

A Catholic Critique of Jehovah's Witnesses

Introduction

Originally published in 1963 and distributed by the Knights of Columbus, this critique has unfortunately long been out of print. The author's intended audience is not the Witnesses themselves but those whom they seek to convert. The author explains:

In what follows we shall attempt to investigate the more outstanding peculiarities of the Witnesses' creed....We would emphasize our purpose in doing this, which is not to ridicule or make light of anyone's beliefs simply because they are not our beliefs. What has prompted this analysis is the Witnesses' own insistence on their beliefs as truths which contradict our beliefs and are incompatible with them. We shall approach the Witnesses' creed from the standpoint of those elements which are avowedly destructive of the Judeo-Christian tradition in which we stand. In doing so, we hope to do a service not merely for those of the Catholic religion but also for all who share the concern of the Catholic Church for the fundamental doctrines and values of the Christianity which has molded our society....

If our judgments have sounded harsh, we insist that we have intended no ridicule for honestly held beliefs as such. Sincerity in belief is an admirable quality. Respect for sincerity, however, may not ever blind us to the duty of service to the truth, and of the defense of our own cherished heritage. We have addressed ourselves far less to the Witnesses themselves than to those who have been the targets of their propagandizing.

Made in America

The sect known today as Jehovah's Witnesses, which has become one of the familiar oddities of the religious scene in America, can hardly be adequately explained apart from the history of the land that gave it birth. In its own way, it is as American as hot dogs and baseball. It has sprung from the same fertile soil that has produced Christian Science, Mormonism, the Black Muslims, and the hundreds of other religious curiosities that have left America without rival in this particular line of human endeavor.

Though the Witnesses claim to have existed for some six thousand years or more, less romantic and more objective historians trace their origin to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, about the year 1872. It was in this year that Charles Taze Russell ("Pastor Russell"), a Congregationalist layman, came to the many of the conclusions that have remained ever after the basic Witness dogmas. Russell

published his conclusions in a series entitled *Studies in the Scriptures*, which gained him a large reading public and many followers. The *Watchtower*, the now quite famous publication of the group whose first leader he was, began to appear in 1879.

The Adventist movement was very strong in the America of Russell's day, and it was on Adventism that Russell founded his main body of doctrine, thus forming one of an endless series of sects that have emerged from Adventist speculation. Despite the Lord's own words concerning His Second Coming, "Of that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Mark 13:32), words that have always convinced orthodox Christians that such speculation is not only useless but also unscriptural, prophets like Russell have appeared with deadly regularity to play on the religious credulity and curiosity and have generally succeeded, as he did, in gathering a following of devout believers.

The Second Coming of Christ, Russell proclaimed, had already taken place, invisibly in 1874. Russell taught this had inaugurated a forty year period which was the dawning of the Millennium. This period would climax by the close of 1914, during which the true members of Christ's Church would be prepared under Russell's guidance. Then would occur the general resurrection and final judgment. The results of the latter would be the complete annihilation of the wicked—Russell had also come to the conclusion that there could be no such thing as eternal punishment—and the everlasting life granted to the "saints," either in heaven or on a new earth cleansed of all evil.

The Great Pyramid

Russell's grounds for these beliefs was the usual mishmash of Biblical passages inherited from generations of free-lance interpretation in fundamentalist circles. However, he combined with this another mother lode of fruitless speculation that commanded much interest in America at this time. This was the curious superstition that pretends to find secret wisdom and prophecy hidden in the dimensions and structure of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Readers may be familiar with one form of this superstition from the newspaper advertisements of the Rosacrucians, a sect which has no pretensions to the "Bible religion" of the Witnesses. Here Russell was influenced by a certain Charles Piazzzi Smyth, who had already combined Biblical speculation with "pyramidology," finding references to the Great Pyramid in such passages as this: "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at

its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt..." (Isa. 19:19-20). Russell's predictions were based equally on the Bible and the Great Pyramid.

The original legal name of Russell's followers was Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society, which was changed in 1896 to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. His followers generally referred to themselves as "Bible Students," which was taken from another one of their legal corporations: International Bible Students Association. The name "Jehovah's Witnesses" was adopted in 1931 at the suggestion of Russell's successor, "Judge" J.F. Rutherford, who took it from such Biblical passages as Isaiah 43:12 and John 18:37, identifying the sect with those of whom the Bible had spoken. It was Rutherford, too, who rid the sect of the embarrassment of "pyramidology" after Russell's death in 1916. The Witnesses now claim to base themselves on the Bible alone, without reference to the Great Pyramid.

Russell's Millennium, of course, did not break out in 1914. The first World War did begin in Europe at that time, however, and it seemed that that was what the founder had somehow been talking about all along. Later, Russell's works were revised to clear up the discrepancy: whereas he had written, "...The deliverance of the saints must take place sometime *before* 1914....," the revised text read: "...The deliverance of the saints must take place very soon *after* 1914..." The current party line has it that in 1914 Christ began "an invisible reign of righteousness"—whatever that may mean. (The belief that 1874 marked Christ's Second Coming has long since been discarded.) Prophets like Russell rarely lose their following merely because their prophecies prove to be false; the credulity that can accept them in the first place remains strong enough to survive scandals of this kind. However, the Witnesses today, now that both Russell and Rutherford are dead, have learnt to make their prophecies in very general terms, and they do not encourage the reading of their founders' prophetic works.

Zealots

Neither Russell nor Rutherford were men of much education, despite the scraps of borrowed learning that appear in their pages. Both of them had a genius for organization, however, and their sect has continued to grow and flourish within the framework they gave it, displaying a zeal worthy of far better causes and flooding the world with literally millions of books and pamphlets in scores of languages. In recent years it has even developed a scholarship of sorts, represented in its own translation of the Bible and the studies which have

accompanied it. Of this we shall say more later.

The Americanism of the sect is readily apparent in its publications, despite the fact that many of these are published abroad. The articles that one finds in the German, French, Italian, or Spanish editions of the Watchtower and other Witness literature, or in the editions of other European, African, and Asian languages, are all faithful translations of what appeared originally in American English and emanated from headquarters in Brooklyn. One is reminded of nothing so much as the foreign editions of the Reader's Digest, particularly in view of the fact that many of the articles are not even sectarian in character but are of the "uplift" and "self-help" variety. Though obviously the teachings of the sect have struck a responsive chord in minds of like disposition throughout the world, and though the claim is made that matters of administration are handled by an international board, one has the impression that in every sense of the word the leadership of the Witnesses has remained solidly in American hands. The keen business sense and efficient production methods shown by this leadership are also quite American, and cause us to believe that the movement will be with us yet for a long time.

The Witnesses

Because of these facts and because of the intense and capable propagandizing carried out by the sect, it has occurred to us that the Witnesses are deserving of the short analysis that appears in the following pages. Americans, it seems to us, should be particularly interested in an organization whose character and existence could hardly be accounted for outside the peculiar religious and other influences that have long existed in our country. In what follows we shall attempt to investigate the more outstanding peculiarities of the Witnesses' creed, along the lines that have already been outlined above. We would emphasize our purpose in doing this, which is not to ridicule or make light of anyone's beliefs simply because they are not our beliefs. What has prompted this analysis is the Witnesses' own insistence on their beliefs as truths which contradict our beliefs and are incompatible with them. We shall approach the Witnesses' creed from the standpoint of those elements in it which are avowedly destructive of the Judeo-Christian tradition in which we stand. In doing so, we hope to do a service not merely for those of the Catholic religion but also for all who share the concern of the Catholic Church for the fundamental doctrines and values of the Christianity which has molded our society.

Bible Versus Cult

As has already been indicated, the Witnesses owe the origin of their curious beliefs to that complete disdain for any traditional control of Biblical interpretation that has accounted for the scores of marvelous sects that have arisen from "Bible religion." The principle of private judgment as the determinant of Bible faith has rightly been blamed for this often scandalous state of affairs, though, to be sure, the question is somewhat more delicate than this. Though Protestantism adopts the Bible as a rule of faith in a way somewhat different from that of Catholicism, and though private judgment determines this rule for Protestantism in a way that it does not in Catholicism, actually Protestantism has never maintained the absolute independence of private judgment against the tradition within which the Bible was written and in which it has been used. Here, of course, we are speaking of those authentically Protestant bodies which regard themselves as constituting the Christian Church in reform. For them to have done otherwise would be to invite anarchy--the very anarchy, in fact, to which groups like the Witnesses have brought us.

That a person with no other equipment than a knowledge of the English language and a seventeenth century English translation of the Bible in his hands is qualified to decide all matters of eternal consequence for himself and the rest of mankind, is the ridiculous conclusion to which the principle of private judgment can finally be brought. In such a process, the countless generations of devout people who have lived and died according to other beliefs simply count for nothing. The centuries of thought and prayer that have gone into the interpretation of the Bible for all these generations likewise count for nothing. The very men who wrote the Bible--who, obviously, held to a faith that could not be sustained by a patchwork of texts culled from Genesis to Revelation and back again, books that did not then exist--these men, too, count for nothing. All that does matter, apparently, is that a Pennsylvania draper ignorant of the Biblical languages and without the vaguest conception of the Bible's historical origins should have the right to pronounce on the meaning of a book and to judge all mankind of the past, present, and future on the basis of his pronouncements. Here, as a Protestant author once observed, is a species of arrogance compared with which the Pope of Rome, with his claim to infallibility, is groveling in the dust. For the Pope claims only to be the voice of Christian tradition. He cannot, as Pastor Russell did, discover new truths about which Christian antiquity was ignorant.

Bible Scholarship

The most obvious trademark of a crank or cultist interpretation of the Bible, as of anything else, is the fact that it stands in contradiction to the agreed conclusions of sound and disinterested scholarship. This is the case with regard to the Witnesses' approach to what they claim to be Biblical religion. It is inevitable that this should be the case, since this approach grew out of a total ignorance of Biblical scholarship--a fact which none of the Hebrew and Greek words which the Witnesses have lately begun to scatter throughout their publications will ever be able to conceal.

Take, for example, the very name by which the Witnesses wish to be known. The word "Jehovah" has become one of the fetishes of their cult, assuming an importance for them which it has certainly had for no other group known to mankind. The word is derived from the name which the ancient Israelites used to distinguish their God from the gods of the Gentiles. It is derived from that name, however, quite incorrectly. The Hebrews called their God by a name which was written YHWH--all in consonants, we note, since the Hebrew alphabet has no vowels. The pronunciation of the name, which existed independently of the spelling, was doubtless something like "Yahweh." Through an exaggerated type of reverence for the name--and also because the name eventually ceased to be used--later Jews never pronounced it, and as a result the original pronunciation is not sure to this day. What is absolutely sure, however, is that it was never pronounced "Jehovah." This version derives from a misreading of the Hebrew Bible after it had been supplied with vowel indications in later Christian times. The vowel indications that had been attached to this word were actually taken from another, the Hebrew word for "My Lord" which was customarily pronounced instead of the sacred name YHWH.

Now the Witnesses themselves know this nowadays, even if earlier Witnesses did not. On page 25 of their *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* they admit this fact, but say that they have "retained the form `Jehovah' because of people's familiarity with it since the fourteenth century" (that is, the fourteenth century *after* Christ). The fact is, however, as the editors of the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible have pointed out:

"1) The word `Jehovah' does not accurately represent any form of the Name ever used in Hebrew; and 2) the use of any proper name for the

one and only God as though there were other gods from whom He had to be distinguished, was discontinued in Judaism before the Christian era and is entirely inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church."

The editors make this sensible statement in justifying their abandonment of the impossible "Jehovah" that has found its way into some older English translations of the Bible.

Mistranslations

What began, therefore, merely as an erroneous reading of an ancient Hebrew word has now become a dogma of faith to be supported by any argument and to be held at all costs out of proportion to its importance. In the Foreword to the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* (1950 edition) no less than fifteen pages are devoted to this question, not simply to justify the use of the word at all, but in order to justify its use in translating the New Testament. The Witnesses make much of the fact that in the ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint or LXX), the name YHWH was frequently left untranslated in its Hebrew consonants. From this they somehow want to draw the conclusion that the same thing was true of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. As a matter of fact, out of the thousands of New Testament manuscripts that we possess there is not a single one that will justify such a conclusion---and the New Testament is the best and most meticulously documented body of literature of all antiquity. Not only is there no evidence in any single instance to justify the 237 times the Witnesses have placed "Jehovah" in the New Testament text, there is no evidence to justify even the correct Old Testament form in such cases. The early Christians who wrote the New Testament certainly did not use this name, but rather the word "Lord," which they also applied to Christ. Here, therefore, we have a pathetic example of pseudo-scholarship attempting to defend the indefensible.

The gradual abandonment of the use of YHWH by the Israelites can be seen in the Old Testament itself. The most ancient parts of the Mosaic traditions that have been assembled in the Pentateuch, for example, tend to use the name YHWH for Israel's God, while the parts that were written down later tend to use the word *Elohim* ("deity," or, simply, "God"). But one of the most obvious evidences is in the so-called Elohist Psalter, that is, Psalms 42 to 83. In all these Psalms the word *Elohim* was systematically substituted for YHWH wherever it occurred. Thus it is that Psalm 53 actually reproduces a Psalm that had already been taken into the Psalter at an earlier stage in its formation (Psalm 14), the only difference, for

all practical purposes, being the use of the divine name.

Why such a thing should have occurred is not too difficult to explain. Even though the Bible ascribes the name YHWH to divine revelation (Ex. 6:3) and though it was therefore most sacred to the Israelites, there was also the danger that it could be misunderstood. It might be thought that Yahweh was the local god of the Hebrews, just as Chemosh was the god of the Moabites, Marduk the god of the Babylonians, and so on. It was to insist on the fact that Yahweh was the one true God of all mankind, therefore, that the proper name was increasingly avoided or replaced by other terms. Even when the Jews continued to *write* YHWH, they *said* "God" or "Lord"--whence the later vowel indications in the Hebrew Bible which have nothing to do with the pronunciation of YHWH at all. "Lord," in Greek *Kyrios*, became the ordinary substitute for the YHWH of the Old Testament. That "Lord" had such divine connotations is the point of Christ's question in Mark 12:35-37. It was with the same connotations that Christ was recognized by the first Christians as "the Lord Jesus."

Language Confusion

The limits to which imagination will go in attempting to support the unsupportable are shown in the argument which the Witnesses employ to justify some of the "Jehovahs" in their translation of the New Testament. First of all, the tradition that the Apostle Matthew originally wrote his Gospel in "Hebrew" is interpreted to mean Old Testament Hebrew rather than the Aramaic which was the language of Palestinian Jews in Matthew's time. "In recent years," the Witnesses write, "some have claimed that Matthew's Gospel account was at first written in Hebrew rather than in its kindred language, the Aramaic." Some have claimed this, indeed, but on the basis of evidence that has not convinced the ordinary scholar. The Witnesses, however, prefer Hebrew to an Aramaic Matthew, since YHWH was not used in Aramaic. The Witnesses go on: "It is now believed Matthew himself translated his Gospel account into the Greek," and: "He could follow the LXX practice and incorporate the divine name in its proper place in the Greek text." Just by whom it is believed that Matthew translated his Semitic Gospel into Greek, is not made clear. The tradition by which alone we know that there was an Aramaic Matthew indicates precisely the opposite. Most scholars agree that the Greek Matthew of our Bibles is hardly a "translation" in the accepted sense of the word at all, but a Greek work through and through. That it was heavily dependant on the Aramaic work known from tradition and used it as a

model justifies our calling it Matthew's Gospel, but does make it a translation in the strict sense of the word. Who its inspired author was, we do not know. The list of names which the Witnesses allege from the early Church as testifying to the existence of a Semitic Gospel of Matthew in the fourth and fifth Christian centuries is quite worthless. As is now known, these persons had mistaken Matthew's original Gospel for the "Gospel of the Hebrews," an apocryphal work which still survives in fragments and which is filled with legendary additions to the authentic Gospel history.

All in all, the pages which the Witnesses have devoted to the subject of "Jehovah" appear to the disinterested observer as much ado about nothing. Even if it were true, which it emphatically is not, that the Hebrews called God by the name "Jehovah," the matter would be entirely irrelevant to Christians. The introduction of the name and the importance attached to it in the Witnesses' translation of the New Testament simply stamp this translation as eccentric.

Immortality

Another matter of greater consequence which rose from Pastor Russell's misunderstanding of the Bible also characterizes the creed of the Witnesses. This is their denial of the immortality of the human soul, a denial that ties in with their rejection of eternal punishment and the strange interpretation they give to certain passages of the Book of Revelation which concern the future life of the elect.

In the appendix to the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* (1950 edition) some five pages are devoted to the translations given the word "soul." In the appendix to the *New World Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures* (1953 edition) another eleven pages deal with the same subject. What all of these references go to prove is that the Semites who wrote the Bible looked on the human personality in a somewhat different fashion from our own. This is not a question of Biblical revelation, but of the notions of human psychology entertained by Biblical authors.

The Hebrew did not, as we do, think of man as a composite of body and soul. When he used the word *nefesh*, which in older translations of the Bible appears as "soul," he meant the whole personality--body and soul together, as we would think of it. Thus it is that modern translations of the Bible ordinarily do not translate the word as "soul," since that is to give an

erroneous impression of what the Bible author would have been talking about. The word *nefesh* simply meant a living being, animal or human. In the same way, he used the same word, *ruach*, translated "spirit" or "breath," for the life principle of all living things. Neither does this word mean "soul"--it simply designated the concrete evidence and fact of breathing life. The same ideas lie behind the Greek words which were used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew, and which the New Testament authors used in their own works.

We repeat, this is not Biblical revelation, but part of the mental framework of the Biblical authors. The better insights that we have into the physical make-up of the human personality are a gain of subsequent scientific knowledge that is as much the gift of God as Biblical revelation itself. We are no more to be restricted by the limitations of the Biblical authors in their knowledge of human psychology than we are to be restricted by their limitations in other realms of science. What we have to do is accept Biblical revelation, but accept it in terms that we know must agree with sound scientific knowledge, since the God of revelation and the God Who is also the Author of nature's laws cannot contradict Himself. Thus, whereas the Bible does not, it is true, speak of the immortality of the human soul--a concept which it does not have in our sense of the word--it does speak of *the immortality of the human person*. And in our language, this means the immortality of the human soul.

Science and Scripture

A good example to illustrate how we must translate Biblical language into our own in a similar instance can be found in the revelation of the creation of the world in Genesis. The Biblical authors thought of the earth as a flat disk floating on water ("the waters beneath the earth," Gen 1:2, Job 28:14, etc.), anchored there by foundation pillars (Job 38:4, Prov. 8:29, Ps 18:16, etc.), over which was arched the sky, a "firmament" shiny and "hard as a bronze mirror" (Job 37:18, etc.). Obviously, this conception of the universe is not our own--we have far better knowledge of the structure of the earth and sky and their make-up than did the Biblical authors. What we must take from the Bible is not its authors' unscientific view of the universe, but the revealed truth that the universe is God's creation, a revelation which the author of Genesis communicated using his unscientific conception of its structure.

In the same way, when Revelation 6:14 speaks of "heaven passing away as a scroll that is rolled up," the author is thinking of the sky in the Old Testament conception, a kind of bowl inverted over the earth, hard and shiny. The Hebrew word we translate as "firmament" means just that: something solid that has been beaten out and shaped. The sky, we know, is not really this, even though that is the way the Biblical authors thought of it. Once again we have Biblical revelation--the end of the present universe as we know it--which, however, we must understand in terms other than those the Biblical authors used.

Does the Bible, then, teach the immortality of the human person? Most assuredly. To restrict ourselves solely to the words of Christ as reported in the Gospels, consider His teaching in Matthew 25:31-46 (Witnesses' translation): "When the Son of man arrives in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit down on his glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will put the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right: 'Come, you who have my Father's blessing, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the world's foundation...' Then he will say, in turn, to those on his left: 'Be on your way from me, you who have been cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels...' And these will depart into everlasting cutting-off, but the righteous ones into everlasting life."

Punishment

The Witnesses would have us believe that this language is to be taken figuratively, at least as far as the accursed are concerned. An everlasting fire, they say, but it burns nobody--immortality is God's gift to the just, but the wicked are simply annihilated. Thus their strange translation, "cutting-off," in the above passage, for what other translations universally render "punishment." The Witnesses suggest in a footnote that the word means "Literally, a 'pruning'; hence a curtailing, a holding in check." This is quite incorrect, as anyone can verify by consulting a Greek dictionary on the word *kolasis*. It means "mutilation," "torture," "punishment." The precise word occurs one other time, in 1 John 4:18, where it has been again mistranslated by the Witnesses--here, however, probably because the translator simply did not understand the text. The verb of the same root, *kolazein*, also occurs twice in 2 Peter 2:9 where again it is a question of

eternal punishment, the Witnesses deliberately avoid using this word, and translate "to be cut off." But in Acts 4:21, where none of their dogma is at stake, they finally come right out and translate "to punish," which is exactly what the word means.

It is pointless to attempt to deny the obvious fact that the Bible teaches an eternal reward for the just and an eternal punishment for the wicked. One may not like such a teaching, but it is the height of dishonesty to change the Bible in order to suit one's likes and dislikes and still claim to depend on the Bible as the word of God. Eternal punishment, of course, involves a natural immortality in man. We refer to this as man's immortal soul. The Biblical authors referred to it otherwise, since they did not use the word "soul" as we do.

Neither does the idea of eternal punishment make God into a vindictive torturer. He is a Judge, not an executioner. Hell is a state which the wicked have willingly chosen for themselves, and the punishment that they must endure there is only what is due their sins. They are their own executioners. Furthermore, no suffering that could possibly be inflicted on them would equal that which is the very essence of hell itself--to endure for all eternity the realization that they have closed upon themselves the gateway to salvation, that they have denied to themselves what their souls were designed for, to be united with God. This is the denial of that hope which is at the heart of the New Testament message of salvation.

Judaizing the Gospel

From the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline letters we know of one of the earliest heresies that afflicted the young Christian Church, the heresy of Judaizing. This heresy took various forms, but all of them had one trait in common, and that was a misunderstanding of the relation of the Old Testament to the New.

In its most blatant form, Judaizing attempted to impose the Mosaic Law on Christian converts, including ritual circumcision and the Jewish dietary laws which were a figure only of the realities which had been fulfilled in Christ. Despite the fact that such a movement could only end in denying the efficacy of Christ's salvation, and despite the fact that the New Testament record is quite clear in its rejection of this entire heresy, one still finds isolated instances today of those who call themselves Christians advocating such practices--"calling to account for what you eat or drink or

in regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Col. 2:16)--and even appealing for their justification to the words and example of Christ Himself. Obviously, any sect which can adopt such a viewpoint towards the divine revelation contained in the Bible is not Christian at all. It is, rather, a religion like that of Islam, which has made for itself a unique combination of Jewish and Christian elements along with its own modifications.

The Witnesses are such a Judaizing sect. They do not, it is true, profess the Mosaic Law in its entirety as of divine obligation for mankind under the rule of Christ's grace. Neither do they insist on the Jewish Sabbath as do some other allegedly Christian sects. Nevertheless, their entire attitude towards the Old Testament is a Judaizing one, as will be seen from a few examples.

In the preceding section we spoke of the Witnesses' denial of the immortality of the soul. To support this belief, they lay great stress on such passages as this from Ezekiel 18:4, "The soul that sins shall die."

To quote Ezekiel to prove such a thing, one has to forget or to be ignorant of certain things. One thing, as we already pointed out, is that the word translated here as "soul" does not mean what we understand by the human soul. It means, rather, the human person himself. Thus, more accurate modern translations have something quite different: "The person who sins shall die" (*An American Translation*); "Only the one who sins shall die" (*Confraternity Translation*). On the other hand, Ezekiel is repeating the well-known Biblical doctrine, that death is the consequence of sin (Gen. 2:17).

Secondly, when Ezekiel is read in his context, it becomes obvious why he makes this statement, which is not to say anything at all about the immortality of man one way or the other, but to define the limits of divine punishment. Whereas in the past God had dealt with man as a member of a people, therefore "inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation" (Ex. 20:5), in the New Covenant that was to come, it would not be so. In the New Covenant, Ezekiel revealed in the name of God, punishment would be inflicted *only* on the one who sinned. When one reads the entire passage, this meaning becomes quite clear.

The Witnesses' use of such a text, however, is entirely indicative of their approach to the Old and New Testaments, in which the relation of the one to

the other is obscured, and no account is taken of the stage of history to which each refer and in which each becomes comprehensible. This attitude is typical of the frame of mind sometimes called Fundamentalism or, less correctly, Biblical Literalism, in which the Bible simply becomes a mine of texts to be slapped together in any helter-skelter fashion, without reference to author, context, or literary background.

Life After Death

Associated with the question we discussed in the preceding section is the idea of retribution for saint and sinner that the Witnesses derive from their Judaizing interpretation of the Bible. Specifically, we refer to the state of the dead as portrayed in the Old Testament.

It is only at the very end of the Old Testament period that the Jews were given any clear-cut revelation concerning the nature of life after death. The most explicit references to this occur in those books which the Witnesses exclude from their translation of the Old Testament--books, however, which modern Scripture scholars admit are necessary for understanding the progress of revelation from the Old Testament to the New. For all practical purposes, therefore, the revelation of a resurrection, of a blessed immortality for the just, and of eternal punishment must be sought in the New Testament. There are several reasons why this should have been the case.

Firstly, the very relation of the Old Testament to the New made an early revelation of these truths inadvisable. Since our Lord Jesus Christ was to be the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18), whose return to the Father victorious from the sacrifice of the cross and resurrection from the dead was necessary that a place be prepared for all who believe (John 14:2), there was little point in giving the people of the Old Testament too precise a knowledge of the afterlife. They could merely have been told that it was their lot at best to wait, perhaps for ages, until the coming of the Redeemer made heaven a possibility for them. This was not a possibility until the coming of Christ (John 3:13); until then, the dead could only wait in "prison" for the redemption (1 Pet. 3:19-20).

Secondly, by lack of precise knowledge of the afterlife the Israelites were spared the many superstitions and vain observances of their Gentile neighbors with respect to the dead. In this, the religion of Israel contrasts strikingly with that of ancient Egypt, for example, or ancient Babylonia, where a man's whole life and much of his substance might be frittered away in vain preoccupations about his

condition after death. The pyramids of Egypt are monuments to other follies than that of Pastor Russell's speculations on the Second Coming of Christ.

The Mystery of the Afterlife

For whatever reason, the fact remains that the Old Testament has little to say about the afterlife. The people of the Old Testament knew that death did not end all, but precisely what did take place after death was largely a mystery to them. As a result, the orientation of the Old Testament is almost entirely towards a this-worldly view of rewards and punishments. This in turn explains some of the "problem" literature of the Old Testament, such as the book of Job. Had Job known of the New Testament revelation concerning the afterlife, much of what troubled him would have already found an explanation in his mind.

The Old Testament calls the place of the dead by the name *Sheol*, a word the exact meaning of which is unknown. Older translations used to put this in English as "hell." Actually, there is nothing wrong with this translation, since the English word originally meant any place to which the dead went, without regard to the condition of the dead in that place. Thus we say in the Apostles' Creed that Christ "descended into hell," merely repeating the idea of such Biblical texts as 1 Peter 3:18-20. However, because "hell" in present-day English means for most people the hell of damnation, other translations are now used for *Sheol*. The *Revised Standard Version* simply transliterates the word as Sheol; the *Confraternity Translation* gives it as "the nether world." Sometimes the Old Testament calls *Sheol* "the pit" or *abaddon*, a word that probably means "the place of those who have perished." In the LXX and in the New Testament the Greek equivalent for *Sheol* is *Hades*.

The Old Testament thought of *Sheol* as a definite place, not merely the grave. It was a place beneath the earth, and also beneath the "waters under the earth" (see Job 26:5-6 and 38:16-17). It was barred by gates (Job 38:17), a place of darkness (Ps. 88:7) and of silence (Ps. 115:17).

There is not a single Old Testament view of *Sheol* and the fate of the dead beyond the few facts that we have just outlined—in the Old Testament times mystery surrounds the afterlife that is only to be solved by the revelation given on the threshold of the New Testament. Thus Job, who had not received the revelation of the resurrection, believed that no one ever returned from *Sheol* (7:9, 10:21, 14:12), and also that everyone, good and bad, went without distinction to the same place (3:3-19). This seems to have been the majority view. On the other hand, Ezekiel

emphatically distinguishes the fate of the uncircumcised enemies of Israel from that of the heroes of ancient times—both are in *Sheol*, but not together (32:17-32). For Isaiah 24:21-22 the pit is a place of punishment, which he calls a prison.

Punishment After Death

The idea that the wicked find a place of punishment after death is expressed very clearly in Isaiah 66:22-24....In contrast to the new Jerusalem which will be the dwelling of the elect of mankind, says the prophet, "They shall go out and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me; their worm shall not die, nor their fire be extinguished; and they shall be abhorrent to all mankind." When we remember that for the ancient Israelite the worst fate that could befall the dead was that their bodies should be burnt or left unburied, we understand what is meant by this apparent contradictory picture of bodies being forever burnt and yet consumed by worms. The author is using partly symbolic language to describe an everlasting punishment. It is not surprising, therefore, that Christ quotes this passage in speaking of an eternal punishment that is far worse than death itself (Mark 9:42-48).

Though the author of Isaiah 66:22-24 does not say so explicitly, he was doubtless thinking of the valley of Ge-Hinnom, the rubbish heap outside Jerusalem, as the site of this everlasting punishment of the wicked (see Jeremiah 7:30-8:3). Certainly our Lord uses this word, translated Gehenna in Greek, to designate the place of eternal punishment. The name, of course, is only symbolic, just as is the name "heaven" (which means simply "the sky") to designate eternal happiness in the presence of God. Daniel 12:2, another passage that comes from a late period in Old Testament times, knows of an eternal life and an eternal disgrace that follow on the resurrection of the dead: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace."

We see, therefore, that the ideas of the Old Testament on the condition of the dead and the matter of retribution are somewhat complex. They also suppose a development leading towards the New Testament. To quote the Old Testament without recognition of these facts adds to the confusion which contributes to the existence of sects like the Witnesses.

The New Testament, in any case, is certainly clear on this matter. The alternative to everlasting life, according to our Lord, is to be thrown into everlasting fire of Gehenna (Matt. 18:8-9). Gehenna is the lot of the wicked following the judgment of

God (Matt. 23:33). Where the wicked go, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12). Various other expressions are used to signify the happiness of the just and the punishment of the rejected. One of the best known examples is the parable of the wicked rich man and the poor Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, where the place of torments is called Hades and the place of Lazarus' reward "Abraham's bosom." Now it is very true that this is a parable told by our Lord not to give us precise information about heaven and hell, but to teach other lessons. However, in His parables Jesus did not deal in mythology but with familiar realities—it was with well known and accepted truths that He illustrated His new teaching. In this story, therefore, He supposes along with those who heard him that there was a reward for good and a punishment for the wicked after death.

Blood and Life

Another outstanding example of the way in which the Witnesses have misconstrued the relation of the Old Testament to the New can be found in their strange teaching about blood. As is well known, the Witnesses hold that blood transfusions are a violation of God's law. There are instances where they have permitted persons to die rather than have a recourse to the remedy which preserves life. Whence comes this extraordinary idea?

In the Old Testament the eating of blood was forbidden by many passages of the Mosaic Law. The reason for this appears in Leviticus 17:11-12: "Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement. That is why I have told the Israelites: No one among you, not even a resident alien, may partake of blood."

In other words, blood, like breath, was regarded as the concrete embodiment of life, the gift of God, and therefore a thing sacred to God. Blood, according to the Law of Moses, was to be used in certain sacred functions of Old Testament ritual, chief among them being the rites whereby atonement was made for sins in the various involved rituals of animal sacrifice. Because of this sacred character, blood was withdrawn from human consumption. To this day orthodox Jews do not eat meat that has not been drained of its blood--this is one of the "kosher" or dietary laws.

But not even the most rigorous Jew ever dreamed that this law constitutes a prohibition of blood transfusions! In coming to such a conclusion the Witnesses have out-rabbied the rabbis of the Middle Ages. For the law

against eating blood obviously had nothing to do with *human* blood--cannibalism was not a problem for the Israelites. In extending a law that had one purpose to another conclusion that is totally foreign to that purpose, the Witnesses have truly turned the divine pronouncement into a senseless legalism and have become guilty of the kind of casuistry that makes a laughingstock out of God's word.

In any case, what does such a law have to do with Christians, for whom the blood rituals of the Mosaic Law are meaningless? An end to the significance of blood under the Mosaic Law was proclaimed in the pouring out of Christ's blood by which the New Covenant was inaugurated--read the ninth and tenth chapters of Hebrews, in which it is shown how the blood ritual and the other provisions of the Law were but the shadow of good things to come.

It is true, according to Acts 15:12-29, the infant Church in Jerusalem mentioned blood as one of the things that the Gentile converts to Christianity in the regions of Antioch and Syria and Cilicia should avoid. The reason for this was also made clear. Since the Jewish population in these regions was extensive, the new Christians were instructed to avoid giving offense by conforming to Jewish custom in matters which involved no sacrifice of Christian principle. The decree of the Jerusalem Council was not a universal ruling of the Church. It was directed to Gentile converts amongst a Jewish population. At the same time, it was made perfectly clear that no Christian was under any obligation to observe the Mosaic Law as a means of salvation--that to recognize any such obligation, as a matter of fact, would be a denial of Christ. In much the same way, Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), not because he believed that it was in any way necessary, but because he did not wish to offend the Jews needlessly among whom he planned to work, and the Jews would have been scandalized at the uncircumcised state of Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman.

The prohibition of blood appears in Genesis 9:4, in one of the later parts of the Mosaic traditions brought into the Pentateuch, as an anticipation of this provision of the Mosaic Law. The Jews insisted upon this regulation for all who lived among them, Gentiles as well as Israelites, as has been seen in the law of Leviticus 17:12, mentioned above. It was to avoid giving needless offence to them in the early missionary work of the Church, therefore, that the instruction was given to the *Gentile* Christians of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. It was never intended by the apostolic Church as the expression of any permanent duty of all Christians.

When the word of God is bent to make it a decree of death rather than part of the way of life, truly the Scripture has been perverted. The bizarre interpretation that the Witnesses have given to the Old Testament law of blood has shocked many people because of the wide publicity that it has occasionally been given. Those who believe in the inspired character of the Scripture in the history of God's salvation are even more shocked, however, by no less pernicious interpretations that have been given to other parts of the divine word, making of it in every true sense a letter that kills.

In the Beginning Was the Word

From the Christian point of view, the worst of the Witnesses' Judaizing of the Gospel lies in their rejection of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, the divinity of Jesus Christ.

On an earlier page we spoke of the supreme arrogance that presumes to regard all traditional interpretation of the Scripture as irrelevant. Not only is this an arrogance, however, it is also a total folly that no one would dare to apply to any other area of life than religion.

What would happen, may we imagine, if every doctor were to begin his practice of medicine by disregarding everything that every other doctor before him had done or written? What would be the progress of science, if every scientist were forbidden to profit from the advances and mistakes of his predecessors, and had to begin precisely from the ground up in whatever generation he should find himself? Obviously, there would never be any progress at all. Science would always be beginning, never going anywhere. The same would be true of any other human endeavor, if such were the methodology that had to be followed.

Theology—the science of revelation—and exegesis—the scientific interpretation of the Scriptures—are among such human endeavors. God has committed His word to His people, and the elucidation of this word has been and is being carried out among this people as part of the work He has given them to do. For anyone in a later age to disregard the study of the word of God from the beginning is not only unsound procedure, it is to disregard the very will of God in communicating the word from the beginning.

Because the Witnesses do spurn the historical study of the Bible, reading their Unitarian literature is like taking a refresher course in the ancient Christian

heresies. Not a mistake was ever made in these matters that has not been faithfully repeated by the Witnesses—the great difference being that the Witnesses have managed somehow to make contradictory rather than consistent mistakes. The heresies relating to Christology (the study of Christ) are many and varied—embracing such almost forgotten titles as Arianism, Modalism, Adoptionism, Subordinationism (heresies which ran their course in the early Church and disappeared from the Christian scene). But simply name it and read the Witnesses' literature; eventually you are sure to run across it. The amusing thing is that it will be presented to you as a brand-new idea. This is as true of their arguments on the childhood level—counting three fingers to disprove the Trinity—as of those which spring from their newly acquired acquaintance with Greek words.

The Holy Trinity

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity in God is a Christian revelation not found in the Old Testament. It was a revelation made to men whose only literature was the Old Testament. Perhaps what is even more important, it was a revelation transmitted through human authors who had such an intellectual background. It was inevitable that the new content of Christianity appears in terminology that comes mainly from the Old Testament, and takes on new meaning in the process.

The Old Testament, for example, knew of a Spirit of God, but it did not know of Him as a distinct divine Person. It is our Lord Who has revealed to us this new truth about the nature of God. In revealing it He adhered to the Old Testament term. In the same way, the remainder of the New Testament speaks of the Trinity, but in Old Testament language.

How were the writers of the New Testament, and our Lord Himself, to make known this new revelation to men who were familiar only with the Old Testament doctrine of God? Not by baldly saying, as later theology could, "Christ is God, the Spirit is God, the Father is God." This would have been understood by Jews to mean three Gods—even as the Witnesses willfully misunderstand Christian language today. The New Testament shows a far better concern for human understanding than this. Even as our Lord made Himself known to His contemporaries in His messianic character only gradually, lest misunderstandings about its nature cause Him to be accepted or rejected as the kind of Messiah He was not, in the same way He revealed His divine nature by degrees and in terms that would not lead to false conclusions.

First of all, He took the familiar term "Son," and by its use related Himself to God in a unique way. "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). Now, it is true, "son of God" was a title that any devout Jew could use of himself (as in Hosea 2:1, see also Romans 9:26). It was also a title used of the messianic king (as in 2 Samuel 7:14, Psalm 2:7). But it should be evident that Christ was saying more of Himself than that He was the Son of God in these senses. For He claims to be the only Person Who really knows the Father, and that only through Himself can anyone else come to a true knowledge of the Father. This implies a unity of life between the Father that is shared by no other. Furthermore, what is perhaps even more important, *no one knows the Son, Christ, except the Father*. Only the divine knowledge itself can penetrate the mystery of the personality of Christ. There is obviously a relationship here that is outside the realm of that of Creator and creature. It is an equal knowledge shared equally between the Son and the Father. When we remember that "knowledge" to the Semite did not mean something merely intellectual, but implied a community of life, we have a fuller comprehension of our Lord's words.

Equal to God

Similarly, Christ did not make the bald statement, "I am equal to God," or, "I am equal to the Father." To a Jew, this could only have signified another God, for in his mentality, something equal to another had at the same time to be numerically different from it. What Christ did was to make the equivalent claim, in entirely different words, "I do the works of the Father," He said (John 10:37). This was language a Jew could understand. For again, Jesus was not saying merely that He was doing the work of God in a way any devout person could do it. He was claiming a community of activity with His Father that was entirely unique. "My Father is working still, and I am working" (John 5:17). Note John's comment in the following verse—that despite the caution with which our Lord has introduced this claim, "This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God." The Jews had grasped the essence of His claim to divinity, though they had drawn an erroneous conclusion from it as regards monotheism. It is for the same purpose that He made the many protestations that the Son was only doing the will of the Father, and so forth (John 5:30, etc.)—not to subordinate Himself to the Father but to insist that His activity and the Father's were *one*. The oneness of the Holy Spirit with the Father and Son is similarly brought out in such passages as John 16:13.

It was in such ways that the doctrine of the Trinity of Persons in one God was first revealed. It was, mainly, in such language that the doctrine was communicated by the writers of the New Testament. However, these writers also record the doctrine in more emphatic language. After the resurrection of Christ the fullness of His meaning became much more evident. After the resurrection Thomas the Apostle greeted Christ with the most explicit act of faith in the Gospels, employing two divine titles, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). After the resurrection the Christian Church, in the great hymn found in Philippians 2:5-11, acknowledged that the Jesus Who had appeared among men in human form had first "emptied himself" of the divine prerogatives He owned by right and had returned to the throne of God the triumphant bearer of the divine title "Lord." After the resurrection the Evangelist John composed the magnificent prologue to his Gospel, in which he names Christ the Word of God Who from eternity was with God and was God.

The Christological heresy of the Witnesses resembles more than any other that of the Arians of the fourth century. They admit that Christ was, at least before His coming on earth and after His resurrection, something more than man. They call Him a "spirit person," a non-Biblical term that they have invented. They say He was "a god," but not God Himself. They claim that this is not to deny monotheism—the thing our Lord was so concerned not to do—since the Scripture also speaks of others as "gods." They have worked out some rules of Greek usage unknown to the authors of the New Testament in order to justify these conclusions.

Greek Usage

It is in obedience to these rules of Greek usage that they first of all deny that the explicit affirmation of Thomas is an affirmation at all. It is, they say, simply an emotional ejaculation, in which Thomas was not actually referring to Christ. Why so? Because what Thomas is reported as saying is *ho kyrios mou kai ho theos mou*—"My Lord and my God." *Ho Theos*, that is, the word "God" with the Greek article, is used only of God in the true sense. The word *theos* only, without the article, they say means only "a god," and this word can be used of Christ to mean something less than God. They point to John's prologue, in which he says "the Word was with God" (*pros ton theon*—the word "God" with the article), and then "the Word was a god" (*theos*).

Does this really work out in practice? Let us take only a single page from

the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* (1950 ed.) in order to show that it does not. This page includes the ending of Paul's letter to the Romans and the beginning of the First Letter to the Corinthians, that is, Romans 16:21-27 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-2. On this page the word "God" appears four times--"the everlasting God," "to God wise alone," "through God's will," "the congregation of God." Note that in each case the Witnesses have translated "God" with a capital "G." Yet in the Greek text only the first and last *theos* has an article. Why not "to an only wise god" and "through the will of a god"? It seems that when no doctrinal issue is involved, the Witnesses' rule becomes very elastic.

As a matter of fact, the Greek does ordinarily use the article with "God," just as it does with the proper names and a great number of other words that are used in English without the article. It is not proper to translate "the" in these cases, or to translate "a" or "an" when the article is omitted, simply because usage differs between the two languages. The article is a determiner. Also, as we have shown, the article can sometimes be omitted without changing the meaning.

Why does John say that "the Word was with God," employing the article, and also "the Word was God," omitting the article? For two reasons, the first being purely grammatical. When one gives a little thought to the subject, one realizes that the same word "was" in these two statements actually means two different things. In the first instance it indicates a condition, a relationship: the Word stands in some kind of relation to Someone else, to God. In the second instance it is merely the equivalent of an equal sign: Word and God refer to the same Person. Now this second kind of use of the verb "to be" involves a subject to which another word is placed as its predicate, the two being the same. In Greek, the subject has the article, while the predicate does not. In English we know the two by position rather than by the use of an article. Thus we translate "the Word (subject) was God (predicate)," not "God was the Word." In John 4:24 our Lord says to the Samaritan woman, "God is spirit." Now the Greek here, actually is *pneuma* (spirit) *ho theos* (God)--in that order. Still, it is not correct to translate, "The Spirit is God," because the article shows that "God" is the subject and the lack of the article shows that "spirit" is the predicate. Note, too, that no verb "to be" occurs here at all, as often is the case in Greek: the "equal sign" is just omitted.

The other reason that John does not use the article in saying "the Word was God" is theological. Actually, it would be very poor Trinitarian theology for him to have done so. Ordinarily, as we stated above, the article is used

with proper names as a determiner. John has placed the Word in relation to God as a determined Person. But at the same time he affirms that the Word is God. Obviously the Word is not the determined Person with Whom He stands in relation--He is a different Person altogether. It would have been to court confusion, therefore, to repeat the article.

There is no objection whatever to translating, as some modern versions do, something like "the Word was divine," as long as this is not falsely construed as signifying something less than "God." Throughout the entire New Testament, however, there is not the slightest shred of evidence for holding that any New Testament author means anything but "God" when he uses the word *theos* in relation to the monotheistic religion in which he believed. The Greek word, of course, is like our own: we can also speak of false "gods" or a false "god," using the same word that we use for the true God. In 1 Corinthians 8:5 and Galatians 4:8, Paul uses the term for such as are falsely called "gods." In the same sense, he speaks of "the god of this world" (2 Cor, 4:4), even as our Lord speaks of "the prince of this world" (John 12:21). But whenever a New Testament author refers the word *theos* to the one, true God of his faith, he can only mean "God."

But does not Christ Himself use such language, and justify His use of it from the Scripture? In John 10:31-39 we read: "The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?' The Jews answered him, 'We stone you for no good work but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God.' Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your law: I said, you are gods? If he then called them gods to whom the word of God came (and Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world: "You are blaspheming," because I said: I am the Son of God? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.' Again they tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands."

Here Jesus does not take back a single word of His claims that had provoked His enemies to the charge of blasphemy, as their reaction proves. What He does only is to ask them to think, referring them to Psalm 82 where a divine title (translated "gods" in the LXX used here by John) was employed of human judges. If such a title could be used in one sense in the Scripture, asks Jesus, could not another sense be readily applicable to Himself? Or does His suggestion of His divinity rule out, as they think, the monotheistic idea of God?

The Hebrew word used in Psalm 82 is *elohim*. This word, which is used of the one true God throughout the Old Testament, is as flexible as the Greek *theos* or the English "god." It could also mean much more. Sometimes it was used for angels. In 1 Samuel 28:13 it is even used for the spirit of Samuel called up by the witch of Endor. Also it was used for pagan deities. The very ambiguity of the word serves as a basis for our Lord's argument—which might be a lesson for the Witnesses to take to heart: "What's in a name?" What is important is the meaning that words have in context, not what they are made to mean. There is no doubt what John the Evangelist meant when he said, "The Word was God."

For this Word, this utterance of the Father, already, before all creation and from all eternity, *was with God*. He *became* flesh, but already in the beginning He *was*. The opening phrase of John's prologue did not say, "In the beginning the Word came to be," but that in the beginning--wherever you place it--the Word already *was*. It would require the passing of centuries before the precise theological language of Christian Trinitarianism doctrine would be worked out, language that would learn from heresies like the collection enshrined in Witness literature what errors to avoid as well as from the thinking of devout Christian men. As the Protestant Biblical scholar William Sanday once wrote: "The decisions in question were the outcome of a long evolution, every step in which was keenly debated by minds of great acumen and power, really far better equipped for such discussion than the average Anglo-American mind of today." They produced the Christian theology that characterizes orthodox Christianity. But they began where we begin, with John's affirmation of the truth:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..."

The Witnesses and the Bible

In 1950 the Witnesses published the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*, rendered from the original language by the New World Bible Translation Committee. In 1960 they published the final volume (Volume 5) of the *New World Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Subsequently, single-volume editions of the complete Bible in this translation has appeared in several languages. The publications are well printed and excellently got out, and are marketed at an incredibly low price. [Since 1990, Witness literature has been distributed on a donation basis in many countries.] They are, as a matter of fact, additional cases in point of what we mentioned earlier regarding the zeal of these

people which deserves a better cause than it serves.

The Witnesses' translation is the culmination of an increasing interest they have taken in the many versions of the Scripture that are available today. It is not unusual for one of the Witnesses' publications to cite as many as ten or more different translations. Moreover, for a number of years they have been making a point of appealing to the original texts of the Scriptures, at least to the standard editions of these texts. All of this is something of a switch from the origins of the Witnesses in Pastor Russell's meditations over the King James Bible.

From what we have brought out above, the major reason for the Witnesses' making their own translation of the Bible is not hard to find. No sect has ever been able to resist the temptation to vindicate its teachings as close to their alleged source as possible. Private judgment in interpretation will carry one a long way, and the claim of mistranslation will solve other difficulties. But what better thing than for a religion based on the Bible to have its own Bible to prove it? And, as it happens, there are countless instances in the Witnesses' Bible where the sacred text has been thoroughly tailored to fit the Witnesses' measurements. We have brought out some of the instances above.

In general, it must be said that where there are no sectarian issues at stake, the Witnesses' translation maintains a reasonably high standard of journeyman scholarship. The work has been done by those who have studied their grammars and dictionaries. There is an excellent system of cross-referencing of texts. The "critical" footnotes are voluminous, even though mainly worthless and irrelevant, as are the appendices.

A translation made for crank purposes, however, will inevitably turn up with eccentricities that really have nothing to do with its main purpose. It is simply that eccentricity breeds a way of thought. Anyone who reads very far in the translation of the Old Testament, for example, will soon be bewildered by the strange way the verb tenses come one after another and by the equally strange way that verbs tend at times to be modified by words that contribute little or nothing to meaning. If he bothers to read the Foreword he will get the explanation of this. The translators have discarded the generally accepted rules of Hebrew syntax on the verb and have followed another isolated view that has never commended itself to many scholars.

The Cross

Certain bizarre translations turn up that obviously mean a great deal to the translators but which could not matter very much to anyone else. As an example, we might take the translation given in the New Testament to the Greek word *stauros*, "cross." This word did, it is true, refer principally to the instrument of execution used by the Romans, without necessarily involving the form that the instrument took. It seems to be equally true, however, that the form was customarily that of a cross as we know it, that is, of an upright together with a crossbar of some kind. This was the form in which the cross as a symbol was adopted by the earliest Christians, who were at that time close enough to the practice of crucifixion to know what would have been the most likely instrument used in the case of our Lord's suffering and death. At the same time, it obviously doesn't matter one bit whether Christ was crucified on a single upright stake or one with a crossbar. The fact that Christian tradition has varied from East to West and back again in representing the cross in different forms shows how secondary the whole question is. The cross is for us a symbol, merely that, to remind us of a great event that took place, and not necessarily a photographic description of it. In any case, the words "cross" and "crucifixion" have a meaning for everybody that commits nobody to any decision as to whether Christ was put to death on a Latin or Greek or Tau cross. For the Witnesses to insist on using the word "torture stake" for this instrument, and to substitute the word "impale" for "crucify," adds up merely to another of the oddities of this Bible translation.

This matter of terminology is, however, another mark of cultist religion, which generally aims at a private vocabulary that substitutes for conventional language. Anyone who reads much of the Witnesses' literature speedily discovers this. Not only does he run across terms like "spirit person," "Bride class," "sanctuary class," and the like, terms that have their home only among the initiates of the sect, but also conventional words, like "religion," have had special meanings attached to them. "Religion," in Witness terminology, was at one time viewed as a bad word which was used to designate any organized or unorganized, visible or invisible church or other religious (since we can't avoid the term here) movement or body or influence that was not Jehovah's Witnesses. The term has since been rehabilitated and most Witnesses today are unaware of the special meaning that was once attached to the word "religion." As we have seen above, the fixation on the name of "Jehovah" is another manifestation of cultist religion.

The Watchtower

It is not the Witnesses' translation of the Bible that is so important, of course, as the use, or rather, the misuse that they have made of it. Aside from its obvious doctrinal biases reflected in translation, the *New World* version of the Scriptures might very well have been welcomed as another effort to put the word of God into modern dress and have stood the test of impartial examination. It is the sect that lies behind the translation that has spoiled any chance of that.

The various publications which the Witnesses have issued on the Bible are somewhat like the *Watchtower* itself---there is apt to be a great deal of material that is harmless, some occasional information that is actually helpful and profitable, and still more that is either nonsense or actually pernicious. In the first category one might put their oft-repeated polemic against the use of the terms "New Testament" and "Old Testament." Everyone will agree, presumably, that these terms are not entirely accurate. However, they refer to recognizable literary units, and the Witnesses will never succeed in getting anyone to substitute for them "Christian Greek Scriptures" and "Hebrew Scriptures" or, for that matter, in getting many people to think the point important enough to bother about. In the second category one might class much of what the Witnesses have written on the history of the Biblical text and the various manuscript evidence. Here they have usually depended on scholarship that, if second-hand is at least solid.

The Witnesses represent the most primitive kind of Fundamentalism, with all its inconsistencies and disservice to the rational service of God. Their frequent citation of recent scholarly opinions and literature, their whole approach to scholarship itself, is only for providing grist for their private mills. The same critics who will be eagerly quoted when it is a question of supporting, or seeming to support some peculiarity of the Witness creed, will be mercilessly ridiculed or studiously ignored in any other matter. It is difficult to ascertain which has an uglier sound for a Witness: "higher critic" or "Roman hierarchy." The real problems of Biblical translation or criticism, involving distinctions of authorship or of sources or the like, are simply ignored....The poor critics are dredged up from the depths and quoted with approval even for their most extreme opinions when it is a question of analyzing the "Apocrypha," only to be abused again when they dare to venture opinions on the other books of the Bible. The Biblical chronology of events and books which appear frequently in Witness publications is a masterpiece of the incredible. All the above is mainly the general

fundamentalist tradition, which does not differentiate the Witnesses much from other groups of a similar religious background.

Jehovah's Witnesses began, first and foremost, as an Adventist sect, which is to say that it began from a misunderstanding of the very meaning of Biblical revelation and prophecy. In every generation known to man there have been those like Pastor Russell and Judge Rutherford, who have interpreted the Bible as a great code-book which reveals a detailed blueprint of the future leading up, by the merest coincidence, just to the present time. The Witnesses have followed faithfully in the footsteps of their founders, and it is not surprising that we find much, if not most of their literature devoted to detailed explanations of where in the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation we may find specific reference made to the League of Nations, the First and Second World Wars, the United Nations, and events in their denominational history. There does not seem to be very much that can be said about all this. As we indicated before, the ability to swallow such an interpretation of the Bible—let alone the Great Pyramid—carries with it the ability to survive such trivial setbacks as the systematic failure of the prophets when they have ventured out of the safe past and into the uncertain future. "Millions now living will never die," said the Witnesses as they emerged into this world. "Millions now living will never die," they say today. And "millions now living will never die" they will doubtless be saying after the millions are all dead, should they remain with us that long. And doubtless they will still have their faithful following.

The Witnesses lean very heavily on the apocalyptic literature of the Bible, that maze of lush imagery and symbolism which, unfortunately, as the Baptist Biblical scholar C.H. Dodd has written, has become "the licensed playground of every crank." It is from the Book of Revelation that they have extracted another of the venerable old heresies of primitive Christianity, that of Millenarianism—the belief in a literal thousand year reign of the saints on earth. It is from the same Book of Revelation that they have been able to determine the precise population of heaven: the symbolic 144,000 of Revelation 7:4-8, the four-square number of the symbolic twelve tribes of Israel with which the Biblical author peopled the four-square heavenly Jerusalem (21:9-21). They insist the total number of 144,000 is literal, while at the same time they say the number 12,000 from each tribe is symbolic.

Here there is little point in going further into this fundamental error of the Witnesses in their approach to Revelation. To those interested in pursuing the

matter in more detail, for an authentic understanding of the meaning of the book, we can recommend our pamphlet: [Revelation: Divine Message of Hope](#).

With this we take our leave of Jehovah's Witnesses, repeating the statements with which we began. If our judgments have sounded harsh, we insist that we have intended no ridicule for honestly held beliefs as such. Sincerity in belief is an admirable quality. Respect for sincerity, however, may not ever blind us to the duty of service to the truth, and of the defense of our own cherished heritage. We have addressed ourselves far less to the Witnesses themselves than to those who have been the targets of their propagandizing. If we have helped any of these to see their way the clearer through the intricacies of this propaganda, we shall be most grateful for this opportunity to serve the cause of the God of truth—whose name is *not* "Jehovah."

Fundamentalism

"The fundamentalists are funny enough, and the funniest thing about them is their name. For, whatever else the fundamentalist is, he is not fundamental. He is content with the bare letter of Scripture—the translation of a translation, coming down to him by the tradition of a tradition—without venturing to ask for its original authority." -- G.K. Chesterton: *All is Grist* (20th century).

The original title of this critique was *Some Bible Beliefs Have To Be Wrong!* What was criticized was the Witnesses' claim that their beliefs are "Biblical religion." Perhaps the meaning of the title would have been clearer if it had been entitled *Some "Bible Beliefs" Have To Be Wrong!* Despite being written over 40 years ago, the text required little editing and updating.

For additional help, consult:

Answering Jehovah's Witnesses by Jason Evert. Published by Catholic Answers. <http://www.catholic.com>

Beginning Apologetics by Fr Frank Chacon and Jim Burnham. <http://www.catholicapologetics.com>

[Catholic Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses.com](http://www.catholicexjehovahs.com) is another great resource.

Catholicism and Fundamentalism by Karl Keating, published by Ignatius Press. Does not deal with Jehovah's Witnesses specifically but addresses many of the same arguments.

<http://www.ignatius.com>

These Protestant resources are generally good:

Jehovah's Witnesses Answered Verse by Verse by David A. Reed.
(Baker Books)

Refuting Jehovah's Witnesses by Randall Watters, available from:

<http://www.freeminds.org/sales/books.htm>