



Jehovah's Witnesses

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Introduction

Jehovah's Witnesses are the followers of a Christian-based religion perhaps best known for their 'door-to-door' evangelizing activities. It is a millennialist religion, with followers believing that we are living in the Last Days and that [Armageddon](#) is fast approaching. During the battle of Armageddon, it is believed, Jesus will return to defeat the current rulers and imprison Satan for a period of a thousand years, the Millennium. Jesus will then return to heaven, from where he will rule over the earth, with the help of the 'anointed class' of 144,000. The earth will be transformed into a paradise over the period of the Millennium and the saved will have restored physical bodies to enjoy everlasting life on earth. 1914 is believed by Jehovah's Witnesses to mark the beginning of the 'End Times'.

Jehovah's Witnesses are also known for their refusal of blood transfusions; for not taking part in political, military, or interfaith activities; and for not celebrating Christmas, Easter, or birthdays. This article outlines the history, beliefs, and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses before turning to a discussion of apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs. It ends with a note on sources.

Introduction and Founding

Initially known as Bible Students, Jehovah's Witnesses originated in America in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the teachings of Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) and his associates. Russell was something of a religious seeker, establishing friendships with teachers in the Adventist movement including Jonas Wendell, George Stetson, and Nelson Barbour, although he claimed never to have been an Adventist himself (Chryssides 2016, 47). Like these individuals, Russell engaged in studying the Bible and he sold the cloth merchant and haberdashery business he had inherited in order to finance his preaching and publishing activities. In the early 1870s, he established a Bible study movement—the International Bible Students Association—in his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1879, Russell published the magazine *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, which would become the Jehovah's Witnesses' main publication, *The Watchtower*. This magazine, as the title suggests, had an apocalyptic theme and discussed the imminence of [Armageddon](#), the return of Jesus to defeat Satan, and the subsequent establishment of theocratic government in heaven and paradise on earth. In the early 1880s,

Russell established the Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society. In 1908, he moved the headquarters of this organization from Pittsburgh to Brooklyn, New York, where it remained until it moved to Warwick, New York, in 2017. (There remain two incorporated societies in America—the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. There is also the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain.)

Russell was succeeded by a lawyer, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942), who became the second president of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and who coined the name Jehovah's Witnesses in 1931. This name is said to identify both the Jehovah's Witnesses' God and their mission—in Isaiah 43:10–12 God says, 'you are my witnesses' (New International Version). Rutherford also introduced some of the distinctive Jehovah's Witnesses' practices, such as the acceleration of house-to-house evangelism, not participating in politics and military service, and not celebrating Christmas. It was under Rutherford's leadership that the Jehovah's Witnesses became a large and stable organization. It also became more theocratic and hierarchical; directors of local congregations were no longer elected by local assemblies but were appointed subject to the approval of the Governing Body in New York. The Governing Body retains overall authority for the movement. In 2019, it was composed of eight men, all of whom were believed to be of the 144,000 'anointed class' (see below for an explanation). Women are not able to join the Governing Body or be elders in the organization, as women are not permitted to teach or to hold authority over men. Jehovah's Witnesses teach gender complementarity rather than gender equality.

In 1942 Rutherford was succeeded by Nathan Homer Knorr (1905–77), who began a public relations programme that won the movement more converts. Knorr oversaw the 1961 publication of the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, a modern English Bible translated from original ancient Hebrew and Greek texts. It is the version of the Bible that Jehovah's Witnesses use today, primarily in its 2013 revision.

The fourth president was Frederick W. Franz (1893–1992) and the fifth was Milton Henschel (1920–2003). Henschel stepped down from the presidency in 2000 (all four previous presidents had remained in post until they died). Subsequent presidents have not been members of the Governing Body and are believed to be part of the 'great crowd' rather than the 144,000. Henschel was succeeded by two presidents: Don A. Adams (b. 1926) became president of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, and Max H. Larson (1915–2011) became president of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. They were succeeded by Leon Weaver Jr (b. 1949) (the society's first Black president) and by Robert Ciranko (b. 1947), respectively. Leon Weaver Jr has now been succeeded by Harold L. Corkern (b.1951).

Members

In 2019, there were over 8.5 million Jehovah's Witnesses in 240 'lands and territories' worldwide. Growth occurs largely through conversion rather than 'internal growth', with the fastest growing congregations currently in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Jehovah's Witnesses have a huge publication and translation programme: the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* is distributed worldwide in more than 150 languages, as importance is placed on people being able to read scripture in their native language. Witnesses also try to ensure that people have access to meetings in their own language and to various magazines and Bible study guides produced by the Watch Tower Society. Despite the diversity in languages, the material leads to conformity within the movement, as all congregations around the world

follow the same programme of Bible study. While Jehovah's Witnesses are active worldwide, they simultaneously work hard to eradicate racial, ethnic, and geographical differences, in an attempt to create a cohesive community.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not use the terminology of 'membership'. A distinction is made between those who are baptized (by immersion) and those who are not yet baptized. Children are not usually baptized until between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, when they can make their own commitment to the organization. Individuals joining Jehovah's Witnesses from a different Christian denomination are rebaptized in the belief that only Jehovah's Witnesses are the 'true' organization that can offer salvation (Chryssides 2016, 211-14). Baptized Jehovah's Witnesses are expected to become 'publishers'—those who go door to door spreading the word and distributing materials. Publishers are engaged in 'witnessing' for Jehovah and they are asked to report their preaching activity to their local congregation each month (it is in this way that the number of Witnesses in each congregation is determined). Some share in the publishing work prior to their baptism (if they are undergoing instruction, for instance) and are known as 'unbaptized publishers'. A wider number of people attend services, including the annual Memorial Service: some twenty million people were reported to have attended in 2019.

Beliefs, Practices, and Lifestyle

Jehovah's Witnesses are a millennial, restorationist, and nontrinitarian Christian movement. They believe that God—whom they call Jehovah—is the 'Most High'. Jehovah is an 'invisible spirit' without a body of flesh and blood, but he is also an individual with thoughts and feelings, as well as infinite wisdom and power. Jesus Christ is recognized as God's son and one can only be saved from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. God provided his son, 'a ransom sacrifice', as a gift to humankind: the death of Jesus paid the 'ransom' for human sin. Jehovah forgives those who have faith in the ransom sacrifice, are repentant, and seek to imitate Jesus in their lives.

Jehovah's Witnesses accept the entire Bible (the Old and New Testaments, which they call the 'Hebrew-Aramaic Scriptures' and the 'Christian Greek Scriptures', respectively) as the inspired Word of Jehovah. They see it as a historical record, a blueprint for living, reliable [prophecy](#), and containing many scientific facts. It is important for Jehovah's Witnesses to live in the service of God and the Bible serves as a 'moral code' for members. They use the concept of 'Bible trained conscience' to refer to ethical decision-making using biblical principles.

Congregational life is of the utmost importance to Witnesses, who meet in purpose-built buildings called Kingdom Halls. They attend a weekend meeting and a meeting on one weekday evening. The weekend meeting includes the public service (consisting of song, prayer, and a Bible talk) followed by 'Watchtower Study' (which involves the study of a passage outlined in the study edition of *The Watchtower* magazine. In this standardised format, all Jehovah's Witnesses congregations around the world study the same passage in the weekend meeting). The weekday meeting is termed the 'Our Christian Life and Ministry Meeting' and includes sections titled 'Treasures from God's Word', which considers Bible passages, 'Apply Yourself to the Field Ministry', which gives instruction in door-to-door evangelizing and teaching interested persons, and 'Living as Christians'.

The Memorial of Christ's death or the Lord's Evening Meal is the only annual festival celebrated by Jehovah's Witnesses, who notably do not mark Christmas or Easter (which are considered to have pagan origins), birthdays, or other secular festivals. The Memorial, as the name suggests, is a commemoration of Jesus's death and ransom sacrifice. The service takes place after sunset on the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month of Nisan, which usually corresponds to the Jewish celebration of Passover, though exact calculations of the date may differ. Jehovah's Witnesses believe (jw.org 2020b) that Jesus's institution of the Lord's Evening Meal or Lord's Supper, 'keep doing this in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11: 23-25, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*), should be marked annually at Passover time, not more regularly as in other Christian denominations. Only unleavened bread and unfortified red wine should be used, and these are considered emblems or symbols of Christ's flesh and blood—Witnesses do not believe in transubstantiation. The Memorial takes place at all Kingdom Halls across the world, on the same day and always after sunset, and all Witnesses are strongly encouraged to attend. However, not all Witnesses consume the bread and wine—in fact, very few do. This is because the emblems are reserved for members of the 144,000 who will be co-rulers with Christ in heaven after the battle of [Armageddon](#). The remainder of true Christians will be part of the 'great crowd', who will have restored physical bodies to enjoy everlasting life on this earth, which will become a paradise. They attend the service to remember Jesus's death and value his sacrifice, but they pass the bread and wine without consuming it.

In addition, all Jehovah's Witnesses spend time in voluntary evangelistic activities as the cornerstone of their faith: being a witness for Jehovah. They are widely known for their door-to-door ministry, knocking at houses within their assigned territory (see Chryssides 2016, 137).¹ In recent years, Jehovah's Witnesses have added another evangelizing approach, with publishers operating literature stands in public places, such as train stations and shopping centres. They claim that this has a biblical basis since the Apostle Paul is recorded as having preached in the market place (Acts 17:17). In this approach, publishers take a generally quietist position and wait to be approached for information or discussion rather than engaging the public actively—although of course this varies from individual to individual. If a member of the public expresses interest, Jehovah's Witnesses will attempt to establish regular home visits for free Bible study courses.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' lifestyle is one that could be considered socially conservative: great importance is placed on married life, marital fidelity, and family values. Keeping the right company or avoiding 'harmful associations' is stressed, as is living a modest lifestyle, and the values of hard work for the benefit of cooperation rather than competitiveness. Employment is usually trade-based and must not be contrary to the faith, such as working in a betting shop, politics, or trades that involve arms. Any actions that go against these values, such as homosexual relationships, sexual relations outside marriage, excessive alcohol consumption, military service, or accepting a blood transfusion, could lead to disfellowshipping (cutting off or expelling the individual from the community) if the individual is considered to be unrepentant of their sinful actions.

Jehovah's Witnesses' opposition to blood transfusions stems from their belief that blood is sacred, as the life force of living things, and its ingestion is believed to be prohibited in several biblical passages (Genesis 9:3-4; Leviticus 17:14; Acts 15:8-29) (Chryssides 2016, 192). In the Leviticus passage, God warns that anyone eating blood will be 'cut off'. The biblical prohibitions have been interpreted as including taking blood into the body intravenously. Jehovah's Witnesses reject transfusions of whole allogeneic blood (blood from a different individual) and its primary components (red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, and

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plasma). It is also prohibited to accept one's own blood donated prior to surgery as blood should not be stored: 'He shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust' (Leviticus 17:13). Blood-based medication is also prohibited, as is the consumption of blood-based foods such as black pudding.

Jehovah's Witnesses see themselves as 'in but not of the world', and therefore to a degree separate themselves from the wider society. As noted above, they do not participate in interfaith dialogue or in any political or military activities. Their commitment to peace and equality has resulted in Witnesses losing their lives through conscientious objection and through refusing to denounce their faith in the most appalling circumstances, including the concentration camps of the Second World War and modern-day prison camps. In 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned in Eritrea, Russia, Singapore, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan for conscientious objection or 'religious activity'. Since 2017, they have been banned as an 'extremist' organization in Russia, condemned as a group that teaches that it is the only way to salvation. Such persecution is interpreted as evidence of the imminent Last Days.

Millennial Beliefs and Prophecy

Jehovah's Witnesses are a millennialist movement, a central teaching of the movement being that we are living in the Last Days and that [Armageddon](#) is imminent. Witnesses seek to share this message with the public through their door-to-door evangelizing activities and literature stands. Baptized, active Witnesses (publishers) spend time in voluntary evangelistic activities as the cornerstone of their faith—being a witness for Jehovah. Their publications, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, freely distributed, describe current events as signs of the End Times.

Through various calculations of different biblical ages, Jehovah's Witness presidents have placed significance on a number of dates throughout the movement's history, including 1874, 1878, 1914, 1925, and 1975. However, scholar George Chryssides (2016, 226) tells us that it is a misunderstanding to consider these as different dates for the same event ('the end of the world', in popular parlance) that are recalculated as each fails to come to pass. Rather, they should be considered as a complex timetable of interconnected events; some of the dates have now been discarded but others still have central significance within the movement.

Contrary to some popular belief, Witnesses do not claim new [prophetic](#) revelations but only seek to interpret biblical prophecy. They believe that the gifts of the *holy spirit*, including prophecy, died out with the first generation of Christian disciples who had received the gifts directly, a position known as 'cessationism' (Chryssides 2016, 224). Unlike the founders of some other new religious movements and nineteenth-century sects, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Charles Taze Russell did not claim a direct personal experience of God or a new revelation; instead, he claimed to interpret predictive prophecies in the Bible. Hence, in the 1870s, through the *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* magazine and among the group of Bible Students, Russell argued that Christ had invisibly returned to earth in 1874 and that his visible return was imminent. One date given for his return was 1878; another was 1914.

A date that remains of central significance in the movement is 1914. Based on biblical calculations, it is considered to mark the end of the gentile times, which began in 607 bce when the last king of Judah was

removed from the throne, Jewish exiles were taken to Babylon, and Jerusalem was left uninhabited (Chryssides 2016, 229-230). The year 1914 marks the beginning of the End Times, the moment when Jesus began to rule the Kingdom of God in heaven and Satan was cast out of heaven to cause havoc on the earth until his defeat at the battle of [Armageddon](#). The year also marks Christ's second presence. Russell expected that the kingdom of heaven on earth would be established by 1915. Members alive in 1914 hence expected to be the generation that would witness Armageddon. This was still the case in 1984 when the May edition of *The Watchtower* included the article, '1914—The Generation That Will Not Pass Away'. This article stated that God's kingdom would come within the lifespan of those who were alive in 1914. This expectation has now been reconsidered (see below).

The expectation of this generation was given further emphasis by the second president of the society, Joseph Franklin Rutherford. In 1918, a number of Jehovah's Witnesses office bearers, including Rutherford, were arrested for their anti-war stance and there was a temporary reduction of the society's preaching activities. Rutherford interpreted this persecution of God's chosen few as evidence of the 'beginning of sorrows' on earth (Chryssides 2016, 234). In 1919, Rutherford gave a speech entitled, 'Millions Now Living Will Never Die!', which was developed into a publication the following year. In the publication, Rutherford described the newly formed League of Nations as the creation of Satan and supported by the clergy of 'nominal' (i.e. not true) Christendom. He also discussed the significance of the year 1925 as marking the time when the 'ancient worthies' would be resurrected—including the biblical [prophets](#) and patriarchs, such as Abraham and Isaac, who died before Jesus's ransom sacrifice and so could not be part of the 144,000. As the date came and went, Rutherford admitted his error and claimed that the date had been just his 'opinion' (Chryssides 2016, 236). However, in 1929, he purchased a property in California that he believed would house some of the resurrected 'ancient worthies' at an unspecified date in the future. He lived there until his death in 1942.

The final date of significance for the movement is 1975. This was interpreted as the start of the 'seventh millennium', marking six thousand years since the completion of the world and the creation of Adam. Many Witnesses expected this date to mark the start of Christ's reign and some increased their evangelistic activities and financial giving in preparation. However, Watch Tower publications made clear that while the biblical calculations were believed to be correct, the length of the time period between God creating humanity and resting on the sabbatical day is not known. Hence the exact start date of the seventh millennium, the new 'sabbatical day' on which God will begin his rule again, cannot be known. For this reason, the exact date of [Armageddon](#) cannot be calculated.

Since 1975, no new dates have been discussed by Witnesses, although 1984 was an important year as it saw the publication of '1914—The Generation That Will Not Pass Away', mentioned above. While the initial expectation had been that Jesus would return within the lives of the generation of 1914, in 1995, the Governing Body revised the 'generation doctrine' (Richman 2012; Chryssides 2016, 242). Once understood literally as a contemporaneous body of people with a human life span, it is now considered more loosely as a group of people. Witnesses still believe that the end of the present system (led by Satan) and the return of Christ will occur while there are members of the 144,000 alive on earth. While the 144,000 began to be chosen in the time of Jesus and began to take their places in 1918, Witnesses can still be added to this select group, meaning that there is no specified date for the end of the present system. Witnesses currently believe that [Armageddon](#) will occur within the lifetimes of those whose lives overlap with the 1914 generation (Watchtower Online Library 2014).

Hence, contemporary Witnesses have no specific dates on which to place their expectations and, instead, live in the belief that we are in the Last Days and that the battle of [Armageddon](#) and the return of Jesus are imminent.

Witnesses believe that the current age is led by Satan and that this system will soon collapse. Present world political and environmental conditions are taken as signs of the end. All current government systems are believed to be dominated by Satan—as are the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations, as noted above. Witnesses are awaiting the return of theocratic government—Christ’s rule in heaven. Their imprisonment in various countries for conscientious objection and their persecution in some countries, including Russia, for spreading their teachings have increased their sense of urgency and of the imminence of [Armageddon](#).

The current environmental situation is also taken as evidence. However, unlike some other millennial Christian movements, Witnesses do not believe that natural disasters are a punishment from God. They consider humankind’s detrimental actions to be contributing to climate change and as the source of many disasters. Nevertheless, they also believe that the Bible foretold that humankind would ‘ruin the Earth’ (Revelation 11:18). But as the earth was a gift from God, it is reasoned, God will not allow the complete destruction of the planet, and intends people to live on the earth forever. In the End Times, God will ‘ruin’ those ‘ruining the earth’—that is, the current government systems, which will be replaced with God’s kingdom.

During [Armageddon](#), it is believed, Christ will lead an army of angels to defeat the earth’s rulers. Satan will be imprisoned for a thousand years, and earth will gradually become a paradise, led by Christ as ruler in heaven (the Millennium). The 144,000, the ‘anointed class’, will be co-rulers with Christ and will inhabit spiritual bodies in heaven. The majority of the 144,000 are already believed to be in heaven. This group, led by Christ, will form the awaited theocratic government.

While Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that they are in ‘the truth’ and that all other religions, including ‘nominal Christianity’ (the term for all other denominations), are part of ‘Babylon the Great’, they do not teach that only Jehovah’s Witnesses will be saved. During Judgment Day, God will resurrect both the righteous and the unrighteous, who are currently ‘sleeping’—both will have the opportunity to be saved through accepting Jehovah. Those who are judged adversely will experience oblivion, as Jehovah’s Witnesses do not believe in the concept of hell. Those who are saved will form the ‘great crowd’ of people from all nations. Their physical bodies will be restored to perfection and they will live on earth, which will become a paradise. Families will be reunited (if all members have accepted the truth) and some Witnesses who do not have children believe that they will do so in paradise. All suffering will finally be eradicated—there will be no more sickness, sorrow, or death, no wars, no wickedness and plenty of food (jw.org 2020a). Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that the ‘[ultimate destiny](#)’ (jw.org 2017) for the majority of true Christians is not heaven but everlasting life on earth—‘The righteous will possess the earth, and they will live forever on it’ (Psalm 37:29; see also jw.org 2014). It is this message of hope that Jehovah’s Witnesses seek to share through their door-to-door evangelizing and inviting guests to the Memorial of Christ’s death.

A Note on Sources

Jehovah's Witnesses produce a great deal of written information through their various magazines and Bible study guides. The early leaders were prolific writers; Charles Taze Russell, as well as penning the *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* magazine, wrote a six-volume theological series, first called *Millennial Dawn* (1886) and later renamed *Studies in the Scriptures* (1886-1904). Rutherford wrote a number of shorter, more accessible volumes, the most famous of which is arguably *Millions Now Living Will Never Die!* (1920). The third president, Nathan Homer Knorr, oversaw the publication of the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* in 1961, as noted above. Since Knorr's reign, all Watch Tower material has been published anonymously. Almost all of the Watch Tower publications are accessible online, with most post-1950s publications available at the Jehovah's Witnesses website, jw.org.

Despite this wealth of information, the relatively large number of Jehovah's Witnesses, their presence in many countries, and their unique teachings, there is a relative lack of academic study of the movement within the disciplines of sociology of religion and religious studies. Notable exceptions include Professor James Beckford's *The Trumpet of Prophecy* (1975) and the current work of Dr George Chrystides, who focuses on the history and theology of the movement, and Dr Zoe Knox, who focuses on such societal issues as Jehovah's Witnesses' position on blood transfusion, politics, and evangelism. Internationally, Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stoklosa's three-volume publication, *Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe* (2016, 2018) is useful, as are Jennifer Jacobs Henderson's study of Jehovah's Witness litigation in the United States (*Defending the Good News*, 2010) and Emily Baran's study of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia until 2014 (*Dissent on the Margins*, 2014).

In general, Jehovah's Witnesses do not have their own tradition of scholarship and do not usually wish to submit their theological materials to academic debate; their focus is on spreading 'the truth'. Jehovah's Witnesses do not encourage their young people to pursue higher education, as universities are considered to be 'worldly' places incompatible with the Witness lifestyle. Manual and trade professions are preferred, and the accrual of excessive wealth is frowned upon; it is not needed in the Last Days. However, members have written autobiographies and histories of the organization at various times. Examples include a close associate of Russell, A. H. Macmillan, who wrote an autobiography, *Faith on the March* (1957); M. Cole's *Jehovah's Witnesses: The New World Society* (1955); and *Bible Students in Britain* (1989) by A. O. Hudson, who left the society to join a splinter organization. The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York has also published official accounts of its own history, namely *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* (1959) and *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (1993).

Former members have also published accounts and exposés of their experiences in their movement. These include William J. Schnell's *Thirty Years a Watch Tower Slave* (1959), Raymond Franz's *Crisis of Conscience* (1983), Carl Olof Jonsson's *The Gentile Times Reconsidered* (1983), James M. Penton's *Apocalypse Delayed* (1985), and Robert Crompton's *Counting the Days to Armageddon* (1996). Jehovah's Witnesses are also often the subject of 'anti-cult' and 'counter-cult' literature because of their teachings that put them at odds with mainstream society and/or other Christian denominations. The issues of refusal of blood donation, disfellowshipping, and historical claims of child sexual abuse are particular flashpoints—and are likely to continue to be so in the future. Not all Jehovah's Witnesses agree with the position on blood. The organization Advocates for Jehovah's Witness Reform on Blood consists of Jehovah's Witnesses who want to remain members and have completely free choice of medical treatment; they argue that the Watch

Tower's current position on blood is doctrinally wrong. There are also former Witnesses who claim to have been abused within the movement. Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the organizations included in the UK's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse investigation into child protection in religious organizations and settings. They were also the subject of one case study in the 2015 Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. There are, in addition, a number of court cases against the Watch Tower Societies ongoing in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, brought by individuals or groups of former members for alleged abuses. In response, the Watch Tower Society has emphasized its child protection policies and procedures in its magazines and other publications, such as *The Watchtower* of May 2019.

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