



STATEMENT DJ065

**A Summary Critique:
Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics
Greg Stafford
(Elihu Books, 1998)**

Jehovah's Witnesses are not known for engaging in scholarly and apologetic dialogue. For decades they have been encouraged to skip higher education and enter into the service ministry. Leaders have instructed the rank-and-file Witnesses to avoid examining materials that are written by "active opposers" to the organization and have told them such materials are like "gan grene" and "pornography."¹

Obviously, such thinking does not foster openness on the part of most Jehovah's Witnesses. In fact, Christians are often frustrated in witnessing situations when they are ready to defend the faith and delve into some of the problem areas in Watchtower theology. Frequently a quick exit is made by the Witnesses, who admit they are only looking for "sheep-like individuals to teach, not "opposers" to debate.

An Unusual New Book. This is what makes Greg Stafford's new book, *Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, unusual. Stafford, a Jehovah's Witness, focuses primarily on Ron Rhodes's work, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses*, but also quotes other works written in opposition to the Society. Stafford demonstrates a familiarity with many information sources that would be utterly unknown to the average Jehovah's Witness. Indeed, Stafford is no newcomer to the issues at stake when Witnesses interact with Christians on an apologetic level. He engaged in numerous discussions on America Online during the years in which the book was in preparation.² This exposure to Christian apologetics has allowed him to hone his arguments and focus on the key issues many Christians find difficult and challenging.

Not surprisingly, the primary focus of the work is on the deity of Christ and the Trinity. These central tenets of the Christian faith are the most frequent targets of cultic attacks. Most of these arguments revolve around such key passages as John 1:1, John 8:58, Colossians 1:15, and Titus 2:13. Stafford also briefly addresses the name "Jehovah," the charge that the Watchtower Society is a "false prophet," and other apologetic topics. It's striking that Stafford's primary focus is more on helping Witnesses defend their position and answer tough questions than on convincing outsiders. This is not to say he does not have an eye toward those outside; he definitely does. But most readers would find the discussions rather difficult to follow if they were not familiar with the Witnesses' position.

Evaluating the Work. A couple of examples from Stafford's book will help us evaluate the work in general. One of the clearest presentations of Christ's deity in the Gospel of John is found in the phrase "I am." In such passages as John 8:24, 8:58, 13:19, and 18:5-6, John records Jesus using the Greek phrase *ego eimi* of Himself in contexts that direct us back to the Old Testament's use of the phrase in Isaiah 41:4 and 43:10, and through these references to the "I Am" of Exodus 3:14.³ Stafford devotes almost 50 pages to these passages in an attempt to deflect their force, providing an explanation for Jesus' words that would not indicate His deity. He includes over 100 footnotes, referencing dozens of scholarly articles and commentaries. Stafford concludes that Jesus is merely identifying Himself as the , Messiah in each of the key passages where He uses the phrase *ego eimi*.

What about the use of *ego eimi* in John 18:5-6? "They answered Him, 'Jesus the Nazarene.' He said to them, 'I am *He*.' And Judas also who was betraying Him, was standing with them. When therefore He said to them, 'I am *He*,' they drew back, and fell to the ground'" (NASB). The imagery is striking. Twice John repeats Jesus' words, making sure that we recognize it was at the utterance of the phrase *ego eimi* (rendered "I am *He*" by the NASB) that the soldiers "drew back and fell to the ground." How does Stafford deal with such a passage? He quotes from various liberal sources⁴ and says: Thus, the reaction of the mob in 18:6 is no surprise given the confident, sudden self-identification Jesus makes...The words "they drew back and fell to the ground" need mean no more than that "the men who came to make the arrest (some of whom at least did not previously know Jesus even by

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sight) were so overcome by His moral ascendancy that they recoiled in fear.” Most likely, then, when Jesus unhesitatingly revealed himself as the one whom they sought, those coming to arrest him...were taken aback by his fearless demeanor. (144)

Stafford’s use of liberal scholars to explain this passage is interesting. It is one thing to deny the plain meaning of Scripture because one does not believe it *has* a plain meaning to begin with: this is the normal result of the liberal denial of the inspiration and unity of Scriptures, but Witnesses uphold the unity and inspiration of Scripture. Why, then, do they accept conclusions based upon presuppositions they reject? When Jesus is allowed to speak for Himself, the conjunction of such passages as John 8:24, 58 with 18:5-6 fully substantiate the observation of noted scholar William Hendrickson: “Basically, the same thought expressed in both passages: namely, that Jesus is God!”⁵

In the Fall 1997 issue of the *Christian Research Journal*, I presented an article in which I suggested that demonstrating the deity of Christ by use of such passages as John 12:39-41 and Hebrews 1:10-12, in which Jesus is identified as Jehovah, is one of the best ways of witnessing to Jehovah’s Witnesses. Stafford addresses both passages in his book, but space will allow us to examine only the use of Psalm 102:25-27 in Hebrews 1:10-12.⁶ The writer to the Hebrews quotes the passage from the Psalms, which plainly describes the unchanging nature of Jehovah and His role as Creator, and he applies it to Jesus Christ. This passage underscores the deity of Christ and the fact that He is the Creator of all things.

Stafford follows instead the explanation provided by the Watchtower Society, which is twofold. First, since the earlier verses differentiate between the Father and the Son, this passage cannot be making Jesus Jehovah. Second, Hebrews 1:5b, a passage that was originally written about Solomon, is applied to Jesus Christ. Since the later application of the passage to Jesus does not make Jesus Solomon, applying a passage that was originally about Jehovah to Jesus does not, necessarily, create an identity between the two. Stafford writes, “Paul no more intended to identify Jesus with Jehovah than he intended to identify Solomon with Jesus. He did, however, apply certain concepts and ideas expressed in those verses which were originally applied to Jehovah God and Solomon, to the Son of God” (50).

At first glance, the argument seems valid. Yet a little reflection demonstrates the error. It is true that drawing a parallel between an Old Testament person, or Jehovah Himself, does not indicate identity. If one drew a parallel between Jehovah being faithful and someone in the New Testament likewise being faithful, we would not necessarily see a direct one-to-one identification of Jehovah with that person. Similarly, paralleling an Israelite king with Jesus does not make Jesus that particular king. But it is precisely here that we see the problem: kingship was not *unique* to Solomon. There were many kings in Israel. Quoting a passage about kingship does not necessarily indicate the identity of a person, because the quality being paralleled was not *unique* to the original person. Psalm 102:25-27, however, is about the completely unique character of Jehovah as the eternal, unchanging Creator of all things! No one else can be said to have such qualities. While kingship has been shared by men, unchanging eternity and creatorship are unique attributes of Jehovah Himself. Therefore, quoting a passage about a king in the Old Testament does not mean Jesus is that particular person, but quoting a passage about the unique aspects of Jehovah’s character and applying it to Jesus does indicate identity with Jehovah.

Two Fundamental Errors. Most of Greg Stafford’s work — and the apologetic writing of the Watchtower in general — misses the opportunity of really engaging the debate over the Trinity. This is due to errors they make in understanding two fundamental truths. First, the doctrine of the Trinity states that within the *one* Being that is God there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal Persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Second, over against *unitarianism*, the belief that God’s being is held by only one Person (normally, the Father). *Trinitarianism*, insists that the one Being of God is shared by *three* Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Central to this belief is the recognition that the Father is not the Son. They are two distinct Persons with different roles in the Godhead and in the work of redemption itself.

The two errors that underlie the majority of the argumentation in Stafford’s work are closely related. Any Christian who learns to recognize them will be a long way down the road toward communicating more clearly with those outside the faith:

1. The assumption of unitarianism.
2. Proving Jesus is not the Father.

Throughout his work, Stafford assumes unitarianism is true in order to disprove Trinitarianism. If one *starts* with the assumption that the term “Jehovah” refers to the Father only, one will find a way around any evidence that shows that the term can refer to the Son and the Holy Spirit as well. One will likewise of necessity find a way to come up with other lesser “gods” so that all evidence showing the deity of Christ can be explained away as Jesus being *a* (created) god but not *the* (Creator) God.

Frequently, the “exegesis” offered by Stafford and other Watchtower writers is based completely upon the overriding assumption of unitarianism, which leads to the conclusion that the Trinity is not to be found in Scripture. This is well illustrated by Stafford’s insistence that Proverbs 8:22 *must* be taken as an exhaustive and binding explanation of the relationship of the preincarnate Son to the Father, a view he thinks proves Jesus is a creature, made at a point in time in the past. This contrasts with his strident attempt to avoid seeing Jesus as the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, in Revelation 1:7 -8 and 22:13. Stafford does not utilize the same set of hermeneutic standards in both cases. This is because his position is not derived from exegesis but instead comes from the ultimate authority of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

Furthermore, Stafford often tries to prove that Jesus is not the Father. His arguments emphasize a difference between the Father and the Son in activity, function, role in salvation, and so on, and he concludes that this means the Son cannot be God. The terms “God,” “Father,” and “Jehovah” are *assumed* to refer to the same Person (unitarianism), so if Jesus is not the Father, then He is not “God.” In reality, all he proves in showing a difference between the Father and the Son is that the Son is not the *Father*, not that the Son is not *God*.

Only by assuming that “God” can refer only to the Father can one argue as Stafford does in almost every section of his book. But Christians have always recognized that the biblical doctrine of the Trinity teaches that the Son is a different Person than the Father, and that each Person has taken different roles in the work of redemption. In light of historic Christian teaching, the arguments put forward by Stafford and Watchtower writers can be seen for what they really are: arguments aimed at a straw man. Hence, when Stafford concludes the section on Hebrews 1:10-12, he writes, “Jehovah is the ‘Most High’ and Jesus Christ is his only-begotten Son” (51). Note the implicit assumption that “Jehovah = the Father *alone*.” It is just this point that must consistently be challenged by the prepared Christian apologist. It is true that the term “Jehovah” can be used of the Father in this way, but a partial truth that excludes the whole truth is a lie. It is *also* true that Jesus is identified as Jehovah, and therefore Jehovah is tri-une — Trinitarian in nature. This is the conclusion to which we are driven by the entirety of the biblical revelation.

Challenge and Encouragement.

Greg Stafford’s book makes it clear that Jehovah’s Witnesses, long recognized as being “outside the pale of orthodox y,” are seeking not so much *direct inclusion* but *credibility and respect*. There is a reward awaiting the patient apologist who takes seriously Stafford’s challenges and examines them thoroughly. That reward is a stronger, deeper, and more grounded faith in the deity of Christ and in the blessed truth of the Trinity. — *James White*

Notes

1 See *The Watchtower*, 15 March 1986, 10-15.

2 He posted under the screen name “Apokrisis1,” but has indicated that this single name was used by a number of Witnesses who cooperated in providing responses. *Apokrisis* is the Greek term for “answer”.

3 See my discussion in chapter six of *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 95-104.

4 The two immediately cited are: J. H. Bernard and A. H. McNeile, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928) and James, Bishop of East Bengal, “‘I Am’ in the Gospels,” *Theology* 62, 468 (1959), 238.

5 William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 67.

6 See my discussion of the citation of Isaiah 6:10 in John 12:39-41 in *The Forgotten Trinity*, 136-38.