We have seen how L. Ron Hubbard uses strategies of association to create a relationship with the audience. By telling his own life story, he indirectly illustrates the major underpinnings of the movement that he founded. In this chapter, we see a very different kind of persuasive strategy. Unlike Hubbard’s argument from ethos, the Jehovah’s Witnesses rely on an understanding of quasi-logical argument. Logos does not involve strict logic, as we have seen from work in rhetoric and argument theory. Rather, the reader is primed to accept arguments because of the appearance of logic. Discourse markers signal arguments here, rather than the chronology used in Hubbard’s speech. This persuasive technique is predictable from what we know about the movement as both ex-members and scholars describe the conversion to the Jehovah’s Witnesses as more rational than spiritual.

Background

The Jehovah’s Witnesses\(^1\) was founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1869 when he began a Bible study routine which caused him to question his faith in Adventism. It was not actually until 1931 under Joseph Franklin Rutherford that it became known as the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Russell was involved in editing religious periodicals, eventually establishing his own, Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence. This has since been renamed Watchtower and, with a circulation of 10 million, is distributed internationally through missions in 214 countries. The Jehovah’s Witnesses is a Christian-based movement in so far as the Bible is its primary text. At the same time, the Witnesses claim that Christianity is in error and deny the Trinity, ‘the personality of the Holy Spirit, the deity of Jesus, his bodily resurrection, his visible return, and
the reality of hell’ (Markham, 1987: 75). Most people are familiar with
the Witnesses’ refusal to have blood transfusions which has led to much
(successful) litigation on the grounds of religious freedom.2 They have
also been active in developing and promoting alternatives. Even though
their prediction for the end of the world in 1914 was not fulfilled
(Markham, 1987: 75),3 the movement has continued to grow. The
re-interpretation of predictions within the movement has been a source
of much external criticism. Interestingly, the way in which the failed
prophecy was eventually dealt with was to redefine the meaning of the
prophecy, that is, of the words of prophecy.4

Though the Bible is the movement’s primary text, it is not the only
sacred text. Russell’s Studies in the Scripture, a Bible study text, is in many
ways more important than Scripture itself. Russell maintains that the
Studies contain the ‘light of Scriptures’ and that if one does not use
them, if one only consults the Bible, one will go into darkness within
two years.5 Indeed the metaphor of light also helps account for how the
movement survives failed predictions. Nicholls writes that ‘the Society is
guided by “increasing light” ’ (1994: 10), that is, increasing revelation.

The movement is not directly descended from Russell, however. After
his death in 1916, a struggle for power took place in which Rutherford
took over the existing legal entity ‘and the pattern of Russell’s control
[was] completely altered by Rutherford’ (Rogerson, 1969: 39). It became
a hierarchical theocracy and thus, the group changed significantly
under Rutherford’s leadership, in much the same way as the Church of
Scientology was re-organised by L. Ron Hubbard.6

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ literature appeals to knowledge and implementa-
tion of knowledge as the path to salvation. It presents itself as an
intellectual movement which offers an intellectual enlightenment as
the path to a spiritual one. This is effected by the Bible study courses
that the movement provides. This ‘intellectual’ approach leads to
confusion about why anyone would join this religion at all in so far as
prima facie there is no spiritual element. While I will not address that
question specifically here, it is worth examining an assessment of this
approach. J.A. Beckford writes,

First and foremost we must report the virtual absence of anything
which closely resembles the phenomenon of religious conversion as it
is customarily understood. Jehovah’s Witness converts certainly experi-
ence no sudden conviction that they have miraculously received
God’s grace nor that they have attained an immediate assurance
of salvation. In fact, very few Witnesses can isolate a particular