

# In the beginning was the Word And the Word was with God And the Word was \_\_\_\_\_?

by Andrew vonderLuft

The Prologue of John's gospel (vss. 1.1-1.18), introduces the themes which John develops throughout the book. Understanding the Prologue is indispensable if we are to understand the rest of John. And inasmuch as the Gospel of John is the key to understanding the other three gospels, as Calvin and others have observed, John's Prologue is rightly considered a key to orthodox Christian faith.

Instead of the accepted "And the Word was God." in the last line of John 1.1, the *New World Translation of Scriptures* (so-called) translates "And the Word was a god." Is this a valid translation?

One of the chief guidelines of biblical hermeneutics (the science and art of biblical interpretation) is that we interpret according to the analogy of Scripture, i.e. Scripture must interpret Scripture. Following this principle we must discard this translation because it contradicts the Bible's central teachings--namely that the Bible reveals one God, not a plurality of gods; and Jesus Christ is clearly portrayed as that one God come in flesh.<sup>1</sup> He who denies this is not of God, but of antichrist.<sup>2</sup>

Theology notwithstanding, this translation is also an impossibly bad reading of the Greek text. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate why the translation "the Word was a god" is grammatically untenable.

## ***The definite article***

Greek and English definite articles are set in bold type:

Transliteration of John 1.1:            *En archê ên **ho** logos,  
kai **ho** logos ên pros **ton** theon,  
kai theos ên **ho** logos.*

Literal Translation of John 1.1:    In *the* beginning was **the** Word,  
and **the** Word was with **the** God,  
and **the** Word was God.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 3.16, et al.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4.2-3.

The Greek definite article, roughly equivalent to English “the,” usually serves to make a generic noun more definite, e.g. “pear” (indefinite—any pear) vs. “**the** pear” (definite—a specific pear). The Greek definite article appears in John 1.1

1. In the first line in “*ho logos*” (**the** Word)
2. In the second line in “*ho logos*” (**the** Word)
3. In the second line in “*pros ton theon*” (with God). Note: in English, “God” with the capital “G” is already definite, and so we do not translate it “*the* God,” though this is the literal Greek.
4. In the third line in “*ho logos*” (**the** Word)

Unlike the “God” in the second line, “God” in the third line does not have the definite article. It is on the basis of this absence of the article, that those who translate “...and the Word was a god” profess their legitimacy. Does a Greek noun need a definite article to be definite? If not, then why is the article absent in this verse?

### ***Does a Greek noun need the definite article to be definite?***

No. This is also true in English – we generally refer to the one God as “God”, not “*the* God.” In Greek, when a name or concept is widely understood, and/or it has been previously introduced, it often occurs without the definite article.<sup>3</sup> Such nouns are called *anarthrous* (without the article). We see an example of this in the very first two words of John 1.1: *En archê* (In *the* beginning). Though *archê* (beginning) has no definite article, it is definite by its very nature. Thus we understand “In **the** beginning,” not “in **a** beginning.” Interestingly, the *New World* translators do not dispute this text. If they were to be consistent in rendering all anarthrous nouns as indefinite, the resulting translations in John’s Prologue alone would include:

- 1.2 He was in **a** beginning with God
- 1.4 In Him was **a** life
- 1.6 There came a man, send from **a** God, whose name was John
- 1.12 ...as many as received Him, to them He gave **a** right to become children of **a** God
- 1.14 And the Word became **a** flesh
- 1.14 ...glory as of the only begotten from **a** father
- 1.18 No one has seen **a** god at any time; **an** only begotten god ...has explained Him

“God” is definite in this verse, and elsewhere in this chapter, both because He is a universally understood concept, and also because He has been introduced in the immediate context. Of the use of the article with *theos* (God) in particular, A.T. Robertson writes “the word is treated like a proper name and may have it (Ro. 3:5) or not have it (8:9).”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Why is the definite article absent in this verse?***

---

<sup>3</sup> A.T. Robertson, W. Hersey Davis, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), item 388 “The Absence of the Article”, 282ff.

<sup>4</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 761.

*kai theos ên ho logos* (And the Word was God), is known grammatically as a *predicate nominative*. This construction occurs when the predicate of a sentence has the same case ending as its subject. When this occurs the predicate indicates some fact concerning the subject, e.g. “David (subject) became king (predicate).” In this example “king” is not an object of the verb, i.e. it does not receive any action, rather, “king” in some way *defines* the subject, “David.” Thus in our sentence *theos* (God) describes *ho logos* (the Word).

But if subject and predicate are in the same case, how do we know which of them is the subject, since Greek subject and predicate are not distinguished by word order as in English? Quite simply, we know because of the definite article. *ho logos* (the Word) is the subject of this sentence and *theos* (God) the predicate, because *ho logos* (the Word) has the article, and *theos* (God) does not. Robertson instructs

“The word with the article is then the subject, whatever the order may be. So in Jo.1:1 the subject is perfectly clear.”<sup>5</sup>

If both words were to have the article, the statement would be reflexive, i.e. the two substantives would be seen as absolutely identical, not one describing the other. In this sentence John would be asserting that “the Word” and “God” are indistinguishable—one and the same. John did not use the article with *theos* (God) because he would have been negating his affirmation of the Word’s distinctness, made in the preceding declaration, “the Word was *with* God.” He would have been asserting Sabellianism, the heresy which claims one person only in the Godhead.

In the predicate nominative construction, the article stresses the *individual identity* of its noun, in contrast to the anarthrous noun which suggests *character, nature and quality*.<sup>6</sup> So it is in our sentence that the inspired writer announces that the *individual person* of *ho logos* (the Word), is *theos* (God) in *character, nature and quality*. Understanding this distinction, it becomes clear that rather than limiting the divinity of *ho logos* (the Word) in John 1.1 to something less than the absolute fullness of the One God, the absence of the article with *theos* (God) serves to affirm it in the strongest terms.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 767

<sup>6</sup> H.E. Dana, J.R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957), 140, 149ff.