

# Grammarian's Corner

## Word Order, Part II Adjectives

This issue's look at Greek grammar continues the theme begun last time, *viz.*, word order. Here we focus on the relative positions of articles, adjectives, and nouns.

Key to the basic understanding of Greek sentences is the recognition of the difference between attributive and predicate position. Generally speaking, an adjective in attributive position modifies a noun directly (an example of direct modification in English would be "the good man").<sup>1</sup> One in predicate position does not; instead, it modifies the noun as part of the predicate (e.g., in English, "the man is good"). In structural/word order terms in Greek, an adjective in attributive position stands directly behind the article: ὁ καλὸς ἀνὴρ, while one in predicate position is not so positioned: ὁ ἀνὴρ ἐστὶ καλός.<sup>2</sup> Note that the attributive position adjective creates, with the article and noun, a simple phrase, while the adjective in predicate position is part of a full or complete clause. Indeed, because the positioning is so distinctive, in the case of the predicate position adjective, the verb "to be" is very frequently omitted, which means that that the previous Greek sentence is frequently rendered ὁ ἀνὴρ καλός (present time is assumed unless context clearly suggests otherwise). One further basic of observation must also be made, *viz.*, that two versions of attributive and predicate position also exist. For attributive, the standard Greek order is ὁ καλὸς ἀνὴρ; the alternative is ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ καλός. For predicate, the standard order is ὁ ἀνὴρ ἐστὶ καλός; the alternative is καλός ἐστὶν ὁ ἀνὴρ. For the attributive pair, normal Hellenic style treats the alternative as emphatic, while in literature composed in a Semitic context the alternative corresponds to Hebrew/Aramaic structure (with the adjective following the noun) and is properly seen as a secondary Semitism.<sup>3</sup> In all Greek, the alternative predicate position (adjective-article-noun) is emphatic.

Now consider the following examples:

- a. Attributive, regular: Matt. 27:53: ...εἰσῆλθον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν...  
(...they went into the holy city...).

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<sup>1</sup>The word "good" is often classified as a predicate nominative in such a sentence, because it must use the nominative case in order to modify the subject, even though it is in the predicate of the sentence.

<sup>2</sup>It is possible for an adjective to be in attributive and predicate position with no article present, but that is not the focus of the current essay.

<sup>3</sup>A secondary Semitism is a structure which is possible in Greek, but is much more frequent in occurrence than what would be expected from a native Greek speaker. (By contrast, a primary Semitism is bad Greek and would not be uttered by a native Greek speaker.)

- b. Attributive, alternate: John 10:11: ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός (I am the noble shepherd).
- c. Predicate, regular: Matt. 7:27: καὶ ἦν ἡ πτώσις αὐτῆς μεγάλη (And its fall was great).
- d. Predicate, alternate: Luke 12:38: μακάριοι εἰσιν ἐκεῖνοι<sup>4</sup> (Blessed are those people).

We may add two further examples, comprising predicate position adjectives without the verb “to be” explicitly expressed:

- e. Predicate, regular, w/o verb: Matt. 9:37: ὁ μὲν θερισμὸς πολὺς οἱ δὲ ἐργάται ὀλίγοι (The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few).
- f. Predicate, alternate, w/o verb: Matt. 5:3: μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ ἐν πνεύματι...(Blessed are the poor in respect to spirit...).

Several things may be noted relative to these examples:

1. The two attributive position possibilities are almost equally likely in NT literature, especially in the Gospels, where some sort of Semitic substratum (whether written or oral) is present. It may be noted, however, that the alternative, answering to Semitic structure, is frequently found on the lips of Jesus, while the evangelists often employ more normal Hellenic order.
2. Predicate position adjectives are regularly used without the verb. Indeed, that may be seen as “normal.” It is, in fact, difficult to find examples of d, above; much more common is f.
3. What comes first when the adjective is in predicate position is normally the focus of the sentence. Thus, in e, above, the harvest and the workers are the focus. By contrast, in f (and all of the Beatitudes), the focus is on the fact that people in positions normally thought of as undesirable are actually μακάριοι, not in bad shape, or accursed. One might translate Matt. 5:3 thus: “The poor with respect to spirit are actually blessed/in good shape—for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>5</sup> Don’t let the familiarity of the KJV rendering fool you!

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<sup>4</sup>Many manuscripts put οἱ δοῦλοι before ἐκεῖνοι, which only reinforces the example.

<sup>5</sup>Note the word order of the last clause, with αυτω/n before the verb in the emphatic forward position. The kingdom is *theirs*, not the possession of the seemingly well off.