainder in

NT Greek of an original demonstrative sense of the relative pronoun.14

The article also (ὁ μέν . . . ὁ δέ) is used in this alternating construc-

tion, reflecting the same historical origin as a demonstrative. Certain

other words, ἄλλος (24 times), ἕτερος (10 times), and the indefinite

τινές (5 times), are also so used. Often these different patterns are

mixed together in one set of such alternative expressions. Even ἄλλος

and ἕτερος mingle in the same set in a way that seems to defy

explanation (cf. 1 Cor 12:8-10). The number of occurrences in the

NT for these alternating expressions are as follows:

Relatives only (ὃς μέν . . . ὃς δέ) 13

Article only (ὁ μέν . . . ὁ δέ) 10

Other words only 9

Relative combined with article 2

Relative combined with other words 5

Article combined with other words 7

Total sets of alternatives 46

Total number of relatives involved 38

The sets may consist of two alternatives (26 times), of three (11

times), of four (6 times), and one set of nine alternatives.

The first item in the list is not always marked by μέν (9 excep-

tions). Instead, the numeral εἶς, the indefinite pronoun τινές, the

demonstrative article οἱ δέ, even a noun (Heb 11:35) and a partitive

genitive phrase (John 7:40), all without μέν, may constitute the first

item. The alternate items of each list are almost invariably marked by

δέ the only exceptions are in the parallel passages, Mark 4:5 and

Luke 8:6, where καὶ ἄλλα or καὶ ἕτερον is found, respectively. 1 Cor

12:28, with οὓς μέν but no succeeding δέ, does not fit the "some. . .

12 Ibid., 960.

13 Ibid., 961-62.

14 Ibid., 695-96.

242 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

other" pattern; the numbered items following the first are not alterna-

tives to, but descriptions of, the first. Thus it is not classified in this

group.

THE MECHANICS OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

In this section the various relative pronouns will be discussed.

This will be followed by a discussion of the antecedents. Finally, the

matter of agreement between relative pronouns and their antecedents

will be analyzed.

*The Relative Pronoun*

By far the most frequently used relative pronoun is ὅς, ἥ, ὅ (1395

times, or 83% of the total). It is found in almost every gender,

number, and case, and in every functional classification except one,

where the sense calls for the quantitative ὅσος.

Ὅστις, ἥτις, ὅ τι is second in frequency (153 or 9%). This word

is a compound of the common relative ὅς and the indefinite pronoun

tij, with both parts of the compound experiencing inflection. This

compounding with the indefinite and the use of the word in the early

Greek gave it the name Indefinite Relative. But the name is no longer

appropriate in the Greek of the NT. Blass says that ὅς and ὅστις "are

no longer clearly distinguished in the NT."15 W. F. Howard16 shows

that ὅστις occurs almost solely in the nominative case and in the

accusative neuter, the only exception being an old genitive singular

neuter form surviving in the stereotyped phrase ἕως ὅτου. N. Turner

says,

Already in the Koine the distinction between the relative pronoun of

individual and definite reference (ὅς and ὅσος) and that of general and

indeterminate reference (ὅστις and ὁπόσος) has become almost com-

pletely blurred. Indeed in general relative clauses ὅς is the rule, and

although ὅστις is still used occasionally in its proper sense of whoever,

it is nearly always misused, by Attic standards, of a definite and

particular person.17

Cadbury18 makes the difference almost a matter of inflection, asserting

that in Luke the normal inflection is ὅς, ἥτις, ὅ (nominative singular)

and οἵτινες, αἵτινες, ἅ (nominative plural).

15 BDF, 152.

16 W. F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek,* vol. 2, *Accidence and*

*Word Formation* (Edinburgh: T. & T, Clark, 1920) 179.

17 N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 3, *Syntax* (Edinburgh:

T.&T. Clark, 1963)47.

18 H. J. Cadbury, "The Relative Pronouns in Acts and Elsewhere," *JBL* 42 (1923)

150-57. He claims only four exceptions in about 200 occurrences.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 243

Ὅσος is a correlative pronoun which adds the concept of quan-

tity to the relative concept and can be translated ''as much as,'' "how

much," or ''as great as.'' It is used of space and time, of quantity and

number, or of measure and degree. With πάντες it means "all who."

With the correlative demonstrative τοσούτος it describes one item by

comparing it with another quantitatively. It occurs 110 times in the

NT (about 6.5% of the relatives) and in every major classification of

relative uses.

Οἷος is much like ὅσος but is qualitative rather than quantitative.

It is usually translated "of what sort" or "such as.'' It is used in simple

relative clauses and in indirect questions and exclamations. Only 14

instances occur (less than 1%).

Ὁποῖος, like οἷος, is qualitative, "of what sort." It is used, much

as οἷος, in simple relative clauses and in indirect questions. There are

only 5 occurrences (less than 0.3%). Ὁπόσος ("how great," "how

much"), which relates to ὅσος in the same way that ὁποῖος does to

οἵος, does not occur at all in the NT.

Ἡλίκος, "how large," "how small," occurs only three times in

the NT, always of size or stature (its cognate noun ἡλικία is used

both of age and stature). The pronoun is used only in indirect

questions.

*The Antecedent*

Definitions

A pronoun is a standardized, abbreviated substitute for a noun.

Every pronoun has an antecedent, the nominal in place of which the

pronoun stands. A relative pronoun introduces a subordinate relative

clause that makes an assertion about the pronoun's antecedent. In

Luke 2:10 the angel said “I bring you good news of a great joy which

shall be for all people." By dropping the relative “which” and repeat-

ing the antecedent "joy" the statement may be restated as two

sentences: "I bring you good news of a great joy. That great joy shall

be for all people." Thus the relative is the subordinating link and the

antecedent is the point of linkage in putting together two clauses.

Grammatical Form of Antecedent

The antecedent of a relative pronoun may be a simple noun or a

substantival expression. By approximate count, 900 antecedents of

relative pronouns are nouns, 150 are pronouns, 160 are other sub-

stantival expressions, 100 are the subject expressed in the person and

number of the verb, and 340 antecedents are left to be understood

from the context. Very unusual are three whose antecedent is an

244 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

adverb (see above under the heading, Clauses Expressing Degree or

Measure).

The large number of noun antecedents needs no comment. The

pronouns are mostly personal or demonstrative. The pleonastic pro-

noun antecedent will be discussed below. Also, the antecedent found

in the inflection of the verb is self-explanatory. Of the other sub-

stantival expressions, a pronominal adjective is found most often as

the antecedent of a relative pronoun (forms of πᾶς [50+ times]; its

opposite οὐδείς [13 times]; specific numbers like εἷς or δώδεκα [10

times]; and indefinite numbers like πολύς, ἄλλος, ἕτερος, and λοιπός

[17 times]). Other substantival adjectives account for about 25 ante-

cedents. Substantival participles are antecedents in 38 instances. In

three places (Acts 2:39, 2 Tim 1:15, Heb 12:25-26) the antecedent is

an attributive prepositional phrase. A quoted scriptural passage that

functions as a noun clause is used as the antecedent of a relativepronoun in Eph 6:2. Even an infinitive serves as an antecedent in

Phil 4:10.

In many places the relative has no specific antecedent stated in

the sentence (about 340 times). In some of these cases it is possible to

supply from the context a word which may be given as an understood

antecedent. But in most of these cases the antecedent is rather to be

seen as implicit in the relative itself. Often the clue is in the gender of

the relative. Masculine and feminine may mean "the one who." Neuter

may mean "the thing which," "that which," or "what." The neuter

relative may also be used to refer generally to the idea or sense of the

context. This implicit or "understood"19 antecedent is especially com-

mon when a relative clause itself functions as a noun clause, and the

antecedent implicit in the relative explains why a following pronoun

is called pleonastic or redundant.

Location of Antecedent

The very term antecedent suggests that the antecedent comes

before the relative, as it actually does in 1089 cases (about 82%). But

in 244 cases the antecedent follows the relative in the sentence. If one

subtracts the 69 places where the pleonastic pronoun is counted as an

antecedent following the relative, there are 175 cases (less than 13%)

in which the antecedent follows the relative.

How far before or after the relative the antecedent may be found

is not easy to summarize even with all the statistics at hand. Counting

inclusively (that is, a count of two means it is the next word) a few

observations may be helpful. Full statistics are available.

19 See n. 7.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 245

Antecedent before relative:

Next word before. 39%

5 words or less before 25%

10 to 20 words before 10%

over 20 words before 3%

Antecedent after relative:

Next word after 25%

5 words or less after 71 %

10 to 20 words after 31 %

over 20 words after 4%

Agreement20

Since a relative has connections with both the antecedent and the

relative clause, its grammatical identifiers (gender, number, and case)

do double duty. Normally, gender and number agree with the ante-

cedent, but the case of the relative is determined by its grammatical

function in its own clause. This normal rule is true in the NT more

than 96% of the time. The exceptions to this rule are often called by

grammarians "ad sensum" agreement, i.e., agreement in sense but not

in grammatical form. The exceptions may be listed in five categories.

Natural or Real Versus Grammatical Gender and Number

There are 25 examples in the NT that may be classified in thiscategory. Words like ἔθνονς, τέκνον, and πλῆθος; are grammatically

neuter, but since they refer to people, sometimes masculine relatives

are used with them. Words like καρπός, σπόρος are grammatically

masculine, but they really are things, so neuter relatives may be used

with them. Θηρίον is neuter, but when it is used of the human

"beast" of the Revelation, a masculine relative is used. Κεφαλή is

feminine, but when it is used as a figure for Christ as head of the

church, a masculine relative is used. This real versus grammatical

distinction sometimes effects agreement in number also. Οὐρανός,

whether singular or plural in grammatical form, may mean simply

"heaven," and once (Phil 3:20) the plural form is antecedent to a

singular relative. Similarly, ὕδωρ in the singular is found once as the

antecedent of a plural relative (2 Pet 3:6). Ναός is singular, but when

it is used collectively for the people of God (1 Cor 3: 17), it is referred

to by οἵτινες, a plural relative. In Luke 6:17-18 πλῆθος, a neuter

20 For the rest of this section on the mechanics of relative clauses, I have depended

largely on the thorough work of A. T. Robertson (*Grammar*, 714-22). Very helpful

also is the discussion of ὅσ in BAGD, 583-85.

246 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

singular antecedent, is found with the masculine plural oi! as relative,

illustrating natural or real agreement in both gender and number.

Translation Formulas

A rather distinct group (7 instances) of these "ad sensum" agree-

ments involve a formula for the translation of names of persons,

places, titles, etc., from one language to another. The formula appears

in six closely related forms, all of which begin with the neuter relative

pronoun, ὅ. The specific phrases and their number of occurrences in

the NT are as follows:

ὅ ἐστιν 621

ὅ ἐστιν μεθερμηνευόμενον 522

ὅ ἐστιν λεγόμενος 123

ὃ λέγεται 224

ὃ λέγεται μεθερμηνευόμενον 125

ὃ ἐρμηνεύεται 226

The antecedent usually is a word that has no grammatical gender in

Greek, and the neuter relative is a natural one if we understand it to

refer to the "word" itself rather than that which it designates, mentally

supplying ῥῆμα or ὄνομα.

Agreement with Predicate Substantives27

Some of the exceptions to the rule of agreement show an agree-

ment of a different kind; the relative clause is a copulative one with a

predicate substantive, and the relative agrees in gender with thepredicate substantive rather than with the antecedent in the main

clause. An example is found in Eph 6:17: τὴν μ΄χαιραν τοῦ πνεύμα-

τος, ὅ ἐστιν ῥῆμα θεοῦ, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of

God." The actual antecedent is μάχαιραν (feminine), but the predicate

substantive, which is of course referring to the same thing, is ῥῆμα

(neuter), and the relative neuter agrees with it. In every instance the

predicate substantive is more prominent than the actual antecedent.

21 Mark 7:11, 34; 12:42; 15:16, 42; Heb 7:2.

22 Mark 5:41; 15:22, 34; John 1:41; Acts 4:36.

23 Matt 27:33.

24 John 19:17; 20:16.

25 John. 1:38.

26 John 1:42; 9:7.

27 Nine instances: Mark 7:11; 15:16, 42; Gal 3:16; Eph 6:17; 2 Thess 3:17; 1 Tim

3:15; Rev 4:5; 5:8.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 247

Neuter of General Notion28

Sometimes the .antecedent seems to be not some specific word

but the general notion, the concept. Col 3:14 has an example: ἐπὶ   
πᾶσιν δὲ τούτοις τὴν ἀγάπην, ὅ ἐστιν σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος,

"And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of

unity." The antecedent is ἀγάπην (feminine), but the sense suggested

by the neuter relative seems to be "that thing, quality, which is the

uniting bond.

Neuter of Abstraction

In the NT as also classical Greek, and especially in John's writ-

ings, the neuter is frequently used of a person when he is being

thought of in an abstract way. This happens at least 6 times29 in

which a neuter relative is used to refer to an antecedent who is

obviously a person. An example is found in John 17:24: Πάτερ, ὃ  
δέδωκάς μοι, θέλω ἵνα ὅπου εἰμὶ ἐγὼ κἀκαῖνοι ὦσιν μετ' ἐμοῦ,

"Father, I desire that they also whom [the neuter, ὅ] Thou has given

Me be with Me where I am." The antecedent is obviously not im-

personal. This abstract neuter is used elsewhere of God (John 4:22)

and of men (John 6:37, 39; 17:2; 1 John 5:4).

1 John 1:1-3 has a list of five relative clauses serving as object of

a verb in v 3. The relatives are all o! (neuter) and the antecedent is not

stated. Two interpretations are conceivable: one is impersonal ("we

proclaim to you the message which"), the other is personal ("we

proclaim to you the One who"). The obvious parallel to the prologue

of the gospel of John strongly indicates the personal view, and the use

of the expression ὃ . . . αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν, "which our

hands handled" (my translation) requires the personal view--one

cannot feel a message with his hands. What should be noted par-

ticularly here is that the neuter does not require the impersonal

interpretation. It may refer in an abstract way to "all He was and did,

abstract Deity."

Some General Considerations

First, it should be noted that above exceptions to the rule of

agreement are not mutually exclusive; some instances fit into two

28 Seven instances: Matt 12:4; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:4, 5; Col 3:14; 2 Thess 3:17; 1 Tim

2:10.

29 John 17:24; I John 1: 1-3 (5 times). There are other places where the neuter

relative has a grammatically neuter antecedent (πᾶν), so that the gender mismatch is

obscured: John 6:37, 39; 17:2.

248 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

of the categories. For example, three relatives listed as translation of

foreign words also show agreement with the predicate substantive.

Second, a large number of these "ad sensum" agreements involve

the neuter gender (about three-fourths of the total), and a large

number involve the specific phrase ὅ ἐστιν. That raises the possibility

that the phrase has become a stereotyped expression in which the

gender is "neutral" rather than neuter, like the Latin *id est*, "that is,"

used in English and written in abbreviation, "i.e." A careful study

shows that ὅ ἐστιν often seems to act like that, but there are other

times when it preserves normal agreement in all three genders, so

such a conclusion cannot be certain. Another phrase, τοῦτ' ἔστιν,

"that is," is totally neutral in gender and equals the use of "i.e."

Third, "ad sensum" agreement is not peculiar to Greek. It is a

very natural construction which usually causes no problem of

interpretation.

Attraction30

Attraction involves the case of the relative and antecedent. The

normal rule is that case is determined by the grammatical function of

the relative within its own clause. But there are exceptions to the

general rule in which the relative is attracted to the case of the

antecedent.

The situations that produce the exceptions to the general rule

involve a relative whose case is attracted to the case of the antecedent

(a phenomenon also found in classical Greek, particularly if the

relative clause was separated from the antecedent by other modifiers).

Most often (50 times in the NT), the attraction involves a relative

whose grammatical function in its clause calls for an accusative, but

the antecedent is either dative or genitive; in such circumstances, the

relative is generally attracted to the case of the antecedent. In addi-

tion, there are 10 instances in the NT where the grammatical function

of a relative calls for the dative case, but the case is attracted to the

case of a genitive antecedent. Cases of non-attraction are rare in the

NT (Heb 8:2 and a few variant readings for other passages).

Inverse Attraction

Sometimes the reverse of what I have described as attraction

occurs; the antecedent is attracted to the case of the relative. An

example is found in Matt 21:42: λίθον ὅν ἀπεδοκίμασαν οἱ οἰκο-

30 Grammarians do not agree on the terminology here. Goodwin (*Grammar*, 220-

21) uses the word "assimilation" for what most grammarians call "attraction," and

"attraction" for what others call "incorporation."

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 249

δομοῦντες, οὗτος ἐγενήθη εἰς κεφαλὴν γωνίας, "The stone which the

builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone" (cf. Mark 12:10

and Luke 20: 17). The "stone" is the subject of the verb ἐγενήθη and

as such would be nominative, but it is attracted to the case of the

relative ὅν which is accusative as direct object of its clause. Note also

the pleonastic οὗτος. Also note that in 1 Pet 2:7 the same quotation is

given without this inverse attraction; λίθος is nominative. In 1 Cor

10:16 inverse attraction occurs twice, both ποτήριον and ἄρτον are

subjects of their clauses but are attracted to the accusative case of the

relatives. Luke 12:10 shows inverse attraction from dative to nomina-

tive case. Inverse attraction in the NT involves the use of an accusa-

tive for a nominative (7 times), an accusative for a genitive (4 times),

an accusative for a dative (once), a nominative for a dative (once), a

dative for an accusative (once), and a dative for a genitive (once).

Inverse attraction usually happens when the relative clause pre-

cedes the main clause, but the antecedent is pulled forward (for

emphasis) to a position just before the relative. In some instances

anacoluthon may be involved; the case of the antecedent results from

a grammatical construction which is begun, but not completed.31

Incorporation

Frequently (42 times) the antecedent is moved out of its position

in the main clause and incorporated into the relative clause. When

this happens, the antecedent does not have an article, it usually does

not follow immediately after the relative (except in a few set phrases:

ὃν τρόπον, ᾗ ἡμέρᾳ, ᾗ ὥρᾳ, δι' ἣν αἰτίαν), and it is in the same case

as the relative, either by attraction or because both have the same

natural case. Examples are found in Mark 6:16, ὃν ἐγὼ ἀποκεφάλισα  
Ἰωάννην οὗτος ἠγέρθη, "John, whom I beheaded, he has risen" and

Luke 19:37, περὶ παςῶν ὧν εἶδον δυνάμενων, "for all the miracles

which they had seen."

With Prepositions

When either or both the antecedent and the relative stand in a

prepositional phrase, a variety of forms may result. The preposition

may appear with both (e.g., Acts 20:18: ἀπὸ πρώτης ἡμέρας ἀφ' ἧς),

with the relative only (e.g., John 4:53: ἐκείηῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐν ᾖ ), or with

the antecedent only (e.g., Acts 1:21: ἐν παντὶ χρόνῳ ᾦ εἰσῆλθεν). If

the antecedent is unexpressed, the preposition may be the one com-

mon to both (e.g., 2 Cor 2:3: ἀφ' ὧν), the one which belongs to the

relative (e.g., Luke 17:1: δι' οὗ = τούτῳ δι' οὗ), or the one which

31Cf. Robertson, *Grammar*, 718.

250 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

would have been used with the antecedent (e.g., John 17:9: περὶ

ὧν = περὶ τούτων οὕς).

MOODS USED IN RELATIVE CLAUSES

The relative has no affect whatever on the mood. The mood in

relative clauses is governed by the same principles as it would be in an

independent clause, and conveys the same semantic significance.

*Indicative*

The indicative is the most common mood used in relative clauses

(1436 [84%] out of 1680). All the tenses are represented.

*Subjunctive*

The subjunctive also is used frequently (159 times [9%]). Only

present subjunctives (38 times) and aorist subjunctives (121 times) are

found in relative clauses in the NT.

The basic significance of the subjunctive mood is potentiality or

indefiniteness, both involving futurity. This element is always present

in relative clauses which use a subjunctive verb.

Οὐ Μή, with the Subjunctive

Elsewhere32 this use of the subjunctive in emphatic future asser-

tions has been discussed. It is usually found in main clauses but may be

used anywhere an indicative can be used. The strangeness of the use of

the subjunctive for emphatic assertion may be explained by the signifi-

cance of the two negatives. The μή, immediately preceding the subjunc-

tive verb negates the verb, making the clause a doubtful assertion.

The οὐ before the μή, negates the doubtfulness, making the total

expression mean "not doubtful," "no doubt about it." Thus, the

subjunctive is a "positively negated" future potentiality. It is found in

8 relative clauses in the NT, involving 9 subjunctive verbs.33

Indefinite Relative Clauses

These are the clauses which in English add the suffix "ever" to

the relative introducing the clause ("whoever" or "whatever," refer-

ring to an indefinite or general antecedent). Most (61 %) are nominal

clauses, serving as the subject or object of the main verb or some

other substantival function. About one-fourth are adjectival. Typically

they are introduced by a relative with ἄν or ἐάν (124); the relative is

32 Cf. my article, "Subjunctives," 6.

33 Matt 16:28; Mark 9:1; 13:2; Luke 8:17; 9:27; 18:30; Acts 13:41; Rom 4:8.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 251

ὅς (101 times), ὅσος (12 times), or ὅστις (11 times). Once the indefinite

relative ὅστις is used without ἅν (James 2:10), and once the simple

relative is used with the indefinite pronoun ti as its antecedent (Heb

8:3). One indefinite relative clause is so compressed that it is difficult

to analyze (Acts 21:16). All of the indefinite relative clauses use the

subjunctive mood.

Relative Adverbial Clauses of Time

This group of relative clauses has been discussed above and

needs here only to be looked at with respect to the mood used. All of

the other adverbial relative clauses and more than two-thirds of the

relative temporal clauses use the indicative mood. But about one-

third of the relative temporal clauses use the subjunctive. Relative

temporal clauses follow the standard procedure for all temporal

clauses. When the sense is "until" and the time "until which" is either

future or unknown, then the subjunctive is used. In all other instances

the indicative is used. So the subjunctive here is normal usage and fits

the basic significance of the mood.

Hortatory Subjunctive

The hortatory subjunctive is usually found in the main clause of

a sentence, expressing a futuristic and potential character. In one

instance it occurs in a relative clause with that same significance (Heb

12:28: ἔχωμεν χάριν, δι' ἧς λατρεύωμεν, "Let us be thankful and so

worship [NIV]).34

Future Indicative as Equivalent to Aorist Subjunctive?

In a previous study35 the use of the future indicative in places

where normally an aorist subjunctive would be expected has been

considered. There are a few places where this may be true among the

relative clauses. In Mark 8:35 and Acts 7:7 the simple relative with ἄν

or ἐάν is followed by the future indicative. Both are indefinite relative

clauses that normally use the subjunctive. In Matt 12:36 a clause with

the future indicative is introduced by πᾶν . . . ὅ, which often is in-

definite. If the future indicative is understood as subjunctive, the

clause would be indefinite and the sense "whatever idle word men

should speak." This would fit the context well. But the particle ἄν is

not present, and the sense could conceivably be definite, "every specific

word which men shall speak."

34 BDF (p. 191, §377) translates the clause, "through which let us worship." A freer

translation is, "Let us take our grace and by it let us worship."

35 See my article, "Subjunctives," 16-17.

252 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

In Luke 11:6 the relative is followed by a future indicative that, if

understood to function like a subjunctive, could be an example of a

deliberative question indirectly quoted in a relative clause. However,

the simple future indicative seems more probable.

*Imperative*

An imperative verb occurs after a relative in 9 instances, but in

none of them does the relative have anything to do with the mood. A

relative clause frequently introduces a new statement by attaching it

subordinately to the preceding one (see the discussion above under

"Adjectival Relative Clauses). The new statement may be imperatival,

with an imperative verb. This use of the relative clause is parallel to

the hortatory subjunctive with a relative. Six such examples are seen

in the NT.36

Three other imperatives in relative clauses are to be explained

otherwise. They are found in clauses involved with the alternating use

of the relative. This alternating relative may put together sets of

words, phrases, or clauses. In Jude 22-23 three imperatival clauses

are put together in this manner: "have mercy on some [οὒς μέν] . . . ,

save others [οὒς δέ] . . . , on some have mercy [οὒς μέν]."

Participle

The alternating use of the relative also explains the two participles

which follow relatives in Mark 12:5, "beating some, and killing

others." The two participles are not verbs governed by the relative,

but rather are two phrases put in an alternating relationship.

A FEW PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES

The purpose of language is to communicate, not to confuse, and

usually it works very well. But when one word is used for another,

such as a relative pronoun for an antecedent, there is introduced the

potential for a misunderstanding. One of the surprising facts arising

out of this study is the rarity of confusion over the identification of

antecedents. Almost always the antecedent is quite obvious. However,

there are a few instances in which this is not the case. I mention four.

Matthew 26:50

When Jesus spoke to Judas in Gethsemane on the occasion of

the betrayal, he said, ἑτῖρε, ἐφ' ὃ πάρει. Two very different under-

standings have developed out of these words. The problem centers in

36 2 Tim 4:15; Titus 1:13; Heb 13:7; 1 Pet 3:3; 5:9, 12.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 253

the use of the relative. Traditional grammarians have tried to treat it

as a normal relative pronoun; the phrase ἐφ΄ ὅ would mean "for

which," and the clause would be translated, "Friend, for which you

are here." This obviously is incomplete. Two solutions have become

popular.

Traditional grammarians have usually supplied the need by in-

serting a verb at the beginning, not expressed but supplied mentally

to make sense of the statement (cf. *NASB*: "Friend, do what you have

come for"; most recent translations are similar). Grammatically it is

proper, the sense is tolerable, but the question remains, why is the

most important word in the statement left unsaid?

In very early times the words were understood quite differently;

they were taken as a question, "Why are you here?" The Old Latin

and Sinaitic Syriac understood it so, as did Luther's German and the

KJV, "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" There is no conjecture and

the sense is more natural to the context. The problem is the pronoun;

o! is a relative, not an interrogative. Grammarians, under the long-

standing dominance of Attic Purists, insisted that the relative never

was used as an interrogative.

Adolph Deissman37 has shown that this was no longer true in

later Greek. He quotes an inscription etched on the side of an ancient

Syrian glass wine goblet (first century A.D.): ἐφ' ὃ πάρει; εὐφραίνου

"Why are you here? Make merry!" Several other such glasses have

been found, and papyrologists attest this interrogative use of the

relative for later common Greek. Taking this understanding the sense

becomes clear and forceful, "Friend, why are you here?"

*2 Peter 1:4*

The prepositional phrase, δι' ὧν, is found in 2 Peter 1:4. Since

ὧν may be any gender, the only factor of agreement to be checked is

number; it is plural. There are three possible antecedents in the

context: ἡμῖν (v 3), πάντα (v 3), and δόξη καὶ ἀρετῇ (v 3). If ἡμῖν is

the antecedent, then the sense of vv 3-4, is, "given to us . . . through

whom (i.e., us) . . . he has given to us promises." This understanding

of the passage is awkward and makes poor sense. When πάντα is

considered to be the antecedent, the sense is, "given us all things. . .

through which (things) he has given to us promises." This, too, is

awkward. The last mentioned possible antecedent is the nearest of the

three, and makes the best sense: "the One who called us by means of

his own glory and virtue, through which he has given promises."

37 Adolph Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper,

1922) 125-31.

254 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

*2 Peter 3:6*

This passage also uses the prepositional phrase, δι' ὧν. Two

antecedents would fit well the meaning of the passage: the flood

waters and the Word of God. But in both cases there are problems of

agreement. Five explanations have been suggested. (1) The antecedent

is τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ θεοῦ (v 5); it is singular, but God's Word is made up

of many words. (2) The antecedent is ὕδατι (v 5); the word is singular,

but it used twice (ἐν ὕδατι καὶ ἐξ ὕδατι), and the nature of water is

such that singular/plural is not so relevant. (3) ὕδατι plus λόγῳ;

together they are plural. However, this is an unlikely combining of

two disparate items. (4) The antecedent is οὐρανοὶ καὶ γῆ; a very

unrealistic suggestion which does not give good sense to the passage.

(5) Variant readings in the text (see NA26) suggest the possibility of

copyist error. However, the evidence for this is weak. Of these five

explanations I prefer the second.

*1 John 3:20*

This is a grammatically difficult passage. The problem centers in

the fact that the word ὅτι occurs twice in the verse, and one of theseseems to be superfluous. There are three basic ways of understanding

this text.

One way to solve the grammatical difficulty of this passage is to

say that the first ὅτι is not the subordinating conjunction, but the

indefinite relative pronoun, ὅτι. This explanation is plausible since,

at the time of the writing of the NT, the continuous writing of words

without spaces between them was the almost universal practice. Thus,

there would be no written distinction between ὅτι and ὅ τι. Given this

understanding, ἐάν is indefinite rather than conditional, and ὅ τι ἐάν

means "whatever." This way of handling the passage has been taken

almost universally by modern speech English translations (e.g., *ASV*

margin, *RSV*, *Amplified Bible*, Philip's, *NEB* text and first margin,

*NASB*, and *NIV*). However, for many reasons I am convinced that

this understanding is wrong.

First, the case of ὅ τι (accusative) does not fit. *NASB* translates

the clause, "in whatever our heart condemns us"; the case of the

indefinite relative pronoun would depend on the verb καταγινώσκω.

This verb takes a genitive object to express the fault with which one is

being charged.38 The accusative cannot be explained by assimilation,

for the antecedent (unexpressed) would not be in the accusative case

either.

38BAGD, 409.

BOYER: RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT 255

Furthermore, if the opening of v 20 was the indefinite relative a

ti, then the structure of 1 John 3:19-21 would not be consistent with

the contrasting structure of opposite conditions so characteristic of

this epistle (cf. 1:6-7, 8-9, 10; 2:4-6, 10-11, 15; 3:6, 7-8, 14-15, 17;

4:2-3, 4-6, 7-8, 10; 5:10). One of the ways in which this contrasting

structure is introduced is with the phrase, ἐν τοῦτο γινώσκομεν, "in

this we are getting to know." The phrase is used nine times in this

epistle with only slight verbal variations. Twice (2:5; 3:16) the phrase

is followed by an indefinite conditional, "whoever." Three times (3:24;

4:2; 5:2) it is followed by one side of a contrasting pair, the other side

being implied. Three times (2:3; 4:2, 6) it is followed by contrasting,

opposite, conditional sentences. 1 John 3:19-21 seems to fit into this

last category: "if our heart condemns us [v 20] . . . if our heart does

not condemn us [v 21]."

Finally, the interpretation of the passage that results from under-

standing the opening words to be the indefinite relative is out of

character with the rest of this epistle. To paraphrase with an indefinite

relative, the passage reads as follows:

We know that we are of the truth and shall persuade our conscience

[the probable sense of καρδία here] toward God with respect to any-

thing our conscience may rebuke us for, because God knows us better

than we know ourselves; he knows that our conscience is wrong in

condemning us. If our conscience does *not* condemn us we already

have this boldness toward him.

This interpretation suggests that man is more sensitive about his sin

than God is. But 1 John was written to bring assurance of salvation

to those who believe (2:3; 5:13). Assurance is gained when one ex-

amines his life on the basis of a series of tests that John presents to

separate between believers and unbelievers. The evidence of God

working in a life is seen when one becomes more loving and more

Christ-like, living in purity rather than in sin. Given the interpretation

that results from understanding John to have used an indefinite rela-

tive, 1 John 3:19-21 would be teaching the opposite of the rest of the

epistle; in this one instance one would be told not to worry about his

conscience, because God knows that he is better than he thinks he is.

The second basic way to understand this text is to interpret the

first ὅτι as a conjunction introducing a nominal, conditional (because

of ἐάν) clause that is the direct object of the verb πείσομεν; the

second ὅτι is superfluous and should be ignored. The sense is, "We

shall persuade our conscience before God that if our conscience

condemns us, God is greater than our conscience." The major problem

with this understanding of the grammar is that nowhere in Greek, NT

256 GRACE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

or otherwise, does πείθω use a ὁτι clause as object. The normal

construction uses an infinitive or περί or ἵνα. Also, it leaves the

second ὅτι unexplained.

The third way to make sense of this passage is to say that the

first ὅτι introduces a causal, conditional clause. The resultant mean-

ing becomes an explanation of the confidence expressed in v 19: "We

shall persuade our conscience before God because, if our conscience

condemns us. . . . " Thus far the grammar is proper, and the sense is

good. But there is still the problem of the second ὅτι. This is variously

explained. Some ignore it or drop it. Alford39 sees the clause as

causal, and by supplying ἐστίν it becomes "it is because God is

greater than our hearts." A. Plummer40 makes it a nominal clause,

with δῆλον to be supplied: "it is obvious that God is greater than our

hearts." This makes excellent sense, and there is a possible parallel to

the construction in 1 Tim 6:7, where there is a ὅτι clause and in the

critical apparatus (NA26) the variant readings show δῆλον ὅτι. Two

other examples, but without ὅτι, are 1 Cor 15:27 and Gal 3:11. Some

variation of this third basic way of understanding the grammar seems

to be the most defensible.

CONCLUSION

The use of relative pronouns and relative clauses in the Greek

NT is rich and varied. This study has statistically analyzed the gram-

matical and semantic functions of relative pronouns and relative

clauses. Generally, these functions are obvious, but the use of one

word in the place of another (such as a relative pronoun in the place

of its antecedent) does introduce the possibility of confusion.

39 Henry Alford, *Greek Testament,* New ed. vol. 4 (London: Longmans Greek, and

Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Company, 1894) 480.

40 A. Plummer, *Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges, The Epistles*

*of St. John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1896) 88.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary

200 Seminary Dr.

Winona Lake, IN 46590

www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [ted.hildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:ted.hildebrandt@gordon.edu)  
 for biblicalelearning.org.