



STATEMENT DJ-055

BOOK REVIEW

Jehovah's Witnesses — Proclaimers of God's Kingdom

by Anonymous (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1993)

This is the most significant book Jehovah's Witnesses have published in nearly half a century. In 1950 their *New World Translation* revised the New Testament to support the sect's theology; now *Jehovah's Witnesses — Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* reinterprets Watchtower history to thwart criticism.

Christians versed in evangelizing JW's know that the most effective approaches begin not with biblical discussion but with exposure to the sect's disturbing history. Documentation of failed prophecies, doctrinal flip-flops, and bizarre teachings weakens confidence in the Watchtower organization and forces Witnesses to reexamine their faith. The new *Proclaimers* book, as JW's refer to it, is designed to protect them from such assaults.

Most JW's reading *Proclaimers* will be coming face-to-face for the first time with information about failed prophecies of the world's end in 1914, 1925, and 1975 (pp. 62, 78, 104, 632-33), founder Charles Taze Russell's failed marriage (645), second president Joseph F. Rutherford's estranged wife Mary and their son Malcolm (89), the role Egyptian pyramids once played in Watchtower teachings (201), and numerous doctrinal reversals and other embarrassing episodes. But why would the Watchtower Society want to expose Witnesses to the very material opposers confront them with? Evidently, for the same reason doctors expose people to flu vaccine — *immunization*.

Vaccine introduces a weakened virus and allows the immune system to develop antibodies under nonthreatening circumstances; similarly, *Proclaimers* introduces damaging information in muted form. It sugarcoats some embarrassing episodes with euphemistic language. For example, rather than admit that Russell promulgated false prophecies, the book minimizes his role and shifts blame to the membership by saying "the Bible Students" innocently "thought," "expected," and "hoped" certain things would happen in 1914 (134-36).

Moreover, by arranging the sect's history topically rather than chronologically the book chops up unpleasant stories into bite-size pieces easier to swallow. Consider the embarrassing doctrinal flip-flop on the identity of the "higher powers" of Romans 13:1. The Watchtower Society taught for decades that these were the secular governments; then during the 1930s-1950s it identified them as Jehovah God and Jesus Christ; finally in 1962 it decided once again that they were secular governments. The new history hides the back-and-forth aspect by omitting the first part of the story and presenting the change in 1962 as "progressive understanding" — even though the "progress" actually took them backwards to a view held formerly (147).

The book's topical format also allows it to pull an episode out of the context of surrounding events and insert it into another context according to topic. In the process it can alter facts in a manner that would have been impossible had the story been kept within its chronological framework. For example, consideration of Russell's religious affiliation during the 1870s is broken up into discussions on pages 43-48, 120-22, 132-35, 204, and 236-37. So, when the book says on page 204 that "the operation of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses has undergone significant changes since Charles Taze Russell and his associates first began to study the Bible together in 1870," readers may have forgotten what earlier chapters revealed: Russell remained part of an *Adventist* organization until 1879; no JW organization existed prior to that date.

Elsewhere, the casual reader is given the impression that Russell came up with the idea of Christ's invisible "presence" from an interlinear rendering of the Greek word *parousia* and then later encountered N. H. Barbour's group, which believed similarly. In

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actuality, it was the other way around. According to the 1959 official history book, *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* (18), it was "one of Barbour's group" who came up with that interpretation and then Russell learned it from Barbour. (*Proclaimers* does not actually lie about this; it simply begins page 133 with events of "1877" and then goes on to events of "1876" — technically accurate, but worded so most readers will be misled.)

Besides rewriting history and doing cosmetic restoration on skeletons in the Watchtower closet, *Proclaimers* actually does reveal more about the organization than any prior Watchtower publication. Notably, it departs from recent custom to provide extensive photographic coverage of past and present leadership — including individual color portraits of Governing Body members (116).

It also devotes 50 of its 750 pages (352-401) to photos of factory and office facilities around the world. With the Brooklyn properties alone (pictured on four pages) valued at \$186 million (*see* "Looking Beyond Brooklyn Heights Toward Heaven," *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1992, p. 46), the other major holdings shown no doubt add up to billions of dollars.

Although described in its foreword as "objective" and "candid," *Proclaimers* could more appropriately be termed *clever* and *convincing*. It was obviously forged as a powerful defensive weapon. And it will certainly strengthen the Watchtower fortress. But it can also be turned against its owner.

First, it can be used to show a JW that certain things actually *did* happen. For example, in the past, Witnesses often dismissed information about Rutherford's San Diego mansion "Beth-Sarim" and the sect's preoccupation with pyramids as stories fabricated by apostates. Now abbreviated accounts of such matters in *Proclaimers* (76, 89, 201) can serve as common ground — a jumping-off point to introduce what radio commentator Paul Harvey would call "the rest of the story."

Second, after a JW has seen the necessary documentation, attention can be focused once again on *Proclaimers* — this time to notice how its carefully crafted accounts conceal important facts. The JW will be forced to think about whether writers who manifest such disregard for truth can join in saying, "But [we] have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2 KJV).

— *Reviewed by David A. Reed*