

The Holy Spirit

Pneuma Hagion – with and without the definite article

Summary

In the New Testament, the English words “Holy” and “Spirit” are translations of the Greek words *hagion* and *pneuma* respectively. Regarding their translation, and whether the definite article (the Greek equivalent of “the”) is alongside or not, is a matter for debate. Dr. E. W. Bullinger, in the Companion Bible, Appendix 101. II. 14., states that:

“when there are two articles present in the Greek (*to pneuma to hagion*), [it] means “the Spirit the Holy [Spirit]”

and

“*pneuma hagion* (without Articles) is never used of the Giver (the Holy Spirit), but only and always of His gift”.

There are two issues here:

(1) Does the textual and grammatical evidence support such an approach?

I suggest that the textual and grammatical evidence does indeed go some way to supporting Dr. Bullinger’s approach, but that there are too many exceptions and inconsistencies to this “rule” to make it a reliable indicator of which aspect is meant.

(2) Are the Giver (The Holy Spirit) and the gift (holy spirit) two aspects that should be so clearly distinguished from each other?

The two aspects are far more intertwined than the Doctor’s approach suggests. Simply put, in many passages, emphasis is placed upon one or the other aspect rather than the other, and the presence or absence of the article is often an indicator of this. Such passages may emphasise the gift as opposed to the being (or vice versa), but not to the exclusion of the other aspect. In other words, the two aspects, Giver and gift, are not always clearly distinguished from each other in the Scriptures themselves.

A More Detailed Consideration

In E. W. Bullinger's book, "The Giver and His Gifts" (sometimes published under the name "Word Studies on the Holy Spirit"), he elaborates on the approach summarised above:

"When we have examined all the fifty passages where this expression (*pneuma hagion*) occurs, we shall find this to be the general result, that it is never used in the sense in which (*to pneuma to hagion*) "the spirit the holy" is used: that is to say, it is never used of the Holy Spirit, but always of what He does; it is never used of the Giver, but always of His gifts and operations." (p.26)

He goes on to state one of the principle reasons behind this approach:

"In these two passages we have the key to the meaning we are to put upon the expression *pneuma hagion*; because, in both passages (Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4,5) the Lord is speaking of the same thing, viz., "the promise of the Father".

In Luke 24:49 He calls the "promise", "power from on high".

In Acts 1:5 He calls this same "promise", "*pneuma hagion*".

Therefore we have this foundation and self-evident truth that *pneuma hagion* is identical with "power from on high". It is impossible for us to get away from this fact. It makes us independent of all human teachers, and sets us free from all man's opinions." (p.27)

If the comparison between Luke 24 and Acts 1 was all we had to go by as a definition, then the approach advocated in "The Giver and His Gifts" would be conclusive. However, there are other factors to be considered. As he himself points out, "the usage [the various senses in which God has employed this word *pneuma* – p.14] depends on a knowledge of all the contexts." (p.7).

In that light, I would like to now consider two issues: (1) the absence or presence of the definite article; and (2) distinguishing the Being from His work.

(1) Absence or Presence of the Definite Article

It is reasonable to say that, in about three-quarters of instances, one can observe of the article either its presence or absence with the words *pneuma* and *hagion*, and then conclude accordingly whether the Being or the power is being emphasised. Two examples below are representative of this:

With the article – "the Helper, the Holy Spirit [*to pneuma to hagion*], whom the Father will send in my name ..."
(John 14:26)

Without the article – "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit [*pneuma hagion*] and began to speak with other tongues ..."
(Acts 2:4)

However, caution should be exercised, because there are rather too many exceptions to this approach, and the Holy Spirit as a being is sometimes shown as being closely identified with what is said to be holy spirit, His work and the power He bestows.

Examples showing the close correlation of the Being and the power may be seen by comparing the use of *pneuma hagion* in the passages below. In these examples it will be noted that the Holy Spirit's involvement in the same events is described in two different ways – at least once with articles, and at least once without articles.

Inspiration of Scripture:

“... no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost [*pneuma hagion* – no article] .” (2 Peter 1:20,21)

“And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost [*to pneuma to hagion*] by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear ...” (Acts 28:25,26)

Of 2 Peter 1:21, Dr. Bullinger says that “the prophets were borne along and swayed by Divine breath, *pneuma hagion*, or ‘power from on high’ .” Yet of Acts 28:25, he says, “Here it is the Holy Spirit Himself speaking by Isaiah”. My suggestion is that applying a rule about the absence/presence of the article has actually produced an error in this instance, bringing about two different and inconsistent conclusions regarding the prophets and inspiration of Scripture.

Spirit Falling on People:

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost [*to pneuma to hagion*] fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost [*to hagion pneuma*] for they heard them speaking with tongues Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost [*to pneuma to hagion*] as well as we? (Acts 10:44-47)

And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost [*to pneuma to hagion*] fell on them, as on us at the beginning. (Acts 11:15)

The events of “at the beginning”, as described there in Acts 11:15, are earlier described in Acts 2 thus:

Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost [*to hagion pneuma*], he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. (Acts 2:33)

A number of problems with the “rule” are highlighted by those verses above.

(a) The article is present with *pneuma hagion* throughout these verses. This would normally indicate the Being, according to the rule, yet these are mostly described by Dr. Bullinger as being the “gift”.

(b) In Acts 10:44, there is no earlier mention of spirit coming that would justify the included article to mean “the spirit I just spoke about”.

(c) Sometimes there is only one article, not two, and the word order varies – should we conclude a varying translation and interpretation for each set of words in Acts 10?

(d) Dr. Bullinger’s own commentary on Acts 10:45 (“on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost [*to hagion pneuma*]”) is not conclusive. He says: “Here it is either the Gen. of Apposition, in which case *hagion pneuma* is the gift; or it is the Gen. of Origin, in which case it is the Holy Spirit the Giver of the Gift.” (p.99)

Point (d) illustrates that a problem has been created by attempting to rigidly distinguish between the Being and the power He bestows. If we are willing to concede that these things are not that clearly separated and distinguished, the passage and the overall testimony of Scripture regarding God’s Holy Spirit allows both aspects to shine through, without excluding one aspect or the other.

“Sealed” in Ephesians

...in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit [*to pneuma to hagion*] of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession ...
(*Ephesians 1:13,14*)

grieve not the holy Spirit [*to pneuma to hagion*] of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.
(*Ephesians 4:30*)

Dr. Bullinger suggests that, despite the presence of two definite articles [*to pneuma to hagion*], Ephesians 1:13 is a fulfilment of the “promise of the Father” (Luke 24:29), and should actually be seen as the gift of holy spirit. This is another example of inconsistent application of the definite article “rule”. Surely the Ephesians 4:30 reference quoted above confirms the present sealing of the Holy Spirit Himself in the life of the believer. If there is some aspect of the Spirit’s work being referred to in Ephesians 1:13, we are best off acknowledging the intertwining nature of the two aspects, instead of having to commit ourselves to one (and excluding the other) every time we come across these words.

The three comparative examples given above – Inspiration; Spirit Falling on People, and “Sealed” in Ephesians – should be enough to highlight that there are a number of flaws in attempting to apply the presence/absence of article rule to our interpretation of Scripture.

The absence / presence of the article with other words

It has sometimes been said that “prepositions are slippery characters”. By this it is meant that prepositions such as the Greek words for by, through, in, over, into, out from, etc., often convey a relatively straightforward meaning ... but not always! The presence or absence of the definite article in the Greek text is just as “slippery”, appearing at times (and not at other times) with some proper nouns such as *Theos* (God), and some abstract nouns such as *agape* (love) and *hupomone* (patience). Some examples:

- In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Literally, the last portion of that verse reads “the Word was with the God [*ton theon* – with the article], and the Word was God [*theos* – without the article]. A basis advocating that they are different ... or an idiom of the Greek language? I would suggest the latter is the case.

- And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope... (Romans 5:3,4)

Below is the same verse with “the” inserted where the Greek text has the article:

And not only so, but we glory in the tribulations also: knowing that the tribulation worketh patience; And the patience, experience; and the experience, hope...

Languages have their own rules, but translation into English is not merely a science that will be governed solely by formulas. Idiomatic use, unique linguistic quirks, and other exceptions to the normal rules are rife. Observation of context and comparison of similar texts should be given the same weight, if not more, when translating prepositions and definite articles. This sentiment is also expressed by leading grammarian J. W. Wenham:

[The] rules for special uses of the definite article are none of them rigid and without exceptions. It is wiser not to use them as a basis for theological argument until the student has reached an advanced stage in the knowledge of the language.
(The Elements of New Testament Greek, p.35, footnote 2)

Despite the initial impression that Dr Bullinger’s approach all but eliminates human interpretation, his own notes in “The Giver and His Gifts” on Acts 10:45 quoted earlier and Romans 8:23 serve as two examples showing how his approach is subject to exception, and therefore not as conclusive as first propagated, despite the technical wording included within those explanations.

The Companion Bible, Appendix 101. II. 14., states that “*pneuma hagion* (without Articles) is never used of the Giver (the Holy Spirit), but only and always of His gift”. This is a statement that even the author himself cannot sustain, as evidenced by the expanded notes he has made in “The Giver and His Gifts”. Several times, the author deals with *pneuma hagion* Scripture references without articles, and yet describes them as referring to The Holy Spirit (e.g. his notes on Ephesians 2:18), and those with articles as being holy spirit (e.g. his notes on Ephesians 1:13).

Furthermore, that approach offers no real explanation for what is meant when only one article is present (e.g., to pneuma hagion) as opposed to two (to pneuma to hagion).

His note on Ephesians 2:18 is worth a closer look:

For through him we both have access by one Spirit [*pneuma* – without the article] unto the Father. (Ephesians 2:18)

Bullinger's commentary states, "the article is latent after the preposition and is not required by the grammar". The preposition being referred to is *en* (by), and in this verse the article before *pneuma* is indeed absent, as noted in his work. However, most grammarians would not agree with the conclusion he has drawn as there are a number of instances in other verses where the article is actually present with *pneuma* following the same preposition, *en*; for example Mark 12:36; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 12:3. This also is simply not a reliable enough approach for interpretation, and in the process, tends to undermine the close correlation between the Spirit and the work He imparts.

The Old Testament Hebrew equivalent

The question of whether this phenomenon arises in the Old Testament Hebrew also. Is there a similar pattern where the article is either present or absent, and what should we conclude from this? Some difficulties become apparent in making such a comparison:

(1) There are only three occurrences of the phrase "holy spirit" in the O.T. for us to work with. These are:

Psalm 51:11 – "take not Thy holy spirit from me"

Isaiah 63:10 – "they rebelled and vexed His holy spirit"

Isaiah 63:11 – "where is He that put His holy spirit within him?"

(2) The relevant Hebrew words are: *qedosh* (holy) and *ruach* (spirit). On each occasion above, the definite article is not present in the Hebrew text. This is because the word for holy (*qedosh*) has a suffix for "your" or "His" attached, and the word for "spirit" (*ruach*) is in what is known as "construct" form. In construct form, any definite article that may have been there otherwise does not accompany the noun in such instances.

Sometimes it is difficult to establish whether a noun in construct form should be translated into English with the definite article. Often a word in construct bears a different spelling, reflecting that it is in construct and indicating that an article should be supplied. The word *ruach*, however, is one of those words which is spelled the same whether it is in construct or not, and the inclusion of the article or not is a decision that is decided upon by either observing the context, or being swayed by one's theology. As an example, Bible translators are roughly equally divided over whether Exodus 28:3 should include the article – "whom I have filled with [either *a* or *the*] spirit of wisdom". There are many similar cases in the O.T.

What become clear, though, is that the absence /presence of the article cannot be used in the O.T. to distinguish between The Holy Spirit and holy spirit. Perhaps this is a mere linguistic inconvenience, and perhaps it is because the two facets should actually not be so clearly delineated. This issue of correlation between the two aspects is one we will now consider.

(2) Distinguishing the Being from His work

Dr. Bullinger's approach regarding the definite article is not completely wrong, but attempts to distinguish too rigidly between two aspects of God's spirit that are not really that clearly distinguished in the revealed Scriptures.

I agree that observation of the context is important, and would suggest that whilst the context, and even the absence/presence of the article, often suggests that one aspect or the other is highlighted, the Being is not separate from His work. For example, when the Spirit came upon the apostles at Pentecost, they were given powers and abilities but God was right there with them in the form of His Holy Spirit. When Christ's earthly life was coming to a close and He was soon to "depart", He said to His disciples several times that He would not leave them alone, but would send another to be with them and help them (John 14:16-18, 25,26; 15:26; 16:7-11, 13-15). This "other one" was not simply a power or inanimate force, but the One Who gave them power. God Himself was with them – not in flesh this time, but in spirit form, manifesting very tangible evidence of His presence through the apostles.

1 Corinthians 2:6-16 tells us something of how the Being and His work are closely related in the life of the believer. Below is just a portion of this profound passage:

the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God;
(1 Corinthians 2:10-12)

There are some dispensational issues to be taken into consideration when reading this chapter; nevertheless, the same basic principle stands true for today. The evidence of the powers and work of the Spirit is shown to be another way in which God's very being connects with the believer. This is more than just via the provision of power and certain abilities; there is the underlying thought of access to the "mind" (or deep things - v.10) of God, which extends much further than merely an empowerment of abilities.

In Paul's case, he was speaking of a gift he had when imparting his God-given wisdom to the Corinthians. The gift enabled him to do this, but the source was God's Holy Spirit. Read those words, and indeed the whole chapter, again, and one can pick up the rather intertwined nature of the Spirit and His work, connecting the believer in a real way with God's essence, and this connection manifesting itself through the guidance and abilities provided by that same Spirit.

In attempting to clearly distinguish the being of the Holy Spirit from the gift of holy spirit, there is somewhat of a parallel in trying to identify which part of the Lord Jesus Christ was "man" and which part was "God". One could argue: when seen as tired and hungry, this was the "man"; when issuing commands to the wind and waves, this was "God". Yet, making such a division is futile. Considering the whole testimony of Scripture, we affirm that He was the one singular being, "God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16), and "the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). We don't speak of His humanity as if it was totally separate from His deity; we don't speak of Him being hungry, and therefore not God for the minutes that He was hungry. No, we recognise that, even though mysterious and difficult to comprehend, the two aspects were present in the one Being. Likewise, the Holy Spirit

performing works and distributing abilities should not be viewed as quite different to the Being Who was a guide and helper to the apostles and the One who seals us unto redemption.

Concluding Remarks

Such a blanket approach of noting the absence or presence of the article, and then making a distinction between the Giver and His gifts on this basis is seen to be flawed. Certainly, Dr. Bullinger's approach is more-or-less right in one sense – that being that the presence of the article often indicates the being, the absence indicates the gift. However, there are far too many exceptions to this rule to make it one to rely heavily upon.

In addition, that approach attempts to make a clear-cut distinction between Giver and gift, about which there is no such clear-cut distinction in the revelation of Scripture when comparing all the relevant passages. One thing we can be certain of: there is much more to God's Holy Spirit than we can imagine, or than has been revealed. The attempt to “demystify” the Holy Spirit by clearly separating His Being from His power and work may be noble in intent, but the method proposed by Dr. Bullinger is ultimately not profitable and, in my view, actually detracts from our appreciation of God's Being, His greatness and mystique.

David Tavender, April 2012.