



"Meditate
upon these things;
give thyself
wholly to them;
that thy profiting
may appear unto all"

I Timothy 4:15

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A POSTSCRIPT TO COLWELL'S RULE AND JOHN 1:1

In the March, 1975, issue of this *Journal*, the undersigned discussed Colwell's Rule and the exegesis of John 1:1 as the concluding portion of a series on "The Greek Article and the Doctrine of Christ's Deity." In looking through a recent volume of the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (vol. 92, no. 1, pp. 75-87), I subsequently located another article on this general subject. It seemed advisable to comment here briefly on the substance of this article, by way of a postscript.

The article in question is by Philip B. Harner of Heidelberg College, Tiffin, Ohio, and is entitled "Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1." Harner states his awareness of Colwell's Rule and its application to the first verse of John's Gospel: "In an article some years ago E. C. Colwell examined this type of word-order [anarthrous predicate nouns preceding copulative verbs] and reached the tentative conclusion that 'definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article.' In accordance with this rule he regarded it as probable that the predicate nouns in both Mark 15:39 and John 1:1 should be interpreted as definite. 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. This problem, however, needs to be examined as a distinct issue." (p. 76)

While Harner does not reject the possibility that Colwell's Rule may be the explanation for the lack of an article before θεός in John 1:1, he himself believes that the article was omitted because of a qualitative significance intended by the holy writer. He examines the stylistic characteristics that John exhibits in his Gospel, and reaches the conclusion "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." (p. 75) This conclusion is, of course, similar to that of Dana-Mantey, whom I cited at some length in my recent discussion.

As an aid to the understanding of the verse, Harner offers to the reader what John might have written as well as what he did write. "In terms of the types of word-order and vocabulary available to him, it would appear that John could have written any of the following:

- A. ὁ λόγος ἦν ὁ θεός
- B. θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος [John's actual words]
- C. ὁ λόγος θεὸς ἦν
- D. ὁ λόγος ἦν θεός
- E. ὁ λόγος ἦν θεῖος

"Clause A, with an anarthrous 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 λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν [the Word was with God]. This clause suggests relationship, and thus some form of 'personal' differentiation, between the two. 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*."

Harner continues: "John evidently wished to say something about the *logos* that was other than A and more than D and E. 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.

"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* has 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."

I have cited Harner at some length, because his illustrations and remarks are interesting and, I believe, for the most part valid. It must be admitted that a qualitative significance for the anarthrous $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ of John 1:1 is a distinct possibility.

It is to be regretted, however, that Harner insists also upon the indefiniteness of the noun $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$. He admits that in other verses anarthrous predicate nouns preceding the verb may be primarily qualitative in force and yet may also have some connotation of definiteness, and rightly affirms that the categories of qualitiveness and definiteness are not mutually exclusive. (p. 87) But in our verse he thinks that "the qualitative force of the predicate is so prominent that the noun cannot be regarded as definite." (p. 87) The category of indefiniteness seems singularly inappropriate for $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ in John 1:1. The term indefinite implies that the noun would be general and unidentified. But in what way could we speak of the Word, Jesus Christ, as being "God" in such an indefinite sense? For Scripture shows us that the Word shares with the Father one and the same divine essence. Moreover, to take $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ here as indefinite could easily serve to perpetuate the antitrinitarian error that the Word is merely "a god" in some vague, undefined sense of the word. This interpretation Harner himself would vigorously oppose. For he suggests: "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*, no less than *ho theos*, had the nature of *theos*." (p. 87)

So it does not matter significantly whether we accept Colwell's exegesis of John 1:1 or the suggestion of Dana-Mantey and Harner that $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is qualitative in significance. In either case, this verse remains a seat of doctrine for the Scriptural truth that Jesus Christ is true God!