



What to Say to Jehovah's Witnesses ... Ch.3 Biblical Texts for the Deity of Christ

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Chapter 3

Biblical texts for the Deity of Christ

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In this chapter, we will examine five (5) biblical texts that strongly support the doctrine that Jesus is God. Third century theologians saw such biblical teachings and formally called God a Trinity: the belief that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three Gods, but rather three persons in one God. While the Trinity may not be easy to understand, I think that the baseball team analogy in the previous chapter may be of help. However, one does not need to be able to understand the essence of God in order to believe that he is a Trinity. There are perhaps many things that we cannot understand about a God who is infinite in every respect. Our lack of full comprehension, however, does not negate an attribute of God. So the question is not, *“Can I understand the Trinity?”* Rather, the question is, *“Does the Bible teach the Trinity?”* In the following, the biblical verse will be provided (usually from the New American Standard Bible), followed by the reason why the verse points to the deity of Christ, usually followed by the JW response, followed by how to answer their response.

1. Isaiah 9:6: *“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”*

Most Christians understand this verse to be a prophecy about the coming Messiah. You may remember it from Handel’s *Messiah*. Jesus is here referred to as *“Mighty God.”* The JW expects you to bring up this verse and will respond that comparative language is used here: Jesus is a *“mighty god,”* but Jehovah is described as *“Almighty God”* elsewhere and, therefore, is more powerful (ie. Jesus is mighty, while God is almighty). They may further note that Jesus is never referred to as *“Almighty God.”* However, the Watchtower interpretation of Isaiah 9:6 is incorrect.

While in English the words may be taken in a comparative manner, the original Hebrew is not at all comparative.

A) Almighty God is the Hebrew *El Shaddai*. The exact meaning of this word is uncertain. Most often it is linked to mountains and therefore can mean *“God of the mountain.”*^[1] *“The idea behind the root in Akkadian and in Hebrew seems to be that of impelling force, hence, the sovereign, ‘Almighty God.’”*^[2] The translation, *“Almighty God,”* is from the Septuagint.

B) Mighty God is the Hebrew *El Gibbor*, and can be translated *“God, the hero or champion among the army.”*^[3] It means a God who is mighty or superior, strong, brave, valiant, a hero.

These Hebrew words have different, unrelated meanings. *“Mighty God”* does not stand inferior to *“Almighty God”* as the term *“strong”* stands inferior to *“strongest.”* They are unrelated terms, as in *“brilliant”* and *“strong.”* More problematic to the Watchtower interpretation of the words *“almighty”* versus *“mighty”* is the fact that God is called *El Gibbor* (Mighty God) just one chapter later in Isaiah 10:20-21! Also in Jeremiah 32:17-18 and Deuteronomy 10:17, the Father is referred to as the *“Mighty God”* (El Gibbor). Therefore, Isaiah 9:6 clearly refers to Jesus as God.

Bottom Line: Isaiah calls Jesus, *“God.”* The Watchtower’s attempts to explain this by claiming *“mighty God”* is less than *“almighty God”* reveals a lack of knowledge of the Hebrew language because the words *“mighty”* and *“almighty”* are not

comparative in meaning, and Isaiah calls the Father “mighty God” one chapter later.

2. John 20:28: “Thomas answered and said to him: ‘My Lord and my God!’”

After his resurrection Jesus appears to doubting Thomas who calls him, “God.” This is a difficult verse for the JW because it is so clear. The JW will respond that either Thomas said, “My Lord” to Jesus, then looked heavenward and said, “My God!” or Thomas was saying it out of exclamation, much like someone today might say “Oh, my God!” when astonished. However, there are four reasons why the Watchtower response is inadequate:

A) The text says, “Thomas answered and said to him: ‘My Lord and my God!’” Thomas was addressing Jesus.

B) In Psalm 35:23 (Septuagint), the same Greek grammatical structure is used as in John 20:28. The Psalmist David says, “Awake, O Lord, and attend to my judgment, even to my cause, my God and my Lord.”

Psalm 35:23: *ho theos mou kai ho kurios mou.*
My God and my Lord.

John 20:28: *ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou.*
My Lord and my God.

David was addressing one person. His God and his Lord were one and the same. Since the Greek grammatical structure in John 20:28 is the same, Thomas is most likely referring to Jesus as God.

C) Jesus never rebuked Thomas for calling him “God.”

D) It is unlikely that Thomas, a pious Jew who was accustomed to carefully guarding his lips, would take the Lord’s name in vain, especially when he saw the risen Jesus.[4]

Bottom Line: Thomas addresses Jesus as his God. Attempts by the Watchtower to explain this by claiming Thomas was looking heavenward when he said “my God” or that he just uttered the statement as an expression of surprise fails to carefully observe Thomas’ statement “to him,” the similar Greek grammatical structure in Psalm 35:23, that Jesus never rebuked Thomas for calling him God, and the fact that the pious Jew, Thomas, would be unlikely to take the Lord’s name in vain.

3. Colossians 2:9: “for in him all the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form.”

The New World Translation renders “divine quality” instead of “deity.” What does the word mean? The Greek word is *theotetos*. There are two words in the Greek language Paul had to choose from.

A) *theiotetos*: divinity or has the quality of the divine; that which shows God to be God, and gives Him the right to worship.[5] The emphasis is on his attributes.

B) *theotetos*: one who occupies the divine office and possesses all divine power.[6] The emphasis is on his nature.

Both words are almost identical in spelling and meaning. Both acknowledge the deity of Christ. But the latter, *theotetos*, is stronger and is the word Paul uses. All the fulness (nothing excepted) of God’s essence dwells in Christ in bodily form. Thus, Colossians 2:9 clearly refers to Jesus as God.

A few years ago, I met an engineer from Greece who was visiting the United States. After a brief conversation, I asked if he could read Koine Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written. He said that in Greece it was a requirement in school to become familiar with the ancient forms of the language. I wrote Colossians 2:9 in Greek for him and substituted the original *theotetos* with *theiotetos*. I asked him

predicate is so prominent that the noun [theos] cannot be regarded as definite.” These are heavy statements for the non-Greek student. Let’s try to simplify them somewhat with a few definitions.

Logos is the Greek term for “word” and is referring to Jesus in the context of John 1 (see verse 14). *Theos* is the Greek word for “God.” A predicate is a word(s) that describes the subject of the sentence. For example, in the sentence, “*the girl is smart,*” “*girl*” is the subject and “*smart*” is the predicate, since it is describing the girl. Articles are either definite or indefinite. When an article is definite (eg. the), it is identifying something. For example, suppose I was in a public debate with a JW and someone asked, “*Which of the two is Mike?*” The answer, “*Mike is the tall guy,*” identifies me from the other. Now let us suppose that later on someone else heard about the debate and asks, “*What is Mike like?*” The answer, “*Mike is a tall guy*” employs an indefinite article (eg. a, an) and points to a quality or trait (ie. tallness). There is no attempt to distinguish or identify the noun from others when the indefinite article is used. In Greek, there are no indefinite articles. However, the absence of the definite article in Greek usually has the same effect as the English indefinite article and places stress on the quality or trait of the noun.

With this in mind, let us now look at the *Journal* article cited by the Watchtower and what the Watchtower claims regarding it. In order to determine what John meant when he wrote, “*the Word was God,*” the *Journal* article’s author, Philip Harner, lists five ways in which John could have said it in Greek. We will refer to these as Clauses A-E as Harner does.[12] The clauses have been translated below in English for the reader. The word “*the*” indicates that the Greek definite article appears before the word.

- A. The Word was the God.
- B. God was the Word. (This is what John wrote.)
- C. The Word God was.
- D. The Word was God.
- E. The Word was divine. (A different word, *theios*, is used.)

Harner states that if the word *theos* [God] had the article [as in Clause A above], then Clause A “*would contradict the preceding clause of 1:1, in which John writes that the Word was with God*

[translated from Greek].” This is because the two words (ie. *logos*, *theos*) would be equivalent to the point that there would be no differentiation between the two as persons and John’s statement that “*the Word was with God*” certainly indicates that two persons are involved. So the Watchtower tract is correct when it says that “*if the latter part of John 1:1 were interpreted to mean ‘the’ God, this ‘would then contradict the preceding clause,’ which says that the Word was with God.*”

Harner continues, “*Clause D, with the verb preceding an anarthrous [without the article] predicate, would probably mean that the logos was ‘a god’ or a divine being of some kind [as the Watchtower translates it] ... Clause E would be an attenuated form of D [ie. carrying a lesser force than D]. ... John evidently wished to say something about the logos that was other than A and more than D and E.*”[13] In other words, Harner says that John wanted to say something other than that God and Jesus were the same person and that the proper way to say that the Word was “*a god*” or “*divine*” would be to use Clause D or E.

However, John wanted to say something stronger about the Word, since he uses Clause B. Harner’s very next statement is cited by the Watchtower tract – yet not in its entirety and its commentary is deliberately misleading. According to the tract, “*The Journal of Biblical Literature says that expressions ‘with an anarthrous [no article] predicate preceding the verb, are primarily qualitative in meaning.’ As the Journal notes, this indicates that the logos can be likened to a god. It also says of John 1:1: ‘The qualitative force of the predicate is so prominent that the noun [theos] cannot be regarded as definite.’*”

Now here is what Harner actually said in the *Journal*. After stating that John wished to say something other than A and more than D and E, he continues, “*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* [emphasis mine].”[14] In other words, clauses B and C stress *theos* as the quality or character of the Word and indicate that the Word and God share the same nature! And this statement is omitted from the

Watchtower tract, although it comes immediately after the statement they quote! Moreover, contrary to the tract, the *Journal* does not note that the Word “*can be likened to a god.*” Harner has clearly said in the statement immediately preceding that John wished to say something more than that! This is deception on the part of the Watchtower. They are deliberately misleading its followers and every reader of their tract.

He continues that if *theos* in Clauses B and C was taken as definite instead of qualitative, then B and C would be the same as A and would be problematic as well given the context. Therefore, *theos* must be referring to the quality of the *logos* [Word].[15] But what is the quality John is wishing to emphasize?

The Watchtower tract says, “So John 1:1 highlights the quality of the Word, that he was ‘divine,’ ‘godlike,’ ‘a god,[16] but not Almighty God.” Remember that the very article they cite states that John did not mean to say that, but more; that the Word has the nature of God. So what does Harner claim is the quality John wished to emphasize? At the end of the article, he states, “These examples [ie. Clauses A-E] illustrate the difficulty of translating the clause accurately into English. This does not mean that the translators were not aware of the issue involved ... Perhaps the clause could be translated, ‘the Word had the same nature as God.’ This would be one way of representing John’s thought, which is, as I understand it, that *ho logos* [the Word], no less than *ho theos* [the God], had the nature of *theos* [God].”[17] The Word, no less than God, has the nature of deity. Deity is the quality John wishes to ascribe to the Word.

So to sum up the article, Harner states that if John had wished to say that the Word was “a god” or “divine,” he had two ways, even a different word, by which he could have done so. But it is evident that he wished to say something even stronger about Jesus. He did not wish to say that Jesus and God are the same person, since he has already stated that they are two persons and there was a way in Greek for him to have done so if he had wished. What John does say is that Jesus and God share the same nature; that Jesus, no less than God, has the nature of deity. This is an extremely strong statement, since it

rules out any interpretation that Jesus was merely acting in God’s place, but was not God Himself. Rather, Jesus was God in his very nature and essence. John’s words echo Paul’s in Colossians 2:9 discussed above when he says that in Jesus, “*all the fulness* [nothing excepted] *of deity dwells.*”

So we observe that the Watchtower has taken a few statements out of context to justify their translation, “*the Word was a god,*” from an article which states that their translation is wrong, and that Jesus possesses the nature of God. It is also interesting to note that the tract states that “[t]here are many other Bible verses in which almost all translators in other languages consistently insert the article ‘a’ when translating Greek sentences with the same structure.” What they do not say is that such does not take into account a simple Greek rule found in just about any Greek Grammar: proper names, places, and certain words such as “God,” “Lord,” and “Holy Spirit” appear numerous times throughout the New Testament with and without the article with no apparent change of meaning and are, therefore, exempt from the very general rule of when to insert the indefinite article ‘a’ when translating Greek.[18] Such a gross lack of scholarship is not a reflection on the JW’s who come to your door with a sincere heart and are good students of Watchtower interpretations. However, it reflects a dangerously deceptive and intellectually naïve leadership at the Watchtower that should neither be followed nor trusted.

Now let’s observe how consistent the Watchtower is with this rule concerning “*an anarthrous* [no article] *predicate preceding the verb*” throughout its own translation, the New World Translation. In the New Testament there are exactly four occurrences where *theos* (God) appears as a singular predicate noun, without the article, before the verb (Luke 20:38; John 1:1; 8:54; Philippians 2:13). Remember the Watchtower said that this grammatical structure merited the translation, “a god.” Yet, in every instance, the New World Translation has rendered *theos* as “God,” contrary to the committee’s rule, except one – John 1:1! In other words, they made a rule then broke it every time except one occurrence when convenient. (See Appendix 1: More on John 1:1 in this book for a detailed look at each of these four verses.)

Therefore, the Watchtower has not only deliberately deceived its trusting followers, but has demonstrated a lack of knowledge of basic rules of Greek and is grossly inconsistent in applying its own rule. This is pseudo-scholarship at its finest!

On the other hand, Harner has shown why the translation, *“the Word was God”* is an accurate rendering of the Greek which is even more precise by saying that the Word possesses the very nature of deity, no less than God Himself. Indeed, the majority of translators render the clause *“the Word was God.”*

But one other point can be made here. It is interesting to note how the earliest Church Fathers who commented on John 1:1 interpreted it. This is especially noteworthy, since the earliest Church Fathers wrote in Greek. Therefore, their views on how it should be translated may reflect not only what the early Church thought of Jesus, but how the original readers of John understood his statement in the original Greek.[19]

Irenaeus wrote around AD 185 and mentions John 1:1 five times.[20] In one reference he comments, *“and the Word was God,’ of course, for that which is begotten of God is God.”*[21] Irenaeus understood Jesus as more than *“a god”* or a divine being of a sort. He referred to Jesus as God.

Origen is another Church Father who wrote in Greek around AD 200. In a reference regarding John 1:1 he comments, *“John, however, with more sublimity and propriety, says in the beginning of his Gospel, when defining God by a special definition to be the Word, ‘And God was the Word, and this was in the beginning with God.’ Let him, then, who assigns a beginning to the Word or Wisdom of God, take care that he be not guilty of impiety against the unbegotten Father Himself, seeing he denies that He had always been a Father, and had generated the Word ...”*[22] Origen understood John to be saying that the Word was God and without a beginning. Elsewhere he refers to Jesus as *“God the Word”* a total of 18 times![23]

Clement of Alexandria wrote in Greek around AD 200 as well. He alludes to John 1:1 and Jesus as God when he says, *“For since Scripture calls the infant children lambs, it has also called Him – God the Word – who became man for our sakes, and who wished in all points to be made like to us – “the Lamb of God” – Him, namely, that is the Son of God, the child of the Father.”*[24] Thus, Clement also interprets John as referring to Jesus as God in John 1:1. Therefore, all of the earliest Church Fathers who comment on John 1:1 interpret John as claiming that the Word was God. Moreover, not a single Church Father, early or otherwise, interprets John as saying that *“the Word was a god”* or the *“Word was divine.”*

In summary, we have seen that there are no good reasons for translating John 1:1 as *“the Word was a god”* as the NWT does. We have seen good reasons to translate it *“the word was God”* with the understanding that John is claiming that Jesus, no less than God, possesses deity. And finally, we have seen that all of the early Church Fathers who commented on John 1:1 and who also wrote in Greek clearly interpreted John 1:1 to be saying *“the Word was God”* and that there were no Church Fathers who understood it otherwise. For these reasons, the normal rendering, *“The Word was God,”* is correct. Therefore, John 1:1 clearly refers to Jesus as God. I know this section on John 1:1 has been quite technical. Carefully read through it a few times and it will serve you well when discussing this verse with JW's.

Bottom Line: The very article in the biblical journal appealed to by the New World Translation Committee to justify their translation of John 1:1 actually advises that it should not be translated *“the Word was a god”* as the NWT translates it, but rather *“the Word was God”* as with most translators. Furthermore, the Watchtower is inconsistent in applying its own rule because the Greek grammatical structure referred to by the Committee appears with the word *theos* a total of four times in the New Testament. In every instance, the NWT has translated it *“God,”* except

one – John 1:1! The Greek John used in this verse indicates that he believed Jesus, no less than God Himself, possesses the very nature of deity. Finally, every Church Father who comments on this verse translates it, “*the Word was God.*”

Some final thoughts on the Deity of Christ

Multiple biblical figures all viewed Jesus as God; Isaiah, John, Thomas and Paul. We have seen that the doctrine of Christ's deity carried from the biblical writers to their successors, the Apostolic Fathers such as Polycarp who knew the apostles and Ignatius who probably did. The doctrine did not stop there, but continued through the Church Fathers who succeeded them such as Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Hippolytus.[25]

Although Jesus is never recorded as coming right out and saying, “*I am God,*” his actions and claims spoke very loud. He accepted worship (Matthew 14:25-33; 28:8-10; John 9:35-38). Yet he knew worship was for God alone (Matthew 4:8-10 [quoting Deuteronomy 6:13]). His disciples also recognized worship was for God alone (Luke 4:7-8; Acts 10:25-26; Revelation 19:10). Yet they worshipped him (Matthew 14:25-33; 28:8-10; Hebrews 1:6). In addition, he claimed to have authority over the Sabbath day that God had instituted (Matthew 12:1-8), something it would seem was reserved for God alone. Finally, he taught with an authority that none of the prophets claimed. The prophets would say, “*Thus says the Lord*” Jesus, on the other hand, said, “*Truly, truly, I say to you.*” It will not do to say that Jesus had the authority to forgive sins, since he granted this right to his disciples (John 21:21-23).

A fair question is “*If Jesus thought of himself as God, why didn't he just come out and say it clearly?*” This is to import 21st century Western thought back into the 1st century Middle East. It appears that the culture in which Jesus lived expected actions rather than words. Consider the question posed by John the Baptist to Jesus in

Matthew 11:2-5. When in prison, John sent some of his disciples to Jesus and asked him, “*Are you the expected one (ie. Messiah) or are we to expect someone else?*” We pick up at verse 4: “*Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.’”* Jesus answered their question by pointing to his works. John presents a similar thought in 10:24-25. The Jews asked Jesus “*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*” Jesus answered them, “*I told you and you do not believe; the works that I do in my Father's name, these testify of me.*”

The question we need to ask then is “*Did Jesus do anything that would indicate that he thought of himself as God?*” When we consider that he accepted worship that he knew was only for God, claimed to have authority over God's Law, and spoke using his own authority, it seems clear that Jesus did think of himself as God.

[Go to Chapter 4 - Conclusion and Application]

References:

- [1] Harris, Archer, Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Volume 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p.907.
- [2] Richard Patterson, “Joel,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin and Richard P. Polycyn, eds. Volume 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), p.243.
- [3] Harris, Archer, Waltke, eds. *TWOT*, Vol.1, p.149.
- [4] Dr. Ron Sauer, Professor of New Testament at Moody Bible Institute, kindly pointed this out to me. Dr. Sauer was the last student of the late F.F. Bruce. When I studied under him at Liberty University, he devoted 8-14 hours daily to his personal study in the Greek New Testament and instilled a passion in this student and many others to learn the Greek language of the New Testament.
- [5] *NIDNTT*, Vol.2, p.86. *TDNT*, Vol.III, p.123. See Romans 1:20 for its only use in the New Testament. Interestingly, the *NST* has rendered

the word "Godship."

[6] *NIDNTT*, Vol.2, p.86. *TDNT*, Vol.III, p.119. Also, see Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.573.

[7] Revelation 22 is somewhat difficult to follow because John changes from one speaker to another without warning, as he seems to do in verses 7, 12, and probably 17. The KJV (Red Letter editions) and the NIV seem to present the conversation most clearly. The NASB seems confused on where to place the quotation marks. It has Jesus speaking in verses 6 and 7. But that is awkward because it would force the Father to send the angel in verse 6 and then Jesus to send the same angel for the same purpose in verse 16. The NWT is likewise confused, identifying Jesus as the angel in verse 6 and also as the one who sends the same angel (quite a task to send yourself) in verse 16.

[8] *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* New York: Watchtower Bible And Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1989, pp.26-28.

[9] The same is also found in *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible And Tract Society Of New York, Inc., 1985), pp.1139-1140.

[10] The article is specifically identified in Appendix 2A of *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures*, p.1140 as Philip B. Harner, "Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, ed. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Vol.92, 1973, pp.75-87.

[11] King James Version, American Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Bible, New Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible, Revised English Bible ("what God was, the Word was"), Amplified Bible ("the Word was God Himself"), Today's English Version ("he was the same as God"), New Living Translation ("he was God").

[12] Harner, p.84.

[13] Harner, p.85.

[14] Harner, p.85. New Testament scholar, Murray Harris agrees. See his excellent book, *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), p.70. The late New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown agrees in *An Introduction to New Testament*

Christology, pp.187-188.

[15] Harner, p.85.

[16] "god" versus "God," much like "mighty god" versus "Almighty God."

[17] Harner, p.87.

[18] eg. John 4:20; 5:15; 20:31. A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar Of The New Testament In The Light Of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), pp.759-761, 795 and H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), pp.139-140, 148-149.

[19] As mentioned earlier, you may find an article on the subject of the early Church Fathers on Jesus by this author: "The Early Church Fathers on Jesus".

[20] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter 8; Book 3, Chapter 11 (3 times); Book 5, Chapter 18.

[21] *Ibid.*, Book 1, Chapter 8.

[22] Origen, *De Principiis*, Book 1, Chapter 2, Section 3.

[23] Origen, *Contra Celsus*, Book 1, Chapter 66 [1:66]; 3:62; 4:99; 5:22; 6:48, 61, 68; 69 (twice), 71; 7:17 (3 times), 42; 8:15, 22, 39, 75.

[24] Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, Book 1, Chapter 5.

[25] For details, the reader may refer to the article by this author titled, "The Early Church Fathers on Jesus".

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