

Biblical Notes – John 1:1

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(This information sheet is divided into two sections – the first explores the meaning of John 1:1, and the second addresses the more technical subject of the correct translation of the verse. The second portion will be of interest to those who are faced with the New World Translation of Jehovah's Witnesses and its rendering of the last clause of this verse as "the Word was a god.")

Section I

John 1:1-3, 14, 18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being...And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth... No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

The prologue to John's Gospel has long been a center of controversy when discussing the Deity of Christ, and naturally so. One can hardly read the above sentences without catching a glimpse of One Who is far beyond the realm of simply human; even far beyond the realm of the angelic. The logos, the Word, was in the beginning, was with God, and was God. The Word created all things, and there is absolutely nothing in existence that the Word did not create. Remember that the original readers of John's Gospel would not have already read verse 14, and they would not have the preconceived knowledge that the Word is identified as Christ. Try to detach yourself from that knowledge for a moment, and imagine what kind of being you would be imagining while reading about this Word. Certainly one can hardly conceive of a higher Being.

To understand what John is saying, we must delve into the verses themselves and analyze them carefully. We must bear in mind that we are reading only a translation of what John wrote, and hence some mention will have to be made of the Greek language.

John's first assertion is that "In the beginning was the Word." Which beginning? Considering the whole context of the prologue, many have identified this beginning as the same beginning mentioned in Genesis 1:1. But most see that the assertion of the Apostle goes far beyond that.

The key element in understanding this, the first phrase of this magnificent verse, is the form of the word "was," which in the Greek language in which John was writing, is the word *en* (the "e" pronounced as a long "a" as in "I ate the food"). It is a timeless word – that is, it simply points to existence before the present time without reference to a point of origin. One can push back the "beginning" as far as you can imagine, and, according to John, the Word still is. Hence, the Word is eternal, timeless. The Word is not a creation that came into existence at "the beginning," for He antedates that beginning. John is very careful in his language at this point. Throughout this section, John carefully contrasts the Word, and all other things. He does so by consistently using *en* of the Logos, the Word, and by consistently employing a totally different verb in reference to all other things. This other verb is "to become" (*egeneto*). It is used of John the Baptist in verse 6, of the world in verse 10, and the children of God in verse 12. Only when we come to verse 14 does John use "to become" of the Word, and that is when the Word "became flesh." This refers to a specific point in time, the incarnation, and fully demonstrates John's intentional usage of contrasting verbs.

John is not alone in this. Jesus contrasted Abraham's "becoming" with His own eternal existence in John 8:58 in the same way. The Psalmist contrasted the creation of the world with the eternity of God in Psalm 90:2 (LXX) by using the same verbs found in John 1:1 and 14. Hardly seems coincidental, does it?

We have seen that the Word is eternal. Much has been said about how John got the term "Logos," the Word. Some say he borrowed it from Greek philosophy, a sort of philosophical subterfuge. No one would argue that John just simply left the Logos as he found it among the philosophers. No, he filled the Word with personality and identified the Word not as some fuzzy, ethereal essence that was the guiding principle of all things, (as the Greeks thought), but as the eternal Son of God, the One Who entered into time, and into man's experience as Jesus of Nazareth. The "Word" reveals that Jesus is the mind

of God, the thought of God, His full and living revelation. Jesus did not just come to tell us what God is like – He showed us. He is the revelation of God.

John did not stop here, however. He did not leave us to simply know the eternity of the Word. The next phrase says, “and the Word was with God.” Again we find the verb “was” cropping up, again pointing to the timelessness of the subject at hand. The Word was with God. The preposition John uses here is quite revealing. It is the Greek word *pros*. It means “to be in company with someone”¹ or to be “face-to-face.” It speaks of communion, interaction, fellowship. Remember that this is an eternal fellowship, a timeless relationship. “Pros with the accusative presents a plane of equality and intimacy, face to face with each other.”²

This phrase, if taken completely alone, would be very confusing, since John has already asserted the eternity of the Word. Now he clearly distinguishes between the Word and God. He asserts that they are distinguishable. “God” and “Word” are not interchangeable terms. Then, is John talking about two “gods?” Can more than one being be fully eternal? John was a monotheistic Jew. He could never believe in more than one Being Who can rightly be called “God.” How then is this to be understood?

This phrase must be taken with the one that follows. We read, “and the Word was God.” Again, the eternal *en*. John avoids confusion by telling us that the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Jesus, as we know Him as the Word, does not constitute everything that is included in the Godhead. In other words, John is not teaching the ancient heresy known as Sabellianism, which taught that Jesus and the Father and the Spirit are simply three different aspects of one person, i.e., Jesus is the Father, the Father is the Spirit, and so on. Instead, John here asserts the full Deity of Christ, while informing us that He is not the Father, but that they (“God” and the “Word”) have eternally co-existed.

This last phrase has come under heavy fire throughout the ages. The correct translation of this passage is here given, and anyone interested in the technical aspects of the argument are referred to Section II. Basically, the passage teaches that the Word, as to His essential nature, is God. John does not here call the Word “a divine one,” as some polytheistic Greek might say. He did not use the adjective, *theios*, which would describe a divine nature, or a god-like one. Instead, he used *theos*, the very word John will use consistently for the Father, the “only true God” (John 17:3). He uses the term three times of Jesus in the Gospel, here, in John 1:18, and in John 20:28. It can not be doubted that John would never call a creature *theos*. His upbringing and Jewish heritage forbade that. How then are we to understand these two phrases?

Benjamin B. Warfield said: “And the Word was with God.” The language is pregnant. It is not merely coexistence with God that is asserted, as of two beings standing side by side, united in local relation, or even in a common conception. What is suggested is an active relation of intercourse. The distinct personality of the Word is therefore not obscurely intimated. From all eternity the Word has been with God as a fellow: He who in the very beginning already “was,” “was” also in communion with God. Though He was thus in some sense a second along with God, He was nevertheless not a separate being from God: “And the Word was” — still, the eternal “was” — “God.” In some sense distinguishable from God, He was in an equally true sense identical with God. There is but one eternal God; this eternal God, the Word is; in whatever sense we may distinguish Him from the God whom He is “with,” He is yet not another than this God, but Himself is this God. The predicate “God” occupies the position of emphasis in this great declaration, and is so placed in the sentence as to be thrown up in sharp contrast with the phrase “with God,” as if to prevent inadequate inferences as to the nature of the Word being drawn even momentarily from that phrase. John would have us realize that what the Word was in eternity was not merely God’s coeternal fellow, but the eternal God’s self.³

The Beloved Apostle walks a tight line here. By the simple omission of the article (“the”, or in Greek, *ho*) before the word for God in the last phrase, John avoids teaching Sabellianism, while by placing the word where it is in the clause, he defeats another heresy, Arianism, which denies the true Deity of the Lord Jesus. A person who accepts the inspiration of the Scriptures can not help but be thrilled at this passage.

John goes on in verse two to reiterate the eternal fellowship of the Father and Son, making sure that all understand that “this one,” the Word, was (there it is again) in the beginning *pros ton theon*, with God. Their fellowship and relationship precedes all else, and it is timeless.

As icing on the cake, John then precludes anyone from misunderstanding his claim that Jesus is eternally God by writing verse 3. “All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” One can hardly be more inclusive than that. There is simply nothing that is existent anywhere that was not created by the

Word. He created everything. Obviously, therefore, if one can be described as creating everything, one must be the Creator, and certainly not a creation. The Word is the Creator. All people reading John's words would understand that the Creator is God, not some lower being created by God to do the work for Him. By not qualifying his statement, John assured that we could correctly understand his intention and his teaching concerning Christ, the Word. He is eternally God, the Creator.

Section II

En arche en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros ton theon, kai theos en ho logos.

Almost all the controversy surrounding John 1:1 revolves around the fact that the theos of the last phrase kai theos en ho logos is anarthrous, i.e., it has no article. Some have gone so far as to assert that the correct translation, therefore, is "the Word was a god," basing the argument on the lack of the definite article ho before theos. What does the lack of the article indicate? Is it necessary to what John is saying?

I begin with the most quoted scholar on this subject, Dr. A. T. Robertson:

And the Word was God (kai theos en ho logos). By exact and careful language John denied Sabellianism by not saying ho theos en ho logos. That would mean that all of God was expressed in ho logos and the terms would be interchangeable, each having the article. The subject is made plain by the article (ho logos) and the predicate without it (theos) just as in John 4:24 pneuma ho theos can only mean "God is spirit," not "spirit is God." So in 1 John 4:16 ho theos agape estin can only mean "God is love," not "love is God" as a so-called Christian scientist would confusedly say. For the article with the predicate see Robertson, Grammar, pp. 767f. So in John 1:14 ho Logos sarx egeneto, "the Word became flesh," not "the flesh became Word." Luther argues that here John disposes of Arianism also because the Logos was eternally God, fellowship of the Father and Son, what Origen called the Eternal Generation of the Son (each necessary to the other). Thus in the Trinity we see personal fellowship on an equality.⁴

As Robertson made reference to his voluminous Grammar in the above quotation, I will include it in its entirety:

The word with the article is then the subject, whatever the order may be. So in John 1:1, theos an ho logos, the subject is perfectly clear. Cf. ho logos sarx egeneto (John 1:14). It is true that ho theos an ho logos (convertible terms) would have been Sabellianism. See also ho theos agape estin (1 John 4:16). "God" and "love" are not convertible terms any more than "God" and "Logos" or "Logos" and "flesh." Cf. also hoi theristai angeloi eisin (Mt. 13:39), ho logos ho sos alatheia estin (John 17:17), ho nomos hamartia; (Ro. 7:7). The absence of the article here is on purpose and essential to the true idea.⁵

Note that Robertson translates the phrase, "the Word was God." His argument is summed up well in the following passage:

A word should be said concerning the use and non-use of the article in John 1:1, where a narrow path is safely followed by the author. "The Word was God." If both God and Word were articular, they would be coextensive and equally distributed and so interchangeable. But the separate personality of the Logos is affirmed by the construction used and Sabellianism is denied. If God were articular and Logos non-articular, the affirmation would be that God was Logos, but not that the Logos was God. As it is, John asserts that in the Pre-incarnate state the Logos was God, though the Father was greater than the Son (John 14:28). The Logos became flesh (John 1:14), and not the Father. But the Incarnate Logos was really "God only Begotten in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18 correct text)⁶

In light of Dr. Robertson's comments, it is indeed unbelievable that some will quote from the above section and try to intimate that Robertson felt that Jesus was less than the Father because he quoted John 14:28. A quick look at his comments on John 14:28 in Word Pictures in the New Testament, volume 5, page 256 refutes this idea. To recap, Robertson says that 1) the translation of the phrase theos en ho logos is "the Word was God." 2) That the anarthrous theos is required for the meaning. If the article were present, this would teach Sabellianism, as then theos and logos would be convertible terms. 3) That the article before logos serves to point out the subject of the clause.

H. E. Dana and Julius Mantey utilize John 1:1 to illustrate the usage of the article to determine the subject in a copulative sentence:

The article sometimes distinguishes the subject from the predicate in a copulative sentence. In Xenophon's *Anabasis*, 1:4:6, *emporion d' en to korion*, and the place was a market, we have a parallel case to what we have in John 1:1, *kai theos en ho logos*, and the word was deity. The article points out the subject in these examples. Neither was the place the only market, nor was the word all of God, as it would mean if the article were also used with *theos*. As it stands, the other persons of the Trinity may be implied in *theos*.⁷

Again, these scholars are pointing out the use of the article to show the subject against the predicate in a clause. They, like Robertson, point out that since *theos* is anarthrous, it shows that it is not convertible with *logos* and vice-versa. Dr. Kenneth Wuest, long time professor of Greek at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, commented on this verse:

The Word was God. Here the word "God" is without the article in the original. When it is used in this way, it refers to the divine essence. Emphasis is upon the quality or character. Thus, John teaches us here that our Lord is essentially Deity. He possesses the same essence as God the Father, is one with Him in nature and attributes. Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter, the teacher, is Very God.⁸

Wuest in his Expanded Translation, renders John 1:1:

In the beginning the Word was existing. And the Word was in fellowship with God the Father. And the Word was as to His essence absolute deity.⁹

Notice that Wuest brings in the idea that the anarthrous predicate noun has a characterizing effect, and that it refers more to the nature of the subject of the clause than to an identification of it. This is right in line with what Robertson said – that the *Logos* is not all of God, and that you cannot say "the God was the *Logos*." The very context (*kai ho logos en pros ton theon*) demonstrates this fully. Those who would assert that the *Logos* is to be identified with all of God (i.e., Jesus is the Father and the Father is Jesus – Sabellianism) find an insuperable problem here.

It is good to note Vincent's comment that here "John is not trying to show who is God, but who is the Word."¹⁰ The *Logos* is the central character here. Hence, when we see that the Word was, as to His nature God, we can understand exactly how He can be with God and yet be God.

F. F. Bruce's comments on this passage are valuable:

The structure of the third clause in verse 1, *theos en ho logos*, demands the translation "The Word was God."

Since *logos* has the article preceding it, it is marked out as the subject. The fact that *theos* is the first word after the conjunction *kai* (and) shows that the main emphasis of the clause lies on it. Had *theos* as well as *logos* been preceded by the article the meaning would have been that the Word was completely identical with God, which is impossible if the Word was also "with God". What is meant is that the Word shared the nature and being of God, or (to use a piece of modern jargon) was an extension of the personality of God. The NEB paraphrase "what God was, the Word was", brings out the meaning of the clause as successfully as a paraphrase can...So, when heaven and earth were created, there was the Word of God, already existing in the closest association with God and partaking of the essence of God. No matter how far back we may try to push our imagination, we can never reach a point at which we could say of the Divine Word, as Arius did, "There was once when he was not".¹¹

Another scholarly source along this line is found in the Expositor's Greek Testament:

The Word is distinguishable from God and yet *Theos en ho logos*, the Word was God, of Divine nature; not "a God," which to a Jewish ear would have been abominable; nor yet identical with all that can be called God, for then the article would have been inserted...¹²

A slightly different tact is taken by another group of scholars. These scholars refer to what is known as Colwell's rule, named after E. C. Colwell, who first enunciated his rule in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 1933.¹³ The rule says, "The absence of the article does not make the predicate indefinite or qualitative when it precedes the verb; it is indefinite in this position only when the context demands it. The context makes no such demand in the Gospel of John."¹⁴ This is the view taken by Morris, Metzger, Griffith and others. Though Colwell's rule is not exceptionless, it is a valuable guide. At the very least, it is a good guide to translation in this case. Those scholars who see the verse in this light are not necessarily in contradiction with the others already cited. First it should be noted that Robertson and Nicoll had passed away before the work of Colwell, and their comments reflect this. Also, both approaches lead to the same conclusion – the passage teaches

the Deity of Jesus Christ. Some scholars see the anarthrous theos as emphasizing the nature of the Word, and all agree that it is not simply an adjectival type of description, saying that Christ is merely a "god-like one." A more recent authors work (March 1973) bears on this issue as well. Philip B. Harner did an extensive study of anarthrous predicate nouns which was published in the Journal of Biblical Literature as well.¹⁵ His research led to some realignment in viewing Colwell's rule, it is true. It should also be noted that his article has been used extensively by those who would deny the Deity of Christ and mistranslate this passage. Sufficient at this point is a quotation from Harner's article itself:

But in all of these cases the English reader might not understand exactly what John was trying to express. Perhaps the clause could be translated, "the Word had the same nature as God." This would be one way of representing John's thought, which is, as I understand it, that ho logos, no less than ho theos, had the nature of theos.¹⁶

The authoritative reference source, Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, is quite direct on John 1:1:

A similar ascription is more common in the Johannine writings, and for the most part incontestable. John 1:1 says of the Pre-existent: kai theos en ho logos...The lack of the article, which is grammatically necessary in 1:1, is striking here, and reminds us of Philonic usage. The Logos who became flesh and revealed the invisible God was a divine being, God by nature. The man born blind has some sense of this when, after his healing, he falls down in believing adoration before Christ, who addresses him with the divine "I" (John 9:38). The final veil is removed, however, when the Risen Lord discloses Himself to Thomas and the astonished disciple exclaims: ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou (John 20:28). In John 1:1 we have Christology: He is God in Himself. Here we have the revelation of Christ: He is God for believers.¹⁷

To summarize: The phrase kai theos en ho logos is most literally translated as "and the Word was God." (Robertson, Bruce). The reason that theosis is anarthrous is both that it is the predicate nominative (Robertson, Dana and Mantey) and that it is demanded by the fact that if it had the article, it would be then interchangeable with logos, which is contextually impossible. (Robertson, Dana and Mantey, Bruce, Nicoll) Colwell's rule also comes into play at this point. We have seen that the majority of scholarship sees the theos as indicating the nature of the Word, that He is God as to His nature. The noun form is here used, not the adjectival theios, which would be required to simply classify the Word as "god-like."

Hence, John 1:1 teaches that the Word is eternal (the imperfect form of eimi, en), that He has always been in communion with God (pros ton theon), and hence is an individual and recognizable as such, and that, as to His essential nature, He is God. Anything less departs from the teaching of John, and is not Biblical.

What about "a god?"

Until 1950, an extra section dealing with a translation of John 1:1 as "the Word was a god" would not have been necessary. No one would dare publish such a "translation." However, in 1950, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society published its own translation of the Bible, The New World Translation of the Greek Scriptures. This version translates John 1:1 in this way. A number of appendices have appeared in the NWT attempting to defend this translation by making reference to many of the same scholars that have already been quoted. Aside from the comment of The Expositor's Greek Testament above, the following from F. F. Bruce sums up the truth pretty well:

It is nowhere more sadly true than in the acquisition of Greek that "a little learning is a dangerous thing". The uses of the Greek article, the functions of Greek prepositions, and the fine distinctions between Greek tenses are confidently expounded in public at times by men who find considerable difficulty in using these parts of speech accurately in their native tongue.¹⁸

A footnote appears after the comment on the article, and it says:

Those people who emphasize that the true rendering of the last clause of John 1.1 is "the word was a god", prove nothing thereby save their ignorance of Greek grammar.

This translation violates the following principles:

- 1) Monotheism in the Bible – certainly it can not be argued that John would use the very word he always uses of the one true God, theos, of one who is simply a "god-like" one or a lesser "god." The Scriptures do not teach that there is a whole host of intermediate beings that can be called "gods." That is gnosticism.
- 2) If one is to dogmatically assert that any anarthrous noun must be indefinite and translated with an indefinite article,

one must be able to do the same with the 282 other times *theos* appears anarthrously. For an example of the chaos that would create, try translating the anarthrous *theos* at 2 Corinthians 5:19. There is simply no warrant in the language to do this.

3) It ignores the position of *theos* in the clause – it comes first, and is emphatic.

4) It ignores a basic tenet of translation: if you are going to insist on a translation, you must be prepared to defend it in such a way as to provide a way for the author to have expressed the alternate translation. In other words, if *theos en ho logos* is “a god,” how could John have said “the Word was God?” We have already seen that if John had employed the article before *theos*, he would have made the terms *theos* and *logos* interchangeable, amounting to Sabellianism.

5) The translation tears the phrase from the immediately preceding context, leaving it alone and useless. Can He who is eternal (first clause) and who has always been with God (second clause), and who created all things (verse 3) be “a god?”

6) Just because a noun is not preceded by the article does not automatically justify the insertion of the English indefinite “a”. This is a gross oversimplification of the facts, a practice unfortunately common amongst those who are not properly trained in the Greek language. I am aware that this is a serious charge, however, the facts reveal that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society has consistently refused to name any of its NWT translators, and of those who have been discovered, none had any more than two years of Greek and no formal Hebrew.¹⁹

Others could be added, but this is sufficient. There is obviously no scholarly support for the rendering of “a god,” and there is massive scholarly argument against it. It is not a valid translation in any way.

Footnotes:

1. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* edited by F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 719.
2. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols., (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1932), 5:4
3. Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1950), p. 53.
4. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 5, pp. 4-5.
5. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934) p. 767-768.
6. A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977) pp. 67-68. shows that it is not convertible with *logos* and vice versa.
7. H. E. Dana, Julius Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1950) pp. 148-149.
8. Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, vol. 3, “Golden Nuggets,” p. 52.
9. Wuest, *Word Studies*, vol. 4, p. 209.
10. M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 384.
11. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 31.
12. W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 1:684.
13. E. C. Colwell, “A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament” (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1933) pages 12-21. See also discussion in footnote, Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 77.
14. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 77.
15. Philip B. Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns, Mark 15:39 and John 1:1” (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, March 1973), 92:75-87.
16. Harner, pg. 87.
17. Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964) vol 3:105-106.
18. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1963), p. 60-61.
19. This information was made available during a trial in Scotland, *Douglas Walsh v. The Right Honorable James Latham Clyde, M.P., P.C., etc.*, Scotland, 1954. I include this to demonstrate the non-scholarly, non-factual approach utilized in defending this erroneous translation.