Another God in the Gospel of John?
A Linguistic Analysis of John 1:1 and 1:18

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Abstract

This article is a new study of the word θεός in the Gospel of John, especially in the cases in which it does not refer to the Father. In the Prologue, θεός is twice used to define the Word, the one close to the Father (1:1, 18). These instances are mostly understood as denoting divine quality shared by the Father and the Word. It is argued that linguistic considerations are compelling enough to consider a different interpretation: the Word can be understood as a second, non-competitive deity, a notion that is not as incompatible with John’s monotheism as is generally thought.

Keywords

Gospel of John – Greek linguistics – monotheism – Christology – Arianism – Justin Martyr – θεός

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Most Bible translations render the opening sentence of the Gospel of John (1:1) in this way or similarly. The phrase is notoriously hard to understand and a great deal has been written to explain how the Word could be with God and at the same time be God.¹ While many scholars have discussed the intricacies of the traditional translation of 1:1, far less attention has been given to an altogether different interpretation for which the Greek itself also allows. This

¹ Among the many bookshelves about this topic a good starting point remains M.J. Harris, Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).
alternative view, in which “the Word was a god” – a distinct but completely cooperative deity close to God – has had advocates mainly outside the field of academic scholarship.2 Although some technical studies admit to the linguistic possibility, it is generally considered impossible within the NT context.3

In this paper I argue that there is good reason to explore the linguistic plausibility of the Word as a god close to God. A new analysis of both John 1:1 and 1:18 will show that this alternative interpretation deserves more serious attention than has hitherto been acknowledged. In addition, a brief overview of difficulties in a relevant passage towards the end of the Gospel (20:28) may indicate that a reappraisal of the existing consensus is justified. As this paper is meant to stimulate further research, I will also discuss how the notion of a second god may be reconcilable with current ideas about early Christian monotheism.

1 John 1:1

“Interpretation of the Bible should rightly involve a significant linguistic component, since biblical studies, regardless of whatever else it may be, is a textually based discipline.”4 It is with this recent observation by Stanley Porter in mind that I will give a full review of all existing interpretations of John 1:1–2. These opening words are here accompanied with an English rendering in which the word θεός is left untranslated:

1 a ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος,
In the beginning was the Word,

b καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρός τὸν θεόν,
and the Word was with the theos,

c καὶ θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος.
and the Word was theos.

2 οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρός τὸν θεόν.
This one was in the beginning with the theos.

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2 For example P. Navas, Divine Truth or Human Tradition: A Reconsideration of the Orthodox Doctrine of the Trinity in Light of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011).

3 Harris, Jesus as God, 63, 67–68; D.B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 266–67. Few would go so far as F.F. Bruce, The Books and the Parchments (Old Tappan: Revell 1963), 69 n. 4: “Those people who emphasize that the true rendering of the last clause of John 1:1 is ‘the word was a god,’ prove nothing thereby save their ignorance of Greek grammar.”

4 S.E. Porter, Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 83.
The word θεός preceded by the article is twice used to refer to “the god” who is elsewhere also called “the father” (for instance 1:18). Traditionally ὁ θεός in English has always been translated as “God”, without the article and with a capital G. For clarity’s sake the noun preceded by the article is in this section consistently rendered literally as “the God.”

In 1:1c θεός recurs without the article in reference to “the Word” who “was with the God” and who later came to the world as the God’s only Son. There is little doubt that ὁ λόγος is the subject in all of its three occurrences in 1:1a–c, so that θεός in the phrase “and the Word was theos” (1:1c) is a predicate noun.\(^5\)

From a strictly grammatical viewpoint, this predicate noun can be interpreted in three different ways.

### 1.1 **Option 1: “The Word Was (the) God”**

#### 1.1.1 Introductory Note

What makes 1:1c open to more than one interpretation is the fact that the predicate noun θεός precedes the copular verb (ἦν). Since Ernest C. Colwell’s study (1933) and the discussion it has generated, it has become clear that when a predicate noun that is anarthrous (without the article) precedes the copula in NT Greek, the (definite) article may have been omitted.\(^6\) The clearest example of this rule can be seen in two semantically identical sentences in John 8:12 and 9:5:

Ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου — φῶς εἰμι τοῦ κόσμου

In both cases, Jesus says “I am the light of the world,” but in the second quotation the predicate noun (φῶς) precedes the copula (εἰμί) and the article (τό) is omitted. In reference to the Father as θεός in the nominative case, John always

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5 S.E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999), chapter 5 §2.5 explains how to distinguish the subject from the predicate: “If one of the substantives has an article, it is the subject.” For a contemporary advocate of θεός as the subject rather than the predicate, see K.N. Webster, *And God was the Word* (Murmansk: Murmansk Christian Church, 2016).

6 E.C. Colwell, “A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament,” *JBL* 52 (1933): 12–21; C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959\(^3\)), 115–16; N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 3, *Syntax* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 183–84; F. Blass, A. Debrunner and F. Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1979\(^5\)), §273; P.B. Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 11:1,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 75–87; Harris, *Jesus as God*, 310–13; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 255–90; C.C. Caragounis and J. van der Watt, “A Grammatical Analysis of John 1:1,” *Filología Neotestamentaria* 21 (2008): 91–138: 110–123.
expresses the article when it functions as subject. In 8:54, the only instance in which it is a predicate noun, it precedes the copula and is anarthrous, just as in 1:1c:

ὁ πατήρ..., ἃν υμεῖς λέγετε ὅτι θεός ἡμῶν ἐστίν

The Father ... whom you say is the God of ours.

1.1.2 Discussion

From the above examples it appears to be grammatically possible that the sentence καὶ θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος, “and the Word was theos” in 1:1c means “and the Word was the God.” This is what the traditional rendering “and the Word was God” actually means. As one textbook of NT grammar puts it, this is “a legitimate translation of the passage according to Colwell’s work, if the predicate is definite.” All three instances of θεός with and without the article in 1:1–2 (here referred to as x, y and z) can have exactly the same meaning (x = y = z):

ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς [x] τὸν θεόν, καὶ [y] θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος.

ὁὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς [z] τὸν θεόν.

The Word was with [x] the God, and the Word was [y] the God. This one was in the beginning with [z] the God.

Any interpretation in which the Word is identified or equated with the God is ultimately based on the premise that this is how the Greek of 1:1 must be understood. As acknowledged by Rudolf Bultmann and others who apparently read it this way, it would make the opening words of the Gospel a “paradoxical state of affairs” or an “apparent logical contradiction.” Robert Kysar posits: “the

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7 3:2, 16, 17, 33, 34; 8:42; 9:39; 13:31, 32. When God is referred to as ὁ πατήρ, all cases except the vocative take the article. The only exception is 8:42, because πατήρ is a pre-verbal predicate noun. For the same reason “the Son of Man” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) appears without the article in 5:27.
8 Porter, Idioms, chapter 5 §2.5 (emphasis his).
9 “Ein paradoxer Sachverhalt”: R. Bultmann, Das Evangelium des Johannes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941), 17, also published in English as The Gospel of John. A Commentary, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 34.
10 J. van der Watt, “He was with God and was God,” SJK 4 (2) (2018): 283–302: 285, who also states that “1:1c refers to identity, identifying the Word as God.” Cf. M.M. Thompson, John: A Commentary. The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 28: “John’s identification of the Word as both with God and as God constitutes the heart of the Christology that is unfolded throughout the Gospel.”
11 R. Kysar, John, the Maverick Gospel (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2007), 43.
Logos is a distinct being, yet identical with God. That is, there is both individuality and identification in the relationship between God and Logos.” Arguing in a similar vein Craig R. Koester explains how this combination of individuality and identification may be understood:

“To hear a person’s word is to hear the person. When a person’s word effects something, the person effects something. This is what the prologue is driving at. The Word is differentiated from God and yet is identified with God.”

However, the majority of commentators do not think the Greek must be understood this way. Most agree with Rudolf Schnackenburg that “the θεός before the copula ... does not simply identify the Logos with the ὁ θεός mentioned before.” In order for the Word to be identified with the God, the subject and the predicate need to be interchangeable, but Murray J. Harris points out that θεός in 1:1c is anarthrous “to show that the statement ‘the Word was God’ is not a convertible proposition.” Andreas J. Köstenberger further notes that if John had wanted to equate the Word with God, this would mean “that the distinction established between the two persons in the previous clause (‘the Word was with God’) would have been all but obliterated.” Colwell’s observation has drawn attention to the fact that pre-verbal predicate nouns without the article may be definite, but this does not give us any certainties. In the case of John 1:1c it is doubtful whether there would have been an article if the predicate θεός had followed rather than preceded the copular verb ἦν. Most commentators point to a different interpretation.

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12 C.R. Koester, The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 28. Cf. R. Bauckham, The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 241: “while the Word can be distinguished from God and said to be with him, the Word is also intrinsic to God’s own unique identity.”

13 R. Schnackenburg, The Gospel according to St John, 3 vols. trans. K. Smyth, C. Hastings, F. McDonagh, D. Smith, R. Foley, S.J., and G.A. Kon (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 1:234.

14 Cf. Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns,” 75: “a predicate noun is arthrous when it is interchangeable with the subject in a given context.” For example, “YHWH is the only God” can be converted to “the only God is YHWH.”

15 Harris, Jesus as God, 63. Similarly, in 4:24, πνεῦμα ὁ θεός (“the God [is] spirit”) cannot be converted (“spirit is the God”), because there are more beings that are spirit (cf. 3:6) but just one God.

16 A.J. Köstenberger, John. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 28 (emphasis his). Cf. Caragounis and Van der Watt, “Grammatical Analysis,” 113–15.

17 Cf. Caragounis and Van der Watt, “Grammatical Analysis,” 120 (capitalization theirs): “The structure of the phrase emphasizes the word Θεός. If Θεός were not to be emphasized, then the clause would have been: καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν Θεός.”
1.2 **Option 2: “The Word Was (Essentially) God”**

### 1.2.1 Introductory Note

Before any grammatical rule concerning the anarthrous predicate noun preceding the verb was defined, a nineteenth-century scholar aptly described how “the Word was theos” is best understood:\(^{18}\)

> It is necessarily without the article (θεός not ὁ θεός) inasmuch as it describes the nature of the Word and does not identify His Person.

According to this comment, John 1:1c does not concern the Word’s identity, but answers the question naturally raised by the opening statement: not who, but what was that entity that in the beginning could be with the God? The answer is that the Word was θεός in nature. The repetition in 1:2, “This one was in the beginning with the God” takes away any confusion: it confirms that θεός does not identify the Word, because only the One person with whom the Word was is referred to as ὁ θεός (with the article).

### 1.2.2 Discussion

In the literature following Colwell’s study, much progress has been made in defining in what instances predicate nouns are deliberately meant to have no article. It is recognized that these cases often have qualitative force.\(^{19}\) For instance, in the statement that “God is love” (ὁ θεός ἀγάπη ἡ ἐστίν, 1 John 4:8/16), the pre-verbal anarthrous noun ἀγάπη conveys that love is God’s single most important quality. It is clear that this abstract noun can be interpreted neither as definite (“God is the love”) nor as indefinite (“God is a love”). The same applies to nouns denoting the substance of which something is made. When during the wedding at Cana the master of the banquet takes a sip out of the water jars, it turns out that the water has become wine: τὸ νῦν γεγενήμενον (2:9). The anarthrous material noun (οἶνον) preceding the copular participle (γεγενήμενον) can only be translated without an article, since the water did not turn into “a wine” or “the wine” but simply into wine.

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18 B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1896), 3, quoted by Moule, *Idiom-Book*, 116. Cf. Harris, *Jesus as God*, 63.

19 Especially since Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns.”
In the context of John 1, one such example evidently is of the latter type. In 1:14 John describes the Word as coming to the world:

Καὶ ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν

And the Word became flesh and lived among us

Here, too, the anarthrous predicate noun (σάρξ) with which the now changed nature of the Word is described precedes the copular verb (ἐγένετο). “Flesh” is a material noun and denotes the substance or essence from which humans are made, regardless of person.20 Thus, “to become flesh” is an atypical way of saying “to become human” or “to become a human being.” “Flesh” is the abstract material used metonymically for the concrete human being made of this material and John appears to use this metonym to stress the Word’s remarkable transition.

Returning to 1:1c, θεός is mostly interpreted in analogy to σάρξ as describing the “divine substance”21 of which the Word consisted in the beginning. In this interpretation the Word is not the same as the God but is as much θεός as the God is: the Word is “God” in the same way as the God is “God,” so that they are together “God.” As Schnackenburg puts it:22 “θεός ... signifies the nature proper to God and the Logos in common.” Craig S. Keener:23 “Scholars from across the contemporary theological spectrum recognize that, although Father and Son are distinct in this text, they share deity in the same way.”

This interpretation involves a necessary shift in meaning of the word θεός. In the case of ὁ θεός in John 1:1b and 1:2, θεός is a generic noun that with the article denotes the concrete divine being who is otherwise called the Father. In between, θεός in John 1:1c consequently describes not a person but the abstract quality or essence shared by the Father and the Word. J. Ramsey Michaels

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20 So also 3:6 ESV: τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σάρξ ἐστιν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμα ἐστιν, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

21 J. Beutler, A Commentary on the Gospel of John, trans. M. Tait (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 3: 37.

22 Schnackenburg, Gospel, 1:234.

23 C.S. Keener, The Gospel of John. A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 374. Cf. Wallace, Greek Grammar, 269 (emphasis his): “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.”
explains: “‘God’ is virtually an attribute of the Word, just as spirit and light and love are attributes of God.” If this is right, it must be understood as θεότης, “God-ness” or “göttliches Sein.” In other words, the sequence in 1:1–2 would have to be understood as follows:

\[
[x] \tauὸν \ θεόν \quad [y] \ θεός \quad [z] \ τὸν \ θεόν
\]

\[
[x] \text{the God} \quad [y] \text{God-ness} \quad [z] \text{the God}
\]

Many scholars agree that this cannot be properly represented in English by rendering θεός with and without the article as “God.” Against the traditional translation “the Word was God”, Francis J. Moloney argues “there is a danger that this might lead the contemporary reader of the English text to collapse the Word and God into one”, adding that it is “extremely difficult to catch this nuance in English.” For a precise and consistent translation in which θεός is three times translated with the same English word, we might use “Deity”, since that word can signify both a divine person and the quality of being divine. But then we would also have to translate the definite article that goes with θεός in 1:1b and 1:2 (x and z): “the Word was with the Deity and the Word was Deity; this one was in the beginning with the Deity.”

Given the problems of the traditional translation several scholars agree that the sense of 1:1c is also correctly conveyed in the paraphrase “what God was the Word was.” The shared quality is that the Word and the God are both divine. It is closer to a more literal translation to take the noun θεός as a substitute for the adjective θεός: “the Word was with the God and the Word was divine; this

24 J.R. Michaels, Gospel of John: New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 48 (emphasis his).
25 “God-ness”: Harris, Jesus as God, 62; “göttliches Sein”: H. Thyen, Das Johannesevangelium, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 64; Cf. U. Schnelle, Das Evangelium nach Johannes (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 40: “göttlichen Wesens”; 45: “vom Wesen Gottes.”
26 F.J. Moloney, The Gospel of John (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 35. The Net Bible (online: https://net.bible.org, John 1:1 note 3) for this reason renders “the Word was fully God.”
27 Cf. Harris, Jesus as God, 69. Also M.M. Thompson, The God of the Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 46.
28 R.E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966–1979), 5; Harris, Jesus as God, 73; Keener, Gospel, 374. Similarly Moloney, Gospel, 35: “The translation ‘what God was the Word also was’ indicates that the Word and God retain their uniqueness, despite the oneness that flows from their intimacy.”
one was in the beginning with the God.”29 Some have argued against this by claiming that John would have used the adjective θεός rather than the noun θεός,30 but a more substantial objection to the rendering “the Word was divine” is that it is ambiguous: it is not clear whether the Word is of a quality uniquely shared with the Father, or is a separate being that can be called “divine” by itself.31 This brings us to option 3.

1.3  **Option 3: “The Word Was a God”**

1.3.1  **Introductory Note**

As far back as we can track documents in the Greek language, there has always been a plurality of gods. “For all the gods: honey” is written on one of the Mycenaean Linear B tablets, as are the names of Zeus, Hera and Poseidon on another.32 From Homer onward, we can detect the notion of a singular “God” in Greek literature, but this has little to do with exclusive cultic devotion.33 There could be “privileged devotion to one god who [was] regarded as uniquely superior”, but other gods were “neither depreciated nor rejected and continue[d] receiving due cultic observance whenever this [was] ritually required.”34 This is of course rather different from the writers of the New Testament, whose sole worship of a single supreme being is beyond dispute. In particular, John quotes Jesus referring to ὁ θεός as “the only God” (5:44) and “the only true God” (17:3). It is for this reason that scholars generally agree that 1:1c cannot be translated as “and the Word was a god.”35 It is argued that another god close to the one God

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29 Cf. Keener, *Gospel*, 374. Cf. Moloney, *Gospel*, 42: “As God is divine so the Word is divine, but the Word is not equated with God.” Schnelle, *Johannes*, 45–46.

30 Bultmann, *Johannes*, 17; Brown, *Gospel*, 5; Caragounis and Van der Watt, “Grammatical Analysis,” 123; Thompson, *John*, 29. For a rebuttal, see E. Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. R.W. Funk, ed. R.W. Funk with U. Busse, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 110–11.

31 Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 269 (emphasis his): “In this … translation, ‘divine’ is acceptable only if it is a term that can be applied *only* to true deity … ‘divine’ could be misleading in an English translation.”

32 KN Gg 702; PY Tn 316. Online: https://www2.hf.uio.no/damos.

33 See the still valuable study by G.F. Else, “God and Gods in Early Greek Thought,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 80 (1949), 24–36. More recently H.S. Versnel, *Coping With the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 276: “The terms *ho theos, hoi theoi, to theion, ho daimon, hoi daimones* referring to an anonymous and mysteriously interfering supernatural power abound in Greek idiom of all periods.”

34 For this definition of henotheism, see Versnel, *Coping With the Gods*, 244.

35 This rendering is best known from the *New World Translation*, first published by Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1950, revised in 2013 (online: https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books).
does not fit the Gospel writer’s monotheism and would in fact be tantamount to polytheism.\textsuperscript{36} No sufficiently thorough linguistic assessment has therefore been deemed necessary.\textsuperscript{37} There has been no incentive to make a comparison between John 1:1c and other instances of anarthrous predicate θεός with a copular verb in Greek literature (“to be theos”).\textsuperscript{38} However, there are two reasons to look into the matter further. First, our understanding of early Christian monotheism has been substantially refined in the course of the last decades. This will be discussed below in section 4. Secondly and more to the point in this linguistic section, a reader-centered approach may help us turn our focus to the question of how the author anticipates the way his audience will interpret his words. In John’s particular case, it is not only the monotheism of the author we have to take into account, but also the audience the author had in mind. As one scholar explains (using the term “implied reader”):\textsuperscript{39}

Because writers compose in the absence of their readers, they must imagine readers’ concerns and how they would react to what is being written. ... Implied readers are the kind of readers who are imagined or expected by the writers, and they therefore influence the way in which the text is expressed and can be reconstructed from the text itself.

So who are the readers or listeners expected by John? In many cases the things John assumes to be known could only be known to his fellow believers,\textsuperscript{40} but on

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\item \textsuperscript{36} Bultmann, Johannes, 17; cf. Brown, Gospel, 25. Köstenberger, John, 28: “John, as a monotheistic Jew, would hardly have referred to another person as ‘a god.’” Cf. Keener, Gospel, 372–73.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Not even by Caragounis and Van der Watt, “Grammatical Analysis,” 111, 119, 122. Those who have put forward arguments in favor of “a god” have had little to no attention from NT scholars, although their reasoning yields interesting insights. J.D. BeDuhn, Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003), 113–34; D. Barron, God and Christ. Examining the Evidence for a Biblical Doctrine (online: https://www.scribd.com/document/20779944/God-and-Christ-Examining-the-Evidence-for-a-Biblical-Doctrine, 2009) 77–84; Navas, Divine Truth, 256–87; G. Stafford, Jehovah’s Witnesses Defended: an Answer to Scholars and Critics (Murietta: Elihu Books, 2012\textsuperscript{2}), 326–66; 569–81. L. Spencer, John 13, Was the Word “God,” or “a god?” (online: https://independent.academia.edu/RavRiv, 2010–2020).
\item \textsuperscript{38} For instance Plato, Symp. 202d: Πῶς ἂν ὤν θεός εἶη δ ἐν τῶν καλῶν καὶ ἄγαθῶν ἄμοιρος, “Then how could the one not sharing in beautiful and good things be theos?”
\item \textsuperscript{39} W.S. Kurz, “Narrative Models for Imitation in Luke—Acts,” in Greeks, Romans, and Christians (eds. D.L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W.A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 173–74. Beside the point here is that perhaps the better term is “intended reader”, cf. P.M. Phillips, The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, A Sequential Reading (New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 34–35.
\item \textsuperscript{40} See for instance R.E. Brown, An Introduction to the Gospel of John (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 35–36.
\end{itemize}
the other hand the Gospel shows several indications that the author intentionally wrote to a wider audience. According to Raymond Brown, his “work would have had appeal in the universalizing and transcendent Hellenistic religious world.” Writing specifically about John’s Prologue, Peter M. Phillips states: “In comparison with Matthew and Mark ... John offers a text with a lower, more accessible threshold. This would suggest that the Prologue is a more open text, written for a more general audience, or a text in search of a new audience altogether.” This is immediately apparent in the fact that the one close to the God in 1:1 is defined as the logos: λόγος is a word with diverse meanings used in Jewish literature as well as in Hellenistic philosophy. Since this seems clear, we may well wonder how John would have envisioned a reader or listener of a non-Jewish or non-Christian background familiar with polytheistic (or henotheistic) language to interpret the opening words of his Gospel. Consequently, comparison with similar instances of anarthrous predicate θεός followed by a copular verb in Greek literature does become relevant.

1.3.2 Discussion
In sections 1.1–2 we have seen that in the sequence in which the word θεός appears three times, most scholars agree that the second instance differs from the first and third: the Word is unlikely to be identified as “the God” (as explained in option 1). The anarthrous noun θεός in 1:1c more likely describes what the Word was (as explained in option 2). What is less clear is whether θεός can function as an abstract noun such as “love” or as a material noun such as “flesh” to denote shared divine nature. In classical and Hellenistic Greek literature, whenever θεός is used as a predicate to define nature, I have not been able to find cases in which it is an abstract or a material noun meaning “God-ness.” If John 1:1c answers the question what the Word was who

41 Brown, Introduction, 183–83. Cf. R. Bauckham, Testimony, chapter 6; W. Hwang and J.G. van der Watt, “The Identity of the Recipients of the Fourth Gospel in the Light of the Purpose of the Gospel,” HTS 63.2 (2007): 683–98; E.W. Klink III, The Sheep of the Fold. The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 152–184.
42 Phillips, Prologue, 15; cf. 69–71; cf. 227.
43 G.R. O’Day and S.E. Hylen, John (Louisville: Westminster John Knox press, 2006), 24: “John begins with language that is not restricted to any religious setting. ‘Word’ or logos would have been familiar to John’s Jewish and non-Jewish readers.” The logos is of course discussed in any commentary of John, but see especially Phillips, Prologue, chapter 5.
44 It may here suffice to mention four examples that follow the same predicate-copula-subject pattern as John 1:1c (cf. n. 38 above) and are all concerned with nature, not identity. Herodotus, Hist. 7.203 mentions a message, οὐ ... θεὸν εἶναι τὸν ἐπίνοντα ἐπὶ τὴν Ἕλλαδα ἄλλον ἄνθρωπον, “that the one who was attacking Greece was not theos but a man.” In Euripides, Bacch. Hypothesis king Pentheus holds Dionysus in custody, λέγων ... ὃτι θεός εἶναι ἄτοι Δίονυσος, “saying that Dionysos is not theos.” Aristotle, Protr. 109 says man’s way of...
in the beginning was with the God, it is instructive to review a passage containing both the explicit question τί ἐστί and an anarthrous predicate θεός as the answer. For this, we turn to Longus' novel about Daphnis and Chloë. The elderly Philetas tells the two young protagonists about his experiences with Eros. Subsequently (Daphn. 2.7):

έπυνθάνοντο τί ἐστί ποτε ο Ἐρως, πότερα ποῖς ἐς ὄρνις, καὶ τί δύναιται. Πάλιν οὖν ὁ Φιλητᾶς ἔφη·

θεός ἐστιν, ὁ παιδες, ὁ Ἐρως, νέος καὶ καλὸς καὶ πετόμενος.

they asked what Eros is, a child or a bird, and what his powers are. So in reply Philetas said:

Eros, children, is theos, young and beautiful and with wings.

Philetas' answer follows the same predicate-copula-subject sequence as John 1:1c. It is clear that the predicate θεός here signifies Eros' nature, just as θεός probably denotes the Word's nature in John 1:1c. Granted, the religious and cultural settings of both texts couldn't be wider apart, but one thing can be learned from the textual similarity. In this passage in Longus' novel, the only correct translation of θεός is "a god", which is not surprising since to the author and the (intended) reader, Eros is not the only god. And yet θεός is not to be understood as indefinite (as in "one of many"), but as qualitative. This is inherent to the word θεός itself: it is a generic term, as will be explained below, and the question before us is whether this is any different if the writer is a monotheist.

More often than not, when a predicate noun is used qualitatively to answer the question "what is it?", it is a generic term, such as "child" or "bird" in the above example. When translated into English, such a noun cannot do without the indefinite article, because it automatically involves a concrete individual: "a child", "a bird". In the Gospel of John an obvious example is the noun ἄνθρωπος. In John 10:33, some of the Jews profess their outrage towards Jesus:

οτι συ ἄνθρωπος ἄν ποιεὶς σεαυτὸν θεόν.

because you, being a human being, make yourself theos.

life is managed in such a way ὡστε δοξεῖν ... θεόν εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον, “that man seems to be theos.” Anth. pal. 16.301: εἰ θεός ἐστίν Ὄμηρος, ἐν ἀδιάναται σεβέσθω, “If Homer is theos, let him be revered among immortals.”
This statement shows that the words ἄνθρωπος and θεός are here regarded as opposites, as they often are.45 Jesus’ human nature is obvious to his opponents. They focus not on who he is but on his human nature. Rather than calling him “flesh,” they say he is ἄνθρωπος. This anarthrous pre-verbal predicate noun can be translated as the adjective “human”, but if we maintain it as a noun must be translated as “a human being” or “a man”. Some other similar examples also require the indefinite article when rendered into English and it is difficult to distinguish between qualitative and indefinite as these generic nouns concern concrete individuals, not abstract terms or substances.46 The linguistic difference between “to be flesh” and “to be a man” is therefore not that “flesh” is qualitative and “a man” is indefinite. Both predicates are qualitative, but σάρξ is a material noun whereas ἄνθρωπος is a generic term. In normal Greek usage, not just in Classical Greek but also in the LXX and NT, the word θεός is a generic noun, just like ἄνθρωπος. Both usually refer to an individual or are used to define an individual’s nature.47

Generic nouns can easily be recognized as they can be used in the plural,48 whereas in cases of abstract or material nouns the plural (“‘Gods are loves”, “‘waters became wines”) would not make sense. The Gospel of John itself offers an interesting example of θεός in the plural. In response to the Jews’ outrage of 10:33 mentioned above, Jesus in 10:34 quotes Ps 82:6, in which God says:

ἔγω εἶπα· θεοί ἐστε

I said, you are gods

In this quotation (also discussed below in section 4), God addresses a group whose members are together defined as θεοί. It stands to reason that if God would have approached these members individually rather than collectively,
he would have said θεός εἰ to each one of them, which would mean, not “you are God”, but “you are a god”. The English language requires the indefinite article in the singular simply because the word θεός, like ἄνθρωπος, is a generic noun. It is important to stress the fact that, due to the non-existence of the indefinite article in Greek, a phrase like ἄνθρωπος εἰμι or θεός εἰμι has a slightly different feel than “I am a man” or “I am a god” has to a speaker of English. In these phrases the nouns are qualitative but in the singular they need to be translated with the indefinite article.49

Returning to 1:1 we can say that the Word was a distinct entity very close to the God, who later became a human individual. The rendering “the Word was a god” is an interpretation that to John’s diverse Greek-speaking reading audience would not only be conceivable, but in fact rather natural. It is consistent with the usage of the word θεός throughout Greek literature, as θεός in 1:1–2 would retain its concrete meaning of “divine being” in all three cases:

[x] τὸν θεόν  [y] θεός  [z] τὸν θεόν

[x] the God / the Deity  [y] a god / a deity  [z] the God / the Deity

This is arguably how at least a Gentile native speaker of Greek, well versed in the wealth of Greek culture, would have understood it in the language that had been used by polytheists (and henotheists) for centuries. The fact that the God with whom the Word was is modified by the article would not rule out the existence of another god.50 There would be no reason to understand the anarthrous θεός as an abstract noun, such as love or light, or a material noun, such as flesh and spirit. It would have much more naturally been taken as the generic noun that ὁ θεός in 1:1b and 1:2 certainly is.

49 The Greek does not require the addition of the enclitic indefinite pronoun τις as in θεός τις “some god or other” as insisted by Caragounis and Van der Watt, “Grammatical Analysis,” 122. Cf. Homer, Il. 22.9–10, where Apollo says to Achilles: αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς ἐὼν ... οὐδὲ νῦν πώ με ἐγὼς ὡς θεός εἰμι, “you a mortal ... not even yet have you recognized me that I am a god?” Here too the focus is on the god’s nature, not on his identity as Apollo. Cf. also Ezek 28:9 LXX and above, n. 38 and 44, in which all examples of theos must be translated as “a god.”

50 I find no justification for Brown, Gospel, 24: “For Gentile readers the line ... avoids any suggestion that the Word was a second God in any Hellenistic sense.” This would be far from clear from the opening lines alone. For a Gentile reader – as Else, “God and Gods,” 31 says – “the developed term ὁ θεός ... no more necessarily implied the existence of one god than ὁ ἄνθρωπος implied the existence of only one human being.” Versnel, Coping with the Gods, 276 mentions a French survey of the use of ὁ θεός in classical Greek literature and concludes: “Ho theos and ho daimon in open contexts ... practically never denote ‘un Dieu unique et personnel.”
Now, instead of speculating about how a contemporary reader may or may not have understood John 1:1c, let us consider what may be viewed as actual evidence of early reader response to the Gospel of John. The second-century philosopher Justin Martyr had a Gentile background and became a Christian, as he tells us in *Dial.* 3–7. In *Apol.* 63.15 he speaks in words reminiscent of John 1:1 and Col 1:15 about the Father and about the Son:

δς Λόγος καὶ πρωτότοκος ὃν τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ θεὸς ύπάρχει.

who, being the Word and firstborn of the God, is also theos.

Within the participle construction the predicates Λόγος and πρωτότοκος are without a doubt definite: the Son is not “a Word” and “a firstborn” of “the God”. The only reason these predicate nouns miss their articles is that they precede the copular participle ὃν. In the clause itself the predicate θεός also precedes its own copular verb (ὑπάρχει = ἐστίν), which makes the use of the anarthrous θεός similar to the instance in John 1:1. However, different from Λόγος and πρωτότοκος, the pre-verbal predicate θεός cannot be interpreted as definite (“the God”), as Justin has previously argued that those who say that the Son is the Father do not know the Father. So within this context θεός must be qualitative, but is it an abstract or material noun (“God-ness”, “Deity”) or is it a generic noun (“a god”, “a deity”)? We can infer the answer to this question from passages elsewhere. In *Dial.* 56.4 Justin argues:

ὁτι ἐστί καὶ λέγεται θεός καὶ κύριος ἐτέρος ὑπὸ τὸν ποιητὴν τῶν ὅλων.

that there is and is said to be another god and lord under the maker of the universe.

Similarly, in *Dial.* 61.3 Justin refers to the Word:

αὐτός ὃν σῶτος ὁ θεός ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν ὅλων γεννησθεὶς.

this god himself being begotten of the Father of the universe.

51 That Justin read the Gospel of John is convincingly argued by Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 316–28. Cf. also C.E. Hill, “The Orthodox Gospel: The Reception of John in the Great Church prior to Irenaeus,” in *The Legacy of John. Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (ed. T. Rasimus; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 233–300: 252–65. We find clear allusions to John’s Prologue in *Apol.* 5:4; 10:5; 21:1; 22:2; 23:2; 32:9, 10; 60:7; 63:4, 15; 2 *Apol.* 6:3, 4–5.
It is evident that Justin treats θεός in both cases as a generic noun, so that we may conclude that his use of the anarthrous predicate θεός in reference to the Word in 1 Apol. 63.15 and other instances is no different from classical Greek. It must here too be translated as “a god”, as it is clear that Justin views the Word as another god. However, this does not change the fact that Justin was a monotheist. “One must worship only God”, he writes in 1 Apol. 16.6 (τὸν θεόν μόνον θεὶς προσκυνεῖν), and at the same time he does not regard “this god begotten of the Father” as competing in worship with God the Father. Rather, in 2 Apol. 13.4 he states:

τὸν γὰρ ἀπὸ ἀγεννήτου καὶ ἀφρήτου θεοῦ Λόγον μετὰ τὸν θεὸν προσκυνοῦμεν καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν.

for we worship and love the Word, sprung from the unborn and unspoken God, after the God.

Justin’s reception of John’s prologue can of course not be used to prove or disprove how John meant 1:1c to be read, but it is valid to say that in his reading of John’s prologue, or at least in his phrasing similar to John’s, the second-century Christian philosopher evidently understood θεός in reference to the Word as the generic noun it naturally is. So, if a monotheistic intellectual saw the Word as “a god” just decades after John’s Gospel was written, the question that deserves further consideration is whether the Gospel writer himself would find this interpretation an infringement of his own monotheism.

2 In God’s Bosom: John 1:18

Before we explore the religious possibilities of “a god” in 1:1c, we must first discuss the end of John’s prologue, John 1:18. The NA28 and UBS5 editions

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52 Dial. 48.2: υἱὸς τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῶν ἀλων, θεός ὄν, “Son of the maker of the universe, being a god”; 58.9: θεός καλεῖται καὶ θεός ἔστι καὶ ἔσται, “he is called a god and is and will be a god.” Cf. 48.4; 127.4.
53 Cf. Dial. 56.11; 75:4; 128.1.
54 See also below, section 4.
55 Hill, “The Orthodox Gospel,” 257–58 offers a brief survey of Justin’s views on the Word in relationship to John’s Gospel and posits: “we may (...) surmise that John’s prologue played a formative role in Justin’s understanding of Christ as the Word of God.”
read this passage as follows (my word-for-word translation again leaves θεός untranslated):56

Θεόν οὐδεὶς ἐώρακεν πᾶσατ: μονογενὴς θεός ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκείνος ἐξηγήσατο.

No one has ever seen theos; only(born) theos the [one] being in the bosom of the Father, that one has explained [him].

This verse has much in common with 1:1, with which it apparently forms an envelope structure.57 Again the word θεός occurs in succession and with different applications. The first occurrence of θεός refers to the Father.58 The second instance of θεός is defined as “the one who is in the bosom of the Father.” The noun is preceded by the adjective μονογενής. This denotes uniqueness,59 and in a familial relation means “who is an only child” or, for lack of a better word, “onlyborn”, “siblingless.” Just as θεός referring to the Father and θεός referring to the Word have already been mentioned in 1:1–2, so μονογενής and πατήρ have already appeared in 1:14. Since in both 1:14 and 1:18 there is mention of a father figure, understanding μονογενὴς as “siblingless” is in accordance with other occurrences in the NT.60 Some scholars prefer to translate μονογενής without the familial nuance as “unique”, “of one kind.”61

56 The principal variant readings are (i) μονογενὴς θεός, (ii) ὁ μονογενὴς θεός and (iii) ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός. See especially Harris, Jesus as God, 73–82. More briefly Beutler, Commentary, 50–51 n. 54.
57 Or inclusio, see Brown, Gospel, 36; Beutler, Commentary, 3, 47.
58 The fact that θεόν misses the article is difficult to explain, but the identification with the Father is certain. Cf. 6:46: σὺν ὃ τὸν πατέρα ἐώρακεν τις εἰ μὴ ὁ ὢν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, οὗτος ἐώρακεν τὸν πατέρα. Also 5:37; 14:9.
59 J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989²), §58.52. Cf. Phillips, Prologue, 203–05.
60 D.A. Fennema, “John 1:18: ‘God the only Son,’” NTS 31 (1985), 124–35: “We discover that every undisputed NT occurrence of μονογενὴς denotes a unique filial relationship, whether or not it modifies υἱός or θυγάτηρ” (127). Cf. Harris, Jesus as God, 92. Also M. Morgen, “Le (fils) monogène dans les écrits johanniques: Évolution des traditions et élaboration rédactionnelle,” NTS 53 (2007): 165–83.
61 G. Pendrick, “ΜΟΝΟΓΕΝΗΣ,” NTS 41 (1995), 587–630. P. Coutsoumpos, “The Difficulty of μονογενὴς θεός in John 1:18: A Reassessment,” Biblica 98.3 (2017): 435–46.
The reading μονογενὴς θεός is considered difficult. It has been suggested that we should emend the text and read μονογενὴς θεοῦ, “only Son of God.” Or we should read ὁ μονογενής, “the onlyborn.” This does not occur in any of the Greek textual witnesses but is indirectly attested. Others prefer the simpler and widely attested reading ὁ μονογενής υἱός, which also occurs elsewhere in John: “the only Son.” However, μονογενὴς θεός has superior manuscript support and therefore deserves our attention.

Many scholars believe that the combination must be translated along the following lines:

μονογενὴς θεός

the one and only (Son), (who is) God

In this translation μονογενὴς has been understood to be what it certainly is in 1:14, namely a substantival adjective. However, in 1:18 μονογενὴς is followed by the noun θεός. This noun is in turn regarded as an explanatory apposition that is to be understood as a qualitative noun (as in 1:1c). Thus, the juxtaposed adjective and noun are not supposed to form a noun phrase, but the noun is viewed to be in apposition to the adjective.

Elsewhere John uses μονογενὴς as he uses other adjectives: (i) as a modifier in a noun phrase (attributive), either (a) before the noun (XY) or (b) after the noun (YX), and (ii) independent (substantival), and with or without the article. These various uses of the adjective may be summarized as follows:

62 Fennema, “John 1.18,” 125: for many scholars it is “just too difficult to accept!” R. Kysar, John (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 34: “The strongest reason for preferring the reading ... is the fact that it is by far the more difficult.” Cf. Thyen, Johannesevangelium, 104: “die schwierigere Lesart.”
63 See Bultmann, Johannes, 55–56 n. 4; Harris, Jesus as God, 93.
64 Such as, among other versions, two manuscripts of the Vulgate (unigenitus without deus or filius). See Harris, Jesus as God, 74–76; Keener, Gospel, 425 n. 586; Thyen, Johannesevangelium, 103.
65 Bultmann, Johannes, 55–56 n. 4. Also Schnackenburg, Gospel, 1:283 and C.K. Barrett, The Gospel according to St. John (London: SPCK, 1978), 169, although they admit to the strong manuscript support. More recently Moloney, Gospel, 46; Thompson, Commentary, 27.
66 Cf. Schnackenburg, Gospel, 1:283; Fennema, “John 1.18,” 128; Harris, Jesus as God, 88–92; Köstenberger, John, 49–50; Thyen, Johannesevangelium, 103–4. On the absence of the article, see below.
67 Cf. Turner, Grammar, 185; Blass, Debrunner and Rehkopf, Grammatik, § 264 and 270; Wallace, Greek Grammar, 294–95; 306–7; 309–11; Porter, Idioms, chapter 6, §§1.1 and 1.4. Some examples: (i a) τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ (3:18), (d) ἄλλος μαθητής (18:15; 20:3), τῇ ἱδίᾳ
The adjective can be used as a noun, but only if it stands alone: the substantival ἅγαπητός means “beloved one”, “one who is beloved.” In combination with a noun, whether in an XY or YX pattern, the adjective invariably forms a noun phrase in which the noun is the head and the adjective the modifier. The noun does not stand in apposition to a substantival adjective. The combination ἅγαπητός υἱός does not mean “beloved one, who is a son” but is a noun phrase meaning “son who is beloved.”

If we take this as a fundamental rule, serious doubt may be raised against taking μονογενὴς θεός in 1:18 as two separate titles and translating as “only Son, who is God.” Appositions consist of two adjacent nouns or of a personal pronoun and a noun, not of a substantival adjective followed by a noun. The adjective μονογενὴς must not be viewed as substantival because it is so in 1:14. The noun θεός must not be interpreted as qualitative on the grounds that it is πατρίδι (4:44); (ii) ὁ μονογενὴς ἅγαπητός (3:16), ὁ μαθητὴς ὁ ἅγαπητός (5:18); (ii) μονογενὴς (1:11), ἅγαπητός (5:7), ὁ θεός (1:1). 68 Cf. Westcott, Gospel, 15: “The best-attested reading (μονογενὴς θεός) has the advantage of combining the two great predicates of the Word, which have been previously indicated (v. 1 θεός, v. 14 μονογενής).” Similarly Fennema, “John 1.18”, 128: “these terms reiterate the ascription to the Logos of two distinct and coordinate attributes, namely sonship (μονογενής, 1.14) and deity (θεός, 1.1).” 69 Cf. Turner, Grammar, 206; Wallace, Greek Grammar, 48. The Net Notes of the Net Bible (online: https://netbible.org, John 1:18 note 45) claim “there are several instances in the NT in which a substantival adjective is followed by a noun with which it has complete concord.” However, of the given examples (Rom 1:30; Gal 3:9; 1 Tim 1:19; 2 Pet 2:5) only Gal 3:9 has an instance similar to μονογενὴς θεός, and it is also a noun phrase: τῷ πιστῷ Ἁβραάμ, “the faithful Abraham”, “Abraham who is the man of faith” – not “the man of faith who is Abraham.” 70 The substantival μονογενής may be semantically equivalent to the noun phrase μονογενὴς υἱός, but that does not justify Harris, Jesus as God, 92: “If μονογενὴς is equivalent to (ὁ) μονογενὴς υἱός in John 1:18, the corollary is that θεός stands in epexegetical apposition to μονογενής.”
so in 1:1c. It is much more in accordance with Greek practice and consistent with the rest of the Gospel’s syntax to take the adjective and the noun as a noun phrase in the XY pattern in which μονογενής maintains its natural adjectival force: not “only Son, who is God”, but “god who is an only Son.”

As for the absence of the article, although it is possible that the words are an indefinite unit that is subsequently defined by a substantival participle, it is more likely that the article that goes with the participle makes μονογενής θεός definite also:

Θεόν οὐδεὶς ἐώρακεν πάντως: μονογενής θεός ὁ ὄν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκείνου ἐξηγήσατο.

No one has ever seen God: the only(born) god, who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has made [him] known.

Whether or not μονογενής θεός is definite, when taken as a noun phrase it means that the one who has made the invisible God known is not just the Son who is also divine, but the god who is God’s only Son, or (to pick up the alternative interpretation of μονογενής) “the unique god” who has the peerless distinction of being uniquely close to God. This amounts to two gods. As one scholar notes:

Since μονογενής means ‘only Son’, if it modifies θεός the resultant phrase is properly translated as ‘(the) only-Son God’. But this so sharply distinguishes the God who is the Son from the God who is not (i.e. the Father) as to posit the existence of two separate Deities.

Thus, interpreting 1:18 as “the only Son, who is himself God” (or “the unique one, who is God”) does not appear to be based on linguistic considerations. It is more likely the result of the presupposition that to the monotheistic author

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71 Cf. κολυμβήθρα ἢ ἐπιλεγομένη Ἐβραίστι Βηθζαβά, (5:2); Πολλοὶ ... ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων οἱ Ἑλθόντες πρὸς τὴν Μαρίαν (11:45). Other NT examples are: παιδίοις τοῖς ἐν ἀγορᾷ καθημένοις (Luke 7:32); σκηνὴ ἢ λεγομένη Ἀγία Ἀγίων (Heb 9:3).

72 Other NT examples are: γυναῖκες αἱ συνακολουθοῦσαι αὐτῷ (Luke 23:49); ἀδελφοὶ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (Gal 1:1); ἑδροὶ δοκίμαζοντες τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν (1 Thess 2:4). It is also worthy of note that all other instances of resumptive ἐκείνος in John refer back to an articular subject, cf. 1:33; 5:11, 37; 9:37; 10:1; 12:48; 14:21, 26. Cf. Wallace, Greek Grammar, 307, 339.

73 Fennema, “John 1.18,” 128.
of the Gospel there can be no more than one deity. As a consequence of what this linguistic study has shown, that view is open to debate.

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Excursus: Does Thomas Have the Final Word? (20:28)

The third and final passage in which the word θεός demands our attention is 20:28. In the penultimate chapter Jesus has risen from the grave and has paid his most trusted disciples a visit:

Now Thomas ... was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them ... Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

John 20:24–29 NIV

Thus the sceptical disciple overcame his doubts and now believed that his master had indeed returned from the dead. We have seen that within the prologue, 1:1 forms an envelope structure with 1:18. It is generally assumed that 1:1c (“and the Word was theos”) and Thomas’ expression in 20:28 (“My Lord and my God”, Ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου) are likewise connected to bracket the entire Gospel. In his commentary, Charles K. Barrett states:

The return to the opening proposition of the gospel is intended, and there can be no doubt that John intended this confession of faith to form the climax of the gospel ...; it is his final Christological pronouncement.

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74 Cf. Porter, Linguistic Analysis, 87: “it has been very difficult for biblical scholars to rid themselves of some deeply rooted preconceptions, since theological presuppositions are strong motivators.”

75 Barrett, Gospel, 573. Cf. Brown, Gospel, 5, 1047; Beutler, Commentary, 3, 515.
In like manner, Keener calls Thomas’ words “the Gospel’s climactic christological confession.” There is consensus that Thomas’ words confirm that “the Word was God”, but the immediate context raises two difficulties.

(a) It is evident that the whole scene forms the climax of the interaction between Jesus and his disciples. All remaining eleven disciples have now seen and acknowledged that their master has risen. However, contrary to what Barrett states, there is cause for doubt that this is John’s final pronouncement of faith in the Christ – it isn’t. The final thing John has to say about how Jesus must be understood immediately follows the scene with Thomas, when the narrator expresses the faith he wishes his readers to have:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30–31 ESV

In this mission statement John sums up the entire Gospel’s purpose. The acknowledgment of Jesus as Christ and Son of God and the resulting everlasting life come together as major themes. Thomas’ expression appears to be far from the narrator’s mind, as Jesus as θεός is not one of those themes. In mentioning the prerequisite for everlasting life, the author does not return to the opening statement in 1:1, but focuses on the message that has been mentioned several times before: God wants people to believe he sent his Son so that they may live forever. In his concluding statement, John makes clear that in order to “have life”, his readers need to know Jesus for who he is (rather than for what he is): the Christ and the Son of God. If John had really meant Thomas to set the example and to pronounce that this Christ is now by every reader to be recognized as “my God”, it is hard to explain why this is not reflected in what is evidently John’s own final christological pronouncement. As an explana-

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76 Keener, Gospel, 121. Cf. Harris, Jesus as God, 129: “the culmination of the entire Gospel”; Th yen, Johannesevangelium, 767: “das adäquateste und gefüllteste Bekenntnis des gesamten Evangeliums.”
77 See for instance Beutler, Commentary, 9–13 on “the aim or purpose of the composition of the Fourth Gospel.”
78 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:40; 8:24, 51; 11:25–26; 17:3. Cf. 1 John 2:22–25.
79 Köstenberger, John, 579 notes: “the evangelist desires that the reader respond in the same way Thomas did.” However, from his mission statement one would surmise that John wants the reader to follow rather Martha’s example in 11:27 ESV: “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.”
tion of why Thomas' choice of words is not adopted here, Brown suggests: “Probably because the title ‘God’ for Jesus was relatively recent, John preferred in his statement of purpose to use the more traditional ‘Son of God’; but his approval of the ‘Lord and God’ profession shows how he understood ‘Son of God.’” This does not make sense: not the author’s but the audience’s understanding is what matters here. Their prospect of eternal life depends on a proper knowledge of who Jesus is. If John in stating his intentions saw no reason to instill upon his readers that Jesus was in fact their God, some caution as to the importance of Thomas’ exclamation is to be recommended.

(b) In addition to John’s uncorroborating mission statement immediately following the Thomas episode, the verses that precede it also need consideration. As we have seen, Thomas addresses the risen Christ as “my God” (ὁ θεός μου). Earlier within the chapter, Jesus himself had used the same phrase and applied it to the Father (20:17):

\[ \text{ἀναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ θεόν μου καὶ θεόν ὑμῶν.} \]

I am going to my Father and your Father and to my God and your God.

Given the fact that the risen Jesus himself refers to the Father as his God as well as his disciples’ God, it would be incongruous if the disciple Thomas would now be the one to suddenly shift the object of worship from the Father to the Son, or to somehow merge the two. As Thompson puts it, “it is highly unlikely that John intends the reader to understand that at some point the Father and the Son are simply ‘collapsed’ into one.” Nor are we to think that Thomas is mistaken: Jesus says nothing to correct his friend, nor does the narrator comment on a lack of judgement on the part of his character, as he does elsewhere.

In understanding 20:28 we should, perhaps, concentrate not so much on the word θεός but rather on the person who says it and the specifics of his previous interactions with Jesus. In the latest instance before chapter 20, we hear of Thomas during the last night the disciples have the opportunity to listen to their master before his trial and death. Jesus speaks at great length during their last supper together (starting in chapter 13). Among the topics of these final lessons are Jesus’ relationship with the Father. In chapter 14 he says (14:1 ESV): “Believe in God; believe also in me.” These words clearly imply that in order to believe in God, it is required to believe in the one who is distinct yet fully in

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80 Brown, Gospel, 1060.
81 Thompson, The God of the Gospel of John, 235.
82 Cf. 8:27; 11:13; 20:14; 21:4.
unison with the Father. Jesus subsequently announces he will go to the Father, and that his disciples will eventually follow him. In response,

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

John 14:5–7 ESV

There is no further mention of Thomas, but in the subsequent verse the narrator mentions another disciple's misunderstanding, which makes him a second case to depict a puzzlement that is probably general. As elsewhere, Jesus' friends need time to process all they learn, and much of it is only perceived after Jesus' resurrection. This brings us back to chapter 20. Since it is to none other than Thomas that Jesus had said: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6), it may very well be that these words come back to Thomas at the moment he sees his master resurrected. As Koester states:

During the last supper, Jesus tells Thomas that he is the way by which people come to know and to see God the Father (14:6–7); but only ... when the risen Jesus shows Thomas the marks of crucifixion, are the words of John 14 realized in Thomas's confession, “My Lord and my God.” ... The significance of Jesus' saying about the way emerges after his death and resurrection.

Saying “My Lord and my God” to the Son would in concordance with 14:6 amount to addressing the Father through the Son. Thus, Thomas was honoring the Father by honoring the Son as the sole person who makes the Father both known and accessible (cf. 1:18; 5:23). Rather than being the first to address Jesus as God, Thomas may here be remembered as the first disciple who put Jesus' role as sole mediator – as the unique interface between man and God – to good use. Thomas already believed, as did Jesus, that the Father was

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83 For the disciples' misunderstanding cf. 4:31–34; 11:11–13; 13:28–29; 16:17–18.
84 Cf. 2:22 ESV: “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed ... the word that Jesus had spoken.” Cf. 12:16.
85 C.R. Koester, Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 295–96. Cf. Thompson, Commentary, 425. For a different approach, see Van der Watt, “He was with God and was God,” 289–91.
86 Moses speaks with God through an angel in Exod 3. Cf. also Ge 31:11, 13; Judg 6:11–22.
his God. He now finally showed faith also in Jesus (14:1) by recognizing him as the necessary and only intermediary.87

This tentative explanation88 is not meant to resolve the difficulties of John 20:28, but serves to illustrate that the interpretation of the Gospel of John is a dynamic process in which final answers are hard to find. If it weren’t for 20:17 and 20:30–31, Thomas’ address in 20:28 would indeed suggest that Jesus is to be identified as God. In its given context, however, no such clear-cut conclusion is justified. Whether 20:28 is relevant to the understanding of 1:1 and 1:18 is little more than undecided.

4 Defining John’s Monotheism

At the beginning of section 1 of this paper I quoted Stanley Porter to stress the importance of the linguistic foundations of textual interpretation. He also wrote:89 “Unfortunately, the biblical texts have been so thoroughly studied for so long that many interpreters do not expect new insights from careful study of the ancient languages.” In sections 1–2 it is argued that a careful linguistic study of both 1:1c and 1:18 actually does produce new or at least some refined insights. The word θεός naturally is a generic noun, and this is true everywhere else in the Gospel of John. When taken as such in 1:1c, only options 1 (“the Word was (the) God”) and 3 (“the Word was a god”) are legitimate translations. With most commentators I agree that 1:1c is not about who the Word was (his identity), but about what he was, his nature, and from a purely linguistic standpoint this would mean option 3 is the preferred translation. However, it is at this point that commentators interpret θεός differently. In the triple succession of the noun θεός in 1:1–2, the second instance is interpreted as an abstract term (“God-ness”) rather than as the generic noun that it is both naturally and in the first and third instance. The question is whether theological considerations give sufficient ground to suppose such a departure from what is normal in Greek. In addition, the adjective μονογενής in 1:18, though followed by

87 I agree with Thompson, The God of the Gospel of John, 235 that Thomas “acknowledges the exclusive and comprehensive revelation of God through the person of Jesus”, but not with her addition “and the identity of Jesus with God.”
88 Contrast Harris, Jesus as God, 125–26: “It is inadequate ... to say simply that Thomas (or John) recognized that God was active in and through Jesus.” It is not inadequate since it is in accordance with 14:7, 9–11, 20. It cannot be ruled out that Thomas with his fingers in Jesus’ side was simply overwhelmed and that Jesus allowed him to say whatever he felt like without his expression being christologically relevant.
89 Porter, Linguistic Analysis, 83.
the noun θεός, is interpreted by most as a noun rather than an adjective, and thus would form the only combination of an adjective and a noun that is not a noun phrase. This interpretation certainly presupposes a serious deviation from common practice. If we accept μονογενὴς θεός as the original reading, we also need to recognize that it is most probably a noun phrase.

I contend that in his use of the word θεός and of noun phrases, John does not deviate from standard Greek practice. If we read both 1:1c and 1:18 in accordance with the syntax of classical and Johannine Greek as “the Word was a god” and “the onlyborn / unique god”, this yields another god in a secondary position, incomparable in his provenance, exclusive in his intimacy with the God. It is now time to look into the sheer feasibility of another god in the works of a monotheistic writer.

In recent years the labours of several scholars have resulted in a more refined understanding of Jewish and early-Christian monotheism.90 For instance, Larry Hurtado, one of the foremost authorities in the field of early Christianity of the past decades, writes in a recent article summing up his seminal contributions to NT studies:91

The problem is that the dictionary definition of “monotheism” typically requires the denial of the existence of any more than one deity, and it is not always clear that ancient Jews and Christians were concerned to do this. Over the last couple of decades, several scholars have noted this and have urged that “monotheism” is not a suitable term in describing ancient Jewish and Christian religious stances. ... [F]or ancient Jews, and ancient Christians, as well, the primary concern was not to deny the existence of other divine beings, but instead to avoid/refuse offering worship to any being other than the one biblical God.

For “other divine beings” in John’s Gospel we now return to 10:34, already mentioned above (section 1.3). Jesus quotes Ps 82:6, in which God addresses other beings with the words θεοὶ ἐστε, “you are gods.” In a recent study, Van der Watt

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90 Cf. the recent overview by B.D. Smith, “What Christ Does, God Does: Surveying Recent Scholarship on Christological Monotheism,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 17.2 (2019): 184–208.
91 L.W. Hurtado, “Observations on the ‘Monotheism’ Affirmed in the New Testament,” in *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology* (eds. C.A. Beeley and M.E. Weedman; Washington: CUA, 2018), 50–68: 51–52 (emphasis his). Cf. L.W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).
concludes:92 “the use of the word θεός is not restricted to the monotheistic God, but allows for a wider use, including sons of God or people performing actions on behalf of God.” The ones addressed in Ps 82 “may be called gods for functional reasons, i.e. because they did what God required.” It is clear that unlike the implication of power or of an exalted position, personal worship is not necessarily inherent to the term θεός:93 it is the cooperation with the God that entitles them to be called “gods.” Van der Watt further argues how this is relevant for the use of θεός for God’s son: “In similar fashion Jesus functionally did the works of the Father.” Of course there is an important distinction between the “gods” of Ps 82 and Jesus: “He is not only functionally one with the Father but their close relationship also illustrates their unity, a unity that never threatens either one of them.” At this point let us return to Hurtado, who remarks on the Son’s unique position as follows (emphasis mine):94

[T]he New Testament reflects a ... distinctive feature central to the religious stance it promotes, which involves the inclusion of the risen/exalted Jesus uniquely as a co-recipient of cultic devotion along with the one God. Yet Jesus is not represented as a second deity; instead, he is designated by God as the unique agent of divine purposes and as the rightful co-recipient of devotion. In obedience to God, therefore, the proper worship of the one God must now include the exalted Jesus. To avoid confusion, this dyadic pattern of devotion can be designated “early Christian monotheism.”95 It comprises a distinctive mutation or innovation in the “ancient Jewish monotheism” in which it first appeared. This innovation reflects and shares the cultic exclusivity of the Jewish matrix from which it historically derived but has this distinctive “dyadic shape,” making “early Christian monotheism” a further distinguishable kind of religious posture and practice.

I have italicized the words that I challenge with the findings of this paper. In the case of the prolific Christian apologist Justin Martyr, they clearly need to be erased. The crucial question raised by my linguistic study is whether in the case of John it would be improper to designate the co-recipient as “a god” alongside “the God”. As is clear from 10:34, the term “god” in itself does not imply a

92 This and the subsequent quotations Van der Watt, “He was with God,” 298.
93 Cf. Thompson, The God of the Gospel of John, 22 on the word θεός; “It certainly need not have implied a figure to be worshipped.”
94 Hurtado, “Observations,” 68.
95 Elsewhere Hurtado explains how this devotion translated into worship practice, cf. Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 105–19.
claim for autonomy and personal worship. It does imply an exalted position and power and – when applied to others than the Father – functional unity with the Father. Hurtado clearly sees a second god as a competitor, contrary to the above findings. However, a “rightful co-recipient of devotion” would not at all diminish the importance of the One God merely by also being classified as a god. Justin wrote just decades after John, and he did in fact define this non-competitive co-recipient of cultic devotion as a second god who clearly does not claim worship for himself at the expense of the Father. Justin’s understanding of the word θεός as a non-competitive exalted being is consistent with that of John in 10:34, and arguably also in 1:1c.96

5 Conclusion

The texts discussed in this article (John 1:1–2, 1:18 and 20:28) are the ones that feature most prominently in any discussion about the divinity of the Son, and none of them is without problem. John explicitly and specifically states what he wants his readers to believe about Jesus (20:31). The fact that this mission statement is devoid of any mention that Jesus is himself God may be of more significance than is generally thought. It is conceivable that interpreters have given too much weight to the use of θεός referring to Jesus. The arguments that have hitherto been put forward against the Word as “a god” are not satisfactory, because to understand the Word as a god is consistent with the characteristics of Johannine Greek and may very well be compatible with early Christian religious views. It is clear from Jesus’ quotation of Ps 82 that the word θεός could be used to imply little more than an exalted position and power granted by God. God himself applies the term “god” to those who are expected to do as he requires, and since God’s Son as his foremost agent with the greatest possible responsibilities unfailingly does what God requires, it stands to reason that the Son could also be referred to as a distinct but non-competitive divine being, and more particularly the god who is God’s only Son.

In view of the above analysis, there are compelling reasons to propose an alternative definition of John’s Christology. In the opening lines, John is concerned with the Word’s nature: he is a divine being who temporarily became a human being. In his mission statement, John focuses on Jesus’ identity: he is the Christ and the Son of God. Nature and identity are not to be confounded, and in neither case is the Word or Jesus equal to God. If it is acknowledged that John

96 Smith, “What Christ Does, God Does,” 204 aptly remarks: “the patristic period’s reception of early Christological monotheism is ripe for further research.”
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quite possibly presents the Christ as a secondary deity without compromising his monotheism, this may prompt new approaches to other christological texts within the NT text corpus. Alternatively, the findings in this paper require new arguments to refute.97

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97 During the research project that resulted in this article I had the privilege to discuss my findings with several experts. I wish to especially thank Gerard Boter for his assiduous and indispensable advice, as well as this journal’s reviewers for their helpful and stimulating comments. I summarize the contents of this paper in the following choliambics: θεὸν θεόν τε μὴ θεόν νομίζοντι / πῶς εἶς ἄν εἶς τε κρηγήως ἀριθμοῖτο; / Πατὴρ υός τε δῆθ᾽ ἕν εἰσιν, ἀλλ᾽ οὐχ εἶς. “There’s ‘God’ and ‘god’, so why not see them as two gods? How else would one plus one be added up correctly? The Father and the Son are of one mind, but not one mind.”
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