

## ***Jehovah's Witnesses and John 1:1***

The following has been excerpted from a Jehovah's Witness' brochure called "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" I have inserted my own comments in brackets using this style font. The following article is not complete but demonstrates not only how Jehovah's Witnesses misrepresent the doctrine of the trinity, but also use unsound methods of biblical interpretation in an attempt to disprove it.

**The un-edited excerpts from the Jehovah's Witnesses pamphlet "Should You Believe the Trinity?" are in red.**

My comments are in black

### **"The Word Was God"**

**At John 1:1 the King James Version reads: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Trinitarians claim that this means that "the Word" (Greek, *ho lo'gos*) who came to earth as Jesus Christ was Almighty God himself. Note, however, that here again the context lays the groundwork for accurate understanding. Even the *King James Version* says, "The Word was *with* God." (Italics ours.) Someone who is "with" another person cannot be the same as that other person. In agreement with this, the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, edited by Jesuit Joseph A. Fitzmyer, notes that if the latter part of John 1:1 were interpreted to mean "the" God, this "would then contradict the preceding clause," which says that the Word was *with* God.**

[The implication of the comment that "Someone who is 'with' another person cannot be the same as that other person" is that Christians believe otherwise. On the contrary, it is clear that John 1:1 indicates a distinction of persons, both of whom have the nature of God.

Fitzmyer's comment is correct, if by it he means that the Father ("God" in the first clause) and the Son are not the same person.

If in the second half of John 1:1 "God" was also preceded by the article in Greek, it would contradict the preceding clause. John's point is not that God (the Father) is the Son, but that the Son has the same essence as the Father. To say that the Father is the Son is as heretical as saying that the Word is less than God.]

**Notice, too, how other translations render this part of the verse:**

**1808: "and the word was a god." *The New Testament in an Improved Version, Upon the Basis of Archbishop Newcome's New Translation: With a Corrected Text.***

**1864: "and a god was the word." *The Emphatic Diaglott, interlinear reading, by Benjamin Wilson.***

**1928: "and the Word was a divine being. *La Bible du Centenaire, L'Évangile selon Jean, by Maurice Goguel.***

**1935: "and the Word was divine." *The Bible-An American Translation, by J.M.P. Smith and E.J. Goodspeed.***

**1946: "and of a divine kind was the Word." *Das Neue Testament, by Ludwig Thimme.***

**1950: “and the Word was a god.” *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures.***

**1958: “and the Word was a God.” *The New Testament,* by James L. Tomanek.**

**1975: “and a god (or, of a divine kind) was the Word.” *Das Evangelium nach Johannes,* by Siegfried Schulz.**

**1978: “and godlike kind was the Logos. “*Das Evangelium nach Johannes,* by Johannes Schneider.**

[The J.W.'s list nine translations which span a period of nearly 200 years. Of those, one is the Witnesses' own translation (The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures) and another is the Emphatic Diaglott - the predecessor of the New World Translation (The Emphatic Diaglott was a 1864 translation by Benjamin Wilson, a newspaper editor in Geneva, Illinois who belonged to a group that also denied the trinity. This translation was then used by Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and his followers). Of the remaining seven translations, only three render the latter part of the verse as "a god. " (The fact that the others use the word "divine" as part of their translation will be discussed briefly later.)

In other words, out of all the translations that appear in various languages spanning a period of 200 years, only four individuals could be found who also translate the verse as the Witnesses do, "a god." Two of them are tied to the J.W. s own beliefs.

It should also be noted that no major translations are mentioned at all, and eight of the nine appear to be translations of individuals, not translation committees.

Because there is no exact crossover from one language to another, interpretation is always involved in translation. But if comparing translations is the way to decide who is right, the vast number of

translations *not* mentioned by the Witnesses clearly show where the opinion of scholarship rests. However, a translation may be good or bad; the real issue still focuses on the Greek text itself.]

**At John 1:1 there are two occurrences of the Greek noun *theos*' (god). The first occurrence refers to Almighty God, with whom the Word was ("and the Word [*lo'gos*] was with God [a form of *theos*']"). This first *theos*' is preceded by the word *ton* (the), a form of the Greek definite article that points to a distinct identity, in this case Almighty God ("and the Word was with [the] God").**

[The above comments leave the impression that because the first occurrence of *God* is preceded by the article which "points to distinct identity" we can be sure it is speaking of Almighty God. That is, they appear to be saying that since the article precedes *theos* (God) it clearly identifies God as Almighty God. We would agree.]

**On the other hand, there is no article before the second *theos*' at John 1:1. So a literal translation would read, "and god was the Word." Yet we have seen that many translations render this second *theos*' (a predicate noun) as "divine," "godlike," or "a god." On what authority do they do this?**

**The Koine Greek language had a definite article ("the"), but it did not have an indefinite article ("a" or "an"). So when a predicate noun is not preceded by the definite article, it may be indefinite depending on the context.**

**The *Journal of Biblical Literature* says that expressions "with an anarthrous [no article] predicate preceding the verb, are primarily [emphasis mine] qualitative in meaning." As the *Journal* notes, this indicates that the *lo'gos* can be likened to a god. It also says of John 1:1 : "The qualitative force of the**

**predicate is so prominent that the noun [*theos*'] cannot be regarded as definite."**

[Because the second occurrence of God is not preceded by the article, the qualitative aspect of the noun is stressed.]

**So John 1:1 highlights the quality of the Word, that he was "divine," "godlike," "a god," but not Almighty God. This harmonizes with the rest of the Bible, which shows that Jesus, here called "the Word" in his role as God's Spokesman, was an obedient subordinate sent to earth by his Superior, Almighty God.**

[The conclusion is now drawn that the Word was "godlike", "divine", but not Almighty God.

A number of comments need to be made relative to the use of Greek grammar and the conclusion Witnesses draw from it.

There are numerous reasons for the lack of the article.

1) It's true that the lack of the article *stresses* the qualitative aspect of the noun rather than its identity (Dana - Mantey, 149), but unlike English that does not mean that the noun is indefinite (see 2 below). Even so the Witnesses try to use this rule of grammar to justify their notion that the Word was "godlike" or "a god."

Such a conclusion is not even related to the grammatical principle stated. Since the anarthrous construction *stresses the qualitative aspect of the noun* (the nature of the noun), the verse would be saying the Word possessed the nature or essence of God. When Witnesses reduce this to "godlike" they are taking a step unsupported by Greek grammar. "Godlike" is a redefinition of the noun θεός (God).

By way of analogy, one could say, "Joe was with the man and Joe was man." Who would conclude that Joe is simply "manlike", but does not possess human nature in the same sense that the man in the first

clause does? Yet by applying the same logic that the Witnesses do to John 1:1 this is exactly what they would conclude. In essence they would say, "Joe was man" means "Joe was not man. He was only "manlike." They conclude the exact opposite of what would normally be a positive assertion. If Joe is only "manlike" but lacking the full attributes of man he should not be designated as man.

Someone may say if the above analogy had been written in Greek it would also be possible to translate it, "Joe was with the man and Joe was *a* man." In the case of men that makes sense for there are many creatures in this world that have human nature. Joe would be one of them - "a man." But in the case of God this cannot be said. "A god" would be blasphemous to Jewish ears. There is only one being that has the nature of God. Without any other contextual indicators, if John said that the Word was "a god" he would be claiming that there is another being of identical nature to [the] God, which is polytheism.

At the same time neither would anyone conclude that the first man and Joe were identical in person. That is the very point that John is making. "The Word was with [the] God (i.e. the Father) and was God (i.e. the same nature as [the] God.)" That is also what Christians claim. The Father and Son are distinct in person, yet identical in nature.

2) The article is simply a pointer, not just a means of making a word definite. Many words, like "God" are definite by the nature of the case. Words such as "God," "sun," "moon," "earth," "heaven," etc. often appear without the article in Greek though they are still considered definite. In other words, when the article appears, the word is certainly definite, when it is not present the word may be definite or not (A.T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 756; BDF, 273). In fact, one could say that a word is only indefinite when the context demands it (Morris, note 15, p.77) (Even the Witnesses agree when they say, **"when a predicate noun is not preceded by the definite article, it may be indefinite."** (emphasis mine). But they fail to stress that it may also be definite!).

The Witnesses bias in this matter is seen in their explanation of why Thomas called Jesus God in John 20:28.

They say, **“To Thomas Jesus was like a god [emphasis mine] especially in the miraculous circumstances that prompted his exclamation. Some scholars suggest that Thomas may simply have made an emotional exclamation, spoken to Jesus but addressed to God. In either case Thomas did not think that Jesus was Almighty God.”** (page 11 of the same brochure).

On what grounds do they conclude that it is acceptable to interpret “the God” (the article is present in Greek) as “like a god?” After so much emphasis on the use of the article in Greek grammar in John 1:1, the *lack* of any explanation is suspicious.

In addition, if we consider that Thomas was a Jew and was raised in a strictly monotheistic culture such an exclamation would be blasphemous.

The suggestion that Thomas was making “an emotional exclamation, spoken to Jesus but addressed to God” is also unsupportable. The text says Thomas said to him (Jesus) “My Lord and My God” not, “looking at Jesus, Thomas said to God, ‘My lord and My God.’” Furthermore, it says Thomas “*answered and said,*” which would be out of place before an exclamation. They introduce a reply to what Christ had said. If addressing Christ, Thomas would be declaring Jesus to be his Lord and God.” (Hodge, Systematic Theology I, 508). If he isn’t addressing Christ, what exactly is he saying? Something equivalent to “Oh my God!”? That would hardly be worth recording in scripture, and would be completely inconceivable to any Jew who had even a superstitious reverence for the name of God, especially for the name Jehovah.

Then with no contextual or grammatical evidence they say, “In either case Thomas did not think that Jesus was Almighty God.”

*We can learn a lot from these observations. Though the Witnesses claim to Bible students and unbiased in their use Greek grammar, in reality if the title "God" is applied to Christ they will deny that it refers to Almighty God whether the article is present or not.*

3) The proper name θεός (God) is freely used with and without the article (A.T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 795). In fact, it is more common in the epistles without the article than with it (A.T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 761).

4) Had an article preceded both θεός (God) and λόγος (Word), the meaning would have been that the Word was completely identical with the Father, which would be impossible if the Word was also "with God" (Bruce, 31). John could not place a second article before the second occurrence of God without teaching Sabellianism, the belief that the Father was the Son.

5) Θεός (God) is a predicate nominative and thus has no article (A.T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 767).

6) If the lack of the article implied indefiniteness (a god) it would be the only time in John's gospel that it was used as such, making it highly improbable on grammatical grounds. (Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 53).

By way of comparison, legitimate placement of an indefinite article with "god" in English is found in Acts 12:22 and 28:26. There the context is clear that a definite article is needed. John 1:1 offers no similar contextual justification.]

**There are many other Bible verses in which almost all translators in other languages consistently insert the article "a" when translating Greek sentences with the same structure. For example, at Mark 6:49, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water, the *King James Version* says: "They supposed it had been a spirit." In the Koine Greek, there is no "a" before "spirit." But almost all translations in other languages add an**

**“a” in order to make the rendering fit the context. In the same way, since John 1:1 shows that the Word was *with* God, he could not *be* God but was “a god,” or “divine.”**

[The analogy is not relevant. There are many spirits. There is only one true *God*. Because the disciples didn't think that Jesus was a particular spirit nor was there any previous reference to a spirit in the context, there was no need for the article in *Greek*.

Secondly, whether the indefinite article in English is present or not, the nuance of an anarthrous construction in *Greek* doesn't change. The point is that the disciples thought that they saw a spirit, not a man. As per the previous discussion, if we took the anarthrous construction as the Witnesses do in John 1:1, we should conclude that the disciples thought they saw a “spiritlike” thing, not a spirit itself.]

**Joseph Henry Thayer, a theologian and scholar who worked on the *American Standard Version*, stated simply: “The Logos was divine, not the divine Being himself.” And Jesuit John L. McKenzie wrote in his *Dictionary of the Bible*: “Jn 1:1 should rigorously be translated ... `the word was a divine being.’”**

[The Jehovah's Witnesses' tendency to stray from the text is seen in their repeated attempt to rally support in favor of translating θεός (*God*) as “divine.” Nowhere in the NT is it translated as such. Had John intended to say “the Word was divine” he had the linguistic ability to do so. He simply could have used the word θεῖος (*divine*) (cf. Acts 17:29; II Pet. 1:3) instead of θεός (*God*).

There is no doubt that there are people who deny the deity of Christ and ample citations from their works can be obtained. But the reason why some translators have chosen the word “divine” over “God” also needs to be considered. The Witnesses insinuate that the word “divine” means something less than *God* and assumes that those who use it in John 1:1 think so too. However, in their own translation of Acts 17:29 they call the Almighty God “a divine being.”

Without knowing the reasons why translators chose the words they did, we cannot assume that even those who translated John 1:1 as “the Word was divine” meant to convey the idea that the Word was less than God. Could it be that they are simply trying to distinguish the essence of the Word from identity of the Father in the preceding clause?]

## **Violating a Rule?**

**SOME claim, however, that such renderings violate a rule of Koine Greek grammar published by Greek scholar E. C. Colwell back in 1933. He asserted that in Greek a predicate noun “has the [definite] article when it follows the verb; it does not have the [definite] article when it precedes the verb.” By this he meant that a predicate noun preceding the verb should be understood as though it did have the definite article (“the”) in front of it. At John 1:1 the second noun (*the os*’), the predicate, precedes the verb-“and [*the os*’] was the Word.” So, Colwell claimed, John 1:1 should read “and [the] God was the Word.”**

**But consider just two examples found at John 8:44. There Jesus says of the Devil: “That one was a manslayer” and “he is a liar.” Just as at John 1:1, the predicate nouns (“manslayer” and “liar”) precede the verbs (“was” and “is”) in the Greek. There is no indefinite article in front of either noun because there was no indefinite article in Koine Greek. But most translations insert the word “a” because Greek grammar and the context require it.-See also Mark 11:32; John 4:19; 6:70; 9:17; 10:1; 12:6.**

**Colwell had to acknowledge this regarding the predicate noun, for he said: “It is indefinite [“a” or “an”] in this position only when the context demands it.” So even he admits that when the context requires it, translators may insert an indefinite article in front of the noun in this type of sentence structure.**

[The issue is not whether an indefinite article can be inserted to make a smooth translation in English. The issue is the significance of an anarthrous noun *in Greek!*

In Greek there is no difference in the use of the anarthrous construction in John 1:1 and John 8:44.

"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. **He was a murderer** from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own *nature*, for **he is a liar** and the father of lies." (RSV)

The fact that "liar" and "murderer" are anarthrous in Greek emphasize the nature of Satan, just as the lack of the article before God in John 1:1 emphasizes the nature of the Word. This is particularly apparent in John 8:44 for Jesus is making a comparison of natures. The Jews' lying and murderous attitude toward Christ reveal that their father is the devil; their like nature bears this out!]

**“The Logos was divine, not divine Being himself.”-Joseph - Bible Scholar**

**Does the context require an indefinite article at John 1:1? Yes, for the testimony of the entire Bible is that Jesus is not Almighty God. Thus, not Colwell’s questionable rule of grammar, but *context* should guide the translator in such cases. And it is apparent from the many translations that insert the indefinite article “a” at John 1:1 and in other places that many scholars disagree with such an artificial rule, and so does God’s Word.**

[It appears that Witnesses' arguments are driven by their theology rather than sound principles of biblical interpretation. They continually refer to the importance of the context, but then instead of showing how their claims are supported by the context, they focus on English *translations* of John 1:1, the insertion of the indefinite

article in *other places* in the English Bible, *general claims* that what they are saying is "the testimony of the entire Bible," or that "someone who is with another person cannot also be that other person" (which demonstrates that they are trying to refute a view they don't even understand themselves).

That their logic is faulty is seen in the fact that John makes the positive assertion "the Word was God" which is interpreted by them negatively as meaning that the Word was *not* God, but kind of a god-like being in some ways.

On the contrary, the context gives more reason to believe the Word was God than not.

1. The fact that the Word already "was " (i.e. in existence) prior to "the beginning" indicates that He Himself is not part of creation.

2. Verse 3 identifies Him as the agent in the creation of **all things**. (Romans 11:36 identifies the Father as the agent of the creation of all things.)

Nothing that exists was made apart from Him. Only God transcends creation.

This is further stressed in the change of the verb from εἶμι (to be) to γίνομαι (to become, to come into being). John says that the Word was (existence); all else became (creation). Because Jesus made all things, He has a claim on all things, though this claim was rejected by men (1:10).

3. In verse 4 the Word is identified as the source of life.

Life does not exist in its own right. It is not even said to be made *by* or *through* the Logos but exists *in* Him (Morris, 83). Only God is the source of life.

All of these claims support the interpretation of John 1:1 that the Word was God.