

Jehovah's Witnesses, Arianism,
and John 1:1
by Greg Loren Durand



A Brief Survey of Early Christological Heresies

"...[N]o heresy dwells among you; indeed, you do not even listen to anyone unless he speaks truly of Jesus Christ."¹ Thus wrote Ignatius of Antioch in the early Second Century, commending the Ephesian church for their proper identification and worship of the Son of God. Martyred at Rome in A.D. 117, Ignatius did not live to see the crises that would arise shortly thereafter, as wave after wave of heresies regarding the Nature of Christ would engulf the fledgling Christian Church in heated controversy, and as they have continued to do so up to the present day.

The first christological heresy was introduced by the

1. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Chapter VI:2; Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), Volume I, pages 51-52.

Gnostics even before the New Testament had been completed in the mid-First Century. These men, led by Simon Magus and Hermogenes, among others, taught that the "Logos" (the "Word") was merely an impersonal emanation of God, which later descended upon Jesus of Nazareth when He was baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was at this moment that He was believed to have become the Christ, or the "Anointed One," for prior to the event, He had been a mere mortal man.

Ireneaus, Christianity's early champion in its battle against Gnosticism, utterly repudiated this teaching that the Logos was an impersonal emanation when he referred to Him as "the Son, eternally co-existing with the Father, from of old, yea, from the beginning."² He then went on to write: "For Christ did not at that time [baptism] descend upon Jesus, neither was Christ one and Jesus another: but the Word – who is the Saviour of all, and the ruler of heaven and earth, who is Jesus . . . who did also take upon Him flesh, and was anointed by the Spirit from the Father – was made Jesus Christ."³

Yet another similar heresy known as *Dynamic Monarchianism*, or *adoptionism*, was first postulated in A.D. 190 when Theodotus the Tanner suggested that Jesus Christ was but "ψιλος ανθρωπος" (*psilos anthrôpos*), or "a mere man" who had been specially anointed by the Holy Spirit at His baptism. Despite his professed acceptance of the Apostles' Creed, Theodotus was branded as a heretic and excommunicated shortly thereafter by Victor, the bishop of Rome.⁴

2. Ireneaus, *Against Heresies*, Book II, Chapter XXX:9; Roberts and Donaldson, *ibid.*, page 406.

3. Ireneaus, *ibid.*, Book III, Chapter IX:3.

4. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1984), page 96.

The denial of Christ's eternal Deity inherent in adoptionism was effectively countered not long thereafter by Tertullian in A.D. 198, when he wrote in what was perhaps his first great work:

... [T]he common people have now some knowledge of Christ, and think of Him as but a man... so that some may naturally enough have taken up the idea that we are worshippers of a mere human being. But we are neither ashamed of Christ... nor do we differ from the Jews concerning God. We must make, therefore, a remark or two as to Christ's divinity. . . .

We have been taught that He proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God. For God, too, is a Spirit. Even when the ray is shot from the sun, it is still part of the parent mass; the sun will still be in the ray, because it is a ray of the sun – there is no division of substance, but merely an extension. Thus Christ is Spirit of Spirit, and God of God, as light of light is kindled. . . . That which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way also, as He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is made a second in manner of existence – in position, not in nature; and He did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth. This ray of God, then, as it was always foretold in ancient times, descending into a certain virgin, and made flesh in her womb, is in His birth God and man united.⁵

At this time, yet another heresy found expression in the teachings of Praxeas, who insisted that, in order to maintain a true monotheism, one had to believe that there was but one Person in the Godhead that has made Himself known by three different

5. Tertullian, *Apology*, Chapter XXI; Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume III, page 34.

names – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This view, known as *modalism*, or *Sabellianism* after the heretic Sabellius who later popularized the teaching, was likewise refuted by Tertullian in his great work *Against Praxeas*.⁶

The Arian Heresy and the Council of Nicæa

Unfortunately, the adoptionist views originally set forth a century earlier by Theodotus were revamped and again spread within the Christian Body in the early part of the Fourth Century by Lucian of Antioch, who was an influential figure in the Syrian church. Drawing from his rationalistic background as a Greek philosopher, Lucian reasoned that if Christ was indeed the “begotten Son of God,” as the Scriptures proclaim, He therefore must have had a point of origin, or creation, and so, being thus finite by nature, He could not be God, who is infinite.

Lucian successfully proselytized a number of disciples, the most noteworthy of whom was Arius, an elder of the church at Alexandria. Arius continued in the tradition of his mentor, popularizing the slogan, “There was [a time] when He was not.” Arius taught that the Word of John 1:1 was of “like substance” (*ομοιονσιος* – *homoiousios*), but not of the “same substance” (*ομοονσιος* – *homoousios*) as God the Father, and was therefore merely a divine being, or “a god.”⁷

In contrast to Arianism, the Church fathers of that period built upon the foundation that had been laid over a century previously by Tertullian, that the Father eternally “begat” the Son, who, though He drew His “subsistence” from God, was

6. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*; Roberts and Donaldson, *ibid.*, pages 597ff.

7. Brown, *Heresies*, page 113.

not ontologically inferior to Him, being “*αἰδιος αἰδιου*” (*aidios aidiou*), or “Eternal of Eternal.” In the words of Arius’ own bishop, Alexander of Alexandria: “Ever God ever Son, together Father with Son, the Son exists unbegottenly with God, ever begotten, unbegotten in kind, not by a thought or a moment does God precede the Son, ever God ever Son, from God himself the Son.”⁸ Arianism was officially condemned as heretical by a ecumenical council of bishops at Antioch in 324. A year later, many of these same bishops were reconvened by the Roman Emperor Constantine in what has become known as the Council of Nicæa. However, the resulting Nicene Creed merely expounded upon what had been stated previously at Antioch, specifically that the Son of God was “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. . . .”

It was for this explicit declaration of Christ’s eternal Deity that the 325 Council has been criticized by every anti-Trinitarian group throughout the centuries, all of which claim that the doctrine of the Trinity was forced upon the Church at that time by a narrow margin of votes. Although it *is* true that some of the bishops in attendance were indeed Arians, it is not at all historically factual to claim that the Trinity was neither spoken of nor accepted by the Church prior to that time. Ireneaus taught in the Second Century that there was only one God, and yet he clearly viewed Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as each possessing the same divine nature. It was not long after the time of Ireneaus that the term *trias* was coined by Tertullian in an attempt to explain the seeming paradox of three Persons united in the essence of one God. The writings of all the Ante-

8. Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), page 160.

Nicene fathers are sufficient proof that the doctrine of the Trinity was accepted, although not as yet expressly formulated, many years prior to 325.

Does the Bible Teach That Jesus is a Created Being?

Despite its defeat, Arianism has continued to plague the Christian Church throughout its history of nearly two millennia, and has, in modern times, heavily influenced such religious sects as the Christadelphians and The Way International. Charles Taze Russell, who founded the worldwide, nearly eight-million member Watchtower Bible and Tract Society headquartered in Brooklyn, New York, also embraced this ancient heresy. Echoing the views of Arius, the subjects of "God's Theocracy," more commonly known as Jehovah's Witnesses, state the following concerning the identity of Jesus Christ:

At the time of his beginning of life, [Jesus] was created by the everlasting God, Jehovah, without the aid or instrumentality of any mother. In other words, he was the first and direct creation by Jehovah God.⁹

The Bible shows that there is only one God . . . and that the Son . . . had a beginning. That the Father is greater and older than the Son is reasonable, easy to understand and is what the Bible teaches.¹⁰

9. *The Kingdom is at Hand* (Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society), page 46.

10. *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Restored* (Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1958), page 164.

In the Jehovah's Witness system, Jesus is actually Michael the Archangel, a created being. Though the Watchtower Society produces a virtual arsenal of proof-texts for this teaching, space permits that we discuss only one of these here. Indeed, any thorough rebuttal of Watchtower christology must begin with the opening statement from the Gospel of John, for it is this passage that is most frequently misused by Jehovah's Witnesses: "In the beginning, was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

A look at the Jehovah's Witnesses' own *New World Translation* shows a slightly reworded version of the above: ". . . and the Word was a god." Concerning this discrepancy, Watchtower writers explain:

What is it that these translators are seeing in the Greek text that moves some of them to refrain from saying, "the Word was God"? The definite article [the] appears before the first occurrence of "Theos" (God) but not before the second. . . . So the text is not saying that the Word (Jesus) was the same as the God with *whom* he was, but rather that the Word was godlike, divine, a god.¹¹

The original Greek text of John 1:1 reads: "*Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος*" (*en arche ein ho logos, kai ho logos ein pros ton theon, kai theos ein ho logos*). Jehovah's Witnesses are taught that the usage of "θεός" (*theos* – "God") without the definite article in Clause C in reference to "ὁ λόγος" (*ho logos* – "the Word") is an example of a qualitative anarthrous noun, and that it therefore merely

11. *Reasoning From the Scriptures* (Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1985), page 212.

describes the *quality* of Christ's nature as a divine or exalted creature, but does not indicate that He possesses the nature of God Himself. Such passages as Acts 12:22 ("[This is] the voice of a god . . ." Greek: "θεου φωνη" – *theou phone*) and Acts 28:6 (" . . . they said that he was a god." Greek: "ελεγον αυτον ειναι θεον" – *elegon auton einai theon*) are then used to justify the rendering of John 1:1, for the definite article is also absent in these instances.

However, these verses provide no support whatsoever for such a conclusion. It should be noted that in both cases, the subject (*i.e.*, Herod in 12:22 and the Apostle Paul in 28:6) was misidentified by non-Christian idolaters as just another god in their pantheon of false deities. John's statement in John 1:1, on the other hand, was made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and was a direct reference to the *true* God. It is therefore contextually inconsistent to attempt to link John 1:1 to Acts 12:22 and 28:6, for to do so would necessitate identification of Jesus as a false god, to which, of course, the Witnesses would not consent.

It should also be noted that there are numerous clear references to Jehovah in the New Testament in which, if the aforementioned grammatical "rule" proposed by the Watchtower were consistently followed, the omission of the definite article in the Greek text would require an identical translation as that of John 1:1 (*i.e.*, John 1:6: "There was a man sent from *a* god, whose name was John. . . ."; verse 12: ". . . [T]o them He gave the power to become the children of *a* god. . . ."; verse 13: ". . . [W]ho were born, not of blood . . . , but of *a* god." See also John 3:2, 13:3; Romans 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 4:10-11, *etc.*). Of course, these, as well as a multitude of other examples, are conveniently overlooked by the *New World*

Translation, thus demonstrating that the Watchtower Society often resorts to scholastic dishonesty in its attempt to substantiate its doctrines.

Why the Definite Article is Missing in John 1:1

A brief digression into a discussion of grammar is necessary here to further rebut the Jehovah's Witnesses' misunderstanding of "*θεος*" in John 1:1 as a qualitative anarthrous noun. This kind of noun is used in a sentence primarily to indicate essential qualities, characteristics, or attributes of the subject. For example, in a sentence such as "Joe was human," the word "human" is a qualitative anarthrous noun because it describes Joe's quality of humanness, rather than identifying him as a *specific* member of the human race.

In the strictest grammatical sense, then, "*θεος*" in Clause C of John 1:1 can indeed be regarded, if isolated from the rest of the text, as nonarticular, or anarthrous, due to its lack of the definite article. Furthermore, it can also be viewed as qualitative in its description of "*ο λογος*" as a divine being. However, another important point that Jehovah's Witnesses fail to consider when dealing with this verse, is the fact that "*θεος*" is *also* a predicate nominative. A predicate nominative functions in a sentence as the subject complement, and serves to establish the identity thereof. For example, in the sentence "George was king," we would understand "king" to be a predicate nominative, because it identifies George specifically *as* king, rather than merely ascribing to him kingly attributes. We may also say, "The king was George," and, although the word "king" here would be a definite identification of George as a specific king, the basic meaning of the word would not change.

In much the same sense, we are told in John 1:1c that "the Word was God." Though "θεος" is indeed indefinite, as already pointed out, this is no justification for the conclusion that its essential meaning changed from its usage in Clause B of the same verse, since it is a predicate nominative that was meant to enhance our understanding of *who*, not merely *what*, the Word was. It is a well known fact among Greek scholars that when the predicate nominative *precedes* the verb in a sentence, it normally does not require, and most often lacks, the definite article. In Clause C of John 1:1, the text can be translated literally to read: "... and God was the Word" ("και θεος ην ο λογος"). Notice that the predicative nominative (in this case, "θεος") precedes the verb ("ην"), thereby identifying it with the subject ("ο λογος").

E. C. Colwell, who did an extensive study of the usage of the definite article in Greek sentence structure, made the following observations:

...[A] predicative nominative which precedes the verb cannot be translated as an indefinite or a "qualitative" noun solely because of the absence of the article; if the context suggests that the predicate is definite, it should be translated as a definite noun in spite of the absence of the article. In the case of a predicative noun which follows the verb the reverse is true; the absence of the article in this position is a much more reliable indication that the noun is indefinite. . . .

"*Kai theos en ho logos*" looks much more like "and the Word was God" than "and the Word was divine" when viewed with reference to this rule. 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 (emphasis in original).¹²

As always, the context of any given biblical passage must determine its proper interpretation. If John had placed the definite article before "θεος" in Clause C (*i.e.*, "και ο θεος ην ο λογος"), as he did in Clause B ("και ο λογος ην προς τον θεον"), the meaning of the sentence would have been completely altered. Both Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses would agree that "τον θεον" as it appears in Clause B is a definite reference to the Person commonly known as God the Father. As we have already seen, the usage of "θεος" in Clause C is a predicate nominative which refers back to the subject of the sentence – "ο λογος," who, as both parties would also agree, is a different Person than that referred to in Clause B. Hence, the designation of the Word as "ο θεος" would have been contextually untenable, for such would identify the Word as the Person previously mentioned – namely the Father. In order to avoid the modalist heresy, John chose rather to emphasize, in the only manner permitted by the Greek language, the fact that the Word was a different Person than the Father, and yet possessed the same inherent nature of Deity as the Father. One respected New Testament scholar stated: "Perhaps the clause could be translated, 'the Word had the same nature as God.' This would be one way of representing John's thought, which is, as I understand it, that 'ho logos,' no less than 'ho theos,' had the nature of 'theos.'"¹³

The only way that one could legitimately interpret

12. E. C. Colwell, "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 52 (1933), pages 12-21.

13. Philip B. Harner, "Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1," *ibid.*, 92 (March, 1973), page 87.

"θεος" in the last portion of John 1:1 as a mere qualitative description of "ο λογος" as a "divine being," or "a god," would be if John had reversed the order of the sentence to read, "ο λογος ην θεος" (*ho logos ein theos* – "the Word was a god"). Thus, according to Julius Mantey, a noted Greek scholar, the *New World Translation's* rendering of this verse is "neither scholarly, nor reasonable."¹⁴

The Eternality of the Word in John 1:1

Before concluding, we will now focus upon another portion of John 1:1 that indicates the Deity of Christ just as strongly as those points discussed above. In Clause A, we read: "In the beginning was the Word. . . ." ("*Εν αρχη ην ο λογος*" – *en arche ein ho logos*). It is more than likely that by beginning with this phrase, John's purpose was to connect the opening verses of his Gospel with the first chapter of Genesis. The several striking parallels between the two passages buttress this assumption. For example, the Greek text of both¹⁵ begins with "*εν αρχη*" and the name "*ο θεος*" appears quite frequently in each. Both passages speak about the creation and describe the important role of the Word in its orchestration (Genesis 3:1a, 6:1a, 9:1a, *etc.*; John 1:3). Both also present a vivid word picture of light brought forth from and contrasted with darkness (Gen-

14. Michael Van Buskirk, *The Scholarly Dishonesty of the Watchtower* (Costa Mesa, California: Christian Apologetics, Research and Information Service, 1976), page 11.

15. The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Koine Greek around 200 B.C. This translation, known as the Septuagint, was widely used during the time of Christ and particularly when John was writing his Gospel in the same language.

esis 1:2-3; John 1:5-9).

It is quite clear from the above information that John intended to teach that "*ο λογος*" was present at the first moment of creation. The word "*ην*," as it is used in Clause A, is the imperfect tense of the third person singular of the verb "*ειμι*" ("to be"). It should be noted that the imperfect tense is used to parse verbs that indicate continuous action in past time, in contrast to the aorist tense, which merely denotes a singular past action. Though seemingly insignificant, this little word supplies us with an undeniable allusion to the eternality of "*ο λογος*," since it tells us that, at the beginning of time, He was "continuing to be" – *i.e.*, *already* existing. If John had simply wished to say that there was a time when "*ο λογος*" did not exist, he would have chosen to use "*εγενετο*," the aorist tense of the verb "*γενεμαι*," which means "to be," or "to become."

Jehovah Witnesses who cling to their perception of the Word as a created angelic being in spite of the evidence that the Greek sentence structure of John 1:1 presents to the contrary, should remember what distinguishes the Creator from His creation. Simply stated, God is an eternal, self-existent Being, while His creatures (*i.e.*, angelic entities, mankind, *etc.*) are finite and dependent upon their Creator for their continued existence (Colossians 1:17). God, having no beginning (Psalm 90:2), exists outside the boundaries of time and space, while His creatures are restricted within those boundaries. Therefore, to state that "*ο λογος*" existed with God before time began, is in essence to declare His eternality. Taking all this into consideration, it would be impossible to identify "*ο λογος*" as an angelic creature, as Jehovah's Witnesses do. If we are to understand "*ο λογος*" to be a "person," then we are drawn to the necessary conclusion that He is essential Deity (Isaiah 44:24; Micah 5:2). One

commentary on John's Gospel stated the following: "The '*logos*' existed before the creation and was not therefore created; it shared the highest of all distinctions with 'God, the Father' Himself: the '*logos*' is eternal."¹⁶

Conclusion

In Ecclesiastes 1:9-10, we read:

That which has been is what will be, that which is done, is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.

One salient characteristic of heresy is that it never completely dies out, but merely changes form and renews its attack on biblical doctrine. From its inception, the Christian Church has struggled against the same heresies in each successive generation. This trend is likely to continue simply because, as Solomon so wisely observed, people are unwilling to study and learn from the mistakes of the past.

The Watchtower Society has purposely kept its followers ignorant of much of Church history because it is well aware that the writings and ecumenical councils of the early centuries abundantly denounced their false christology. Selected phrases from such Church fathers as Tertullian, Ignatius, and others, are

16. Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), Chapters 1-6, page 110.

often cited by Watchtower publications to validate their teachings. However, these works are not made available to Jehovah's Witnesses in their entirety, due to the fact that it would be plain to see that the Arian denial of Christ's Deity was sufficiently refuted ages ago.

Jehovah's Witnesses pride themselves in being God's unique channel of communication with the world today. However, they are unaware that they are merely in company with an entire host of heretics and enemies of the cross that have gone before them in attempting to dethrone the Almighty Son of God. Though heresy is constantly changing to adapt to any particular situation, God's Word is forever consistent in its condemnation of such men as these: "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (John 5:22-23).

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