

# John 1:1 "In the beginning, the Word was a god . . ."

by  
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John 1.1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

The theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses movement explicitly denies the deity of Christ. They do not believe in the orthodox doctrine of a "trinity," i.e. that there are three persons all of the same substance, co-equal, co-existent, and co-eternal. Rather, they argue for the existence of one eternal God and contend that Jesus is a lesser mighty god. They teach that Jesus was the first and direct creation of Jehovah God, a mighty spirit person--in fact, a god--but certainly not to be identified with the Almighty God Jehovah. Jehovah's Witnesses attempt to support this doctrine from Scripture, especially the text of John 1:1.

Their official translation of John 1:1: "In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god." (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, [Brooklyn, N.Y.: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1961, revised 1970].)

The Watchtower understanding of Christology cannot be supported by this passage, and furthermore, their translation of John 1:1 is untenable.

*In this text, the article serves to identify the subject nominative and distinguish it from the predicate nominative. The absence of the article does not necessitate interpreting the noun as indefinite (i.e. "a god"), but highlights the quality or essence of the noun.*

1. THE ABSENCE OF THE ARTICLE: QUALITY, ESSENCE, IDENTITY: When the Jehovah Witnesses assert that the absence of the article in Greek means that the noun is indefinite, they are committing the gross error of reading the Greek language using English rules of grammar. All Greek grammars point out that the function of the article (or absence of the article) is different in the two languages. In Greek, the essential difference is that the absence of the article (an "anarthrous" construction) does not necessarily mean that the noun is indefinite. A given writer may intentionally omit the article as a means of stressing the quality or essence of the noun.

*George R. Beasley-Murray--* "καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος . . . denotes *God in his nature*, as truly God as he with whom he "was," yet without exhausting the being of God (observe that the Evangelist did *not* write καὶ λόγος ἦν ὁ θεός ("and God was the word"). (John, WBC 36 [Dallas: Word, 1987], 11).

2. PREDICATE NOUNS GENERALLY OCCUR WITHOUT THE ARTICLE:<sup>1</sup> This is the simplest explanation for the grammar of the passage. It must be seen in connection with the above observation that the absence of the article may serve as the author's means of stressing the quality or character of the noun. The λόγος is particularized throughout the Johannine prologue--both in grammatical terms (by the consistent use of the article) and by the content. In other words, John identifies the λόγος as the subject of the passage and then proceeds to predicate (or affirm) a number of things about the λόγος.

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<sup>1</sup>Nigel Turner, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament, Vol. III: Syntax (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 183. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, rev. by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §273, "Predicate nouns as a rule are anarthrous."

3. INCONSISTENCY OF THE NEW WORLD TRANSLATION ON TRANSLATING "θεός" WHEN THE ARTICLE IS NOT PRESENT: Notice in the following passages from the Gospel of John that θεός does not have the article, and yet it is not translated "a god" (versus God) by the New World Translation:

- 1.6 Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ,  
NWT: "There arose a man that was sent forth as a representative of God"
- 1.12 ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι,  
NWT: "to them he gave authority to become God's children"
- 1.13 ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.  
NWT: "and they were born . . . but from God"
- 1.18 θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε.  
NWT: "No man has seen God at any time"
- (see also John 3:2, 21; 6:45; 8:54; 9:16, 33; and many other passages)

These references demonstrate that John can, and frequently does, refer to Yahweh as "God" by using the word θεός without the article.

4. THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN: John always uses the word θεός with reference to the God of the Old Testament, the God of salvation history. He never uses θεός to refer to pagan gods or even "lesser" gods. He certainly could have used the word θεός in a different sense, but he would have taken special care to qualify the usage in context.

5. CHRISTOLOGY IN THE OVERALL CONTEXT OF JOHN: Clarification, indeed proclamation, of the identity of Jesus Christ was one of the overall concerns in John's gospel. This involved demonstrating to some degree a very close relationship with God the Father, thus the Christological title "Son of God." The prologue as a whole shows that Jesus does the works of the Father--he creates, he reveals, and he provides salvation. Because Jesus does the same works as the Father, it is not unreasonable to suppose that John identifies Jesus with the Father in 1:1. This also accords well with Thomas' confession of Jesus as "My God" (ὁ θεός μου) at the end of the Gospel (20:28).

*George R. Beasley-Murray--* "The divine nature of the Logos is seen in his activity in creation (1-5), revelation (5, 9-12, 18) and redemption (12-14, 16-17); in all these God expresses himself through the Word, hence the dictum of Bultmann, "From the outset God must be understood as the 'one who speaks,' the God who reveals himself." (John, WBC 36 [Dallas: Word, 1987], 11).

6. SELF-CONTRADICTION IN JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES' OWN KINGDOM INTERLINEAR TRANSLATION: Professor Alan Gomes points out that their own interlinear contradicts itself. On the left side of the page is the Greek with a word-for-word English translation under the Greek. On the right side of the page is the New World Translation. The left side of the page (English under the Greek) reads: ". . . and God was the Word. . . ." On the right side of the page, the NWT reads: ". . . and the Word was a god. . . ." Now which is it? Is "God the Word" (left side of the page) or is the Word "a god" (right side of the page)? It cannot be both!

7. POSSIBLE APPLICATION OF "COLWELL'S RULE": In 1933, Ernest Cadman Colwell (University of Chicago) published the results of his research on the function of the Greek article when used with a linking verb (a copulative).<sup>1</sup> Based upon his analysis of all the relevant NT texts, he formulated the following "rule": *when a predicate nominative appears before a form of the verb "to be," that noun is to be taken as definite, even though it has no definite article.* This is precisely the construction we have in John 1:1. Not all scholars, however, have found this "rule" valid in all cases.

<sup>1</sup>E. C. Colwell, "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament," JBL 52 (1933), 12-21.

*Leon Morris*-- EMPHASIZES IDENTITY (FOLLOWING COLWELL): "Nothing higher could be said. All that may be said about God may fitly be said about the Word. This statement should not be watered down . . . John is not merely saying that there is something divine about Jesus. He is affirming that He is God, and doing so emphatically as we see from the word order in the Greek" (The Gospel According to John, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 76-77)

EMPHATIC SINCE NOT AN ADJECTIVE: Note 15: "Abbott points out that it is more common to have an adjective than a noun in this position, which makes John's use of the noun all the more significant."

*D. A. Carson* -- Raises suspicion about the validity of the Colwell rule (in Exegetical Fallacies [Baker, 1984, pp. 86-88]). Note his conclusion: "In other words, it is a fallacy to argue, on the basis of the fact that a predicate noun preceding a copulative verb is anarthrous, that it is highly likely to be definite. Statistically this is no more likely than the conclusion it is *indefinite*. Colwell's rule never claims otherwise: it *begins* with the criterion of "definiteness" and then develops its breakdown. As such, it is still valuable, and certainly allows for the interpretation "and the word was God" in John 1:1, if other contextual indicators suggest it (and they do). But Colwell's rule must not be abused" (87-88).

*Nigel Turner*-- "Moreover, he [Colwell] is the first to admit the lack of objectivity in his method of counting: he professes to include only *definite* nouns among his anarthrous predicates, and the degree of definiteness is extremely difficult to assess" (in A Grammar of the Greek New Testament, Vol. III: Syntax [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963], 183-84).

#### 8. SOME TAKE θεός AS "DIVINE": Moffat translated the phrase, "and the word was *divine*."

*Leon Morris*-- DOES NOT SIMPLY MEAN "DIVINE": Note 15: "This is too simple. How else in Greek would one say, "the Word was God"? And, as Westcott says, an article would equate θεός and λόγος, and would be "pure Sabellianism". . . . The adjective "divine" would be θεῖος. This word was available and it is found in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 17:29; II Pet. 1:3)" (John, 77).

*Raymond Brown*-- DOES NOT SIMPLY MEAN "DIVINE": "This seems too weak; and, after all, there is in Greek an adjective for "divine" (*theois*) which the author did not choose to use" (The Gospel According to John I-XII, Anchor Bible 29 [New York: Doubleday, 1966], 5).