

The Second Coming

At this point, we move from long expositions of major issues to a series of short takes related to the doctrine of the Second Coming. We will not repeat ourselves on such issues as salvation by works since that has been dealt with at length twice before. We will not explore these passages in the depth that we explored Jesus' divinity, since that would place us in a position of tackling peripheral issues in exhausting detail. References exist which allow the interested person to do this to whatever detail is desired. For the rest, we will note that "Jehovah's Witnesses," by Robert M. Bowman Jr. (1995, Zondervan) is a concise review of the issue. Even Bowman's work must be reviewed carefully, since the JW's correctly understand the state of the dead and Bowman does not. As before, the NWT will be quoted inline when it substantially differs from more conventional translations.

Our first issue is the death and resurrection of Christ. JW's believe that Jesus was put to death on a torture stake where one nail goes through the feet and one through the hands which are stretched overhead. While this method of execution was not unknown, and the Greek can be translated this way, almost all NT translations except the NWT have always rendered it "cross," and the early church fathers always referred to it as a cross. While this is not a particularly important issue theologically, it sets JW's apart from the mainstream of Christianity.

1. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples. Is there anything in his appearance that would allow us to distinguish between a torture stake and a cross as the means of Jesus' death? (John 20:25)

2. "Jesus died and was resurrected by God as a spirit creature, and he returned to heaven. (1 Peter 3:18)" (JW Website) The idea behind this is that when Jesus gave his life as a ransom (Matt 20:28), he forever forfeited his human existence. Therefore, his resurrection had to be as a spirit. As further support, they cite John 20:19 and Luke 24:30-36 which indicate abilities no person possesses. Do these passages indicate that Jesus was resurrected as a spirit? (Acts 8:36-40, Matt 14:25-27 cf. Mark 6:42-50, John 6:6-20)

3. What is Jesus' testimony about whether or not he would be resurrected as a man or as a spirit? (John 2:18-21; 10:17-18)

17 This is why the Father loves me, because I surrender my soul, in order that I may receive it again. 18 No man has taken it away from me, but I surrender it of my own initiative. I have authority to surrender it and I have authority to receive it again. The commandment on this I received from my Father. (John 10:17-18)

4. What do the NT accounts tell us directly about whether Jesus was resurrected as a man or as a spirit? (John 20:20-28, Luke 24:39-43)

5. What is Jesus' status now? (Psalm 132:11, Acts 17:31, 1 Cor 15:47, Col 2:9, 1 Tim 2:5, Heb 1:1-3)

9 because it is in him that all the fullness of the divine quality dwells bodily (Col 2:9)

1 God, who long ago spoke on many occasions and in many ways to our forefathers by means of the prophets, 2 has spoken to us by means of a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the systems of things. 3 He is the reflection of [his] glory and the exact representation of he very being, and he sustains all things by the word of his power; and after he had made a purification of sins he sat down on the right hand of the Majesty in lofty places. (Heb 1:1-3)

Having dealt with the nature of Jesus' resurrection, we now turn our attention to the resurrection of the believers. JW's believe that there will be two groups of saints. The first is the 144,000 (Rev 7:2-8). These people are "bought from the earth" (Rev 14:3), implying that they do not remain on the earth. This is the anointed class. It includes Christians from the first century, Witness-like Christians from all succeeding

centuries, Russell and the Bible Students up to 1935, and a limited number of Witnesses since 1935. These saints will reign in heaven with Christ as spirit sons of God. Only the 144,000 are "born again."

The second group is the "great crowd" (Rev 7:9-17). These are persons with an earthly hope. They are resurrected as provisionally guiltless, and are tested during the millennium. Only at the end of the millennium are they given irrevocable status as guiltless.

A detailed exegesis of the passages used to support these ideas is beyond the scope of this study. However, we can examine a few key passages to determine whether or not the key elements of the JW distinction between classes of saints is valid.

6. Where are the 144,000 located? (Rev 7:1-4)

7. Are the 144,000 and the "great crowd" different groups of people? (Rev 7:4, 9)

8. Where is the "great crowd" located? (Rev 19:1)

9. What does it mean to be "purchased from the earth?" (Rev 14:3, 1 John 2:2)

10. John 10:16 is alleged to prove two classes of Christians. What actually happens to the two groups in the end?

11. If the 144,000 live forever in heaven, will they have greater or lesser blessings than the "great crowd?" (Rev 21:1-4)

12. Are there two groups of saints? (Matt 5:3-12, Eph 4:3-4, 1 Cor 12:12-27)

13. Are only the 144,000 "born again?" (John 3:3-5, 1 John 5:1)

The final part of the JW eschatological schema is the invisible return of Christ. Rather than a physical return, Christ is said to have returned in a "presence" in 1914. This time was supposed to be the end of the "times of the nations" (Luke 21:24 NWT). At that time Jesus was to receive his kingdom. This time is supposed to have begun when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 607 BC, so that "the typological kingdom of God ceased to function in Judah." ("Pay Attention to Daniel's Prophecy," pp. 95-97) The length of the time of the Gentiles is calculated from the seven years of the destruction of Jerusalem using the year for a day principle and 360 day years. 2,520 years leads to October 4/5, 1914. It is worth noting that the JW's place Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem at 624 BC to allow this reckoning (PADP, pp. 18-19). The dates as determined from Ptolemy's canon and cuneiform Babylonian records makes it clear that Jerusalem fell in August of 605 BC, and Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon in September of 605 BC. The return of the Jews in 536 BC is not counted against this calculation since "Jehovah's sovereignty was not manifested on the earth. That was so because Zerubbabel, the heir to David's throne, was made not *king*, but only *governor* of the Persian province of Judah." (PADP p. 96)

14. What indication exists within the story of Nebuchadnezzar's madness that it should be used to calculate a future time for the return of Christ? Is it legitimate typology to identify the cutting off and restoration of a heathen king with the cutting off and restoration of the kingdom of righteousness? (Dan 4:24-26)

15. The Jewish calendar has twelve months which begin with the new moon. This yields a year of 353-355 days. Since the festivals are tightly tied to the seasons, a means had to be found to keep the calendar in sync with the seasons. Seven of nineteen years are leap years, where a thirteenth month is added to the end of the year, giving a leap year of 383-385 days in length. Is there any warrant in scripture for the Jews to keep a calendar with 360 day years? (Dan 7:25; 9:25, Rev 11:2-3; 12:6)

16. What is the nature of the Second Coming? Are we to be able to predict it? (Matt 24:42-44, cf. Luke 12:39-40, Acts 1:6-7)

17. When was Christ's kingdom inaugurated? (Matt 28:18-20, Acts 4:25-27; 13:32-33, Rev 2:26-27)

The key to this schema is the resurrection of Jesus as a spirit. If he was resurrected as a spirit, then he will return as a spirit, and as such will not be visible. This return will be as a "presence." The Greek "*parousia*," commonly translated "appearing" can be taken as "presence" in other passages, and this is how the JW's take it.

18. John 14:19 is taken by the JW's to indicate that Jesus would no longer be seen on earth, but only by the saints who go to heaven will see him. What is Jesus speaking about in this passage? (John 14:18-20; 16:16)

19. Acts 1:9-11 records Jesus' ascension. JW's take this description of clouds to indicate that Jesus' return will not be visible. What does this passage say about the second coming?

20. JW's take Rev 1:7 to indicate a purely spiritual "seeing" or discernment. The clouds indicate concealment, so that only those who are truly spiritual will be aware of it. The reference to "those who pierced him" is taken to indicate those who are persecuting JW's at the time of the return. What may we properly say about the nature of Jesus' return? (Matt 24:24-27, Mark 13:26-27, Luke 21:25-27, 1 Thess 4:13-17, Heb 9:28, Rev 1:7; 6:12-17)

24 For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will give great signs and wonders so as to mislead, if possible, even the chosen ones. 25 Look! I have forewarned YOU. 26 Therefore, if people say to YOU, 'Look! He is in the wilderness,' do not go out; 'Look! He is in the inner chambers,' do not believe it. 27 For just as the lightning comes out of eastern parts and shines over to western parts, so the presence of the Son of man will be.

21. A number of NT passages which refer to Jesus' "appearing" are translated by the NWT to say that Jesus will be "manifested." Col 3:4 is translated to say "When Christ, our life, is made manifest, then YOU also will be made manifest with him in glory." The NASB puts it this way. "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." Similar changes are found in 1 Peter 5:4, 1 John 2:28, and 1 John 3:2. These passages are changed to conceal the fact that the second coming will be seen visually. What does "made manifest" mean? (John 1:30-31, Heb 9:26, 1 Peter 1:20)

22. Jesus' presence on his return is taken by the JW's as only being figurative. This means that Jesus' "presence" is not literal. How does this compare with Jesus' promise? (Matt 28:19-20)

19 Go therefore and make disciples of people of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the holy spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all the things I have commanded YOU. And, look! I am with YOU all the days until the conclusion of the system of things.

23. What is the nature of the true kingdom of God after the second coming? (Isa 65:17-19, 2 Peter 3:13, Rev 21:1-5)

24. What have JW's done to the hope of the Cross?