

Colwell's Rule  
Rodney J. Decker • February 1995

Colwell, E. C. "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament."  
*Journal of Biblical Literature* 52 (1933): 12–21. [cited below as: CR]<sup>1</sup>

**Statement of the Rule:**<sup>2</sup>

"In sentences in which the copula is expressed, a definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb."  
(CR 13)

CV + A + dPN • or • ødPN + CV

In sentences in which the verb occurs: (CR 20)

1. Definite predicate nouns here regularly take the article.
2. The exceptions are for the most part due to a change in word order:
  - a. Definite predicate nouns which follow the verb ... usually take the article;  
CV + A + dPN
  - b. Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article;  
ødPN + CV
  - c. Proper names regularly lack the article in the predicate;  
øName + CV • or • CV + øName
  - d. Predicate nominatives in relative clauses regularly follow the verb whether or not they have the article.  
RP + CV + A + PN • or • RP + CV + øPN

**Illustrations of these constructions:**<sup>3</sup>

2.a.	CV + A + dPN:	σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.	John 1:49b
2.b.	ødPN + CV:	σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ.	John 1:49c
2.c.	øName + CV:	σὺ Ἥλιος εἶ;	John 1:21
	CV + øName:	αὐτός ἐστιν Ἥλιος.	Matt. 11:14
2.d.	RP + CV + A + PN:	ἥτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ.	Eph. 1:23
	RP + CV + øPN:	ὁ ἐστὶν ἀρραβὼν τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν.	Eph. 1:14

**Observations:**

1. The usual word order for copulative sentences in which the copulative verb is expressed and the predicate noun is definite is CV + dPN.

---

<sup>1</sup>Abbreviations: ø = anarthrous; CV = copulative verb; A = article; PN = pred. noun [ pred. nominative!]; RP = relative pronoun; d = definite; i = indefinite; q = qualitative; (CR) = Colwell's JBL article

<sup>2</sup>The "formulas" above are not Colwell's and are not found in the original article. They have been supplied in an attempt to clarify the relationships involved.

<sup>3</sup>Not all examples come from Colwell's article; acCordance has been used to supplement as needed.

2. Definite predicate nouns in sentences with an expressed copulative verb are *usually* articular: CV + A + dPN.
3. Colwell's rule addresses only the question of word order, and that only for a subset of possible constructions. His data set was not selected to establish all aspect of articular use with equative verbs and predicate nouns. It was deliberately limited to those that Colwell had *already determined were definite*. (CR 17)<sup>4</sup>
4. The rule does not apply to sentences in which the copulative verb is elided (because there is no way to determine where the original writer would have inserted the copulative if he had included it).
5. Definiteness is *assumed*, not proven by the rule. It is not valid to use the rule to establish definiteness.
6. . The converse of the rule may not be assumed. That is, it is *not true* that because a predicate noun precedes a copulative verb, it is therefore definite. (See previous observation.) This is often ignored and the rule is often used *as if it said*: an anarthrous predicate nominate which precedes the verb is usually definite. This is not what the rule says and it may not be inferred from the rule. (See: Wallace, 186, 189)
7. "An anarthrous noun in the subject or predicate ... may be either indefinite or definite, but the presumption ought to be that it is either (1) *indefinite* ..., until it has been shown to be definite from the context ..., or (2) *qualitative*, whatever be its state of definiteness." (Harris, 312)
8. "There is a constant danger of arguing in a circle by assuming from the context that a particular anarthrous predicate noun is definite and then finding in its placement before the copula the confirmation of its definiteness" (Harris, 312).
9. The rule established general patterns only; practically all possible combinations occur as the following examples illustrate.

A + dPN + CV:	<u>ὁ προφήτης</u> <u>εἶ</u> σύ;	Jn. 1:21
CV + A + dPN :	σὺ <u>εἶ</u> ὁ <u>υἱὸς</u> τοῦ θεοῦ.	John 1:49b
∅dPN + CV:	σὺ <u>βασιλεὺς</u> <u>εἶ</u> τοῦ Ἰσραήλ.	John 1:49c
CV + ∅dPN:	θεοῦ <u>εἶμι</u> <u>υἱός</u> .	Matt. 27:44
iPN + CV:	<u>προφήτης</u> <u>εἶ</u> σύ	Jn. 4:19 <sup>5</sup>
CV + iPN:	<u>γίνεται</u> <u>δένδρον</u>	Matt. 13:32

<sup>4</sup> Some of the statements that Colwell excluded are: proper names, "seed of Abraham" (and about 10 similar phrases [not given in the article], and "practically all such expressions as ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν" (abstract nouns?), and "all nouns as to whose definiteness there could be any doubt" including qualitative nouns (CR 17 and n. 12). This suggests a severely limited data set.

<sup>5</sup>There are very few of this construction in the NT (1 Tim. 6:10 and Jn. 6:70 are two other possibilities). It is an established use in other koine Greek, however. οὐ πᾶς δὲ ὁ λαλῶν ἐν πνεύματι προφήτης ἐστίν (Didache 11:8). (See: Wallace, 193–94.) Harris (312, n. 55) suggests Mark 6:49.

qPN + CV:	<u>ὁ λόγος</u> σὰρξ ἐγένετο	Jn. 1:14
CV + qPN:	ἦσαν γὰρ <u>ἀλιεῖς</u>	Matt. 4:18
A + Name + CV:	παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἢ κεφαλὴ <u>ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν</u>	1 Cor. 11:36
CV + A + Name:	οὗτός <u>ἐστιν ὁ Μωϋσῆς</u>	Acts 7:37
∅Name + CV:	σὺ <u>Ἡλίας εἶ</u> ;	John 1:21
CV + ∅Name:	αὐτός <u>ἐστιν Ἡλίας</u> .	Matt. 11:14

[The following examples in relative clauses need more work. At this point all they illustrate is the variety of word order used. No consideration has been made as to the definiteness or qualitiveness of the predicate noun.]

RP + CV + A + PN:	<u>ἦτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα</u> αὐτοῦ.	Eph. 1:23
RP + CV + ∅PN :	<u>ὃ ἐστὶν ἀρραβὼν</u> τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν.	Eph. 1:14
RP + A + PN + CV:	ὁ ἄρτος δὲ <u>ὃν ἐγὼ δώσω ἢ σὰρξ</u> μου <u>ἐστιν</u>	Jn. 6:51
RP + ∅PN + CV:	<u>οὗ</u> ἡμεῖς <u>μάρτυρές ἐσμεν</u>	Acts 3:15
RP + CV + A + PN:	τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, <u>ἦτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα</u> αὐτοῦ	Eph. 1:22–23
RP + CV + ∅PN:	<u>ὃν ἔχεις</u> οὐκ <u>ἐστὶν</u> σου <u>ἀνὴρ</u>	Jn. 4:18

### Instances involving a textual variant:

Wallace argues that the value of Colwell’s rule is not for exegesis since it does not establish definiteness but only suggests probable word order in certain cases. Rather, “its validity is for textual criticism rather than for grammar.... The rule’s validity for textual criticism is as follows: if it is obvious that a pre-verbal PN is definite, the MSS which lack the article are more likely to support the original reading.” (Wallace, 188.) This does not help, of course, when the variant involves not just the article, but also word order. See the examples in (CR 16) where B and **ℵ** evidence this combination pattern.<sup>7</sup>

### John 1:1,

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.  
 The relevance of Colwell’s rule to John 1:1 would be worth pursuing in greater detail. Note that the rule does *not* help by determining definiteness! It has often been misused by well-intentioned defenders of the deity of Christ. (See: Harris, 51–71; Wallace, 194–95.)

### Bibliography

Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984. (See pp. 86–88.)

Dixon, Paul S. “The Significance of the Anarthrous Predicate Nominative in John.” Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975.

<sup>6</sup>This verse illustrates the construction regardless of whether ἢ κεφαλὴ or ὁ Χριστός is taken to be the predicate.

<sup>7</sup>I did not have time to read the NA<sup>27</sup> apparatus to find examples where Colwell’s rule would be relevant, and neither Colwell nor Wallace cite specific examples.

- Harner, Philip B. "Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1." *JBL* 92 (1973): 75–87.
- Harris, Murray J. "The Definite Article in the Greek New Testament." Appendix I (301–13) of *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.
- McGaughy, Lane C. "Toward a Descriptive Analysis of ἔειπαι as a Linking Verb in New Testament Greek." Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt Univ., 1970. Reprint. SBL diss. series 6. N.p.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972.
- Moule, C. F. D. *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2d ed. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1959. (See pp. 115–16.)
- Porter, Stanley E. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*. Biblical Languages: Greek 2. Sheffield: JSOT, 1992. (See pp. 109–10.)
- Turner, Nigel. *Syntax*. Vol 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* by J. H. Moulton. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963. (See pp. 182–84.)
- Wallace, Daniel B. "The Definite Article, Part II: Special Uses ... of the Article: A. Anarthrous Pre-Verbal Predicate Nominatives (Involving Colwell's Rule)." Pp. 185–97 of *Exegetical Syntax*, 1994 draft MS of *Beyond the Basics of Biblical Greek: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming, 1995.
- Young, Richard A. *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994. (See pp. 65–66.)