

## An Outsider's Notes on the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Revelation: Its Grand Climax at Hand!*

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### Abstract

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society's *Revelation: Its Grand Climax at Hand!* is a substantial commentary of John's Apocalypse (319 pages) with a remarkably wide distribution – more than 16.6 million copies of its various editions were in print by 1988. Yet because of the organization's reclusive nature there is minimal dialogue with the academy and by all appearances no sustained analysis of this particular book by biblical scholars. This paper offers a commentary on a commentary, using Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities as a way into this idiosyncratic study of the Apocalypse.

### Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*

[1] Stanley Fish answers his well-known titular question – *Is There a Text in This Class?* – rather playfully in the opening words of his preface: “there is and there isn't” (Fish: vii). There isn't, he goes on to explain, if by text one understands an unchanging entity, one that is stable moment-to-moment. But there is a text if by the term one means the obvious “structure of meaning” that presents itself to an interpretive community guided by particular assumptions. Said differently, all readers are guided by protocols which invariably shape the expectations placed on the text being read. This understanding of text as something unstable and fluid, and the shift away from author- and text-centered interpretation towards an audience-centered theory of reading is particularly helpful when considering the unique ways religious presuppositions influence encounters with texts. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society is well-described as an interpretive community with a worldview and reading strategies that shape the way the Bible is experienced by members. (With respect to nomenclature, I am using the shorter “Watch Tower” when referring to the organization and “Jehovah's Witnesses” when discussing its members. The term *Watchtower* is the title of one of the organization's publications.) Reader-response criticism is a helpful methodology for approaching this literature and so a few more comments about Stanley Fish's theory of reading will serve as a preface for this study of a Watch Tower publication.

[2] Fish's opening chapter proposes a new “method” that is at once simple and significant. It is the reader's experience, he suggests, not the text itself, which is “the proper object of analysis” (21). As a method, the reader needs to ask what it is that individual words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, novels, plays, and poems do, not what the author intended (26-27). Risking censure by proponents of text-centered criticism who find in this approach “affective and intentional fallacies” (2; cf. 22-23, 27, 32, 344, 349),<sup>2</sup> Fish questions the assumed stability of texts and substitutes “the

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Wendy Peterson of Providence College for kindly reading an earlier draft of this paper and offering many helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Fish challenges arguments made by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in their well-known essay “The Intentional Fallacy” (reprinted in *The Verbal Icon* [1954]). They warn against an interpretive misstep they call the affective fallacy, “a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*) [. . .] It begins by trying to derive the

structure of the reader's experience for the formal structures of the text on the grounds that while the latter were the more visible, they acquired significance only in the context of the former" (2). This suggestion is a clear departure from the dominant text-centered New Criticism of the 1960s and 1970s that Fish resists (his first major study was *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* [1967]; many of the essays included in *Is There a Text in This Class?* are reprinted, the earliest previously published in 1970).

[3] Two key concepts in Fish's book illustrate how meaning resides in readers, not the text or authorial intent. The first Fish calls "affective stylistics," which indicates how readers make sense of words on the page by anticipating what is to follow. Readers may be right or wrong in their expectations and when errors occur their point of reference is made uncertain; at such a point, rather than "following an argument along a well lighted path [. . . they are] now looking for one" (24). This kind of ambiguity is part of the reading experience and meaning is found in that encounter with the utterance, even with mistakes made along the way. Fish goes so far as to suggest, "there is no direct relationship between the meaning of a sentence (paragraph, novel, poem) and what its words mean." Whatever information is found in an utterance, its message is, therefore, "constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning. It is the experience of an utterance – all of it and not anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say – that is its meaning" (32).<sup>3</sup>

[4] Fish recognizes the role individual readers have in generating meaning. He speaks of "*meaning as an event*, something that is happening between the words and in the reader's mind, something not visible to the naked eye but which can be made visible (or at least palpable) by the regular introduction of a 'searching' question (what does this do?)" (28; italics original).<sup>4</sup> In his later work, however, he moves beyond this, recognizing that all readers are inevitably shaped by their environment, or what Fish calls communities. This leads into the second major concept.

[5] When making his point that environment shapes interpretation he provides a sample reading of a passage from *Paradise Lost* that produces a conclusion "not discovered by the analytical method but produced by it" (13). He says elsewhere "I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention" (163). Such a discovery is the product not of individual acumen in reading a difficult text but rather in the application of a particular reading strategy. Readers are, Fish argues, inevitably shaped by the interpretive communities to which they belong.

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior

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standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome [. . .] is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (21; cited in Fish: 23).

<sup>3</sup> McCormick suggests that in his early work Fish is "attracted to the study of the reading process because of its strange, elusive quality, its dynamic nature, its defiance of analysis" (75). His "openness to paradox, tension and apparent contradiction" is a reaction to "the theoretical neatness and sterility of formalism and [he] appears willing to make statements that seem to him intuitively true, even though he cannot prove them" (67).

<sup>4</sup> Various shifts away from Fish's 1970 essay "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics" (chap. 1 of *Is There a Text in This Class?*) are observed by McCormick, who laments the move toward interpretive communities as a "catch-all answer to everything literary critics ever wanted to know" (75). This reduces the complexity of the reading experience that is articulated in his earlier work.

to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around (171).

For Fish, reading is a generative act and a form of writing. As he puts it, “meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being” (172-73). There is, then, an essential relationship between the meaning found in a text and the assumptions held by the communities to which the reader belongs. The text is no longer a “privileged container of meaning” and instead the reader is given “joint responsibility for the production of meaning” (3).

### The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society

[6] As a reading and interpretive community the Watch Tower employs certain strategies for navigating biblical writings and its members share a number of assumptions about the world and their place in it. This environment inevitably shapes the Bible-reading experience for Jehovah’s Witnesses since the interpretive methods and symbols of the organization are constantly in view, especially in the context of formal Bible study. The apparent uniformity in theology and praxis – at least in its public expression (tracts, website, door-to-door ministry, etc.) – owes something to the organization’s massive publishing initiative that ensures all members are reading the same texts, asking the same questions (various publications include study questions, including *Revelation: Its Grand Climax at Hand!* that is considered here), and applying the same interpretive grid. Their publications are an exercise in “symbol management” that involves constant repetition of essential truths held by members. Numerous tracts, magazines, and books play a key role in maintaining this highly symbolic world:

The vast quantity of literature produced by the society in order to keep the current body of symbols alive for the membership consists necessarily of a constant repetition of the basic viable symbolic themes. This repetition becomes mantric in quality, and the society’s constant rephrasing and re-presentation of the basic corpus of recognized belief becomes for the membership the rhythmic life-breath of *the* symbol, *the* truth, *the* ultimate security (Botting and Botting: 94, emphasis original).

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society’s 1988 commentary *Revelation: Its Grand Climax at Hand!* (hereafter *RGCH*) is a particularly interesting example of this exercise of symbol management. This volume, like many Watch Tower publications, blurs the traditional boundaries that distinguish sacred literature from interpretation, so much so in fact that it is argued here that this book functions, in effect, as scripture for this particular reading community.

[7] The term sacred text or scripture is not easily defined (see, e.g., Smith), but at a minimum it suggests a way of looking at the world and a tool for answering questions about the meaning of life and death, morality and justice, and perceived progress or regress in the world. All of this is found in *RGCH*. No author(s) is (are) identified which enhances its authoritative tone and repeated suspicions about the integrity or acumen of biblical scholarship<sup>5</sup> encourages readers to trust the text

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<sup>5</sup> Consider, e.g., the phrase “Worldly commentators” who offer alternative readings of Revelation (120). At other times there are appeals to academic resources (e.g., 13, 191, 175, 151, 187, 188). Various mainstream books are cited at points (without complete documentation) including: James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (1950, 1955, 1969 [13]), Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (1906, 1907 [151]), Joseph Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (first published 1885 [294]), Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (first published 1964 [270]). Publication dates for books are usually omitted – including the above – except for those recently published (e.g., Claudia Koonz’s *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 1986 [39]). Significantly, there is no dialogue with contemporary biblical scholarship.

itself and the leaders of the movement responsible for this particular interpretation of the Book of Revelation (the elders in “Jehovah’s anointed” congregations are identified with the “angels” referred to in the seven letters [RGCH 28-29]). If official interpretations of the Bible carry such authority, it is arguable that the Bible alone is not scripture for the Watch Tower, and the Old and New Testaments gain this status only when the organization’s history and presuppositions are woven into them. There is no room for ambiguity or debate in RGCH – the book includes the bold assertion, “The entire book of Revelation is explained in this publication” (5; following the table of contents) – though the possibility for future revision is left open (see especially 8-9).

[8] As far as I am aware there are no academic analyses dedicated to RGCH specifically, even though this is a fairly substantial study of John’s apocalypse (319 pages) with a very wide circulation. In its various incarnations there were apparently, by 1988, 16.6 million copies printed in 51 languages (2). Study of this book is therefore warranted if only because of its immense influence. However, because of the organization’s reclusive nature there is minimal dialogue with the academy and analysis of this book in particular is, as noted, almost non-existent. This lack of attention to Watch Tower publications by outsiders is also noted by Gutjahr who comments on the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ official translation of the Bible:

Certain large American religious traditions, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses . . . have produced and circulated alternative translations of the Bible. As early as 1890, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were producing portions of the Scriptures that bore their name. By 1926, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were producing complete Bible editions, and in 1946 they embarked on translating their own version of the Scriptures, in an edition that highlighted their tradition’s beliefs. Completed in 1960, this new Bible edition was called the *New World Translation*. By 1992, nearly eighty million copies of this version were in print, and yet no extended study of this Bible version has been undertaken by anyone outside this religious tradition (344).

This paper puts forward at least a few preliminary observations on this widely influential book.

[9] Although RGCH is a Bible commentary, there are several departures from what is usually understood by that term. As a result this book shapes, it is argued, the reader’s reception of that ancient document in significant ways. Here we have an example of the content (Revelation) being shaped by the package (RGCH; the entire text of the Apocalypse in the *New World Translation* is included). Reading Revelation through Watch Tower publications, that is to say through the lens of this interpretive community’s ideology, is a very different experience than reading it on its own. As a way into RGCH, attention will be given to four features of this book that illustrate its idiosyncratic style and distinctive form of Bible presentation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Authoritative Interpretation**

[10] According to Fish, interpretive communities are not stable. As communities grow and decline, as individual readers come and go, there is bound to be some degree of flux.

. . . while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assure that they will never be settled. The notion of interpretive

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<sup>6</sup> There is only minimal dialogue with the particular conclusions reached by this book even though this would be an interesting exercise. RGCH is certainly among the more unusual readings of John’s Apocalypse articulated in a full-length commentary.

communities thus stands between an impossible ideal and the fear which leads so many to maintain it. The ideal is of perfect agreement and it would require texts to have a status independent of interpretation. The fear is of interpretive anarchy, but it would only be realized if interpretation (text making) were completely random. It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop (172).

Allowing this there is still remarkable uniformity among the Jehovah's Witnesses, at least if their literature is any indication.<sup>7</sup> The Book of Revelation is a highly contentious work that rarely permits any reading community to reach a consensus about its meaning, but the Jehovah's Witnesses have made an ambitious attempt to do just that. *RGCH* makes no claim to infallibility (9), yet this interpretation of Revelation assumes that no ambiguities exist in the biblical text. This is carefully qualified because clarity of understanding is contingent on God's illumination and progressive revelation meaning doctrinal positions are subject to adjustment over time. The book begins with a rehearsal of the organization's history of formal study of the Book of Revelation beginning in 1917. Their reading of the text has been revised many times since then for two primary reasons, namely the unfolding of world events and continual but gradual revelation from Jehovah (8). In *RGCH* they lay claim to their uniquely authoritative and God-sanctioned reading of Revelation in a few ways.

[11] To begin with, there is the oft-repeated assertion that biblical literature is accessible and comprehensible to faithful Christians.<sup>8</sup> Rather than approaching this difficult book with uncertainty, readers in this interpretive community are assured from the outset that they can fully understand its mysteries. Second, alternative interpretations of biblical literature are vilified as non-members are identified with the villains in Revelation while the Witnesses are aligned with God and his emissaries. Questioning the *RGCH* interpretation thus raises the spectre of one's allegiance to God. Finally, this reading of the Book of Revelation makes repeated connections between (a) John's visions, (b) selected historical events of the twentieth century (see note 9), and (c) the organization's past experiences. This creates a reading experience that is in some sense self-fulfilling: *if Revelation accurately describes our past it must also be concerned with our present while predicting our future.*

### Reading Revelation in the First Person Plural: John is Telling Our Story

[12] Jehovah's Witnesses identify themselves as participants in John's story since Revelation is largely concerned with the twentieth century: "Most of the prophecies in Revelation were to be fulfilled after John's time" (*RGCH* 24).<sup>9</sup> Sympathetic readers therefore find their own story in *RGCH* – it is a

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<sup>7</sup> There are examples of prophetic failure requiring adjustments to the Jehovah's Witnesses' eschatological calculations throughout the twentieth century (see Penton 1985, especially chap. 4). This does not change the point being made here of general consistency in patterns of thinking.

<sup>8</sup> It is argued repeatedly that only Jehovah's Witnesses are truly faithful to God and so they are uniquely situated to understand the contents of John's apocalypse. This is implied by a statement early in the book: "The mysteries locked up in the book of Revelation have for long baffled sincere students of the Bible. In God's due time, those secrets had to be unlocked, but how, when, and to whom? . . . Those sacred secrets would be revealed to God's zealous slaves on earth" (9). Presumably these faithful slaves are synonymous with the 144,000 "integrity keepers" mentioned in the near context, a select group among the Jehovah's Witnesses distinct from other members (cf. e.g., "sheep class" [120]). The principle method used for interpretation is harmonizing biblical texts and observing correspondences with current events: "we firmly believe that explanations set forth herein harmonize with the Bible in its entirety, showing how remarkably divine prophecy has been fulfilled in the world events of our catastrophic times" (9).

<sup>9</sup> The interpretation of the phrase "the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10) is key for *RGCH* and Watch Tower eschatology as a whole. The commentary links John's use of the phrase with Paul's language (e.g., 1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6) suggesting a sequence of events beginning with the crowning of Jesus as the heavenly king and culminating in judgment

first-person plural (“we”) reading experience that announces this community’s ultimate vindication and the demise of its detractors. A few selected examples of this reading strategy through which the organization “finds itself” in the Book of Revelation can be noted.

[13] To begin with, the great multitude of Rev 7:10 is said to refer to Jehovah’s Witnesses because they alone are reaching out to “all people of earth with one united message” through their enormous publication program (123; the great crowd [Rev 7:10] is distinguished from the 144,000 of Rev 7:4-8 in *RGCH*; this number is believed to refer to a literal 144,000 anointed Christians who make up spiritual Israel [118]). On another occasion, an eschatological timetable incorporates the movement’s own history into the interpretation of John’s phrase “the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10; see note 9). Having identified the year 1914 as the beginning of Jesus’ “heavenly rule” (24) and the year in which “the Messianic Kingdom was born” (200), much is made of the organization’s activities during the three and a half years between 1914-1918 and Jesus’ three and a half year ministry (see especially 32). Just as the first three and a half year period began when Jesus was baptized as King-Designate in October of 29 C.E. and ended when he judged the money changers in the Temple in 33 C.E., so too the later three and a half year period (1914-1918) follows a similar pattern of events:

There appears to be a parallel to this [Jesus’ earthly ministry, framed by baptism and judgment of the money changers] in the three-and-a-half-year period from Jesus’ “sitting down on his glorious throne” in the heavens in October 1914 until his coming to inspect professed Christians as judgment began with the house of God . . . Early in 1918 the Kingdom activity of Jehovah’s people met with great opposition. In May 1918 Christendom’s clergy instigated the imprisonment of officials of the Watch Tower Society, but nine months later these were released . . . As Jesus began his inspection in 1918, the clergy of Christendom no doubt received an adverse judgment (*RGCH* 32).

We can see in these brief statements how history, eschatology, critique of alternative religious expression, and interpretation of the organization’s place in God’s plan are tightly woven together.<sup>10</sup>

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and the restoration of paradise (22). By identifying events that fulfill prophetic passages in Daniel, the timeline for future events can be determined. The interpretation builds on Daniel’s “seven times” and references to the end of David’s line (4:23-24, 31-32 [but note: David is nowhere mentioned in these verses; Daniel 4 is concerned with Nebuchadnezzar]). From this starting point the following calculation provides a twentieth-century location for most of the events described in Revelation: “The major fulfillment of that prophecy started with the desolating of the kingdom of Judah, which is indicated by Bible evidence to have been completed by October 607 B.C.E. Revelation 12:6, 14 shows that 3 1/2 times amounts to 1,260 days; hence, seven times (twice that number) must be 2,520 days. Reckoning ‘a day for a year,’ we arrive at 2,520 years as the duration of the ‘seven times.’ (Ezekiel 4:6) Therefore, Christ Jesus began his heavenly rule in the latter part of 1914. The erupting of the first world war in that year marked ‘a beginning of pangs of distress’ that have continued to plague mankind. Since 1914, how remarkably events in this bloodstained earth have confirmed that year to be the start of the ‘day’ of Jesus’ presence!” (24; cf. 31: “when the Lord’s day dawned in October 1914 . . .”). Among the various exegetical problems raised by this reasoning is the date of Judah’s desolation which most argue is 586, not 607 B.C.E. The Lord’s day was followed, “about three and a half years later, in 1918” with Jehovah’s arrival in his spiritual temple to judge and “reject finally the false Christians” (31; cf. 32, 35).

<sup>10</sup> For other examples of links between Jehovah’s faithful witnesses and scenes in the Book of Revelation, see, e.g., 91 (regarding persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses), 118 (regarding the 144,000), 165, 168-70 (regarding the identification of the two witnesses with the Jehovah’s Witnesses), 185, and 209. The exegesis of the letters to the seven churches also builds on the dating scheme that identifies the early twentieth century as both “the day of the Lord” and the time Jehovah comes to judge Christendom (i.e., 1914 and 1918). As a result, “Jesus’ words to the congregations” are said to have “their major application since 1914” (32).

[14] Another interesting example of synchronizing the movement's history and the Apocalypse occurs in the reading of Rev 8:6-11:19. Here the seven angels blowing seven trumpets are linked to the organization's activities between 1919-1922 during which time the public ministry was restructured by the "revitalized John class"<sup>11</sup> and publication of the magazine *The Golden Age* (renamed *Awake!*) commenced, a publication credited with "exposing false religion's political involvements" (132).<sup>12</sup> Also, the seven trumpets are closely tied to seven Watch Tower conventions held between 1922 and 1928 – an insert with the heading "Highlights of Jehovah's Trumpetlike Judgment Proclamations" is given, complete with a brief description of each (173). Very specific connections are made between these conventions and their major themes, and the seven trumpets. For example:

When the sounding of the seven trumpets got under way in 1922, the Bible Students' convention at Cedar Point, Ohio, featured a talk by the president of the Watch Tower Society, J. F. Rutherford . . . The trumpet blast of the seventh angel was reflected in highlights of the Bible Students' convention in Detroit, Michigan, July 30-August 6, 1928 (172).

No other strategies for interpreting the angels' trumpets are suggested.

### Identifying the Beast, Identifying Our Opponents

[15] The Jehovah's Witnesses go to great lengths to distance themselves from other expressions of Christian faith, and symbols associated with traditional Christianity are described as marks of the beast. New Testament announcements of a coming apostasy are invoked (2 Thess 2:3-12; 2 Pet 3:1-3; 2 John 7-11) and subsequent Church history is cited as proof that it has come. Evidence of this great apostasy is found, among other things, in the church's supposed substitution of "Lord" and "God" for "Jehovah," the fourth-century development of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the idea of an immortal soul (30).<sup>13</sup> *RGCH* includes numerous attacks on traditional Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism (e.g., 30-31, 70, 197, 134, 139-41, 154, 208, 262).

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<sup>11</sup> The "John class" is a recurring group of characters in the book (16, 35-36, 120-22, 132, 150-51, 184, 198, etc.) who represent a unique group of God's anointed who were active during the Lord's day (i.e., 1914; see 198). Just as God used the prophet John to communicate his message in the first century so too he is using earthly messengers – the John class – to do the same. God uses these messengers "in unlocking the meaning of the prophecy" (16) and some members of the John class "have shared for upwards of 70 years in the fulfillment of these visions" (17). These people are identified with the literal 144,000 thousand who will be in heaven, distinct from the great multitude who will live in paradise on earth. These 144,000 are called the "Kingdom class" (201) and "integrity keepers" who "become priestly corulers with the Messianic Seed, Jesus Christ" (11). At times their teachings are aligned with John himself (e.g., "John, and with him the John class today, is given a preview . . ." [198]).

<sup>12</sup> The plagues announced by the first four trumpets fall on "a third" of the earth, sea, rivers, fountains of waters, and sources of light (see Rev 8:7-12). This "third" is identified clearly in the commentary – "It is Christendom!" (133). The analysis of the seven trumpets as a whole involve, then, a condemnation on false religion and ideology.

<sup>13</sup> There are frequent references to the evils of Christian symbols such as crosses (cf. the illustration depicting Jesus' crucifixion on a post without cross beam [294]). Christian celebrations like Christmas and Easter are rejected (cf. 197). Regarding the latter: "Christmas and Easter: Jesus was not born on December 25. He was born about October 1, a time of year when shepherds kept their flocks out-of-doors at night. (Luke 2:8-12) Jesus never commanded Christians to celebrate his birth. Rather, he told his disciples to memorialize, or remember, his death. (Luke 22:19, 20) Christmas and its customs come from ancient false religions. The same is true of Easter customs, such as the use of eggs and rabbits. The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas or Easter, nor do true Christians today" (taken from "What Does God Require of Us?," in the lesson titled "Beliefs and Customs that Displease God" [Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 2006]).

[16] One is struck by the viciousness of this commentary's polemics when discussing those identified as the beast's associates (e.g., the British Empire and the United States as the seventh head of the beast in Revelation 13 [188] and the United Nations as the "eighth king" of Rev 17:11 [253-54]). Even though Jehovah's Witnesses are pacifists (e.g., 39), the sympathetic reader is permitted, it would appear, to indulge in a little *Schadenfreude*, knowing others will experience eschatological suffering. This comment is based on the frequency of violent illustrations scattered throughout the book that suggest a fixation with the torments of the wicked.

[17] A recurring theme in Watch Tower discourse is the conviction that Jehovah's Witnesses are under attack by satanic forces, usually embodied as either the state, the United Nations (e.g., 247), other (therefore false) religions, or a fallen, godless society that rejects the truth and the Witnesses themselves. The latter is not entirely unfounded. Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced maltreatment at points of their history. Because they understand John 17:14 – disciples are to have "no part of the world" (*New World Translation*) – as an injunction against patriotism in any form, they were conscientious objectors during the First and Second World Wars. As a result, the Witnesses were viewed with suspicion during war time on all sides of the conflict,<sup>14</sup> a situation frequently mentioned in *RGCH* (e.g., 39, 197). Their belief in the sacredness of blood introduces another point of contention between Witnesses and the state. Their refusal to accept blood transfusions – especially when minors are involved – often involves legal challenges. In *RGCH* it is argued that the AIDS epidemic justifies the Jehovah's Witnesses' position on this matter: "How thankful Jehovah's people are that the wise counsel of his Word keeps them away from fornication and misuse of blood, through which so many diseases are transmitted today!" (97).

[18] These confrontations are interpreted in religious terms and viewed as satanic attacks on the true people of God. The faithful are therefore encouraged to keep their distance from political and social institutions that represent a satanic threat. In addition to all signs of patriotism (e.g., 196), certain social functions have similarly been viewed as involving conformity with an evil system (such as the celebration of birthdays and holidays; 197). By far the most virulent attacks are against the world's religions. Anti-Christian statements are found on most pages of the book with particular disdain shown towards Roman Catholicism and the Pope (e.g., 91, 107, 136, 139, 184-86, 270). There is, of course, nothing new about identifying opponents with the evil figures in Revelation. The history of interpretation is riddled with examples of interpreter's aligning themselves with God and their enemies with the beast (for discussion on this point, see, e.g., Koester; Schüssler Fiorenza; for other examples in *RGCH*, see 195, 247-48, and 254). Among many visible incarnations of impiety among the enemies of God, *RGCH* mentions ecumenical gatherings that do not pray to "Jehovah" (249) and the United States and Britain who follow Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome as great but evil powers (252-53).

### Use of Visual Aids

[19] There are numerous illustrations scattered throughout Watch Tower publications that are strategically important. Andrew Holden's sociological analysis of the movement connects the images to the construction of social boundaries that distinguish members from non-members (92). Language and the visual clues found in these pamphlets and books "enable devotees to draw around

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<sup>14</sup> For comments on Canadian "conscientious objectors" and the arrival of conscription in 1917, see Penton 1976: 35-80, 259-65. The situation during World War II for Canadian Witnesses was also trying, the organization even being declared seditious and banned (see Penton 1976: 129-55). For comments on the experiences of Witnesses in Japan during the War, see Wah.

themselves a kind of mental map to affirm who belongs to the community and who does not” (92). In *RGCH*, specifically, the pictures help explain difficult scenes presented in the Book of Revelation and to this end they are almost always very literal representations of the text, even in places where the language is clearly symbolic (e.g., pictures of an actual “lamb” when Jesus is clearly referred to by the term [Rev 14:4-5]; cf. 202). These images also introduce an emotive force to the commentary with several representations of grotesque monsters intended to frighten, and others that are sentimental, such as reunions with deceased loved ones (e.g., 299; this picture shows children running away from gravestones and tearful embraces with their parents).

[20] Stereotyping is also a regular feature of the pictures in this book. Representations of villains, for instance, are riddled with clichés. Among them we find the seductress (e.g., 49, 182, 197, 239, 242, 245, 256, 268, 275) with long flowing hair and makeup, military figures (e.g., 182, 196, 231, 242, 245, 255), religious leaders with distinctive clothing (e.g., 182, 184, 213, 242, 249), rulers/kings (e.g., 184, 213, 242, 255), those who smoke (e.g., 197, 213, 268 [two times]), and of course those who spurn overtures from Jehovah’s Witnesses to hear the gospel (e.g., 160). Though there are clear exceptions in the book, some pictures appear to favor whites, males, heterosexuals (couples with children), westerners (indicated by clothing), and the middle class. When God’s face is visible, it is white as are the faces of Jewish male authority figures in the text (Jesus, John, the patriarchs; see e.g., 7, 16, 70, 213, 301). Other figures, like angels and the twenty-four elders, are also white. The interpretation of Revelation 11 illustrates this tendency to construct the ideal figure as a white, western male. Ezekiel’s story of the dry bones is invoked as part of the explanation for the two witnesses rising from the dead in Revelation 11. These two passages are identified as prophetic utterances which had “their striking modern-day fulfillment in 1919, when Jehovah restored his ‘deceased’ witnesses to vibrant life” (169; i.e., the early days of the organization’s history [as Bible Students]). The picture on page 169 depicts the death of bearded and robed Jewish males and presents a background of dusty bones. An inset shows the “resurrection” of these bones as two white males, with short haircuts, suits and ties that represent the rebirth and the “modern-day preaching work” of the Bible Students/Jehovah’s Witnesses.

[21] Those inhabiting heaven are not consistently represented. In some cases they are uniformly white, heterosexual, and western (e.g., 316). At other times those in glory are robed in white, youthful but without children (121). Pictures of senior citizens are often used in representations of faithful believers (e.g., 26, 62, 316). Some scenes are culturally diverse with equal representation of gender and age (e.g., 308-9).

[22] These illustrations are consistent in other respects. Physical appearance is a concern for Jehovah’s Witnesses. There is an “obsession with neatness” among members that extends to clothing and personal grooming, such as short hair for men and formal dress for both sexes during door-to-door ministry (Holden: 54). *RGCH* attests to this in numerous illustrations (e.g., 128) and occasionally the clothing and hairstyles of the faithful are contrasted with the appearance of the wicked (e.g., the temptress on 197 with cigarette, beer can, and loose, flowing hair who attempts to lead astray a short-haired, young, male Witness).

[23] With respect to aesthetics, the pictures are not at all appealing, by any standard of evaluation. Literal depictions of God and the devil, angels and beasts, torments and blessings remove all sense of mystery from John’s imagery. At least two reasons for this kind of representation can be suggested. First, it seems plausible that the pictures are intended for children who would likely find them compelling and frightening. This would suggest a pedagogical intention for the book and an attempt to evoke emotional responses. Second, aesthetics is not a concern for the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Their assembly halls do not have icons or stained glass, and they regularly criticize the

visual symbols of traditional Christianity. Perhaps the avoidance of “real” art is linked to this general pattern of thought that likely goes back to biblical injunctions against representations of the divinity (Exod 20:4; though God is frequently depicted in diagrams, e.g., 86, 121, 179, 302). If the fear of art is linked to the possible temptation of substituting beautiful things for God, these simplistic and unpleasant diagrams pose no threat. Religious iconography and art is linked to idolatry and sinful behavior throughout this book. On a few occasions in *RGCH* “real” religious art is ridiculed as in the descriptions of Buddhist and Hindu statues:

Revolting sexual corruption is portrayed to this day in the war-damaged Buddhist sculptures at Angkor Wat in Kampuchea and in the temples at Khajuraho, India, which show the Hindu god Vishnu surrounded by disgusting erotic scenes (*RGCH* 262).

It is interesting to note that representations of sexuality are described as revolting and disgusting but depictions of violence are not, if dozens of graphic pictures in *RGCH* are any indication.

### Some Conclusions

[24] *RGCH* is a very distinct example of biblical commentary, and if by “scripture” we mean literature providing a way of understanding the world and one’s place in it, then *RGCH* is well described by the term. This reading of the Apocalypse consistently identifies the organization with virtuous characters in Revelation, connects outsiders with biblical villains and the demonic realm, and presents strategies for demarcating their particular interpretive community from others who claim to have an interest in the Bible. *RGCH* has a functional, catechetical structure as well, one intended to assist with proselytizing and instructing its readers. Hundreds of footnotes anticipate questions raised by Revelation and each is answered definitively in the commentary itself. These questions influence how readers experience Revelation and *RGCH* because they are directed through both texts very methodically.

[25] Stanley Fish argues against the narrow reading strategies of New Critics who find meaning only in the text itself. Similarly problematic is any attempt to locate meaning in authorial intention which is necessarily beyond the reach of critics. Instead, “the experience of the reader, rather than the ‘text itself,’ [is] the proper object of analysis” (Fish: 21). In the published writings of The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society we find a striking example of this kind of reader-response interpretation of Scripture. The approach to scripture modelled by the Jehovah’s Witnesses resists an interpretation limited to the text itself. If meaning resides in the text alone there would be no need to rely on either God’s unfolding revelation or the unique insights of the “John class” (e.g., *RGCH* 221). There could also be less emphasis on formal and official group Bible study and more emphasis on private, individual reflections on the text.<sup>15</sup> The author (John) is also downplayed; since he wrote of events that would occur long after his death, there is little need to contextualize his writing to any great extent.

[26] The Watch Tower’s hermeneutics also resembles Fish’s reader-response criticism with its assumption that texts are open. Meaning develops outside the text, Fish argues, in a “dynamic relationship with the reader’s expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions” (2). These are learned from the norms of interpretive communities which are themselves “no more

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<sup>15</sup> As proof that “The activity of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is wholehearted,” *RGCH* includes a record of the number of Bible studies conducted between 1918 and 1987. In 1987 there was an average of 3,005,048 Bible studies conducted each month (65).

stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned” (172). Communities change. So too the Watch Tower recognizes the possibility that interpretations will change over time. This is couched in religious terms as the gradual unfolding of divine revelation which allows for adjustments in their reading of the Bible.

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