

John 8:58

**“Before Abraham was,
I am” – Jesus**

**A Consideration of the Defence made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses
of their Translation of John 8:58
and of some other verses**

Dr Trevor R Allin

www.livingwater-spain.com

The translation of John 8:58

The quotation of John 8:58 on the front cover is from the NRSV, The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and is used by permission. All rights reserved.

First published edition 2013

© Trevor R Allin 2022

This revision: 23rd June 2022

About the Author

Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him a Ph.D. for his thesis “A Grammar of Resígaro”.

For many years he taught a range of languages up to “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of “Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T.”¹, the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.² He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

¹ CLIE, 2019 See <https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico>

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
1 Why “I am” is significant	6
2 A Rule of Greek Grammar?	7
The Jehovah’s Witnesses abandon this “rule”	8
3 Words not used by God?	10
4 Fact-checking the Jehovah’s Witness Claims	11
Another Bible verse with the same structure	11
5 Other Translations	14
6 Are the Syriac Translations of the Bible Reliable?	16
7 Inconsistencies in the “New World Translation”	21
8 Other Bible Verses	22
9 Quotations from Experts	25
10 Conclusion	27

Introduction

The New World Translation

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York Inc. is the publisher for the Jehovah's Witnesses. As well as their other literature, it publishes their own version of the Bible, which differs in many key points from the great majority of other translations, and in some cases from all other translations.

The purpose of this study is to consider the arguments presented by the publishers of their version in an article of theirs where they seek to justify their translation of the last two words of the original Greek text of verse 58 of the eighth chapter of the gospel of John. We will also make reference to some arguments used by them in the same article with reference to some other verses where their version is disputed by other translators and experts in the original Greek (Koiné Greek), although without going into the detail of those verses.

Most of the documents supplied to me by the Jehovah's Witnesses were in fact their own Spanish translations of articles written by them, so I have needed to translate back into English those phrases and sentences that I quote.

The use of Greek by the Jews

After their return from the captivity and exile that began in 587/586 B.C., most Jews no longer spoke Hebrew in daily life, but Aramaic, although at that time they still read their Scriptures in the Hebrew original. However, in about the third century B.C. their Scriptures were translated into Greek. This Greek translation is known as the "Septuagint"³, and by the time of Christ most Jews were fluent in Greek and read the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew original. In fact, Jobes and Silva state, "In the two centuries before Jesus, most Jews in the world spoke Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic."⁴

The New Testament was written entirely in Greek (apart from an extremely small number of phrases quoted from Aramaic and a few Latin words), and it is clear that when Christ quoted from the Old Testament, at least on some occasions, possibly on all occasions, he quoted from the Septuagint translation. This is beyond dispute because on occasion the style and precise choice of wording in the Septuagint is not a literal translation of the Hebrew. We find a typical example in Matthew 21:16 ("Out of the mouth of children and suckling babies you prepared praise for yourself"), which is a verbatim quotation from the Septuagint translation of Psalm 8:2 (verse 3 in the Septuagint numbering of the verses).

³ Translation produced in Alexandria between approximately 285 and 245 B.C., reportedly by 70 translators. To refer to this translation, "LXX", the Roman numeral for 70, is usually written.

⁴ Karen H Jobes and Moisés Silva in "Invitation to the Septuagint", 2000, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, p. 82

John 8:58: a translation disputed by the Jehovah's Witnesses

The original Greek text of John 8:58 says:

εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι
ἐγὼ εἰμί.⁵

The two words disputed by the Jehovah's Witnesses are the last two: ἐγὼ εἰμί, for which an approximate English pronunciation would be "egō amy".

In their Greek-English interlinear text⁶, the translators of the version published by the Jehovah's Witnesses give the following word-by-word translation into English:

Said to them Jesus Amen Amen I am saying to YOU Before Abraham to become
I am

This interlinear translation of this verse is very close to the Greek original and is not disputed (even though the translation of the word "genesthai" (γενέσθαι) as "to become" is not the best). Regrettably, the Jehovah's Witnesses' "New World Translation" ignores their own interlinear translation.

⁵ Nestle-Aland 27 (1992)/UBS 4 (1993). In this verse the text is the same as that of the Westcott & Hort text (1881) which was used by the translators of the "New World Translation" (the title chosen by the Jehovah's Witnesses for their version of the Bible).

⁶ "The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures", published 1969 by Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.

1. Why “I am” is significant

On this occasion, Christ was referring to the great “I am” pronouncements by God in the Old Testament. Some of the key statements are found in Isaiah (for instance, in 41:4, 43:10, 43:25, 45:18, etc.). Centuries before the time of Christ, the Israelites came to refer to God as the “I am”, and this is particularly clear in the Greek translation of their Scriptures. For instance, in the Septuagint translation of 2 Samuel 12:7 we read:

τάδε λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς Ἰσραὴλ ἐγὼ εἰμι ἔχρισά σε εἰς βασιλεία ἐπὶ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ἐγὼ εἰμι ἐρρυσάμην σε ἐκ χειρὸς Σαουλ.⁷

Translated as literally as possible, this says:

“Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘I am anointed you as king over Israel and I am rescued you out of the hand of Saul’ ”⁸

This important text about King David would have been well-known to the Jews of Jesus’ day in the Greek translation.

However, the most well-known divine “I am” statements are found in Exodus 3, on the occasion when God revealed Himself to Moses, and in John 8:58, Jesus was quoting verbatim from the passage in Exodus 3:14, which was likewise extremely well known to the Jews of His day, especially in the Greek. In that passage God describes Himself to Moses with the phrase ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (“egō amy ho ōn”) - “I am the one being” or “I am the one who exists”.

When Jesus said “egō amy” (ἐγὼ εἰμί), the Jews picked up stones to stone Him (John 8:59), for having claimed that He was God. (See John 10:33, where they give precisely this explanation.)

In spite of the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ translators *correctly* translate “egō amy” (ἐγὼ εἰμί), with the words “I am” in their interlinear text, in the version of the Bible that they publish – which is the only version that they recommend be used⁹ – they change it in John 8:58 only to “I have been”, thus hiding the direct quotation from Exodus 3:14.

⁷ Readers without a knowledge of Koiné Greek are referred to “A New English Translation of the Septuagint” 2007, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 271, 284.

⁸ Translation by the author of this article

⁹ “New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures”, © 1961 by Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society of Pennsylvania, published by Watchtower Bible And Tract Society of New York, Inc., Brooklyn.

2. A Rule of Greek Grammar?

The Jehovah's Witnesses give five reasons to seek to justify their version of John 8:58. This is their first reason.

In their interlinear version, the translators of the "New World Translation" give a footnote to justify this change: "I have been = ἐγὼ εἰμί after the a'orist infinitive clause πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι and hence properly rendered in the perfect tense."

It is appropriate to make two comments concerning this explanation:

1. This supposed "rule" of Greek grammar does not exist.
2. The explanation contains two components that make it incomprehensible to the vast majority of readers of the Bible:
 - i) quotations in the middle of the sentence from the Greek, which virtually no readers will be able to read
 - ii) the use of incomprehensible linguistic terminology.

As a professional linguist (with a doctorate in Linguistics), I have no difficulty understanding the terminology used. But in a whole professional lifetime dedicated to teaching foreign languages both to young people and to adults and to training and inspecting language teachers, I have never used so much dense terminology as that which is seen here. And this explanation printed by the Jehovah's Witnesses was not written for an audience of professional linguists, but for the ordinary, non-academic lay people who read or refer to its version of the Bible and who do not have a Ph.D. in linguistics.

The Watchtower Society has a complete programme of continuous training of its members, and it is difficult to imagine that they would not know how to communicate well, even if it is necessary to explain ideas that many people might have difficulty grasping. Thus the question arises, "Why have they used terminology that is so difficult to understand?"

It is obvious that in virtually all cases the reader will feel insecure and inferior to those who had written this "explanation", because he or she would not understand it. But at the same time such a reader will suppose that there must be a good reason which he or she – through his or her own fault, lacking the necessary studies – has been unable to understand.

This is a technique frequently used by the Jehovah's Witnesses: deliberately writing abstruse "explanations" that are intended to be incomprehensible to the target audience. This is nothing less than *intellectual intimidation*. Unfortunately, this conclusion is unavoidable. But the "explanation" will fulfil its purpose: that of persuading the Jehovah's Witness reader or the person that they are seeking to convert, without being understood by him or her.

The Jehovah's Witnesses abandon this "rule"

This 1969 edition of the "Kingdom Interlinear Text" continues to be in widespread use among Jehovah's Witnesses, who therefore quote this made-up "rule" when challenged on the NWT's incorrect translation on John 8:58. However, the "rule" is so patently indefensible that sixteen years later the Watchtower organisation finally accepted that it was unsustainable and they therefore abandoned it. This created the need for them to produce a new argument to justify their mistranslation of John 8:58, and in the rarely-seen 1985 edition of the "Kingdom Interlinear Text" they introduced a different "rule", newly invented by them. Here is what it says:

"58* I have been (ἐγὼ εἰμί, *eg-o' ei-mi'*). The action expressed by this verb began in the past, is still in progress, and is properly translated by the perfect indicative." ("Kingdom Interlinear Translation", 2nd edition, 1985, Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., p 451)

This new "rule" clearly goes against all normal usage in any language. Let us look at an example. Suppose I have started making a doll's house for my daughter but have not yet finished it. In this case, I might say, "I am making a doll's house for my daughter" – using the present tense of the verb: "I am making".

The new "rule" invented by the Jehovah's Witnesses to justify their mistranslation of John 8:58 states, "The action expressed by this verb began in the past, is still in progress, and is properly translated by the perfect indicative." But to apply this new "rule" is clearly nonsense. If I apply this new "rule", I will have to describe my on-going work on this doll's house by saying, "I have made a doll's house for my daughter", which is the perfect indicative tense that they say is correct in such cases.

But that would definitely not be correct! Not only would it be inaccurate; it would be misleading and imply that I had finished making the doll's house before speaking and that the activity had taken place in the past and had ended: the doll's house was finished.

In other words, if the action "is still in progress" it is definitely not "properly translated by the perfect indicative"!

Again, we also note the writers' use of grammatical terminology to confuse and intimidate their readers and anyone who may be told this "rule". Their phrase "the perfect indicative" refers not only to the tense of the verb but also to the far-less-widely understood "mood" of the verb. It uses language and concepts that are not part of normal everyday speech and are highly unlikely to be understood by the reader or hearer.

Once again, this use of technical language is designed to overawe readers and hearers and make them assume that the rule must be right, but that they themselves are at fault for not comprehending it. It implies that the writers of the explanation have some sort of superior knowledge that means that they must be right, even if the reader does not understand them.

This footnote in the revised edition of the Kingdom Interlinear Text finishes with the words, "See App 2F." This implies that there is further support for their argument

elsewhere. If we search out that further “explanation”, we will find at the end of the book on pages 1145 and 1146 (!) and there we will discover that it merely lists translations into English of mistranslations of the verse into various other languages, each of which is commented on in greater detail later in this article. It then repeats its quotation from a 19th-century writer before concluding “See App. 2A, 2E.” Again, the implication is that there is further support for their argument elsewhere.

No doubt few users of the “Kingdom Interlinear Translation” will have found “App. 2F” on pages 1145 and 1146. Fewer still are likely to pursue the search in order to find “App. 2A, 2E.” (which are to be found on pages 1139-1140 and pages 1143-1144, respectively). They are likely to give up and assume that the point has been proved, although they don’t have the time to research it further or the appetite to struggle through further incomprehensible arguments.

The determined researcher who perseveres in searching out this series of appendices and reading them is rewarded, again, with lists of references from little-known translations and commentaries written by self-taught amateurs such as Benjamin Wilson (1864, New York) and unknown writers from Germany. In the latter cases, only translations made by the Jehovah’s Witness of their comments are given, not their original text, and bibliographical information is incomplete, making tracking down of the original articles difficult at best and probably impossible in most cases.

In their endeavours to try to find support for their mistranslations of other Biblical passages, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have even had to go back to private translations from the 18th century (for instance, Cornelius Nary in 1719 or Daniel Mace in 1729. See p. 1143).

But this is not the most extraordinary argument that the Jehovah’s Witnesses have to offer. They justify their “New World Translation” by quoting from – wait for it! – their “New World Translation”! (see pages 1139 and 1143) This is absolutely the ultimate in circular arguments. Effectively, they are saying, “Our translation is right because our translation says it”! Nothing could show more clearly the lack of support for their deliberately distorted text.

The fact of the matter is that in John 8:58 Jesus did not say “I have been”, which would be (ἐγὼ) ἦμην [(egō) ēmēn], as used by him on other occasions (see for instance John. 16:4). In the passage under consideration, John 8:58, he said “I am” (ἐγὼ εἰμί [egō eimi]), which is what we find in this verse in every ancient Greek manuscript of the New Testament. All the bluster and tricks of the writers of the “Kingdom Interlinear Translation” cannot change this fact.

3. Words not used by God?

Given the blanket rejection by scholars in many countries of their initial reason and their revised “rule”, the Watchtower Society now puts forward other, new reasons. Their second reason is:

“Egō amy” (ἐγὼ εἰμί) was used by human beings. The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that this shows that Jesus Christ was nothing more than a man.

It is indeed true that “egō amy” (ἐγὼ εἰμί) was used by men (see, for example, Acts 10:21). But the conclusion given (“that Jesus was therefore nothing more than a man”) does not follow from this, for two reasons:

1. To speak with humanity, God has to limit Himself to human speech. If He did not do this, we would not understand Him!
2. If this argument given by the Jehovah’s Witnesses were valid, it would also be necessary to apply it to Exodus 3:14 and the many other passages in the Old Testament where “the almighty God” (a key phrase used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses) says “I am” – which would of course mean that the “almighty God” is nothing more than a man! *It is not possible for them to apply this argument only where it suits them, and then to hope that the reader or listener will forget it when studying another passage in the Bible.*

4. Fact-checking the Jehovah's Witness Claims

So the Jehovah's Witnesses have at different times presented two *different* supposed grammatical "rules" that they claim justify translating the Greek present tense ἐγὼ εἰμί ([“egō amy”], “I am”) by the English past tense “I have been.”

Even they have abandoned the first of these arguments, as shown above, and their second “rule” has been demonstrated to go against reality.

Let us return to the Greek text of the Bible.

Is there any other place in the New Testament where anyone translates the present tense Greek ἐγὼ εἰμί ([“egō amy”], “I am”) by the English past tense “I have been”? The answer is “no”. Not a single case. Not even in the Jehovah's Witness version of the Bible.

Wallace¹⁰ points out that if it were necessary to translate this example of ἐγὼ εἰμί ([“egō amy”], “I am”) in John 8:58 into the past tense in English, “it is apparently the only historical present in the NT that uses the equative verb εἰμί.”¹¹

So we see that the Jehovah's Witness claim is false.

Another Bible verse with the same structure

Interestingly, another Bible verse has the same structure and almost the same words as Jesus' statement in John 8:58. How do the Jehovah's Witnesses translate that verse?

It is Psalm 90 verse 2. In the ancient translation known as the Septuagint it reads as follows in the Koiné Greek:

πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη γενηθῆναι καὶ πλασθῆναι τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν οἰκουμένην καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος σὺ εἶ¹²

[pro tou orē genēthēnai kai plasthēnai tēn gēn kai tēn oikoumenēn kai apo tou aiōnos heōs tou aiōnos su ei]

Literal translation:

Before the mountains existed and the earth and the inhabited world were formed, both from eternity and until eternity you are.” That “you” refers to God.

The New Revised Standard Version¹³ translates this as:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

This verse has two parts:

- Before (a series of events),
- you are.

¹⁰ Wallace, Daniel B, “Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics”, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996

¹¹ p. 530, emphasis added

¹² In the Septuagint it is numbered as Psalm 89:2.

¹³ NRSV - New Revised Standard Version Bible. Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The translation of John 8:58

John 8:58 has two parts:

- Before (one event),
- I am.

In the following table we look at the two key phrases of Psalm 90:2 and John 8:58, side by side. It will become obvious that:

- the structure is the same in both verses and indeed
- the same two verbs are used in both verses.

	Psalm 90:2	John 8:58
Text	πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη γενηθῆναι ... σὺ εἶ	πρὶν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί.
Meaning	“Before the mountains existed ... you are.”	“Before Abraham existed I am”
First verb	γενηθῆναι [genēthēnai] is the infinitive aorist passive form of the verb γίνομαι, [ginomai, “to exist”].	γενέσθαι [genesthai] is the infinitive aorist middle form of the verb γίνομαι [ginomai, “to exist”].
We can see that the same verb, γίνομαι [ginomai, “to exist”], is used in the first phrase of both verses. In both cases, the verb is in the infinitive, as required by the grammatical context. There is in this context no significant difference of meaning between the infinitive aorist passive and the infinitive aorist middle forms of the verb.		
Second verb	... σὺ εἶ	ἐγὼ εἰμί.
	“You are”	“I am”
	εἶ [ei] is the indicative present active 2nd person singular form of the verb εἶμι [amy, “to be”].	εἰμί [amy] is of course the indicative present active 1st person singular form of the verb εἶμι [amy, “to be”].

So in both verses we have:

- an infinitive aorist form of the verb γίνομαι [ginomai], “to exist”
- followed by an active present tense singular form of the verb εἶμι, [amy], “to be”.

If the claims made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses are right, and ***if*** they are consistent in their version of the Bible, ***then*** in Psalm 90:2 ***they will have had to change the second verb to the past tense.*** According to the “rules” stated by them, their version will ***need*** to say “before the mountains existed, ***you have been***”, just as in John 8:58, where they write, “before Abraham came into existence, ***I have been***”.

Is that what they write in Psalm 90:2? Not at all! Here is what they have put in their 2013 revision of their version of the Bible: “Before the mountains were born Or you brought forth the earth and the productive land, From everlasting to everlasting, ***you are*** God.”

We note that not only do the Jehovah’s Witnesses use the ***present tense*** of the verb “to be”, they even add the word “God”.

Why this inconsistency in their version of these two nearly identical phrases?

Clearly, in the case of Psalm 90, their doctrines do not oblige them to ***change the tense of the verb.*** In contrast to this, in John 8:58, ***their doctrines do oblige them to change the tense of the verb.*** Their perversion of the text in John 8:58 has nothing to do with the Greek text nor with their supposed “rules” of Greek grammar, ***which they themselves***

*ignore in Psalm 90. **Their version of John 8:58 is entirely driven by their doctrines, which lead them to make a conscious mis-translation of the original text of the verse.** We know that this is not an error by their translators, as for decades they have added misleading commentaries on this verse, to try to justify their mistranslation of it.*

The facts are clear: the Jehovah’s Witness version of John 8:58 goes against both the Greek text, and the way that the Jehovah’s Witnesses themselves translate the same structure elsewhere in the Bible.

We recognise that Psalm 90 was originally written in Hebrew, but the Greek Septuagint translation of it was made at least two centuries before the time of Christ and (as indicated elsewhere in this article) at the time of Christ most Jews were more familiar with the Greek text than with the Hebrew original.

Indeed, it is likely that both Jesus and the Jews who heard him on that occasion had the Greek text of Psalm 90:2 in mind when he said, “Before Abraham existed, I am.”

Psalm 90:2 is part of a prayer to God. In John 8:58 we see the reply from Jesus. He was clearly claiming to be God. No wonder the Jews sought to kill him for blasphemy! (See their words recorded shortly thereafter, in John 10:33.¹⁴)

Here again for ease of comparison are the key phrases of these two verses:

	1 st phrase	2 nd phrase	Implied by context
Psalm 90:2	Before the mountains existed	You are	[God]
John 8:58	Before Abraham existed	I am	[God]

¹⁴ ἄνθρωπος ὧν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν θεόν [anthrōpos ōn poieis seauton theon, “Being a man, you make yourself God”]

5. Other Translations

The third reason given by the Jehovah's Witnesses consists in seeking support from other translations that have translated "egō amy" (ἐγὼ εἶμι) by a verb in some past tense.¹⁵

There are various problems with this argument.

1. The New Testament, or part of it, has been translated into more than two thousand four hundred languages¹⁶. In the main languages there are various or even many different translations. In total there are probably about 3,000 translations of the gospels.

The headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses in New York state has for decades had a team of members of its organisation who work full time researching and writing articles to defend and justify their doctrines and the version of the Bible made by some members of their organisation.

To support their erroneous version of John 8:58 in all these decades of research they have found a mere **5** translations. *Statistically*, this is insignificant: it is one sixth of one per cent (0.16667%) of the translations that have been made.

2. Moreover, if the existence of these five translations is valid and relevant evidence to justify the version made by the Jehovah's Witnesses, the overwhelming majority of translations that *do not* support their version (the other 99.83%, according to the calculation made above) are also valid and relevant evidence.
3. What is more, *linguistically*, the translations referred to by the Jehovah's Witnesses are of little significance. The earlier a manuscript is, the closer it is, chronologically, to the original text, but all the texts referred to by them are late, i.e., produced *centuries* after the original New Testament manuscripts. They are translations made in the fifth and sixth centuries into Georgian and into Ethiopic and three manuscripts of translations into Syriac. It is also not known with certainty from which manuscripts or from which language these translations were derived. Let us look at each of them.

Georgian The earliest manuscripts for the Georgian translation are quite late, going back only to the eighth century. According to experts in the analysis of these manuscripts, it would appear that the Georgian translation may have been based on a Syriac translation.¹⁷ Thus this translation merely repeats a mistranslation in the Syriac.

¹⁵ The article referred to was given to me by the Jehovah's Witnesses in May 2011. It was written in Spanish, presumably translating an English original.

¹⁶ Wikipedia: up to 2005. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translations_of_the_Bible (data retrieved 23.5.2011.) – quoting SIL, one of the main authorities in the world on Bible translations (the other one being the Bible Societies).

¹⁷ Dr Philip W Comfort, "Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism", 2005, Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, p. 95.

The translation of John 8:58

Ethiopic The earliest extant Ethiopic manuscripts are extremely late, dating from the 13th century and according to manuscript expert Dr P Comfort “these manuscripts seem to rest rather heavily on the Coptic and the Arabic.”¹⁸ Thus, the translators may not even have seen a manuscript of the New Testament in the original Greek, which makes this translation irrelevant in determining the correct translation of the Greek.

Syriac The Jehovah’s Witnesses refer to various Syriac manuscripts. What they call “Curetonian Syriac” is in fact a Syriac manuscript of the four gospels, published in London in 1858 by the English academic William Cureton. The manuscript had been bought from a Syriac monastery in Egypt in 1842 and taken to England. *The most notable feature of this manuscript is its differences from all the known Greek manuscripts of the gospels.* It is significantly later than many Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and is from the fifth century. Dr Comfort says, “it is a revision” of an earlier Syriac manuscript.¹⁹

Peshitta Syriac According to one expert in the Peshitta text, “We have no full and clear knowledge of the circumstances under which the Peshitta was produced and came into circulation. ... almost every assertion regarding the authorship of the Peshitta, and the time and place of its origin, is subject to question.”²⁰ The majority view of experts is that the Peshitta New Testament was translated in the 5th century, since “It combines ... some of the more complex ‘Byzantine’ readings of the 5th century.”²¹

So the date of the Syriac translations undermines their authority. The circumstances in which these translations were produced and the identity of the translators are unclear. But what is their quality? The next chapter summarizes the conclusions of the principal experts in the Greek text of the New Testament who are also experts in the translations into Syriac.

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁹ Op. cit., pp. 91-92.

²⁰ Retrieved from Wikipedia article on “Peshitta”, 17.1.13.

²¹ Same article as previous reference.

6. Are the Syriac Translations of the Bible Reliable?

Should the Syriac texts be considered authoritative? The Syriac Bible is characterised by its departures from the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Are the variant renderings in the Syriac, which change the meaning of the original texts, important enough to overthrow the thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament in the original Greek?

Let us look at the conclusions of some of the principal acknowledged experts in Syriac and other Biblical texts.

Brock

Sebastian Brock taught at the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge and Oxford, where he was Reader in Syriac Studies from 1974 until his retirement in 2003. He has published extensively in the field of Syrian and has edited a number of new texts.

In his book “The Bible in the Syriac Tradition”²², Brock gives multiple examples of changes in the various Syriac translations to the meaning of the Biblical texts.

Brock describes the Curetonian Old Syriac translation is “much more free” [than the revised Peshitta text] (p. 33).

He also refers to multiple examples of cases where the Peshitta Syriac text departs from the text of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. See, for example, p. 101. These departures change radically the meaning of the original text, and Brock says, “In the Peshitta New Testament the translators have introduced the idea” of their understanding of the Incarnation “at two places in the Letter to the Hebrews” (p. 101). On the same page he writes, “All these terms are based *on some distinctive feature to be found only in the Syriac Bible.*” (emphasis added)

Concerning the Peshitta Old Testament, he says that the translators have made “some unusual interpretative renderings” (p. 24). Elsewhere (p. 26) he says that “the Peshitta translation has *a great many distinctive renderings*” – i.e., wording that departs from the correct meaning of the original text. Some other changes made to the original text are given on pp. 35-36, as well as elsewhere in “The Bible in the Syriac Tradition”.

He also states that changes in the Peshitta New Testament even went as far as changing place names in some cases (p. 110).²³

²² Brock, Sebastian, “The Bible in the Syriac Tradition” Gorgias Handbooks Volume 7, 2nd Revised Edition, 2006: Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press

²³ We also note that, like the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament (which was made over a period of years approximately 250 years before the time of Christ), the Peshitta Bible does not use the name Yahweh nor any other form of this name. The Septuagint uses the Greek *Kyrios*, which means “Lord”. The Peshitta uses *Marya*, which has the same meaning. (Brock, op. cit., p. 76). If the Watchtower Society considers the Peshitta text to be such an authority, why does it omit all reference to the Peshitta text when trying to justify the Watchtower Society use of the corrupted form “Jehovah” in its own “New World Translation”?

Metzger

Bruce M Metzger was Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was an expert in ancient Biblical manuscripts, participated in three major Bible translation projects, was chairman of the NRSV translation committee and was the author or editor of more than thirty books on the Bible and Biblical manuscripts.

His “A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament”²⁴ was produced on behalf of and in cooperation with the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)²⁵. It reports the reasons for the Committee’s decisions on textual variants after consulting all available Greek manuscripts on the New Testament, as well as early translations into some other languages, including Latin and Syriac. All of the members of the Committee were experts in the ancient Biblical texts.

Concerning the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript rendering of Matthew 1:16²⁶, Metzger summarises the conclusion of the committee with the words, “*There is no evidence that [this] reading ... ever existed in a Greek manuscript.*” (p. 6, emphasis added)

In Luke 22:17-20, the committee observed that the Curetonian Syriac added to the text by inserting “the wording of 1 Cor 11.24 added to ver. 19a” (p. 148), that the Sinaitic Syriac “still further expanded [the text], chiefly by the insertion of [various additional phrases]” (p. 148), while “the Peshitta Syriac lacks ... verses 17 and 18” (p. 148). Thus, errors are observed at this point in all three Syriac manuscripts, two of which add extra text and one of which misses out some verses.

A few further examples will suffice. In Luke 23.43, the Curetonian Syriac changes ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ (“en tō paradeisō” – “in paradise”) to “in the Garden of Eden” (p. 155).

In Luke 24:32, which in “in the overwhelming preponderance of witnesses” (i.e., the Greek manuscripts and other ancient translations) reads, “Were not our hearts burning within us?”, “The Old Syriac (Sinaitic and Curetonian) manuscripts and the Peshitta version read ‘Was not our heart *heavy* ...?’ ” (p. 159, emphasis in Metzger’s text). This is a clear error or deliberate mistranslation that is found in all the ancient Syriac translations.

Other references by this book to the Syriac texts speak of a misunderstanding of the Greek by the Peshitta translator (in Acts 1:4, cf. p. 241) and an error by the Peshitta translator (in Acts 3:12, p. 269). In Acts 4:27 the Peshitta renders the Greek “people of Israel” as “synagogue (or, assembly ...) of Israel.” (p. 281) In Acts 17:28 it replaces the word “poets” with the reading “ ‘sages’ or ‘wise men’ . ” (p. 406)

²⁴ Second Edition, 1994: Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft / United Bible Societies

²⁵ 1993: Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft. The Committee consisted of eminent scholars who were/are experts in the Greek text of the New Testament from a range of countries and representing the main Christian groupings throughout the world: Kurt Aland (German Lutheran), Matthew Black (Scottish academic and minister), Carlo M. Martini (Italian Roman Catholic, Rector of the Pontifical Bible Institute, Rome), Bruce M Metzger (American Presbyterian), Allen Wikgren (North American academic who worked on the preparation of the Nestle-Aland 26 and UBS3 editions of the Greek New Testament), Ioannes Karavidopoulos (Greek Orthodox) and Barbara Aland (German Lutheran).

²⁶ Metzger, op. cit., pp 2-6

The translation of John 8:58

Significantly, the Committee didn't even take into consideration the Old Syriac (Sinaitic and Curetonian) and Peshitta translations of John 8:58, since the Greek manuscript evidence for this verse is so solid – no variants at all from ἐγὼ εἰμί (“egō amy”) are to be found. The Syriac departure from the Greek text is thus irrelevant to the determining of the original text.

The Nestle-Aland text of the Greek New Testament

The Nestle-Aland text of the Greek New Testament is based on over a century of research by the world's leading scholars in the text of the New Testament.

Commenting on the “early versions” of the New Testament in Syriac, Latin and Coptic, the editors of the 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland text of the Greek New Testament state, “their value for scholarship today in comparison with earlier generations has been modified by the great number of Greek manuscripts on papyrus and parchment discovered in the twentieth century.”²⁷ In other words, it is neither wise nor necessary to base conclusions concerning the original Greek text of the New Testament on the Syriac, Latin and Coptic translations.

Conclusion

It is thus clear that appeals to the Old Syriac translations (Sinaitic or Curetonian) or to the Peshitta Syriac to support a departure from the Greek text of the New Testament cannot be justified.

As has been amply demonstrated above, the Syriac translations show misunderstandings or mistranslations of the Greek original in many places. The Syriac handling of John 8:58 that is quoted by the Jehovah's Witnesses is a case in point.

Thus, it is most probable that these translations were made from other translations. It would appear that here we have at most three independent translations that seem to support the “New World Translation” of the phrase “I am” – just three, in the whole world, in the course of twenty centuries.

Worse still, we are here dealing with translations not manuscripts reproducing the original Greek text. Dr Philip W Comfort states, “ancient translators, as well as modern, took liberties in the interest of style when they rendered the Greek text. Therefore, the witness of the various ancient versions is significant only when it pertains to significant verbal omissions and/or additions, as well as significant semantic differences. The citation of such versions for these kinds of variant readings ... can be quite misleading.”²⁸

Given that we have easy and direct access to reliable manuscripts in the original Koiné Greek, the fact that – after decades of research – the Jehovah's Witness organization has to fall back on the texts referred to above merely highlights the lack of serious support for their translation of John 8:58.

²⁷ “Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece”, 28th Revised Edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013, p. 23*

²⁸ Op. cit., p. 91.

But there is a further powerful reason that undermines the JW claim that the Syriac translation is authoritative:

The Jehovah's Witnesses reject other parts of the Syriac translations!

Let us look in further detail at the mistranslation in the Syriac rendering of Matthew 1:16, which in the Greek original says "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born." In the Greek, "by whom" is in the feminine, showing that Jesus was not the son of Joseph, but on the contrary, only of Mary. The Syriac gets this wrong, saying, "Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the virgin, begot Jesus".²⁹

Consulting the New World Translation of Matthew 1:16, we see that it (correctly) rejects the Syriac translation of this verse as inaccurate. This seriously undermines the acceptance by the Jehovah's Witnesses of the Syriac mistranslation of John 8:58, which acceptance is clearly motivated by the Jehovah's Witnesses' desire to find support for their own mistranslation of ἐγὼ εἶμι ("egō amy"), even when they have to resort to unreliable sources in order to find such support.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also misuse other translations

1. The same translations to which the Watchtower Society appeals as authoritative are rejected by them for other passages, where they do not support the Jehovah's Witness translation. We have seen this above in the case of the Syriac. But many more examples could be quoted. Thus, for example, in the same article, although in this case with reference to Titus 2:13, they quote from the English translator J B Phillips³⁰ to support their translation of that verse. But when they present, also in the same article the (very few) translations that seem to support their translation of John 1:1, they do not quote from J B Phillips. If we consult the translation of that verse made by J B Phillips, we immediately see why the authors of this article do not quote it: it does not support the "New World Translation". It would be better if the researchers of the Watchtower Society decided whether a translation is authoritative or not, instead of accepting it in one place and rejecting it in another, as it suits them in each case.
2. We may also be surprised to discover that the article referred to above lists among other authorities to justify their translation (in this case of John 1:1) the "Traducción del Nuevo Mundo de las Escrituras Griegas Cristianas", Brooklyn, 1973 ("The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures", Brooklyn, 1973). This is nothing less than the translation into Spanish of their own translation into English. This is the most extreme of circular arguments. It is the equivalent of saying, "this translation is correct because we ourselves also translated it that way into other languages."
3. What is more, this translation into Spanish has not been made from the original languages but from the English translation made by the same organisation. Thus it brings no independent or additional support to their text, nor does it benefit from the knowledge of Spanish-speaking experts familiar with the original languages. (In

²⁹ Quoted by Daniel B Wallace, "Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics", 1996, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, p. 336 fn 57. Wallace also refers to Metzger, "Textual Commentary" pp 2-7 on this.

³⁰ "The New Testament in Modern English", 1972 edition.

The translation of John 8:58

passing, it is worth also pointing out that the translations into French, German and other languages published by the Watchtower Society are also nothing other than translations from the same English version, not from the original languages.)

Some books from antiquity have only survived in translation. Some have survived with portions of the text so damaged or fragmented that we need to consult a translation of that period to try to determine what the original text said. But that is not the case with John 8:58, nor indeed with any of John's gospel – nor indeed with any part of the New Testament! There can therefore be no justification for appealing to a translation (no matter how old) as authority for deviating in a modern version of the Bible from the clear meaning of the Greek text when we have the undisputed Greek text before us.

7. Inconsistencies in the “New World Translation”

The Jehovah’s Witness appeal to other translations for support, but such translations offer no support to their aberrant translation of John 8:58. Even more significantly, their own “New World Translation” reveals inconsistencies and even contradicts their arguments.

1. There is a lack of consistency in the translation of the phrase “eggo amy” in the “New World” translation. On seven previous occasions in the same eighth chapter of John’s gospel (and in many other parts of the New Testament), the translators of the “New World Translation” correctly translate ἐγὼ εἰμί (“egō amy”) by “I am”. Only in verse 58 do they translate it incorrectly. One must ask oneself why there is this lack of consistency, even within one chapter.
2. Jesus refers to the same incident in Exodus – the call of Moses at the burning bush – in Mark 12:26, where He quotes from Exodus 3:6 (where ἐγὼ εἰμί is used in the Septuagint Greek translation), and the New World Translation renders this quotation as follows: “God said to him, ‘**I am** the God of Abraham and God of Isaac and God of Jacob’.” So in their own translation of Mark’s gospel they themselves render the ἐγὼ εἰμί in Exodus 3 with the words “I am”. The same incident is reported in Matthew 22:32, and again the New World Translation translates this with the words “**I am** the God of Abraham ...” They also give “I am” in Acts 7:32, which quotes from the same verse in Exodus.

But when Jesus refers in John 8:58 to the same incident in Exodus 3, the “New World Translation” on this occasion only translates ἐγὼ εἰμί with the words “I have been”, to hide the obvious quotation and the clear claim by Christ that He is divine – as indeed was understood by His hearers, whose commentary on His statement can be seen in John 10:33. Twice they translate Jesus’ quotation from Exodus 3 with the words “**I am**”, and once (only in John 8:58) they “translate” it “**I have been**”, which is of course totally inconsistent as well as not being an honest or correct translation of the original Greek – but if they had translated it accurately it would have been clear that the Jehovah’s Witness doctrine concerning Christ is contradicted by Christ Himself.

8. Other Bible Verses

Next, the Jehovah's Witnesses give a fourth reason to justify their version of John 8:58. This consists of references to some Bible verses where it is possible to translate a verb that is in the present in Greek into a past tense in Spanish³¹. Again, one observes a weight of linguistic terminology that will not form part of the daily vocabulary of the majority of readers (nevertheless, it will serve the purpose of impressing the reader): "In such a situation, εἰμί, which is the present indicative of the first person singular, is correctly translated by the preterite perfect of the indicative."³²

There are various problems with this argument:

1. There is no such thing as a "preterite perfect tense" in Spanish (nor in English, nor in Greek). There is a preterite (or simple past) tense, for instance, "I was", and there is a perfect tense, for example "I have been"; but the term "preterite perfect" does not correspond to any verb tense nor to any normal usage of linguistic terminology for any of the languages referred to by the Jehovah's Witnesses in their article.
2. The leading Koiné Greek scholar Daniel B Wallace writes:

"The fact that the present tense follows an aorist *infinitive* has nothing to do with how it should be rendered."³³

3. The explanation continues with the words "Examples of the same syntax are found in Lu³⁴ 2:48, 13:7, 15:29, Jn 5:6, 14:19, 15:27"³⁵ and three other verses.³⁶

In the first example given, I have not been able to determine to which verb they are seeking to refer.

In the second example given (Luke 13:7), we read in the Greek:

εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τὸν ἀμπελουργόν· ἰδοὺ τρία ἔτη ἀφ' οὗ ἔρχομαι ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν τῇ συκῇ ταύτῃ καὶ οὐχ εὕρισκω.

A very literal translation would be: "So he said to the man tending the vineyard, 'Behold since three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I don't find any'."

This is an example of a structure and a concept that makes a reference to a fixed point in the past when an action that is still taking place began. (The other examples given are also of this structure and concept.) In Greek, as in some other languages (for

³¹ In the Spanish-language article that they gave me, which is apparently translated or adapted from an English original.

³² "En tal situación, εἰμί, que es el presente de indicativo de la primera persona del singular, se traduce correctamente por el pretérito perfecto del indicativo."

³³ Op. cit. p. 530.

³⁴ Uncommon abbreviation of "Luke", apparently invented by the Watchtower. Likewise, "Jn" must be "John". Such abbreviations make following the text and looking up Biblical references harder for many readers.

³⁵ "Ejemplos de la misma sintaxis se hallan en Lu 2:48, 13:7; 15:29; Jn 5:6; 14:9; 15:27"

³⁶ "Ac 15:21; 2 Cor 12:19; 1 Jn 3:8."

example, French), the present tense of the verb (“come” and “find” for this passage) is used for this idea, as the action is still taking place in the present.

It is true that in some other languages (for example, English) it would be possible, or perhaps in some cases preferable, to translate these verbs that are in the present tense in Greek by verbs in the past, although this is not essential.

In Spanish (the language in which the article is written) this is not necessary. It would be perfectly normal to translate these verbs by a present tense, exactly as in the original Greek. In fact, the 1995 revision of the Reina-Valera translation does precisely this.³⁷

Thus it is not the case that it is necessary to translate these verbs that occur in the present tense in Greek by verbs in the past in other languages.

4. Contrary to their claim, none of the examples given has “the same syntax” (grammatical structure) as John 8:58.
5. None of the verbs in the other verses that they give is “(egō) amy” ((ἐγὼ) εἰμί). There is a reason for this: nowhere else in the New Testament does “(egō) amy” ((ἐγὼ) εἰμί) have a past meaning.³⁸ If that had not been the case, we can be sure that the Jehovah’s Witnesses would have found it and quoted it!
6. In Greek there is a past tense form of the verb to be – ἦμην³⁹. This is the form which Christ would have had to use in John 8:58 if he had wanted to give a past meaning. This word occurs many times in the New Testament, even used by Christ Himself (although, significantly, not in John 8:58!). See, for example, Matthew 25:35, Matthew 25:36, Matthew 25:43, Mark 14:49.⁴⁰

It is also particularly significant that this past form of the verb also occurs repeatedly in the words of Christ in the very same gospel of John: John 11:15, John 16:4 and John 17:12. But Christ chose not to use the past of the verb in the occasion described in John 8:58. The fact that in this very case he chose precisely the present of the verb highlights even further what He was saying: “Before Abraham was, I AM”. It is not surprising that the Jews picked up stones to stone Him. Contrary to the claims made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christ was here not using a structure that required the present to communicate the past. This is not a personal opinion; it is the fact of the Greek structure.

7. If Christ had wanted to say what the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that this means – namely, that He was created before Abraham, as Bowman says⁴¹, he could easily have

³⁷ : “Ya hace tres años que vengo a buscar fruto en esta higuera y no lo hallo.”

³⁸ Dr Wallace states, “If this is a historical present, it is apparently the only historical present in the NT that uses the equative verb εἰμί.” (op. cit., p. 530)

³⁹ This is the 1st person singular – I was. It also occurs in the 3rd person singular – ἦν – (he) was (as well as in other forms, such as the plural (we were), etc). This tense also occurs repeatedly in the same book, the gospel of John, starting with the very first verse of the first chapter.

⁴⁰ It also occurs elsewhere in the New Testament, for example, in 1 Corinthians 13:11.

⁴¹ Robert M Bowman Jr, “Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of John”, Baker Book House 1989, pp. 114-116.

The translation of John 8:58

said: πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγώ; ἐγενόμην (“prin Abraam genesthai, egō egenomēn”), that is to say, “Before Abraham came into being (or “was created”) I came into being (or “I was created”)”. If he had said this, the Jews would have presumably considered that they had further grounds to call him mad. But they would not have tried to stone him for being mad. That was not how they treated mad people. The fact is that this is not what He said. They tried to stone him for claiming that He was God (John 10:33).

9. Quotations from Experts

Finally, the Jehovah's Witnesses give a fifth "reason", to justify their version of John 8:58. This consists of quoting from various books of Greek grammar written by foreign authors (i.e., authors who are not Greek native speakers), to support their translation.

There are four problems with this reason:

1. Some of these "experts" are unknown, do not have any recognised academic standing, or wrote in the 19th century, before the great discoveries of the beginning of the 20th century (especially of engravings and papyri) and following the Second World War (of manuscripts). These discoveries increased our knowledge of Koiné Greek enormously and improved our understanding of the original texts.

For example, in their article on their translation of John 8:58, the authors quote a book on Greek grammar by someone they refer to as "G B Winer". Johann Georg Benedikt Winer was a lecturer in theology at Leipzig University, Germany principally in the first half of the 19th century. (He died in 1858.⁴²) His "Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Sprachidioms" ("Grammar of the New Testament Speaking Idiom") departed from categories of previous grammars of Greek, and Winer self-published his book in the original German between 1822 and 1855. There were two subsequent editions in German and probably two English versions of his book, one of which (that of 1897) is quoted from by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Even though, nearly two hundred years ago, Winer's book marked an improvement on previous Greek grammars that sought to describe the language in terms of Latin, these days, it is most unusual in academic circles (for instance in university departments of Biblical languages) to quote from Winer as an authority on Koiné Greek.

White states⁴³ "Winer himself, being an anti-Trinitarian, admitted it was not grammatical grounds that led him to reject the correct rendering of Titus 2:13 but theological ones." It is reasonable to assume that Winer would have applied the same principles to his interpretation of other passages in the New Testament, including John 8:58. It may be that in an anti-Trinitarian the Jehovah's Witnesses found someone whose ideas they could easily use. However, since their quotations of experts often do not accurately reflect the source material, it is impossible to be confident in the reliability of their claims. Moreover, since they do not give any bibliographical information on the source of their quotation, it is impossible to check exactly what Winer said.

2. It would be very easy to quote from other authors who say exactly the opposite of what Winer appears to have said. For example, the main authority on Koiné Greek accepted today is the third English edition of the lexicon by Walter Bauer, revised and

⁴² Porter, Stanley: "Constantine Tischendorf", London: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 14-15

⁴³ White, James R, "The King James Only Controversy", 2nd edition, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2009, p. 339

The translation of John 8:58

edited by Frederick William Danker.⁴⁴ This translates πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί as “before Abraham was born, I am” (p. 283, left-hand column).

3. The Watchtower Society does not present a balanced argument or report: it quotes from those who are (or appear to be) in agreement with their translation, but misses out the vast majority of the experts, who do not agree with them.
4. The quotations given are very selective, such that sometimes the scholars quoted appear to support the argument being made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, when in reality they do they exact opposite.

Thus, for example, in the Appendix of the first English edition of the “New World Translation”, and in the Appendix of their interlinear text (“The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures”)⁴⁵ they quote from the book “A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament” by Dana and Mantey⁴⁶ to justify their addition of the word “a” in their translation of John 1:1 (“the Word was with God and the Word was a god”, according to their translation). They quote some phrases from page 148 of Dana and Mantey’s book. The phrases quoted seem to support their translation. But they cut the quotation off precisely *before* the conclusion given by Dana and Mantey: “As it stands, the other persons of the Trinity may be implied in θεός.” (p.149)

In other words, Dana and Mantey say that the use of the word θεός with reference to Christ can indicate that He is God, whereas on reading the incomplete quotation given in the Watchtower document, one would think that they were saying the opposite of this! This lack of accuracy and of academic honesty only damages the Jehovah’s Witnesses amongst the experts who know the real meaning of the documents that the Jehovah’s Witness claim to have support from, when in reality such documents do not offer them any support at all.

⁴⁴ “A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature” (BDAG) 3rd edition, © 2000 by The University of Chicago.

⁴⁵ Appendix p. 1158 “John 1:1 – “a god”

⁴⁶ © Tommie P Dana & Julius R Mantey, 1955

10. Conclusion

Why did the Jehovah's Witnesses decide to mistranslate John 8:58?

Dr Wallace explains the motives and implications of this decision, and I can do no better than quote him:

The translators of the *New World Translation* understand the implications of ἐγὼ εἰμί here, for in the footnote to this text in the NWT, they reveal their motive for seeing this as a historical present: “It is not the same as ὁ ὢν (*ho ohn'*, meaning ‘The Being’ or ‘The I Am’) at Exodus 3:14, *LXX*.” In effect, this is a negative admission that if ἐγὼ εἰμι is *not* a historical present, then Jesus is here claiming to be the one who spoke to Moses at the burning bush, the I AM, the eternally existing One, Yahweh (cf. Exodus 3:14 in the *LXX*, ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν).⁴⁷

In conclusion, we have seen six arguments presented by the editors of the “New World Version” – **one of them subsequently abandoned by the organisation!** And we have seen more than **twenty-five** reasons why **none** of these arguments given by the Jehovah's Witnesses justifies their version of John 8:58.

More reasons

And there are more reasons:

1. The reliability of the original text is not disputed. Specialists in the Greek source texts of the New Testament refer to verses such as John 8:58 as “textually secure”, i.e., “the NT manuscripts have no competing [textual] variants”⁴⁸ – they all say the same thing: ἐγὼ εἰμί (“egō amy”).
2. The meaning of the original passage is clear, simple and unambiguous.
3. The Greek text does not present any problems for the translator. Only *one* translation of the last phrase is possible: “I AM”.

What has been written has been written. The interpretation – the meaning – of this can be discussed by theologians if they so desire. What is not acceptable is to change the translation to avoid a conflict with some doctrine, of whatever organisation.

⁴⁷ Op. cit., pp. 530-531.

⁴⁸ Jobs and Silva op. cit. pp. 190-191