

JD

A GROSSLY MISLEADING TRANSLATION

John 1: 1, which reads "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God", is shockingly mistranslated, "Originally the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god," in a New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures, published under the auspices of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Since my name is used and our Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament is quoted on page 744 to seek to justify their translation I am making this statement.

The translation suggested in our Grammar for the disputed passage is, "the Word was deity." Moffatt's rendering is "the Word was divine." William's translation is, "the Word was God Himself." Each translation reflects the dominant idea in the Greek. For, whenever an article does not precede a noun in Greek, that noun can either be considered as emphasizing the character, nature, essence or quality of a person or thing, as theos (God) does in John 1: 1, or it can be translated in certain contexts as indefinite, as they have done. But of all the scholars in the world, as far as we know, none have translated this verse as Jehovah's Witnesses have.

If the Greek article occurred with both Word and God in John 1: 1 the implication would be that they are one and the same person, absolutely identical. But John affirmed that "the Word was with (the) God" (the definite article preceding each noun), and in so writing he indicated his belief that they are distinct and separate personalities. Then John next stated that the Word was God, i.e., of the same family or essence that characterizes the Creator. Or, in other words, that both are of the same nature, and that nature is the highest in existence, namely divine.

Examples where the noun in the predicate does not have an article, as in the above verse, are: John 4: 24, "God is spirit". (not a spirit); I John 4: 16, "God is love", (not a love); I John 1: 5, "God is light", (not a light); and Matthew 13: 39, "the reapers are angels," i.e. they are the type of beings known as angels. In each instance the noun in the predicate was used to describe some quality or characteristic of the subject, whether as to nature or type.

The apostle John in the context of the introduction to his gospel is pulling all the stops out of language to portray not only the deity of Christ but also His equality with the Father. He states that the Word was in the beginning, that He was with God, that He was God and that all creation came into existence through Him and that not even one thing exists which was not created by Christ. What else could be said that John did not say? In John 1: 18 he explained that Christ had been so intimate with the Father that He was in His bosom and that He came to earth to exhibit or portray God. But if we had no other statement from John except that which is found in John 14: 9, "He that has seen me has seen the Father," that would be enough to satisfy the seeking soul that Christ and God are the same in essence and that both are divine and equal in nature.

Besides, the whole tenor of New Testament revelation points in this direction. Compare Paul's declaration in Colossians 1: 19, for instance: "that all the divine fullness should dwell in Him," or the statement in Hebrews 1: 3, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the perfect representation of His being, and continues to uphold the universe by His mighty word." (Williams translation). And note the sweeping, cosmic claim recorded in Matthe 28: 19, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth."

And, if we contrast with that the belittling implication that Christ was only a god, do we not at once detect the discord? Does not such a conception conflict with the New Testament message both in whole and in part? Why, if John, in the midst of the idolatry of his day, had made such a statement would not the first century hearers and readers have gotten a totally inadequate picture of Christ, who we believe, is the Creator of the universe and the only Redeemer of humanity?

Julius Robert Mantey, A.B., Thd.D., Ph.D., D.D.  
Professor of Greek and New Testament  
Northern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Chicago, Illinois