

In the Third Edition of *Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, Greg Stafford takes up the familiar defense of subjects having to do with the use and pronunciation of the divine name, the identity of the biblical God Jah and of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as issues and questions having to do with salvation, God's sovereignty and mankind's "free will." This edition also contains discussions of several controversial issues, including questions related to abortion, a person's sexual orientation, and regarding uses of blood.

Most significantly, this book puts forth not only a defense of some the biblical teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses associated with the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, but it also further introduces the Christian Witnesses of Jah, Jehovah's Witnesses who reject human traditions when these can be shown to contradict what is based on the best available reasons. Thus, a call is made to all Jehovah's Witnesses, to all Christians, indeed, to "every breathing thing" to bear witness to and to praise the biblical God Jah, and to acknowledge what can be shown to be true for good reasons about Jesus of Nazareth.—Psalm 150:6; Isaiah 29:13; 43:10, 12; Acts 18:24-28; Galatians 1:10; Revelation 19:1, 3, 4, 6.

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Cover design by George Foster

Religion

ISBN: 978-0-9659814-0-6



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AND CRITICS

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GREG STAFFORD



Murrieta, California

*Jehovah's Witnesses Defended:*  
*An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, Third Edition  
Copyright © 2009 by Elihu Books, LLC.

Published by Elihu Books, LLC.

www.elihubooks.com

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Murrieta, CA 92563

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Printed in the United States of America by  
Angel Printing, Inc., Oceanside, California

\*This printed edition may differ in form and in content from pre-publication copies of some of the material released online by the author. Only the printed forms of this book contain the published edition.

**Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication**  
*(Provided by Quality Books, Inc.)*

Stafford, Greg G.

Jehovah's Witnesses defended : an answer to scholars  
and critics / by Greg Stafford. -- 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

LCCN 2008905531

ISBN-13: 978-0-9659814-0-8

ISBN-10: 0-9659814-0-1

1. Jehovah's Witnesses--Doctrines. 2. Jehovah's  
Witnesses--Apologetic works. I. Title.

BX8526.S69 2009

289.9'2

QBI08-600184

primary basis for this conclusion is the available manuscript evidence which shows that the OT text that would have been quoted by the NT writers contained a form of the divine name rather than surrogates like the sacred name abbreviations (*nomina sacra*).

There are others, however, such as Lundquist and Countess referenced earlier, who believe that the earliest NT copies we have show us just how the original NT document writers treated the divine name. If those who argue this way are correct, then the conclusion we must reach is that the NT writers, instead of quoting from the Hebrew or Greek OT texts before them, introduced a brand new way of representing the divine name (and possibly even other names or titles), but all without making any specific mention of this new practice. Further, in doing so the NT writers would had to have decided *not* to follow the use of the divine name in the Hebrew and Greek OT texts before them. I say this, because all available evidence before the second century CE shows that the OT texts available during that same time did in fact contain some form of the divine name.

**Nomina sacra.** The *nomina sacra* (Latin for “sacred names”) which have been mentioned already in this discussion are of special importance when we consider the use of the divine name in the NT. They are important not only in terms of what the original NT documents may have contained, but they are also important when it comes to answering questions about what should be used today when translating available Greek NT texts.

For example, if the original NT writers used *nomina sacra* then not one of the modern NT translations that I have seen is following this practice. In other words, if specially marked contractions such as  $\bar{\kappa}\zeta$  for words like “Lord” ( $\kappa\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$ , *kyrios*) were used in place of God’s name when an OT text was quoted, or if the NT writer simply decided to use these abbreviations apart from any OT quote then, again, no modern NT translation is using the same or a similar kind of specially marked abbreviation like the NT writers allegedly did. But back to the primary question: Did the original NT writers *begin* the practice of using *nomina sacra*? If they did not begin this practice then who did, and why?

If the NT writers did not start this practice of using *nomina sacra*, then what did the NT writers use for the divine name when quoting an OT Hebrew or Greek text that contained the name? Larry Hurtado has provided some of the more recent discussion on the use of the *nomina sacra*.<sup>138</sup> After noting the unique features and use of the *nomina sacra* as compared to other Greek literary devices (unique even when compared to Jewish scribal practices concerning their treatment of the divine name), Hurtado believes there is a “counterpart” between these Jewish scribal practices and the *nomina sacra* used in Christian texts. But Hurtado believes that the Christian *nomina sacra* “are both different in form from any of the Jewish scribal devices and comparatively more consistent in form.”<sup>139</sup> Hurtado concludes:

[I]t seems to me that the best reading of the evidence is that the *nomina sacra* represent a Christian innovation. Granted, the practice was, in all likelihood, indebted in some sense to the varied ways that Jewish scribes tried to mark off the divine name ... but the particular scribal techniques differ. For instance, the Christian innovation appears to include the standardized use of the supralinear stroke to mark off the words treated as *nomina sacra*, and the characteristic use of contracted abbreviations of these words seems likewise to be a distinctively Christian scribal convention. Moreover, the evidence indicates that Ἰησοῦς [“Jesus”], Κυριος [“Lord”], Θεος [“God”], and Χριστος [“Christ”] were treated as *nomina sacra* much more consistently, and probably earlier, than any of the other words in question. Finally, there are reasons to suspect that the whole scribal tradition may have begun with a distinctive writing of Ἰησοῦς as IH, and that this first happened among Jewish Christians or Christians sufficiently acquainted with Jewish traditions to devise and appreciate the gematria involved in this way of writing Jesus’ name.

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<sup>138</sup> See Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2006), pages 95-134; “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal,” *JBL* 117.4 (1998), pages 655-673.

<sup>139</sup> Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, page 105. See also pages 99-104.

“Gematria” involves “ascribing religious significance to the numerical value of alphabetic characters,”<sup>140</sup> such as we find in certain early Christian writings in relation to abbreviations of the name “Jesus,” or in the New Testament itself in places like Revelation 13:18 and 15:2 in regards to the “number of [the] name” of “the wild beast.”<sup>141</sup> Whether the use of *nomina sacra* involves any use of gematria (which seems unlikely overall since no other sacred name abbreviation [except one for “Jesus”] appears to have any numerical significance) is not as significant as the fact that we have in the *nomina sacra* a unique scribal device apparently invented by Christian scribes. Further, the *nomina sacra* may relate directly to Jewish or to Jewish Christian treatment of the divine name *after* the NT was written.

This brings us back to the questions I asked at the beginning of this sub-section. First, were the NT writers the originators of such “sacred name” surrogates? In other words, did Peter, Paul, James, John, or Luke use ⲕϯ rather than the divine name? Since there is no evidence anywhere outside of Christian circles for the use of such an abbreviation, if the first writers of the NT did invent this convention then why is there no mention of such a novelty anywhere in their writings? Also, it is of interest that there does not appear to be anything in the Christian traditions following the first century CE that teaches or even suggests that the *nomina sacra* began first with the writings of the NT.

Since as we have seen it was not uncommon to use one or more forms of the divine name (in paleo-Hebrew, Aramaic, or in Greek) in OT Greek texts during and prior to the first century CE, then the NT writers would have had no reason for some

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<sup>140</sup> Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, page 114.

<sup>141</sup> For a more complete discussion of the significance of names and numbers in early Christianity, see François Bovon, “Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” *NTS* 47 (2001), pages 267, 288. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, page 114, notes that in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (9.7-8) and in Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 6.278-280) reference is made to the number 318, which the LXX of Gen 14:14 represents by the Greek letters TIH. These writings see in this numerical representation the name of Jesus (IH = 18) and the cross (T = 300), represented by the 318 servants of Abraham. See also Bovon, “Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” pages 281-282, for a discussion of this abbreviation of Jesus’ name relative to Abraham’s 318 servants.

special remark about continuing that practice. If the NT writers used the divine name then they would simply have been doing what was consistent with all Hebrew and Greek OT texts that are known to have been available during that same time. But if the NT writers invented a new way of representing the divine and/or other names (such as by means of the *nomina sacra*), then one might have expected some explanation or discussion of this new practice at some point within the first few decades of the writing of the NT. This is especially so if use of the *nomina sacra* was seen as something newly inspired by influence from the holy spirit, or by the tradition started and then handed down by the apostles (compare 2 Thessalonians 2:15). Yet, there is no mention of this practice (use of *nomina sacra*) as having displaced use of God's name *first* in the writings of the NT.

The fact is no one knows for a certainty if the *nomina sacra* were invented by the NT writers. But there is no evidence that they adopted an existing Jewish practice and there is also no convincing evidence that they were used in the composition of the original NT documents. All that we have available to us today are copies of NT books and letters, the earliest of which are from the second, middle or late second,<sup>142</sup> and third centuries CE. Further, we have testimony from early scholars like Jerome (c. 342-c. 420 CE) and Gennadius of Marseilles (who wrote during the late fifth century CE), namely, that at least one of the NT writings was originally composed in Hebrew and that the writer faithfully followed the Hebrew text rather than the Greek texts available to him:

Matthew, also called Levi, apostle and aforesaid publican, composed a gospel of Christ at first published in Hebrew for

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<sup>142</sup> Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, Appendix 1, pages 217-224, has a useful chart of NT manuscripts, the earliest of which (P.Oxy. 4404 [P<sup>104</sup>]) he dates to "CE2late" (= late second century CE [see his page 217, number 93.]). But the earliest manuscripts containing *nomina sacra* are from "CE2-3" (second or third centuries CE [see his numbers 94. (P<sup>64</sup>) and 114. (P<sup>75</sup>)]). Compare my discussion on pages 76-79 and in note 137 above regarding P<sup>46</sup> and P<sup>66</sup>, the two oldest manuscripts that preserve an NT text *quoting* a divine-name-containing OT text but with a surrogate (*nomen sacrum*) for the divine name.

the sake of those of the circumcision who believed, but this was afterwards translated into Greek though by what author is uncertain. The Hebrew itself has been preserved until the present day in the library at Caesarea which Pamphilus so diligently gathered. I have also had the opportunity of having the volume described to me by the Nazarenes of Beroea, a city of Syria, who use it. In this it is to be noted that wherever the Evangelist, whether on his own account or in the person of our Lord the Saviour quotes the testimony of the Old Testament he does not follow the authority of the translators of the Septuagint but the Hebrew.<sup>143</sup>

Even if the first-century CE Greek translations of the OT did not have a form of the divine name (and all available manuscript evidences suggests that they did), the testimony above, namely, that when Matthew quotes “the testimony of the Old Testament he does not follow the authority of the translators of the Septuagint but the Hebrew” suggests that Matthew originally used the name found in the Hebrew text. If this testimony is accurate, then quotations in Matthew’s Gospel as found in Matthew 3:3, 4:4, 7, 10, 22:44, and 23:39 *must* have originally contained the divine name.<sup>144</sup>

That is, of course, unless there is an OT Hebrew/Aramaic text that Matthew quoted which itself did not use God’s name. But if both the OT Hebrew and the OT Greek versions available to Matthew contained a form of the divine name, and if Matthew faithfully quoted from them, then according to all available OT texts dated to Matthew’s time he would have used the divine name when quoting the OT. Thus, we cannot use later copies of the NT books and letters with what appear to be brand new scribal conventions (such as the *nomina sacra*) to answer the question about what the original NT writers *actually* used when quoting a Hebrew or a Greek OT text that contained a Hebrew (or

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<sup>143</sup> Jerome and Gennadius, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, NPNF 3, chap. 3, page 362.

<sup>144</sup> For a discussion of the Hebrew versions of Matthew’s Gospel available today, such as the versions of Jean du Tillet and Shem-Tob ben-Isaac ben Shaprut (referenced in the NWT and in the KIT as J<sup>1</sup> and J<sup>2</sup>, respectively) see the Second Edition of my *Jehovah’s Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics* (Huntington Beach, CA: Elihu Books, 2000), pages 36-43.

paleo-Hebrew), an Aramaic, or a Greek form of the divine name. This question, like the question involving the pronunciation of the divine name, should be answered based on the best available evidence, with beliefs subsequently formed around those reasons.

The best available evidence clearly does not favor use of the *nomina sacra*, and even if it did then no one today is following this tradition by making use of the same written convention. The best available evidence is the available OT texts that could have been used by the NT writers. This includes OT fragments like 4QLXXLev<sup>b</sup>, 8HevXIIgr, P.Oxy. 3522, and P.Fouad 266<sup>b</sup>, all of which contain forms of the divine name rather than specially marked abbreviations, or even complete word surrogates.

Those who believe that the NT writers did in fact use *nomina sacra* for the divine name that is found nearly 7,000 times in the OT must explain the significance of manuscripts like P.Oxy. vii. 1007 (discussed briefly on page 75), which contains a fragment of the book of Genesis dated to the third century CE. This fragment not only uses a *yod* doubled with a line through it (~~י~~~~י~~) for the divine name (compare note 129 above) in Genesis 2:8 and 18, but it also uses a sacred name abbreviation for the Greek word for “God”! Additionally, in P.Oxy. 2745 (see note 64), known as the “Onomasticon of Hebrew Names,” the divine name Ιαω (*Iao*) occurs eight times in this third century CE papyrus when explaining OT biblical Hebrew names translated into Greek. But, in addition to the use of *Iao* throughout, the Greek word for “God” (as in P.Oxy. vii. 1007) is contracted as a *nomen sacrum* (“sacred name”)!

These two texts show that even if the NT writers did use *nomina sacra* that would not necessarily mean that they did not also use some other representation for or form of the divine name. Because these types of conventions are used in these two texts, scholars have had a hard time deciding whether or not these manuscripts are Jewish or Christian. But there is no reason why they cannot be the product of Christian Jews who retained a

special significance for the divine name, and who also adopted newer conventions for other sacred words (*nomina sacra*).<sup>145</sup>

No one knows the exact origin of these scribal conventions or the precise reasons why in some texts such as P.Oxy. vii. 1007 and P.Oxy. 2745 we find *different* representations for the divine name and for the *nomina sacra*. However, the best available evidence in the form of OT sources available for quotation by the NT writers strongly suggests that NT writers used the divine name that was found in such OT texts. It is true that in the oldest available NT documents *nomina sacra* are used, not a form of the divine name (except in Revelation 19 [see below]). But, again, the best available NT evidence in the form of such texts is at best fifty to one hundred years older than the date of the earliest NT documents (P<sup>46</sup> and P<sup>66</sup> [see page 78]).

The best available evidence, the evidence that I would use no matter what it suggested or contained, is the best of the older OT texts that could have served as the basis for the NT writers’ OT quotations. All such OT texts available today contain a form of the divine name, and it is best that we today use what that body of evidence tells us the NT writers most likely would have seen, read, and quoted: a form of the divine name.

Before moving on to the next section in which I will discuss the extent to which the divine name is used in the NWTNT, as well as the basis for its use according to the NWT Committee, it is good to ask and to answer the rest of the questions that I posed at the beginning of this sub-section: If the NT writers were not responsible for the use of *nomina sacra*, and if they in fact used a form of the divine name when they quoted from the OT, then who took it out of the NT? Related to this, it is good to also ask and answer why the divine name is not used in most OT Greek texts after the first century CE?

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<sup>145</sup> Compare Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, page 122, note 82: “In the first and second centuries CE, we can certainly see Christian group identity emerging, but a significant number of people can still be identified as both ‘Christian’ and ‘Jewish,’ and they felt no need or desire to identify themselves *exclusively* as one or the other. So we should not be surprised that some manuscripts exhibit a mixture of features that more typically distinguish Jewish and/or Christian scribal practices.”