

The Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures – Part 1

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The Jehovah's Witnesses constitute a large and aggressive sect which has opposed the doctrines of biblical Christianity from its inception. Many fine works have already detailed the history and doctrines of this group and contrasted the latter with biblical teaching.¹ It is our goal in this article to briefly critique the English translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Watchtower Bible and Tract Society's *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (NWT).

Our purpose will be to determine the legitimacy of the Jehovah's Witnesses' claim to respect and honor the Bible as divine revelation. If the Witnesses have not translated God's revelation with care and accuracy—but instead have incorporated their own doctrinal bias in disregard of the Greek text—then it is unlikely that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS) is, as widely proclaimed, God's sole channel for communicating His will to mankind today.

Indeed, the combined weight of four indisputable facts proves the Watchtower Society has no regard at all for the Word of God. These four pillars of disproof of Watchtower claims include their 1) pervasive unbiblical theology, 2) clear bias in translation, 3) numerous false prophecies historically, and 4) changes and contradictions in their doctrine, history and important dates.²

The Emphatic Diaglott

Before we begin our analysis of the NWT, we should note that for about 70 years the NWT was preceded in use by the *Emphatic Diaglott*, published in 1864 by Benjamin Wilson and based on the 1806 recension of J. J. Griesbach. Unfortunately, in utilizing this translation, the Witnesses never informed their members that the translation was flawed or that Wilson was a Christadelphian, who, holding similar doctrines with Jehovah's Witnesses, naturally sought a translation in harmony with Christadelphian bias. For example, the *Diaglott* translates Matthew 25:46 “agelasting cutting-off” and John 1:1 “the Word was a god,” both in harmony with Christadelphian (and Watchtower) denials of eternal punishment and Christ's deity respectively.³ Professor Edmond Charles Gruss of the Master's College in southern California, author of a standard work on Jehovah's Witnesses, *Apostles of Denial*, and a former member of the group, observes how the

Diaglott fits the needs of the newly formed Russellite (Jehovah's Witness) religion:

Wilson was self-educated; his work shows that he certainly was not a scholar. Neither did he have the respect of those who were scholars. Obviously, his purpose was not to translate, but to justify his theological views.... It may be concluded, then, that the *Emphatic Diaglott* was adopted because of its Christadelphian bias which agreed almost perfectly with the new Russellite group that was forming. The Russellites accepted the renderings of Wilson, for they did not have the linguistic ability either to evaluate or to determine their correctness, nor did they wish to question that which so perfectly supported their theories....⁴

In spite of his bias and errors in translation, Wilson had claimed "scrupulous fidelity" to the original languages:

Scrupulous fidelity has been maintained throughout this version in giving the true rendering of the original text into English; no regard whatever being paid to the prevailing doctrines or prejudices of sects, or the peculiar tenets of theologians. To the Divine authority of the original Scriptures alone has there been the most humble and unbiased submission.⁵

As we will see, the Jehovah's Witnesses also make similar claims to scholarly objectivity—and yet also fail to live up to them.

The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures

Eventually the Watchtower Society produced its own translation, *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. The alleged manner in which this translation was produced is relevant to note. We cite Professor Gruss who quotes from a legal case wherein testimony was being given under oath. F. W. Franz was the Society vice-president who testified before the Court of Session, Edinburgh, November 23, 1954. F. W. Franz and N. H. Knorr headed the secret committee of seven translators. The *Scottish Daily Express*, November 24, 1954, records that Franz testified that 1) he and Knorr have the final word in translation; 2) he, Franz, was head of the Society's Publicity Department, and 3) translations and interpretations come from God in such a way that they are invisibly communicated to the Publicity Department via "angels of various ranks who control witnesses."⁶ This is a rather startling admission, for the actual control of men by "angels" or spirits sounds more like spirit possession than divine inspiration. And perhaps it is instructive to note here that one mediumistic translation which claims to originate in the spirit world has translations similar to those of the NWT. The 1937 NT translation by spiritistic medium Johannes Greber has similar translations for John 1:1 and Hebrews 1:8 and is even quoted by the WBTS in several of its books.⁷ Given the serious errors of translation in the NWT, if Witnesses were actually controlled by "angels" of various ranks, these spirits would of necessity have to be immoral angels; i.e., demons. This fact would indeed explain the theological bias and anti-Christian nature of their translation.

Whether the origin of the NWT was from a supernatural source or not, the Watchtower Society clearly made similar claims to translation accuracy as that of

Wilson cited previously. Of course, if Witnesses really believed the translators were possessed by “angels,” it would be easy to assume the translation was divine and hence accurate even when the translators themselves did not know the original languages. Regardless, we find the WBTS claiming absolute fidelity to the Greek and Hebrew text. Their *Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures* declares:

Sincere searchers for eternal, life-giving truth desire an accurate understanding of the faith-inspiring Greek Scriptures, an understanding that will not be confused by sectarian, denominational religious teachings but that is fortified by the knowledge of what the original language says and means. To aid such seekers of truth and life is the purpose behind the publishing of *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures*. Its literal interlinear English translation is specially designed to open up to the student of the Sacred Scriptures what the original *Koine* Greek basically or literally says, without any sectarian religious coloration.⁸

And their New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is even more assertive:

It is a very responsible thing to translate the Holy Scriptures from their original languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, into modern speech. Translating the Holy Scriptures means a rendering into another language the thoughts and sayings of the heavenly Author of this sacred library of sixty-six books, Jehovah God, which holy men of long ago put down in writing under inspiration for our benefit today. That is a sobering thought. The translators who have a fear and love of the divine Author of the Holy Scriptures feel especially a responsibility toward Him to transmit his thoughts and declarations as accurately as possible. They also feel a responsibility toward the searching readers of the modern translation who depend upon the inspired Word of the Most High God for their everlasting salvation. It was with such a sense of solemn responsibility that the committee of dedicated men have produced the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, over the course of many years.⁹

In their text, *All Scripture is Inspired of God and Beneficial*, the Jehovah’s Witnesses make similar claims. Note their assertions to grammatical accuracy:

The New World Translation... conveys accurately the action or state expressed in the Hebrew and Greek verbs.... The conveying of the state of the Hebrew verb accurately into English is most important, otherwise the meaning may be distorted.... Similar care has been exercised in the translating of the Greek verbs.... The New World Translation...is accurate and reliable... a faithful translation of God’s Word.¹⁰

The loftiness of these claims is important to document in light of the *New World Translation’s* repeated failure to live up to them. When one realizes the magnitude of the claim and the impoverished result, one must conclude that the Watchtower Society is engaging in purposeful bias in its translation. As we will now document, at the point of their own doctrinal distinctives, they have little concern with what the Greek text actually says. Their only desire is to conform it to their own preconceived and unbiblical theology.

Our analysis is divided into two parts. Part one documents representative

comments on the NWT by those familiar with the original languages who have made a study of the Jehovah's Witnesses a scholarly pursuit, or are Greek scholars themselves. Part two documents the accuracy of these claims by citing specific examples of mistranslation from the NWT.

Notes

- ¹ Note: all Jehovah's Witness texts are published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS, 25 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, NY 11021). Standard works include Edmond Gruss, *Apostles of Denial* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976) (unless noted otherwise, all references to Gruss are from this text); Walter Martin, *Jehovah of the Watchtower* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1974); Anthony Hoekema, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981). (Also published in *The Four Major Cults*.)
- ² See our *The Facts On the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House); also Gruss, discusses each of these, cf., his *The Jehovah's Witness and Prophetic Speculation* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972).
- ³ Benjamin Wilson, *The Emphatic Diaglott New Testament* (Interlinear Edition, Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1942), pp. 106, 372.
- ⁴ Gruss, pp. 194-96.
- ⁵ Wilson, p. 3 "Preface."
- ⁶ Gruss, pp. 32-33, 219. See also *The Watchtower*, September 1, 1932, p. 263; *Light*, Vol. 1, 1930, pp. 106, 120, 218; Vol. 2, 1930, pp. 12, 20; *Vindication*, Vol. 3, 1932, p. 250, *Preparation*, 1933, pp. 36, 67.
- ⁷ For documentation see William and Jean Cetnar, *Questions for Jehovah's Witnesses* (Kunkletown, PA: 1983), pp. 48-55.
- ⁸ *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY: WBTS, 1969), p. 5.
- ⁹ *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY: WBTS, 1961), p. 5.
- ¹⁰ *All Scripture is Inspired by God and Beneficial* (Brooklyn, NY: WBTS, 1963), pp. 226-30.