Arete

A. Classical
1. The noun *arete* is related to the verb *aresko* (ἀρέσκω), “to accommodate, to be pleasing, to seek to please.”
2. It is derived from the root *ari-* which is also seen in *aresko*, the adjective *arestos*, “pleasing.”
3. At the time of the NT the word *arete* had so many meanings that it gave rise to misunderstandings.
4. It had come to be so widely used in antiquity, including the classical period, that it became a rather ambiguous term which could range in meaning from “wealth” to “manliness” to “moral virtue.”
5. The word originally meant “the specific quality appropriate to an object or a person.”
6. In the early classical period, the term *arete* was used fairly universally with reference to things, animals, men and the gods.
7. Thus it can denote the excellent quality of arms or horses (Herodotus 3, 88; Plato, Republic 335b).
8. Homer speaks of the *arete* of the gods and demonstrations of their power (Iliad 9, 498).
9. This use of the word is found in the Hellenistic period (Philo, Som. 1, 256; Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 130; 18; 266).
10. Usually, however, the reference is to human qualities, such as *arete* of feet, in fighting or of the mind (Homer, Iliad 15, 642; 20, 411).
11. Thus *arete* is used of the whole man, of both physical and spiritual abilities.
12. In this sense *arete* may describe the quality of women (Homer, Odyssey 2, 206) or courage of men (Xenophon, Anabasis 1, 4, 8; cf. Latin: *virtus*).
13. The extraordinary wide variety of usages to which this word can be put also extends to good fortune (Homer, Odyssey 13, 45; Hesiod, Works 313) and in a more general sense and the glory.
14. One unique role played by *arete* was its part in the language of philosophy.
15. In the Greek philosophy *arete* came to designate “virtue.”
16. It should be noted that although the concept of moral human virtue played a prominent role in Greek philosophy, it is foreign to the Old Testament’s understanding that only God has “virtue” or can do “virtuous deeds.”
17. Philo and Josephus integrated such ideas into their writings since they were acquainted with both concepts.
18. The meaning of the concept of virtue is limited in the case of Socrates, who used *arete* to describe not general human qualities which are outwardly apparent, but only morality.
19. His individualistic and rationalist ethic removes the ties binding *arete* to the polis, making it into something based upon man’s striving for the good, and leading to the thesis that virtue may be learned.
20. He who attains a true insight into the good, will also do it (Plato, Protagoras 329 f; Apology 25d).
21. Plato saw virtue as conditioned by the soul and in his doctrine of the soul (Republic 1, 353; 2, 376e) developed the sequence of the 4 classic virtues (Republic 4, 433):
   b. *Andreia*, “courage.”
   c. *Sophrosune*, “prudence.”
   d. *Dikaiosune*, “justice.”
22. The Wisdom literature and Socrates utilized these concepts.
23. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle regarded virtue as *hexis*, i.e., as the permanent behavior of a person, depending on his qualities and decisions (Eth. Nic. 2, 4 f.; 1106a 14 ff.).
24. He distinguished between ethical, i.e., practical virtues, which include courage, temperance and generosity; and dianoetic virtues, i.e., ways in which the reason is used, which include insight, wisdom, knowledge and art (Eth. Nic. 1130 ff.).
25. Ontologically, virtue is defined as the mean between two extremes (Eth. Nic. 1107a).
26. The Stoics emphasized the agreement between the virtues and human nature.
27. They serve no outside purpose, such as the interests of the state or of the gods, but are an end in themselves, bringing about by means of knowledge and practice the goal of *eudaimonia*, “happiness” (Seneca, Ep. 66, 31 f.; Cicero, Leg. 1, 8; 1, 16).
28. The Platonic scheme of the 4 cardinal virtues became the basis for summaries of the virtues, the so-called catalogues of virtue (Epictetus, Dissertations 2, 16, 45; 3, 2, 3 and 14; 3, 22, 13).
29. Similar catalogues of virtue are found in the writings of Philo (Sacr. 22, 27; Leg. All. 1, 86; Spec. Leg. 3, 63), in Qumran and in the NT.
   a. Goodness, excellence
b. Of manly qualities in Homer, of the gods
c. Of women for valour
d. Brave deeds
e. Later of the gods, glorious deeds, wonders, miracles
f. Generally, excellence, moral virtue, forms of excellence, good nature, kindness
g. Of animals, things as land, productive
h. Prosperity
i. Good service done him
j. Reward for excellence, distinction, fame
k. In plural, glories
l. Personified
m. As a title, Your worship
n. An engine of war
o. A plaster

B. LXX
1. The canonical writings of the LXX indicate that arete was seen as the equivalent to 2 Hebrew terms:
   a. Hodh (יהוּד) (noun), “majesty, splendor” (Hab. 3:3; Zech. 6:13).
2. Arete as an equivalent to these terms always modifies God.
3. The apocryphal documents and specifically the Maccabean writings reflect a compromising shift.
4. They evolved directly out of Hellenistic Judaism.
5. In the apocryphal documents arete is a quality of life.
6. Arete in Hellenistic Judaism associated arete with suffering and dying for the nation of Israel.
7. Josephus used the word to praise his fellow countryman for their religious activities, which he attributed as being virtuous.

C. NT
1. The noun arete appears only 5 times in the NT (Phlp. 4:8; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:3, 5 twice).
2. The word appears in 2 Peter 1:3 where it is used in the plural of the “virtues” of God the Father.
3. It is used again by Peter for the “virtue” of God in 2 Peter 1:3.
4. He applies the word of the “virtue” of believers, which of course is acquired from God and specifically the production of the Holy Spirit when the believer applies the Word of God.
5. It is used only once by Paul in Philippians 4:8 where it means “virtue” and is applied to the doctrines of Christ, i.e. the Word of God, which the Philippians are to contemplate.
6. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, “arete properly denotes whatever procures preeminent estimation for a person or thing; hence, "intrinsic eminence, moral goodness, virtue," (a) of God, (1 Pet. 2:9), "excellencies" (KJV, "praises"); here the original and general sense seems to be blended with the impression made on others, i. e., renown, excellence or praise (Hort); in (2 Pet. 1:3), "(by His own glory and) virtue," RV (instrumental dative), i. e., the manifestation of His divine power; this significance is frequently illustrated in the papyri and was evidently common in current Greek speech; (b) of any particular moral excellence, (Phil. 4:8; 2 Pet. 1:5) (twice), where virtue is enjoined as an essential quality in the exercise of faith, RV, "(in your faith supply) virtue."
   b. A manifestation of power characterized by excellence – ‘wonderful act, powerful deed, wonderful deed’ (page 682).
8. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, pages 105-106:
   a. In its usual meaning moral excellence, virtue
   b. In accordance with a usage that treats arete and doxa as synonyms, which finds its expression outside the OT
   c. Manifestation of divine power, miracle
   a. Any excellence of a person (in body or mind) or of a thing, an eminent endowment, property, or quality.
   b. Used of the human mind and in an ethical sense, it denotes
      (1) A virtuous course of thought, feeling and action; virtue, moral goodness
      (2) Any particular moral excellence

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(3) Used of God it denotes His power and in the plural His excellences, perfections

10. The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised (page 50):
   a. Goodness, good quality of any kind
   b. A gracious act of God
   c. Virtue, uprightness