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Jehovah's Witnesses and Their New Testament

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A VISIT TO HEADQUARTERS

On a cold, raw, wet and windy day in January, I paused momentarily outside the attractive apartment building at 124 Columbia Heights in Brooklyn. So this was Bethel!¹ Entering the lobby, I found myself at the desk of a male receptionist, a young man in his early twenties. Upon his inquiring how he could help me, I told him my name, where I was from, and my desire for an interview with a member of the Society concerning the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures. He relayed my request through the switchboard operator, who could be seen in an adjacent room, and informed me shortly that one of the writers would talk with me. As I was depositing my coat in the cloakroom, several people were securing theirs from the same room, apparently having just come from the dining room or from a committee meeting. I was greeted with "Good afternoon, brother!" "Hello, brother!" "How are you, brother!"

I made my way to the comfortable, well-appointed lounge with a large picture window overlooking the East River. Beyond the slow-moving river traffic, one could discern the familiar silhouette of the Manhattan skyline. I had barely seated myself on one of the comfortable sofas when a scholarly looking young man in his twenties or thirties appeared on the stairs. He carried what appeared to be an overstuffed Bible. Following mutual introductions we began our discussion of the New World Translation. I was disappointed to learn that the writer was not a member of the Translation Committee and therefore could not answer many of my questions. What procedure had the Committee followed in making their translation?² What criteria operated when they departed from the Greek text of Westcott and Hort? To what extent was the New World Translation influenced by the *Emphatic Diaglott*?³ What changes were made when the 1950 edition was revised in 1951? Why were many of the passages in the 1961 edition of the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (the complete Bible) translated in a more literal fashion

¹ Hebrew, "House of God."

² Cf. the account of the procedure followed by the panel of scholars in the Introduction to the New English Bible New Testament, pp. ix-x.

³ The *Emphatic Diaglott* is an interlinear Greek-English New Testament. Besides the word-for-word rendering with the Greek text, it has an English translation in the right margin. The term "Emphatic" refers to the system of notation for emphasizing certain key words in the English column. "Diaglott" means "through the tongue," or "through the original language."

than the same passages in the 1951 edition of the Christian Greek Scriptures (the New Testament)?

When I mentioned the difficulty I had experienced in finding information concerning Benjamin Wilson, the original publisher of the *Emphatic Diaglott*, my companion told me that some information could be obtained from the Geneva Historical Society in Geneva, Illinois. He added that the Watchtower Society would be glad to obtain this information from Geneva and pass it on to me.⁴ When I expressed my desire for an interview with a member of the Translation Committee I was politely told that the members of the Committee could not grant an interview, since they preferred to remain anonymous.

Upon inquiry concerning a tour of the Society's factory, I was given verbal instructions as to how to reach it from Bethel. In addition I received a small map with the route from Bethel to the factory clearly indicated. The factory is a modern, up-to-date printing plant, situated at 117 Adams Street, only a few blocks from Bethel and practically a stone's throw from the Brooklyn Bridge. Here I was greeted by a male receptionist, a young man also in his twenties. He was expecting me and had arranged for a guide to escort me and a visiting Witness from Philadelphia through the factory.

The guided tour of the plant was thorough and informative. Our very able young guide was given to the use of litotes, which emphasized the pride he felt in being a part of this ongoing enterprise. The multitude of sights and sounds as we went from floor to floor coalesced into a conglomeration from which it was difficult to separate specific details. Some dominant impressions remained, however, one of which was the youthfulness of most of the workers. Repeatedly I asked myself what it was that could attract these young people to this factory and hold them there. Linotype operators, press operators, mechanics, binders—all could command good salaries in industry. Why then did they choose to work for the \$14 a month plus maintenance which they received at Bethel? How I wished to talk at length with some of them to learn their reasons for joining the movement and continuing with it.⁵

⁴ About a month after my initial visit I received a letter from the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, with information about Wilson that I had hitherto been unable to obtain.

⁵ During a subsequent visit I learned that many of the workers at the factory were from foreign countries. They work for half a day at the factory and attend the Gilead School for half a day. The work at the factory is on-the-job training, intended to fit them to operate printing establishments in their own countries.

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Another impression was the friendliness of the workers. Everyone was addressed as "brother." On several occasions I was introduced to individual workers as "Brother McCoy." Even when it was indicated that I was not "in the truth," I experienced the same cordiality; I was referred to as a person "of good will." Still another impression was the diligence and industry of the workers. Everyone went about his prescribed task with a minimum of loitering, even in those departments where there appeared to be no immediate supervision. Even the worker whose task was to gather and bale the scrap paper that remained after trimming seemed to perform his chore with a sense of dedication. Upon completion of the tour, I left the factory with a profound desire to learn more about the Witnesses and what it is that binds them to the strange doctrines which they call "the truth."

THREE PRESIDENTS

The Jehovah's Witnesses form an aggressive, international organization claiming over half a million adherents and controlling immense assets. How did it all begin? The movement can be traced back to a small Bible class of businessmen led by a young merchant named Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916). The son of a prosperous merchant, Russell was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, which is now a suburb of Pittsburgh. He received his early religious training in the Presbyterian Church; later he became a member of the Congregational Church and of the YMCA. After a period of skepticism his faith in the Bible was restored as a result of his attendance at a meeting of Second Adventists. These people were disciples of William Miller, an ardent expounder of millenarian views. Young Russell began a detailed, albeit uncritical study of Biblical prophecy, with particular attention to the Book of Daniel. Out of a Bible study group, which he organized, grew the movement that was eventually to be known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Formal organization began with incorporation in 1884 of the Zion's Watchtower Tract Society of Pennsylvania, which later in 1896 became the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

Russell was a prolific writer and an able speaker. Partly because of his intemperate attacks on the clergy, the churches, and the government, he was frequently involved in litigation. For the most part, the system of thought that he developed remains to this day the theology of the Witnesses. Known to millions as "Pastor Russell," he died on a train in Texas while on one of his speaking tours.

The mantle of leadership then fell on Joseph F. Rutherford (1869–1942). Unlike his predecessor, Rutherford was born of poor parents on a farm in Missouri and grew up in the Baptist tradition. Determined to become a lawyer, he was admitted to the bar in 1892 after much hard work and sacrifice. He was brought into the movement through reading some of the literature of the Society.

Becoming legal counselor of the Society in 1907, Rutherford represented the organization in numerous cases of litigation. Following Mr. Russell's death he was elected President of the Society in 1917. The transition was far from smooth, much friction was generated, and some members withdrew to form splinter groups. To compound the difficulties of the new administration, Mr. Rutherford and some of his associates were convicted and sentenced to Atlanta Penitentiary after being tried for conspiracy.⁴

Released from prison in 1919, Mr. Rutherford found himself a martyr and set about molding his organization into a tight theocracy. The message of the imminence of Armageddon was proclaimed in radio broadcasts and by the use of sound trucks and portable phonographs. Millions of leaflets, tracts, books, and Bibles poured forth from the Society's presses to "advertise, advertise, advertise the King and the Kingdom."⁵ Previously known by various names, the members of the movement were given the name "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931 at a convention in Columbus, Ohio. In his final years Mr. Rutherford left more and more of the task of running the organization to Nathan H. Knorr, the vice-president, spending much of his time at Beth-Sarim (House of Princes) in San Diego, California. Here it was that he died without witnessing the return of the Old Testament personalities, Abel, Noah, and Abraham, for whom the mansion had been prepared.

The third president of the Society, Nathan H. Knorr, was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1905. He was introduced to the teachings of the Society through literature that his family received and studied while he was still in high school. Being influenced in favor of the movement, he withdrew from the Reformed Church. Upon graduation from Allentown High School in 1923 he went to Brooklyn to become a member of the working family at Bethel.

⁴ A. H. Macmillan, *Faith on the March* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), ch. 7.

⁵ Nathan H. Knorr, "Jehovah's Witnesses of Modern Times," *Religion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Vergilius Fern (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 385.

Starting in the shipping department of the printing plant he rose rapidly in the organization, becoming in nine years the general manager of the publishing office and plant. In due course he became director and vice-president of both the People's Pulpit Association, the predecessor of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society Inc., of New York, and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. Following the death of Mr. Rutherford in 1942 he was elected to the lifetime presidency of both corporations.

Although continuing in the main the pattern laid down by his predecessors, Mr. Knorr has introduced some innovations. Under his administrations the portable phonographs long associated with the Witnesses disappeared completely. Instead of relying on the recorded sermons of Mr. Rutherford, the Witnesses were trained to speak the message themselves. According to Mr. Knorr's own testimony, training of the Witnesses has been of paramount importance.⁸ He established the Watchtower Bible School of Gilead in South Lansing, New York⁹ to train Witnesses for foreign missionary service. Apparently he has been interested in changing the public image of the organization. The vituperative and denunciatory articles once issuing from the headquarters have given way to more restrained expressions of the Society's conviction that it alone possesses the truth. Gerard Hebert reports the cordial reception given to a Roman Catholic priest who visited the headquarters in 1954;¹⁰ a visit of this sort would have been virtually impossible a dozen years earlier. Probably the most ambitious undertaking of the present regime has been the translation of the Bible.

A NEW TRANSLATION

In 1950 at Yankee Stadium, New York, a new translation of the New Testament was released. The occasion was an international assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses at which the president of the Society presented to those assembled the first edition of the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures, which had been translated by a special committee and printed on the Society's own presses.

The New English Bible New Testament was published in 1961, its release coinciding with the 350th anniversary of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

⁹ Also called the Gilead School, the institution is now located in Brooklyn, across the street from Bethel.

¹⁰ Gerard Hebert, *Les Temoins de Jehovah* (Montreal: Les Editions Bellarmin, 1960), p. 103.

appearance of the King James Version. This eagerly awaited translation was widely acclaimed. In this same year almost unnoticed, except within their own circle, the Witnesses published their translation of the entire Bible, which they called the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. Combined to form this work were the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures and volumes I through V of the New World Translation of the Hebrew-Aramaic Scriptures. This event marked the culmination of approximately thirteen years of endeavor, beginning with formation of the New World Bible Translation Committee in 1948.

Why did Jehovah's Witnesses decide to translate the New Testament? For years they had used the King James Version and the American Standard Version, even printing them on their own presses. The writings of Mr. Russell and Mr. Rutherford are liberally sprinkled with quotations from both these versions. In addition, the Society is the exclusive publisher of the *Emphatic Diaglott*, a private translation originally published in 1864 by an obscure newspaper editor named Benjamin Wilson.

One of the reasons for translating that the translators give is the Foreword to their translation is the "better understanding of the original tongues." A second reason is the "progress of modern living language, with its changes in meanings of words and in forms of expression." These are two of the reasons for the general interest in production of new translations and revisions. But the third reason given is one that is unique with the Witnesses, namely, that the existing English translations in support of "a preferred religious view" reflect "an inconsistency and unreasonableness."

Further reason may well have been a desire for prestige and for a recognition of the Society as capable of scholarly undertakings. For many years the Society scorned what they considered educated people and took pride in the limited educational attainments of their members.¹¹ In more recent times one detects a change in attitude. The Society's semi-monthly magazine, *Awake!*, has carried interesting articles that have little or no immediate religious significance. Some examples are "The Heart Makes Its Own Electricity," "Unraveling Nature's Riddles," "Negro Progress and Discrimination in Labor," "Visiting the Land of Fire," and "Will the Whistling Swan Survive?" All appear in the September 8, 1959 issue of *Awake!* Other examples might be given of articles showing acquaintance with and interest

¹¹ Herbert H. Stroup, *The Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 120, 121.

in science, economics, history, and other areas of learning that previously the Society would have scorned as a waste of time.

Since the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures is a translation of the New Testament, one may ask why it is called the "Christian Greek Scripture" instead of the New Testament. The Translation Committee's reply to this inquiry is that they have endeavored to avoid the "snare of religious traditionalism."

This very effort accounts for distinguishing this differently as a translation of the "Christian Greek Scriptures." It is a traditional mistake to divide God's written Word into two sections and call the second section "The New Testament"¹²

TEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

If the documents prepared by the New Testament writers had been transmitted by printing, the discipline of textual criticism would have been far less exacting. Since, however, each document had to be prepared by hand, corruptions have crept into the texts, so that, though there are thousands of extant New Testament documents, no two are alike. Textual criticism aims at restoring the original autographs as nearly as possible.

The documentary evidence for the New Testament consists of Greek manuscripts, versions, and quotations from the Church Fathers. Greek manuscripts are generally referred to as uncials and cursives and are designated, respectively, by capital letters and Arabic numerals. Of the many existing manuscripts, a comparative few are uncials, which are written in capital letters, while the vast majority are cursives, which are written in a running hand.

Of all extant manuscripts a few uncials are considered most valuable. They are the Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph), the Codex Vaticanus (B), the Codex Alexandrinus (A), the Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C), the Codex Bezae (D), the Freer Manuscript, also called the Codex Washingtonianus (W), the Codex Regius (L), and the Codex Koridethi (Thēta).¹³

The New World Translation contains an explanation of the symbols used in its marginal references that refers to all the uncials listed above except the Codex Regius, the Freer Manuscript, and

¹² *The New World Translation*, pp. 6-7.

¹³ Vincent Taylor, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), pp. 15-18.

the Codex Koridethi. It also makes reference to the Chester Beatty papyri, p^a, p^b, and p^c. In addition, the explanation lists the versions that have been considered in the readings of the translation. They are the Armenian (Arm); the Old Latin or "Itala" (It); the Vulgate (Vg); and the Syriac Versions, which include the Curetonian Syriac (Sy^c), the Philoxenian Harkleian version (Sy^b), the Jerusalem or Hierosolymitanum version (Sy^m), the Peshitta (Sy^p), and the Sinaitic codex (Sy^x). It is most interesting that the New World translators would include with their translation a sort of critical apparatus, using the conventional notations of textual criticism.

Although they have followed the text of Westcott and Hort rather closely, in several instances the translators have retained readings that Westcott and Hort considered secondary readings or interpolations, and in a few instances even readings Westcott and Hort rejected. For example, the Cambridge scholars placed Matt. 12:47 at the bottom of the page of their Greek text, rather than in the text itself. They considered it a secondary reading, which does not mean that it was rejected, but that it was less probable or not as well attested as the primary reading. In the New World Translation the verse is included in the text.¹⁴

Most of the Greek text of Matt. 16:2,3 is enclosed in double brackets by Westcott and Hort. The enclosed portion of this passage they termed an interpolation, "probably 'Western' in origin, containing important matter apparently derived from extraneous sources. . . ."¹⁵ The New World translators note the omission of the passage from Aleph, B, Sy^{a,c}, Arm, and other important manuscripts, but retain it on the strength of its appearance in C, D, Thēta, and the Latin versions.¹⁶

A portion of Matt. 27:49 is one of the instances in which Westcott and Hort use double brackets to indicate a very early interpolation, omitted only by "Western" and "Syrian" documents. They include the bracketed portion of the verse in their list of noteworthy rejected readings.¹⁷ The New World translators, while noting the documents that omit the reading, retain it against Westcott and Hort's rejection of it.¹⁸

¹⁴ The RSV omits the verse, but the NEB includes it.

¹⁵ Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 683.

¹⁶ The RSV retains the reading, while the NEB does not.

¹⁷ Westcott and Hort, *op. cit.*, p. 583.

¹⁸ The RSV has omitted the reading, but contains it in a footnote. The NEB, however, omits the reading and does not recognize it with a footnote.

METHOD AND STYLE

The New World translators have favored the literal method of translation. They state:

We offer no paraphrase of the Scriptures. Our endeavor all through has been to give as literal a translation as possible, where the modern English idiom allows and where a literal rendition does not for any clumsiness hide the thought. That way we can best meet the desire of those who are scrupulous for getting, as nearly as possible, word for word, the exact statement of the original. . . . To each major word we have assigned one meaning and have held to that meaning as far as the context permitted.¹⁹

As for the style of their translation, they show themselves well aware of the modern trend to render the Scriptures in contemporary speech forms:

Archaic language we have disposed of altogether, even in prayers and addresses to God. This means we have everywhere dropped using the now sanctimonious formal pronouns *thou, thy, thine, thee* and *ye*, with their corresponding verb inflections. The original Bible was written in the living language of the people of the day, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; and so the Bible characters addressed God and prayed to him in the same everyday language that they employed in speaking to their fellow creatures on earth. The translation of the Scriptures into a modern language should be rendered in the same style, in the speech forms current among the people.²⁰

The following passages are taken from the New World Translation to illustrate something of the method and style found in the translation. Comments on the method of translation, that is, literal versus the sense of the word or passage, will be made where deemed appropriate. On the matter of style, the passages will be allowed to speak in the main for themselves.

Happy are those who are conscious of their spiritual need, since the kingdom of the heavens belongs to them. Happy are those who mourn, since they will be comforted. Happy are the mild-tempered ones, since they will inherit the earth. Happy are those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, since they will be filled. Happy are the merciful, since they will be shown mercy. Happy are the pure in heart, since they

¹⁹ *The New World Translation*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

will see God. Happy are the peaceable, since they will be called "sons of God." Happy are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, since the kingdom of the heavens belongs to them. Happy are YOU when people reproach YOU and persecute YOU and lyingly say every kind of wicked thing against YOU for my sake. Rejoice and leap for joy, since YOUR reward is great in the heavens; for in that way they persecuted the prophets prior to YOU. (Matt. 5:3-12)

This version of the Beatitudes follows the Greek quite literally, even to the translation of *eunēnēn* as a plural in verses 3 and 10. Most translations render the word as a singular in English, whether the Greek word be singular or plural, since there does not appear to be any significance in the occurrence of one form or the other. "The mild-tempered ones" in verse 5 seems a better rendering for *koi praeis* than "the meek." (So also at 21:5.) In verse 9 *koi eirēnepoioi* is translated as "the peaceable," which has a more passive connotation than seems warranted by the Greek. One could question why the translators have not stayed closer to the literal meaning, as do most translators. "Lyingly" in verse 11, a new word for the familiar "falsely" of the King James, translates *psudomēnoi*.²

No sooner was it the sabbath than he entered into the synagogue and began to teach. And they became astounded at his way of teaching, for there he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Also at that immediate time there was in their synagogue a man under the power of an unclean spirit, and he shouted, saying: "What have we to do with you, Jesus you Nazarene? Did you come to destroy us? I know exactly who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus reproved it, saying: "Be silent, and come on out of him!" And the unclean spirit, after throwing him into a convulsion and yelling at the top of its voice, came on out of him. Well, the people were all so astonished that they began a discussion among themselves, saying: "What is this? A new teaching! He authoritatively orders even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." So the report about him spread out immediately in all directions through all the country round about in Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)

Variation in the translation of *kai eunēnēn* is worthy of note. In verse 21 the expression is given as "no sooner was it," while in

² It is interesting to note that *psudomēnoi* was apparently omitted in the Greek text used by the translators of the NEB.

verse 23 it becomes "also at that immediate time." Elsewhere in the chapter it is rendered variously "and immediately," "and at once," "but without delay." Verse 24 may suggest an impertinence on the part of the possessed man when he says, "What have we to do with you, Jesus you Nazarene!" "Come on out of him" in verse 25 for *exlike ex astou* sounds provincial rather than colloquial. On the other hand, it may be intended to convey the lack of polish in Mark's style.

And I saw standing in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures and in the midst of the persons of advanced age a lamb as though it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which eyes mean the seven spirits of God that have been sent forth into the whole earth. And he went and took it right away out of the hand of the one seated on the throne. And when he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four persons of advanced age fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp and golden bowls that were full of incense, and the incense means the prayers of the holy ones. And they sing a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slaughtered and with your blood you bought persons for God out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and you made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule as kings over the earth." (Rev. 5:6-10)

It seems strange that the translators should retain the traditional expression "in the midst" in verse 6 when they have replaced the word "elders" with "persons of advanced age." The translation of *sisia* by "mean" is rather free, since *sisia* means "are," as the translators note by their alternative reading. In verse 7 "took it right away out of the hand" seems a strange way to translate *ritphew ek its dexias*, which literally means "he took out of the right [hand]." Perhaps the word "right" is in the wrong place. The use of the word "scroll" to translate *biblion* is an improvement over the King James rendering "book."

A SPECIAL VOCABULARY

Some of the words in the New Testament, such as *parabolē* and *mysterion* have been transliterated through Latin into English and have become a part of our everyday vocabulary. Probably the reason for not translating words such as these was the difficulty in finding an English equivalent that expressed the idea of the word involved. In line with their principle of avoiding the "snare of religious traditionalism," the New World translators have trans-

lated several key words in a way that differs from traditional and contemporary renderings.

The Greek word *kyrios* is frequently translated "Jehovah" in the New World Translation. "Jehovah" was introduced into the English tradition by Tyndale, and other versions, notably the American Standard Version, followed Tyndale's usage. A glance through the typical Protestant hymnbook will reveal how the word "Jehovah" has become prominent in the vocabulary of our hymns. One could think of titles such as "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," or "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne."

Frederick C. Grant gives an account of the background of this word. According to Grant it was an attempt in the late Middle Ages to make a Christian word of an "unpronounceable hybrid." By about 300 B.C. the ancient Hebrew word for God (YHWH) was held to be too sacred to utter. In the public reading of the Scriptures the word ("DHWNY") "my Lord" was substituted for the tetragrammaton. The ancient Jews did not try to pronounce "Yahowah," but understood that they were to read "the Lord" when they came to the sacred tetragrammaton. The ancient translators also followed this usage in both the Septuagint (*kyrios*, Lord) and the Vulgate (*Dominus*). In the late medieval period the consonants of YHWH were combined with the vowels of 'DHWNY, and the result was the word "Jehovah."²²

Since the vindication of the name of Jehovah is a prime issue for the Jehovah's Witnesses,²³ the word "Jehovah" has a great significance for them. The New World translators devote almost fifteen pages in their Foreword to an extended discussion of the divine name. In those instances in which they have translated *kyrios* as "Jehovah" in their text, they have a footnote referring to a number of medieval Hebrew translations of the New Testament as their authority for the rendering. Also included is a "concordance of all places in this translation where the name 'Jehovah' occurs in the main text and also where it occurs in the lower marginal reading alone."²⁴

The Revised Standard Version, following the modern trend, went back to the King James tradition of using the word LORD or GOD in capitals. In the Preface to the RSV the revisers give two reasons for the return to the more familiar usage of the King James Version:

²² Frederick C. Grant, *Translating the Bible* (Greenwich, Conn.: The Seabury Press, 1941), p. 160.

²³ Koort, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

²⁴ *The New World Translation*, p. 759.

(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 any 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 New World Bible Translation Committee state that, "while inclining to view the pronunciation 'Yahweh' as the more correct way, we have retained the form 'Jehovah' because of people's familiarity with it since the 14th century."²⁸ One might still question why, if the form "Jehovah" is incorrect, they do not call themselves "Yahweh's Witnesses"?

Reading through the Synoptics in the New World Translation, one soon discovers that the word "parable" is missing and in its place the translators use the word "illustration." For a proper understanding of the word *parabolē* as used in the New Testament it is necessary to refer to the Old Testament word *māšāl*. *Māšāl* in Hebrew literature "could mean almost any kind of verbal image: riddle, proverb, taunt, simile, metaphor, prophetic oracle, detailed simile (similitude), illustration, narrative, example story, or even allegory."²⁹ While the word *parabolē* in the Synoptics describes a similar range of figurative utterances, it is most commonly restricted to three types: similitude, narrative parable, and example story.³⁰

One of the difficulties with the practice of translating a given Greek word by using the same English word regardless of context is the fact that words have different areas of meaning. Thus, the Greek word *parabolē* has a wide area of meaning, which in some contexts includes part of the meaning of "illustration." Therefore, in certain contexts the word "illustration" may serve to convey the meaning intended by *parabolē*, or at least to approximate its meaning. In other contexts one may question its use, as for example in Matt. 13, where the disciples have to ask for an explanation of Jesus' saying. Since an illustration is usually designed to throw light upon a subject and not to obscure it, the word "illustration" does not appear to be adequate in this instance.³¹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁹ S. MacLean Gilmour, "The Gospel According to St. Luke," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), p. 195.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ For a good discussion of the concept of areas of meaning, see Eugene A. Nida, *Bible Translating* (New York: American Bible Society, 1947), pp. 25-27.

"Never may it occur that I should boast, except in the torture stake of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been impaled to me and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). The New World translators render the Greek noun *stauros* by "torture stake" and the related verb, *stauroō* as "impale," with an alternative reading for the latter of "fasten on a stake or pole." In a discussion of the first appearance of the term *stauros* in Matt. 10:38 they give an explanation for their rejection of the word "cross" in favor of the expression "torture stake." In this discussion the position is taken that Jesus was fastened to a simple stake without a crossbeam. Therefore the traditional representation of the cross of Jesus as having two parts is wrong. Since the word "cross" is associated with this traditional representation, another word is needed to show that He was put to death on a simple stake.¹⁰

Edersheim says that three kinds of crosses were in use at the time of Jesus' crucifixion: the St. Andrew's cross, the cross in the form of a T, and the ordinary Latin cross with a crossbeam. He believes that Jesus bore the latter and cites the testimony of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others.¹¹ Hebert says that the doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses concerning their rejection of the traditional type of cross is of recent origin. It first appeared in Mr. Rutherford's book, *Riches*, in 1936. Before that time the traditional cross had appeared in illustrations in Mr. Rutherford's publications.¹²

Vincent Taylor gives an account of the practice of the type of execution known as crucifixion. This type of punishment originated in the East; the Romans used it to punish slaves. Various shapes of the cross were in existence. Sometimes a simple stake was used, to which the victim was fastened, or upon which he was impaled. At other times the instrument of execution consisted of two parts, with diagonal arrangement or with an upright and a crossbeam. Traditionally it is thought that the cross of Jesus was this latter type, but it is not certain that this was the case.¹³

"THEOLOGICAL TRANSLATIONS"

One of the subtle temptations to guard against in serious Bible translation is the tendency to permit theological convictions to shape the translation. Dr. Nida comments regarding this ten-

¹⁰ *The New World Translation*, 768-771.

¹¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: Loebmans, Green and Co., 1899), II, pp. 584-585.

¹² Hebert, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹³ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1952), p. 589.

deity that, since the Bible is the heritage of the entire church, it should not be made the instrument for propagandizing one's own special theories of interpretation. To be assured of the best and most generally accepted interpretation of the Bible, a constant checking of the translation with reliable commentaries should be made. In addition one should hold to the basic principle that neither his own group nor any other group has a monopoly on the truth.²² William A. Irwin is even more emphatic in this matter:

The fact must be stressed that there is no place for theology in Bible translation, whether conservative or radical or whatever else. A "theological translation" is no translation at all but merely a dogmatic perversion of the Bible. Linguistic science knows no theology. . . . The Bible translator is not an expositor; . . . he has no right whatever to intrude his opinions into the translation, or to permit his dogmatic convictions to qualify or shape its wording. His one responsibility, and it is absolute, is to render the Biblical meaning as accurately and effectively as is possible into appropriate English.²³

In not a few instances the New World Translation contains passages which must be considered as "theological translations." This fact is particularly evident in those passages which express or imply the deity of Jesus Christ. The Witnesses reject the trinity and believe that Christ Jesus was the first creation of God.²⁴ Thus the translation of John 8:58 reads: "Jesus said to them: 'Most truly I say to YOU, Before Abraham came into existence, I have been.'"²⁵ An explanatory footnote says, "I have been *egō imi* . . . after the aorist infinite clause *prin Abraam genesthai* and hence properly rendered in the perfect indefinite tense. It is not the same as *ho ēn* (meaning 'The Being' or 'The I am') at Exodus 3:14, LXX." On grammatical grounds alone, the rendering cannot be justified, since the tense of *imi* is present. It cannot be called a historical present, since the words are not narrative, but a part of Jesus' statement. To express the meaning "I have been," John would have used the imperfect *ēn*.

But the context must also be considered. That the Jews understood Jesus as intending to claim for himself the prerogative of deity is clear from the verses that follow. They took up stones to kill him as punishment for blasphemy. Their action hardly seems intelligible if they did not take Jesus' words at face value.

²² Nida, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

²³ William A. Irwin, "Method and Procedure of the Revision," *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament* (Chicago: The International Council of Religious Education, 1952), p. 14.

²⁴ Koert, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

Barrett relates John 8:24 and 8:58 in their absolute use of *egō rimi*. The use of *egō rimi* is hardly a Greek expression, but is taken from the Septuagint rendering of 'any *hō*', that expresses the eternity of God. "The *rimi* is a properly continuous tense, implying neither beginning nor end of existence."¹⁸ This meaning fits the context of John 8:58: "Before Abraham came into being, I eternally was, as now I am, and ever continue to be."¹⁹

In keeping with their view that Jesus Christ is a created being, the translators render Col. 1:15-17 as follows:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, because by means of him all other things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, . . . All other things have been created through him and for him. Also he is before all other things and by means of him all other things were made to exist.

"All other" is a mistranslation of *pasēs, pantas, and pantiōn*, which mean "all." In the case of Luke 13:2,4 to which the translators refer as analogous, the "translator's privilege" may be invoked to justify the use of "all other" instead of "all." But to make the two passages analogous is to indulge in a type of question-begging. The whole tenor of the Epistle to the Colossians is to exalt Christ above all things, to give him the pre-eminence, and to put him in a class by himself.

Metzger observes the tendency of Jehovah's Witnesses to insist that this passage teaches that God created the Son. He calls attention to the fact that the word used here, *prōtotokos*, means "first begotten," and that to express "first created" Paul had available the word *prōtoktistos*.²⁰ T. K. Abbott says concerning this passage that "this exposition of the unique and supreme position of Christ is directed against the errors of the false teachers who denied his supremacy."²¹

CONCLUSION

"Jehovah's Witnesses of Modern Times"²² is what President Knorr has called his organization, with the possible implication of a difference between present-day Witnesses and those of a former

¹⁸ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: The Macmillan Co., n.d.), p. 383.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

²⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ* (Princeton: The Theological Book Agency, 1953), p. 71.

²¹ T. K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* ("The International Critical Commentary Series," New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 213.

²² Knorr, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

day. Although the theology and type of organization have remained essentially the same with the passage of the years, some changes have occurred in attitude and method. The very fact that Mr. Knorr contributed a chapter to Vergilius Ferm's *Religion in the Twentieth Century* constitutes a radical departure from the attitude of his predecessors; they would cooperate in no way with "organized religion." Popular presentations of the movement, such as Marley Cole's enthusiastic endorsement⁴¹ and A. H. Macmillan's subtle testimony,⁴² are examples of a "soft sell" approach to the public.

The translation of the New Testament is evidence of the presence in the movement of scholars qualified to deal intelligently with the many problems of Biblical translation. This translation, as J. Carter Swaim observes, has its peculiarities and its excellences.⁴³ All in all, it would seem that a reconsideration of the challenge of this movement to the historic churches is in order.

⁴¹ Marley Cole, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: Vantage Press), 1955.

⁴² A. H. Macmillan, *op. cit.*

⁴³ J. Carter Swaim, *Right and Wrong Ways to Use the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p. 40.