

THE TRANSLATION OF ΘΕΟΣ IN THE  
NEW WORLD TRANSLATION

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The volume chosen as the basis of this paper is the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* published in 1950 and revised May 1, 1951, by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Brooklyn. The 1961 appearance of the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*—the entire Bible—left the former edition of the New Testament essentially intact. Furthermore, the 1951 edition was selected because it contains a Foreword and appendices which shed much light on the translation.

There is no issue taken with NWT regarding the meaning of Θεός, for seldom does it mean anything other than "God." The issue arises at first glance out of the arthrous or anarthrous status of this word; but this paper shall endeavor to demonstrate that the issue arises out of a prior "preferred religious view"<sup>1</sup> on the part of the Witnesses, so that one may see that the arthrous or anarthrous status of Θεός became simply a grammatical means to a doctrinal end.

Since the position of NWT is stated so precisely in an appendix to John 1:1, the first portion of this paper will present that appendix and its significations. Thereupon will follow a discussion of the Greek article. Lastly, there will be a discussion of the more than 1,300 occurrences of Θεός and the NWT rendering of them.

Appendix to John 1:1—"a god"

The appendix to John 1:1 occupies nearly four pages of NWT.<sup>2</sup> It commences by presenting two modern English versions: *The Complete Bible* and James Moffatt's *A New Translation of the Bible*. Both render Θεός at John 1:1 "divine." Immediately following is this statement:

Every honest person will have to admit that John's saying the Word or Logos "was divine" is not saying that he was the God with whom he was. It merely tells of a certain quality about the Word or Logos, but it does not identify him as one and the same as God.<sup>3</sup>

The NWT rendering of John 1:1 bears out this testimony which "every honest person will have to admit." It runs: "Originally the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god."

1. *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1950), p. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 773-7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 773.

The effect of designating Christ “a god” is at the very least startling to the Christian reading or hearing this translation. Certainly there must be ponderous evidence for such a departure from the almost universal manner in which this verse has been rendered in the past—“and the Word was God.” The appendix is not slow to give reasons. Referring to *The Complete Bible* and to Moffatt:

The reason for their rendering the Greek word “divine,” and not “God,” is that it is the Greek noun *theos* without the definite article, hence an anarthrous *theos*. The God with whom the Word or Logos was originally is designated here by the Greek expression ὁ Θεός, *theos* preceded by the definite article *ho*, hence an articular *theos*. Careful translators recognize that the articular construction points to an identity, a personality, whereas an anarthrous construction points to a quality about someone.<sup>4</sup>

Thus NWT derives a translation principle which may be stated as follows: anarthrous Θεός equals “a god”; arthrous Θεός equals “God.” The anarthrous is qualitative; the arthrous is quantitative. An incidental criticism at this point is necessary. NWT has “a god,” clearly a quantitative rendering! The translators, to be consistent with their principle, should have followed Moffatt and *The Complete Bible*, both reading “divine.”

Next, the appendix continues by quoting the grammarians Dana and Mantey on the significance of the article with a predicate nominative. An analogous passage to John 1:1 from the *Anabasis* is given, reading: “and the place was a market.” Dana and Mantey conclude:

The article points out the subject in these examples. Neither was *the place* the only market, nor was *the word* all of God, as it would mean if the article were also used with Theos.<sup>5</sup>

One cannot but notice that NWT omitted the last sentence of Dana and Mantey’s statement, for reasons most obvious: “As it stands, the other persons of the Trinity may be implied in Θεός.”<sup>6</sup> Then NWT lightly chides these grammarians for not translating Θεός as “a god” to parallel “a market” in the *Anabasis*.

Some scholars in the past have asserted that the article before Θεός in John 1:1 is to be assumed. NWT counters:

it is presumptuous to say that such a definite article is to be understood so that the sentence should therefore be translated “and the Word was God.”<sup>7</sup>

4. *Ibid.*, p. 774.

5. *Loc. cit.*

6. H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 149.

7. *New World Translation*, p. 774.

Such a rendering, they contend, would mean that the Logos is the God with whom he is said to be, and "This is unreasonable."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the inspired writings of John and his fellow disciples indicate what the true idea is, namely that the Logos "is not God or *the* God, but is the Son of God, and hence is a god."<sup>9</sup>

The appendix concludes by acknowledging that theirs is not the first translation to render John 1:1 "a god." That honor must reside with an 1808 New Testament printed in London and based upon Archbishop Newcome's new translation.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Significance of This Rendering*

If it is simply a matter of the presence or absence of the article, then why cannot a principle be established and followed throughout the New Testament that ὁ Θεός be translated "God" and Θεός "a god"? Such is, to be sure, the clear assertion of the NWT appendix.

But the really trenchant significance of this rendering "a god" is that Jesus Christ is not "very God of very God" and the second person of the Trinity. He is merely "a god" in a pantheon of lesser divinities. The Witnesses would tell us that Jesus in his pre-human state was an angel, identifiable in the Old Testament with Michael and as such, God's Chief Executive Officer.<sup>11</sup> Yet Jesus is to be regarded as unique and worthy of obeisance, but not worship.

#### *The Greek Article*

The NWT appendix several times uses the phrase "the definite article" so as to imply that in Greek there exists in correspondence to English an "indefinite article." Such phraseology implies lack of understanding of this aspect of the Greek language, for there is no such parallel correspondence to English usage.

In his doctoral dissertation, the reviser/translator of the Blass-Debrunner Greek grammar, Robert W. Funk, presents a recent analysis of the Greek article in both classical and Hellenistic times.<sup>12</sup> By way of general comment Funk notes that there are several factors which make the article an important element in any stylistic or grammatical study. One is its high frequency. Its constant, and sometimes almost automatic, repetition tends to make it more idiomatic and more revealing of a writer's temperament and disposition; in this respect it compares closely with particles, although exceeding them, of course, in frequency.

8. *Loc. cit.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 775.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 777.

11. *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1943), p. 44, and *New Heavens and a New Earth* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1953), pp. 28-30.

12. Robert W. Funk, "The Syntax of the Greek Article: Its Importance for Critical Pauline Problems" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, 1953).

Also the article is characterized by its being a luxury of the language, but never without meaning. The Greek article is not necessary for a substantive to be definite; yet, when the article is used, definiteness is assured and a nuance is added which is not available to authors under different grammatical systems.

The article is deictic in that it points to something as does an index finger. Thus is apparent the development from the demonstrative of the ὀριστικὸν ἄρθρον, as the Greeks called it—"the defining article." But unlike the demonstrative it does not denote location in space and time. Because the article is deictic its function is twofold: (1) individual, in that the known, specific, previously recognized individual person or thing is denoted; and (2) generic, in that it refers to class or genus of persons or things.

Grammarians past and present realize the difficulty of making hard and fast rules governing the use of the article. They further agree to the flexibility of this part of speech. One must acknowledge that the article can be understood and appreciated only through diligent study of it over a long period of time. One must attempt to capture, as Walter Bauer put it, "das Stilgefühl"—the feeling of style—of the writer. From Plato to Paul the article has appeared as an integral and viable part of the language. In the Papyri and in Patristics it continued to retain its vitality. It defies constriction by narrow grammatical rules, but it also defies the charge of ambiguity. And it is with all of this in mind that one must view the rendering of NWT at John 1:1 and the definitive principle by which this rendering is defended: ὁ Θεός = "God" and Θεός = "a god."

#### Colwell's Rule

In 1933 an endeavor was made to delineate a definite rule for the use of the article. Ernest C. Colwell—then of the University of Chicago—outlined his discovery in an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* entitled "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament."<sup>13</sup> The proposed rule is, *A definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb.* [I shall abbreviate it "Colrule."]

As a result of his study of John 1:49; 5:27 and 9:5, Colwell came to the two conclusions set forth in his proposed rule. In 1:49 Nathaniel ascribes two titles to Jesus; in one of them he uses the article, but in the other he does not. Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ· σὺ βασιλεὺς τοῦ Ἰσραήλ. Why the difference? Close scrutiny revealed to Colwell that the variable quantum is not definiteness but word order. It was then necessary for him to establish this observation upon general New Testament usage.

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

As formulated by Colwell the rule relates only to constructions where the copula is actually expressed.

The task yet awaits the labor of someone to scrutinize carefully the entire New Testament in order to set forth all the data relevant to Colrule. However, of the many examples available are these. In John 19:21 the title "King of the Jews" occurs twice. The Jews demand of Pilate, "Write not 'The King of the Jews'; but that he said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" The Jewish objection was to the factual character of the superscription. They wanted it changed so as to indicate to everyone that Jesus merely claimed to be King. The former instance of this title has the article; the latter is anarthrous and *it precedes the verb*. In these passages—Matthew 27:11, 37; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3, 37; and John 18:33—"King of the Jews" appears with the article and *each time it is after the verb*. In Matthew 27:42 the same title is anarthrous and before the verb.

Two other examples from the Gospels must suffice for the present paper. The first relates to the so-called seven major "I am's" of John's Gospel. They are as follows:

- 6:35 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς.
- 8:12 Ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου.
- 10:7 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ θύρα τῶν προβάτων.
- 10:11 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός.
- 11:25 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἡ ζωή.
- 14:6 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωή.
- 15:1 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή.

All illustrate Colrule in that each has the arthrous predicate noun after the copula. Interestingly, in 9:5 John writes φῶς εἰμι τοῦ κόσμου. The anarthrous predicate noun precedes.

The other example is the Matthean explanation of the Parable of the Sower, 13:37-39. The passage contains a series of seven clauses with seven predicate nouns. The first five predicate nouns are articular and *follow* the verb while the last two, equally definite, are anarthrous and *precede* the verb.

1. ὁ σπείρων τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.
2. ὁ δὲ ἀγρός ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος.
3. τὸ δὲ καλὸν σπέρμα, οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας.
4. τὰ δὲ ζιζάνια εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ,
5. ὁ δὲ ἐχθρὸς ὁ σπείρας αὐτὰ ἐστὶν ὁ διάβολος.
6. ὁ δὲ θερισμὸς συντέλεια αἰώνος ἐστὶν,
7. οἱ δὲ θεριστὰι ἄγγελοί εἰσιν.

Whether Matthew altered the order of words for the purpose of emphasis or for variety of style we cannot be sure. Of this, however, we can be certain: the predicate nouns in the last two clauses are as definite as those preceding; the only difference is that he omitted the article when the noun preceded the copula.

Colwell discusses some fifteen apparent exceptions to his proposed rule which vary from the rule that a definite predicate noun before the verb is anarthrous.<sup>14</sup> Half are scattered throughout Luke, John, 2 Peter and the Apocalypse. In five of these there is significant manuscript evidence for omitting the article in compliance with Colrule. The other half of these exceptions occur in the Corinthian letters. Of these seven, five place the predicate noun not only before the verb but before the subject as well: for example, in I Corinthians 9:1  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\tau\omicron\ \tau\omicron\ \xi\theta\gamma\omicron\nu\ \mu\omicron\nu\ \acute{\upsilon}\mu\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\epsilon\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \chi\upsilon\tau\iota\omega$ ; Colwell suggests that this is "a stylism temporarily affected by the Apostle to the Gentiles, possibly for the sake of greater emphasis."<sup>15</sup>

That class of exceptions which omits the article after the verb contains more examples—approximately twenty-six.<sup>16</sup> Since proper names regularly omit the article in the predicate when following the verb, they are not included as exceptions. Two of these twenty-six are quotations from the Septuagint; five are substantivized adjectives. The rest have no common characteristics. Two—1 Corinthians 12:27 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3—have textual evidence giving some basis for reading in accordance with Colrule. The most notable feature in this list is the large number of exceptions in Romans.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of Colrule may be seen in at least three areas of New Testament study: grammar, text, and translation or interpretation. Future grammars will no longer merely say that predicate nouns regularly omit the article. They must say that when the copula occurs that about two-thirds of the definite predicate nouns do have the article. The following rules may be formulated tentatively:

- (1) Definite predicate nouns here regularly take the article.
- (2) The exceptions are for the most part due to a change in word order: (a) Definite predicate nouns which follow the verb (this is the usual order) usually take the article; (b) Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article; (c) Proper names regularly lack the article in the predicate; (d) Predicate nominatives in relative clauses regularly follow the verb whether or not they have the article.<sup>18</sup>

14. Luke 4:41; John 1:21; 6:51; 15:1; II Peter 1:17; Rom. 4:13; I Cor. 9:1, 2; 11:3, 25; II Cor. 1: 12; 3:2, 17; Rev. 19:8; 20:14.

15. Colwell, p. 18.

16. Matt. 20:16; Mark 4:32; 9:35; 12:28; Luke 20:33; 22:24; John 4:18; 18:13, 37; Acts 10:36; Rom. 4:11, 18; 7:13; 8:16, 29; 11:6; I Cor. 12:27; 16:15; II Cor. 5:21; 6:16; Gal. 4:31; I Thess. 4:3; I Peter 5:12; Heb. 11:1.

17. Colwell, pp. 18-19.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

In the area of textual criticism Colrule makes an equally definite contribution. "It shows in certain specific cases what the probabilities are as to the author's use or non-use of the article."<sup>19</sup> Second Peter 1:17 is a good example. Westcott and Hort, following, of course, Vaticanus, read ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητὸς μου οὗτός ἐστιν. Since the evidence set forth in Colwell's study points to the extreme rarity of this type of construction in the New Testament, Tischendorf's judgment—that the more greatly attested reading is οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητὸς μου—is to be preferred.

The area of translation or interpretation receives the greatest light from this rule. No longer can a predicate noun preceding the verb be translated as indefinite or qualitative solely because no article is present. If the context (and not necessarily just the immediate context) reveals that the predicate noun is definite, then it ought to be translated as a definite noun despite the absence of the article. Contrariwise, when a predicate noun is anarthrous following the verb, the probability that it is indefinite is very great. In summary Colwell remarks:

Loosely speaking, this study may be said to have increased the definiteness of a predicate noun before the verb without the article, and to have decreased the definiteness of a predicate noun after the verb without the article.<sup>20</sup>

John 1:1 is cited by him as one of the many verses where this rule suggests translating an anarthrous predicate noun definitely. Regarding the context Colwell states:

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.<sup>21</sup>

Colwell's proposed rule has not passed unnoticed in the intervening thirty-three years. Bruce Metzger, writing in *Theology Today* in 1953, says that NWT overlooked entirely "an established rule of Greek grammar which necessitates the rendering 'and the Word was God'."<sup>22</sup> That Metzger's opinion of Colrule remains unchanged is affirmed by a recent letter.<sup>23</sup>

In 1963, the author of Moulton's Greek grammar, Nigel Turner, alluded to Colrule. Although his remarks are on the whole pessimistic, he does admit that the rule "may reflect a general tendency."<sup>24</sup> Clearly then the last word regarding this rule remains to be uttered, and may

19. *Loc. cit.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

21. *Loc. cit.* For Thomas' confession see John 20:28.

22. Bruce M. Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today*, X (April, 1953), pp. 65-85.

23. "Though I have not made any special study of the matter in recent years, I have come across nothing that I can recall now which would lead me to change my earlier opinion of the validity of the rule formulated by Colwell." (Personal letter, October 11, 1966.)

24. Nigel Turner, *Syntax*. Vol. III of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* by James H. Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), p. 184.

never be; but the first word demands a confrontation with anarthrous nouns which may very well be very definite.

#### The Occurrences of Θεός in the New Testament

Having received impetus from NWT's appendix which attempted to justify "a god" for Θεός I observed every occurrence of ὁ θεός, θεός in the New Testament. Using Moulton and Geden's *Concordance to the Greek Testament* the 1,300 plus occurrences were checked against the Nestle text, and when a variant regarding the article existed, against the Westcott and Hort text—the basic text underlying NWT.

In a table each instance of ὁ θεός, θεός was recorded along with the NWT rendering of it. The results clearly indicate the inconsistency of the translators and markedly point up the arbitrariness with which they manipulated the text at John 1:1. Throughout the New Testament the arthrous Θεός far exceeds the anarthrous, and of 282 occurrences of the anarthrous Θεός NWT sixteen times has either "a god, god, gods, or godly." The translators were, therefore only 6% faithful to their canons enunciated in the appendix to John 1:1—i.e. Θεός = a god and ὁ Θεός = God. On the other hand they were 94% unfaithful.

The first paragraph of John, 1:1-18, furnishes a lucid example of NWT's arbitrary dogmatism. The Greek word for "God" occurs eight times, in verses 1, 2, 6, 12, 13, 18, and has the article but two times, verses 1 and 2. Yet NWT reads "God" six times. Of these, four are *anarthrous* and two arthrous. And in verse 18 NWT reads "the . . . god" where there is *no* article in Greek. Such examples can be adduced in great abundance throughout NWT.

#### Conclusion

That NWT has certain praiseworthy features—for example, an *apparatus criticus*—everyone must admit. That NWT is perhaps the first entire translation of the New Testament by any of the cults is significant. But that it has chosen to translate John 1:1 "a god" is most unfortunate for several reasons: (1) It shows ignorance of a particular nuance of the Greek language; (2) The translators have established a principle regarding the article to which they themselves have been unfaithful 94% of the time; and (3) The "preferred religious view" of an Arian-type cult has influenced the rendering of a very important passage. The "Foreword" of NWT disclaims any prejudice or bias for its translation. All other translations are written off as having been influenced by "religious traditions, hoary with age."<sup>25</sup> The reader, I suggest, must be the judge.

Is Colrule absolute? No. Much work remains to further establish and explicate it. In view of available data, however, one must concur with Colwell when he says that "And the Word was God" may not be regarded as strange in a Gospel that concludes with Thomas' exclamation in 20:28, ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου.<sup>26</sup>

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25. *New World Translation*, p. 6.

26. Colwell, *op. cit.*, p. 21.