

# ***Martyreō* and Cognates in the New Testament: Some Notes**

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## **Abstract**

This study of *martyreō* and its cognates begins with observations on the distribution in the New Testament and continues with earlier usages in Greek literature and the Septuagint. While in early Judaism witness is not yet equated to martyrdom, instances of bearing witness leading to death emerge. The study goes on to define the specific usages in various parts of the New Testament. Witness leading to suffering anticipates the later Christian notion of martyrdom. Some theological conclusions are: (1) witness is about God's revelation in history; (2) early witnesses sometimes report about events beyond ordinary experience (e.g., the resurrection of Christ); (3) witnessing is prolonged in conjunction to the work of the Spirit; and (4) it is unsurprisingly accompanied by persecution.

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**T**he verb *martyreō* and its cognates do not have a narrowly-defined and technical meaning. This makes it all the more important to observe syntactical and semantic contexts with some care, and especially to observe the idiolectic distinctives found in some authors.

## I. Notes on Distribution in the New Testament

Without providing the detailed data readily available in any concordance (digital or otherwise) and in superior articles like those in *NIDNTTE*,<sup>1</sup> it may nevertheless be worthwhile to remind ourselves of some of the distribution patterns that surface in the NT. The verb occurs 76x in the NT, but primarily in the Johannine corpus (31x in John, 10x in the Johannine letters, 4x in Revelation), as compared with 1x in Matthew, 1x in Luke, 8x in Paul, and 8x in Hebrews. By contrast, of the 19x the noun *martyrion* occurs in the NT, none is found in John's Gospel or in the Johannine letters, only 1x in Revelation, and 9x in the Synoptics (3x in each).<sup>2</sup> Again, the noun *martyrs* occurs 35x in the NT, none in the Johannine gospel or letters (though 5x in Revelation). On the other hand, the noun *martyria* shows up 37x in the NT, and of these 26 occurrences are in the Johannine corpus (14x in John, 4x in John's letters, 8x in Revelation).<sup>3</sup> The verb *martyromai* occurs 5x in the NT (Acts 10:26; 26:22; Gal 5:3; Eph 4:17; 1 Tim 2:12), the compound *diamartyromai* 15x, nine of them in Acts, "where it almost always serves as a special expression for the proclamation of the apostolic message, the urgently wooing address of the gospel of Christ (e.g., Acts 4:20; 8:25 [the word of the Lord]; 18:5 [Jesus as Messiah]; 20:24 [good news of God's grace]; 28:23 [the kingdom of God])."<sup>4</sup> Almost a dozen other cognates appear in the NT, none of them frequently, and they are well surveyed by the classic book on this subject by Trites.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Notes on Earlier Usage

Referring to the act of bearing witness, *martyria* occurs once in Homer, along with several instances of *martyros*, referring to the person who bears witness. Later classical authors prefer *martyrs* for the latter. Occasionally *martyrs* can be used to refer to gods (often cited is Pindar *Pyth.* 4.167, *ammin martyrs estō Zeus*, "let Zeus be our witness"), but more commonly to human beings and even to bits of evidence. By contrast with *martyria*, the noun *martyrion* tends to be used for the content of the testimony rather than for

<sup>1</sup> Moisés Silva, revision ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 3:234–46.

<sup>2</sup> Inevitably that will prompt Johannine scholars to remember that John is awash in occurrences of the verb *pisteuō* but has no instance of the noun *pistis*.

<sup>3</sup> Owing to textual variants, not all authorities are agreed on these numbers (e.g., *martyrion/mysterion* in 1 Cor 2:1).

<sup>4</sup> *NIDNTTE* 3:293.

<sup>5</sup> Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, SNTSMS 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 66–77.

the act of testifying or of bearing witness. Thus, it can sometimes be rendered “evidence” or even “proof.” Admittedly *martyria* sometimes carries that sense: the line between *martyria* and *martyrion* is not as rigid as some might wish. Both *martyrion* and the verb *martyreō* occur as early as Pindar. The verb commonly means “to bear witness,” and is frequently used to confirm the truth of a statement, whether to someone’s advantage or disadvantage.

Very often and certainly important are the many instances in which this word group is used in the legal sphere. In such cases witnesses are expected to give truthful testimony without constraint (such as torture). But when the word group stretches beyond the legal sphere to the domain of private and even public (but non-legal) relationships, its terms may refer not only to “the establishment of events or actual relations or facts of experience on the basis of direct personal knowledge,” but also to “the proclamation of views or truths of which the speaker is convinced.”<sup>6</sup> In such cases *martyria* may be not so much the giving of objective testimony as an expression of philosophical or moral conviction.

Usage in the LXX follows roughly similar patterns, though several distinctive occurrences surface. For example, *martyrion* in Psalm 119 (118) and elsewhere (e.g., Deut 4:25) can refer to the Torah, conceived not only as established law and specific commands but as godly wisdom. The psalmist loves and marvels at such “testimony” (119:119, 129—presumably God’s testimony), pledging to observe it (119:88, 146). Such “testimony” is to be cherished precisely because it is the expression of the covenant, and thus the means of knowing God. Another LXX coinage is the pleonastic use of *pseudomartyreō* in the Decalogue (Exod 20:16; Deut 6:20) with *martyria pseudēs*. By and large, however, *martyria* occurs rather sparsely in the LXX.

The most frequently-occurring member of this word group in the LXX is *martyrion*, but mainly (about 140x) as a mistranslation of Hebrew *mô‘ēd* in the expression “the tent of meeting.” This is commonly rendered in Greek *hē skēnē tou martyrion* (“the tent of witness,” e.g., Exod 28:43), even though *mô‘ēd* never means “witness.” The reasons for this strange inaccuracy are hard to decipher. The ark of the covenant, which of course was housed in the Most Holy Place within the tent of meeting, is often called “the box of the testimony” (*hē kibōtos tou martyriou*, about 20x, e.g., Exod 20:33), and the tablets within the ark of the covenant can be called “the tablets of the testimony” (*hai plakes tou martyriou*, e.g., Exod 31:18). Recognizing that “witness” or “testimony” (*martyrion*), as we have seen, can refer to the law or the law-covenant, it is possible that certain semantic borrowing has taken

<sup>6</sup> TDNT 4.478; cited also in NIDNTTE 3:235–36.

place,<sup>7</sup> with the result that by *hē skēnē tou martyriōn* the LXX translators meant something like “the tent of the law-covenant,”<sup>8</sup> rather than “the tent of the testimony.”

The noun *martyrs* in the LXX continues in its classical sense to refer to someone who bears witness to events based on observation or at least personal knowledge. That *martyrs* may be called to give testimony in a legal context, confirming an agreement or an event. Sometimes God himself is invoked as the witness (e.g., Gen 31:43–54; 1 Sam 12:3–7); indeed, he may step forward as a witness against Israel (e.g., Jer 26:23 [29:23]). More commonly, however, the word refers to human witnesses—e.g., the elders are witnesses to the contract Boaz makes (Ruth 4:9–11). Considerable emphasis is placed on the responsibility of witnesses to speak the truth, along with severe warnings against lying witnesses (e.g., Exod 23:1; Deut 19:16–18; Ps 27:12; Prov 12:17; Isa 8:2). The concern to establish and confirm the truth and avoid mendacity is strengthened by the procedural stipulation that certain kinds of decisions can be established only on the basis of multiple witnesses (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6–7; 19:15–18).

Despite the strong lines of continuity between the use of the witness word group in classical Greek and its use in the Greek of the Old Testament, there does not appear to be any instance where *martyriōn* or a cognate refers to subjective convictions that have no basis in objective observation. More interesting is the growing recognition in the literature of Second Temple Judaism that bearing witness could issue in suffering, even martyrdom. Nevertheless there does not appear to be any instance in this literature of *martyrs* or any cognate of the word group referring to people who bear witness to the point of death, indeed who bear witness *by* dying as martyrs.<sup>9</sup> In other words, “the Old Testament and later Judaism are excluded as the place of origin of the title of martyr” as it came to be used in early Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

### III. Notes on Some Distinctive New Testament Usages

In broad strokes, the NT writers maintain the usage found in earlier Greek. The relatively few occurrences of the word group in the Synoptic Gospels

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 86–88.

<sup>8</sup> Doubtless that is why, in the two places where *hē skēnē tou martyriōn* occurs in the NT (viz., Acts 7:44; Rev 15:5), the NIV translators render it “the tabernacle of the covenant law.”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. TDNT 4:486–88, and especially Norbert Brox, *Zeuge und Märtyrer: Untersuchungen zur frühchristlichen Zeugnis-Terminologie* (Munich: Kösel, 1961).

<sup>10</sup> Brox, *Zeuge*, 176.

are dominated by legal use, many in connection with the trial of Jesus. That trial conjured up evidence understood to be false by the writers of the Gospels: note some of the occurrences of the *pseudo-* compounds of our word group (Matt 26:59–60 par. Mark 14:56–57), the instances of *katamartyreō* (Matt 26:62; 27:13; Mark 14:60), two passages with *martys* (Matt 26:65 par. Mark 14:63), and four with *martyria* (Mark 14:55–56, 59; Luke 22:71). Acts can continue this legal use of words in this group in connection with the (false) witness surrounding the execution of Stephen (Acts 6:13; 7:58). Other NT corpora also use the words of this group in a legal sense abstracted from contextual overtones of false witness. For example, the demand for “two or three witnesses” (Deut 17:6; 19:15), clearly in a legal sense, surfaces in several NT books (Matt 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28). But it may be more helpful to identify distinctive uses. As there is no straight-line development of the usage of this word group across time, but rather idiolectic preferences related in part to the themes of individual authors, it may be misleading to present the evidence in temporal order—so I have purposely not done so.

(1) *Hebrews*. Remarkably, the verb *martyreō* appears in the passive voice in seven of its eight occurrences (the exception is Heb 10:15). Especially in chapter 11 it is clear that those who make up this corridor of faith have been “testified to” or “witnessed to”—i.e., commended—by God himself, who hides behind the passive verbs.<sup>11</sup> It is all the more remarkable, then, that in 12:1 they have themselves become “a great cloud of witnesses” whose testimony is for the benefit of the church.

(2) *Synoptics*. We have already observed how the relatively small number of instances of this word group in the Synoptics tends to function in a legal context and focus on the passion narrative. But one distinctive expression draws our attention. In Matthew 8:4 (par. Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14), Jesus tells the leper, now healed, to show himself to the priest “and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony [*eis martyria*] to them.” This should probably not be taken in an exclusively negative sense, as if the expression means that the healing will be validated and thus serve to accuse, or perhaps even condemn, the leaders for their unbelief. Rather, this “testimony” speaks to the truth of who Jesus is because it attests to his power to heal: the validation prescribed by the Law thus provides a testimony to Jesus’s identity, whether it is well received or not. Indirectly, then, the law bears witness to

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<sup>11</sup> Contrast Acts 22:12, a rare use of the passive outside of Hebrews, where Paul is “highly respected” (*martyroumenos*), that is, testified to, commended, not by God but “by all the Jews living there.”

Jesus (cf. 5:17). Similarly in Matthew 10:18: “you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony [*eis martyrion*] to them and the Gentiles (NRSV; ESV has “to bear witness before them and the Gentiles”; NIV, “as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles”). Once again, this cannot be purely negative. The witness Jesus’s followers bear is to Christ and his gospel, regardless of how it is received (cf. also Mark 13:9; Luke 21:13–14). And finally, the phrase *eis martyrion* occurs in Mark 6:11 (par. Luke 9:15), where Jesus instructs his trainee apostles to “leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony [*eis martyrion*] against them.” Here the overtone is clearly negative: shaking off the dust of one’s feet is not an open-ended witness that may be accepted or rejected, but a sign that rejection has already taken place.

(3) *Acts*. The most striking development of the theme of witness in Acts concerns the witness that the apostles and others bear to the resurrection of Jesus Christ—not only in contexts where the *mart-* word group is used (e.g., “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” [Acts 4:33]), but also in contexts where the theme of bearing witness to Jesus is very strong even if this word group is not present (e.g., “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” [Acts 4:19–20]).<sup>12</sup> This is in line with the injunction of the resurrected Jesus in Luke 24:46–48, where the witnesses attest to not only the resurrection but the veracity of the gospel: “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” The connection with the opening chapter of Acts is obvious: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). The replacement for Judas Iscariot has to “become a witness with us of his resurrection” (1:22). This element of Christian witness captures not only the Twelve and others who traveled with Jesus from the beginning (2:32; 3:15; 13:31), but also Paul, who likewise sees the risen Lord Jesus (22:15; 26:16). Indeed, Paul’s evangelistic ministry can be summarized as testifying about Jesus (23:11). Even where the *mart-* word group does not in Acts directly have as its focus the resurrection of Jesus or the gospel, it continues to carry the

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<sup>12</sup> This is the place to remind ourselves that a full coverage of the theme of witness would include not only many passages that speak of hearing and seeing certain things, but also of the use of *autoptai* (“eyewitnesses”) in Luke 1:2, which stands as a sentinel over all of Luke-Acts.

sense of “bearing witness” to something observed, such as good deeds, one’s reputation, or the like (Acts 6:3; 10:22; 16:2; 22:5, 12; 26:5).

One further feature in Acts that must be noted is the use of *martys*. As opposition arises against Christians and the witness they bear, it becomes increasingly clear that the way of the witness is the way of the cross. Paul looks back on his pre-Christian life and confesses, “And when the blood of your *martys* Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him” (Acts 22:20). The NIV here translates *martys* by “martyr,” leaving “witness” for the footnote. This is a mistake: the semantic crossover may be beginning in this passage, but it is not yet established. See further the comments on the Apocalypse, below.

(4) *Paul*. The word group occurs 35x in the Pauline corpus, with twelve of them showing up in the Pastoral Epistles. Mirroring usage in Acts, Paul bears witness to the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead (1 Cor 15:15). Indeed, if Christ has not been raised, it follows that Paul and others who have borne such witness are demonstrated to be false witnesses (*pseudomartyres*, 15:15). Sometimes the verb *martyreō* attests something important but less transcendent than the gospel: e.g., Christians doing what is right (2 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:15; Col 4:13), or Jewish people having a zeal for God (Rom 10:2). Unique is Paul’s use of the verb in Romans 3:21, where, after insisting that the righteousness he is proclaiming has been made known apart from the law, the apostle nonetheless insists that the Law and the Prophets testify to this righteousness. Lodged in a salvation-historical context, presumably this means that the Law and the Prophets “testify” to the righteousness secured in the gospel by anticipating it, pointing it out in advance, announcing it along the trajectories of redemptive history as well as in specific words.

Some have suggested that Paul “may have been the first to give the noun *martyrion* the special sense of gospel proclamation”<sup>13</sup>—e.g., “just as [lit.] the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you” (1 Cor 1:6; cf. NIV, “God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you”). Similarly in 2 Thessalonians 1:10, the substance of the testimony is as broad as the gospel (“because you believed our testimony to you”). Yet Paul does not turn *martyrion* into a technical expression that inevitably refers to the gospel. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 1:12 the word can refer to what Paul’s conscience does to him (“Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world ... with integrity and godly sincerity”).

As in classical Greek and the LXX, the apostle can use *martys*, invariably in the singular, to refer to God, who bears witness to Paul’s words and

<sup>13</sup> NIDNTTE 3:241.



actions (Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23; Phil 1:8; 1 Thess 2:5).<sup>14</sup> The plural form of the noun is used to refer to the “many witnesses” who testify to Timothy’s call and ministry (1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 2:2). It is also used to refer to the two or three witnesses required by Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15 (2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19).

(5) *John*. We have already noted that the frequency with which this word group occurs in the Johannine corpus widely outstrips its use elsewhere in the NT, and that John uses the verb *martyreō* and the noun *martyria*, both signaling action, and never *martyrion* or any of the *mart-* compounds. Even *martyrs* (“witness”) is absent from John’s Gospel and Epistles (though it does appear several times in the Apocalypse). John says quite a bit about those who bear witness, but his vocabulary preference is for the words favoring action rather than identity.

We may usefully outline John’s use of the word group under four headings:

(a) John commonly uses the verb *martyreō* in one of its common senses, human attestation, human “bearing witness” to public facts. John the Baptist directs his followers to bear witness to the fact that he, John, never claimed to be the Messiah (John 3:28). Toward the end of Jesus’s public ministry, some people bear witness to the resurrection of Lazarus (12:17). Jesus himself does not need human testimony (2:24). When Jesus tells the court, “If I said something wrong ... testify as to what is wrong” (18:23), he is demanding that the temple guards provide truthful witness of substantive evidence. In 3 John, where the verb and noun together occur three times (vv. 3, 6, 12), the witness about Gaius and Demetrius is faithful commendation based on observation of good behavior.

(b) Although all four canonical Gospels open their respective accounts by describing the ministry of John the Baptist, the Fourth Gospel, much more strongly than the other three, casts that ministry in terms of witness borne to Jesus. John “came as a witness [*eis martyrian*, ‘for a testimony’]<sup>15</sup> to testify [*hina martyresē*] concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not that light; he came only as a witness [*hina martyresē*, ‘in order to bear witness’] to the light” (1:7–8; cf. further 1:15, 19, 32–34, 3:26, 31–32). When Jesus publicly affirms the validity of the witness of John the Baptist, the wording suggests that the Baptist’s witness covers more than observable phenomena but includes his “take” on Jesus: “You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth” (5:33).

(c) Other people and things bear witness to Jesus, including the Scriptures (5:39), which doubtless amounts to saying that God bears witness to Jesus in

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the plural where Christians bear witness along with God: *humeis martyres kai ho theos* (“You are witnesses, and so is God”).

<sup>15</sup> Not to be confused with *eis martyrian*, discussed above.



the Scriptures (cf. Gal 3:8). The Father bears witness to Jesus (e.g., 5:32). Most commonly, however, Jesus's disciples bear witness to him, but commonly in contexts where that to which they bear witness is both the observable and its proper inferences. Whoever accepts Jesus's testimony "has certified that God is truthful" (3:33). The faith of the Samaritans begins with the testimony of the Samaritan woman—i.e., her witness to her experience with Jesus, and the inferences to be drawn (4:39). The witness of the disciples to Jesus is drawn into and becomes part of the witness of the Paraclete (15:26–27; cf. 1 John 5:6). In the closing verses of the Gospel, "the disciple who testifies to these things and wrote them down" is certified to be providing truthful testimony (21:24). The sweeping witness of the first Epistle runs from historical eyewitness testimony regarding the incarnation<sup>16</sup> to conviction about the truth of the gospel: "The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ... And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ... And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 John 1:2; 4:14; 5:11).

(d) In John's Gospel, Jesus also bears witness to himself. The expression *martyrō peri* ("I bear witness concerning") occurs 19x in John's Gospel, once in 1 John, and nowhere else in the NT. Of the 19 occurrences in the Gospel, eight stipulate *martyrō peri emou* ("I bear witness concerning me"); another three read *martyrō peri emautou* ("I bear witness concerning myself," 5:31; 8:14, 18).<sup>17</sup> At a superficial level, this testimony of Jesus to himself leads to a formal contradiction. In John 5:30–31 we read, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. If I testify about myself [*martyrō peri emou*], my testimony is not true." A little later, however, when Jesus declares that he is the light of the world, his opponents criticize him for appearing as his own witness; his testimony must therefore be invalid (8:12–13). Jesus replies at some length:

<sup>16</sup> I here take the traditional view, rather than the suggestion put forward by Matthew D. Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection of the Incarnate Christ: A Reading of 1 John*, SNTSMS 153 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), who argues that that to which John bears witness is Jesus's resurrection, not his incarnation. For the purposes of this essay, it makes little difference which option one selects: in either case, John runs from witness regarding historical events (the incarnation, the resurrection) to affirmation of the gospel.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Gospels Before Normativization: A Critique of Francis Watson's *Gospel Writing*," *JNTS* 37 (2014): 193–95, appeals to these statistics to demonstrate that the so-called Egerton Gospel is dependent on John, not the other way around, since the *peri emou* expression is found in GEger A 4 (using Watson's label).

Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me. (8:14–18)

How do these two passages belong together in the same book? How shall we think about the concatenation of “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true,” and “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid”?

As Simpson puts it, “If the statements are juxtaposed outside the context of the conversation there is a contradiction.”<sup>18</sup> In reality, the conversational context clarifies and limits the naked statement in both cases. In the first, Jesus’s insistence that he is not testifying about himself is cast against the background of 5:16–30. There, Jesus’s insistence that he has the same rights to act on the Sabbath as his Father does elicits the charge that he is calling God his own Father in a way that makes himself equal with God (5:17–18). In other words, Jesus’s Jewish opponents saw the force of Jesus’s claim, but interpreted it in polytheistic categories: if Jesus makes himself equal to God, then there are two Gods, the Father and Jesus. Jesus’s response paves the road toward the peculiarly Christian understanding of monotheism. Jesus insists he is not another God, an independent God; far from it: he can do nothing by himself (5:19). Yet at the same time, this unique Son does *whatever* he sees the Father doing, including the kinds of things that only God can do, such as making a universe (1:3) and raising the dead and giving them life (5:21). Meanwhile the Father, for his part, intends that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father (5:23), which inevitably means honoring him as God. *Within the framework of this theological dialogue*, Jesus’s statement “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true” is not so much a judicial pronouncement of what constitutes valid testimony, as a revelatory statement insisting that he is *not* providing independent claims, for he is *not* an independent, second God. He does what the Father gives him to do; he says what the Father gives him to say. His claims are thus of a piece with what God says, which is why Jesus goes on to say, “There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is true” (5:32). John the Baptist likewise bore truthful testimony to Jesus (5:33)—yet, says Jesus, the fact that Jesus mentions this is not because he “accepts” human testimony: the one who is identified as having the

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas W. Simpson, “Testimony in John’s Gospel: The Puzzle of 5:31 and 8:14,” *TynBul* 65 (2014): 214.

authority of God does not hang about waiting for someone to acknowledge his status. Jesus does not need John and his witness. Jesus mentions John, he says, so that “you may be saved” (5:35): the crowds need the witness of John the Baptist, but Jesus does not. Jesus himself has weightier witness than that of John, namely the Father himself, disclosed in the works Jesus does and in the Scriptures God provides (5:36–39). Jesus does not accept the witness of the Baptist in the sense that he does not accept glory from human beings (5:41). Jesus’s opponents, however, do not believe the witness of John the Baptist, they do not see the significance of the signs Jesus performs (including the healing in this chapter that precipitates this discussion), and they do not grasp what the Scriptures speak, so how can they possibly believe what Jesus says (5:47)? So we conclude, again, that Jesus’s statement “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true” is not so much a judicial pronouncement of what constitutes valid testimony, as a revelatory statement disclosing the oneness of Jesus’s testimony with the testimony of God himself.

When we turn to the second disputed witness passage, once again the dialogue context is important. “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going” (8:14), Jesus insists—unlike his opponents, who judge by human standards and who have no idea where Jesus came from or where he is going (8:14). In other words, Jesus can testify about himself, making these spectacular claims, because what he is doing is speaking out of his own experience—and in this, he stands with his Father, who bears witness to the same truth (8:16–18).

All of this is in line with what Jesus elsewhere says to Nicodemus: “Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony [*martyria*]” (3:11): Jesus speaks out of the uniqueness of his own experience, his own origin, his own identity with God. Indeed, the reason he was born and came into the world was “to testify to the truth” (18:37). Thus the witness Jesus bears is witness to *what he knows out of his own unique experience*, but in the nature of the case it cannot be witness to *what others think of as verifiable fact*, since they have no similar experience. From their perspective, it is a revelatory claim, one they cannot accept. All the testimony of Jesus’s words about his origin and mission and status, all the testimony of Jesus’s works, all the testimony of the Father in the pages of Scripture, cannot be squeezed into the restricted, unbelieving, and frankly sinful grid of their limited criteria. Human demands for legitimation, grounded in the criteria of merely human and fallen experience, are hopelessly inadequate, because they cannot

hear or see the revelation God provides, the revelatory witness without which there can be no grasp of who Jesus is.<sup>19</sup>

(6) *Revelation*. The distribution in the Apocalypse of the words from our word group I summarized at the beginning of this article. Some of the distinctive uses are bound up with the apocalyptic genre in which most of the book is written. John's task, he declares, is to testify to everything he saw—that is, to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2), which apparently came to him when he found himself in exile on Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). The notion of seeing the word of God is not transparent, but John probably means that what he saw was the sequence of apocalyptic visions, which constitute the message of God, the word of God. In that sense, he saw the word of God. If so, John is bearing witness to what he has personally experienced, even if that experience is visionary and cannot be corroborated by other witnesses. In short, as sometimes in the Gospel of John, the content is revelatory. The expression “the testimony of Jesus (Christ),” found in both these verses, is ambiguous: does *martyria Iēsou* (*Christou*) refer to the testimony that Jesus provides, or perhaps to testimony about Jesus, i.e., testimony whose content is Jesus? Certainly Jesus can elsewhere be described as “the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5; 3:14). As the faithful witness, there must be ways in which Jesus *bears* witness. But when the same expression occurs in 12:17, most commentators take it to refer to testimony about Jesus: “those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus [*martyria Iēsou*].” As Spicq puts it, “All missionary preaching is a *martyrion* announcing the advent of salvation (1 Cor 1:6; 2:1; 2 Thess 1:10; 1 Tim 2:6; 2 Tim 1:8), so that it can be said that the disciples ‘hold to the testimony of Jesus’ (Rev 12:17; cf. 19:10; 20:4; Acts 22:20).”<sup>20</sup> Again, when the expression occurs twice in 19:10, it probably has the same meaning. John had fallen down before the interpreting angel, who tells him to stop: “Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus [*martyria Iēsou*]. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears witness to Jesus” (lit., “For the Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus [*martyria Iēsou*]”). The flow of thought

<sup>19</sup> Despite many interesting and stimulating elements in the book by Andrew T. Lincoln (*Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000]), his reading of much of the language of witness in John as contributing to the shape of the Fourth Gospel as a lawsuit does not adequately wrestle with the revelatory nature of the witness of Jesus to himself.

<sup>20</sup> Ceslaus Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:449.

seems to be something like this: Don't worship me, the angel whose task it is to interpret these prophetic visions and who stands with you as a fellow servant who joins you in bearing witness to Jesus. Rather, worship God, who has given these visions that bear witness to Jesus, these visions that are thus identified with the Spirit of prophecy, God's Spirit of prophecy.

Most striking, however, is the way in which Antipas, a Christian in Pergamum who was executed for his faith, is called Christ's "faithful witness" (*martys*, 2:13). More broadly, John describes the wretched action of Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth, who becomes drunk on the blood of God's saints, "the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus" (17:6). The language reminds us of the reference to Stephen in Acts 22:20. Both there and here in the Apocalypse, believers who bear witness to Jesus may seal their witness with their blood. These are the transitional passages that show the first stages of how the very word for witness came eventually to mean (Christian) martyr—that is, Christians who give their lives to maintain their witness to Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. *Final Theological Reflections*

We may usefully draw attention to four things:

(1) One of the remarkable elements about Christianity is its claim to revelation *in history*. The many sacred writings of Hinduism and Buddhism are not cast the same way. The Qur'an is largely devoted to Allah directly addressing human beings, mostly with commands; the book includes relatively little history.<sup>22</sup> Muhammad himself, though hugely important as the final prophet (which means the last one in the sequence of events we call history), is not considered inspired to write the words of the Qur'an; rather, he is presented as the faithful recorder of what Allah gives him. As a result, there is no complex doctrine of two authors, one divine and one human, and therefore no wrestling with the ways in which the social location or the idiolectic preferences of the human author might in some measure determine what is written. From the Muslim point of view, this protects the otherness of Allah, along with the perception that the Qur'an is the utterly pure word of God. By

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<sup>21</sup> By further extension, of course, the word "martyr" came to refer to all those who give their lives for a cause, regardless of the cause. In other words, the word came to be dissociated from its Christian roots. In some sectors today, the word has undergone another change. Someone might say, in exasperated criticism, "Oh, don't be such a martyr!," referring to someone who feels very sorry for himself.

<sup>22</sup> The history of Muhammad is considered very important for exemplary purposes, of course, but that is largely relegated to the Hadith.

contrast, Christians insist that God's self-disclosure in history, including his sovereign use of the words of specific human beings, far from jeopardizing his transcendence, in reality demonstrates the measureless lengths to which he goes to rescue his rebellious image-bearers. Such self-disclosures *in history*, not only in specific historical events but even in words deployed by specific historical individuals, establish the trajectories that bring us to the supreme self-disclosure in history, the incarnation of the Word.

This emphasis on history means that there are huge swaths of God's self-disclosure that can be witnessed. To the Muslim, such a notion threatens to make God contingent; to the Christian, God remains sovereign and true in such revelation-in-history events, regardless of whether the human witnesses faithfully report what takes place, or even understand it.

All of this means that the witness language of the NT is extraordinarily important. "The principal events of the public ministry of Jesus were wrought in the presence of his chosen companions and apostles. They had been present in Jerusalem during the final week and were in a position to attest the facts of his trial, crucifixion, and burial. Above all, they were competent witnesses to vouch for the fact of his resurrection."<sup>23</sup> The book of Acts is especially forceful in this respect, not least in the speeches. Even in the appointment of a replacement for Judas Iscariot, the nascent church was eager to "choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21–22), for only such men could be witnesses of this historical revelation. The four evangelists, however theologically driven they may be, are no less committed to establishing the facts of the origins of the gospel, largely based on eyewitness testimony.<sup>24</sup> If possible, Paul is even more forceful. Not only does he insist that the historical data surrounding Jesus's death and resurrection are matters "of first importance" that are established by a plethora of witnesses (1 Cor 15:1–8), but that if Jesus did not in fact rise from the dead, then these witnesses are liars, false witness—and Christian faith is invalid and useless (15:12–19). In other words, the validity of Christian faith turns, at least in part, on the truthfulness of faith's object, of God's self-disclosure *in history*, which is attested by witnesses.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *NIDNTE* 3:243.

<sup>24</sup> In the past this has been a common perception of the nature of the canonical Gospels (e.g., A. Barr, "The Factor of Testimony in the Gospels," *ExpTim* 49 [1937–38]: 401–8), now competently revived in the work of Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Implicitly, then, we must reject the approach to history advocated by some who will speak of a historical event only if it is entirely explainable by the causes admitted by the guild of

(2) Not everything to which people bear witness lies in the public, historical, arena, observable in principle by anyone who happens to be there. In the Apocalypse, John the Seer bears witness to the visions God gives him. He thus speaks from his experience, but of course the experience to which he bears witness is not in the public arena. More importantly, Jesus testifies concerning himself, including what he has learned from the Father: all of this is real experience, but not experience that is verifiable by other witnesses. Such revelation is *reported* in the public arena by these witnesses (in this case, by Jesus and by John), even though *the revelation itself* is not in the public arena—quite unlike the revelation that does actually take place in the public arena (like the resurrection of Jesus).

(3) Beyond the first generation of Christians, believers bear witness to Jesus by testifying as to who he is, what he has done, and what they have experienced of him. The expectation that they will be “brought before governors and kings *as witnesses* to them and to the Gentiles” (Matt 10:18) envisages a time beyond the initial eyewitnesses. This form of bearing witness is developed into a larger theme in the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John: Jesus himself has a lawsuit running with the world, and his followers are witnesses in this massive “legal” drama, along with such witnesses as the Scriptures, the reported preaching of John the Baptist, the works Jesus does, and the Holy Spirit. This is one way in which NT apologetics works itself out: the claims of Christ are contested in this world in which the kingdom has been inaugurated but not yet consummated, and the witnesses of various kinds are boldly aligned to command and elicit faith (e.g., John 5:33–34, 36; 10:25–26), even though in the final analysis there is no acceptance of all this witnessed truth apart from the illumining work of the Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor 2:10b–16).

(4) Because the world is so adamantly opposed to Jesus’s Lordship, it cannot be a surprise that to bear faithful witness to him frequently arouses opposition and persecution. Jesus’s followers should not expect better treatment than Jesus himself received (John 15:18–25). The Book of Acts applies the terminology of witness to the first Christian martyr (22:20), and the Apocalypse, knowing that Christians are on the verge of facing severe persecution, encourages them to “hold” to the “testimony of Jesus.” Although the NT documents never complete the semantic slide of the *mart-* word group from “witness” to “martyr,” it is easy to understand how the challenge

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historians, i.e., by the causes recognized by philosophical naturalism. On such a reading, the resurrection of Jesus is an event, but not a historical event; rather, it is an event open only to the eyes of faith.



Christians faced in bearing witness toward the end of the first century paved the way for the change and made it inevitable. In the twenty-first century, a new generation of Christian witnesses constitute the latest generation of Christian martyrs.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See especially John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution* (Colorado Springs: Image, 2013); Rupert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith under Attack* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).