# The Optative Mood

The optative mood is used when the speaker wishes to portray an action as *possible*.[1] This is slightly different from the subjunctive mood, which portrays an action as *uncertain* but nevertheless *probable*. The name optative may lead one to assume that it's main use is to express wishes. This is however not exactly true. The optative indeed has three usages, just like the subjunctive: potential, volitive and oblique. Of these three uses, the contingency particle ἄν is usually present (but not always) in the first and third kinds. Accordingly, the name was given to the mood by ancient grammarians because at the time the only use it had without the particle ἄν was that of portraying wishes.[2]

The optative is a subtlety of the Greek language that was never very common (even in ancient Greek). Robertson even suggests that it was never common in the vernacular, appearing mainly in literary works.[3] The mood was actually dying out during the Hellenistic koine period, with its uses being taken over by the imperative and subjunctive moods. There are in fact very few instances of the optative mood in the New Testament (NT). This fact, however, should not lead one to assume that NT authors were unaware of the difference between the two moods. As a matter of fact, all instances of the optative in the NT are used precisely where one would expect an optative. As Wallace states,

> When one morpho-syntactic feature is becoming absorbed by another in Hellenistic Greek and when a Hellenistic author uses the **rarer** form, he normally does so consciously and with understanding. (…) A Hellenistic author may use a subjunctive while in classical Greek an optative would have been used. But a Hellenistic author will not use an optative in a situation which, in the classical era, required a subjunctive.[4]

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[1] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 480; Harvey Eugene Dana and Julius Robert Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1957), 172.

[2] Archibald Thomas Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 936–37.

[3] Robertson, 936.

[4] Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 480. Emphases in the original.

# Uses of the Optative

As we mentioned before, there are three principal usages of the optative: volitive, potential and oblique.[5] In the first two uses, the optative is used as the mood of the main verb, i.e., in an independent clause, whereas in the last use, it is the mood of a dependent clause.

## 1. The Volitive Optative

This is the most extensive use of the optative in the NT. It is the ordinary form used to express a realizable wish referring to the future.[6] It is used in independent sentences without the particle ἄν and is negated using μή. By NT times, this use has been substituted by the subjunctive and imperative moods.

Examples:

1. καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτῇ· μηκέτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἐκ σοῦ μηδεὶς καρπὸν **φάγοι** – and he said to it, "May no one eat of your fruit any longer" (Mk 11,14)
2. εἶπεν δὲ Μαριάμ· ἰδοὺ ἡ δούλη κυρίου· **γένοιτό** μοι κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου – Then Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. May it happen to me according to your word." (Lk 1,38)
3. τὸ ἀργύριόν σου σὺν σοὶ **εἴη** εἰς ἀπώλειαν ὅτι τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνόμισας διὰ χρημάτων κτᾶσθαι – may your money go with you to destruction because you presumed to acquire the gift of God by means of money (Acts 8,20)
4. ἐλεύσεται καὶ ἀπολέσει τοὺς γεωργοὺς τούτους καὶ δώσει τὸν ἀμπελῶνα ἄλλοις. ἀκούσαντες δὲ εἶπαν· μὴ **γένοιτο** – he will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others. When they heard this, they said, "May it never be!" (Lk 20,16)

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[5] Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), § 384-386; Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 481–84.
[6] Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, trans. Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), § 1814; Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 173.

## 2. The Potential Optative

Here the optative is used with the particle ἄν to state a future possibility, propriety or likelihood, as an opinion of the speaker.[7] This optative is also used as the verb form of a 4th class condition in both the protasis (the condition clause) and apodosis (the main clause).[8] Nevertheless, when used in an independent clause, it is not limited by any condition present in the mind, hence it is not always necessary to supply any protasis in thought.[9]

Examples:

1. ὁ δὲ Παῦλος· **εὐξαίμην** ἂν τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐν ὀλίγῳ καὶ ἐν μεγάλῳ οὐ μόνον σὲ ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀκούοντάς μου σήμερον γενέσθαι τοιούτους ὁποῖος καὶ ἐγώ εἰμι παρεκτὸς τῶν δεσμῶν τούτων – Paul replied, I would pray to God that sooner or later not only you but also all who are listening to me today should become just as I am, except for these chains. (Acts 26,29)
2. κρεῖττον γὰρ ἀγαθοποιοῦντας, εἰ **θέλοι** τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, πάσχειν ἢ κακοποιοῦντας – for it is better to suffer, if the Will of God should will it, for doing good than for doing evil. (1 Pet 3,17)
3. πῶς γὰρ ἂν **δυναίμην** ἐὰν μή τις ὁδηγήσει με; παρεκάλεσέν τε τὸν Φίλιππον ἀναβάντα καθίσαι σὺν αὐτῷ - "How in fact will I be able [to understand] unless someone were to guide me?" And he besought Philip to climb up and sit with him. (Acts 8,31)
4. καί τινες ἔλεγον· τί ἂν **θέλοι** ὁ σπερμολόγος οὗτος λέγειν; – And some were saying, "what would this babbler say? (or, what does this babbler wish to say)" (Acts 17,18) *here one could infer an implicit protasis such as "if he had anything to say"*

## 3. The Oblique Optative

Here, the optative is used without the particle ἄν in a dependent clause, which is usually an indirect question after a secondary tense (i.e., a past tense). The optative thus substitutes an indicative or subjunctive that would have been present in the direct question. Since, however, direct discourse is preferred by most NT authors, this usage is

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[7] Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, § 1824.
[8] There are no complete fourth-class conditions in the NT, i.e., we only find them in mixed cases, i.e., with a non-optative in the apodosis, cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 699–701.
[9] Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, § 1825.

quite rare and is only found in the more literary works, e.g. in Luke. In some cases, one can find an oblique optative used with the particle ἄν. This means that the indirect statement corresponds to a potential optative in the direct statement, which some authors call the *deliberative optative*.[10]

Examples:

1. ἡ δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ διεταράχθη καὶ διελογίζετο ποταπὸς **εἴη** ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος – but she was much perplexed at this word and was wondering what kind of greeting this could be. (Lk 1,29) *here the corresponding direct question would be ποταπός ἐστιν/ἦ ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος;*

2. ἐνένευον δὲ τῷ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ τὸ τί ἂν **θέλοι** καλεῖσθαι αὐτό - they made signs to the father asking what he would want to have him called. (Lk 1,62) *here the corresponding direct question would have been τί ἂν θέλοις καλεῖσθαι αὐτό;*

3. αὐτοὶ δὲ ἐπλήσθησαν ἀνοίας καὶ διελάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους τί ἂν **ποιήσαιεν** τῷ Ἰησοῦ - But they were filled with folly and started discussing with one another what they might do with Jesus. (Lk 6,11) *here the corresponding direct question would have been τί ἂν ποιήσαιμεν τῷ Ἰησοῦ;*

# Bibliography

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[10] Robertson, *Grammar of the GNT*, 940; Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 174.