

Psalm 16

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

“I set the Lord before my face,
 “He bears my courage up;
 “My heart and tongue their joys express,
 “My flesh shall rest in hope.

“My spirit, Lord, thou wilt not leave
 “Where souls departed are;
 “Nor quit my body to the grave
 “To see corruption there.

“Thou wilt reveal the path of life,
 “And raise me to thy throne;
 “Thy courts immortal pleasure give,
 “Thy presence joys unknown.

Thus, in the name of Christ the Lord,
 The holy David sung,
 And Providence fulfils the word
 Of his prophetic tongue.

Jesus, whom every saint adores,
 Was crucify’d and slain:
 Behold the tomb its prey restores,
 Behold he lives again.

When shall my feet arise and stand
 On heaven’s eternal hills?
 There sits the Son at God’s right hand,
 And there the Father smiles.

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Word Was God

Kevin T. Bauder

The Word is the Eternal One. He existed before every possible beginning. He Himself had no beginning.

The Word is Another One. He existed with God. Someone was God who was not the Word. God and the Word were eternally in communion.

The Word is the Divine One. This is the clear statement of the last clause in John 1:1. The Word was God.

Those who deny the deity of the Word have subjected this text to intense reinterpretation. For example, Benjamin Wilson’s *Emphatic Diaglott*, an early interlinear Greek text, translates this clause, “a god was the word.” The *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (NWT), published by the Watch Tower people, translates, “the word was a god.” According to one Watch Tower publication, the “Word is not God himself. Instead, because of his high position among Jehovah’s creatures, the Word is referred to as ‘a god.’ Here the term ‘god’ means ‘mighty one’” (*What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 202).

Wilson and the Watch Tower crowd try to base their translation on a grammatical point. They argue that the term *God* (Greek *theos*) in the last part of John 1:1 lacks the article. They take the absence of the article to mean that *theos* is indefinite: *a god* rather than *God*. But two facts make their interpretation impossible.

First, even their own translation is inconsistent. The NWT translates John 1:6, “There came a man who was sent as a representative of God; his name was John.” It translates John 1:12, “However, to all who did receive him, he gave authority to become God’s children, because they were exercising faith in his name.” It translates John 1:13, “And they were born, not from blood or from a fleshly will or from man’s will, but from God.” It translates the opening clause of John 1:18, “No man has seen God at any time.”

Why do these translations matter? In all four of these verses, the translation *God* is capitalized. But in all four, it occurs without the article in the Greek text. Yet the verses are clear that the word *God* (Greek *theos*) refers to the true



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and living God, even when it does not have the article. None of these verses is about “a god.” They are all about Jehovah.

If the Watch Tower folks were consistent, they would translate the anarthrous (that’s the fancy word for “no article”) *theos* as *God* in verse 1, just as they do in verses 6, 12, 13, and 18. They would recognize that verse 1 declares the Word to be God, the true and living God, Jehovah. But they will not translate the verse this way, because they have already decided that the one God cannot be more than one person. Rather than letting the text dictate their theology, they are letting their theology dictate their translation of the text.

But something else is going on in John 1:1, and it is truly amazing. John is walking a tightrope, and he chooses exactly the wording that will keep him from plunging into error. He has a good reason for *not* using the definite article with the word *God* in the last clause of the verse.

His reason is grounded in the way that the Greek article works in certain grammatical constructions. Those constructions involve the use of predicate nouns. A predicate noun is always joined to a subject by a linking or state-of-being verb. Examples might be, “Susan is a mother,” or “The ball is a sphere.” In these examples, *mother* and *sphere* are the predicate nouns.

In English, we use the order of the words to figure out which noun is the subject and which noun is the predicate. But word order matters much less in Greek. Instead, Greek can use the article to designate the subject and the absence of the article to designate the predicate. So Greek could read either, “The ball was sphere,” or “Sphere was the ball.” Both sentences would be translated the same way. *Ball* is the subject in both, and *sphere* is the predicate.

The sentence might also be constructed, “The ball was the sphere,” or “The sphere was the ball.” In this case, the subject and predicate are ambiguous, but it doesn’t matter. When both nouns have the article, the effect is to equate or identify them. Loosely, we could translate either, “This particular ball is identical to this particular sphere,” or “This particular sphere is identical to this particular ball.” The construction is like an equation—it can be reversed without changing its meaning.

That is what would have happened if John had written, “The Word was the God.” In that construction, *Word* and *God* would have been identical. And that would have been wrong. As the middle clause of John 1:1 points out, “The Word was with God.” Someone who was God was not the Word. God and the Word were and are not identical. The Father is not the Word. The Holy Spirit is not the Word.

If John had used an article before God, he would have been affirming error. He would have been saying that the Word was identical with everything

that is God. He would have been implying that Jesus is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But that is wrong. It is Modalism. It is heresy.

What John wrote was “God was the Word.” Because *God* has no article, it is the predicate, and *Word* is the subject. The right translation is, “The Word was God.” But there is a nuance here that needs to be brought out.

As we have seen, when the predicate noun has the article, the emphasis is on identity. But when the predicate lacks the article, the emphasis is on quality. What John is affirming is that the Word possesses the qualities or properties of being God.

We refer to God’s qualities or properties as *attributes*. When you think of God, what attributes come to mind? Do you think of His eternity? His self-existence? Maybe you think of the “omni” attributes: omnipotence (He is infinite in power), omniscience (He possesses all knowledge), and omnipresence (He fills all space). Perhaps you think of the glorious holiness that lifts Him above all creatures. Whatever attributes you think of, those attributes belong to the Word.

Is God eternal? So is the Word. Is God omnipotent? So is the Word. Is God immutable? So is the Word. Any quality that God possesses, the Word possesses. As to His quality, He is God.

The Word is not the Father. The Word is not the Holy Spirit. But the Word is God. He is the one God, the true and living God. He is not just similar to the Father and the Spirit. He is of the same substance or nature with them. That is what John is saying.



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.
