Ronald D. Peters

*The Greek Article: A Functional Grammar of ὅ-Items in the Greek New Testament with Special Emphasis on the Greek Article*

Linguistic Biblical Studies 9


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Although not stated in the monograph itself, this addition to the Linguistic Biblical Studies series was a doctoral thesis done under Stanley Porter’s and Cynthia Westfall’s tutelage at McMaster Divinity College. The work makes a radical proposal that, if correct, would overturn much of grammatical scholarship done on the Greek article in the past two centuries.

The basic thesis of the book is that “the article is employed in a wide variety of structures that fill the same slot and performed [sic] the same or similar function as structures that employ the relative pronoun” (271). In other words, “the article [is viewed] as a reduced form of the relative pronoun, and that both parts of speech share certain defining functional characteristics that demonstrate and justify this co-classification” (3). Rather than functioning as a determiner, Peters believes that the article—at least in Koine Greek—made nouns concrete, not definite. Without the article, they are abstract (70).

Linguists and grammarians have long since abandoned the idea that the Greek article’s main function is to definitize. But using the poles of concrete versus abstract is new, and the notion that the article never definitizes is probably the most revolutionary aspect of Peters’s thesis, at least for exegesis: “any indication of definiteness or indefiniteness is
outside the scope of the article’s function” (181). Further, “the Greek article orients the identification of the referent to the speaker or writer. This stands in contrast to the English definite article and demonstratives, which indicate that the recipient possesses the information necessary for identification or direct the recipient to the information respectively” (4). Peters here articulates a view that, in part, is found among those who work in the field of Greek linguistics and grammar, that the article is used primarily as an identification marker. However, where he differs is in his view that the orientation of this identification is to the speaker/writer rather than the hearer/reader. In other words, the readers will not be able to make the connections for themselves. He suggests that first-year Greek students would do well to employ “the gloss the one who or that which from the beginning of their language education” when translating the article (272).

The book has an introduction and conclusion with ten chapters. The end matter includes a bibliography and three indices.

In chapter 1, “Historical Overview” (5–68), Peters makes a case that English-language grammars of ancient Greek have been uncritically indebted to German-language Greek grammars (11–13). This is so in both classical and New Testament grammars. One grammarian, however, stands out against this trend: Thomas Fanshaw Middleton, whose *Doctrine of the Greek Article* published over two hundred years ago argues that the Greek article is the equivalent of the relative pronoun, according to Peters (48). Nevertheless, Middleton could not break completely from the idea of definiteness for the article, a perspective faulted by our author (50). Middleton’s view also is different from Peters’s in one key respect: while Middleton saw the article as functioning like a relative pronoun from Homer on, Peters considers the article’s function to have morphed toward this, apparently sometime after the age of Attic Greek.

In spite of being the longest chapter, the “Historical Overview” has several lacunae as well as some odd features. In a work of this sort, which purports to overturn centuries of scholarship regarding the origins and function of the Greek article, it is incumbent on the author to have a good grasp of the scholarship that he is challenging. Yet Peters seems to overlook several authors whose writings make significant contributions to classical and biblical studies. Whether these works contradict Peters’s view, supplement it, or embrace it, we simply are not told. But the thoroughness of investigations into the secondary literature that is required is lacking. In his discussion of classical Greek grammars, he lists only Jelf, Jannaris, and Smyth as representatives prior to the twenty-first century. He briefly mentions Kühner-Blass and Schwyzer (but not Schwyzer-Debrunner) in his section on the influence of German scholarship but does not interact with these works in his section on classical scholarship. Nor does he mention Gildersleeve’s *Syntax of Classical Greek from Homer to Demosthenes*, whose second volume has nearly one
hundred pages of analysis on the article. In Peters’s treatment of New Testament grammars, there are quite a few gaps. Not mentioned, for example, are Radermacher (*Neu testamentliche Grammatik*), Abel (*Grammaire du grec biblique: Suive d’un choix de papyrus*), Hoffmann and von Siebenthal (*Griechische Grammatik zum Neuen Testament*), Young (*Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach*), and Rehkopf’s revision of Blass-Debrunner (*Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*). In addition, one or two specialized studies on the article in the New Testament were missed, such as Cignelli and Bottini, “L’Articolo nel Greco Biblico,” *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Liber annuus* 41 (1991): 159–99. The largest lacuna, however, involves Greek literature outside of classical and New Testament Greek. In particular, Mayser’s *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit* and volume 1, *Der Artikel*, of Völker’s *Syntax der griechischen Papyri* should have constituted part of the historical examination.


The issue here is more than bibliographical. Repeatedly throughout the monograph Peters claims that the Greek article has changed in its usage so that in the Koine period it functions like a relative pronoun. He often speaks vaguely of this change: “Over time” (153), “by the New Testament (and more broadly, Koine) period” (69), “it had, by this time, become so common, so conventional” (177), and passim (e.g., 163, 178). But he offers no data to back up his many statements that the article has changed from Attic to Koine.

The bibliographical problems also run in another direction. The first chapter canvasses grammars by using first editions (Moulton, Robertson, Moule, etc.) or not telling us the edition (Blass-Debrunner-Funk). The bibliography gives the date of the later editions but does not indicate this. The problem is that Peters does not list full bibliographic data in the footnotes, thus requiring the reader to rely on the bibliography for the data. But often there are mismatches.
The second chapter (“The Common Function of the Article and Relative Pronouns: Methodology” [69–82]) puts forth Peters’s general approach. Two essential arguments are given for the association of the relative pronoun with the article in the Koine period: they are both used in similar constructions, and they have a similar morphology. The first argument is explicated in subsequent chapters. The second argument seems to be against Peters’s overall thesis, that the article’s functions have changed over time. He nowhere discusses the relative pronoun’s changing functions but uses morphology as an argument that the two have similar functions. Yet morphology is akin to etymology, and this argument looks suspiciously like what lexicologists call “root fallacy” or “etymologizing.” Syntactical studies could benefit from input from lexicology, reaching back to Barr’s *Semantics of Biblical Language* and, through that landmark volume, to Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*. (Indeed, some linguists have explicitly seen the article’s functions to have increased in their complexity due to the long history of usage in Greek; so Steven Runge, de Mulder and Carlier, Greenberg; in other words, they recognize that grammatical forms, like lexemes, do not necessarily maintain a unifying idea.) Throughout Peters’s treatment he is careful never to label the formal relationship of the relative pronoun and the article as etymological (but he does say, “On strictly morphological grounds, it is arguable that the article is more closely akin to the relative pronoun than the demonstrative pronoun” [2]), but by calling it morphological it seems to be little more than a rose with a different name.

My point is not a mere quibbling over words. Peters seems to strongly link morphology to meaning for more than just the article. For example, on more than one occasion he enlists Porter’s definition of the semantics of the genitive as essentially that of restriction (213 and passim). Yet this definition of the genitive’s semantics is adequate only for the eight-case system. The five-case system (which Porter embraces; Peters does not tell us which approach he takes) involves the idea of separation as well. Regarding the article, Peters links morphology to semantics in such a way that he assumes the necessity of a unifying notion for the article’s meaning: “Nowhere is there a more urgent need for a uniform theory of the article’s function than in regard to nouns” (226). This is precisely what Middleton did, yet Middleton was consistent in seeing the same force from Homer to the New Testament. Peters, however, sees the article’s functions as changing over time, yet he still maintains a singular unifying theory.

Chapter 3 (83–122) shows “how relative clauses and articular participial clauses are used interchangeably to perform similar functions” (83). Specifically, “both function to define or provide further characterization of a head term” (83). Peters provides several biblical examples showing the parallel functions of both constructions. However, what he does not do in this chapter is explain why it must be the article that parallels the relative pronoun. The standard understanding is that the article necessarily turns the participle
into an adjective (and, like an adjective, can be used substantivally). Why is it, for example, that this parallel is found only between relative clauses and participial clauses? Surely the verbal force of the participle is the key here, since there is a finite verb in relative clauses and a nonfinite verb in participial clauses. This raises one of the fundamental problems in this monograph: the evidence seems to be highly selective; explanation about the lack of parallels between the relative pronoun and the article in other constructions is largely ignored.

Here Peters also makes an assertion that will be repeated dozens of times throughout the monograph in one form or another: “There is no indication that the recipients share this information with the writer or that the information is recoverable or obvious in the discourse, nor does he direct them to where the information may be found” (89). A basic problem with this refrain is that it is often accompanied by nothing else; mere assertion is assumed to prove the point. Yet on numerous occasions it is demonstrably false (as in cases of anaphora as well as par excellence and monadic articles, the latter two often, if not usually, reflecting a preunderstanding between author and reader), and in such instances the argument that the article functions like a relative pronoun is thereby weakened.

Peters tries to make this point in discussing Rom 9:5, for example, concerning the expression ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα, ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων θεός. With his view that the information about the referent is not recoverable or obvious in the discourse, Peters’s exegesis is, at best, a stretch: “Just as god was a class in the ancient world, so too there were many χριστοί, anointed ones, thus the class Christ. Jesus is the Christ who is defined by the fact that he is the one who is God over all things, as subset of the class Christ. Paul provides the information necessary for the readers to make this identification” (97). Apart from the problem of the identification of θεός with Χριστός here, Peters’s argument that the readers would not know which Christ was in view (when the context up to this point is inexorably leading to Jesus Christ, not to mention that for Paul no one else is ever the referent) is rather forced. The larger issue is that Peters seems to be treating the second attributive position of the article as functioning restrictively, when there are other more likely interpretations of its usage. See also similar strained treatments of Rom 1:25 (196–97), Matt 20:24 (204), and John 1:21 (228–29). Regarding Jas 2:14 he takes issue with my view, which is almost universally held as well, that ἡ πίστις is anaphoric, indicating which kind of faith cannot save (228). Anaphoric articles are among the clearest proofs that the article in Greek provides information that is recoverable by the reader, yet Peters simply asserts that this way of reading the text is incorrect without giving any alternative.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer more parallels between the relative pronoun and the article. The fifth chapter looks at μέν … δὲ constructions that use either the article or relative
pronoun, and in so doing seems inordinately long (151–78). The parallels serve the author’s purposes well, yet there are two problems for his view that he does not address. First, why is the article used like the relative pronoun in such structures, yet there are no examples of ὁ γὰρ in which the article parallels ὅς γὰρ (e.g., Matt 16:25; Mark 4:25; 8:25, 38; 9:40; John 5:19; Rom 7:15)? Second, why are all the New Testament examples of the article in μὲν ... ἤ δέ constructions nominative and either masculine or feminine when the relative pronoun construction is neither limited to case or gender? Peters argues that the article’s parallel to the relative pronoun in μὲν ... ἤ δέ constructions “had become colloquialisms” (178), yet he does not explain why the colloquialism was restricted to the masculine/feminine nominative.

The sixth chapter focuses on the definition of the article’s function. Here the author articulates his view that the article does not “definitize” anything but instead turns that which is abstract into a concrete entity: “The function of the Greek article is to characterize whatever part of speech it modifies as concrete” (185). His exegesis of several texts regarding concreteness, especially in chapter 9, seems to be both cumbersome and overly subtle. We will address some of those passages below.

His treatment of the article with numerals (204–5) and infinitives (207–11), as well as with proper names (247–51), is particularly problematic for his view. The first two occur in his seventh chapter (“The Article with Individual Parts of Speech,” a chapter that overall does not serve Peters’s views well). For example, Peters does not explain why infinitives after prepositions are always articular, yet he asserts that “[i]t is, in fact, demonstrable that the article does exert a semantic influence on infinitives” (208). Most grammarians have argued that the article’s function with infinitives is primarily structural rather than semantic; Denny Burk’s Articular Infinitives in the Greek of the New Testament: On the Exegetical Benefit of Grammatical Precision (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006) is the most comprehensive treatment. As problematic as the articular infinitive is for Peters’s view, which he admits (“the article’s function with infinitives presents a challenge” [209]), it is nevertheless dismissed with a five-page treatment. Further, his argument that without the article modifying a proper name readers would not be able to identify the referent or at least would not regard the character as in any way prominent (249–50) is difficult to swallow.

In the ninth chapter, which addresses the greatest number of arthrous instances, Peters repeats his assertion that without the article a noun “is an abstraction” (227). He defines this as follows: “The absence of the article indicates the speaker or writer’s subjective characterization of a noun, which is presented as abstract, in that it is characterized as not belonging to immediate experience as an actual thing or event, or is not associated with a
specific instance. The noun has no reference in terms of a class whose identifying characteristic is grammaticalized by the noun” (227).

The author is to be applauded for dealing with texts that seem to be difficult for his interpretation, but the way in which he handles them often lacks conviction. For example, concerning Mark 3:20 (19b in some versions), Jesus is said to “enter a house” (ἐρχέται εἰς οἶκον). Peters argues that “οἶκον is characterized as abstract, that is, it is not characterized as belonging to experience as an actual thing or a specific instance” (231–32). It would seem that the traditional view, that this is an indefinite house, is a more straightforward understanding. At the same time, many translations have “Jesus went home” (e.g., NET, RSV, NRSV, NJB, ESV), a translation that Peters does not address. He similarly speaks of the anarthrous ὃχλος in verse 32 as abstract (232). Again, the more natural explanation is that it is indefinite.

Peters’s view also has implications for the theology of the New Testament. His extensive treatment of John 1:1 (237–40) is a case in point. He rejects the idea of the anarthrous ἄρχη as definite: “The translation in the beginning, with the use of the definite article, must be viewed as an accommodation to English. Any notion of definiteness must not be read back into the Greek” (238). But surely the par excellence sense of ἄρχη is sufficient to point to its definiteness, as the starting point of creation. Nouns may indeed be definite without the article in Greek (see my Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament, 245–54). More problematic is Peters’s treatment of θεός in the last clause of the verse, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. Although he is right to reject Colwell’s understanding of θεός as definite, he errs in treating the noun as abstract: “Without the article, θεός must be interpreted in the abstract sense: god, deity, pertaining to the divine” (239). Peters regards the anarthrous θεός as belonging to the background of the text. It is not salient; it is not the main point. The history of exegesis would suggest otherwise: that the Word was θεός is an astonishing proposal, and the rest of the Prologue is intended to reinforce this point by showing that the Word, θεός, became incarnate and dwelt in the midst of mankind. The fronting of θεός in John 1:1c shows its prominence; the lack of the article dissociates it from exact identification with τὸν θεόν earlier in the verse.

Peters’s treatment of John 1:1 suggests that he is too myopic in his views of the article as marking salience. Predicate nominatives are usually anarthrous, and when so, this does not necessarily mean that they lack salience. Consider the following illustrations:

Mark 2:28: “the Son of Man is lord even over the Sabbath” (κύριός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τοῦ σαββάτου);

John 4:24: “God is spirit” (πνεῦμα ὁ θεός);
Phil 2:13: “for the one working in you is God” (θεὸς γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν);

1 Tim 4:12: “Let no one despise your youth, but become a pattern for the faithful” (τύπος γίνου τῶν πιστῶν); Peters’s treatment of this passage (244–45) is strained;

Heb 1:10: “the heavens are the works of your hands” (ἔργα τῶν χειρῶν σοῦ εἰσιν οἱ οὐρανοί).

Significantly, in each of these examples the predicate nominative is put at the front of the clause, which is another way to mark salience. The larger issue of grammar as a whole, however, is that the article is one way to mark salience, but there are often competing factors that would delimit its prominence. Further, there are instances in which the lack of the article marks salience, such as John 4:27 (ἐθαύμαζον ὅτι μετὰ γυναικὸς ἔλαλε: here the reason for the disciples’ shock was that Jesus was speaking to any woman; again, here is an instance of fronting the phrase in question [with the prepositional phrase preceding the verb] to underscore its salience).

Several factual errors mar the work, especially those related to the history of the discussion about the Greek article. The opening sentence has three: “To date, the first and only comprehensive grammar of the Greek article was Thomas Fanshaw Middleton’s The Doctrine of the Greek Article, published in 1828” (1). First, although it is true that an edition of Middleton’s work appeared in 1828, his tome was first published in 1808 (Peters says it was “first published in 1828” [46, emphasis added]), undergoing its first revision in 1828, followed by a significant revision in 1841. Second and third, it is not exactly the case either that the “first” or “only comprehensive” grammar of the article was Middleton’s book. Adrian Kluit in 1768 published a two-volume work on the use of the article in the New Testament entitled, Vindiciae Articuli O, H, Tó in Novo Testamento (Paddenburg: Traiecti ad Rhenum), which even Middleton refers to (but had not seen).

When Peters discusses Colwell’s rule, he calls it by an alleged synonym, “Colwell’s Construction,” a term that he cites my grammar for (Exegetical Syntax, 256), yet there I explicitly note that the construction is not the same thing as the rule. This is an important distinction since one, strictly speaking, is a text-critical rule and the other is simply the construction that such a rule, on occasion, may be found to apply to. Peters criticizes Colwell’s rule without discussing its inherent limitations or value. E. C. Colwell became a giant in New Testament textual criticism, and although he saw his rule as also having grammatical implications, its import is especially valid for textual reconstruction. But as such, it has implications on what we can say about the use of the article in the New Testament, and this raises a significant problem I have with this monograph: Peters does
not address the textual variants in the passages that he discusses, even though some of them would impact interpretation.

Frequently throughout this monograph Peters chastises Greek grammarians for using English illustrations, as though they see a one-to-one correspondence. In one of his critiques of my treatment of the article in Exegetical Syntax, Peters says that “Underlying these categories is the basic understanding that the Greek article functions in a manner consistent with English TH- items” (182). Yet Peters concedes that often the only adequate way to translate the Greek article is with “the”: “While English idiom will require us to use the definite article in certain structures, it should be approached with caution as a matter of translation” (226). Elsewhere he concedes: “I have struggled with the dilemma of, on the one hand, wanting to avoid associating the Greek article with English the, while on the other hand recognizing that English provides no other realistic option for a simple gloss. Having experienced this for myself, I have a degree of grace for textbooks that oversimplify” (46 n. 164). In light of this concession, why does Peters assume that Robertson, Moulton, Turner, Funk, Wallace, and many other grammarians are reading the English the into the Greek article at every turn?

I counted over seventy-five form and spelling errors in the work. Some of these were fairly serious such as “1948” for the revision date of Middleton’s Doctrine of the Greek Article on page 46 (1848 was meant); point “a.” on page 46 without a subsequent “b.”; “understated” for “overstated” on page 47; παράκλητος for παράκλητας on page 63; “enterance” on both page 93 and page 94; and “appointing” for “anointing” on page 266. There seemed to be a disproportionately larger cluster of such infelicities when the author was quoting others (e.g., “my” on 51, quoting Middleton; “sole” on 54, quoting Colwell; “kai” on 55, quoting Sharp).

In sum, as bold as Peters’s thesis is, I do not think he has made a compelling case. He has not examined the secondary literature as thoroughly as he should have, nor has he challenged his own views with any degree of rigor. Although he does offer some legitimate insights on a number of particulars, his view simply cannot handle the majority of instances. As such, it fails as an adequate explanation of the function of the article. In the end, although his goal seemed to have been to write “a comprehensive grammar of the Greek article based exclusively on descriptions derived from observations of its usage in Koine Greek” (1), his overarching prescriptive approach prevented him from truly observing the text.