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GETTING OVER THE HURDLES OF THE NEW WORLD TRANSLATION

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SYNOPSIS

Believers who attempt to present the message of Christ to Jehovah's Witnesses face several daunting obstacles, particularly those involving the Watchtower's New World Translation of the Bible. Jehovah's Witnesses usually dispute several key passages and often are well trained in making presentations on these passages. Many believers feel inadequate to address questions that touch on the correct translation of the original Greek or Hebrew languages and so have no response. Others collect quotes from their favorite scholars about these passages, but the conversation usually ends in a stalemate because neither side can overwhelm the other with enough citations to settle the dispute.

There is another approach to discussing the New World Translation and its questionable rendering of certain passages, one that not only bypasses the typical objections and defenses, but also provides a clear witness to the truth. This approach involves demonstrating the consistent testimony that the biblical context gives to the truth that a disputed passage contains, thereby exposing the underlying bias and inconsistency of the New World Translation. Even believers who have no training in Greek and Hebrew can use this approach to clear some of the hurdles commonly encountered when trying to reach Jehovah's Witnesses.

Believers today face a bewildering array of challenges as they seek, in obedience to Scripture (1 Pet. 3:15), to be ready always to give a reason for the hope that is within them. Attacks on the Christian faith increasingly are focusing on its very foundations: the authority of the Bible as God's Word, the integrity of the manuscripts that preserved the Scriptures through the early centuries, and the extent of the canon of Scripture. The works produced by the Jesus Seminar, the volumes being produced by Bart Ehrman from the University of North Carolina, and *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown all launch attacks at these foundations. For the past half century Christian apologists have had to deal in-depth with issues of manuscript evidence and the translation of Scripture in response to the publication of the New World Translation (NWT) by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (i.e., Jehovah's Witnesses).

The NWT presents one of the greatest challenges to believers who wish to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jehovah's Witnesses, or, just as often, who wish to fortify fellow believers against the false views presented by Jehovah's Witnesses. Numerous articles have been written concerning the general character of the NWT, both pro¹ and con.² Lists of disputed verses and a discussion of the overall bias of the NWT against historic Christian doctrine are readily available.³

It is one thing to attempt to deal with Watchtower doctrines from a biblical perspective, but few evangelicals feel confident addressing specific textual or translational issues that often are involved. That feeling of apprehension is increased in the countercult apologetic encounter. Add to this the prevalence of the *Kingdom Interlinear*, a New Testament that shows the original Greek text beside the NWT English text,

and the predilection of individual Witnesses to make reference to the original Greek or Hebrew languages (though very, very rarely do they actually know either language), and one can see why the NWT is an efficient conversation stopper, a true barrier to the evangelization of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Challenging the mistranslations of particular texts in the NWT has its place, but such an approach often leads to a stalemate unless someone in the conversation can claim some kind of expertise in the subject. One person says, "I have read scholars who say your version of the Bible mistranslates this passage." The other responds, "Do you read Greek?" "No," answers the first person, to which the other person replies, "Well, neither do I, but I've read scholars who support our translation over yours." This approach can become a source of frustration very quickly. I believe there is another approach that avoids its pitfalls.

One of the key exegetical (i.e., interpretational) truths to grasp, not only regarding the NWT, but with reference to all exegetical interaction with all kinds of false religions, is this: The truth of God's Word is not limited by those artificial divisions we call *verses*. The truth, rather, is found in the *entirety* of God's Word when it is handled properly, not merely in individual texts. That is not to say that we can ignore close examination of those texts, but the broader witness of multiple texts carries tremendous weight.

This addresses a common source of frustration for Christians: sometimes an individual verse or passage can be understood in more than one way. Zealous believers often will feel compelled to refute false teachers on every text they misuse when at times that is simply not possible. Sometimes a better approach to refuting a misinterpretation of a particular text is to establish the full teaching of the Word of God on that point rather than trying to prove that the individual text cannot be read in that way.

When it comes to the NWT, this approach can allow us to get past the my-scholars-versus-your-scholars roadblock while, at the same time, providing a witness to the truth. In some areas the NWT's translation is simply wrong; in others it is inconsistent. By approaching the issue with a wider scope in mind, an error in the NWT can be demonstrated not merely by referring to external authorities, but by showing the inconsistencies between biblical passages that result when a particular translation is allowed to stand. Once the Jehovah's Witness is confronted with this, the citation of external authorities may be met with less resistance.

JESUS THE GREAT "I AM"

When the NWT first appeared, its rendering of John 8:58 raised an outcry from Christians, and for good reason. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) renders the text, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.'" In contrast, the NWT has, "Jesus said to them: 'Most truly I say to YOU,⁴ before Abraham came into existence, I have been.'" Jesus' words here historically have been connected to the divine name in the Old Testament, where *Yahweh*⁵ is identified as the "I Am." Critics of the NWT identified its translation of this passage as a less-than-subtle attempt to mask its indication of the deity of Christ, and the Watchtower Society responded with a rather muddled attempt at a grammatical defense of the translation. Nonscholars who witness the dispute are left feeling that there is no place for them in the discussion of the correct translation of the text and of whether the NWT is accurate.

I suggest that for the average lay apologist, a more effective and less confrontational approach to discussing the proper rendering of "I am" would be to demonstrate the inconsistency of the NWT's translation from a broader context. This admittedly requires the apologist to know the topic in greater depth than would be necessary were he or she to merely list alleged mistranslations, but knowing the many ways the Scriptures testify to the deity of Jesus Christ beyond direct references to Him as God is vitally important in today's environment of competing religions. (It also is a blessing to any believer's own spiritual life.) One can mount a strong grammatical case against the NWT's rendering, but it is far more effective to demonstrate its error in a way that the Witness will remember long after the encounter has ended.

John 8:58 is one of a string of texts where John uses the Greek phrase *ego eimi*, the emphatic form of "I am," or, "I myself am." When we isolate John 8:58 from the rest of John's gospel, we greatly diminish the force of his argument, and in fact, give to our opponents their greatest weapon: they can always come up with some means around a *single* passage. In most instances, however, truth doesn't come in single verses

or passages alone. It is rather like an avalanche on a mountainside: theoretically, you can always dodge a single rock, but avalanches don't send single rocks; they send thousands at a time, and you cannot dodge them all at once. In this instance, John did not simply give us one instance of *ego eimi* in a single isolated passage. A strained but slightly plausible explanation that avoids the truth in one text becomes more strained when you have to try to get around the truth in two texts, and then three texts, until what was once plausible becomes implausible and the truth is clear.

Jesus uses *ego eimi* in a number of ways in John. He uses it as simply self-identification in 4:26 and 6:20. It is used in such phrases as "I am the bread of life" (6:35) and "I am the light of the world" (8:12). In John chapters 8, 13, and 18, however, a series of uses appears that, when taken together (as surely they are meant to be seen by the author of the gospel), add yet another thread to the tapestry of witness John is giving to the person of Christ. Beginning in John 8:24 we read, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins."⁶ This is part of the argumentation leading up to Jesus' words in verse 58, "Before Abraham was, I am." However one understands Jesus' identity, it is clear that unless one accepts Him for who He has revealed Himself to be, one will not have eternal life. When Jesus uses the same phrase in 8:58, immediately the Jews respond by picking up stones to stone Him.

In John 13:19 Jesus says to His disciples, "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*." How does providing a prophetic word prove who Jesus is? We will find an answer to this when we look to the Old Testament background of these passages, but let's first look at another significant passage.

When Judas comes to betray the Lord in Gethsemane, we read, "They answered Him, 'Jesus the Nazarene.' He said to them, 'I am *He*.' And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. So when He said to them, 'I am *He*,' they drew back and fell to the ground" (John 18:5-6). This would be a very odd incident if, in fact, we did not connect it to what has gone before. Twice John notes that Jesus used the phrase *ego eimi*, emphasizing that when Jesus uttered this phrase, those seeking to arrest Him "drew back and fell to the ground." Amazing efforts have been expended to avoid the plain meaning of this text, but to no avail. When Jesus speaks these words, something miraculous takes place.

Why would the Jews attempt to stone Jesus for saying, "Before Abraham was, *I am*"? Is the mere proclamation of preexistence sufficient grounds for stoning, or did the Jews see something more in Jesus' claim? How would Jesus' knowledge of the future help the disciples believe? What caused the officials and soldiers to fall to the ground when Jesus said *ego eimi*? Many believe that this alludes to the phrase "I am that I am" in God's self-disclosure to Moses in Exodus 3:14, which it surely does in part, but the strongest connection is in the books of the prophets, particularly Isaiah. In fact, we find the phrase *ego eimi* being used as a name of the one true God numerous times in Isaiah (e.g., 41:4; 43:10, 25; 45:8, 18, 19, 22; 46:4, 9; 48:12, 17) in the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used in Jesus' day) and, most significantly, in the very verse from which Jehovah's Witnesses derive their name.

In the NWT this verse, Isaiah 43:10, reads, "'YOU are my witnesses,' is the utterance of Jehovah, 'even my servant whom I have chosen, in order that YOU may know and have faith in me, and that YOU may understand that I am the same One. Before me there was no God formed, and after me there continued to be none.'" Jesus uses the very same phrase of Himself in John 13:19, which explains how His revelation of the future would aid the disciples to have true faith in Him; for only God can know the future. It likewise explains why the Jews reacted as they did when Jesus used this phrase in 8:58; for only God has always existed. It also explains why the soldiers who would have no knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures would fall back on the ground when Christ identified Himself as the very I Am; for only God's own presence could cause this involuntary reaction. In each instance those who heard Jesus recognized that He was God, or that He was claiming to be so.

When we review the entire record of John's use of this phrase, the NWT's inconsistency is strikingly evident, as is the utter futility of its attempt to hide this truth. The NWT does not mistranslate *ego eimi* in these other instances. In John 8:24 the NWT has "I am [he]." In John 13:19 and 18:5-6 the same translation

appears. By attempting to hide this truth in just *one instance*, the translation testifies to its own inconsistency and its true purpose. When we approach the disputed text by first examining verses in which the NWT accurately renders the phrase so as to view the text in a wider context, we can avoid much of the argumentation and defense that Witnesses offer and can present the truth clearly to them.

JESUS "OUR GREAT GOD AND SAVIOR"

Another excellent example of how one can actually use the errant or strained translations of the NWT to the advantage of the truth is found in the Bible's description of Jesus as our "God and Savior" in Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1. In both instances we have an example of a syntactical⁷ formula in the Greek language known as Granville Sharp's Rule, and once again, as soon as grammar enters most conversations, those involved will be looking to move elsewhere very quickly. In addition, Witnesses who are better read can always find a translation here or a scholar there to provide support for the NWT rendering. As with the previous example, however, when we take a wider approach we not only can demonstrate the bias and error of the NWT, but we can give a memorable testimony to the truth as well.

Compare the NASB and the NWT on these passages:

Titus 2:13: "...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (NASB).

"...while we wait for the happy hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of [the] Savior of us, Christ Jesus" (NWT).

2 Peter 1:1: "...by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (NASB).

"...by the righteousness of our God and [the] Savior Jesus Christ" (NWT).

The NWT clearly seeks to put as much distance as possible between the terms "God" and "Savior," while the NASB equates the two, describing one person, Jesus Christ, as both "God and Savior." The Watchtower Society, which denies the deity of Christ, obviously cannot describe Him as "God and Savior," so a wide variety of arguments have been developed to substantiate their translation; again, however, context allows the believer to establish the truth without first obtaining a degree in Greek syntax.

The context of the passage in Titus 2 indicates that only one person is in view: Christians are looking for the appearing, the coming, of Jesus Christ. The sentence continues into verse 14 with only one person, Christ, in view. He "gave Himself" to "purify for Himself" a people. This language is reminiscent of the redemptive work of Jehovah with reference to Israel (e.g., Ps. 130:7-8; Ezek. 37:23; Exod. 19:5), but here it is speaking of the work of Jesus Christ in particular. There is simply no reason to insert a gratuitous and unnatural reference to the Father into the middle of this passage *unless* your real reasons have nothing to do with the context or language but everything to do with your theology, as is the case with the NWT.

Being only part of the opening lines of an epistle (or "letter"), 2 Peter 1:1 does not have the kind of contextual support we find surrounding Titus 2:13. The epistle of 2 Peter as a whole, however, provides a powerful example of the inconsistency of the NWT and its blatant theological bias. Compare a transliteration of the Greek text of the last phrase in verse 1 ("...our God and Savior, Jesus Christ") with the text only 10 verses later:

tou theou hemon kai soterou Iesou Christou (v. 1)

tou kuriou hemon kai soterou Iesou Christou (v. 11)

These phrases are grammatically and syntactically identical, with only one variation: the Greek term *theou* (the genitive singular form of the word "God") in verse 1 over against the term *kuriou* (the genitive singular form of the word "Lord") in verse 11.

The NWT gives itself away by translating the phrase in verse 11 correctly: "...our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." In fact, we likewise find identical grammatical constructions in 2 Peter 2:20 and 3:18 that the NWT translates correctly. The only reason for the NWT's rendering in 2 Peter 1:1 is clear: their theology demands it and precludes the correct rendering. By starting with 2 Peter 1:11, then examining 2:20 and 3:18, and moving back to 1:1, we can demonstrate the theological bias of the translation, hopefully laying the foundation for further discussion of the specifics of the passage.

CHRIST THE “CREATOR OF ALL THINGS”

To this point, we have demonstrated the translational errors and inconsistencies of the NWT by references to their surrounding contexts. Many of the questionable renderings presented by the NWT can be addressed in this way, including its famous translation, “the Word was a god” in John 1:1. Some, however, require another level of knowledge concerning the context, requiring the apologist to be a student not only of the text of Scripture, but of the historical background as well. Specifically, when a translation turns an author’s argument on its head given the historical context in which he was writing, then it is presumably incorrect. An illustration of this can be found in the NWT’s most infamous attempt to hide a reference to the deity of Christ, in Colossians 1:15–17:

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, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. 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.

When the NWT first appeared, the word *other* was inserted without brackets, implying that it was in the original Greek text. An outcry once again was raised and translators added the brackets. The Watchtower Society defends its insertion of *other* based first on its errant understanding of *firstborn* as meaning “first created.”⁸ Then, in light of that meaning, they insist that *creation* should be taken in such a fashion as to be the larger set of which the *firstborn* is a part.⁹ Therefore, the firstborn could only create all *other* things, since the firstborn is itself a part of creation.

The orthodox translation of this passage can be defended quite successfully based on syntactical arguments, but few are prepared to argue at this level. Is this text then rendered unusable to us in evangelism because of the Watchtower Society’s complex defense of its erroneous translation? It is not—if we approach it from the background of the error against which Paul is writing.

One of the earliest heresies the Christian faith faced was *Gnosticism*, which basically held the view that spirit is good, while matter (i.e., the physical world) is evil. This was fundamentally inconsistent with the Christian view that God created matter. One expression of this movement was known as *Docetism* (from the Greek, *dokein*: “to seem”), which taught that since Jesus was good, He did not have an evil, fleshly body, but only *appeared* to have a physical body. The apostle John specifically argued against this teaching and identified it as the teaching of “anti-Christ” (2 John 1:7). In the same fashion, Paul, knowing that an early form of Gnosticism that joined elements of Judaism and Christianity was moving into Asia Minor and specifically into Colossae, warned the Colossian believers against it using the very terminology the Gnostics themselves used. In Colossians 1, Paul speaks of the “fullness” (Gk. *pleroma*), a term used by the Gnostics to describe the group of beings emanating from the one true God, known as “aeons.” It seems these early Gnostics, on encountering the proclamation of the risen Lord Jesus, tried to fit Him into their scheme, making Him one of the aeons, a divine being, but a derivative of deity—less than God Himself.

Paul denies this kind of teaching by asserting that Christ is not just one of the aeons, but is instead the preeminent being, the one through whom *all* created things were made, and in whom the fullness of deity dwells in *bodily* form (Col. 2:9). No Gnostic could possibly accept such teaching. If, however, you render the text as does the NWT, you are forcing Paul to abandon his primary argument and agree with his opponents, the Gnostics! By making Jesus a created being, something less than the true God, the NWT does indeed turn Paul’s argument on its head. His point, in fact, is that Christ’s creative activity exhausts all of creation: there is *nothing* outside of His creative power. By seeking to conform the biblical text to its own theology, the Watchtower Society ends up making the apostle agree with his opponents, clearly indicating the error of their translation.

APPLICATION IN GENERAL

In-depth textual, grammatical, and syntactical discussions have their proper place in the realm of Christian scholarship and apologetics (even outside the domain of evangelizing Jehovah’s Witnesses). In most apologetic encounters, however, a more effective means is found in demonstrating translational and

theological errors through the presentation of a sound, compelling, and understandable explanation of the context of a passage or author. Purposeful mistranslations, or highly questionable renderings, will distort the meaning of the author, and hence can be detected and exposed by those who grasp the overall teaching of the writer. Many Jehovah's Witnesses have a concentrated knowledge of issues that separate them from historic Christianity, but they lack an overall, contextually sound biblical understanding. When faced with a testimony based on contextual understanding, many are deeply troubled, for they rarely encounter believers who seriously study the Scriptures so as to be able to witness so effectively.

You may view the NWT as an almost insuperable barrier, or you can instead recognize it as a tool that every Jehovah's Witness will offer to you willingly for your use. Few Jehovah's Witnesses will take Christian literature, but I have never seen one leave his or her NWT behind! When a faithful Christian accurately and confidently demonstrates the truth of Christ's deity to them from the pages of their own Scriptures, that testimony will go with them and will have a lasting impact on their thinking. That is the kind of witness that the Holy Spirit can use to open blind eyes to the glory of the Word made flesh, the Creator of all things: our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

NOTES

1. For a representation of the Watchtower defense, see Rolf Furuli, *The Role of Theology in Bible Translation* (Murrieta, CA: Elihu Books, 1999). Until the late 1990s the Watchtower discouraged apologetic defense of their work by individuals not under the direct control of its Governing Body, but it now realizes that with the advent of the Internet there is no way to keep the members of the Society insulated from the writings and information of "active opposers," let alone control the activities of individual Witnesses who wish to defend the Society in the same forums.
2. For a representation of the evangelical response, see Robert H. Countess, *The Jehovah's Witnesses' New Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982).
3. I consistently noted when the translation of the NWT materially influenced the interpretation of specific passages relevant to the doctrine of the Trinity in James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998).
4. The NWT is not without positive aspects. When translating plural pronouns it employs this all-caps form to help the reader differentiate between plural (e.g., YOU) and singular (e.g., you) pronouns that are spelled the same in English, a useful mechanism.
5. While some Jehovah's Witnesses will fight tooth and nail for the Germanicized pronunciation "Jehovah," the vast majority of scholarship recognizes that "Yahweh" is the best pronunciation, and most Witnesses will actually be surprised at any use of the divine name, whether Yahweh or Jehovah, on the part of a non-Witness.
6. Most printed English translations use italics or brackets to indicate that a word was not in the original language text, but was inserted by the translators for clarification. In this instance, the pronoun *He* was not part of the original Greek phrase *ego eimi*.
7. *Syntax* refers to the relationship of words to one another. In the study of context, examining syntax is the next step up from examining the grammatical form of words in isolation.
8. The Greek term *prototokos* has a rich background in the Old Testament, used of Israel as Yahweh's "firstborn" (obviously not "first-created") in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9. The firstborn is the one having preeminence.
9. That is, as a *partitive genitive*, indicating that the *firstborn* is a part of the wider group *creation*.