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## The Apologists Bible Commentary

# John 1

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1

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

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**C** With the possible exception of Genesis 1:1, this verse is the most striking opening of any book of the Bible. Often missed in the various discussions about what John means by this elegant and deceptively simple sentence, is the fact that this verse is *poetic*. Many commentators have noted the poetic form of the first 18 verses of John's Gospel - the so-called "Prologue." Some see in the Prologue an early Christian hymn; others argue against that view. But few, if any, deny that John is writing beautiful, rhythmic prose. John captures our attention with both style and content. He wants to create questions in the minds of his readers - questions that his Gospel will answer in full measure. If this verse is poetic in nature, and if the writer intends to arrest his audience - to grab their attention from the outset with a striking and consciously enigmatic statement - is it little wonder that so much has been written about the ultimate meaning of this verse, and the final clause in particular?

**o** The opening phrase, "In the beginning," is an allusion to Genesis 1:1. The same phrase in Greek appears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which John and his audience would have been intimately familiar. But whereas Genesis opens with "In the beginning *God*," John opens with "In the beginning *was the Word*." In the place where "God" occurs in Genesis, John substitutes "was the Word" in his Gospel. This juxtaposition of God and the Word - the interplay between the Word with God and the Word *as* God - is one of the primary themes of the Prologue, and the Gospel as a whole. From the outset, John challenges his audience by introducing the Word - the Son of God - into places and activities where they would have expected God to be. The Word never *replaces* God, however, but rather is always there beside Him.

**m** The "beginning" is the beginning in Genesis - the first act of creation, when God made the heavens and the earth. There is little evidence that Jews in the Second Temple period held a common belief in an undefined period prior to the creation in Genesis, during which God created things other than the heavens and the earth. John's audience would have understood his meaning quite easily, though it would have surprised and intrigued them: In the beginning, before all creation, the Word already existed. The Greek word translated

"was" signifies continual existence (see Grammatical Analysis, below). There is no more hint here of the creation of the Word than there is of the creation of God.

The Greek for "Word" is **LOGOS**. Much speculation has surrounded John's source for this term. Many have suggested Philo as a likely source. However, recent scholarship has focused more on Jewish Wisdom tradition, which spoke of God's Word in a metaphoric sense as having personal attributes. The discovery of a native Jewish origin for **LOGOS** has caused most scholars to abandon the notion that John's Gospel represents an early Gnostic text (championed by Bauer and others). If John's audience was familiar with the use of **LOGOS** as a personified attribute of God, it must be asked whether they would consider John's **LOGOS** to be a separate being, or still in some way a "part" of God - either literally or still an exaggerated personification. It is impossible to tell with certainty, of course, but it seems likely that their prior understanding of the term would lead them to consider the **LOGOS** primarily a "part" of God, though in what sense, they could only wait for John to explain. This seems particularly likely, given that the Wisdom tradition was also poetic in nature. Thus, John audience would have understood that in the Beginning, God has with Him His creative Word - the Word by which He spoke the universe into existence. They would, at this point, perhaps have more readily thought of the Word as yet another poetic personification of an attribute of God; it is unlikely they would have assumed that the Word that was intimately with God was another god, a secondary created being, whose creation appears nowhere in this passage, and whose existence stretches back before the beginning of creation.

"The Word was with God." The personal distinction between God and the Word is clearly expressed. The words "Word" and "God" in the Greek are both preceded by the article, specifying a personal reference. This phrase presents significant difficulties to [Modalists](#). The word behind "with" denotes an intimate, personal relationship. It might almost be translated "toward," an idea echoed in verse 18, where Son is said to be "in the bosom of the Father." John's audience would now be confronted with a clear statement that the **LOGOS** is more than a mere personification of a divine attribute: The **LOGOS** is a personal being, just as the Father is.

"And the Word was God." Here we have what are certainly the most widely discussed five words in the Bible. Is John here declaring that the Word is God the Father? A secondary, lesser god? Or One who possesses Deity in the same measure as the Father, but is also distinct from the Father? The word "LOGOS" is, again, preceded by the article. But the word "God" is not. While Greek possesses the definite article ("the"), it does not have an indefinite article ("a, an"). In Greek, the absence of the article usually signifies indefiniteness; however the grammar here makes that unlikely (see Grammatical Analysis, below). Definiteness is also a possibility, and indeed, many commentators and some grammarians see "God" here as a definite noun. There is a third option: Qualitative. Qualitative nouns occur in sentences like John 1:1c throughout the NT. They signify neither definiteness ("the God"), nor indefiniteness ("a god"), but rather attribute all the qualities or attributes of the noun to the subject of the sentence. If "God" is qualitative, here, it means that all the attributes or qualities of God - the same God mentioned in the previous clause - belong to the Son.

Consider the sentence: "*Homo Erectus* was Man." Here "Man" is neither definite ("the Man") nor indefinite ("a man"), but rather qualitative. If I made this statement to an evolutionist, I would be asserting that our ancient ancestor possessed all the qualities or attributes of humanity. I am saying he is truly human. Similarly, John is saying that the **LOGOS** is truly God - not the same Person mentioned in the previous clause - but possessing the same attributes or qualities.

The majority of grammarians who have written on this subject view "God" in 1:1c as qualitative, though some older grammarians did not use this term. Some grammarians and most commentators regard "God" in 1:1c as definite, though their interpretations of this verse are much the same as those who see it as qualitative. Ultimately, grammar and context must determine John's intention, and both, it will be argued below, point conclusively to this verse being accurately paraphrased as follows:

**"In the beginning of all creation, the Word was already in existence. The Word was intimately with God. And the Word was as to His essence, fully God."**

"In the beginning" recalls the opening words of Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The expression does not refer to a particular moment of time but assumes a timeless eternity. "Word" is the Greek *logos*, which has several meanings. Ordinarily it refers to a spoken word, with emphasis on the meaning conveyed, not just the sound. *Logos*, therefore, is an expression of personality in communication. Scripture also tells us that it is creative in its power: "By the word [*logos*, LXX] of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps 33:6). This verse clearly implies that the expression of God had creative power and called the universe into being. To the Hebrew "the word of God" was the self-assertion of the divine personality; to the Greek the formula denoted the rational mind that ruled the universe. John is asserting that the "Word" is the source of all that is visible and antedates the totality of the material world.

The use of *logos* implies that John was endeavoring to bring out the full significance of the Incarnation to the Gentile world as well as to the Jewish people. He does not adopt the Greek concept in its entirety, but he uses this term to indicate that Jesus had universal rather than local significance and that he spoke with ultimate authority. He was preexistent, involved in the act of creation, and therefore superior to all created beings. This presentation lifts Christ above the materialistic, pagan concept of deities just as the Incarnation brings the Hebrew concept of God into everyday life.

The preposition "with" in the phrase "the Word was with God" indicates both equality and distinction of identity along with association. The phrase can be rendered "face to face with." It may, therefore, imply personality, coexistence with the Creator, and yet be an expression of his creative being. The position of the noun *God* in the Greek text marks it as a predicate, stressing description rather than individualization. The "Word" was deity, one with God, rather than "a god" or another being of the same class. This is the real meaning of the phrase. Unity of nature rather than similarity or likeness is implied. The external coexistence and unity of the Word with God is unmistakably asserted (EBC).

**In the beginning**—the beginning before all beginnings, prior to the beginning of Genesis 1:1. The phrase could be rendered "from all eternity." The expression in Greek "characterizes Christ as preexistent, thus defining the nature of his person" (Dana and Mantey). was the Word—Greek, *ho logos*, signifying primarily "the Expression"—God expressed, God explained, God defined (see 1:18). The Greek term *logos* in philosophical terminology also denoted the principle of the universe, even the creative energy that generated the universe (Morris). Thus, Christ as the *Logos* is the agent of and the personal expression of the Creator God. **the Word was with God**—The preposition translated "with" is *pros*. In Koine Greek *pros* (short for *prosôpon pros prosôpon*, "face to face") was used to show intimacy in personal relationships (see Matt. 13:56; 26:18; Mark 6:3; 14:49; 1 Cor. 13:12; 6:10; 2 Cor. 5:8; Gal. 1:18). Thus, for John to say "the Word was with God" was for him to mean "the Word was face to face with God" (see Williams's translation) or "the Word was having intimate fellowship with God." This speaks of the preincarnate Son's relationship with the Father prior to creation—in fact, prior to everything (see 1:18; 17:5, 24). **the Word was God**—The Greek clause underlying this clause stipulates, according to a rule of grammar, that "the Word" is the subject and "God" is the predicate nominative. Another particularity of the Greek is that the article is often used for defining individual identity and often absent in ascribing quality or character. In the previous clause ("the Word was with God"), there is an article before "God" (*ton theon*), thus pointing to God the Father; in this clause, there is no article before "God." The distinction, though a fine one, seems to be intended. In the previous clause, John indicates that the Son was with God, the Father; in this clause, John indicates that the Son was himself God (or should we say, deity) but not the God (i.e., God the Father). Therefore, some translators have attempted to bring out these distinctions by rendering the last clause as follows: "and what God was the Word was" (NEB) or "and he was the same as God" (TEV). Thus, we see that John presents the Word as being eternal, as being with God (the Father), and as being himself God (or, deity). This is the One who became flesh and dwelt among men on earth (JFB).

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εν αρχη ην ο λογος, και ο λογος ην προς τον θεον, και θεος ην ο λογος.

EN ARCHÊ ÊN HO LOGOS, KAI HO LOGOS ÊN PROS TON THEON, KAI THEOS ÊN HO LOGOS.

In [the] beginning was the Word, and the Word was with (the) God, and the Word was God.

## ARCHÊ

- Beginning, origin in the abs[olute] sense ([BAGD](#)).
- 1 John has the phrases "that which was from the beginning" (1:1) and "he who was from the beginning" (2:13-14) for the Logos who has become perceptible to the disciples but is eternally preexistent, since it is God himself who here gives himself to us. "In the beginning" in Jn. 1:1 says this specifically of the Logos; the Logos is before all time, so that no temporal statements can be made about him. Eternal preexistence is plainly implied ([TDNT](#)).

ÊN ("was") is the indicative imperfect active form of the verb EIMI, signifying continuous or linear existence in past time. The contextual contrast is between ÊN and EGENETO ("to become"), the continuous preexistence of the LOGOS (v. 1) and the LOGOS becoming flesh at a specific point in time (v. 14). "In the beginning, the LOGOS already was."

*The preexistence of the Word is strongly brought out by the phrase εν αρχη ην ὁ λογος (en arche en ho logos, "in the beginning was the word"). Αρχη (arche) according to H. Bietenhard "is an important term in Gk. philosophy," which means, among other things, "starting point, original beginning" (DNTT, 1:164). By itself, this may not seem too significant, for few would debate that we are dealing with the "original beginning." It is the presence of the verb ην (en, "was") that brings out the importance of this phrase. Literally, it could and should be rendered "When the beginning began, the Word was already there." This is the sense of en which is in the imperfect tense and implies continuing existence in the past. So before the beginning began, the Word was already in existence. This is tantamount to saying that the Word predates time or Creation ([EBC](#)).*

## PROS

- with the acc[usative] of a person, after verbs of remaining, dwelling, tarrying, etc. (which require one to be conceived of as always turned towards one)...after EIMI...Jn i.1 ([Thayer](#)).
- be (in company) with someone...J 1:1f ([BAGD](#)).
- a marker of association, often with the implication of interrelationships...'the Word was with God' Jn 1:1 ([Louw & Nida](#))

Some commentators, such as JFB, above, see PROS in this verse as shorthand for the idiomatic expression PROSÔPON PROS PROSÔPON (literally "face to face", [RWP](#), cf., [Moulton](#)). This seems view is given weight by the context, in which the Son is said to be "in the bosom of the Father" (v. 18), and thus in the ideal position to declare the Father to the world.

TON THEON, literally "the God," is in the accusative case, which makes this the direct object of the second clause (hO LOGOS is in the nominative, and is thus the subject). There is no difference in meaning between THEON here and THEOS in the next clause; they are the same word in different cases. The article TON (accusative form of hO) indicates a personal distinction. As Karl Rahner and others have noted, the [articular](#) form of THEOS in the New Testament usually refers to the Father ([Rahner](#), p. 146; [Harris, Jesus](#), p. 47). Thus, saying "the Word was with (the) God" is the same as saying "the Word was with the Father."

THEOS ÊN HO LOGOS. The first task of the translator faced with this clause is to determine the subject. In most sentences or clauses (such as John 1:1b), the noun in the nominative case is the subject. The noun in the accusative case is the direct object. However, in Greek, "copulative" verbs (generally a form of "to be" or "to become") take the nominative case, not the accusative. Technically, a copulative verb does not ascribe an action, but predicates something about the subject. The "object" of a copulative verb, therefore, is called the "[Predicate Nominative](#) (PN)," not the direct object. As we have seen, ÊN is a form of the verb "to be." Therefore, both THEOS and LOGOS are in the nominative case - one is the subject and the other

the PN. In such cases, if one noun has the article and the other does not, the noun with the article is the subject (see [Dana and Mantey](#), p. 148; [McGaughy](#), p. 50; etc.). Thus, **hO LOGOS** is the subject of the sentence; **THEOS** is the PN. "The Word was God," not "God was the Word." While the latter is not impossible from the standpoint of pure grammar, [McGaughy's](#) study makes it highly unlikely.

So, John is telling us something about the **LOGOS** - that He is **THEOS**. The \$64,000 question, then, is what does John mean by this? Since **THEOS** is [anarthrous](#), does he mean that the Word was "a god" (indefinite)? Or does he mean that the Word is God (definite)? Or does he mean that the Word has all the qualities and attributes of God (qualitative)? To answer this essential question, we will need to review how several prominent grammarians have viewed this issue.

### Pre-Colwell

Before E.C. Colwell wrote his landmark study (see below), many scholars viewed **THEOS** in John 1:1c as qualitative:

- "It is necessarily without the article (θεος not ὁ θεος) inasmuch as it describes the nature of the Word and does not identify His Person. It would be pure [Sebellianism](#) to say 'the Word was ο θεος' (Westcott).
- " ὁ θεος ην ὁ λογος (convertible terms) would have been pure Sabellianism.... The absence of the article here is on purpose and essential to the true idea" (Robertson, *Grammar*, pp. 767-768).
- "Θεος ην ὁ λογος emphasizes Christ's participation in the essence of the divine nature" ([Dana and Mantey](#), p. 140).
- "Θεος without the article signifies divine essence, or the generic idea of God in distinction from man and angel; as σαρξ, ver. 14, signifies the human essence or nature of the Logos" (Lange)
- "Θεος sine artic. essentialiter, cum artic. personaliter" (Chemnitz).
- "Θεος must then be taken as implying God, in substance and essence, not ὁ θεος 'the Father,' in Person....as in σαρξ εγενετο [John 1:14], σαρξ expresses that state into which the Divine Word entered by a definite act, so in θεος ην, θεος expresses that essence which was His - that He was very God. So that this verse might be connected thus: the Logos was from eternity, - was with God (the Father), - and was Himself God" (Alford).

It is important to note that these scholars did not use the term "qualitative" to describe their view of **THEOS** in John 1:1c. Prior to Phillip B. Harner's study of qualitative anarthrous predicate nouns (see below), "qualitative" nouns were viewed more or less as indefinite nouns. These scholars would probably have described **THEOS** as definite, but not as a convertible term with **hO THEOS** in John 1:1b. Indeed, Julius Mantey, in his famous letter to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, cites Colwell's study as 'proving' that **THEOS** in 1:1c is definite, though it is clear from what he wrote in his Manual Grammar several years before that by this he does not see definiteness as requiring convertibility. Convertible terms are 100% equivalent, such as "Jesus" and "Son of God" in this sentence: "Jesus is the Son of God." We can reverse the terms without changing the meaning: "The Son of God is Jesus." If **THEOS** in 1:1c is convertible with **hO LOGOS**, John would be teaching that the **LOGOS** is 100% equivalent to the **hO THEOS** of 1:1b, which would be conducive to some form of [Modalism](#).<sup>1</sup>

These scholars all argue that the anarthrous PN preceding the copulative verb stresses the nature of **THEOS**. As we will see, this is precisely the way later scholars described a "qualitative" noun - one that stresses the qualities, attributes, or nature of the noun.

### Colwell's Rule

In 1933, E.C. Colwell published his now famous [study](#) of the use of the article with PNs occurring both before and after the verb. Colwell began by identifying a number of PNs that he believed were definite by virtue of the context. He then performed a statistical analysis of their occurrence - either before or after the verb - and with the article or without. He found that 87% of definite PNs before the verb occurred without

the article. He "tentatively" offers a rule that, in part, stipulates: "Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article" ([Colwell](#), p. 20). Colwell reasons:

But it is in the realm of translation and interpretation that the data presented here have their most valuable application. They show that a predicate 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 ([IBID](#), p. 20).

Thus, Colwell's study indicates that **THEOS** in John 1:1c should not be translated as an indefinite noun *solely* on the basis of the absence of the article. Colwell, like most grammarians prior to Harner (see below), considered "qualitative" nouns to be more or less equivalent to indefinite nouns. Recall, though, that Colwell studied only nouns that he had identified as definite based on the context - he did not study all nouns in the New Testament. Thus, some scholars have questioned Colwell's further application of his rule:

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.

The opening verse of John's Gospel contains one of the many passages where this rule suggests the translation of a predicate as a definite noun.  $\text{Καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος}$  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. 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 ([IBID](#), p. 21).

Based on his data gathered from known definite nouns, Colwell extrapolated that more or less the same statistical balance would prove true with nouns that were exegetically questionable. As we shall see below, subsequent studies have called this extrapolation into question, particularly those that emphasize qualitiveness as a semantic force independent of definiteness or indefiniteness.

At the same time, the vast majority of commentators (e.g., [Carson](#)) and some grammarians (e.g., Metzger) have accepted Colwell's conclusions regarding John 1:1, as has at least one major study (see Lane McGaughey, below). As with their earlier counterparts, these more recent scholars do not perceive definiteness as requiring convertibility, but rather emphasize that the nature of **THEOS** is ascribed to the Word: "The 'Word does not Himself make up the entire Godhead; nevertheless the divinity that belongs to the rest of the Godhead belongs also to Him'" (Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 45, quoted in [Carson](#), p. 117). They are thus not far semantically or exegetically from those who argue for a qualitative or qualitative-definite semantic force for **THEOS** in 1:1c.

### **Maximilian Zerwick**

Zerwick's introductory [grammar](#) first appeared in Latin in 1944. A revised and expanded edition was published in 1960, and an English translation with further additions followed three years later. Zerwick admits that Colwell has presented "not a few persuasive examples" that definite nouns preceding the verb usually appear without the article, but he cautions: "[Colwell's] theory has its appeal, but it is not easy to admit that the reason for this use of the article it to be found in a circumstance (order of words) which seems to belong to an altogether different category" ([Zerwick](#), p. 56), Zerwick echoes other grammarians in viewing nouns without the article as being primarily qualitative:

The **omission** of the article shows that the speaker regards the person or thing not so much as this or that person or thing, but rather as *such* a person or thing, i.e. regards not the individual but rather nature or quality. ([Zerwick](#), p. 55, emphasis in original).

Zerwick conflates qualitative and indefinite nouns into a single category and places **THEOS** in John 1:1c in that category:

for in the nature of things, the predicate commonly refers not to an individual or individuals as such, but to the class to which the subject belongs, to the nature or quality predicated of the subject; e.g. Jo 1,1 και θεος ην ὁ λογος, which attributes to the Word the divine nature ( ὁ θεος εν ὁ λογος, at least in NT usage, would signify personal identity of the Word with the Father, since the latter is ὁ θεος ) ([IBID](#)).

In fact, this one mention of "class" is the only time Zerwick may be inferred to understand indefiniteness to be present in an [anarthrous](#) noun at all. His entire discussion of the non-use of the article centers on the qualitative aspects ascribed to the subject. Thus, for Zerwick, nouns are either definite or qualitative, and membership in a class is secondary to the attributes, characteristics, or qualities ascribed to the subject when the author omits the article.

### **Blass, Debrunner, and Funk**

The Blass and Debrunner grammar, translated and revised by Robert Funk, generally endorses Colwell's study, but notes: "[Colwell] deals only with sentences in which the verb appears and only with nouns that are unambiguously definite" ([BDF](#), p. 143). The latter point will be developed in greater detail by Dixon (see below) with regard to the application of Colwell's Rule and John 1:1c. Blass and Debrunner have little to say about predicate nouns that lack the article, but in reference to Mark 7:15 remark: "the idea which runs through the whole discourse is that there really is something which produces this effect, and this given category is now referred to a particular subject" ([IBID](#)). Thus, it may be inferred that Blass and Debrunner view [anarthrous](#) nouns in much the same way as Zerwick, primarily ascribing qualities or characteristics to the subject rather than membership in a class (the category itself is "referred" to the subject - the subject is not said to be placed *in* the category).

### **Lane McGaughey**

McGaughey's published [dissertation](#) on the use of the Greek verb **EINAI** ("to be") has been widely recognized for its thoroughness. McGaughey examines Colwell's statistics and finds several of the "exceptions" to his rule that Colwell noted are, in fact, not exceptions at all. Thus several scholars have recognized McGaughey as supporting Colwell's conclusion that **THEOS** in John 1:1c is definite (e.g., [Carson](#), p. 137) or has even given it greater weight (e.g., [Grudem](#), p. 234, n. 12). McGaughey says that John 1:1 "should be translated 'And the Word was God' rather than 'And the Word was divine'" ([McGaughey](#), p. 77). He cites Zerwick approvingly: "A noun preceding the verb and lacking the article should not be regarded as 'qualitative' on the mere grounds of the absence of the article" ([IBID](#)). Interestingly, McGaughey has not, to my knowledge, addressed Harner's article (which appeared one year after McGaughey's study), which distinguishes between a qualitative meaning and the weaker adjectival "divine" that McGaughey argues against.

### **Phillip B. Harner**

The impact of Phillip B. Harner's [study](#) of qualitative anarthrous predicate nouns on the interpretation of John 1:1 cannot be overemphasized. Harner noted that "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](#), p. 76). Again, Colwell, like most older grammarians, saw qualitative nouns as more or less the same as indefinite nouns.

Harner argues that qualitiveness should be considered a semantic force in its own right:

This study will suggest that anarthrous predicate nouns preceding the verb may function primarily to express the nature or character of the subject, and this qualitative significance may be more important than the question whether the predicate noun itself should be regarded as definite or indefinite ([IBID](#), p. 75).

Harner says that qualitiveness may coexist with either a definite or indefinite semantic force. Though not explicitly stated, a close reading also indicates that he believed qualitiveness may exist by itself. When considering Mark 12:35, Harner says, "the predicate noun could be interpreted as definite, indefinite, or qualitative, depending on the particular meaning or emphasis which we understand the passage to have" ([IBID](#), p. 79).

Harner found that 80% of anarthrous pre-verbal PNs in Mark and John are qualitative and 20% are definite. None are exclusively indefinite, which supports Colwell's conclusion as well. Harner notes that some qualitative nouns, such as **HAMARTÔLOS** ("sinner") in John 8:31, though best translated with the indefinite article due to English idiom, should actually be considered qualitative:

Again the qualitative aspect of the predicate is most prominent; they [the Jews] think that Jesus has the nature or character of one who is "sinner." There is no basis for regarding the predicate as definite, although in this instance we would probably use the indefinite article in English translation ([IBID](#), p. 83).

Harner stresses that when considering whether a pre-verbal predicate noun is definite, indefinite, or qualitative, it is important to consider how the writer might have expressed his intentions using another, and possibly less ambiguous, syntax as well as what he actually wrote. Thus, with John 1:1c, Harner notes the following possibilities:

- A. hO LOGOS ÊN hO THEOS
- B. THEOS ÊN hO LOGOS
- C. hO LOGOS THEOS ÊN
- D. hO LOGOS ÊN THEOS
- E. hO LOGOS ÊN THEIOS

Clause A, with an [arthrous](#) predicate, would mean that *logos* and *theos* are equivalent and interchangeable. There would be no *ho theos* which is not also *ho logos*. But this equation of the two would contradict the preceding clause of 1:1, in which John writes that ὁ λογος ην προς τον θεον. This clause suggests relationship, and thus some form of "personal" differentiation, between the two ([IBID](#), p. 84-85).

So, Harner, in agreement with Robertson, Dana & Mantey, and most other scholars cited above, notes that if both **THEOS** and **LOGOS** were articular, the two terms would be convertible. Since John did not use this syntax, his intended meaning must be something else. Harner continues:

Clause D, with the verb preceding an anarthrous predicate, would probably mean that the *logos* was "a god" or a divine being of some kind, belonging to the general category of *theos* but as a distinct being from *ho theos*. Clause E would be an attenuated form of D. It would mean that the *logos* was "divine," without specifying further in what way or to what extent it was divine. It could also imply that the *logos*, being only *theios*, was subordinate to *theos* ([IBID](#)).

Thus, Harner notes that had John wished to express the idea that the **LOGOS** was "a god," or a divine being distinct from **hO THEOS**, he had at least two unambiguous ways of doing so. Since he did not, we may conclude that John in all likelihood chose the syntax he did because he wished to express something else with regard to the **LOGOS**.



Clauses B and C, with an anarthrous predicate preceding the verb, are primarily qualitative in meaning. They indicate that the *logos* has the nature of *theos*. There is no basis for regarding the predicate *theos* as definite. This would make B and C equivalent to A, and like A they would then contradict the preceding clause of 1:1 ([IBID](#)).

Note here that Harner equates a definite semantic force in a pre-verbal PN without the article to an articular noun. He sees both forms as examples of a convertible proposition. This is the major point of contention between scholars who regard **THEOS** in 1:1c as definite as opposed to those who see it as qualitative. Scholars on both sides interpret this clause in more or less the same way, as Harner himself notes: "In many cases their [commentators'] interpretations agree with the explanation that is given above" ([IBID](#)). Those who agree with Harner reject a definite force because they view it as semantically the same as a convertible proposition, which would present problems with regard to the previous clause (1:1b). Those who view **THEOS** as definite believe the absence of the article precludes the possibility of convertibility. Yet both generally agree that the meaning of 1:1c is as Harner himself translates it: "The Word had the same nature as God" ([IBID](#), p. 87).

Harner continues:

As John has just spoken in terms of relationship and differentiation between *ho logos* and *ho theos*, he would imply in B or C that they share the same nature as belonging to the reality *theos*. Clauses B and C are identical in meaning but differ slightly in emphasis. C would mean that the *logos* (rather than something else) had the nature of *theos*. B means that the *logos* had the nature of *theos* (rather than something else). In this clause, the form that John actually uses, the word *theos* is placed at the beginning for emphasis ([IBID](#), p. 85).

Thus, Harner says that not only is John attributing the nature of **THEOS** to the **LOGOS**, but emphasizes that nature by placing **THEOS** at the head of the clause. The emphasis of **THEOS** would seem unaccountable if John intended an indefinite nuance, but is perfectly understandable if **THEOS** is qualitative, signifying that the Son's nature is that of God.

### **Paul Dixon**

Dixon's [study](#) is the first of several to challenge the popular application of Colwell's rule. Dixon notes that Colwell's data begins with definite PNs and demonstrates that these usually lack the article. However, those using the rule to "prove" that **THEOS** in John 1:1c is definite (including Colwell himself!) are not actually citing Colwell's rule, but it's converse:

The rule does not say: an [anarthrous](#) predicate nominative which precedes the verb is definite. This is the converse of Colwell's rule and as such is not a valid inference....from the statement "Definite predicate nominatives preceding the verb are anarthrous," it is not valid to infer "Anarthrous predicate nominatives preceding the verb are definite" ([Dixon](#), pp. 11-12).

Colwell himself affirmed that the converse of the rule was as valid as the rule itself, and said that [anarthrous](#) pre-verbal PNs would normally be definite ([Wallace](#), p. 259). Like Harner, Dixon considers qualitiveness a semantic force in addition to definiteness and indefiniteness. While Harner says that qualitiveness may exist either independently or along with definiteness or indefiniteness, Dixon argues that only one of these three semantic forces is the author's intended meaning in any given instance:

The whole notion that a noun can have two or more simultaneous nuances as used in a particular context is rather like saying a word can have two or more simultaneous meanings when used in a particular context. There is no question that a word can have two or more

meanings, but when it is actually used by an author it almost always has a particular meaning, unless he is intentionally employing a double entendre (perhaps like ΚΕΦΑΛËΝ in 1 Cor 11:5). Likewise, we can assume an author has a particular nuance of a noun being used and is not intentionally being ambiguous so as to confuse the reader (Dixon, message posted on b-greek discussion list on the Internet, Friday, March 2, 2001).

Dixon's statistical methodology, unlike Colwells', was to begin with [anarthrous](#) PNs (as opposed to only examining those PNs that were definite), and determine the semantic force of each. His statistical analysis substantiates Harner's findings: "When the [anarthrous](#) predicate nominative precedes the verb it is qualitative in 50 of 53 occurrences, or 94% probability" ([Dixon](#)). Dixon concludes:

We may conclude three things about John 1:1. First, Colwell's rule cannot be applied to the verse as an argument for definiteness. Colwell's rule says that definite predicate nominatives preceding the verb usually are anarthrous. The rule says nothing about definiteness. It does not say that anarthrous predicate nominatives preceding the verb usually are definite. This is the converse of the rule, and as such is not necessarily valid. Indeed, our thesis demonstrates just the opposite, that anarthrous predicate nominatives preceding the verb usually are qualitative, 94% of occurrences. Second, on the basis of the contrast with 1:14 (where the humanity of Christ is stressed), we conclude that THEOS in 1:1c stresses quality. Third, this thesis demonstrates that the statistical probability for THEOS being qualitative, rather than definite or indefinite, is quite high, 94% ([IBID](#)).

### **Daniel B. Wallace**

In his intermediate Greek [grammar](#), Wallace accepts Harner's definition of the qualitative semantic force, and provides a number of examples outside of John 1:1. Wallace, like Harner, advocates qualitiveness as a separate semantic category, either coexisting alongside definite or indefinite semantic forces or existing by itself. Citing Harner and Dixon, Wallace concludes that **THEOS** in John 1:1 is qualitative, and finds the indefinite semantic force the least likely for preverbal predicate nominatives. Though Wallace says that "the Word was divine" may be an acceptable translation, this is only acceptable if we define "divine" in such a way that it is only applied to true Deity. The import of the qualitative force goes well beyond what we commonly would refer to as "divine" in contemporary usage:

The *idea* of qualitative θεος here is that the Word had all the attributes and qualities that "the God" (of 1:1b) had. In other words, he shared the *essence* of the Father, though they differed in person. *The construction the evangelist chose to express this idea was the most concise way he could have stated that the Word was God and yet was distinct from the Father* ([Wallace](#), p. 269, emphasis in original).

### **Don Hartley**

One of the possible objections to Wallace's advocacy of qualitiveness as by far the most likely semantic force (apart from a concurrent definite or indefinite nuance) is that most of the examples he provides are "mass" nouns. Mass nouns are those that cannot be semantically indefinitized or pluralized (that is, that cannot be used with the indefinite article, and for which there is no plural form). "Flesh," is a mass term - we would not say "a flesh," nor "fleshes." A "count" noun, on the other hand, is a noun that can be used with the indefinite article and for which there is a plural form. "Dog" is a count noun - we can say "a dog," or "dogs." Simply put, a count noun is something that can be counted; a mass term is one that cannot. We can count dogs but not flesh. Some have argued that mass terms differ dramatically from count terms in the semantic force they can convey (it is sometimes argued that count terms must always be definite or indefinite and that there is no such thing as a "qualitative count noun").<sup>2</sup> Because it is generally conceded that mass terms can exude a qualitative force, it has been argued that the statistical analyses of Harner and

Dixon are weighed unfairly towards qualitative nouns, particularly when applying those statistics to **THEOS**, which is a count noun.

Don Hartley, a student of Dan Wallace's and research assistant on Wallace's [grammar](#), wrote his Master's of Theology thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary on the topic of Colwell's Construction and mass / count nouns. He also published a [paper](#) derived from his thesis. Hartley's methodology is to examine every example of Colwell's Construction in the Greek New Testament. Hartley purposely leaves controversial or questionable nouns out of this sample. He then eliminates all factors that would unfairly weigh the sample towards one semantic force, such as mass terms. He carefully identifies all potential semantic forces - following Wallace, Hartley advocates qualitiveness as either a standalone semantic force, or as one that can coexist alongside definite or indefinite forces. He notes that all mass terms exude a purely qualitative force (John 1:14, for example, does not teach that the Logos became The Flesh or a flesh, but rather "flesh," signifying that all the Logos possesses all the qualities or attributes of "flesh"). He therefore concludes that qualitiveness is a valid semantic category apart from definiteness or indefiniteness, and argues that this force may be applied equally to mass or count terms.

Hartley's results demonstrate that in John's Gospel, a preverbal PN is usually qualitative (56%), as opposed to definite (11%), indefinite (17%), or qualitative-indefinite (17%). He concludes that from the standpoint of pure statistical analysis, **THEOS** in John 1:1c is most likely qualitative: "Thus, Jesus is God in every sense the Father is" ([Hartley](#), p. 40).

### Conclusion

While the scholars we have considered have some differences with regard to the applicability of Colwell's Rule to John 1:1c and the particular semantic force of **THEOS** in this clause, they are unanimous in regarding the proper understanding of John's meaning: The Word has all the qualities, attributes, or nature of God, the same God referenced in the previous clause. The absence of the article, all agree, is purposeful; John intends to remove any possibility of a convertible proposition. The definite article signifies a *personal* distinction, thus the Person of God is in view in John 1:1b. The absence of the article signifies that the nature or essence of God is in view in 1:1c. John is not teaching that the Logos is the same Person as the Father. Nor, do the scholars believe, is John teaching that the Logos is a second god. All agree that the indefinite semantic force is unlikely.

It is my view that those who argue that the definite semantic force would signify a convertible proposition have the best case (but, see note #2, below). The purely qualitative nuance is well-attested in the Greek New Testament<sup>3</sup>, as has been demonstrated by Harner, Dixon, Wallace, and Hartley. The latter has demonstrated its application to both mass and count terms, and thus its application to **THEOS** in John 1:1c. It is important to note that even those scholars who maintain that **THEOS** is definite nevertheless argue that the significance of John's words are virtually identical with those who argue for a qualitative nuance.

Based on the evidence presented here, we may confidently take John's meaning as:

**"In the beginning of all creation, the Word was already in existence. The Word was intimately with God. And the Word was as to His essence, fully God."**<sup>4</sup>

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### Notes

1. This objection, raised most forcefully by Harner, assumes a mathematical precision that cannot always be sustained in the pragmatics of language use. While convertible propositions usually signify 100% equivalence between subject and predicate, this need not be the case when they are preceded by an explicit statement denying 100% equivalence ("And the Word was with God"). It is doubtful that the 8th Century scribes who wrote "*kai ho theos en ho logos*" in Codex L (Regius) understood what is grammatically a convertible proposition to be tantamount to Modalism. Other explanations are certainly possible, such as understanding *theos* to be used as a title or proper name, or taking the entire verse as a paradox.

2. This line of argument is addressed in the Jehovah's Witness/John 1:1c section of Other Views Considered (below). It has been thoroughly [debated](#) by Don Hartley and Jehovah's Witness apologist, Greg Stafford. I had a brief [interaction](#) with Greg Stafford on this subject as well. See also "[Theos is a Count Noun](#)").

3. C.f., John 3:6 "He who is born of the flesh is (by nature) flesh; he who is born of the Spirit is (by nature) spirit"

4. Cf., Wuest's *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*: "And the Word was as to His essence absolute deity;" and the New English Translation: "and the Word was fully God." Perhaps the most accurate English translation of John 1:1 has been offered by Robert Bowman: "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the Deity, and the Word was Deity" ([John](#), p. 27). This translation preserves the use and non-use of the article, and conveys the purely qualitative nuance of the anarthrous *theos*. The [Dana-Mantey](#) grammar offers essentially the same translation, *sans* the capital letters: "and the word was deity" (p. 148). In [Colossians 2:9](#), Paul uses a different grammatical construction to say much the same thing about Christ's Deity.

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### Jehovah's Witnesses

[John 1:1a](#)

[John 1:1b](#)

[John 1:1c](#)

### Bible Students

[John 1:1a](#)

### Unitarians

[John 1:1](#) ("The Unscholarly Scholarship of Anthony Buzzard")

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### Articles

[The New World Translation and John 1:1: What the Scholars Really Said](#) Robert Hommel

[Jesus as "a god" Alongside God: JWs and John 1:1](#) Sam Shamoun

[Theos is a Count Noun: Is the Word "God" or "a god" in John 1:1c](#) Robert Hommel

[Qualitative Nouns: Emphasis or Sense?](#) Robert Hommel

[The Early Church Fathers, John 1:1, and the Pre-Existence of Christ](#) Robert Hommel

[John 1:1c in the Sahidic Coptic Translation: What the Scholars Really Said](#) Robert Hommel

### Dialogs

[Don Hartley and Greg Stafford on Mass / Count Nouns and John 1:1](#)

[Robert and Jason BeDuhn on John 1:1 and the New World Translation](#)

[Robert and Greg Stafford on John 1:1 and Mass-Count Nouns](#)

[Robert and Kevin on Qualitative "Count" Nouns in the Greek New Testament](#)

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