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# A Point of Contention: the Scriptural Basis for the Jehovah's Witnesses' Refusal of Blood Transfusions

## I. Introduction

It is questionable whether the “Christian Community” has ever been truly unified. Even very early references to the community, such as the “Apostolic Council” (Acts 15:1—35), attest to conflict and debate within the community. Over the centuries there have been many areas of contention, and one of the frequent battlegrounds has been the understanding of scripture. In some cases the different interpretations of scripture have been minor, with little or no important consequences. In other instances, significant differences have led to radically different claims as to what is ethically or morally appropriate and as to what is so fundamental that one must be willing to die for it. Furthermore, such differences in interpretation have led to sharp, even violent clashes not only within the Christian community but also between elements of the Christian community and the secular world around them.

One specific instance of such a conflict is reflected in the stance of the Jehovah's Witnesses on blood transfusions, which is in conflict with other Christian groups and with the surrounding secular community. Specifically, the conflict revolves around their moral and legal claim that one should reject the use of blood to save the lives of adults and of minor Jehovah's Witness' children. This difference over blood transfusions is but one example of the “culture wars” between believers and non-believers. Furthermore, the issues are so tightly embedded within the Jehovah's Witnesses' religious understandings that to the general public they appear as incomprehensible. This article will explore the grounds for the commitment of the Jehovah's Witnesses concerning the use of blood, which has set them at odds with mainstream health care policy.

Basically, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Bible forbids them from accepting blood transfusions. Thus, when a serious or life-threatening injury occurs, Witnesses are expected to refuse a blood transfusion, even when it is medically clear that such a transfusion would save the individual's life. The situation is further complicated when the Witness needing blood is incapable of giving or refusing consent. The stance by Jehovah's Witnesses also creates serious difficulties for performing surgeries, such as organ replacement or repair, where blood loss is a normal complication of the surgery.

The rejection of blood transfusions by Jehovah's Witnesses has led to dilemmas for many non-Witnesses, Christian or otherwise. Doctors and nurses have agonized over the loss of life, real or potential, when an individual, or his or her next-of-kin or guardian, has refused a transfusion. Lawyers have argued court cases over who has the right to make life-and-death decisions for others. These judicial cases have frequently developed when legal remedy is sought either by patients or legal guardians who do not want the transfusion or by doctors and governmental representatives who want to save the life of an individual, particularly when a child or an unconscious individual is involved. Finally, this position of the Witnesses has led to debate, sometimes contentious, between apologists and antagonists of the Witnesses community itself.

Although this stance by the Witnesses has proven to be contentious for the medical, legal, and religious personnel involved, there have been some positive results. Doctors

and nurses have become more aware of the need to consider a patient's moral and religious understanding in making medical decisions. Furthermore, in trying to accommodate the stance of the Jehovah's Witnesses, doctors have sought new ways of performing surgery, where blood loss has been minimized or eliminated, and have looked for artificial blood components that might be acceptable to the Jehovah's Witness community. There is also greater legal clarity as to who has the right to make these life-and-death decisions for others. And there is further debate on how differing religious communities, particularly Christian ones, should interact with each other.

Within this context of competing positions and occasional rancor between different Christian communities, this article will look at a defined issue, which is illustrative of the larger set of problems. The focus is on the manner in which Jehovah's Witnesses have interpreted the Bible in order to support their position on the refusal of blood transfusions.

The perspective of the Jehovah's Witnesses on blood transfusions has been known for some time. Indeed, there is considerable literature about the medical, ethical, and legal ramifications of their refusal to accept blood transfusions.<sup>1</sup> However, while the Witnesses claim that their refusal is based on biblical materials, there has been little analysis of those biblical passages employed in the discussions or of the ethical basis for using biblical materials to make decisions about transfusions. The following article seeks to provide that analysis.

In order to examine the biblical basis upon which the Jehovah's Witnesses reject transfusions, this article will first discuss the process of interpretation of scripture in general. There needs to be some clarity about how scripture is generally interpreted and about how Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, use scripture. The second step will be to examine the manner in which Jehovah's Witnesses and others use the Bible for moral norms. This focus on the Jehovah's Witnesses also necessitates some discussion of the history of the Witnesses' tradition itself. With that as background, there will be a discussion of the specific passages used in the argument against blood transfusions and an analysis of how these passages are understood both in the Jehovah's Witnesses' community and in other communities of interpretation. Finally, there will be a discussion as to how the historical and cultural context impacted the development of the prohibition on blood transfusions in the Jehovah's Witnesses' community.

The goal of this article is not to provide evidence for or against the Jehovah's Witnesses' positions on scripture, on ethical theory, or on blood transfusions. Such approaches have been taken by others.<sup>2</sup> Rather, this article seeks to provide an understanding of the manner in which Jehovah's Witnesses apply biblical materials to the issue of blood transfusions. Thus, the article seeks to explain the Jehovah's Witnesses' process of interpretation of scripture in light of alternative processes of interpretation, and to examine the Jehovah's Witnesses' employment of the Bible for moral decisions in light of alternative approaches to biblical ethics.

## II. INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion of the interpretation of scripture is to suggest that such interpretation is more an art than a science.<sup>3</sup> However, there are some considerations which need to be raised in order to understand this comment.

The first consideration is that the perspective and historical context of the reader of the text affects the interpretation of the text. This is true whether one is reading a novel or sacred literature. Simply exemplified, a child's understanding of a text will normally be different from that of an adult. This is because the reader's ability, knowledge of the world, and comprehension of the text will vary. Similarly, a reader in the 4th century, employing an allegorical reading, will see a text differently from an 18th century literalist or a 20th century post-modernist. So, one must be aware of literary analysis and the impact of the reader and his or her environment on the interpretation of the text. Different people and people in different times will read scripture in different manners. Consider how a priest, a Buddhist, an evangelical Christian, and a Muslim might read Jewish or Christian scripture, or how Augustine, Luther, and Billy Graham will read scripture. Their perspectives will not be the same.

A second consideration in interpreting a text is that of understanding what the writer intended in the text. This is particularly difficult when the text comes from an author who is inaccessible - whether that author is dead or, as some would argue in regard to the biblical text, the author is God and therefore not wholly comprehensible to the reader. What this inaccessibility of the author implies is that the reader must work hard at listening to the text. Within the field of biblical studies, the methodology employed to assist this process of listening is called "exegesis." It is a term which means "to read out of" and suggests that the reader tries to listen to what the text says and not to herself or himself alone. That is, the reader tries to understand the text and not to impose preconceived notions on the text; the text must be allowed to speak for itself.

This process of exegesis entails reconstructing the world of the author and asking such questions as who wrote the text, who was the original audience, when was the text written, what literary type was employed, why the text was composed by the author, and what was the theological "message" the author was trying to convey. It is not always possible to answer these questions fully or even in part, and there are often arguments about the answers. Nevertheless, the reader must attempt to answer these questions in order to develop a sound and informed understanding of the text.<sup>4</sup>

Interpretation, then, entails the careful melding of the author's intention with the reader's perspective to result in comprehension. As indicated, this suggests more of an art than a science. It also suggests that more than one "comprehension" of a text is possible, depending on one's knowledge of the author and one's stance in relationship to the text. In the case of more literalistic readings of the text, this "art" becomes problematic. For example, fundamentalists often argue that there is only one correct interpretation or meaning of the text. However, even there, problems arise because different fundamentalist groups can and do understand the same text differently. In the case of less literal and more symbolic readings of the text, this "art" also becomes problematic since there is often more than one symbolic meaning possible. This may be disconcerting to the person who merely wants a definitive answer as to what the text means.

### III. SCRIPTURE AND ETHICS

Associated with the issue of the interpretation of scripture is the question of how scripture is used in relation to ethics. There are three prongs to this discussion. One

looks at the nature of ethical theory itself. The second looks at the use of scripture as a basis for later ethical decisions. The final issue is how Jehovah's Witnesses have used scripture in making ethical decisions. The first two of these concerns are areas of major discussion, and the issues and debates will only be briefly outlined here.<sup>5</sup>

A good overview of ethical theory can be found in Thomas Olgetree's volume, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (1983). He lays out three fundamental or "dominant" approaches to ethics. The first is what he calls "consequentialist," also known as utilitarian or teleological, where the goal or aim is the primary determinant for ethical decisions. The "ends justify the means," or "the greatest good for the greatest number" are phrases often used with this approach. The second approach is the "deontological," where moral principles or laws are the primary determinants for ethical decisions. Observance of moral principles takes precedent over any goal or consequence - "the means justify any end." The final approach is what Olgetree calls "perfectionism," where pursuit of "virtue" forms the basis of ethical decisions. One seeks to rise above the "self" and to attain "excellencies which are appropriate to our potentialities as human beings" (Olgetree, 1983, p. 28). Olgetree spends time explaining each of these approaches and then argues that any one of these approaches is inadequate. Rather, "what we require is a synthesis of the three determined by the temporal horizon of experience" (Olgetree, 1983, p. 17). In other words, one needs to be aware of the ends, the means, the virtues, and the context in order to arrive at an ethical decision.

When we look at how the Bible can be employed in ethical decision making, Robert Daly, in his book *Christian Biblical Ethics*, outlines four basic positions (1984, pp. 39ff). The first is "biblicism" where one takes a literal interpretation of the text and applies one's reading of the text directly to contemporary decisions. A second approach is based on the idea that all theology is ultimately biblical theology. That is, the theology and ethics which have developed today in Christianity are a natural, lineal development or evolvement from biblical theology and ethics. The third position suggests that contemporary ethics is "foundationally" based on the Bible. Ethics are based on and draw upon the Bible as the source (but not a "literalistic" source) of ethics. The final position is that contemporary Christian theology and ethics are a result of the development of Christian ideas, concepts, and theology. Thus, Christian ethics are not foundationally based on the Bible. Daly's own position is to advocate the third approach. One looks to the Bible as a norm or model for deriving one's ethical decisions, and such decisions are seen as a mixture of art and science where the norm of the Bible is combined with theology and ethics in the kettle of contemporaneity to result in a decision (Daly, 1984, p. 114).

Another way to arrive at the position advocated by Daly is to start with the realization that the Bible is rooted in a culture which is not modern and that one can easily point out internal inconsistencies on ethical matters in the Bible (Barton, 1998, pp. 7, 12-13). These points result in the awareness that there is diversity in scripture and that it cannot be the sole basis for moral judgments (Birch & Rasmussen, 1976, p. 50). The question then is how the Bible is to be considered as "somehow normative" for Christian ethics (Birch & Rasmussen, 1976, p. 46). Is it "absolutely" normative (the fundamentalist position)? Is it a mirror for judging what is normative contemporary behavior? Is it to provide analogical examples for behavior? Or is it "one of the informing sources for moral judgments" (Birch & Rasmussen, 1976, pp. 48-49).

These questions provide an interesting context in which to look at the Jehovah's Witnesses' use of scripture for ethical issues. We can start with the awareness that the Bible is viewed by Witnesses as "divinely inspired." Indeed, H. Stroup argues that Judge Rutherford, an influential leader of the Witnesses,

used the Bible as absolute proof of the accuracy of his views. To him, merely to quote a verse of the Bible which even remotely had some bearing upon the subject was to end a debate victoriously. Any verse from the Bible was as authoritative as any other. There was no consideration for the period in which it was written, for its background or historical meaning. The Witnesses do not consider the Bible as a complex, human document with a legion of contributors, expressing various stages of religious development, and written under widely varying social conditions. (Stroup, 1945, p. 55)

At the same time, asserts Stroup, Rutherford limited the sale of Bibles by the Witnesses in order to distribute his own written works more widely (Stroup, 1945, p. 47). This dichotomy suggests that while the Bible was an important source for moral norms, there were times when the statements and positions of the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses were also a very important source of moral norms.

Stroup's analysis provides a good background for understanding how the Witnesses use scripture and of how they derive their understanding of blood transfusions. However, one other example will demonstrate the complexity of the situation. In 1939, Rutherford was asked about the situation of Jewish Jehovah's Witnesses and the observance of dietary laws in the Old Testament. He is quoted in the Watchtower (February, 1939) as saying that all food is religiously clean: "I see no reason why anyone should hold that ham and bacon are unclean" (Stroup, 1945, p. 108). Thus, while the Witnesses hold scripture in high esteem for ethical issues, there are often times, not always acknowledged, in which interpretations by leaders or contemporary situations play a role in establishing ethical norms. To understand this kind of complexity in regard to the issue of blood transfusions, it is necessary to examine the historical emergence of the Witnesses.

#### IV. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

The next step is to look at the origins and historical context of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The religious tradition they draw upon is Christianity, which has existed for nearly two millennia. Throughout that period of time, Christianity has seen the emergence of a variety of groups which have claimed a "better," "newer," or "more correct" understanding of the religion. Such communities as the Lutherans, Syrian Orthodox, and Quakers are examples of the branches of Christianity. Another example is that of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Jehovah's Witnesses were founded in Allegheny, Pennsylvania by Charles T. Russell, who was born in 1852.<sup>6</sup> He was brought up as a Christian, in the Presbyterian Church, and his study of the Bible was heavily influenced by an expectation of the end of the world associated with the second coming of Christ. In light of that influence, he began a society in 1872, later known as the Jehovah's Witnesses, which published tracts, drawing heavily from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, about this anticipated end of the world. At one point Russell's society thought that 1914 would be the year of the second coming of Christ.<sup>7</sup> When that date passed, the community asserted that the end

of the world had indeed come and that the current governments were representatives of Satan. From this perspective arose the opposition of the Jehovah's Witnesses to government in general, to wars, and to state imposition of rules on the community.

The group moved to Brooklyn, New York, in 1909 as it began to expand its operations. Russell died in 1916 and was succeeded by Joseph F. Rutherford, a lawyer from Missouri. "Judge" Rutherford, as he came to be known, led the community through many of its early legal conflicts with the U.S. Government until his death at seventy-two in 1942. The perspectives which unfolded during his tenure provided the context for the later emergence of the prohibition of blood transfusions. Specifically, it was a period of turmoil and persecution for the Jehovah's Witnesses, which led them to define themselves more clearly and distinctly apart from the general society.<sup>8</sup>

The third president of the society was Nathan H. Knorr, who died in 1977. It was during his term as president that the issue of blood transfusions arose and a policy was developed and promulgated. Since 1977 the society has been governed by a central committee, from its international headquarters in Brooklyn.

Although the Jehovah's Witnesses are a relatively young community, their existence is well known through their visitation to homes, their distribution of publications such as the Watchtower and Awake!, their opposition to government and to national rituals, and their stance on medical treatment. Within this last category is the prohibition against blood transfusions. This prohibition is not only relatively recent, first introduced in the Watchtower on July 1, 1945, (pp. 198-201, esp. p. 200), but it also appears to be unique among religions (Singelenberg, 1990, p. 515).

## V. THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

The scriptural bases of the Jehovah's Witnesses' prohibition against the use of blood and blood transfusions are primarily located in three interrelated passages in the Bible: Genesis (Gen.) 9:4; Leviticus (Lev.) 17:10-14; and Acts 15:28-29. In addition, there are four other passages which are occasionally mentioned in connection with this prohibition: Leviticus 7:26-27, which is basically the same as Leviticus 17:14; Deuteronomy 12:23-25, which repeats the prohibition against eating blood; I Samuel 14:31-35, which labels eating blood of animals as sinful; and Acts 15:19-21, which is similar to Acts 15:28-29. To facilitate this discussion, the three main passages just mentioned will be presented.<sup>9</sup> This will be followed by a brief explanation of each passage so that the larger context of the passage can be understood.

### A. Genesis 9:4

4Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

This passage appears in conjunction with the story of Noah and the flood (Gen. 6-9). After the flood is over and Noah and his family survive, Noah and his sons are blessed by God (9:1), told to be fruitful (9:1,7), given dominion over life on earth (9:2-5a), and commanded not to kill other humans (9:5b-6). In the middle of the granting of dominion, God informs Noah of all that can be food fit for him and orders that flesh which has blood in it not be eaten (9:4).

### B. Leviticus 17:10-14

10If any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. 11For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. 12Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood. 13Any man also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust. 14For the life of every creature is the blood of it; therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.

Chapters 17-26 of Leviticus are often referred to as the “Holiness Code,” a series of regulations and stipulations which specify how the people of Israel must act to be “holy” - to be in harmony with God. The Code defines activities that are necessary to maintain ritual purity and are prohibited in order to avoid contamination. Among the stipulations are ones that speak of sexual relations (Lev. 18), that specify the behavior of priests (Lev. 21), and that establish the liturgical calendar (Lev. 23). In Leviticus 17, the focus is on the sacrifice and slaughtering of animals. Leviticus 17:1-9 discusses the necessity of bringing animals to the altar for sacrifice. Leviticus 17:10-14 continues the theme of sacrifice of animals with the proviso that blood must not be eaten. Rather, the blood must be taken to the altar to “make atonement” with God (17:11) or poured upon the ground (17:13). Failure to follow these stipulations can mean separation of the offending person from the community (17:10,14).

#### C. Acts 15:28-29

28For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

Acts 15:1-35 reports on a meeting of the “Jerusalem Council” of the Christian community (circa 48 AD). A primary issue before the early leaders (James, Paul, Barnabas, and Peter) of this community was how to deal with the growing number of Gentiles (non-Jews) among their numbers. Since virtually all early Christians were Jewish, would all Gentiles have to become Jews before becoming Christians (Acts 15:1-11)? In the middle of this debate is the issue of what new converts to Christianity should be told about idols, blood, and chastity. This passage prohibits consumption of things sacrificed to idols, calls for an avoidance of blood and “what is strangled,” and calls for chastity (Acts 15:19-21,28-29). The second prohibition harkens back to the passages from the Hebrew Bible mentioned above and refers to meat which is not ritually butchered. Proper butchering requires both that the animal is killed by means other than strangulation and that the blood of the animal is properly drained and disposed of, before the meat can be consumed.

#### VI. JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES INTERPRETATION OF THESE PASSAGES

The first statement of the Jehovah's Witnesses on blood transfusions appears in the *Watchtower* of July 1, 1945, where it stated “blood transfusions were pagan and God-



dishonouring” (pp. 198-201, esp. p. 200). Since then, there have been numerous statements by Jehovah's Witnesses on the issue of blood transfusions and the biblical text. There are, however, three major publications which specifically address the topic: *Blood, Medicine and the Law of God* (1961); *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Question of Blood* (1977); and *How Can Blood Save Your Life?* (1990). All of these, like most publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses, are published anonymously by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS) of New York, Inc. These three publications form the basis of the following discussion.

In *Blood, Medicine and the Law of God*, the first detailed publication on this issue, the interpretation starts with Genesis 9 where the “Creator specifically forbade any eating of blood.” This is repeated in Lev. 17:13,14, where the Witnesses read “You must not eat the blood of any sort of flesh, because the soul of every sort of flesh is its blood.” What is more, blood is to be poured on the ground because “the blood is the soul and you must not eat the soul with the flesh” (Deut. 12:23-25) (*Blood*, 1961, p. 4). Building upon Acts 15, the same prohibition about blood is applied to Christians (*Blood*, 1961, pp. 6-7). Upon this basis, the use of transfusions is rejected. As the publication states,

The law God gave to Noah made it unlawful for anyone to eat blood, that is, to use it for nourishment or to sustain life. Since this is wrong in the case of animal blood, it is even more reprehensible in the case of human blood. This prohibition includes “any blood at all” (Leviticus 3:17). It has no bearing on the matter that the blood is not introduced to the body through the mouth but through the veins. Nor does the argument that it cannot be classed with intravenous feeding because its use in the body is different carry weight. The fact is that it provides nourishment to the body to sustain life. (*Blood*, 1961, p. 14)

To support the claim that a transfusion is equivalent to eating, the publication draws upon “a letter from Denys, French physician and pioneer in the field of blood transfusion. It says: ‘In performing transfusion it is nothing else than nourishing by a shorter road than ordinary - that is to say, placing in the veins blood all made in place of taking food which only turns to blood after several changes.’”<sup>10</sup>

The two later publications use basically the same argument but refine it at some points. When discussing Gen. 9, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Question of Blood* makes the connection between the attitude toward animal blood and human blood. It states, “Persons complying with these divine directions would not be shedding the blood of (killing) humans, nor would they be eating either animal or human blood” (*Jehovah's Witnesses*, 1977, p. 6). The argument is that all blood is sacred and from God and that this perspective is true for Jews and Christians:

Up to this point we have established that the Bible requires the following: A human is not to sustain his life with the blood of another creature. (Genesis 9:3-4) When an animal's life is taken, the blood representing that life is to be ‘poured out,’ given back to the Life-Giver. (Leviticus 17:13,14) And as decreed by the apostolic council, Christians are to ‘abstain from blood,’ which applies to human blood as well as to animal blood - Acts 15:28-29. (*Jehovah's Witnesses*, 1977, p. 17)

To clarify the application of ancient regulations to modern times, the pamphlet states:

“But even though the Bible did not directly discuss modern medical techniques involving blood, it did in fact anticipate and cover these in principle” (Jehovah's Witnesses, 1977, p. 17).

The most recent publication, *How Can Blood Save Your Life?*, contains the same views and addresses the issue of the connection between blood and life. “All Humanity was thus notified that in the Creator's view, blood stands for life” (How Can Blood, 1990, p. 3). In addition, the pamphlet reiterates the point that transfusions are the same as eating blood: “Hence, thinking people in past centuries realized that the Biblical law applied to taking blood into the veins just as it did to taking it into the mouth” (How Can Blood, 1990, p. 6).

Throughout these publications the writers hold up certain ideas and emphasize them by placing them in italics. Two examples will illustrate this and provide a summary of the basic position of the Jehovah's Witnesses on blood transfusions, and, for our purposes, on their usage of biblical materials. The first quotation, which comes from the 1977 publication, says, “*Thus the determination of Jehovah's Witnesses to abstain from blood is based on God's Word the Bible and is backed up by many precedents in the history of Christianity*” (Jehovah's Witnesses, 1977, pp. 16-17; emphasis added). The second quotation, from the 1990 publication, also draws upon the biblical materials but draws a more general or universal theological conclusion: “*Those who respect life as a gift from the Creator do not try to sustain life by taking in blood*” (How Can Blood, 1990, p. 6; emphasis added).

This section has shown how Jehovah's Witnesses use the biblical text to support their opposition to blood transfusions. The goal has been to let them speak in their own words and to show how they understand the text. They understand the text both literally, such as seeing all blood as sacred and the application of Hebrew Bible admonitions to Christians, and take the text beyond literalism, such as seeing eating as the same as transfusing and seeing references to handling animal blood as applicable to human blood.

## VII. ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

Another path to understanding these passages is to employ the method of exegesis, and to try to listen carefully to texts, by asking questions about the background of the passage and the author. This also implies that the text is seen, as often stated, as “the words of God in the words of humans.” That is, the Bible reflects human attempts to capture and convey to others the infinite revelation from God which humans, being finite, can only incompletely or inadequately understand. In what follows, each of the three main passages will be considered in this manner.

### A. Genesis 9:4

Genesis, 11 as well as the entire Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), has traditionally been considered to be authored by Moses. However, for several centuries, that perspective has been questioned because of the duplications, inconsistencies, and anachronisms found in these five books. That awareness has resulted in contemporary scholars identifying multiple hands at work in the text. In the case of the Genesis passage, the most common suggestion is that the material was collected and composed by a “Priestly” writer (or writers). This writer was probably at

work during the period after the fall of the monarchy (after 586 BCE). This was a time when traditional political rule, the monarchy, no longer existed and new forms of governing had to be developed. It was a time when priests were primarily responsible for the preservation of the tradition and of the religious community. In that context, they expressed their understanding of God's relationship with the community and with individual people through regulations about how one should live. In addition, the writer was concerned with how God's people are distinctive from others, and part of that distinctiveness was what was allowed for consumption and what was not. Hence, not eating certain meats (Lev. 11) and not eating meat improperly prepared, with blood still in it, would make the community distinctive.

The passage itself (Gen. 9:4) is a prohibition against eating (Hebrew *'ākhal*) of flesh (Heb. *bāsār*) with its life (Heb. *nephesh*), that is its blood (Heb. *dām*). What is alluded to is the requirement that all meat be drained of blood before it can be consumed. This was basically preparation of "kosher" food, food prepared according to the command of God.<sup>12</sup>

In order to understand this passage and the passage in Leviticus more fully, it is necessary to look more closely at the language employed by the writers and to examine the Hebrew terms.<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew term *'ākhal* clearly has the meaning of "to eat" or "to consume" and those terms in English correctly convey the appropriate meaning (Ottoson, 1977, pp. 236-241). The same clarity is true for the term *dām*. It means "blood," as we would use the term (Kedar-Kopfstein, 1978, pp. 235-250). However, there is a further implication to this Hebrew term. The blood of an animal or a person is the "essence" of that animal or person. In a sense, it is that which makes an animal or person living (Kedar-Kopfstein, 1978, pp. 239-241). It is given by God to humans and animals, and, since it is therefore sacred, it must be handled with appropriate care and reverence.

The word *bāsār* is best translated as flesh or body, and it typically refers to animal flesh that is to be consumed. It can also refer to the flesh or body of a human (Bratsiotis, 1977, pp. 316-332). Finally, the most difficult term is *nephesh*. It is the "life" of a human or animal. It is clearly not the blood, nor the body, but it is related to both, in the sense that an individual animal or human must have all three elements. Sometimes *nephesh* has been translated as "soul," but that can be misleading since there was no conceptualization of soul, in the dualistic sense of "body and soul," in the Hebrew Bible. That understanding of the "soul" derives from Greek philosophy and emerges in later Christian texts and discussions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, most readers today are influenced by this Greek concept and see body and soul as parts of a dichotomy and as parts that can somehow exist independently one from the other. Such was not true for the Hebrew scriptures, and hence one should avoid such a term as "soul" and employ the more neutral term "life" as the translation of *nephesh*.

To apply this discussion to Genesis 9:4, one gets a translation such as provided by the Revised Standard Version (quoted above): You shall not eat flesh (*bāsār*) with its life (*nephesh*), that is its blood (*dām*).

In this text the blood of the animal is equated with the life of that animal. That "life" makes an animal, or a person, alive. Thus, this passage suggests that one must respect

the command of God by allowing the blood, the life of the animal, to be removed before one consumes the flesh of that animal.

#### B. Leviticus 17:10-14

Many of the same initial arguments about the background of Genesis 9:4 also apply to the background of this passage in Leviticus.<sup>15</sup> It too is part of the “Priestly” materials, which are concerned with proper ritual and proper observance of the categories of clean and unclean when offering sacrifices. The focus of the passage is on the proper preparation of meat for sacrifice. Clean meat is that which has been drained of its blood and that blood has been properly poured upon the ground. Again, the statement is that the “life” of flesh is the blood and that it must be disposed of before the meat can be consumed. Violation of this regulation will result in ostracism from the community.<sup>16</sup>

Drawing on the earlier discussion of terms, the crucial section of this passage (17:14), which when translated more precisely, should read as follows: “the life of all flesh is the blood of the flesh; therefore I have said to the sons of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of every flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.”

There are two key elements added to the discussion by this passage. The first is that it is God who has given life to the flesh through its blood, and the blood is therefore sacred (Lev. 17:11). This explains the source of life, God given, and explains the sacredness of the blood which provides the existence of animal or human. A second element is the consequence for the violation of the rules in handling the flesh and its blood: separation from the community of believers.

#### C. Acts 15:28-29

This passage moves the discussion into the Greek Bible or New Testament. It is part of the “history” of the early Christian community found in the book of Acts.<sup>17</sup> This book, probably written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, relates the events of the first approximately twenty-five years of the Christian community after the death of Jesus. Luke's goal was to show how the community lived, how it imitated the life of Jesus, and how it prepared for the movement of the “center” of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. It was probably written some time around 85-90 CE.

As indicated in the initial presentation of this passage, the issue is the treatment of Gentiles as they become Christians. Luke, who shared Paul's perspective on the issue, supported the conversion of Gentiles directly to being Christians, without the intervening step of becoming Jews. In that perspective, it was still necessary to provide a context for these converts. That context was especially crucial in how the converts were to relate to the many other, non-Christian religious practices which existed at that time. Of particular interest here is the command that these persons were to continue the practice of avoiding meat that was not properly prepared by having the blood drained from it. One must not consume animal products that contain such blood.

Unlike the passages from the Hebrew Bible, this passage does not raise the issues of the distinctions between life, blood, and flesh. Indeed, there is no explanation of the reasons for the avoidance of blood, or any suggestion that it is sacred. The passage merely indicates that Christians should not eat blood of that (presumably animals) which are strangled. The keys here are the emphasis on the proper preparation of food for

consumption and the extension of that tradition from the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Bible.

#### D. Summary

This discussion provides a view of these three passages, which varies from that of the Jehovah's Witnesses. First of all, the discussion sought to understand the background out of which the passages were produced. Secondly, the discussion sought to listen carefully to what the passages themselves were saying. Finally, the discussion argued that the prime concern of the authors was the proper preparation of meat for sacrifice and consumption, with proper handling of the blood from those animals.

#### VIII. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE READER

As indicated above, when trying to understand the biblical materials, it is essential that one examine the historical context of the writers of the biblical materials. However, it is equally important to be aware of the historical context of the readers. What is happening to the reader and to his or her community impacts one's interpretation of scripture. In this case, it is instructive to consider the historical context of the Jehovah's Witnesses as they moved toward a ban on blood transfusions.

The history of the relationship between the Jehovah's Witnesses and governments has never been smooth. This was especially true of the Jehovah's Witness and the government in the U.S. during war. When the end of the world did not occur in 1914, as they had anticipated, the Witnesses reinterpreted the expected event and began to see all governments as the handiwork of Satan. This led to their refusal to participate in the compulsory military conscription and the imprisonment of many Witnesses as conscientious objectors. Furthermore, after the publication of *The Finished Mystery* by the Witnesses,<sup>18</sup> the government moved to ban the book's distribution and to accuse the International Bible Students' Association (an early name for Jehovah's Witnesses) of sedition for promoting the refusal to support the war effort (Beckford, 1975, p. 29; Macmillan, 1957, pp. 87-90). In addition, in the U.S. Senate, a memorandum to an amendment to the espionage law said "The International Bible Students' Association pretends to the most religious motives, yet we have found that its headquarters have long been reported as the resort of German agents" (Congregational Record - Senate, 56:6, May 4, 1918, p. 6052).

This tension between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the U.S. Government, which existed during WWI, continued into WWII with more claims for conscientious objection and charges of sedition. Buttressing the public's antagonistic perspective on the Witnesses was their refusal to salute the flag or to be vaccinated (Beckford, 1975, p. 35; Macmillan, 1957, pp. 188-191, 171- 172; White, 1968, pp. 319-327). The only significant difference in approach by the Witnesses in WWII was that the opposition to governmental imposition of laws was centralized in their headquarters rather than in local communities or by individual decisions (Beckford, 1975, pp. 35-36). This institutional resistance to governmental requests furthered the public opposition to the Witnesses, and there was "the urgent need for Jehovah's Witnesses to present a unified and organized resistance to hostile forces in the USA" (Beckford, 1975, p. 35).<sup>19</sup> However, at the same time, there was a significant persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Hitler's Germany (Macmillan, 1957, p. 171). So while Witnesses were accused of being pro-axis in the U.S.,<sup>20</sup> they were considered Communists and pro-Jewish in Germany (Beckford, 1975, p. 34).

The point of this discussion is to display the state of persecution in which Jehovah's Witnesses found themselves in the 1940s. It is no wonder that they began to see outsiders as their enemies (Stroup, 1945, p. 73). Moreover, this situation brings to mind comments by the anthropologist Mary Douglas in her classical study, *Purity and Danger*. In this volume Douglas presents an understanding of how rituals of purification and pollution are developed within communities. She argues that such rituals create a "unity in experience" and "were positive contributions to atonement" (Douglas, 1966, p. 2). Furthermore, she argues that the idea of pollution guards against "threatened disturbances of the social order" (Douglas, 1975, p. 55) and that "the dangers and punishments attached to pollution act simply as a means of enforcing conformity." (Douglas, 1975, p. 58). In other words, when threatened, groups will develop laws, regulations, and rituals, which seek to protect the individual and the group by making the group distinctive, cohesive, and identifiable (Singelenberg, 1990, p. 520). Refusal of blood transfusions would fit this perspective both by rejecting pollution (refusal of blood since it is a "pollutant") and by giving the group an identifiable (and unique) identity.

What is really intriguing about this approach to understanding the Witnesses, is how it parallels the development of the Priestly laws of purity and pollution in the Hebrew Bible. This development in the Bible starts after the destruction of the temple, of the monarchy, and of the nation, in the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. These events decimated the Jewish community, but, more significantly, it destroyed important tenets of the community's theology - the promise of a monarch, the promise of the eternal protection of Jerusalem, and access to the altar in Jerusalem for sacrifice to God. The Jews were then exiled and persecuted in Babylon. In this traumatic period of exile, the community leaders needed to reformulate the community's theology in some manner so as to maintain the community's relationship with God and to give the community a sense of identity. The Priestly writers accomplished these goals through the laws and rituals they wrote down. The people of God were those who, unlike their Babylonian captors, were circumcised (Gen. 17:9-27), who observed restrictions on their diet and "kept kosher" (Lev. 11, 17; see also Daniel 1); and who avoided marriage outside the community (Ezra 9-10). This response to the persecution of the Jewish community seems to be similar in type to the response to the persecution of the Jehovah Witnesses' community.

To understand how the specific prohibition on blood transfusions by the Jehovah's Witnesses fits into the historical context, one more piece of data needs to be added. This has to do with the attitude of the leadership of the Witnesses toward medicine in general. Clayton J. Woodworth, the editor of *The Golden Age* magazine, the predecessor to *Awake!*, was a vocal opponent of the medical profession (Singelenberg, 1990, p. 516). Woodworth rejected the germ theory of disease and argued that disease was a product of improper diet, incorrect emotions, or sin (Bergman, 1980, p. 83). Furthermore, he ridiculed the theories of Pasteur and argued that Satan had led people to believe that sin is not the cause of sickness (Bergman, 1980, p. 84). He also spoke out against the chlorination of water, the use of aspirin, and vaccinations. In the May 1, 1929, issue of *The Golden Age*, Woodworth wrote, "Thinking people would rather have small pox than vaccination, because the latter sows the seed of syphilis, cancers, eczema, erisipelas, scrofula, consumption, even leprosy and many other loathsome afflictions. Hence the practice of vaccination is a crime, an outrage and a delusion" (White, 1968, p. 391; see

also Cumberland, 1986, p. 473).

With this kind of a context it is not surprising that a rejection of blood transfusions emerged among the Jehovah's Witnesses. It was bred on a distrust of medicine, weaned on a rejection of vaccinations, and matured on a diet of persecution, harassment, and isolation.

## IX. CONCLUSION

Throughout all of the biblical passages employed in the discussion of blood transfusions, there are two underlying and related themes. These are the belief in the sanctity of blood and the necessity of proper preparation of animals prior to consumption. It is very clear from the passages above that blood was seen as the "life substance" of the human as well as the animal. This "life substance" was given by God and was expected to be returned to God in thanksgiving. Hence, there is a prohibition against the eating of blood. However, once the blood has been properly removed and offered to God, the meat was then ready for consumption. This later process is known as making the meat "kosher," that is, religiously pure for consumption.

From the scriptural texts cited above, the Jehovah's Witnesses derive their prohibition against blood transfusions. However, it must be acknowledged that the historical circumstances of the prohibition - that is, WWII, the persecutions of the 1940s, the resistance of the Witnesses to external, governmental coercion, and the resistance to vaccination - played a role in the Witnesses' interpretation of these biblical texts.<sup>21</sup>

These scriptural texts in and of themselves do not prohibit blood transfusions. First of all, the prohibition about blood in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is explicitly against the eating of blood from animals. A transfusion is not eating and humans are not classified as animals in the Bible. Secondly, the biblical concern is with the proper, ritual preparation of meat and the proper respect for the blood which is drained from the animal. Hence, ritual and religious purity and cleanliness are the concern. Thirdly, the context of the reference in Acts (references to idols and chastity) and the reference to "what is strangled" strongly suggests that the prohibition against blood in the New Testament also refers to the necessity of proper preparation of meat for consumption. Fourthly, at the time these biblical texts were composed, there was no comprehension of anything like a transfusion. Thus, the biblical prohibitions did not anticipate, nor do they directly apply to, the specific case of transfusion.

Then from where did the Jehovah's Witnesses' prohibition against transfusions arise? The answer is complicated but emerges from looking again at the Witnesses' statement of 1977: "*Thus the determination of Jehovah's Witnesses to abstain from blood is based on God's Word the Bible and is backed up by many precedents in the history of Christianity*" (Jehovah's Witnesses, 1977, pp. 16-17). Thus, the Witnesses, reading from a particular place in time, appear to use both the Bible and church traditions to establish this "moral norm." Hence, they appear to adopt Daly's second approach to ethical decision making (i.e., all theology is ultimately biblical theology), although their reliance upon later Christian tradition and rejection of other biblical norms (e.g., prohibition against eating pork), move them close to Daly's third approach, where ethics are only "foundationally" based on the Bible. In terms of Ogletree's categories of ethical systems, the Witnesses clearly place a priority on law and would therefore employ a deontological

system. And while they resist the modification of norms because of particular circumstances (i.e., rejecting the position Ogletree advocates), they clearly have been influenced by “particular circumstances” in arriving at their interpretation of the biblical materials.

In summary, the biblical origins of the Jehovah's Witnesses' prohibition against accepting blood transfusions are clear. It is also clear that their reading of the Bible is influenced by the perspectives of their community and their approach to ethics, and it is not the only possible reading. The purpose here has been to show the origins of their perspective and to display alternate understandings and ethical interpretations of the biblical text.

Having said all of this about the biblical basis for the Jehovah Witnesses' stance on blood transfusions, and how they have construed the text, one is still left with the reality of their stance. Rightly or wrongly, the Jehovah's Witnesses believe the Bible requires them to refuse transfusions of blood. Thus, the question becomes one of how to react to the moral stance of a religious community, even though one might radically differ with the basis or nature of that stance.

One must first acknowledge the long standing Christian tradition of seeing the biblical text through different sets of glasses. There were early arguments about I Clement's inclusion in the New Testament. Similarly, Luther questioned the place of the book of James in the canon. The understanding of Paul's position on women has fluctuated between liberator and misogynist. Debate is currently raging on what can be clearly identify as the actual “words of Jesus.” And Christians are deeply divided as to whether wine is actually blood, potentially blood, symbolically blood, or merely wine (or grape juice as the case might be). The point is that the process of biblical interpretation has a long, sometimes contentious history. What is more, one comes to recognize that cultural and historical environments play a significant role in those interpretations. Thus, definitive claims for an eternally “true” understanding of scripture must be viewed suspiciously, regardless of which side of the blood transfusion issue one places oneself.

The other longstanding Christian tradition is the willingness to maintain a religious or moral stance in the face of peril or even death. There are, of course, the examples of the martyrs at the hands of the Romans and of those caught up in the Inquisition. However, there are also the religious (Christian) wars in Europe and Britain with their spillover into the Americas. More recently, we have seen several examples of groups who opt for death because of their religious community's theological understanding of the world. Into this context can also be placed the Roman Catholic mother who chooses not to abort her fetus, even though such an action would save the mother's life, the Jehovah's Witness who refuses a life-saving blood transfusion, and, one could argue, the ultimate example of Jesus's willingness to die for his cause. Thus, it is clear that one's faith, and the moral stances which flow from it, can have an impact on one's actions, and the willingness to stand up for one's Christian views, in spite of cultural or religious difference and persecution, should not be a surprise.

So do the Jehovah's Witnesses have the right to refuse blood transfusions? In particular, do they have a moral right to refuse blood transfusions for their minor children? Do they have that right even if their use of the Bible is questioned, even when the cultural



environment probably fostered the refusal, and even when a life could be saved? Who has the right, moral, legal, or otherwise, to tell a person that he or she cannot die for his or her beliefs? These are important questions which flow from this discussion, but the answers will have to await another occasion. In the meantime, it is certain that the Jehovah's Witnesses's positions will continue to create significant conflicts in the bio-ethical "culture wars," as religious believers argue among themselves and struggle with the secular society in which they live.

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#### NOTES

1. See, for examples, the following: Ackerman (1990); Anderson (1983); Bergman (1980); Blajchman (1991); Detry et al. (1999); Dixon (1981); Farr (1972); Fontanarosa and Giorgio (1989); Goldman and Oberman (1991); 'In Place of Blood: New Techniques to Treat Jehovah's Witnesses' (1982); 'Jehovah's Witnesses Test Religious Liberty' (1965); Jonsen (1986); Kleinman (1994); Levy (1999); Macklin (1988); Ott (1977); Rosengart et al. (1997); Rosenthal (1988); Sacks and Koppes (1986); Smith (1997); Spence et al. (1992); Tierney et al. (1984); and Vinicky et al. (1990).
2. For a different approach to this discussion of how the Jehovah's Witnesses use scripture, see the articles by Green (1991) and Nielsen (1991), in which the authors tend to be more polemical and seek to disprove the Witnesses understanding of scripture. See also the recent series of exchanges on the Jehovah's Witnesses and blood transfusions between Muramoto (1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d, 1999a, 1999b), a doctor, arguing against the Witnesses' position, and Malyon (1998a, 1998b), Ridley (1999), and Wilcox (1999), officials of the Witnesses community, arguing for the Witnesses' position.
3. For a good introduction to the discussion of biblical interpretation, see Hayes and Holladay (1987), esp. pp. 5-32. One could also consult Goldingay (1995), esp. pp. 1-11; Keegan (1985), esp. pp. 3-13; and McKnight (1985), esp. pp. xi-xix.
4. There are particular sources which are helpful to the reader in this quest for understanding scripture - commentaries and dictionaries. Commentaries provide an overview of materials relevant to a particular book or passage and then comment and interpret that passage. These commentaries can be a single volume, where every book of the Bible is covered in one book, or they can be commentaries on a single (or part of a single) book. Two one-volume commentaries are Brown et al. (1990); and Neil (1975). Other commentaries are often part of a series, and some of the series are Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday); The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press); Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press); Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press); The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press); and Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books). There are also Bible dictionaries, which are really more like encyclopedias: Achtemeier (1985); Buttrick (1962); and Freedman (1992).
5. For discussions of the relationship of ethics and scripture, see the following sources: Barton (1979); idem (1994); idem (1998); Birch (1991); idem (1994); Birch and Rasmussen (1976); Crenshaw and Willis (1974); Daly (1984); Hays (1996); Houlden (1973); Janzen (1994); Kaiser (1983); Marxsen (1993); Olgetree (1983); Sanders (1975); Schrage (1988); and Wilson (1994).

6. There are several sources which provide an overview of the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses and which were used in constructing this "brief history." Consult the following: Anderson (1983), pp. 31-32; Bergman (1984), esp. pp. xii-xxxix; Blajchman (1991), pp. 243-245; Cumberland (1986), pp. 468-470; Macmillan (1957); Singelenberg (1990), pp. 515-519; Stroup (1945); idem (1987); and White (1968). For a recent discussion by a former member of the "governing body" of the Jehovah's Witnesses, see also Bowman (1991). Franz (1991) and (1992).
7. An interesting discussion of the way Jehovah's Witnesses have used the Bible in setting and explaining various "ends" of the world can be found in Mayer (1957), pp. 38-47. See also McKinney (1962), pp. 92-106.
8. This issue of separation from society will be explored more fully later in the paper. Suffice it to say here that accusations about connections to Nazis and refusal to salute to vote, to submit to conscription, or to agree to vaccinations, resulted in public persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. Such persecution in turn resulted in a closing of the ranks of the community against outsiders.
9. One of the complications in understanding scripture is the myriad of translations which exist. Some are out-of-date translations; some use poor or not up-to-date original sources; and some highly reflect the bias of the particular translator. To avoid these pitfalls, one should use a translation that is done by a committee and that uses good, modern translation techniques of appropriately chosen ancient copies of the biblical materials. For this article, the translation (version) used is the Revised Standard Version. (One might also use such versions as the New English Bible, New American Bible, Jewish Publication Society Version, and New International Version.) The Jehovah's Witnesses have produced their own version which is called the New World Translation.
10. Blood (1961), p. 14. This is a reference to Jean Baptiste Denys, a physician in the court of Louis XIV (1638-1715). See Crile (1909), pp. 153-155.
11. For commentaries which provide background and interpretation of Genesis, consult the following: Coats (1983); Hamilton (1990); von Rad (1973); Sarna (1989); Speiser (1964); and Westermann (1984).
12. Two examples of recent, detailed scholarly discussion of this passage, are Milgrom(1997); and Vervenne (1993).
13. For general discussion of the meaning of these words, see the terms "blood," "eating," "flesh," "life," and "soul" in the biblical dictionaries edited by Buttrick (1962); or Freedman (1992).
14. Bratsiotis (1977) 2:325-326. See also Piper (1962) and Porteous (1962).
15. For commentaries which provide background and interpretation of Leviticus, consult the following: Levine (1989); and Noth (1965).
16. Detailed, scholarly discussions of this passage can be found in Milgrom (1971); and Schwartz (1991).
17. For commentaries which provide background and interpretation of Acts, consult the following: Bruce (1990); Conzelmann (1987); Haenchen (1971); Munck (1967); and Willimon (1988).
18. This book was the seventh volume of C.T. Russell's massive Studies in the Scriptures. The first six volumes were published during Russell's lifetime. This seventh volume was published posthumously, and there was considerable debate among Witnesses as to its faithfulness to Russell's ideas (Beckford, 1975, p. 124).
19. Detailed stories of the public reaction to Witnesses can be found in White (1968),pp.327-336.
20. For example, Stroup refers to an article entitled 'Fifth Column Jitters,' by Charles

Walker in November 1940 edition of McCall's where he charged that "most of the 'Witnesses' are of German Blood" (Stroup, 1945, p. 73).

21. More discussion of the cultural and historical influences on the Jehovah's Witnesses can be found in Singelenberg (1990), pp. 515-523.

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