The Greek Definite Article

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It is easy for the superficial reader of the Greek New Testament to treat the definite article as a part of speech which sometimes conveniently points out the distinction between "the man" and "a man," but which is also often omitted or included without any apparent rhyme or reason. The translators of the King James version, moreover, influenced perhaps by the Latin, which has no article, apparently also felt under no compulsion to bow the knee to the authority of the Greek definite article. The idiom of languages differ, with the result that one language may call for the definite article where another requires the absence of the article. Nevertheless, there are rules of grammar and usage governing its use and non-use, and an understanding of these principles for Greek will furnish many sparkling facets in the process of "rightly dividing the word of truth."

One general rule permeates the use of the article in Greek: *Nouns which have the article are generally either definite or generic, and nouns which do not have the article are generally either indefinite or qualitative.*[1] Examples of each of these may be found, respectively, in John 1:19, "*the* Jews"; 2:25, "he knew what was in *man*"; 1:23, "*a* voice"; and 1:14, "full of *grace* and *truth.*"

I

With this general rule in mind, some specific corollaries may be mentioned.

Since the verbs "to be" and "to become" take the nominative case in both subject and predicate, and since Greek has no re-

quired word order of subject and predicate, one may sometimes wonder how to tell which is which. For instance, why should John 1.1 not be read, "and God was the Word"? The subject is the thing to be identified, and will usually be definite, requiring the article; while the predicate will usually be indefinite or qualitative, not using the article: hence the subject of these verbs usually has the article, and the predicate does not have the article unless it is either definite or identical with the subject. John 1:1, therefore, is correctly read, "and the Word was God." As a matter of fact, the use of the article with divine names in Greek is rather irregular. Often, however, the general rule can be applied; and in the above passage the meaning probably is that the Word was divine in nature (quality of God, without the article) rather than that the Word was the person of God (definite, which would require the article). Contrast John 1:4, "the life was the light," and I John 3:4, "sin is lawlessness," where both subject and predicate have the article, implying that the subject and the predicate are essentially equal.

Objects of which there is only one, monadic nouns, involve definiteness, hence require the article in Greek—"heaven," "the earth," "the sun," etc. Similarly, objects which are singled out from their class for special emphasis require the article; for example, "the coming One"—the Messiah, as outstanding above all others who may come; and "the writings," the regular Greek phrase for "the Scriptures," as "the writings *par excellence.*"

John 4:40 speaks of "two days." John 4:43 uses the phrase "after *the* two days," referring to the same period of time. In this manner Greek uses the definite article for repeated mention of a thing, since it thus acquires definiteness even though indefinite at its first mention.

[1] In English, definiteness is denoted by the definite article; the generic idea in various ways which describe a class of objects as a whole—"mankind," "God loves *the sinner*," "*The dog* is *man's* best friend," etc.; the indefinite idea by the indefinite article "a," "an"; and the qualitative idea by the absence of any article—"justice," "peace," etc.

When possession or property is obvious, sometimes the Greek possessive pronoun is omitted, the possession being implied by the article. John 7:30, for example, says, "no one laid *the hand* upon him"—a common New Testament idiom—since the reference is clearly to someone's own hand; similarly, Matt. 15:4 and 19:19, "Honor *the* father and *the mother.*" A similar usage is found in German language, particularly with reference to parts of the body.

Quality is indicated by absence of the article. But when a quality, or any abstract noun, is used as though it were concrete, tangible, or personal, it takes the article. In I Cor. 13: 1, 2, 3, "love" is spoken of as a quality. But in the next verses it is personified and takes the article. This type of distinction is very significant in the New Testament, as, for example, with the word "sin."

In a series of nouns, if each is to be considered separately, the article precedes each if it is used at all. If the nouns are to be considered together, the article precedes the first noun only—cf. "high priests and Pharisees" in John 7:35 and 7:45.

While the article signifying *definiteness* is used for nouns *singled out* from their class, the article is used in an almost oppoite sense, with the generic idea, for a noun used as typical of its class. This usage is common in proverbs and general truths; as Luke 10:7, *"the* laborer" (any laborer), and John 10:10, *"the* thief" (any thief).

II

Finally, some usages which are exceptions to the general rule should be noted.

With the verbs "to be" and "to become" a predicate noun regularly does *not* have the article if it is written preceding the verb, regardless of whether it is definite or not, and the context must be the deciding factor in its interpretation. Compare John 8:12 and 9:5, and see also Mark 15:39.

A noun may be definite, requiring the definite article in English, even though it does not have the article in Greek, provided it is clearly made definite by some defining phrase in the Greek (particularly if the defining noun has no article). This is probably largely limited to set phrases or idioms, such as "the word of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15. Cf. 1:8). Similarly, certain prepositional phrases, probably also used idiomatically, may be considered definite even though the object has no article, if the context indicates definiteness (cf. the English "at home"); for example, John 1:1, "In the beginning."

Usage of the article with proper names is rather irregular, since a proper name would be definite without the article. Some monadic nouns, moreover, which usually require the article, may sometimes be considered as proper names and thus not have the article, much as the English "the earth" or "Earth." So also with the divine names and titles the article may or may not be used. Even with these proper and divine names, however, the regular rules regarding the use of the article may apply in any given instance, as was noted above regarding John 1:1, "the Word was God." Similarly, the Holy Spirit generally takes the article in references to his person and omits the article in references to his operations. The word "law" requires individual attention. The article indicates a particular law, or Mosaic Law; without the article reference may be to "law" as a principle, but evidently sometimes to the Mosaic Law under the rule governing proper names.

The Greek article, like James' characterization of "the tongue" (generic usage, by the way!), is indeed "a little member and boasteth great things." The careful translator will not fail to consider it carefully, and the New Testament student will be rewarded by acquainting himself with its significance.