

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP364

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND MATTHEW 24: "New Light" or New Hermeneutic?

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On October 2012, nearly five thousand Jehovah's Witnesses gathered in New Jersey for the 128th annual meeting of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania to hear the Governing Body's "new light."<sup>1</sup> The Governing Body, currently made up of eight men, is the sole entity responsible for defining orthodoxy and orthopraxy for roughly eight million Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide.

The most recent "new light" focuses on Jesus' parable in Matthew 24:45–51, which begins with the question, "Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?" (NRSV).

"In the past," the Governing Body states, "our publications have said the following:...the slave represents *all anointed Christians* on earth as a group at any one time since then." Going forward, though, "*a small group of anointed brothers* who are directly involved in preparing and dispensing spiritual food" is now the slave, and "these anointed brothers make up *the Governing Body*" (emphasis added).

In one radical announcement, the Governing Body designated themselves—and themselves alone—the faithful and wise slave. How should we assess such a claim? Is this really "new light" or is it a new hermeneutic?

According to experts in rhetoric,<sup>2</sup> there are four solid reasons you can properly criticize someone else's viewpoint: demonstrate that they are uninformed, misinformed, illogical, or incomplete in their justification. As Christians, we add a fifth category to their list: unbiblical.

Using these five categories, we will assess the latest interpretative shift coming from Jehovah's Witnesses' headquarters. We will focus on one key issue per category in an attempt to evaluate the radical shift at play in the Governing Body's "new light."

**Uninformed.** If you disagree with someone because you believe they are uninformed, you must demonstrate that they lack some *relevant* piece of evidence. It is not enough simply to show they are missing information. You must show that the information they lack makes a meaningful difference to their overall argument.

The Governing Body's new interpretation makes at least one such glaring omission: it fails to factor in the first-century "imitation Christians." "In the first century," according to the Governing Body, "there was hardly a reason to ask ['who is the faithful and wise slave?]." Since the apostles were performing miracles, signs, and wonders, that proved Jehovah supported them. "At the dawn of the second century C.E.," however, "'the weeds appeared' when imitation Christians became visible in the world field." As a result, to settle any questions about who the true Christians were, "Jesus began to inspect the spiritual temple in 1914. That inspection and cleansing work involved a period of time—from 1914 to the early part of 1919." During those four and a half years, "Jesus judged [a small group of zealous Bible Students] to be true Christian wheat." In other words, the Governing Body's entire claim to authority rests on the assertion that Jesus' first-century question only had a twentieth-century answer.

Turning to the New Testament, however, a very different picture emerges. Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:18–20), Demas (2 Tim. 4:10), and Simon the magician (Acts 8:9–24) are all examples of "imitation Christians" in the first century. Even some of the apostles were rebuked for their hypocrisy in the first century (e.g., Gal. 2:11–13). Moreover, many passages in the New Testament strongly warn about the first-century problems of "false brothers brought in quietly" (Gal. 2:4, New World), "associating with so called brothers" (1 Cor. 5:11, NASB), "false apostles" (2 Cor. 11:13, NASB), "imposters" (2 Tim. 3:13), and "those who call themselves apostles and are not" (Rev. 2:2, ESV).

It is clear, then, that identifying the faithful slave was as critical in the first century as it is today, given the early church's transitional situation.

**Misinformed.** To disagree because you believe someone is misinformed, you must demonstrate that they are asserting what is in fact contrary to the best available evidence. For the Governing Body, this error comes from their own translation of the Scriptures—the New World Translation (NWT).

Modern English translations invariably translate the Greek word ἄρα in Matthew 24:45 as a simple transition: "then." This interpretation comes with good reason: the most well-researched ancient Greek lexicon views ἄρα in Matthew 24:45 as a "marker of an inference made *on the basis of what precedes*" (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

The NWT, on the other hand, interprets ἄρα as an intensifier: "Who really is the faithful and discreet slave?" Of course, this peculiar understanding is possible. But the burden of proof falls on the Governing Body to demonstrate why their idiosyncratic translation is the best one.

Pursuing the evidence further, however, only weakens their reading. In the parallel passage in Luke 12, Jesus presents the parable of the faithful and wise slave explicitly to clarify His previous parable after Peter asked Him, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" "Who then" is such a natural translation in this context that even the author of the Watchtower article could not help but use it himself just a few paragraphs later.<sup>4</sup>

If we were originally listening to Jesus tell this parable, then, the most natural way for us to understand it would be as an extension and explanation of the previous parable. Jesus raised His audience's interest just moments before by telling the story of two people grinding grain in a field. One person was suddenly taken, while the other was left behind—revealing the consequences of being unprepared. Thus His audience would want to know *how* to stay alert, not *who* it is that is alert.

**Illogical.** If you suggest someone is illogical, you are saying they lack cogency in some respect. When the Governing Body argues that the *doulos*/"slave" of Matthew 24:45 is a collective noun intended to refer to a group, they lack such cogency.

This argument has appeared numerous times in their publications. For example, in an article on stewardship, the Governing Body clarified that "most true Christians today are not part of 'the faithful steward' *class* whom Jesus mentioned" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Although collective nouns appear in the Greek New Testament, these are limited to nouns intrinsically plural even though they are grammatically singular: words such as "crowd" or "people." Put simply, there is no cogent grammatical basis for arguing that "slave" is a collective noun.

**Incomplete.** If you disagree with someone because you believe their argument is incomplete, you must show that their understanding falls short *within the parameters set out by the argument*. As we saw above, the Governing Body is uninformed regarding "imitation Christians" in the first century. Nevertheless, even if we were to accept their viewpoint on its own terms, we would quickly discover further inaccuracies.

In the 2012 annual report, the Governing Body argued the following: "Jesus indicated that this 'slave' would appear during a time when a legitimate question would be: 'Who really is the faithful and discreet slave?' Jesus' apostles had miraculous gifts of holy spirit, so there was scant reason to raise that question in the first century CE (1 Corinthians 14:12, 24, 25)." Except that, Jesus did raise the question in the first century—in the previous parable, here, and elsewhere (most explicitly in Mark 13:37)!

When interpreting Scripture, we must keep in mind the original audience and setting. Jesus' teaching ministry did not take place in a vacuum. These were real people, hearing real teaching, with real application.

Even Paul—using himself as the example—kept the *present* (first-century) tension between warning and assurance when he stated, "I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27, ESV).

All that to say, the Governing Body's justification for detaching Jesus' question from its historical context falls short within the parameters set out by the argument. It was just as important in the first century as it is today precisely because it does not refer to one particular person (or group), but to anyone who wishes to be wise rather than foolish.

**Unbiblical.** Finally, if you disagree with someone because you believe their position is unbiblical, you must demonstrate incoherence within the scriptural record. One good way to tell that an interpretation lacks scriptural coherence is its violation of the sufficiency of Scripture. In short, the sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture alone is sufficient in providing us with all the words God intended us to have for salvation.

The Governing Body's radical reinterpretation of Matthew 24:45–51 as applying solely to themselves is actually the result of *eisegesis* (reading into the text what one wants) rather than *exegesis* (reading from the text what is already there). Their answer lacks support from any other New Testament passage. Nowhere in the New Testament is a group of people (large or small) designated as “the channel” on which “our spiritual health and relationship with God depend on” as the Governing Body claims. In fact, we find the exact opposite asserted in texts such as Acts 17:11, 1 Timothy 2:5, and 1 John 2:27.

Scripture cannot simply mean whatever a later audience wants it to mean. The Governing Body's interpretation of Matthew 24:45–51 violates the sufficiency of Scripture and is therefore unbiblical.

The July 15, 2013, article explaining the Governing Body's “new light” reveals much more than a new interpretation. It reveals a new hermeneutic at work within the Governing Body. The last sentence of their article tells it all: “Let us be determined to show our loyal support to the anointed brothers who make up that faithful and discreet slave.” The only hermeneutic that would explain this uninformed, misinformed, illogical, incomplete, and unbiblical interpretation and exhortation is one that promotes allegiance to the Governing Body above all else.

In contrast, we will conclude with an exhortation based on our hermeneutic: “Let us be determined to show our loyal support to God the Father, through God the Son, by means of God the Holy Spirit, as Scripture sufficiently reveals.” —*Brian J. Wright and Timothy Ricchuiti*

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## NOTES

- 1 The announcements are set forth in the July 15, 2013, edition of The Watchtower publication “Who Really Is the Faithful and Discreet Slave?” *The Watchtower* 134, 14:20–25.
- 2 Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, “How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intellectual Reading,” rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1972).
- 3 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἄρα 1b.
- 4 “Who Really Is the Faithful and Discreet Slave?” 22, par. 10.
- 5 “You Are a Trusted Steward,” Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/ws20121215/youare-a-trusted-steward/>.