

Most people are familiar with Jehovah's Witnesses (here called 'JWs' for short) knocking on their doors, usually in pairs. The JWs are proud of the fact that they go into all the world to preach the gospel. Whether this is commendable or not depends, of course, on whether the gospel they preach is true to the Bible. Here a few of their beliefs are examined in the light of the Scriptures.

### Jehovah

In Exodus 3:13 Moses asks God what his name is. God replies that his name is 'I am' (Hebrew 'ehyeh), and instructs him to tell the Israelites that he is to be called *yhwh* (or *jwhv* if you transcribe the Hebrew letters differently). These four letters (called the 'tetragrammaton', meaning 'four letters') were, along with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, written originally only as consonants, with no vowels. They were considered by the Jews to be so holy that they dare not pronounce them lest they take God's name in vain, so we are not sure what the pronunciation should be; perhaps 'Yahweh'. Instead, when they came to the tetragrammaton, the Jews would read it as *"donay* 'Lord'. When the Hebrew Bible was given vowels (marks around the consonants), the tetragrammaton was written with the consonants YHWH and the vowels of *"donay*, EOA. This was then interpreted by translators of the Bible into English as being 'Jehovah'.

In the Bible a name is more than a mere handle. It often describes character and personality. This passage in Exodus concerns God's existence. So we have to make a decision here. Is the tetragrammaton simply indicating that God is the self-existing one, or do we have to call God 'Jehovah' every time we speak of him?

The Jews never used this holiest of names, as we have seen. But then, they may have been wrong in this. The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, renders the tetragrammaton as *kurios* ('Lord'). But of course they may have been mistaken in not correctly translating God's name. The Septuagint Greek version was used by New Testament writers. If we must always refer to God as 'Jehovah', why does this name not appear even once in the New Testament?

The nearest approach to the tetragrammaton in the New Testament occurs in Rev. 19, where four times over we find 'Hallelujah'. This is Hebrew, and means 'Praise Yah'. Apart from this, there is not the slightest reference to the tetragrammaton in the whole of the New Testament. If we should always refer to God as Jehovah, why do not the New Testament writers do so? Why did Jesus not do so? If this is vital, we would expect that somewhere in the New Testament we would be instructed that we should always use this name.

It seems that JWs take the words in Exodus 3 literally. But surely it would appear that these verses are concerned with God's character rather than how we are always to refer to him. It is particularly strange to insist that we use a certain name for God when no one knows how this name is to be pronounced. It certainly was not pronounced 'Jehovah'!

### The nature of Christ

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). That seems quite clear, doesn't it? There is no doubt that the 'Word' spoken about here is none other than Jesus Christ, who 'became flesh' (v. 14). However, JWs hold that Jesus was not God, and that this verse should be translated 'and the Word was a god'.

It is true that the term 'god' can be used for important personages. In Ps. 82:1, 6 (quoted by Jesus in John 10:34) 'gods' seems to be used to refer to human judges. Is it right to suppose that in John 1:1 it means no more than that the Christ was an important person? In that case, we would read these verses to say that this Word was with God from the beginning of time, that all things were made through him, that he is the true life that enlightens people, 'and, by the way, he was an important person.' Does that seem to fit?

In the Greek the word for God is *theos*. There is no word for 'a' in Greek. The word *theos* is usually preceded by the definite article 'the'. Word for word, John 1:1 reads 'and the word was with the god and god was the word.' The second occurrence of 'god' does not have 'the' before it. Should we then read it as 'a god'? Greek scholars say that the absence of the definite article here indicates that *theos* is the complement ('object') of the verb, and 'the word' is the subject. The presumption is then pretty clear that it does not say 'the Word was a god' but rather 'the Word was God'.

However, the deity of Christ does not rest on this one verse alone. There are many other pieces of evidence. One is that he was able to forgive sins, although the religious teachers claimed that no one could forgive sins but God alone (Luke 5:20-4).

Certain verses in the New Testament appear in the original Greek to refer to Christ as God. Take, for instance, 'God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side' (John 1:18), 'Christ, who is God over all' (Romans 9:5), 'Our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ' (Titus 2:13) and 'Our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1:1). We are told that he was 'in the form of God' (the New International Version reads 'in very nature God') (Philippians 2:6).

In Revelation 22:8-9 John falls down and worships the angel and is rebuked for doing so. 'Worship God!' the angel tells him. When Satan tempts Christ to worship him, Christ quotes Deuteronomy 6:13 and says 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only' (Matthew 4:8-9). True worshippers 'will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (John 4:23-4).

However, in several parts of the gospels people are described as worshipping Jesus (see, for instance, Matthew 14:33, 28:9, 17, Luke 24:52, John 9:38). None of these people are rebuked for doing so. On the other hand, Peter is quick to stop Cornelius from doing so (Acts 10:25-6). (In all these references in the last two paragraphs, the Greek uses the same verb *proskuneo*.) In John 20:28 doubting Thomas calls Jesus 'My Lord and my God!' and is not rebuked for this.

One suggestion advanced by the JWs is that Christ is an archangel. They point out that the return of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is accompanied by the shout of the archangel. Could it be that the archangel is Christ himself?

This view is rebutted by Hebrews chapter 1. There the Son is shown to be far superior to the angels (v. 4). No angel could be the Son of God (v. 5). In fact, the angels are to worship him (v. 6 - *proskuneo* again!) If one must not worship angels but God alone (Revelation 22:8-9), what shall we say about the one whom angels worship? One possible translation of v.8, described as the most likely translation by some commentators, is 'Your throne, O God', addressing the Son.

As you can see, there are many parts of the New Testament which seem quite definitely to indicate that Christ is indeed God. Try to look for a moment at this matter from God's point of view. If Christ were not God, it would be a disastrous heresy for people to suppose that he is God. Do you not think that God

would have ensured that in the compilation of the Bible such a heresy would be avoided? Surely there would be a clear statement in the New Testament that Christ is not God. We look in vain for such a statement, but only find passages which speak of him being God.

Christ paid for our redemption from sin. That is certainly made clear. How could a created being have value enough to pay for mankind?

Of course, it is obvious why JW's hold that Christ cannot be God. How can you hold to the view of one God, but three persons within the Godhead? How can the Son pray to the Father and follow the Father's commands, when they are both one and the same? Such ideas, they claim, are unreasonable. And this shows why JW's strive so hard to contradict the Scriptures which show Christ's deity. They base their arguments not on the Scriptures, but on reason. It should not be surprising to us that the nature of God goes beyond what we can comprehend with our limited minds. When it comes to considering what God is like, we should seek to be subject to what the Bible says, rather than seeking to make the Bible subject to our views of what is reasonable or unreasonable.

### **Eating blood**

JW's are mentioned most often in the media for refusing blood transfusions. Their reason for this is that they claim it is tantamount to eating blood, which was strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses (Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 3:17 etc.)

The New Testament indicates that those who believe in Christ are no longer under the Law (of Moses). 'You are not under the Law, but under grace' (Romans 6:14). 'If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law' (Galatians 5:18). 'We have been released from the Law' (Romans 7:6). The Mosaic Law is useful as an indication of God's standards, but it is not incumbent on us to keep all the commandments of the Law.

In the early church there were Jews who had been brought up to keep the Law. For them it was a hard thing to free themselves from such constraints. In particular, the Galatians were tempted to go back to law-keeping. Paul has to tell them, 'All who rely on works of the Law are under a curse' (Galatians 3:10). He goes further, and tells them that to seek to observe one part of the Law makes you subject to the whole of it. 'I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole Law' (Galatians 5:3). The Law is a whole, and you cannot make part of it a requirement without making the whole of it a requirement.

How can it be, then, that JW's take just one part of the Law, avoiding eating blood, and make this a necessary commandment for all to obey? They justify this by Acts 15, the 'Council of Jerusalem'.

Some Pharisees who were Christian believers were teaching, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses' (Acts 15:5). So the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church met together to consider the matter (v. 6). Peter described any requirement to keep the Law as 'a yoke which neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear' (v. 10). Believers should now be free from this yoke. However, Gentile believers were to be told to abstain 'from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood' (v. 20). 'Pollutions of idols' would no doubt mean eating food sacrificed to idols. 'Unchastity' would be sexual immorality. 'What is strangled' would mean meat killed without draining off the blood.

On the surface, it appears that the decision of the Council was that some parts of the Law were still binding on believers,

whether Jews or Gentiles. How could Paul (who was present at the Council) agree to such a conclusion? He declares that if you have to keep one part of the Law, you have to keep it all, and the Council state quite plainly that keeping the whole Law is not necessary.

The matter of sexual morality is clear-cut. 'Flee from sexual immorality,' says Paul (1 Corinthians 6:18). The body of a believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit (v.19), not to be dishonoured. We respect this ruling not because it is a commandment in the law (which it is) but because it is God's standard for conduct.

Eating food sacrificed to idols is dealt with by Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. He points out that idolatrous gods do not really exist (v. 4). Food offered to idols is therefore inconsequential. However, not everyone has this knowledge (v. 7). Some consider that eating such food really does make a difference spiritually. Their conscience is weak (v. 10), and if others eat this food it could prove a stumbling-block to them (v. 9). Therefore we should abstain for the sake of the other person and how they might view such eating.

The third of the instructions to Gentile believers entails the matter of eating blood. Blood under the Law was ceremonially unclean and not to be eaten. However, Jesus 'declared all foods clean' (Mark 7:19). Paul says, 'I am fully convinced that nothing [no food] is unclean in itself' (Romans 14:14). 'All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble' (Romans 14:20). As with food offered to idols, one should abstain from eating blood if others are to be offended. Christianity grew out of Judaism. If religious Jews saw Christians breaking traditions which the Jews considered sacrosanct, this would cause unnecessary offence. It is 'better not to eat . . . or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall' (Romans 14:21).

Paul explains his methods in 1 Corinthians chapter 9. He is free (vv. 1, 19), but he makes himself a slave to others so that he might win them (v. 19). In particular, 'to those under the Law I became like one under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law), so as to win those under the Law' (v. 20). Following one of the precepts of the Law in order not to offend others does not mean that this precept is mandatory for all believers for all time.

### **Conclusion**

From these examples certain deficiencies can be seen in the way JW's handle the Scriptures. They often take certain verses and interpret them in a wooden, literal way without considering that in doing so they may make them contradict many other parts of the Bible.

At times they approach the Scriptures with fixed prejudices and then have to devote much effort to explaining away what the Scriptures actually say. This is seen especially with regard to the Trinity. It is unreasonable, they say, that one God may appear in three persons, and therefore Christ is not God.

The great need is for JW's to study the Bible more, to immerse themselves in what it really says, to get a grip on the whole sweep of the Bible rather than on narrow 'proof-texts'.

A good example to follow would be that of the Bereans (Acts 17:11). They did not even take the words of the apostle Paul for granted, but 'examined the Scriptures every day to see if these things were so.' Paul urged Timothy, 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15).