

Ere the Blue Heav'ns Were Stretch'd Abroad

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Ere the blue heav'ns were stretch'd abroad,
From everlasting was the Word:
With God He was; the Word was God,
And must divinely be adored.

By His own power were all things made;
By Him supported all things stand:
He is the whole creation's Head,
And angels fly at His command.

But lo! He leaves those heav'nly forms,
The Word descends and dwells in clay,
That He may converse hold with worms,
Dressed in such feeble flesh as they.

Mortals with joy beheld His face,
Th'eternal Father's only Son;
How full of truth! how full of grace!
When through His form the Godhead shone.

Archangels leave their high abode,
To learn new mysteries here, and tell
The love of our descending God,
The glories of Immanuel.

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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

John 1 and the Deity of Christ

Kevin T. Bauder

Jehovah's Witnesses claim that John 1:1 does not teach the deity of Christ. They insist that most English versions of the Bible have mistranslated the text to read, "and the word was God." They point out that the word for God (*theos*) doesn't have a definite article, so it must mean that the word was *a god*. In fact, their New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (NWT) renders the verse exactly that way: "In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god." By translating the verse this way, they hope to represent Jesus as something less than the True and Living God.

In its context, the verse reveals significant truth about Jesus Christ. John, the author of the Gospel, is walking a tightrope between errors. If he were to stray just a little to either side, he would plunge into heresy. But John chooses his words with precision to show exactly who Jesus Christ is.

John is clearly talking about Jesus, whom he calls "the Word" (*logos*). He makes this point explicit in 1:14, where he states that, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (NASB). Even Jehovah's Witnesses acknowledge that this verse is pointing to Jesus Christ. The Word is Jesus.

What does John 1:1 say about the Word? It offers three observations. The first is, "In the beginning was the Word." John does not specify a particular beginning. He rather suggests that in any possible beginning, the Word already was.

That word *was* is significant. It contrasts with the word *became* that is used in 1:14. The Word was not always flesh. At a particular point in time, the Word became flesh. But there never existed a point in time when the Word did not exist. At any beginning, the Word already was.

If the Word already existed before all beginnings, then the Word must be eternal. Yet only one being possesses the attribute of eternity. All creatures are locked within time. Every created thing has a beginning. The only being who never began is the uncreated God. God is the "I AM" because there was



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never a time when He was not. And John 1:1 asserts that the Word shares this attribute of eternity. The Word is the Eternal One, and if that is true, then the Word must be God and not just a god.

John's second observation in 1:1 is that the Word was with God. This is puzzling, for we have already discovered that the Word is eternal and therefore God. Was the Word somehow with Himself? No, that will not work. The clear implication of John's second assertion is that there must be a person who is God, but who is not the Word.

Who is this divine person? John 1:14 says that the Word was begotten of the Father. The Father is God. The Son, who is the Word, is also God. We discover later in Scripture that a third person, the Holy Spirit, is also God. Yet these three divine persons are only one God with one name (Matt 28:19–20). The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. All are one God.

Yet the Word was *with* God. The Word is not identical to all that is God. The Word is not identical to the Father. The Word is not identical to the Holy Spirit. He is with them, but He is not them. Yet He is God, as they are God.

Of course, Christians have invented a label for this teaching. When Christians think about a Father who is God, a Son who is God, and a Holy Spirit who is God, but who together are only one God without being each other, they use the word *Trinity*. Even though the word *Trinity* is not in the Bible, it is the label for a complex of very important biblical teachings. It is a good word to use.

To summarize, first, the Word is the Eternal One. Second, the Word is also the "Other" One. He is "other" than the Father, and He is "other" than the Holy Spirit. By emphasizing the "otherness" of the Word, John is building a barrier against the ancient heresy called Sabellianism or Modalism. That heresy collapses the Trinity into a single person, erasing the distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John insists that the Word is distinguishable from other persons who are God.

What about John's third assertion, that "the Word was God?" While it is true that John here uses the word *God* (theos) without a definite article, this is something that he does repeatedly in this chapter. For example, 1:6 states that "There arose a man that was sent forth as a representative from God" (NWT). As in 1:1, the word *God* has no definite article. Yet even the NWT capitalizes the word *God* here. No one denies that 1:6 is pointing to the True and Living God.

Likewise, 1:12 says that "as many as did receive him, to them he gave authority to become God's children" (NWT). Here again, the word *God* has no definite article, but the NWT translates it as *God* rather than *a god*. All agree that 1:12 is talking about the True and Living God.

Furthermore, 1:18 says that "No one has seen God at any time" (NWT). As in the previous two instances, the word *God* has no article in the Greek text. And as in the previous two instances, the NWT still translates it as *God*, i.e., the True and Living God.

Four times in this context, John uses *theos* without the article. In three of those instances, the NWT agrees that it should be translated as *God* and not *a god*. Reasonably, it should also be translated this way in 1:1.

There is a technical name for the construction that John employs in 1:1. It is called a *qualitative anarthrous predicate noun*. In this construction, two nouns are joined by a "being" verb. One of those nouns has to be the subject and the other has to be the predicate, but Greek does not rely on word order to tell us which. In Greek, the noun that has an article is the subject and the noun that doesn't is the predicate. For the predicate, the focus is on the quality of the noun.

The word order in Greek is "And God was the Word." In this construction, "the Word" has the article, so it is the subject. "God" has no article, so it is the predicate, and the emphasis is on its quality.

A good paraphrase of the clause might be, "And the Word was qualitatively God," or "the Word possessed all the qualities of God-ness." It is an assertion of the genuine deity of the Word.

Jesus Christ is the Word. He is the Eternal One. He is the Other One. He is the Divine One. He is God.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
