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JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND JOHN 1:1: NEW EVIDENCE ADVANCES THE DISCUSSION

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SYNOPSIS

Many Jehovah's Witnesses are publicizing new manuscript evidence they claim supports their preferred rendition of John 1:1c: "and the Word was *a god*." This evidence—an early translation of the New Testament—comes from the same century as the earliest Greek witness to the New Testament.

Such an understanding of John 1:1c flies in the face of what all major branches of the Christian tradition have testified about Jesus since the Nicene Creed: "true God from true God." Therefore, if Jehovah's Witnesses are correct concerning what this new evidence supports, it would radically alter how Christians understand the divinity of Jesus. But are Jehovah's Witnesses correct in how they understand this new evidence? They are not. The best interpretation of this new evidence indicates that the subject of John 1:1c ("the Word") *possesses all the qualities of God* (capital G). Not only is such an understanding well supported by existing scholarly work, it also applies best to other, similar passages in the New Testament, fits what we know the remainder of Scripture testifies to concerning Jesus, and accounts for the early Christian worship of Jesus.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus Christ is not like Jehovah, the only true God. He is rather a lesser divine being ("a god"). One primary passage they often point to is John 1:1. Why? Their own translation of the New Testament—the New World translation—reads "and the Word [=Jesus] was *a god*" in John 1:1c. Does their translation have any merit? How did they arrive at it? Why don't other translations render it that way?

Up until recently, if you were to discuss such questions with a Jehovah's Witness (JW), your dialogue would go something like this:

JW: "One of the main reasons for producing our own translation of the Bible fifty-one years ago was because the most used translation at that time, the King James Version, used archaic language, making Scripture difficult for people to understand."

You nod in agreement.

JW: “Furthermore, the original Greek text of certain critical passages was translated inaccurately. For example, in John 1:1c, a fundamental text for orthodox Christian theology, the original Greek text lacks the article (in English, ‘the’) before the Greek word for ‘god’ (which is ‘theos’). That is why we correctly translate the passage, ‘and the word [Jesus] was *a god*.’ You can see this same reasoning applied elsewhere in passages we don’t debate. For example, we both translate Luke 20:6, ‘John was a prophet.’ That is because the Greek text lacks the article.”

At this point, you might be able to quote some Christian scholars who say a Greek grammatical rule called “Colwell’s rule” disproves their translation of John 1:1c.

JW: “They are wrong. Colwell’s rule doesn’t disprove either of our positions” (and they share the reasons why).

For much of the past fifty years, your discussion ends here, both sides having to “agree to disagree.” More recently, however, many JWs are considering, advocating, and proclaiming new evidence in support of their translation. What is this new evidence? Why do they believe it supports their translation? What difference does it make?

One of the earliest translations of the Greek New Testament into another language was Sahidic Coptic, which was spoken in Egypt during the first few centuries of Christianity. This language, like English but unlike Greek, has an indefinite article (what English speakers would typically think of as “a” or “an”). And it just so happens this indefinite article precedes the Coptic word for “god” (*noute*) in John 1:1c. JWs believe this evidence clearly supports their viewpoint: Jesus Christ is merely “a god” — not like Jehovah, *the* one true God, as previously mentioned. Thus, continuing the conversation above, they add:

JW: “Although we may agree to disagree over the best way to translate the Greek, have you heard about the new evidence we now have for our translation? The evidence is from some of the earliest Christian missionaries, and it clearly refers to Jesus as ‘a god’ in John 1:1c. What are your thoughts on this evidence? Has anyone in your church shared this with you yet?”

The ball is now in your court.

So, along comes this very early translation, from a language that has an indefinite article (again, Greek does not). Furthermore, this very early translation uses the indefinite article in John 1:1c. So it appears to say, “and the word [Jesus] was a god.”

Does this provide airtight support that early Christians understood John 1:1 in exactly the same way JWs understand John 1:1 today?

It is *possible* that JWs are correct about the Coptic text and what some early Christians would have believed. Nevertheless, it does not seem *probable* given what else we know about early Christianity and the divinity of Jesus. In fact, the historic Coptic Church fully embraced the Nicene Creed, penned by an Egyptian church father, Athanasius, which explicitly states Jesus is fully God — “true God from true God.” Since that is the case, what *is* the best way to understand this new evidence? We can begin by

examining all other occurrences of the Coptic indefinite article alongside *noute* (again, that Coptic word for “god”). Then we can better determine whether this “lesser divine being” interpretation has a legitimate claim.

Twenty-six texts help us understand how the Coptic people (Copts) were using the indefinite article alongside *noute*. These twenty-six texts are similar to the Greek text of John 1:1c. In twenty-one cases, where the Greek text lacks the article, Coptic uses the *definite* article. If anything, this appears to support the JW position, because wherever the Coptic translation utilizes the *indefinite* article (like in John 1:1c), it appears intentional.

What, then, do we make of the five remaining texts where the Greek lack of an article is matched by a Coptic indefinite article (John 1:1; Acts 28:6; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; 2 Thess. 2:4)? If the JWs are right, we should expect to see another text, perhaps even multiple texts, translated the same way JWs translate John 1:1c. Otherwise, the JWs are simply taking a possible English interpretation and misreading it back into the Coptic language.

Do these five remaining texts support what JWs say they do? Do the evidence and the most convincing arguments rest on their side? Should we view Jesus Christ as “a” god, and therefore not truly “God” as the Christian Church proclaims?

NEW EVIDENCE

No one doubts the Sahidic Coptic version is among the most important of the early translations of the original Greek New Testament. Most scholars place the Sahidic Coptic translation no later than the fourth century and as early as the second (the same century of our earliest existing Greek manuscript of the New Testament: P52).

As such, the Sahidic Coptic manuscripts comprise a rich deposit of empirical evidence. They tell us what the early Greek texts might have looked like. They tell us how the Copts understood the text at the time of translation. In fact, the Sahidic Coptic translation was primarily intended to proclaim the gospel throughout Egypt where the Copts lived. This, then, was the text some of the earliest Christian missionaries used to first share the gospel in Egypt.

Fortunately, knowledge of this Sahidic Coptic evidence is not new. Unfortunately, popular-level access to legitimate New Testament scholarship on it is new. In fact, 2011 marks the first year a major academic publisher—Oxford University Press—published a work devoted solely to the Sahidic Coptic version’s varying uses of the Coptic word for “god.”

Therefore, the majority of resources available for mass consumption are limited to forums, blogs, and websites. Disappointingly, these sources are not academically peer-reviewed, scrutinized, or published. Thus, we are left wondering: are there other academic options circulating? Do the JWs have the only or best solution?

POSSIBLE ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

One of three scenarios will help us answer the question of how the Copts were using the indefinite article with “god.” What are the three options?

1. The Copts intended the indefinite article to indicate a *stylistic distinction*.
2. The Copts intended the indefinite article to indicate a *grammatical requirement*.
3. The Copts intended the indefinite article to indicate an *interpretive distinction*.

To reiterate, it is *possible* to understand each of these five texts in its own particular way, but a solution that accounts for all of the texts is preferable to a solution that accounts for only one. Put another way: one solution is better than five.

Stylistic

The Coptic indefinite article can indicate various stylistic distinctions. For example, in narrative passages, the Coptic indefinite article can indicate the movement of an unknown entity to a known one. The transfiguration is one such instance. In Luke 9:34–35, “a” cloud comes to Jesus, Moses, Elijah, James, John, and Peter. Then, having been introduced already, “the” cloud overshadows them, and they hear a voice from “the” cloud.

Does this solution work for our five passages?

It is tempting to think the indefinite article somehow indicates this stylistic consideration. Two of the five texts— John 1:1c and Acts 28:6— occur within narrative material. Nevertheless, the passages themselves do not fit the pattern at all. In neither passage does “god” have the definite article anywhere. In fact, the one entity in John 1:1 we might expect to go from unknown to known entity (“the word”) has the definite article throughout the passage. Furthermore, as noted, only two of the five texts are narrative. As a result, the stylistic solution fails to solve the mystery.

Grammatical

A grammatical solution would be some grammatical reason requiring the indefinite article in the text. Interestingly, two of our five texts have just that. First Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:6 have similar constructions, both speaking of “one God.” One of the ways Coptic expresses the numerical idea of “one” is with the indefinite article. Therefore, the indefinite articles are functioning numerically in these two texts.

What about the remaining three verses?

Nothing in our other three passages requires (or really even allows) this numerical idea (“one God”). Grammatical considerations, however, do help us narrow our focus. First, we have removed two of the five texts from consideration. Second, the grammar of the three remaining passages reveals a pattern: the sentences have “god” near the end of the sentence (called the “predicate” position). What looks like the subject shifts to the end of the sentence. Usually, this is done when two things are being equated, such as in the sentence “He is a welder” (so, he = welder). This further supports our contention that the best solution of the indefinite article’s use will be the one that best explains all three texts.

Interpretive

In general, the New Testament text refers to the Christian God when the Greek article appears with the word “god” (that is, such a construction does not merely mean “divine” or “godlike”). We say “in general,” because this does not always hold true. For example, “God” in Romans 8:33 refers to the Christian God, even though it lacks the article in Greek: “It is God who justifies.” Conversely, in Philippians 3:19, “god” has the Greek article, though it does not refer to the Christian God: “their god is the belly.”

But what about Coptic?

Similar circumstances hold true. Usually, Coptic pairs the definite article with *noute* to refer to the Christian God. Again, however, there are exceptions. Revelation 16:7 has no Coptic article with “God,” while clearly speaking of the Christian God: “Lord God over all.” On the other hand, 2 Corinthians 4:4 is *not* referring to the Christian God, yet has the definite article: “the god of this age.”

Since references to the Christian God are not universally conducted with the definite article, and since the indefinite article in John 1:1, Acts 28:6, and 2 Thessalonians 2:4 cannot be explained by either stylistic or grammatical means, what is left?

The only viable option is an interpretive distinction. The Copts were distinguishing between the definite, indefinite, and qualitative use of the article. To flesh this out a little bit more, definite (“the”) and indefinite (“a” or “an”) are categories you are already familiar with. You may be less familiar with the qualitative category, on the other hand. One standard Coptic grammar describes the qualitative nouns as those speaking of an entity by its quality.¹ In other words, rather than indicating “the” Christian God (definite) or “a” god (indefinite), the article would indicate “the qualities” of whatever god (or gods) the speaker/author imagined.

How does this category apply to our three texts?

In the case of Acts 28:6 (“they changed their minds and said he was a god”), the local Maltese population does not understand “god” as the Christian God. But neither do they understand their own conception of “god” to be an inferior one. One well-known scholar says the islanders take a more- than-180-degree turn and conclude that Paul is not a “protégé of a god, but a very god.”² In other words, the indefinite article signifies the *qualities* of whatever god(s) the population imagined.

On the other hand, 2 Thessalonians 2:4 lacks such contextual clarity: “displaying himself as God.” Even though some modern commentators differ, most agree that Paul means God with a capital G. As shown above, since the Coptic indefinite article does not *have* to mean indefiniteness (a god), always using the indefinite article as a contextual marker for indefiniteness falls short. Instead, using the indefinite article to indicate a qualitative distinction makes better sense of the passage: “displaying himself as [one who possesses the qualities of] God.” This would satisfy the commentators who think it is God with a capital G *and* those who think it is God with a little g.

In both Acts 28:6 and 2 Thessalonians 2:4, the most probable understanding of the indefinite article alongside “god” is descriptive/qualitative.

John 1:1c

What about our controversial text, John 1:1c? So far, the best way to understand the Copts' use of the indefinite article is that they were making an interpretive, qualitative distinction. This distinction was to describe the qualities of whatever god/entity was being referenced by the speaker, author, or both. Thus, the Maltese population in Acts 28:6 were saying Paul possessed the qualities of "a god." This fits well with how the Copts were probably understanding the text: descriptively. The population was not calling Paul a false god or a lesser divine god. Instead, the population was describing him as one characterized as having the qualities of "god" *as they understood the gods*.

Likewise, the best understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:4 is that the author is referring to the qualities of the Christian God, even though the "man of lawlessness" is not the Christian God. As one scholar put it, "It is therefore preferable to understand the characterization as of someone who is so self-aggrandizing that he vaunts himself against all gods whatsoever, perceived or real."³ Again, this complements how the Copts probably understood the text: descriptively. The "man of lawlessness" will not exult himself as a false god or a lesser divine god, but as one claiming the qualities of "god" (in this case, the Christian God).

The same category easily applies to John 1:1c. This qualitative/descriptive understanding makes the best sense within the opening of John's Gospel. The Copts understood John to mean "the Word" possesses the same qualities as the Christian God. If one rejects our arguments above, however, the only other viable interpretation, *given the other usages*, would suggest the Copts understood "the Word" to be a "god of the pagans" (cf. Acts 28:6) or some "usurper god" (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4). If that is the case, "Houston, we have a problem!" Such an interpretation leaves us with much more difficulty.

First, other passages in the Coptic text explicitly call Jesus "God" with the definite article. We do not even need to leave John's first chapter! In the same chapter and book, there are clear references to Jesus as God (e.g., John 1:18; 20:28). Or look elsewhere in the New Testament (Titus 2:13; 1 John 5:20). It is improbable the Coptic translators took the author of the Gospel of John to mean Jesus was a "pagan god" or "usurper god" in John 1:1c, and then the Christian God 17 verses later. Yet, even if one still rejects all those passages, the manuscript evidence shows the Copts feeling comfortable ascribing "god" to Jesus—with the definite article!—early in their history. Look at what one of the earliest Coptic manuscripts, labeled P.11710 reads: "Jesus Christ, who is God."⁴

Second, other Coptic words were available to express the idea of Jesus being merely divine, godly, or godlike if they desired, but they clearly did not.

Third, the overall context—chapter, book, and New Testament—all decrease the probability of any interpretation other than the qualitative one.

Fourth, other examples of common nouns with Coptic indefinite articles are available to compare. For example, take the word "prophet" in John 4:19: "The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are [one who has the qualities of] a prophet.'" The other two solutions would clash with this example—a pagan/usurper prophet. In contrast, the "interpretive distinction" solution works well.

These four reasons decrease the likelihood that the Copts used the indefinite article to suggest that “the Word” was either a god of the pagans or some usurper god.

REACHING A CONCLUSION

Reflect for a moment on the three options we discussed above. Did one of the options best explain all three texts? Were the Copts completely random when using the indefinite article with “god,” or were they purposefully selective?

Granted, far more could be said in this dialogue. But given this new evidence alone, it is time to advance the conversation.

When looking at the testimony of the New Testament, the Coptic evidence regarding the indefinite article shows how strange calling Jesus “a god” in John 1:1c would be. As we discovered, it is much more likely describing Jesus as having all the qualities of God—capital G.

This will not silence the cries of all JW's, however. It will always be *possible* to argue for another interpretation of Acts 28:6 and 2 Thessalonians 2:4. Likewise, it will always be *possible* that John 1:1c means something different than what all three branches of orthodox Christianity—Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism—have taken it to mean historically. Our job is not to eliminate all *possible* explanations categorically. Rather, we hope to offer the most *probable* explanation: an explanation that fits all three instances and that is derived from a scholarly supported grammatical category, not from a theological agenda.

Effective Evangelism

Let's go back to our discussion with the JW. Before the ball was left in our court, he asked:

JW: “Although we may agree to disagree over the best way to translate the Greek, have you heard about the new evidence we now have for our translation? It's from some of the earliest Christian missionaries, and they clearly refer to Jesus as ‘a god’ in John 1:1c. What are your thoughts on this evidence? Has anyone in your church shared this with you yet?”

Our abbreviated response: “Thanks for sharing your beliefs and this additional evidence. I agree this is important, and that a healthy dialogue should continue. I also agree all viable evidence should be academically considered, verified, and evaluated.

Likewise, I am aware of this new evidence, and have weighed the various options.

At the end of the day, I believe the best explanation of all three occurrences of the indefinite article in the Sahidic Coptic version of the New Testament is the qualitative one. Therefore, John 1:1c should read: ‘and the Word [Jesus] possesses the same qualities as God.’ This scholarly supported category contextually fits other, grammatically similar passages and best corresponds with what is attested elsewhere—scripturally and historically. But even if we still do not agree on John 1:1c, would you be

willing to sit down and look with me at how the Copts clearly saw God with a capital G in other places in the NT that are not debatable?”

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NOTES

- 1 Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar: Sahidic Dialect* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2000), 227.
- 2 Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 674.
- 3 Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 420.
- 4 Andrew E. Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels: A Critical Edition of the Surviving Greek Manuscripts* (New York: T and T Clark, 2007), 127.