

Getting to know the Bible:

Should John 1:1 be translated as “the Word became a god” as Jehovah Witnesses and Muslims claim?

The claim the Jesus was and is God is the greatest and most unique claim of the Bible, setting the Christian faith apart from all other religions and worldviews. However, many people who respect Jesus, including Jehovah Witnesses (JWs) and Muslims, believe that Jesus was not God, and that the Bible never said that He was.

One of the central passages to the debate is John 1:1 where JWs and Muslims claim that the translation should be “the Word [understood as Jesus in the context] was a god” as opposed to “the God” or just “God,” suggesting that Jesus was not God himself but somehow less.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
John 1:1, NIV, NASB, ESV, KJV.

The main reason for their argument is that, in the original language, the word used for “God” (*theos*) does not have an article before it (*tos theos*, *tos* is the article), meaning the word is not talking about *the* God, but a lesser god or divine man. Thus the passage it is not saying that Jesus is God in the full Christian sense.

However, this is a very poor argument. Consider the following:

1. In the New Testament, “God” is used 282 without the article. In the JW Bible (the New World Translation), the JWs translate it is “god” (not in reference to *the* God) only 16 times! That means they were only faithful to their own translation principle six percent of the times.¹

This is seen even in the NWT in John 1:1-18. The highlighted words below are all *theos* without an article. Only **once** does the NWT translate it as “a god”- in verse 1.

1 In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god. 2 This one was in [the] beginning with God. 3 All things came into existence through him, and apart from him not even one thing came into existence. 4 What has come into existence by means of him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light is shining in the darkness, but the darkness has not overpowered it. 6 There arose a man that was sent forth as a representative of God: his name was John. 7 This [man] came for a witness, in order to bear witness about the light, that people of all sorts might believe through him. 8 He was not that light, but he was meant to bear witness about that light. 9 The true light that gives light to every sort of man was about to come into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into existence through him, but the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own home, but his own people did not take him in. 12 However, as many as did receive him, to them he gave authority to become God's children, because they were exercising faith in his name; 13 and they were born, not from blood or from a fleshly will or from man's will, but from God. 14 So the Word became flesh and resided among us, and we had a view of his glory, a glory such as belongs to an only-begotten son from a father; and he was full of undeserved kindness and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, yes, he actually cried out—this was the one who said [it]—saying: “The one coming behind me has advanced in front of me, because he existed before me.”) 16 For we all received from out of his fullness, even undeserved kindness upon undeserved kindness. 17 Because the Law was given through Moses, the undeserved kindness and the truth came to be through Jesus Christ. 18 No man has seen God at any time; the only-begotten god who is in the bosom [position] with the Father is the one that has explained him.

John 1:1-18, New World Translation²

¹ R.H. Countess, *The Jehovah's Witnesses' New Testament: A Critical Analysis of the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982), 54-55. As cited in Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 267.

2. The indefinite translation (“a god”) of a word without an article that occurs before a verb (that’s the Greek construction here) is “most poorly attested” in the Greek language. In fact, according to one study, if this should be understood in an indefinite way, this would be the only place in the NT where this would occur.³

Why, then, did John not use an article to make his statement clear? Why didn’t he just say “the God” (*tos theos*)?

In actuality, John was very smart and distinct. In the first part of v.1, “the God” is used of God the Father. If John had said “the Word was *the* God,” then John would be espousing another heresy, that Jesus was the Father. This is a view known as modalism, where there is only one God but he changes his personhood: God transforms himself from Father to Son first, and then from Son to Spirit. What John wants to say, and what the rest of the Bible will affirm, is that Jesus is distinct from God the Father (“He was with God”), and yet is fully God in essence (“He was God,” without an article). Grammatically speaking, this way of using *theos* is considered a qualitative usage.⁴

Thus, in conclusion, we can say that John 1:1 can be confidently understood as making a revolutionary statement: that Jesus was and is fully God.

² <http://www.watchtower.org/e/bible/index.htm>, December 2, 2006

³ Wallace, 267.

⁴ Wallace, 269. See Wallace for a further discussion of qualitative usages.