

Is Jesus God in John 1.1c?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Throughout church history, almost all biblical scholars have insisted there are two primary passages in the New Testament (NT) that identify Jesus as “God.” These are John 1.1c (“and the Word was God”) and John 20.28 (“my Lord and my God”).

In this article we will consider John 1.1c. This brief phrase has caused Christians to believe Jesus is God more than any text in the Bible. But that is because most of them don’t know biblical Greek and thus are unaware of the grammatical issues involved.

The Gospel of John begins with a prologue consisting of 18 verses. It serves as an outline for this gospel’s text, so that many of its clauses link to portions in the text.

Most modern English Bible versions translate John 1.1 as it appears in the King James Version (KJV). It reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The first problem that surfaces from this reading is that the Word being *with* God seems incongruous with the Word actually *being* God.

Traditionalists (those who believe Jesus is God) assert that this prologue calls Jesus “God” by comparing John 1.1c with v. 14. This verse says, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” referring to the man Jesus Christ. So, traditionalists reason that the Word was God, and the Word became Jesus Christ, so that Jesus Christ is God. But there are complex grammatical issues with the translation, “and the Word was God.”

First, the Greek text of John 1.1c reads *kai theos en ho logos*. It is literally translated “and god was the word” because *theos* (god) appears before *logos* (word). Because of this word order, and prior to KJV of 1611, some translators—including Wycliffe, Coverdale, Bishop, and Luther—translated John 1.1c: “and God was the w/Word(e).”

But the main grammatical problem with John 1.1c is that *theos* is anarthrous (without the article; Gr. *ho* and Eng. “the”) whereas *theos* is articular (*ton theon*, with the article) in the previous clause, in 1.1b. A noun with an article usually makes it definite, “the god/God,” whereas an anarthrous noun usually makes it indefinite, “a god.” That is why Jehovah Witnesses insist that John 1.1c should be translated “and the Word was a god.”

Due to this grammatical difficulty in John 1.1c, a few scholastic authorities treat its anarthrous *theos* as qualitative and thus render the phrase adjectively—“and the Word was divine.” But this translation seems unwarranted since, if the author wished to so describe the *logos*, he likely would have used the Greek word for divine, which is *theios*.

In the 20th century, a sharp debate arose among NT scholars about anarthrous nouns in the Greek NT, especially in John 1.1c. This debate centered on two articles published in the same prestigious theological journal, but a generation apart.

In 1933, E.C. Colwell tried to establish a Greek rule of grammar. He claimed that “a definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb.” He was attempting to support the traditional translation of John 1.1c, and traditionalists ever since have cited this “Colwell Rule.” Yet Colwell admitted that the exception to his rule was that the context could demand otherwise.

In 1973, Philip Harner wrote, “Colwell was almost entirely concerned with the question whether anarthrous predicate nouns were definite or indefinite, and he did not discuss at any length the problem of their qualitative significance.” Harner shows that when an anarthrous predicate noun precedes the verb, as in John 1.1c, it has a distinctly

qualitative force that is more prominent than its definiteness or indefiniteness. Harner concludes, “In John 1.1 I think that the qualitative force of the predicate is so prominent that the noun cannot be regarded as definite.” Thus, he renders *theos* qualitative in 1.1c.

So, according to Harner’s analysis the traditional translation of John 1.1c (“and the Word was God”) is incorrect. To date, Harner’s determinations have not been thwarted. Rather, an increasing number of scholars have endorsed his compelling argument and therefore have abandoned the traditional translation of John 1.1c.

Harner ends his article by endorsing the New English Bible (NEB) translation of John 1.1c. It reads, “and what God was, the Word was.” This means that the Word, which later became Jesus of Nazareth, was exactly like God without being God. This translation treats the anarthrous *theos* as adjectival, thus qualitative, without translating it “divine.” This rendering corresponds well with the last clause in Hebrews 1.3. It reads, “He [Jesus] is the radiance of His [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His [God’s] nature.”

Finally, this NEB translation of Jn 1.1c—“and what God was, the Word was”—links with the following sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John:

- “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10.38, cf. 30).
- “And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me” (John 12.45).
- “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14.9).
- “I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me” (John 14.11, cf. v. 20).
- “Thomas answered and said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God’” (John 20.28).

Jesus’ words in John 14.9, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father,” explain John 1.1c.

What say the scholars? Marinus de Jonge says, “The author of this Prologue clearly wants to identify ‘the Word’ and God as closely as possible without infringing the belief in the One God.” William Barclay states, “When John said *the word was God* he was not saying that Jesus was identical with God; he was saying that Jesus was so perfectly the same as God in mind, in heart, in being that in him we perfectly see what God is like.”

In my book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (2008), I devote 12 pages to a thorough examination of John 1.1c. In doing so, I cite 26 distinguished scholars and their works.