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"GOD BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER"  
A NOTE ON LUKE 18:13

"God be merciful to me a sinner" is the KJV rendition of the Greek text in Luke 18:13: ὁ θεός, ἰλασθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ. More recent translators have attempted to improve the reading as follows:

- O God, be reconciled to me, sinner that I am (Weymouth, 1903);
- O God, be merciful to me, the sinner (Ferrar Fenton, 1905);
- O God, have mercy on me for my sins (Moffatt, 1913);
- God be merciful to me, the sinner (Balandine, 1923);
- O God, have mercy on a sinner like me (Goodspeed, 1923);
- O God, be merciful to me, the sinner (Spencer, 1937, and the Roman Catholic Version of 1941);
- O God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am (New English Bible, 1961).<sup>1</sup>

One minor alteration which most of the modern translators have adopted is the rendering of ὁ θεός as "O God," with a comma before the verb. The intention apparently has been to emphasize the fact that the imperative is in the second person, not in the third. A more fundamental change, however, is the attempt to stress the article before the adjective by translating "the sinner," "sinner that I am," "for my sins," or "a sinner like me." The attempt to emphasize the article raises an interesting point of Greek grammar and merits consideration.

Some of the New Testament grammarians are emphatic in their remarks on the article

<sup>1</sup> The RSV (1946 and 1953) has retained basically the reading of the KJV, merely altering the punctuation: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

before ἁμαρτωλῷ. A. T. Robertson, for example, states: "But the Canterbury Revisers cannot be absolved from all blame, for they ignore the article in Lu. 18:13, τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ."<sup>2</sup> He no doubt would translate the publican's prayer as follows: "God be merciful to me, the sinner." In another volume Robertson declares concerning this phrase: "The sinner, not a sinner. It is curious how modern scholars ignore this Greek article. The main point in the contrast lies in this article. The Pharisee thought of others as sinners. The publican thinks of himself as the sinner, not of others at all."<sup>3</sup> H. P. V. Nunn expresses similar disagreement with the usual translation of this text: "Many of the mistakes made by the translators of the *Authorized Version* were due to their misunderstanding or neglecting the use of the Definite Article. Compare the translations in the A. V. and the R. V. of such passages as 1 Tim. vi. 5, 10. See how greatly the force of the passage is altered by the omission of the Definite Article in Jn. iv. 27 in the R. V. and by its insertion in the marginal reading in Lk. xviii. 13."<sup>4</sup> Nunn apparently would insist on the use of the definite article in translating Luke 18:13.

Agreeing with the opinion of these two grammarians are the statements of most of the New Testament commentators: "'Be merciful (Dan. ix. 19) to me *the* sinner.' He also places himself in a class by himself; but he makes no comparisons. Consciousness of his own sin is supreme; *de nemine alio*

<sup>2</sup> *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York, 1931), p. 756.

<sup>3</sup> *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York, 1930), II, 233, 234.

<sup>4</sup> *A Short Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 56.

*homine cogitat* (Beng.)."<sup>5</sup> "The Publican did not lift his eyes to heaven. His prayer was more than asking for mercy. It means literally translated 'God be propitiated towards me, the sinner.'"<sup>6</sup> "His prayer is one shuddering sigh: God, be merciful to me, the sinner! In his eyes there is only one sinner worth mentioning, only one whose sins he can see; and that is himself. Cp. 1 Tim. 1:15."<sup>7</sup> "It is right to lay emphasis on the τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ. He accounts himself a sinner, κατ' ἐξοχήν, as Paul names himself, 1 Tim. 1, 15, the chief of sinners, and all for which he prays is comprehended in the single word 'Grace.'"<sup>8</sup> "A sinner (τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ). With the definite article, 'the sinner.' 'He thinks about no other man' (Bengel)."<sup>9</sup> "... God, let Thyself be propitiated in regard to me, the open sinner! . . . he calls himself ὁ ἁμαρτωλός, 'the open and notorious sinner,' . . . R[obertson], *W[ord] P[ictures]* scores a point in pointing out that the article is so often overlooked. The main point lies in the article. The Pharisee thought of others as sinners; the publican thinks of himself alone as the sinner, not of others . . . 'the sinner.'"<sup>10</sup> "τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ, the sinner; he thinks of himself only and of himself as *the* sinner, well known as such, the one fact

worth mentioning about him, as one might speak about the drunkard of the village."<sup>11</sup> "μοι τῷ ἁμαρτ. Observe the article. Bengel rightly says: '*de nemine alio homine cogitat.*' 'he thinks about no other man.'"<sup>12</sup> "... God, be merciful to me a sinner. The original has the definite article, '*the* sinner,' as if there were no other: and so his view of himself and representations of himself before God is just the opposite of that of the Pharisee above. 'To the Pharisee all are sinners and he is righteous; to the publican all are righteous and he only *the sinner*' (Westermeier)."<sup>13</sup> "Gott, sei mir [dem] Sünder (κατ' ἐξοχήν, d. i., dem vornehmsten unter allen 1 Tim. 1, 15) gnädig."<sup>14</sup> "Saying, God be merciful to me a sinner; properly *the* sinner. The American Bible Union Version and Dr. S. Davidson give the article conformably to the Greek, and the Revision allows it as the alternative."<sup>15</sup> ". . . to me a sinner . . . literally 'to me the sinner'; as if he should say, 'If ever there was a sinner, I am he.'"<sup>16</sup>

The citations exemplify the general consensus of opinion among the New Testament commentators and their agreement with several New Testament grammarians and translators on the interpretation of the article in

<sup>5</sup> A. Plummer, *The International Critical Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke* (New York, 1906), p. 419.

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible: The New Testament* (New York, 1913), I, 162.

<sup>7</sup> P. E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible: The New Testament* (St. Louis, 1921), I, 363.

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Lange and P. Schaff, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: The Gospel According to Luke* (New York, 1873), p. 274; cf. J. P. Lange, *Bibelwerk: Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Leipzig, 1867), p. 278.

<sup>9</sup> M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (New York, 1905), I, 406.

<sup>10</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's and St. Luke's Gospels* (Columbus, Ohio, 1934), pp. 1041, 1042.

<sup>11</sup> W. R. Nicoll, *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (London, n. d.), I, 599.

<sup>12</sup> H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (New York, 1884), 503; cf. H. A. W. Meyer, *Handbuch über die Evangelien des Markus und Lukas* (Göttingen, 1885), p. 559.

<sup>13</sup> H. L. Baugher, *The Lutheran Commentary* (New York, 1896), IV, 333, 334.

<sup>14</sup> A. Daehsel, *Die Bibel* (Leipzig, n. d.), V, 825.

<sup>15</sup> W. N. Clarke, *American Commentary on the New Testament* (Philadelphia, n. d.), II, 270.

<sup>16</sup> Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments* (Philadelphia, n. d.), V, 303.

Luke 18:13.<sup>17</sup> Their remarks give the impression in no uncertain terms that the translation of the KJV is incorrect because it reads "a sinner" rather than "the sinner," "the well-known sinner," or "the open and notorious sinner." Such general agreement would be gratifying if the remarks of these commentators, translators, and grammarians were substantiated by Greek grammar. Their emphatic stress, however, of the Greek article in this verse is grammatically incorrect. It should be of interest and benefit, therefore, to clarify the point of grammar which so frequently has been overlooked.

According to the idiom of the Greek language, Luke should have written τῷ ἀμαρτωλῷ ἐκείνῳ to indicate the well-known or famous sinner.<sup>18</sup> The article alone does not generally imply such a connotation.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, the article in Greek is natural and customary with words in apposition to personal pronouns, without implying any emphasis of the appositive. Under the heading ARTICLE WITH APPOSITIONS OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS, Professor Gildersleeve states: "Appositions with the personal pronoun take the article, even when the pronoun is involved in the verb. Omission occurs in poetry, rarely in prose."<sup>20</sup>

The following are several examples from classical Greek in which words in apposition to personal pronouns take the article and in

this respect are parallel to the phrase μοι τῷ ἀμαρτωλῷ in Luke 18:13:

ἀλλ' ἦτοι κείνόν γε τὸν ταῦτα βουλευσάντα δεῖ ἀπόλλυσθαι ἢ σὲ τὸν ἐμὲ γυμνὴν θεησάμενον καὶ ποιήσαντα οὐ νομιζόμενα. Herodotus 1.11.3;

καὶ ὑμῖν ἔστω τι τεκμήριον ἃ πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ξυγγενεῖς δρῶσιν. . . Thucydides 1.34.3;

τούτων δὲ πάντων ἀπορώτατον τό τε μὴ οἶόν τε εἶναι ταῦτα ἐμοὶ κωλύσαι τῷ στρατηγῷ . . . Thucydides 7.14.2;

ὑμῶν δὲ τῶν Ἑλλήνων καὶ στέφανον ἐκάστω χροσοῦν δώσω. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.7.7;

χαίρω γὰρ ἀκούων ὑμῶν τῶν σοφῶν. Plato, *Ion* 532d;

ἀλλὰ μὴν, ὦ ξένε, τὴν γε περὶ Σαλαμίνα ναυμαχίαν τῶν Ἑλλήνων πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους γενομένην ἡμεῖς γε οἱ Κρητες τὴν Ἑλλάδα φαμέν σῶσαι. Plato, *Laws* 707b;

. . . οὗτος ὑμῖν, Αἰσχίνη, τοῖς προδιδοῦσι καὶ μισθαροῦσιν τὸ ἔχειν ἐφ' ὅτω δωροκήσετε περιποιεῖ . . . Demosthenes, *De Corona* 49;

. . . καὶ μετὰσχοιεν ὧν ἡμεῖς οἱ τὰ βέλτιστα βουλόμενοι τοὺς θεοὺς αἰτεῖτε . . . Demosthenes, *De Corona* 89.<sup>21</sup>

The New Testament also contains illustrations of the rule that words in apposition to a personal pronoun have the definite article:

Πλὴν οὐαὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς πλουσίοις . . . Luke 6.24;

Ἄλλὰ ὑμῖν λέγω τοῖς ἀκούουσιν . . . Luke 6.27;

νῦν ἡμεῖς οἱ Φαρισαῖοι . . . Luke 11.39;

ἀλλὰ οὐαὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς Φαρισαίοις . . . Luke 11.42;

οὐαὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς Φαρισαίοις . . . Luke 11.43;

καὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς νομοκῶς οὐαὶ . . . Luke 11.46;

<sup>17</sup> In checking the commentaries we noticed only two which did not stress the article in Luke 18:13: *The Greek Testament* by H. Alford, and *The Greek Testament with English Notes* by S. T. Bloomfield.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Plato, *Protagoras*, 361c.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Robert G. Hoerber, *A Grammatical Study of Romans 16:17* (Milwaukee, 1947), pp. 24, 25. The context alone may imply an emphasis of the article; the context of Luke 18:13, however, contains no such implication.

<sup>20</sup> B. L. Gildersleeve, *Syntax of Classical Greek from Homer to Demosthenes* (New York, 1911), II, 279.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 7.223, 248; Sophocles, *Antigone* 922, 923; *Electra* 303, 304; Euripides, *Andromache* 391, 392; Aristophanes, *Knights* 458, 1359; Thucydides 3.57.1; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 5.7.20, 6.6.14; Plato, *Laws* 680c; Demosthenes, *De Corona* 94.

οὐαὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς νομικοῖς . . . Luke 11.52;  
καλῶς ἐπροφήτευσεν Ἡσαΐας περὶ ὑμῶν  
τῶν ὑποκριτῶν . . . Mark 7.6;

ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς  
ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν  
εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ . . . John 1.12;

Ἄγουσιν αὐτόν πρὸς τοὺς Φαρισαίους, τὸν  
ποτε τυφλόν. John 9.13;

. . . ἵνα γινώσκωσιν σὲ τὸν μόνον ἀληθινὸν  
θεόν . . . John 17.3;

δοκῶ γάρ, ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀποστόλους  
ἐσχάτους ἀπέδειξεν ὡς ἐπιθανατίους . . .  
1 Corinthians 4.9.

The article, according to the previous passages, is employed with attributive appositives of personal pronouns. An attributive appositive may be (1) a participle, (2) an adjective, or (3) a noun designating character, relation, or dignity. If a personal pronoun, however, is modified by (1) a participle, (2) an adjective, or (3) a noun denoting character, relation, or dignity and the article is not present, there is implied a difference in meaning — the modifying word would be in the predicate of its clause instead of being in apposition to the personal pronoun. Examples of the predicate function of the three types of modifiers also occur in the New Testament:

#### 1. Participle

ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς ἀφέντες τὰ ἴδια ἠκολουθήσαμεν  
σοι. Luke 18.28;

προσκαλεσάμενοι δὲ οἱ δώδεκα τὸ πλῆθος  
τῶν μαθητῶν εἶπαν· οὐκ ἀρεστόν ἐστιν ἡμᾶς

καταλείψαντας τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ διακονεῖν  
τραπέζαις. Acts 6.2;

#### 2. Adjective

κύριε, οὐ μέλει σοι ὅτι ἡ ἀδελφή μου μόνην  
με κατέλειπεν διακονεῖν; Luke 10.40;

. . . θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς σοφοὺς εἶναι εἰς τὸ  
ἀγαθόν, ἀκεραίους δὲ εἰς τὸ κακόν. Romans  
16.19;

#### 3. Noun

ὑπάγετε· ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω ὑμᾶς ὡς ἄρνas ἐν  
μέσῳ λύκων. Luke 10.3;

. . . καθὼς γέγραπται ὅτι πατέρα πολλῶν  
ἐθνῶν τέθεικά σε . . . Romans 4.17.

The evidence, then, clearly substantiates the translation of Luke 18:13 found in the KJV, the RSV, and others.<sup>22</sup> The translations of Weymouth, Moffatt, Goodspeed, and the New English Bible are acceptable, although their circumlocutions are unnecessary. Contrary to the idiom of the Greek language, however, are the renderings of Fenton, Ballantine, Spencer, and the Roman Catholic Version of 1941, as well as the remarks of Robertson, Nunn, and most of the commentators. Their emphatic stress of the definite article, which denotes merely apposition, is more zealous than wise.

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<sup>22</sup> "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Andrews Norton, 1855); "O God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Twentieth Century, 1904); "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (The New Testament in Basic English, 1941).