

# FROM 'GOD' (ΘΕΟΣ) TO 'GOD' (ΝΟΥΤΕ): A NEW DISCUSSION AND PROPOSAL REGARDING JOHN 1:1C AND THE SAHIDIC COPTIC VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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## Abstract

Due to the antiquity of the Sahidic Coptic version of the New Testament among early versions of the New Testament, it is a significant resource for New Testament textual criticism, reception history, and the history of interpretation. This article explores the manner in which the Sahidic Coptic version translates the anarthrous nominative singular (AnNS) θεός, and its effect on a key passage regarding the understanding of Jesus' divinity. It does so by answering two distinct but related questions: (1) Did the Sahidic Coptic translators uniformly translate the AnNS θεός? (2) How can the assessment of the Sahidic Coptic translation pattern inform the discussion of the history, transcription, and translation of John 1:1c?

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Sahidic Coptic version of the New Testament is among the most important of the early versions of the New Testament. Most scholars place the Sahidic Coptic translation no later than the fourth century and as early as the second.<sup>1</sup> Given its early date,

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of scholarly opinion, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 127; Arthur Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament: Manuscript Studies* (Stockholm: Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1954), pp. 219–20; and Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd edn., vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), p. 35. Frederik Wisse ('The Coptic Versions of the New Testament', in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995], pp. 134–6) updates the discussion and sees a three-stage development for the Sahidic translation, but still places the earliest stage of that development in the third century.

coupled with the fact that it is highly representative of the Alexandrian form of text,<sup>2</sup> the Sahidic Coptic version of the New Testament provides a unique window into the transmission, reception, and interpretation of the New Testament text. Furthermore, given the Coptic text's ability to reliably signify information about the Greek text<sup>3</sup> (e.g. word order<sup>4</sup>), extant Sahidic Coptic manuscripts comprise a rich deposit of data about what that early Greek text would have looked like and how it was understood at the time of translation. With that understanding in mind, this article explores a new area of discussion concerning the Sahidic Coptic version: its translation of the anarthrous nominative singular (AnNS) *θεός*.

No current academic publication examines whether Sahidic Coptic translators uniformly translated *θεός* from their New Testament *Vorlage*. In fact, New Testament scholars have almost uniformly ignored the manner in which Sahidic Coptic translators used the Coptic articles with ΝΟΥΤΕ to reproduce Greek constructions involving *θεός*. As a result, what little information there is on the Coptic use of the article contains inaccuracies. For example, one standard Coptic grammar states: 'ΝΟΥΤΕ always takes [the definite article] ⲛ- when referring to the God of the Bible.'<sup>5</sup> Likewise, one Coptic lexicon states that ⲡΝΟΥΤΕ always ('toujours') carries the equivalence of 'ὁ Θεός'.<sup>6</sup> These assessments, while helpful in general, are not axiomatic. For example, if we were to take a look at the 12 instances of the anarthrous ΝΟΥΤΕ, two of them (Rom. 1:21 and Rev. 16:7) plainly refer to 'the God of the Bible'. Only four of them (John 10:35, 1 Cor. 8:4 and 5, and 2 Thess. 2:4)

<sup>2</sup> So Vööbus, *Early Versions*, p. 227; Koester, *History and Literature*, p. 35; and Wisse, 'Coptic Versions', p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Vööbus, *Early Versions*, p. 225. With the obvious linguistic caveats in mind, see J. Martin Plumley, 'Limitations of Coptic (Sahidic) in Representing Greek', in Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, pp. 141–52. For caution in scholarly usage of Coptic manuscripts for textual criticism, see Christian Askeland, 'Has the Coptic Tradition Been Properly Used in New Testament Textual Criticism?' (paper presented at the annual meeting of the SBL, Boston, MA, 22 Nov. 2008) and Peter J. Williams, 'On the Representation of Sahidic within the Apparatus of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 8 (2006), pp. 123–5.

<sup>4</sup> Wisse, 'Coptic Versions', p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar: Sahidic Dialect* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> The author understands 'ὁ Θεός' in the sense of the God of the Jews and Christians ('dans le sens du Judaïsme et du Christianisme'). Werner Vycichl, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte* (Leuven: Peeters, 1984) p. 145.

actually follow Layton's maxim: that is, the anarthrous  $\text{HOYTE}$  refers to an entity other than 'the God of the Bible'.<sup>7</sup> The same type of variation exists when the converse of the rule is examined: there are two examples of  $\text{HOYTE}$  occurring with the definite article that do not refer to 'the God of the Bible' (Acts 7:43 and 2 Cor. 4:4).

Without canvassing all the issues or opportunities previous treatments raise, we will answer two distinct but connected questions: (1) Did the Sahidic Coptic translators uniformly translate the AnNS  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$ ? (2) What can that uniformity (or the lack thereof) tell us about one of the earliest understandings of John 1:1c? In order to answer these two questions, we will define our database parameters, evaluate the translation pattern in the Sahidic Coptic version, and assess the results, particularly with respect to John 1:1c.

## II. MAIN DATABASE

The first step in building our database<sup>8</sup> is to assess how often the nominative singular  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$  occurs within the Greek New Testament. Through various analyses in individual manuscripts as well as compiled New Testament texts and modern critical texts, we were able to place that number at a little greater than 300.<sup>9</sup> Of those roughly three hundred occurrences, fewer than 10 percent are anarthrous.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly for this study, of

<sup>7</sup> In the other six instances, Coptic utilizes a multi-word phrase containing  $\text{HOYTE}$  to translate a single Greek term:  $\text{HHACT HOYTE}$  for  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\sigma\sigma\upsilon\gamma\epsilon\iota\varsigma$  in Rom. 1:30 ('God-haters'), and  $\text{THHTPEQWHE HOYTE}$  for  $\epsilon\upsilon\delta\acute{\epsilon}\beta\epsilon\iota\alpha\nu$  in 1 Tim. 6:5, 2 Pet. 1:3, 1:6–7, and 3:11 ('godliness').

<sup>8</sup> For the Greek New Testament, Accordance 8.4.6 produced the statistics and was cross-checked with Bibleworks 8. For the Sahidic Coptic version, we examined *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect, Otherwise Called Sahidic and Thebaic, with Critical Apparatus, Literal English Translation, Register of Fragments and Estimate of the Version*, ed. George W. Horner (7 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911–24); Hans Quecke, *Das Johannesevangelium saïdisch: Text der Handschrift PPalau Rib. Inv.-Nr. 183 mit den Varianten der Handschriften 813 und 814 der Chester Beatty Library und der Handschrift M569* (Barcelona: Papyrologica Castroctaviana, 1984); *The Coptic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Epistles in the Sahidic Dialect*, ed. Herbert Thompson (Cambridge, 1932); David Kneip, 'The Text of Romans in Sahidic Coptic' (M.Div. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2004); and the Sahidica 2010 text compiled by J. Warren Wells, available at <<http://sahidica.warpcu.com/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Within the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland text (NA<sup>27</sup>), for example, the nominative singular  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$  occurs 309 times in 287 New Testament verses. The Westcott-Hort New Testament has 296 occurrences in 279 verses. The Textus Receptus (TR) has 316 occurrences in 291 verses.

<sup>10</sup> See Table 1 for details.

those AnNS *θεός*, only four were transcribed with the Sahidic Coptic indefinite article: John 1:1, 1 Cor. 8:6, Eph. 4:6, and 2 Thess. 2:4. These are, in fact, four of only five times the indefinite article occurs with *ΝΟΥΤΕ* in the New Testament. Acts 28:6, which is translated from an anarthrous accusative *θεόν*, is the only other instance of this same construction. Hence, every time the indefinite article occurs with *ΝΟΥΤΕ*, it parallels an anarthrous form of *θεός*.

To be sure, one must keep in mind that the Copts would have translated from the particular manuscripts in front of them, rather than from critical texts as we do today. Therefore, it is difficult to say in some cases whether a given Coptic text differs from our Greek text because of a translational issue rather than a textual one, or vice versa.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, in defining the set of texts to examine, we cast a wide net. We looked at all occurrences of the AnNS *θεός* in seven early New Testament manuscripts: P<sup>46</sup> (2nd c.), *Σ* (4th), A (5th), B (4th), C (5th), D/05 (5th), and D/06 (6th). Additionally, we examined the Robinson-Pierpont Majority text.<sup>12</sup> In all, our searches produced 31 instances of the AnNS *θεός* (see Table 1).

Because these texts are not uniform, it is necessary to determine which manuscripts (if any) the Sahidic Coptic New Testament follows. This requires some assumptions on our part. Our first assumption is that if there is no variant involving the article and *θεός*, then the Sahidic translators would have had an AnNS *θεός* in front of them. This holds true in 21 of the 31 cases.<sup>13</sup> In the other ten cases, our job is not so simple. To proceed, our second assumption is that, due to the Alexandrian nature of the Sahidic Coptic text, if *Σ* and B are united on a particular variant, then the translators would have had that reading in front of them.

<sup>11</sup> Karlheinz Schüssler examines the vagaries of such a study (i.e. moving between modern eclectic texts and ancient MSS) for the Gospel of John in particular ('Some Peculiarities of the Coptic (Sahidic) Translations of the Gospel of John', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 10 [2008], pp. 41–62).

<sup>12</sup> *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform*, compiled and arranged by Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont (Southborough, MA: Hilton Book Publishing, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Luke 20:38; John 1:1; Acts 15:8; Rom. 8:33, 9:5; 1 Cor. 3:7, 8:4 and 6; 2 Cor. 1:3 and 21, 5:5 and 19, 6:16; Gal. 6:7; Eph. 4:6; 1 Thess. 2:5; 2 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 3:4, 11:16; Rev. 21:7. Notice that all four of our special cases (those translated into Coptic without the definite article) appear on this list. To satisfy the reader's curiosity, let it be known that Acts 28:6 (the only other occurrence of *ΝΟΥΤΕ* without the definite article) also lacks any variants having to do with *θεός*.

TABLE 1. *AnNS*  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$  in selected New Testament manuscripts

	p <sup>46</sup>	8	A	B	C	D/05	D/06	R-P Byz
Matt. 22:32		AnNS		Art		AnNS		Art
Mark 12:27		Art	Art	AnNS	Art	AnNS		Art
Mark 12:32		Lacks $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$	Lacks $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$	Lacks $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$		Art		Lacks $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$
Luke 20:38		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS		AnNS
John 1:1		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS		AnNS
John 1:18		AnNS	Lacks $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$	AnNS	AnNS			Lacks $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}s$
John 8:54		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS
Acts 15:8		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS
Rom. 8:33		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
Rom. 9:5	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
1 Cor. 3:7	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
1 Cor. 8:4	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
1 Cor. 8:6	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
2 Cor. 1:3	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
2 Cor. 1:21	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
2 Cor. 5:5	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
2 Cor. 5:19	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
2 Cor. 6:16	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
Gal. 2:6	Art	Art	Art	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS
Gal. 6:7	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS		AnNS	AnNS

(continued)

TABLE 1. *Continued*

	P <sup>46</sup>	8	A	B	C	D/05	D/06	R-P Byz
Eph. 4:6	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS
Phil. 2:13		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	(corrected to Art)	Art
1 Thess. 2:5		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS
2 Thess. 2:4		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS
1 Tim. 2:5		AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS
1 Tim. 3:16		Lacks <i>θεός</i>	Lacks <i>θεός</i>	Lacks <i>θεός</i>	Lacks <i>θεός</i>	Lacks <i>θεός</i>	Lacks <i>θεός</i>	AnNS
		(corrected to AnNS)	(corrected to AnNS)	(corrected to AnNS)	(corrected to AnNS)	(corrected to AnNS)	(corrected to AnNS)	
Heb. 3:4	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS
Heb. 11:16	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS	AnNS
Rev. 4:11		AnNS	Art					Art
Rev. 21:3		Lacks <i>θεός</i>	AnNS					Lacks <i>θεός</i>
Rev. 21:7		AnNS	AnNS					AnNS
Legend:	Art =	AnNS =						
	Articular <i>θεός</i>	Anarthrous						
		Nominative						
		Singular <i>θεός</i>						

TABLE 2. *Sahidic Coptic New Testament texts translated from an AnNS θεός*

Luke 20:38	Rom 8:33	2 Cor. 1:3	Gal. 6:7	1 Tim. 2:5
John 1:1	Rom. 9:5	2 Cor. 1:21	Eph. 4:6	Heb. 3:4
John 1:18	1 Cor. 3:7	2 Cor. 5:5	Phil. 2:13	Heb. 11:16
John 8:54	1 Cor. 8:4	2 Cor. 5:19	1 Thess. 2:5	Rev. 21:3
Acts 15:8	1 Cor. 8:6	2 Cor. 6:16	2 Thess. 2:4	Rev. 21:7

This holds true for John 1:18, John 8:54, and Phil. 2:13.<sup>14</sup> Mark 12:32 is the exception to this rule. The Coptic text follows a θεός only present in articular form in D/05; it is anarthrous in the TR, E, W, and a few other manuscripts. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell from which form the Coptic text derives its reading, since both forms of the variants can be represented by the Coptic ΠΟΥΤΕ. This also holds true in the cases of Matt. 22:32, Mark 12:27, Gal. 2:6, and Rev. 4:11. The final two references can be sorted out on their own merits. For 1 Tim. 3:16, neither the Sahidic Coptic witnesses nor our seven Greek manuscripts above even contain ΠΟΥΤΕ/θεός; it most certainly is not translated from an AnNS θεός. On the other hand, only A even contains θεός in Rev. 21:3, making it certain that the Coptic text (which contains ΠΟΥΤΕ) followed the AnNS θεός. Therefore, our final list of 25 Coptic texts that follow Greek texts with an AnNS θεός is as shown in Table 2.

### III. TRANSLATION PATTERN

At first glance, the database for the Coptic indefinite article with ΠΟΥΤΕ can appear either insignificant or purposefully selective.<sup>15</sup> As is mentioned above, even if one expands the search to include every other case form, there is only *one* other instance of the indefinite article with ΠΟΥΤΕ: Acts 28:6. This single additional reference further supports the fact that the Sahidic Coptic

<sup>14</sup> John 1:18 and 8:54 can both be validated independently of this assumption, lending it credence. In the case of John 1:18, A and the Majority text have ἵος instead of θεός. Additionally, P<sup>75</sup> and a corrector of 8 add the article in front of μονογενῆς. But the original hand of 8 and our other manuscripts overwhelmingly support the AnNS θεός. For John 8:54, while it does have a variant (among others, P<sup>66</sup> and L are articular), our manuscripts are entirely united on the AnNS θεός.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, we understand what a small database this is. Nevertheless, one must not dismiss the discussion for two reasons: (1) As is demonstrated above, it is a substantive database nonetheless. (2) Taken as a whole, these references do present us with a coherent answer. Therefore, we contend that this small yet justifiable database yields legitimate results/conclusions.

TABLE 3. *The indefinite article with ΝΟΥΤΕ in the Sahidic Coptic version of the New Testament*

Text	Form of ΝΟΥΤΕ	Form of θεός
John 1:1	ΝΟΥΤΕ	θεός
Acts 28:6	ΟΥΝΟΥΤΕ	θεόν
1 Cor. 8:6	ΟΥΝΟΥΤΕ	εἰς θεός
Eph. 4:6	ΟΥΝΟΥΤΕ	εἰς θεός
2 Thess. 2:4	ΟΥΝΟΥΤΕ	θεός

translators rarely used the indefinite article ΟΥ with ΝΟΥΤΕ, regardless of case form. What is more, we also found no other examples of this construction in the following critical texts: the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, the *First Revelation of James*, the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, *A Book of Allogenes*, *Egerton Papyrus 2: The Unknown Gospel*, and *Other Unidentified Gospel Fragments* (i.e. *P.Vindob.G* 2325, *P.Mert.* 51, *P.Oxy.* 210, *P.Oxy.* 1224, *P.Oxy.* 840, and *P.Berol.* 11710).<sup>16</sup> What explains this selectivity?

Further examination of the five indefinite occurrences of ΝΟΥΤΕ (see Table 3) reveals four possible scenarios regarding the Sahidic Coptic translations: (1) The indefinite article functioned as a stylistic marker. (2) The indefinite article indicated the presence or absence of the Greek definite article, without making an interpretative distinction. (3) Coptic syntax required the translators to employ the indefinite article. (4) The indefinite article allowed for an interpretative distinction between the definite, indefinite, and qualitative use of θεός: 'God' vs. 'a god' vs. 'possessing the qualities of God [or a god]'.

### A. Stylistic Issues

Our small sample size is itself a clue to the Copts' use of the indefinite article, or their neglect of it altogether. Of the 25 instances of the AnNS θεός, the vast majority are reflected in the Sahidic Coptic version with the definite article (21/25; 84%). Of these, the vast majority are also in reference to 'the

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Andrew E. Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels: A Critical Edition of the Surviving Greek Manuscripts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007); April D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); Uwe-Karsten Plisch, *The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2008).



God of the Bible' (20/25; 80%).<sup>17</sup> It is no exaggeration to suggest, then, that the Coptic translators were disinclined to use anything other than the definite article when translating *θεός*.<sup>18</sup> If the Coptic translators were so reluctant to use the indefinite article with *HOYTE*, our question must not be 'what uniformly required the translators to use the indefinite article?' but instead 'what individual circumstances required the use of a disfavoured construction?'

One such stylistic circumstance is narrative: specifically, the movement within a narrative from an unknown to a known entity. Layton notes instances in which the indefinite article is used to indicate an unknown entity in a story before it becomes the known entity, at which point the definite article can be utilized.<sup>19</sup> Luke 9:34–5 represents one such example. In the transfiguration story, an unknown entity, 'a cloud' (*ΔΥΚΛΟΟΛΕ*), overshadows the group. Then, the group enters 'the cloud' (*ΕΤΕΚΛΟΟΛΕ*) and hears a voice from 'the cloud' (*ΤΕΚΛΟΟΛΕ*). As seen, the latter two references became the known entity, now definite, since the unknown entity had already been introduced.

Such an explanation is tempting in the case of our two narrative texts, John 1:1 and Acts 28:6. Unfortunately, neither matches the conditions well. For example, *HOYTE* would need to be an 'unknown' entity in John 1:1; it is not. It would need to occur with the indefinite article first; it does not. Then, it would need to be followed by the definite article; it is not. And even if all those characteristics were ignored, the more likely candidate for 'unknown to known entity' in this verse would be 'the Word' (*ΠΩΧΕ*). The problem, though, is that within these four verses 'the Word' occurs exclusively with the definite article. The same can be said for Acts 28:6. There is no point later on in the narrative that refers to the definite *ΠHOYTE*. These texts, then, are simply not attempting to introduce an unknown god that subsequently becomes known.

The narrative stylistic solution, therefore, is not probable. It neither accounts for the other non-narrative texts (1 Cor. 8:6, Eph. 4:6, and 2 Thess. 2:4) nor the circumstances of the two

<sup>17</sup> John 1:1, John 1:18, and Rom. 9:5 refer to Jesus. 1 Cor. 8:4 and 2 Thess. 2:4 are ambiguous.

<sup>18</sup> To belabour this point just a bit more, of these particular 25 references, there are only two occurrences in which the referent of *θεός* is clearly 'the God of the Bible', yet is translated without the definite article: 1 Cor. 8:6 and Eph. 4:6. In both cases, the indefinite article paired with *HOYTE* functions numerically.

<sup>19</sup> Bentley Layton, *Coptic in 20 Lessons* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), p. 15.

narrative texts (John 1:1 and Acts 28:6). Though such a solution is tempting, the evidence does not support it.

### *B. Indicating the Presence or Absence of the Greek Article*

As is stated above, of these 25 Greek New Testament passages, 21 of them are translated without an indefinite ΝΟΥΤΕ. This eliminates the possibility that the Coptic translators were systematically using the indefinite article to reflect the anarthrous *θεός*. That is not to say there is no value in using Coptic articles to make assumptions about the Greek text the translators would have been using. One must of course be cautious; just because the Coptic version contains a definite article does not mean its *Vorlage* did as well. On the other hand, it is highly probable that the Greek *Vorlage* lacked the article if the Coptic text attests the indefinite article. Both of these observations are especially important due to the increasing amount of Coptic MS discoveries and their use in critical Greek texts. For example, there are roughly 182 Coptic MSS of the Gospel of John in the Sahidic dialect. That number includes five complete MSS of John's Gospel (i.e. sa 505, 506, 508, 561, 600), 38 lectionaries, and three other liturgical MSS.<sup>20</sup> This is certainly evidence that ought to be considered in assessing studies such as our own. But the preponderance of manuscript evidence does nothing to support the suggestion that the Coptic translators were using the indefinite article to indicate the presence or absence of the Greek article with *θεός* systematically. They simply were not.

### *C. Syntactical Issues*

If the few occurrences of the indefinite article with ΝΟΥΤΕ cannot be explained by means of style, or by accounting for the presence or absence of the Greek article, let us examine individual syntactical issues that might require the use of the indefinite article.

#### 1. John 1:1

καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος

ⲁⲩⲱ ⲛⲉⲩⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲡⲉ ⲡⲱⲗⲗⲉ

and the word was [a] god

<sup>20</sup> Schüssler, 'Some Peculiarities', p. 42. His recent MS calculation helps explain the now '1057 Coptic citations of John's gospel in the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece' (Askeland, 'Coptic Tradition', p. 1).

This verse follows Layton's sixth pattern for nominal sentences ('*Entity Term* π<sub>ε</sub> *Entity Term*').<sup>21</sup> As he points out, 'identification of predicate and subject is not signalled at the level for the individual sentence; rather, it is signalled within a larger unit of text'. In this case, the larger unit (the remainder of John 1:1-4) makes clear that πωαξε is the subject. Another consideration is the converse of Lambdin's classification for nominal sentences. He notes: 'If the subject and predicate are both definite, the normal position of π<sub>ε</sub>, τ<sub>ε</sub>, ν<sub>ε</sub> is between them... Identification of subject and predicate in this case can be made only on a contextual basis.'<sup>22</sup> In our case, the problem is not determining the subject between two definite entities, but evaluating the indefinite πΟΥΤΕ along with the definite subject πωαξε. Either way, Lambdin's observation makes clear that the indefinite article is not *required* in the service of grammatical clarity in John 1:1c.

## 2. Acts 28:6

ἔλεγον αὐτὸν εἶναι θεόν

πεσαγ̃ χε ου̃νουτε̃ πε

they said he was a god

The grammar of Acts 28:6 is very similar to that of John 1:1. The few differences, however, make the case against the syntactical necessity of the indefinite article even more stark. That is to say, there is no other entity necessitating differentiation of the subject from the predicate. Indeed, there is no predicate. Consequently, it is even clearer that the indefinite article is not required by the semantics.

## 3. First Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:6

εἰς θεὸς ὁ πατήρ

ΟΥ̃ΝΟΥΤΕ̃ ΝΟΥΤ̃...ΠΕΙΩΤ̃

one God, the father

εἰς θεὸς καὶ πατήρ

ΟΥ̃ΝΟΥΤΕ̃ ΝΟΥΤ̃ ΠΕΙΩΤ̃

One God [and] father

The similar Greek constructions in 1 Cor. 8:6 and Eph. 4:6 yield similar Coptic constructions. In at least these two verses, the presence of the indefinite article can indeed be explained entirely on syntactical grounds. The indefinite article is simply

<sup>21</sup> Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, §268.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), p. 15.

functioning numerically (for 'one'). The presence of ΟΥΩΤ merely strengthens the case for such an interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. Second Thessalonians 2:4

ἀποδεικνύντα ἑαυτὸν ὅτι ἔστιν θεός

ἐφ' ὧν ἡ ΜΟΦ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΟΥΝΟΥΤΕ ΝΕ

displaying himself as [a] god

2 Thess. 2:4 presents the richest single deposit for our comparisons in one of the most enigmatic sections of the New Testament (2:3–12).<sup>24</sup> Within a span of 23 words, all three ΝΟΥΤΕ constructions occur: definite, indefinite, and anarthrous. The definite and anarthrous constructions are easily understood: the definite construction, 'the temple of God' (ἐπρπε μπουουτε), refers to 'the God of the Bible' while the anarthrous construction, 'so-called god' (ετομουτε ερουουχε ΝΟΥΤΕ), reflects its idolatrous context. The indefinite construction proves a bit more difficult since this construction is a nominal sentence, with a single entity followed by ΝΕ. This follows Layton's fourth pattern for nominal sentences—unfortunately, such recognition does not make interpretation any easier.<sup>25</sup>

The Coptic text can be understood a few different ways: (1) referring to 'the God of the Bible' ('displaying himself as God' or 'as if he were God'); (2) referring to a god other than 'the God of the Bible' ('displaying himself as a god'); or (3) referring to the qualities of God ('displaying himself as if he has the qualities of God'). Although the majority of critical commentaries translate *θεός* as 'God', they often still note something to the fact that Paul may have intended the anarthrous *θεός* to simply mean 'a god' or 'divine'.<sup>26</sup> We concur. Indeed, in the following section,

<sup>23</sup> Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, §158b.

<sup>24</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (vol. 2 of *Christianity in the Making* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009]), p. 717.

<sup>25</sup> Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, §267.

<sup>26</sup> See, among others, Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 283. In that same vein, though, it is necessary throughout this discussion to keep in mind the different levels of meaning, interpretation, and understanding happening in translation. The discussion that follows regarding the best understanding of 2 Thess. 2:4 and what its author would have meant is a separate one from how the Copts would have understood the text, which even still is a separate discussion from how the text is understood today. Nevertheless, we do not think 'a god' or 'divine' is the most probable translation.

In our opinion, the (1) scriptural context (e.g. referring specifically to 'the man of lawlessness / son of destruction'), (2) grammatical constructions

we will outline our current understanding of John 1:1, Acts 28:6, and 2 Thess. 2:4. We believe that the best explanation for the indefinite article in the three remaining references will be one that unifies and explains them accordingly.<sup>27</sup>

#### *D. Indicating an Interpretative Distinction*

There is an accepted view that ‘the [Greek] article appears when the specific Jewish or Christian God or Lord is meant (not “a being of divine name” or “a Lord”)’.<sup>28</sup> However, while this assertion is *generally* true, it is not *always* true. For example, *θεός* in Rom. 8:33 is referring to ‘the God of the Bible’, though it lacks the article. In Phil. 3:19, *θεός* has the article, yet it does not refer to the Jewish or Christian God.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, several scholars have shown that there is no firm, fine, or consistent distinction between the articular and the anarthrous *θεός*.<sup>30</sup>

The same accepted view and critique holds true within the Coptic language. For example, Rev. 16:7 has no Coptic article with *ⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ*, while clearly speaking of ‘the God of the Bible’:

κύριε ὁ θεός ὁ παντοκράτωρ  
 ΠΧΘΙC *ⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ* ΠΠΔΙΓΓΚΡΑΤΩΡ  
 Lord God, the Almighty

(e.g. the use of *ναός* with combined definite articles; *τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ*), (3) OT allusion(s) (e.g. Isa. 14:13–14; Ezek. 28:2; Dan. 11:36–7), (4) semantic range (e.g. the main verb of this phrase [*ἀποδείκνυμι*] means ‘to show forth the quality of an entity’ [BDAG 108]), and (5) authorial intent (e.g. translating it qualitatively ‘is preferable as representing not what a pagan or apostate might say [“I am a god or am divine”] but rather the claim of a Christian writer [a usurper declares: “I am God”]’), (Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995], p. 329) significantly increase the probability of understanding/translating *θεός* qualitatively.

<sup>27</sup> It is already the case that these three references utilize the same syntax for nominal constructions (all three are simple nominal sentences).

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert Walter Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Acts 7:43 and 2 Cor. 4:4 (the latter is discussed below).

<sup>30</sup> See, among others, Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), p. 29; Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God: An Exploration into the Johannine Understanding of God* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p. 177.

On the other hand, 2 Cor. 4:4 is clearly referring to *a god* other than 'the God of the Bible', yet the definite article is attested:

ὁ θεός τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου

ΠΙΟΥΤΕ ΔΑΤΩΗ ΠΙΗΤΗ

the god of this age

This assessment holds true regardless of how one takes the Greek genitive construction following it (epexegetical, objective, possessive, etc.). It is clear, then, that 2 Cor. 4:4 does not refer to 'God' in any canonical sense. Furthermore, 'the God of the Bible' is referred to as 'the King of the ages' (e.g. 1 Tim. 1:17; Τῷ δὲ βασιλεῖ τῶν αἰώνων), *never* this present age.<sup>31</sup>

With that in mind, our purpose is to examine the Sahidic Coptic evidence to see whether it suggests that the translators were attempting to make an interpretative distinction between the definite, indefinite, and qualitative use of the article. Layton describes the qualitative category this way: 'A descriptive predicate is one that speaks of an entity by its quality but without explicitly naming (denoting) the particular entity to which it refers.'<sup>32</sup> Rather than speaking of 'the God of the Bible' (definite) or some pagan god (indefinite), our three remaining references would be speaking of the *qualities* of whatever God or gods the speaker/author had in mind.

In the case of Acts 28:6, it is clear that 'the God of the Bible' is not the entity the local Maltese population means by *θεός*. This reference alone adds credence to this explanation for the indefinite article. On the other hand, 2 Thess. 2:4 does not possess such contextual clarity. It is impossible to say for certain whether the Copts would have understood the final *θεός* of 2 Thess. 2:4 to refer to 'the God of the Bible' or some sort of false god; indeed, even modern commentaries differ on that interpretation. For example, Pervo states that the islanders take a more-than-180-degree turn and conclude that Paul is *not* simply a 'protégé of a god, but a very god'.<sup>33</sup> In addition, although not

<sup>31</sup> The distinction between 'ruler/king of *this age*' and 'ruler/king of *the ages*' was also consistently maintained after the New Testament, e.g. in the Apostolic Fathers (cf. among others Ign. *Magn.* 1.3 and 1 *Clem.* 61.2).

<sup>32</sup> Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, p. 227.

<sup>33</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, MN; Fortress, 2009), p. 674. His assessment is contra the majority of other critical commentaries. See also F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1988), p. 499; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker, 2007), p. 744.

a critical commentary, Dunn suggests terms like 'divine' and 'god-likeness' here.<sup>34</sup>

The lack of any other clarification of the article supports the idea that its meaning must be relatively self-evident, and it must be so in all three references. However, where the explanation of using the indefinite article as a contextual marker for indefiniteness falls short, the understanding of using the indefinite article to indicate a qualitative distinction stands out. In both Acts 28:6 and 2 Thess. 2:4, it is possible to translate the indefinite  $\text{ἰσοϋτε}$  as well as the AnNS  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  descriptively (i.e. 'he possessed the qualities of a god [or of God]').

#### IV. APPLYING THE RESULTS TO JOHN 1:1c

Over 50 years ago, Bruce Metzger explicitly rejected the rendering 'a god' in John 1:1c as reflected in the Jehovah's Witnesses' own translation of the NT, *The New World Translation*.<sup>35</sup> His primary argument in both noted publications congregated around Greek grammar (i.e. Colwell's Rule); it remains a popular argument today.<sup>36</sup> But scholars have shown the need for clarification, adequately demonstrating why that argument leaves much to be desired.<sup>37</sup> Our purpose, then, is to apply the results of our Coptic study to this debate to see how this early version sheds light on the history of interpretation and potentially helps one translate and interpret these verses.

Although we did not initially include John 1:1c due to its debated nature, it is now time to examine it in the light of our discussion above. If one accepts our arguments, then the best way to understand the Copts' use of the indefinite article is that

<sup>34</sup> Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, pp. 999, 1001, n. 195.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, 'On the Translation of John 1.1', *ExpTim* 63 (1951–2), pp. 125–6; id., 'Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ', *ThTo* 10 (1953), pp. 65–85.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), p. 49; Douglas W. Kennard, *Messiah Jesus: Christology in his Day and ours* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 473; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) p. 48. n. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew P. Morgan, 'The Legacy of a Letter: Sabellianism or Scribal Blunder in John 1:1c?', in Daniel B. Wallace (ed.), *Revisiting the Corruption of the NT: Manuscript, Patristic and Apocryphal Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, forthcoming). Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 257–62; id., 'The Implications of an Indefinite  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  in John 1.1c' (paper presented at the annual meeting of the ETS, Danvers, MA, 18 Nov. 1999).

they were making an interpretative, *qualitative* distinction. This distinction was to describe the qualities of whatever god/entity was being referenced by the speaker, author, or both. Thus, the Maltese population in Acts 28:6 were simply saying that Paul had the qualities of 'a god' as they perceived the gods. In other words: 'It is not that Luke intended their verdict to be taken literally: his earlier campaign against false ideas of God and of God's relation to humankind was too clear and sustained for such a conclusion to be possible... and those who speak the words are, after all, "barbarians"'.<sup>38</sup> This fits well with how the Copts were probably understanding the text: descriptively. It is not that the 'barbarians' were calling Paul a 'false god', or a 'lesser divine god', but that they were describing him as one characterized as having the qualities of 'a god' as they understood the gods.

Likewise, the best understanding of 2 Thess. 2:4 is that the author is referring to the qualities of 'the God of the Bible', even though the 'man of lawlessness' is not meant to be understood as 'the God of the Bible'. As Malherbe said: 'It is therefore preferable to understand the characterization as of someone who is so self-aggrandizing that he vaunts himself against all gods whatsoever, perceived or real.'<sup>39</sup> Again, this complements how the Copts probably understood the text: descriptively. It is not that the 'man of lawlessness' will exult himself as a 'false god', or a 'lesser divine god', but that he was one claiming the qualities of God (in this case, 'the God of the Bible').

The same category applies to John 1:1c. This qualitative/descriptive understanding makes the best sense within John's prologue. The Copts understood John to be saying that 'the Word' has the same qualities as 'the God of the Bible'. On the other hand, if one disagrees with our arguments above, the only other viable interpretations given the other usages would suggest that the Copts understood 'the Word' to be either a 'god of the pagans' (cf. Acts 28:6) or some 'usurper god' (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4). Yet, this leaves one with much wider problems.

First, there are other passages in the Coptic text which explicitly call Jesus *θεός*, with the definite article, even in the

<sup>38</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996), p. 347. Furthermore, Luke did not attempt to portray Paul as a *θεός ἀνὴρ* (C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 [New York: T & T Clark, 1998], p. 1224). Cf., among others, Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 499; Bock, *Acts*, p. 744; *Acts Thom.* 106.

<sup>39</sup> Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 420.



same chapter and book (e.g. John 1:18; 20:28; cf. Titus 2:13; 1 John 5:20). It is improbable, then, that the Coptic translators would have taken the author of the Gospel of John to mean for 'the Word' to be a 'pagan god' or 'usurper god' in John 1:1, and then 'the God of the Bible' 17 verses later. Yet even if one rejects all of these texts, the manuscript evidence shows that at least at some point early in history the Copts felt comfortable ascribing ΠΝΟΥΤΕ to Jesus, as seen in P.11710: ἰησοῦς χριστός πνοῦτε.<sup>40</sup> Second, there were other Coptic words available to them to denote the idea of 'the Word' being *merely* divine, as some sort of 'godly' or even 'god-like' entity (e.g. εὐαγγελίζε and ἡταγγελίζε in 2 Pet. 1:3, 4 respectively).<sup>41</sup> Third, the overall context of the pericope, chapter, book, and New Testament decreases the probability of any interpretation other than the qualitative one. To this point, it is worth noting Sadananda in full:

It is not in the title or in the abstract categories [love, light, truth], but in the text context that theological thinking enfolds and is expressed. The text context is not merely a linguistic one, it reflects the socio-cultural context. By way of exploring human experience, and understanding the concrete community context which created the 'text contexts', we encounter not only in the explicit theological language, but also in silent implicit symbols, 'the God' of the community.<sup>42</sup>

Fourth, other examples of common nouns with indefinite articles, such as 'prophet' or 'spirit', clash with either interpretation (i.e. a 'pagan prophet/spirit' or a 'usurper prophet/spirit'). Compare, for example, John 4:19 and John 6:14:

John 4:19: λέγει αὐτῷ ἡ γυνή· κύριε, θεωρῶ ὅτι προφήτης εἶ σύ.

πεσε τεσριμε ἡαϥ. σε πχοεic ὡαϥ σε ἡτοκ ἡτρ ουπροφητης.

The woman said to him: 'Sir, I see that you are [one who has the qualities of] a prophet.'

John 6:14: Οἱ οὖν ἄνθρωποι ἰδόντες ὃ ἐποίησεν σημεῖον ἔλεγον ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ προφήτης ὁ ἐρχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον.

ἡρωμε δε ἡτεροϡηαϥ επῃαἡἡ εἡταγγελαϥ ἡεγῶω ἡμοc σε παἡ ἡαμε πε πεπροφητης εἡτηἡη επκοcμοc.

<sup>40</sup> Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels*, p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Walter E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 231. See also Horner, *Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect*, pp. 67, n. 3, 68–9, n. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, p. 11.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say: 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

These four reasons alone decrease (or possibly eliminate) the likelihood that the Copts understood (or meant to use the indefinite article to suggest) 'the Word' to be either a 'god of the pagans' or some 'usurper god'.

## V. CONCLUSION

Coming full circle, we conclude by offering our proposal in regards to the initial two questions we posed:

### *A. Did the Sahidic Coptic Translators Uniformly Translate the AnNS θεός?*

The answer to this question depends at least in part on what we mean by 'uniformly'. If we mean 'categorically, without exception', then, no, the nominative singular θεός is not translated uniformly. As is laboured over above, there are instances where the Copts translated passages with the AnNS θεός without the article or with an indefinite article. However, 'categorically, without exception' is a standard that no translation, ancient or modern, is held to. Instead, 'uniformly' is best taken as 'regularly'. In which case, yes, the Copts regularly translated the nominative singular θεός with the definite article.

To the question of what to do with those instances in which the Coptic translators did not use the definite article, we can start by ruling out three of the four solutions we examined: (1) There was no overriding stylistic reason that explained every occurrence. (2) It was not used merely to indicate the presence or absence of the Greek article. (3) There was no syntactical requirement that accounted for all the examples. We propose then, that the indefinite article, absent any other considerations, was used with ΝΟΥΤΕ within Sahidic Coptic grammar to indicate an interpretative distinction, categorically labelled in Coptic grammars as 'descriptive' (or 'qualitative' in Greek grammars).

### *B. What Can that Uniformity (or the Lack thereof) Tell Us about One of the Earliest Understandings of John 1:1c?*

We propose that the best way to take the indefinite article in John 1:1c is as an attempt by the Copts to interpret the anarthrous θεός descriptively/qualitatively. As a result, they interpreted and translated John 1:1c to mean that 'the Word' possesses the same qualities as 'the God of the Bible'. This

interpretation best explains and complements the other passages in the Coptic text which explicitly call Jesus *θεός*, the other Coptic words available to them to denote something different, the specific and broader context within the book and New Testament, the other indefinite common noun references, and the history of transmission regarding this title being ascribed to Jesus.<sup>43</sup> This solution also accounts for the similarities of syntax between the three passages, and takes into account the Copts' apparent confidence that the indefinite article would be understood properly without any further clarification.

The other New Testament references we examined do not support the concept of some in-between category of 'sort of god' or a 'lesser divine god'. To place John 1:1c in this category would require substantial arguments that have gone undetected in this work. In fact, the argument(s) would have to add enough plausibility that the Copts understood John to open his Gospel with an interpretation that appears different from anything attested elsewhere.

<sup>43</sup> See n. 40.