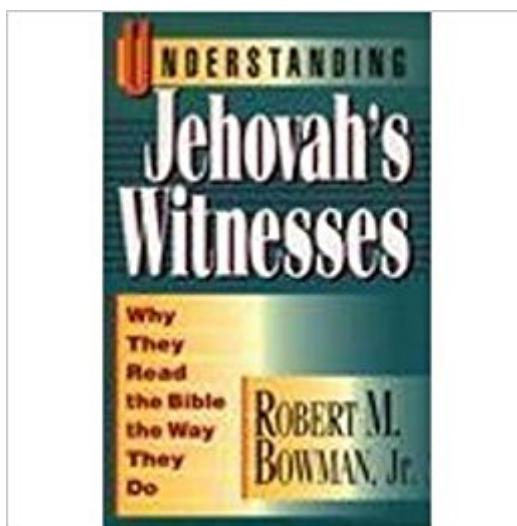


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Understanding Jehovah's Witnesses: Why They Read The Bible The Way They Do



Synopsis

Book by Bowman, Robert M.

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Customer Reviews

Book by Bowman, Robert M.

Most everyone in America has had some contact with the Jehovah's Witnesses. From their appearances at your door to their street corner distribution of The Watchtower and Awake!, they are an ubiquitous though oft ridiculed part of modern American religious culture. Most Christians just ignore their doorstep invitations to discuss the Bible and those who do are often bewildered by the strange amalgamation of passages used to support their unorthodox doctrines. The closed system of interpretation they have developed over a century can seem impenetrable to an outsider and well meaning attempts to explain orthodox Christianity to them falls on deaf ears as the two participants talk past each other. Robert M. Bowman is well versed in the exegetical methods employed by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (the authoritative arm of the Jehovah's Witnesses) and has published his insights in Understanding Jehovah's Witnesses. The book, primarily aimed as a tool for dialogue between Evangelical Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, is a detailed critique of the Jehovah's Witnesses' use of Scripture backed up with extensive references. While vehemently disagreeing with the Watchtower organization's methodology, he does not resort to questioning the motives or sincerity of individuals in the organization. This is considerably different from many other critiques focusing on the alleged "cultic" elements of the Jehovah's Witnesses while paying scant

attention to the underlying premises of their belief structure. Bowman begins with two introductory chapters setting the basis for the examination in terms agreeable to both parties. While admirably irenic in tone, this section is by far the weakest in the book as its subjective nature shows an implicit (albeit unintended) Evangelical Protestant bias. For example, in a list of "ground rules", Bowman includes as hypotheses positions held only by a minority of the world's Christians - primarily Evangelical Protestants. In so doing he asserts a selection of pseudo-scientific criteria to examine Scripture without realizing his assumptions are steeped in the traditions of modernity and have little connection with how Scripture was read in the early Church. Fortunately, little of his pretense at an impartial exegetical methodology has any bearing on what follows. It is when turning to his critique of the Jehovah's Witnesses exegetical techniques that Bowman finds his range. In successive chapters, he zeroes in on the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society's self-definition as God's chosen arbiter of Scripture and in successive chapters points out in detail their changing doctrine and failed eschatological predictions, the intentional and self-serving mistranslation of Scripture in their New World Translation, how Charles Taze Russell (founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses) was formed theologically by the conflagration of novel doctrines and eschatological ferment from the Adventist movement he had joined with the rigidity of the extreme form of Calvinism he knew in his youth, and the hermeneutical blinders the Jehovah's Witnesses belief system requires in order to fit the words of Scripture into their theological prism. When he is through, he has exposed the Watchtower interpretations for what they are - a manmade system of beliefs with no validity in the context of the Apostolic Church. Bowman then demonstrates the fallacious reasoning outlined earlier with two specific examples: their interpretation of Luke 23:43 and their doctrines concerning the divine name. The former is a clear indication of the convoluted grammatical leaps the Jehovah's Witnesses will go to in order to twist the Scripture to fit their doctrine. The latter poor reasoning behind their insistence on using the name "Jehovah" and their own inconsistency in its application. These twin examples illustrate the often "ad hoc" exegetical techniques used to attempt to get Scripture to conform to Watchtower edicts. Bowman adds two helpful appendices. The first examines the Jehovah's Witnesses claims of scholarly approval for the New World Translation. In actuality, there is no notable scholar of Biblical Greek or Hebrew who has endorsed the New World translation. The Jehovah's Witnesses have instead relied on out of context quotations, innuendo, and outright forgeries to manufacture a reputation their translation could not attain on its own. The other appendix examines their claim that Jesus was crucified on an upright stake rather than a cross even though all archeological, historical, and Scriptural evidence points the other way. History as well as Scripture needs to be translated through their funhouse mirror of interpretation. Despite some initial

flaws, Bowman does a remarkable job in explaining the Jehovah's Witnesses worldview and in pointing out how it skews their view of Christ and his Church. After reading Understanding Jehovah's Witnesses, a discussion with a Jehovah's Witness will immediately set alarm bells ringing. Even if it only prevents the confusion such encounters can produce, it is a good effort. For any interested in defending the Christian faith against such errors, it is highly recommended.

One of the hardest things to do for a Christian attempting to share his/her faith with a JW is to understand from where the Witness comes. Bowman does an excellent job in this book giving the mindset of a Witness in a fair and even compassionate manner. He covers some hermeneutical issues, even spending an entire chapter on Luke 23:43 and analyzing it. This is probably not the only book a person should own--I might recommend Rhodes' "Reasoning from the Scriptures with a Jehovah's Witness"--but it's a good supplementary volume that I believe the average layperson should be able to understand and even utilize.

Robert M. Bowman Jr. (born 1957), is Director of Research at the Institute for Religious Research, and specializes in the study of apologetics. He is also the author of books such as The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel, Why You Should Believe in the Trinity: An Answer to Jehovah's Witnesses, etc. He wrote in the Preface to this 1991 book, "The focus of this book is on understanding Jehovah's Witnesses, not attacking them. In fact, the first two chapters do not criticize the Jehovah's Witnesses at all, and even the rest of the book is more concerned with understanding the Witnesses than with criticizing them. In a sense, I have written the book more for orthodox Christians than for Jehovah's Witnesses... Of course, I do hope that Jehovah's Witnesses will read the book, too." Here are some quotations from the book: "Some Jehovah's Witnesses, in private conversations and discussions with evangelicals, have found it useful to deny that God's organization is to be identified with the Watchtower Society. The Watchtower Society, they argue, is actually only a corporation that God's people use to get their work done. This technicality does not, however, alter the facts. The leaders of the Watchtower Society on Brooklyn are not merely administering a corporation, they are controlling the doctrines believed by the millions of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide." (Pg. 49-50) "The kinds of doctrines I have in mind here are especially the Jehovah's Witness 'don't's': blood transfusions, war, participation in political affairs, various celebrations (Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, birthdays), the use of the cross as a religious symbol, and the like... Yet many people are attracted to the Witnesses because of one or more of these 'don't's.'" (Pg. 93-94) "Although this is much less true

today than it was a century ago, it cannot be denied that the form 'Jehovah' is still widely used outside Jehovah's Witness circles." (Pg. 110)"Although the most basic meaning of 'stauros' was of a straight stick or stake, it was commonly used in Jesus' time to refer to a variety of wooden instruments of execution used by the Romans, probably most often of the cross." (Pg. 143)

You open a Bible and examine it with a Jehovah's Witness and you get nowhere! What do you do? A beginning point is to get your hands on Bowman's book. Bowman explains some basic logical and interpretive principles and then digs into the differences between JW and Christian ways of looking at the same Bible passage. The JW's method of Bible interpretation is shown to be dictated by the Watchtower and Bible Tract Society. Bowman examines the New World Translation of the JW's, their belief system, and their use of "Jehovah" as their name for God. He offers a sample, technical case study of interpreting Luke 23:43. The book closes with appendices on the New World Translation and a word study on "stake" vs "cross." Bowman also includes an excellent annotated bibliography. Bowman's purpose is not to attack, but to help Jehovah's Witnesses find truth. Read his book and absorb his insights.

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