

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND THE DEITY OF CHRIST

by VICTOR PERRY

MR. PERRY, a younger scholar well known in the Christian Education Fellowship, provides some interesting and valuable observations on the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses about the deity of Christ, with special reference to the translation of the last clause of John 1 : 1.

THE teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses is at present probably the most virile heresy. J.W.s are active in door-to-door visitation, tract-distribution and proselytizing in every form possible.

On several occasions the writer was asked by friends who had been opposed by J.Ws in their evangelistic work, to give them an answer to their arguments, and in particular to their views on the deity of Jesus. Now the J.Ws attack orthodox Christianity principally on three grounds, the immortality of the soul, eternal punishment, and the deity of Jesus. It is, therefore, wise to counter their teachings on these three points, and since their attacks seem to be more frequently concerned with the deity of Jesus, it is best to answer them first here. So as a result of enquiries from friends and contact with J.Ws, I wrote an article on this subject. It is obvious that the subject is so vast that rigorous limitation was essential, and especially so because in discussion J.Ws are adepts at changing the topic when cornered. Since, therefore, the J.Ws make much of the interpretation of John 1: 1 in writing and discussion, the article was limited to this verse.

This original article was shown to several J.Ws, who came to the door from time to time. But although they were always willing to use such technicalities as "anarthrous predicate," which had been learned by rote, when they thought the person they were addressing knew no Greek, they soon retired behind a plea of ignorance when one replied in kind. In fact, I have never yet met a J.W. who did know Greek, although many were at first willing to lecture on Greek grammar. But one Circuit minister of the J.Ws took a copy of the article and sent it for comment to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. In time a reply was received. This reply is interesting in itself in many ways, and in this paper we shall print first, a section of my original article; secondly, the comment of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society; and thirdly, a reply to their comment. To avoid

a charge of unfairness all relevant parts of the J.Ws' reply will be printed.

I.

Original article. Concerning Jesus the Jehovah's Witnesses teach, "he was a God but not the Almighty God, who is Jehovah" (*Let God be True*, p. 35). They thus deny the deity of Christ. This view is brought out in the translation of the New Testament by the Jehovah's Witnesses, called the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*. We shall examine their translation of part of John 1: 1, which in the Greek is *theos ēn ho logos*.

The A.V. translation of this clause is "*the Word was God.*" But these words are translated in the *New World Translation* as "*the Word was a god.*" Let me first give three arguments to support the orthodox interpretation.

(1) *The argument from common sense.* We must remember that the religious background of the N.T. writers is Jewish monotheism. The monotheism of the Jews was of the strictest kind. John could not have referred to Jesus as "a god." To hold that Jesus is "a god" is to be guilty of polytheism.

J.Ws' reply. The person's first argument is, he says, "from common sense." He insists that to speak of Jesus as "a god" is to believe polytheism and is also to suggest the writers of the Christian Greek Scriptures believed in polytheism. Yet Paul speaks of Satan at 2 Corinthians 5: 4 as "a god" and he was a Christian and monotheist. Bible writers in many other instances speak about the existence of other gods. Paul does again at 1 Corinthians 8: 5, 6, and the psalmist does at Psalm 96: 4, 5. True those other gods are inferior to the Supreme God, Jehovah, but that they exist is not disputed. And surely the very expression "Almighty God" in itself implies the existence of other gods, not almighty ones but lesser ones. Surely the monotheism-or-polytheism argument does not revolve around *belief* in one God or many but rather *worship* of one God or many. Christians believe in the existence of other gods but they worship only Jehovah God. So this person's first argument is not "common sense" as he would suggest.

Comment. This paragraph, like much of the J.Ws' reply, contains much confusion. We must first clear up some definitions. Whatever the J.Ws say, in common usage and according to the dictionaries polytheism means the belief in many gods, and monotheism the belief in one God. So we are back to the question of polytheism. Let us ask a question: If a monotheist says "that man makes a god of his money," does he make himself a poly-

theist? The answer is obviously "No." The use of "god" is metaphorical. Nor does one compromise his monotheism by speaking of (say) "the gods of the Greeks." No more do the verses quoted by the J.Ws contradict Paul's monotheism. In fact, in 1 Cor. 8: 5, 6, Paul states clearly first that other gods are only "so-called gods," and secondly that "for us there is but one God," an impression one would not get from the J.Ws' comment. Again Ps. 96: 4, 5 in reality condemns the J.Ws' position, because the word translated 'idols' in the A.V. literally means 'nothingnesses,' an indication of the Jewish attitude to "the gods of the nations." They have no real existence at all. The monotheism of the Jews is unambiguously stated in such a verse as Isa. 44: 6, "Thus saith the LORD . . . I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no god." (See also Deut. 4: 35, 39; Is. 45: 5, 18, 21, 22; 46: 9.) The J.Ws make the astonishing admission that they are polytheists. Let the reader judge for himself the completely un-Biblical nature of this doctrine.

II.

Original article. (2) *The argument from vocabulary.* It might, therefore, be explained that this verse means "the Word was divine," which is the translation given by Goodspeed and Moffatt, who are quoted approvingly in the *New World Translation* (p. 773). But the Greek word for "divine" is *theios*, not *theos*. The abstract nouns formed from these words, *theiotēs* (divinity) and *theotēs* (deity), are not of the same meaning. They had been distinguished by the Greek writers Plato and Plutarch, and clearly differ in meaning in Paul, who uses both words once. In Rom. 1: 20 he uses *theiotēs* (divinity) and in Col. 2: 9 *theotēs* (deity); i.e. God's divine attributes are revealed in nature, but "the fulness of the deity dwells bodily" in Christ. In Col. 2: 9 the *New World Translation* mistranslates *theotēs* as "divine quality," and marginal references misdirect to Acts 17: 29, where *theios* is used, and Rom. 1: 20, where *theiotēs*, is used. If John had wanted to say "the Word was divine," he would have used *theios* and not *theos*.

J.W's reply. His second argument depends very much on the difference in meaning between four Greek words. However, checking *Strong's Concordance* we do not find such a difference as he says exists. For *theos*, the concordance allows "a deity, especially the supreme Divinity"; for *theios*, "godlike, divine"; for *theotēs* "divinity"; and for *theiotēs*, again "divinity." This person also speaks about the difference between "divinity" and "deity" and says the Greek philosophers showed they differed in meaning. But in the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*, for "deity" it

gives "Divine status, quality or nature ; a god"; and for "divinity" it gives, "Being divine, godhood ; a god." So this person's rather complicated and detailed argument is not supported by all authorities .

Comment. Here the J.Ws ignore the argument entirely. No scholar would accept *Strong's Concordance* as an authority on Greek usage, and the reference to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary* is quite irrelevant, because the meaning of English words is not in question. So the argument remains unanswered. Furthermore, in the above passage I accuse the J.Ws of misrepresentation of the facts. I notice that no defence is offered against this charge.

III.

Original article. (3) *The argument from grammar.* (Note: in general *theos* is frequently used without the article in the sense of "God," e.g. John 1: 12, 18, but here we are dealing only with the predicate usage.) *The New World Translation* argues that the omission of the definite article before *theos* in John 1: 1 shows that the word must be translated as indefinite and not definite, i.e. as "a god" and not "God." To show that the article is used with the predicate a footnote (p. 776) quotes thirty-five verses, containing thirty-six examples, from John alone. This is an impressive list. But in John 1: 1 the predicate, which does not have the article, comes *before* the verb, whereas in thirty-three of the thirty-six examples quoted by the Jehovah's Witnesses it comes *after* the verb. This agrees with the rule formulated by Colwell: "A definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb ; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb . . . The opening verse of John's Gospel contains one of the many passages where this rule suggests the translation of the predicate as a definite noun. 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, for this statement cannot be regarded as strange in the prologue of the gospel which reaches its climax in the confession of Thomas" (*Journal of Biblical Literature* lii (1933)). So of the thirty-six examples quoted in the *New World Translation* thirty-three are irrelevant. Of the other three, the article before "prophet" in John 1: 21 is demonstrative, i.e. "the expected, predicted prophet." The *New World Translation* brings this out well by its use of capitals, "Are you The Prophet?" The other two instances, John 6: 51 and 15: 1, are also special cases and will be mentioned below.

On the above three grounds, therefore, we see that the A.V. is correct, and the *New World Translation* wrong.

J.Ws' reply. His third argument attacks much of what is said in the Appendix of the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scripture* on John 1: 1. The Appendix quotes various authorities on Greek grammar to support its own view about an anarthrous noon in a predicate. None of these authorities say anything about predicates before the verb differing from predicates after the verb.

This person quotes one authority, Colwell, who does say the position of the predicate makes a difference. But we notice that Colwell does not suggest the position of the predicate is conclusive. He simply says that this rule "suggests" that the noun under discussion in John 1: 1 is a definite noun. He goes on to say that the context is the deciding factor but concludes that the context in John's Gospel argues for the verse to be translated in the way already suggested. So finally he relies on interpretation, not grammar.

But Colwell's final point is not right. The context of the whole Bible, let alone the gospel of John, suggests that the verse be translated as it is in the *New World Translation*. As for Colwell's comment about the "confession of Thomas," please see *The Watchtower* of 1955, page 543, about that.

The New World Translation, therefore, quotes many recognized authorities which support its translation; this person quotes Colwell who would disagree. It is a question of which authority a person takes. Similarly with Bible translations and even Bible manuscripts. One differs from another. Grammar and authorities are not always conclusive. They prove very helpful but consistency, the internal harmony of the Bible and many other things play their part.

Comment. Again the J.Ws evade the charge of misrepresentation, and again they show a real misunderstanding of the nature of scholarship. First, we should be clear that it is not the number of "authorities" that matters (I quoted one, but could appeal to more), but whether their statements fit the facts. Any reader who knows Greek can check for himself whether Colwell is right. Notice, too, how the J.Ws give a completely false impression of what Colwell writes: his clearly stated rule is made to appear very indefinite by extremely partial quotation. As the article in *The Watchtower*, to which reference is made, turns on their belief in the existence of other gods, it has been sufficiently dealt with above.

IV.

Original article. Now let us look at John 1: 1 from the other side, as it were. The implication of the grammatical arguments of the Jehovah's Witnesses might lead one to suppose that if the article were put before *theos*, then the A.V. translation would be justified. But this is not so. "If the article is used with both predicate and subject, they are interchangeable" (A. T. Robertson, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament*, p. 279). An example is 1 John 3: 4, which can be translated either "sin is the transgression of the law" or "the transgression of the law is sin." (This is also the case in John 6: 51 and 15: 1 mentioned above.) So if the article occurred before the predicate (*theos*) in John 1: 1, "God was the Word" would also be a possible translation. This statement is contrary to Scriptural teaching concerning the Trinity, which declares that Jesus is God, but the whole of the Godhead is not Jesus; but this could be the meaning if the article occurred before *theos*.

J.Ws' reply. This person's second paragraph on page 2 is entirely supposition. Summed up, it says that if the article preceded *theos* in John 1: 1 then it would allow a rendering of the verse which would be out of harmony with the trinity doctrine. But, the article is not included. Moreover to contend that the verse supports the trinity because if it were written differently it would not support it, is to use most peculiar, flimsy and very unsound reasoning, especially when so many authorities contend that even in its present form the verse does not support the trinity.

Comment. The J.Ws pervert my argument. Let us try to see the matter clearly. For here an important point arises: assuming the orthodox position to be correct, how would John have written this clause in Greek? To know what the J.Ws would answer to this question, I have twice written to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Now they cannot say that the present Greek text can be translated in a trinitarian sense, because they argue that grammatically such a translation is wrong. Yet in the second reply to me they agree that if the article were put before *theos*, one could not tell "whether *Theos* was the subject of the sentence or whether the Word was the subject." But they do not answer the question. Is an answer to my question possible? Yes—John would have written the clause exactly as it is written! And this the J.Ws cannot admit.

But what an admission they do make. "Grammar and authorities are not always conclusive. They prove very helpful, but consistency, *the internal harmony of the Bible* and many other things

play their part" (italics ours). If grammar is not conclusive, why their appendix, intended to show that their translation is grammatically correct? And if the internal harmony of the Bible is so important, they have much to answer on the score of polytheism. It looks as if they are weakening.

V.

Original article. There are two more points to be mentioned in conclusion. On p. 777 of the *New World Translation* we read: "At Acts 28: 6 we have a case paralleling that of John 1: 1 with exactly the same predicate construction, namely, with an anarthrous *theos* (i.e. *theos* without the article). But there the *King James Version*, *An American Translation*, *Moffatt's translation*, the *Revised Standard Version*, the *Westminster Version* (1948, Roman Catholic), F. A. Spencer's translation (1946, Roman Catholic), etc., all translate it, not, 'he was God,' but 'he was a god.' With equal justifications from the Greek text of the inspired Scriptures we have rendered John 1: 1 'And the Word was a god'." This paragraph is entirely misleading. For not only in Acts 28: 6 does the predicate follow the verb, where we would expect the article if it was definite, but the Maltese were polytheists, whereas John was a monotheist. This argument from context (e.g. argument 1 above) is well illustrated from the rendering of the phrase *huios theou* in Luke 1: 35 and Matthew 27: 54 in the *New World Translation*. Note that neither word has the article. The first passage is translated, "God's Son"; the second has "God's Son" in the text, and a footnote: "Or, 'a son of God,' or 'a son of a god'." Why is the translation "a son of a god" rightly mentioned as possible in Matthew 27: 54 but not in Luke 1: 35? Because the centurion was a polytheist, and the angel Gabriel is not. So we see that the principle of translation according to context is recognized by Jehovah's Witnesses. An exact parallel is, however Rom. 8: 33, *theos ho dikaiōn*. Note that *theos* does *not* have the article, and precedes the subject (the verb is omitted). The literal translation is, "the justifier is God," and the *New World Translation* correctly has "God is the One who declares them righteous." But faithfulness to their rendering of John 1: 1 would demand the translation "a god" here. We see, therefore, that the principles behind the correct translation of John 1: 1 are also recognized by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

We, therefore, conclude that the Jehovah's Witnesses' translation of John 1: 1 is completely wrong, and the arguments used to support it inaccurate and misleading.

J.Ws' reply. The argument about Acts 28: 6 reverts to the

predicate-before-verb and monotheism-or-polytheism arguments. The first is not a conclusive argument as shown already. The second is surely irrelevant. Luke, not the Maltese, wrote the expression and the expression is similar in its Greek construction to John 1: 1 except for the position of the predicate in this person's contention. There, its use in this argument ends. The beliefs of the Maltese are totally irrelevant.

So, reviewing the article, the first argument does not follow and the second and third arguments depend on which authorities a person takes. Taken all round, it is not by any means convincing, conclusive reasoning.

When all is considered, these arguments revolve around one verse only. It does show how hard trinitarians have to fight to retain the few scriptures which they contend support the doctrine. Yet were we to concede the point of translation, it does not prove the trinity. Only two persons, Jehovah and Christ Jesus, are concerned in the verse. True, this person keeps his conclusion to John 1: 1 and its proper translation, but the whole point of his article is to defend the trinity doctrine. When it comes to disproving the trinity, we do not have to rely on grammar authorities and just one verse. The whole tenor of the Bible is against the doctrine. And if common sense is going to be used at all, it comes heavily against the trinity, not in favour of it.

Comment. Let us comment briefly. In Acts 28: 6 Luke is reporting the words of the Maltese, and is not giving his own opinion. The beliefs of the Maltese are, therefore, entirely relevant. The J.Ws offer no reply to the rest of my argument. Their correct translation of Rom. 8: 33 is especially significant. Dare they reply? Their own translation is witness against them.

Their concluding paragraph is irrelevant, as they appear to realize. John 1: 1 is a verse that they have made much of. Here an answer is given. If this answer is correct, the whole position of the J.Ws is demolished. There are many other passages that teach both the deity of Jesus and support the trinitarian doctrine in its completeness. But they are irrelevant here. They say, "Yet were we to concede the point of translation, it does not prove the trinity." No, it was not intended to. But it does prove the J.Ws' Christology wrong, and that invalidates their whole system.

To conclude: here is a prevalent heresy, whose adherents bring forward an appearance of a wealth of learning to support their case. We have replied in kind. We suggest they have found our reply unanswerable.

Chatham, Kent.