

## Unusual Usages of the Hebrew Article – Notes. Peter Schmidt. 2025

*This is not a full treatment of the Hebrew definite article. I focus on the article on isolated terms (not its usage in discourse), and on what is different from English, or what is ambivalent in Hebrew itself.<sup>1</sup>*

Ø stands for “no article in Hebrew”, even though “the” might be supplied in the English translation.

[the] indicates that the article is there in Hebrew, but not natural in an English translation.

↔ stands for “tension / contrast”.

### I. No article

#### 1. Proper names and unique appellatives functioning like names

הָאֵל	Abel	אֱלֹהִים	God
מִצְרַיִם	Egypt	שְׂרַי	Ø Almighty

These are inherently definite.

Contrast this with the unique representatives of a class (see under II.3.).

#### 2. Certain cosmological entities

שְׁאוֹל Sheol

תֵּבֶל Landmass, earth

תְּהוֹם “Ø the Deep”

This applies only to a few words and contrasts with the unique referents under II.1.

#### 3. Cardinal points<sup>2</sup>

גְּבוּל נֶגֶב “the border of Ø south / the southern border”, Num. 34:3

רוּחַ-מַּזְמַח ‘a wind-of-west / a west wind’, Exod. 10:19

Contrast: נֶגֶב and יָם come with the article here: בְּעֶרְבָה בְּהָר וּבְשִׁפְלָה [Go] to the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, and the [Mediterranean] seacoast ...’, Deut. 1:7, NRSV, adapted.

<sup>1</sup> Compare my Notes “About the Use and Non-use of the Definite Article in Hebrew”.

<sup>2</sup> When the cardinal direction is in view, the article is usually missing. When a territory as an entity is in view, it is present (cf. JM § 137q; Schneider p. 235).

Deut. 2:3 פָּנוּ לָכֶם צָפוֹנָה “Turn [for yourselves] Ø northward.”

↔ Isa. 43:6 תִּנִּי לְצָפוֹן אֶמַּר “I will say to the north, ‘Give [them] up!’”

Exod. 26:20 לְפָאֵת צָפוֹן עֶשְׂרִים קָרֶשׁ “for the side of Ø north, 20 frames”

↔ Ezek. 40:35 אֶל-שַׁעַר הַצָּפוֹן יְבִיאֵנִי “He brought me to the gate of the north.”

#### 4. Imaginary person

With the addressed person being absent.

Ps. 2:10 וְעַתָּה מְלָכִים הַשְׁכִּילּוּ

“Now then, you kings, use insight.” (NASB)

Ecc. 11:9 שִׂמַּח בַּחוּר בְּיָלְדוּתוֹ

“Rejoice, Ø young man, in your youth, ...”

Contrast this with the vocative under II.8.

## II. With article

### 1. Unique referent

הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ the sun

הָאָרֶץ the earth

Contrast this with the cosmological entities under I.2.

### 2. For a class that is definite (“generic” use)

- E.g. “the Canaanite”

- Note nominalized adjectives:

E.g. “the righteous”

Ps. 37:16 טוֹב-מִעַט לְצַדִּיק מִהֶמּוֹן רָשָׁעִים רַבִּים

“Better is the little of the righteous / Than the abundance of many wicked.” (NASB)

But in reality, the article is missing so often that the above can hardly be called the regular case.<sup>3</sup>

Ps. 11:5 יְהוָה צֹדִיק יִבְחֶן וְרָשָׁע

“The Lord tests Ø the righteous and Ø the wicked.” (NASB)

Hab. 2:4 וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ יֵחִי

“But Ø the righteous one will live by his faith.” (NASB)

- This is not only an issue in poetry. As a case taken from the Law, זָר ‘stranger/outsider’ can be used with or without article, compare:

Num. 1:51 וְהֵזַר הַקָּרֵב יוֹמָת

“And the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

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<sup>3</sup> I checked exemplarily: The word צַדִּיק, in Psalms 1–50, comes with the article only 3x in ca. 20 cases (and sg. and pl. about equally often); רָשָׁע in Proverbs 5–11: with article only once in ca. 20 cases (and sg. and pl. about equally often; for the use of the plural with the article [“the righteous ones”], cf. IBHS § 13.5.1f, p. 245)!

Except for a general remark about inconsistency in poetry (cf. below), neither IBHS [Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax] nor GBH [Grammatik des Biblischen Hebräisch] discuss this.

Exod. 30:33 אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִרְקַח כְּמֹהוּ וְאֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן מִמֶּנּוּ עַל-זֶר וְנִכְרַת מֵעַמּוּוֹ:

“Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on Ø an outsider shall be cut off from his people.” (ESVUS16)

Num. 18:4 וְזֶר לֹא-יִקְרַב אֲלֵיכֶם:

“Ø An outsider shall not approach you.”

In English, several constructions are grammatical, although not all equally elegant: “An outsider / The outsider / Outsiders shall not approach ...”

- Often with animals:

הַסּוּס “the horse” [that is, all horses], Ps. 33:17;

This is possible in English (cf. “The camel does not have split hooves”), but less common than in Hebrew (see the translations of Ps. 33:17: “A horse disappoints those who trust in it. [NET] / “War horses are useless ...” [GNTD]).

- “Sometimes the class is regarded as a unity, while at other times an individual within the species is singled out to represent the genus.” (IBHS § 13.5.1f, p. 244).

Thus: Prov. 22:6 “Train a [the] lad [לְנֶעֱר] in the way he ought to go; / He will not swerve from it even in old age.” (NJPS2017)

This conflicts with the usage for an individual of such a class, see II.3.

- This use occurs especially in comparisons,<sup>4</sup> e.g.:

2Sam. 17:10 כָּלֵב הָאֲרִיָּה “like the heart of a [the] lion”.

Isa. 34:4 וְנִגְלְוּ כִסְפָּר “and they will be rolled up like a [the] scroll”

- Additional note: the use and non-use of the article helps to distinguish תַּנִּין ‘serpent/dragon’ (which can occur with the article [הַתַּנִּין], e.g. Isa. 27:1) as a **generic term** from both *Leviathan* [לִיָּיתָן] and *Rahab* [רָהַב] (both of which never occur with article) as **names** for certain species (ISBE 1:990; 3:108; cf. 4:34).

### 3. For an individual member of a class which is an outstanding representative or perceived as unique

הַיָּאֵר *the river* (that is, the River Nile) / but הַנָּהָר the Euphrates river

הָאֱלֹהִים *the god* = God (! rarer than the usage under I.)

הַבַּעַל *the lord* > Baal

הַשָּׂטָן *the adversary* > Satan

This is somewhat in tension with the generic usage for a class, see II.2.

Also contrast with the unique appellative (I.1).

<sup>4</sup> A colleague points out that this makes good sense in that the item to which something is compared must be known.

#### 4. Materials

A standard example from the grammars is this:<sup>5, 6, 7</sup>

בְּכֶסֶף [Abraham was very rich] in [the] silver, Gen. 13:2

But the use of the article with materials does not apply regularly.

Num. 7:13 מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת | שְׁנֵיהֶם “both of them full of fine flour”

2Ki. 2:21 with מֶלַח (2x): “Put salt in it. ... He threw salt in it.”

Compare the two similar cases below – one without article, one with:

“This is the contribution which you are to take from them: Ø gold, Ø silver, and Ø bronze.” [וְזֹאת הַתְּרוּמָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְחוּ מֵאֹתָם זָהָב וְכֶסֶף וְנֹחֶשֶׁת:].

Exod. 25:3 NASB

“I have called by name Bezalel ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, ... to devise artistic designs, to work in [the] gold, [the] silver, and [the] bronze [בְּזָהָב וּבְכֶסֶף וּבְנֹחֶשֶׁת:]. Exod. 31:2–4 ESVUS16

The text above might use the article because it refers to the materials from the collection – which by then are known; however, the wording suggests a statement about Bezalel’s ability to work with *such* materials in general.

#### 5. Abstract nouns: attributes / qualities / states

Abstract nouns can<sup>8</sup> have the article. This includes diseases etc.

לְךָ אֲדֹנִי הַצְדִּיקָה To you, O Lord, belongs [the] righteousness,

וְלָנוּ בֹשֶׁת הַפָּנִים but to us open shame. (Dan. 9:7 ESVUS16)

עִיר הַצְדִּיק “City of [the] Righteousness” [a particular city], Isa. 1:26

Prov. 25:5 “His throne will be established in [the] righteousness [בְּצִדִּיק].”

Gen. 19:11 בְּסַנּוּרִים [They struck the men ...] with [the] blindness.

Compare English: “*The* can be used informally with a few common illnesses: She’s never had **(the) measles**.” (Practical English Usage, 142:15)

Isa. 14:30 בְּרָעַב יָהֲמֹתִי I will kill [your root] with [the] famine.

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<sup>5</sup> GKC 126n, p. 406 enlists:

Names of materials known everywhere, the elements and other words denoting classes, even though only a part and not the whole of them is considered, in which case in other languages, as e.g. in English, the article is usually omitted (cf., however, our *to fall into the water, into the fire, &c.*).

<sup>6</sup> A colleague observes that often when the article is used, a preposition is also present (for example, there is no case in Gen.–2Chr. where כֶּסֶף has the article without a preposition). But note Gen. 2:11 (NASB) “it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is [the] gold” (אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם הַזָּהָב). The next verse says “The gold of *that land* is good” [emphasis added]. This shows that v. 11 does not talk about the only source where all gold is found. Another factor that could make the non-use of the article more likely in places is negation.

<sup>7</sup> In some cases, it could be argued that the article is missing due to a construct phrase which is to be kept indefinite, as here: “If in Ø a vessel of bronze it was boiled [וְאִם-בְּכֵלִי נֹחֶשֶׁת בִּשְׁלָה], ...” Lev. 6:21[28].

<sup>8</sup> I checked: The word צִדִּיקָה appears with article only in ISA 32:17 (2x) DAN 9:7; the word צִדִּיק with article is found only in PRO 25:5 ECC 3:16 ISA 1:26; 61:3 – thus rarely!

Job 28:12 “But where can [the] wisdom [הַחִכְמָה] be found?”

English: “We usually use no article to talk about things in general: *Life is hard*.” (Practical English Usage, 136:7)

Contrast German: “**Das** Leben ist hart.”<sup>9</sup>

(In the above verse, both is possible in German: “(die) Weisheit”.)

Zech. 12:4 (NASB) “I will strike every horse with [the] confusion [בְּתַמְהוֹן] and its rider with [the] insanity [בְּשִׁנְעוֹן].”

But the article can be missing on an abstract noun (and otherwise) in poetry. In the verse below, the first colon does not have it, the second has it.

Isa. 11:5 (NRSV)

“Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, וְהָיָה צֶדֶק אֲזוּר מִתְנָיו  
/ and [the] faithfulness the belt around his loins.” וְהָאֱמוּנָה אֲזוּר חֲלָצָיו:

However, this happens in prose as well.

2Sam. 8:15 וַיְהִי דָוִד עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט וצֶדֶק

“David administered Ø justice and Ø righteousness ...”

Deut. 28:48 וְעַבַדְתָּ אֶת־אֹיְבֶיךָ ... בָּרָעַב וּבְצָמָא וּבְעִירָם וּבְחָסֶר כָּל

“You shall serve your enemies ..., in [Ø] hunger and [Ø] thirst, in [Ø] nakedness and [Ø] lack of everything.”

## 6. Water & fire in the cult

There is debate about how to explain cases like these:

In the cultic setting, we almost always find ‘**water**’ used with the article, as in Lev. 16:4: “He shall bathe [רחץ] his body in [the] water [בַּמַּיִם].”

Water could be taken as a “material” (see II.4.). We find this with another liquid, milk, in SoS. 5:12: “bathed in [the] milk [רָחַצוֹת בְּחֶלֶב].”

But ‘water’, in Hebrew, does not always take the article. It is not a grammatical necessity:

Gen. 43:24 “The man gave them water [וַיִּתֵּן־מַיִם].”

Exod. 30:18 “You shall put water in it [וַיִּנְתֵּן שָׁמָּה מַיִם].”

Ezek. 16:4 “On the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with Ø water for cleansing [וְלֹא־רָחַצְתָּ לְמִשְׁעִי].”

Similarly, in the cultic setting, ‘**fire**’ – when used with the verb שָׂרַף – always has the article, as in Lev. 16:27: “... shall be taken outside the camp,

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<sup>9</sup> Claude.ai: “The general pattern is that German uses definite articles more liberally, treating many concepts as inherently definite that English treats as indefinite or generic.” / “German tends to mark nouns as definite unless there's a reason to treat them as indefinite, while English tends more in the opposite direction.”

But: English: “She plays the piano” ↔ German: “Sie spielt Ø Klavier”!

and they shall burn [שרף] their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in [the] fire [באש].”

But again, it is not a grammatical law that ‘fire’ cannot be used without article (see Judg. 9:15 “Let fire come out [תצא אש] ...”).

(Hypotheses: Is the use of the article described above “generic” use? Does it come under “use for materials”? Is a “specific” water/fire in view (designated for cultic use)? Does it have to do with the verbs and is it “instrumental”, as in other verbal phrases (“write on a [the] scroll”)?

## 7. Measurements

Exod. 16:36 וְהָעֹמֶר עֲשָׂרִית הָאֵיפָה הוּא:

“An [The] omer is a tenth of an [the] ephah.”

Ezek. 45:11 וְהָיְתָה הָאֵיפָה וְהַבַּת “The ephah and the bath ...”

## 8. Vocative

With the addressed person being present.

1Sam. 17:55 הַמֶּלֶךְ אִם-יָדַעְתִּי:

“[The] king, I do not know.” > “O king, I do not know.”

Joel 1:2 שְׁמַעוּ-זֹאת הַזְקֵנִים

“Hear this, you elders.” (NASB)

Contrast this with the imaginary person under I.4.

## 9. Stereotypical locations

In the second and third example below, one could surmise that the location was known, and is therefore grammatically definite; but the first example speaks of any forest generally.

Deut. 19:5 (NASB) “When a person goes into the forest [בַּיַּעַר] with his friend to cut wood ...”

1Ki. 13:14 (NASB) “He found him sitting under an [the] oak [תַּחַת הָאֵלֶךְ].”

1Ki. 19:9 (NASB) “Then he came there to a [the] cave [אֶל-הַמְעָרָה] and spent the night there.”

**Conclusion:** When we find the article being present or absent in a certain word, this is not arbitrary; there are rules for its use and non-use. But these rules, at times, compete. Or we do not understand them fully. Therefore, the same explanation does not always apply.<sup>10</sup> And there are exceptions.<sup>11, 12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. IBHS § 13.5.1b, p. 242; § 13.5.1f, p. 244.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. JM § 138b–e, pp. 481–483.

<sup>12</sup> Finally, the Masoretes tend to vocalize one-consonant prepositions in such a way that we read the article where the consonantal text does not force us to (see JM § 137f, p. 475; IBHS § 13.7a, p. 250).

**By way of repetition, compare:**

- Materials can have the article, but they do not have to have it.

תִּקְחוּ מֵאֵתָם זָהָב

“... you are to take from them: gold, ...” (Exod. 25:3)

←→

וַיִּשֶׂם רֶבֶךְ הַזָּהָב עַל-צְוָארוֹ:

“He put a chain of [the] gold around his neck.” (Gen. 41:42)

**Translation** into English: in both cases without article: “gold”.

- הַצְדִּיק in generic use

←→

צִדִּיק in poetry

**Translation** into English: in both cases, both is possible: “the/a righteous person”.

- אֱלֹהִים as inherently definite, unique appellative

←→

הָאֱלֹהִים as for a unique member of a class

**Translation** into English: in both cases “God”.

- הַרְשָׁע ‘the wicked’ has the article in its generic use (thus, “every/any wicked”) (Prov. 5:22)

←→

הַשָּׂטָן ‘Satan’: a unique member of a class

**Translation** into English: in the second case as a name.

- הַמַּיִם [bathe in] [the] water (Lev. 16:4)

←→

מֵיִם [washed with] Ø water (Ezek. 16:4)

**Translation** into English: in both cases without article.

- As an abstract noun, ‘righteousness’ – when seen as a unique quality and thus determinate – can take the article. More often it does not.

Dan 9:7 לְךָ אֲדֹנָי הַצְדִּיקָה “To you, O Lord, belongs [the] righteousness”

←→

Ezek 18:5 וְעָשָׂה צְדָקָה: “[if] he does Ø righteousness”.

**Translation** into English: in these two cases without article.