

Explaining the Trinity to the Jehovah's Witnesses

by Jay Hess¹

The Jehovah's Witnesses² (hereafter abbreviated as J-Ws) hold to an Arian-like theology insisting that the Father alone is the One True God with the Son being Michael the archangel who is above all other angels. Angels, including Michael, are said to be gods, inferior to the One True God by virtue of their having been created. The Holy Spirit is truly God but is not distinct from the Father; "it" is God's Power, sometimes on loan to Jesus.

Although the J-Ws have held to an Arian belief since their beginning with C.T. Russell in the late 1800's (then called "Bible Students") and have consistently taught their anti-Trinitarian views throughout their books and semimonthly magazines, they have rarely committed an entire publication to the subject³. In their 1983 book *Organized to Accomplish Our Ministry*, which is used to evaluate candidates for membership and baptism, four of the 110 questions focused on ensuring their Arian stand. Their 438 page handbook *Reasoning from the Scriptures* used in their door-to-door ministry has about 28 pages devoted to refuting aspects of the Trinity. This is the closest thing to an official publication that defines what the J-Ws are to believe. As evidence that they are very misinformed about what evangelical Christians believe, under "Trinity" it says this:

"Definition: The central doctrine of religions of Christendom. According to the Athanasian Creed, there are three divine Persons (the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost), each said to be eternal, each said to be almighty, none greater or less than another, each said to be God, and yet together being but one God. Other statements of the dogma emphasize that these three "Persons" are not separate and distinct individuals but are three modes in which the divine essence exists. Thus some Trinitarians emphasize their belief that Jesus Christ is God, or that Jesus and the Holy Ghost are Jehovah.- *Not a Bible teaching.*"

Unfortunately this reflects the same misunderstanding in the mainstream Christian community. In one survey among 60 prospective evangelists in a Southern Baptist church, less than a third professed to believe the Trinity doctrine in contrast to holding to a modalistic view. So it is not a surprise that the Christian theology often heard on the doorstep reinforces the above J-W "Definition." Sadly, the Christian public is the only source of information about Christianity that the J-Ws ever hear, outside of the Watchtower Society's propaganda.

It is commonly held by the Christian public that the Bible teaches there is only one real God; all others are false, imaginary. Likewise it is assumed that the term "God" is a name (due to the replacement of the unspoken Hebrew Divine Name with "Lord" or "God" - see Judges 16:28

¹ Paper presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 18, 2004 by Jay Hess (107 North Lakeside Dr.; Smithfield, NC 27577; 919-989-9485; jhess@nc.rr.com)

² Members of the WTBS (Watchtower, Bible and Tract Society).

³ The only publications of any note are two booklets: *"The Word" Who is He? According to John* in 1962 and a larger brochure *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* in 1984.

LXX). Consequently, misusing the word “God” would be viewed as taking God’s “name” in vain. All this would seem to imply to the average Christian that a simple way to prove the Trinity would be to demonstrate to the J-Ws that the Bible calls Jesus “God,” the unique name of the only biblical God. One could use Isaiah 9:6 and John 1:1. If that fails, use John 20:28. If that fails, use John 8:58. The average Christian assumes this approach should be airtight but J-Ws always seem unaffected. Why?

The average Christian has no idea of how J-Ws think. The J-Ws hold that the term “God” is not *unique* to the Creator for angels are legitimately called “gods” (Elohim - Psalm 8:5; Hebrews 2:7). Of course Jesus can be called “God” (or “god” since Hebrew does not have an uppercase alphabet). The term “God” cannot be a name. It is a title. As every J-W knows, the only genuine name for God is “Jehovah.” To the J-W the argument is absolutely irrelevant to proving whether Jesus is the One True God. In their translation (the *New World Translation*) John 1:1 reads: “In the beginning the Word was, the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.” This teaches them that “god” is not unique to any one person but is applicable to the Word who was *with* another God.

The most popular argument ever heard by the J-Ws is that connecting John 8:58 with Exodus 3:14. They view this as the most illogical presentation of all. God’s personal name never has been “I AM” or *ehyeh* (Hebrew) or *ego eimi* (Greek). In Exodus 3:15 God’s eternal name is clearly stated as being “Jehovah.” God’s name could not have been *ego eimi* for Jesus likely spoke Aramaic in John 8. When Jesus was asked if he had seen Abraham, if his reply truly had incorporated the Divine Name then what is the grammatical structure of this sentence: ‘Before Abraham existed, Jehovah’? It appears something is missing in this sentence. At best the Christian presenting this is viewed as a buffoon.

So what can one say to the J-Ws?

When you put a puzzle together do you start with the edge-pieces? Probably not, you start with looking at the picture on the box.

While it is essential to use the right proof-texts - the puzzle pieces that go around the edge - in reaching out to the J-Ws; they cannot imagine what picture those proof-texts supposedly portray. They have been told mainstream Christians worship a schizophrenic God, One God who has three personalities and presents himself in three modes. They acquired this picture from the Watchtower and from talking to Christians in their door-to-door ministry⁴. The scriptures they hear do not appear to ‘fit’ the anticipated picture but seem to reflect a very confused Christian. Instead the J-Ws need to hear, at the very first, a biblical and simple statement that paints the overall picture in terms they understand.

The J-Ws already believe the Father and Son are distinct persons and that the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father. Thus their view overlaps with the complementarian model rather than

⁴ J-Ws occasionally hear the doorstep illustration that a man can be a husband, a father and a son.

the egalitarian view. Of greater importance is that the Watchtower leadership has given them the impression that the JW's alone have this belief. *It is a shock to their world-view when they learn that this is not true.* When J-W's ask if I believe the Trinity, I say "If you mean, 'Do I believe the Son is a distinct person from the Father and is eternally subordinate?' Yes I do." Initially they think I answered "No" because my answer was not modalistic. My response does not fit in their world-view of the Christian public. If what I had said were indeed true, then the Watchtower's claim would be false.

When they dispute the claim that evangelical Christians believe in the complementarian model I refer them to the book *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*⁵ chapter 26 ("The Subordination of Christ") by R.C. Sproul where it clearly spells out that Christians do believe Jesus is a distinct person eternally subordinate to the Father. Mentioning publications such as this to the J-W's is very effective in challenging their belief system because it affirms a theological position they already have, yet exposes the Watchtower as misrepresenting evangelical Christians. From personal experience I have found this to be the single, most effective, thing to say to them. Instead of wrangling scriptures I spend the next few minutes attempting to prove R.C. Sproul actually exists and represents more than a handful of Christians.

The J-W's next need to hear an illustration of the aspect of the Trinity they find the hardest to understand, how three can be one. There are three useful biblical examples of composite entities. These illustrations are not meant to define the Trinity but illustrate that the concept is biblical and understandable. The first is found at the very beginning of the Bible:

1. The first couple lived alone in the garden. The two are to be viewed as one.
 - a. Genesis 2:24 - In the garden, two persons, the man and the woman, "became one flesh."
 - b. Genesis 5:1,2 :
 - "God created *man*" (singular)
 - "He made *him*" (singular)
 - "named them *Man*" (singular)Yet it also says:
 - "He created *them* male and female" (plural)
 - "He blessed *them*" (plural)
 - "and named *them*" (plural)
 - "*they* were created" (plural)Note that the first couple was collectively named "Man." This was their original name for the woman was not given her individual name "Eve" until after her sin (in Genesis 3:20; see Genesis 2:23). The reference to "man" was interchangeable with "them" and included both the male and the female.
 - c. Genesis 1:26,27 -
 - "Let Us make *man*" (= "adam", singular)"
 - "God created *man*" (singular)
 - "He created *him*" (singular)

⁵ 1992 by R. C. Sproul - Tyndale House Publishers

In contrast the same text also says:

- “. . . let *them* rule” (plural)
- “male and female he created *them*” (plural)

Again, the reference to “man” was interchangeable with “them” and included both the male and the female. “Man” meant “mankind.”

- d. Mark 10:6-8 - Jesus refers to the first couple and after stating they were one flesh adds “they are no longer two.”
- e. Romans 5:12-19 - In saying that sin entered humanity through “one man” it potentially suggests that the “one man” could also include the first woman.

These verses imply that in the creation account singular references to “man” include the two persons in the garden. This is unusual with the more common meaning of the term “man” referring to the primary person in the couple, the male (Genesis 2:21). Likewise, although the term “God” can on occasion mean “Us” and “Our” (“Let Us make . . . Our image . . . Our likeness . . .” - Genesis 1:26) likely the more common meaning is the “Father,” the primary person in the ‘Godkind.’

I then ask the J-Ws if they understand this statement:

“In the garden was the woman, the woman was with the man and the woman was man.”

I ask them if they agree with this. Would it be correct to say “the woman was a man” or “the woman was the man?” No. If one agrees with Jesus arithmetic that they were “no longer two” then how many “man” were in the garden? One.

2. Going to the end of the Bible and note the Bride of Christ. The semblance of *one* can really signify many.

- a. Revelation 22:17 - The "Bride of Christ" is portrayed as if a single person who speaks.
- b. Revelation 19:7-9 - The Bride dresses for the wedding.
- c. Revelation 21:2,9,10, 27 - In reality she is a city full of people.
- d. Ephesians 5:23-27 - The Bride is composed of the entire church - Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19,20; Luke 5:34,35.
- e. 2 Corinthians 11:2 - Including the Corinthian congregation - the Greek 'you' is plural while 'virgin' is singular.

The first illustration showed how two persons were meant to be viewed as one. The second illustration showed how the appearance of one person is in reality a composite of many persons. This next illustration is found in the middle of the Bible (ironically this verse was on the cover of the Watchtower magazine for many years, through 1973):

3. Going to the middle of the Bible (Isaiah 43:10) to see God’s one servant, the nation of Israel.

- a. “Witnesses” is plural. They are distinct and separate in their relationship to each other, able to offer independent testimony.
- b. “Servant” is singular, collectively unified in their relationship to God.
- c. Other examples where “one man” means many: Judges 6:16; 20:1,8,11; Nehemiah 8:1.

The ‘picture’ we are painting is that of a composite God who is often portrayed as a single Creator (Deuteronomy 32:6; John 1:1-3; Job 33:4) yet is composed of three persons (or Testifiers, distinct Minds; John 8:16-18; John 15:26; Romans 8:16,26). Just as some Christians within the ‘Bride’ have a subordinate role (1 Corinthians 6:1-6), within the composite God there is a ranking (John 14:24, 26, 28; 16:13-15; 1 Corinthians 15:28) and consequently some decisions are reserved for the Father alone (Matthew 20:20-23; 24:36⁶; Acts 1:6,7).

Since the J-Ws are uncomfortable with the terms *nature*, *essence*, and *person* I use this as a restatement of the Trinity:

“Within the one God, the Maker of all things⁷, are three Testifiers, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

After drawing the above ‘picture’ one can fill in the rest of the puzzle with foundation scriptures focusing on the attributes of God that are clearly unique to God. Avoid discussing the attributes that the J-Ws dispute as being unique to God alone (names and titles: “God”, “First and Last”, etc.).

The J-Ws believe God has these unique attributes:

- 1) God alone is the Creator.
- 2) There is no one like God, or who can do what God can do.
- 3) God alone receives the highest form of honor, “sacred service” (*latreia* / *latreuo* - Matthew 4:10).
- 4) God alone is called Almighty.

Let us address each in turn:

⁶ My preferred explanation is that some decisions belong to the Father alone and have not been shown. What has not been shown is not yet known (John 5:20). *Knowing* can mean having a personal involvement with the thing known (Matthew 7:23). Jesus did not participate in sin so did not “know” sin (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). Jesus does not participate in some decisions that are reserved for the Father alone so those decisions are things Jesus does not yet know.

⁷ The J-Ws agree that God alone is the Creator. While they acknowledge that the Son made all things they are forbidden to call him “Creator.” So one should initially refer to the “Maker of all things.”

==> God alone is the Creator.

After presenting the three illustrations of composite beings above, ending with Isaiah 43:10 . . .

- Continue through the rest of Isaiah showing how God is unique, there is no other (Isaiah 45:5-7,12,14,18,21,22).
- Next show that God, at the beginning, made all things alone (Isaiah 44:6-8,24). Since the J-Ws acknowledge that Jesus made all that there is, this verse should really be applied to Jesus, not the Father. So who really did this making of the universe. If it was not Jesus, but the Father alone, then what is meant here?
- Reinforce that God made the universe all alone (see Isaiah 37:16; Job 31:15; Malachi 2:10; Acts 17:24,26).
- Ask “How many gods made the universe? Was there another god with the True God at the beginning who shared in making all things?” (See John 1:1 *NWT*)

Either:

1. There was no other ‘god’ present (contradicting John 1:1),
2. God forgot there was another ‘god’ there.
3. The other ‘god’ was so insignificant there was no reason to mention him (also an apparent contradiction to John 1:3,10; Colossians 1:16,17; Hebrews 1:2,3)
4. As in Genesis, the one God includes another Person/Testifier who was with God (just as “man” includes another person who was with the male).

A similar but shorter presentation:

- Psalm 102:12, 15, 21, 22, 24-27 - God clearly identified as Jehovah/Yahweh. Yet Christians claim this is Jesus. Ask ‘Do not all Christian groups believe this is Jesus?’
- Hebrews 1:10-12 - Where Psalms 102:25-27 is quoted with the same activity being applied to the Son. (The WTBS agrees this is Jesus - see *Reasoning* pg. 414.)
- Isaiah 44:6-8, 24 - Yahweh made all things by himself, alone. Was there a second god there? How many gods made the universe?

==> There is no one like God, or who can do what God can do.

- Psalm 86:8-10 - Among the gods/angels there are none like Yahweh.
- Psalm 89:5-7 - No one among the angels resembles Yahweh. See also Isaiah 46:9; 1 King’s 8:23,60; 2 Chronicles 6:14.
- John 5:18-20 - Jesus does everything the Father does, exactly as the Father does it.
- Hebrew’s 1:3 - “reflection of his glory and the exact representation of his very being” - *NWT*).

==> God alone receives the highest form of honor, “sacred service” (*latreia / latreuo* - Matthew 4:10).

- The August 1, 1991 *Watchtower*, page 9 (paragraph 7) says “Any who use Jesus’ name in their worship but fail to give the greater honor to Jehovah do not manifest a genuine love of the light.”
- John 5:23 - “in order that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He that does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” - *NWT*
- Daniel 6:26,27; 7:13,14 - The Son of man is to be given ‘sacred service’ - LXX Rahlfs ed. shows the textual variation with *latreuosa*.

- John 12:26 - Son is to receive “service.”

==> God alone is called Almighty.

- See the paper *A Man Who Has Told You the Truth: Abraham and the Angel of the LORD in John 8:31-59* by Gunther H. Juncker (Assistant Professor of New Testament at Toccoa Falls College) presented on November 17, 2004 at the 56th Annual ETS conference.
- John 8:40 - When was it that Abraham did not seek to kill Jesus?
- John 8:56 - When was it that Abraham rejoiced (laughed?) to see Jesus’ day and Jesus saw Abraham? Did the Jews think Jesus was claiming to be Isaac (Matthew 16:13,14)?
- Genesis 17:1,15-22 - God Almighty announces the day of Isaac’s birth, Abraham laughs.
- Genesis 18:1-14 - Yahweh announces the day of Isaac’s birth, Sarah laughs.
- Genesis 21:1-3,6 - On the day of Isaac’s birth Yahweh, the Speaker of Genesis 17:1 (“God Almighty”) “visited” Sarah (likewise LXX).
- John 8:58 - Jesus could not have been claiming to be Isaac.
- Jesus met Abraham face-to-face and spoke the truth. Abraham rejoiced with laughter instead of seeking to kill Jesus. Abraham looked forward to a prophetic day when Isaac would be born and the Speaker of Genesis 17:1 would return/visit Sarah. When it happened, Abraham rejoiced.
- The J-Ws agree that it was Jesus’ voice who was heard at Genesis 17:1⁸.
- See Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 56⁹.
- See Jamieson, Fausset, Brown Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible (1871) for John 8:56.

⁸ See WTBS publications: *The Watchtower* 12/15/1968 p. 762 “. . . maybe you recalled reading something about the number of times that humans heard Jehovah’s voice. . . . you are referred to page 28 of *Awake!* of August 8, 1962. . . . you will find that there seem to have been three occasions when humans heard Jehovah’s own voice, and they were all when Jesus was down on earth. We read of these occasions at Matthew 3:17; 17:5 and John 12:28.” also see *Insight* Vol 2 p. 1160 (1988); *The Watchtower* 5/1/2000 p. 13, par 2; *The Watchtower* 5/15/1974 p. 298.

⁹ See Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho by R. P. C. Hanson “ ‘Moses is the first witness, informing us of the God who appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre . . . another God and Lord below the Creator of the universe, who is also called a messenger (angel) because he delivers as a message to men whatever the Creator of the universe wants him to deliver, the Creator above whom there is no other God. . . . he was one of those three whom the holy prophetic Spirit describes as men seen by Abraham?’ He said, ‘No. But God had been seen by him before the appearance of these three. . . .’ ‘Then,’ said I, ‘how is it that one of the three who was in the tent, who was also the one that said ‘*In due season I will return to you and Sarah shall have a son*’ (Genesis 18:14), appears to have returned when Sarah did have a son, and the prophetic word there indicates that he was God? Listen to what was explicitly said by Moses: (reference to Genesis 21:9-12) Notice now that he who then said under the oak that he would return (for he knew beforehand that it would be necessary to give Abraham advice about the demands Sarah would make on him) did return, as it is written, and is God . . . I will try to convince you that this figure who is mentioned and described as seen by Abraham and Isaac and Moses is another God than the God who is Creator of the universe, other in number, I mean, not in will, for I do not assert that he ever did anything except what the Creator of the world, above whom there is no other God, intended both to do and to say.’” - Justin viewed Genesis 21:9-12 as the fulfillment of Genesis 18:4 however his reference to “returned when Sarah did have a son” could imply the fulfillment is also in Genesis 21:1,2 (‘Yahweh visited Sarah . . . at the appointed time that God had spoken of with him’).