

## Both Being *God* and Being *With God*

By John H. Niemelä

Imagine yourself as a child with no understanding of gravity, but knowing that the earth is spherical. Now, your older sibling starts asking questions, just to exasperate you:

Elder: If the earth is round, why don't we fall off?

Younger: We just don't.

Elder: We don't, because the earth is flat? Right?

Younger: No, it's round. I don't know why we don't fall off.

Similarly, many Christians do not want to be asked about John 1:1. They view it as a paradox. Specifically, they wonder how the Word could be with God and also be God. By analogy, imagine that Adam (before God brought him a wife) said, "I am Adam and I am with Adam." Such a statement would only come from the lips of someone who was (mentally) beside-himself. The average Christian avoids discussing John 1:1, because it may seem inexplicable.

The Watch Tower Society (WTS) uses John 1:1 to bend Christians into pretzels. Consider what one of their booklets says:

Even the *King James Version* says, "The Word was *with* God." . . . Someone who is "with" another person cannot be the same as that other person. In agreement with this, [an article by Phillip Harner in] the *Journal of Biblical Literature* [JBL] edited by Jesuit Joseph A. Fitzmyer notes 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.<sup>1</sup>

What is it that the WTS hopes people will conclude?

- A. (Allegedly) all trinitarians interpret John 1:1 as: *Jesus was beside Jesus*,
- B. John 1:1 does not mean that Jesus was beside Jesus,
- C. Therefore, all trinitarians (allegedly) misinterpret John 1:1.

Anyone imagining that all trinitarians hold this view is vulnerable to Witness propaganda. Sermons about Colwell's rule have not dispelled fog in the pew. A cookies-on-the-lowest-shelf approach is needed. Clarifying the term *God* will help.

### What Is the Term *God*?

*The Word* functions as a name in John 1:1,<sup>2</sup> but *God* is a title. What is the difference between proper names and titles? Daniel Wallace contends:

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<sup>1</sup> *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* (Watch Tower Society, 1989). Italics in original. Citation is from Philip B. Harner, "Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1," *JBL* 92 (March 1972): 85.

<sup>2</sup> If John said, "In the beginning was Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was with God, and Jesus Christ was God," the interpretive options would align with those for the reading *the Word*, since Jesus Christ is the normal name by which the Word was known.

One of the difficulties in determining any principles relates to the definition of a proper name [versus of a title]. A good rule of thumb to follow is that a proper name is one that cannot be pluralized. Thus, [Christ] *Christos*, [God] *theos*, and [Lord] *kurios* [pluralize, so they] are not proper names [but titles]; [Paul] *Paulos*, [Peter] *Petros*, and [Jesus] *Iēsous* [cannot pluralize and] are [proper names].<sup>3</sup>

He asserts that Pauls, Peters, and Jesuses do not meaningfully pluralize. Why not? There are countless people named Paul or Peter, but only one Paul and only one Peter wrote NT books. Likewise, only one Jesus grants everlasting life to believers, though many Spanish-speakers name their sons Jesus. Names do not meaningfully pluralize.

In the interest of space, we will confine treatment of titles to God, a key term in John 1:1. Some may initially quibble with Wallace's assertion that Gods (not merely gods) is conceivable. However, Daniel 7:15f says that he asked one of the angels in the vision what 7:13f means to relieve his confusion. He might have asked something like this: "How do I reconcile seeing two Gods (ʔēlōhîm)—the Ancient of Days and the One like a Son of Man<sup>4</sup>—with the fact that there is only one God (ʔēlōhîm)?" He did not have a convenient term like Trinity to express the concept that the One true God exists in three Persons. For Daniel, this was paradoxical (literally, beyond rational thought) truth. Daniel may well have struggled to make sense of God and Gods.

So, Daniel 7:13-16 substantiates Wallace's case for regarding *Theos* (God) as a title. This raises a question: Why do titles meaningfully pluralize? Why do proper names not meaningfully pluralize?

A name designates an individual. Today, identity theft involves falsely impersonating someone for the purpose of stealing assets. By contrast, a title refers to an office that someone may hold. Imagine that one page ends with the words, "The President of the United States spoke, today." The next page starts with, "Four score and seven years ago. . ." The quote from the Gettysburg address identifies the president as Abraham Lincoln. The point is that a title may not narrow the identity to one individual only. That is a by-product of titles being pluralizable.

### **Titles: The Key to the Logic of John 1:1**

If God were a name, John 1:1 would make no more sense than Adam saying, "I am Adam and I am with Adam." However, assuming that God is a title makes all the difference.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), 246, n. 77. Wallace used lower case for the Greek forms of *theos* (God/god) and *kurios* (Lord/lord). English translations tend to capitalize God and Lord when referring to the Father or to the Son, but most Greek texts leave them lower case. Wallace, in context, seeks to distinguish proper nouns from (proper) titles. In keeping with his context and English conventions, I capitalize the glosses here: God and Lord.

<sup>4</sup> *P<sup>e</sup>lah* is paired with *s<sup>e</sup>qad* (to worship) in Dan 3:12, 14, 18, and 28. *P<sup>e</sup>lah* stands alone (with a worship-service sense) in Ezra 7:24; Dan 6:16(17), 20(21); 7:14, and 27. The fact that He is worshipped forever in this vision establishes that the One like a Son of Man is God.

## **An Illustration**

Consider David and Solomon. Late in King David's life (1 Chron 23:1), he appointed Solomon as co-regent. Both simultaneously sat on Israel's throne.

In 1 Kings 1:39 Solomon is anointed King. 1 Kings 1:46 says, "And also Solomon has been seated (perfect tense) upon the throne of the kingdom." Yet, 1 Kings 1:43f and 47f call David King.

That it was a true co-regency is evident from both David and Solomon making royal decrees. David's many decrees following 1 Chron 23:1 appear in 1 Chron 23:6–29:22, etc. Solomon decreed that his older brother Adonijah, who tried to usurp the throne, would be spared, "If he is a virtuous man." However, he did not, so Solomon executed him (1 Kings 2:24).

Solomon's co-regency ended in 1 Kings 2:12, with David's death. While both sat on Israel's throne, each made royal decrees in the full capacity of king. The word king is a title, describing an office. During the co-regency, two men occupied that one office. This analogy may not be perfect, but it serves to clarify the logic of John 1:1b-c: And the Word was with God and was God.

Assume a time when David and Solomon were together during their co-regency. David could say: "I am Israel's King and I am with Israel's King." Likewise, Solomon could say: "I am Israel's King and I am with Israel's King." Neither one's claim to be King denies the co-regency.

Similarly, in John 1:1, Jesus Christ could say, "I am God and I am with God." This would not deny the Trinity, because Jesus does not exhaust the category of God. Likewise, the Father could say, "I am God and I am with God." This would not deny the Trinity; the Father does not exhaust the category of God. Similarly, the Spirit could say, "I am God and I am with God." This would not deny the Trinity; He does not exhaust the category of God.

## **Conclusion**

The same people who tell their children, "Never give up; try and try again," ignore their own advice. Fear—that some fast-talking door-knocker might twist them into pretzels—silences many who know the life-giving message. One embarrassing encounter should not cause withholding the message of life from unbelievers. Let us not fear John 1:1, but be ready to proclaim both it and other truths that derive from it.

John 1:1 is not a paradox—beyond rational explanation. It is as simple as Solomon saying, "I am Israel's King and I am with Israel's King [David]." Jesus is fully God and is also with other members of the Trinity. As God and man (John 1:1 and 14), His death was sufficient to pay the sin-incurred death-penalty for everyone. It is also the basis of Him guaranteeing an infinite promise for all eternity to all believers: "He who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the Bread of life" (John 6:47f).