Who'll be a witness for my Lord?
Testimony in the Old Testament

W. Derek Suderman

Testimony can be a loaded word in contemporary church contexts. Some Christians see it positively as sharing one's faith; for others, its connotations are negative, associated with attempts to evangelise through coercion or fear. Thomas Long, a contemporary writer, describes testimony as "how ordinary Christians talk about God and faith when we are not in church."[1]

In what follows I will briefly introduce the concept of testimony or witness in the Old Testament, noting ways it both resonates with and challenges Long's depiction. After beginning with instances thematically reflected in Long's description, I will introduce the Hebrew term for testimony and outline ways Old Testament materials employ it in legal, covenantal, and prophetic contexts. Finally, I will suggest that Deuteronomy exemplifies how scripture itself should be seen as a witness bound to a particular people.

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Although individuals in the Hebrew Bible do testify to the actions of God in their lives, the breadth and profundity of testimony in the Old Testament moves well beyond such a limited perspective and includes the eternal partnership between the discerning, committed community and its scripture. Indeed, the diversity of witness in the Old Testament should inspire our own witness.

Testimony inside and outside Israel

While the church does not yet exist in this material, the Old Testament provides many examples consistent with Long's description of testimony in which individuals talk about God outside of worship settings. Because our context often assumes this

view of testimony, I will note a few examples from within and beyond Israel before focusing on how the Old Testament uses the term testimony itself.

In many instances, followers of the Lord witness to or within the royal court. Within Israel, the prophet Elijah famously challenges King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, as well as the prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18–19). Beyond Israel, both Joseph and Daniel give testimony by interpreting dreams and visions before foreign kings, first linking their interpretation to wisdom and then attributing this wisdom to God (see Gen. 40:9, 16–19; Dan. 2:19–23, 28; 5:18). These accounts reflect the possibility that either animosity (the persecution of Elijah and Daniel) or prestige (the promotion of Joseph and Daniel) may arise from such testimony.

The account of a foreign military commander suffering from leprosy provides another striking example. Through the words of his Israelite slavegirl, Naaman hears of a prophet in Israel, and as a result Elisha eventually heals him of his sickness. The commander's response reflects the fruit of this witness: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

Finally, the Jonah narrative portrays an odd prophet who testifies reluctantly. During a storm that arises from his attempt to "flee from the presence of the LORD," Jonah responds to the sailors' queries by identifying himself as a Hebrew who worships the Lord, the God of heaven (Jon. 1:9–10). Jonah's testimony prompts the Gentile sailors to cry out, fear the Lord, offer sacrifices, and make vows, a response that contrasts sharply with his own flight from his calling. Similarly, Jonah's one-line warning to Nineveh hardly qualifies as prophecy (2:4), yet his testimony results in the remarkable repentance of this great city—animals included!

While we could list many more examples of individual witness outside worship settings, we now move beyond this thematic connection to explore the significance and function of the term testimony in the Old Testament.

Testimony in legal, covenantal, and prophetic contexts

Since "testimony" and "witness" are used to translate the Hebrew term *ʿēd* or *ʿûd* and its derivatives, we will briefly consider how these terms function in legal, covenantal, and prophetic contexts.

However, because the role of scripture as a witness proves both distinct and significant, this issue will be treated separately below.

The term testimony seems to emerge from what we would identify as the judicial realm. Both the prohibition against bearing false witness (Ex. 20:16) in the Ten Commandments and the stipulation that one could not be convicted on the testimony of a single witness (Deut. 19:15–21) reflect this concern. Before surveillance cameras and DNA evidence, truthful witnesses were essential to arriving at judicial decisions and settling disputes justly. Partly as a result, false and injurious speech figures prominently as a repeated complaint in the Psalms (Ps. 27, 35, etc.). This judicial understanding was also used metaphorically, as in the prophetic lawsuit in which the people are figuratively taken to court because of their unfaithfulness (Hos. 2).[2] The judicial aspect of witness based on personal observation and experience may be closest to the way we employ the term today.

While we may think of witnesses as people who stick to the facts, Old Testament material proves as interested—or even more interested—in *why* certain events occur.

Testimony also proves significant in the context of covenant. Symbols, ceremonies, and exchanged items all witness to covenants or treaties made between people as well as between people and God (Gen. 21:30). During a covenant renewal ceremony Joshua warns of the responsibilities involved in entering such an agreement, as well as the consequences for violating it. Upon outlining these stipulations, Joshua states that "you are witnesses against yourselves," to which the people respond, "We are witnesses" (Josh. 24:22). Similarly, in Ruth 4 the elders at the gate testify that proper procedure was followed, and with the refrain "We are witnesses" (v. 11) they ratify the decision reached. In a similar vein, God calls on the people of Israel as witnesses before the nations (Isa. 43:10), and even on heaven and earth to witness the covenant between God and the people (Deut. 30:19).

Testimony also appears in prophetic contexts. The prophet Isaiah tells his listeners to "bind up the testimony, seal the teaching [*torah,* in Hebrew] among my disciples" (Isa. 8:16). While we may think of witnesses as people who stick to the facts, Old Testament material proves as interested—or even more interested—in

why certain events occur. The major prophetic motif of warning about coming exile provides repeated examples that include sign actions. For example, Ezekiel first lies on his left side for more than a year and then on his right for forty days (Ezek. 4:4–8); Jeremiah puts on a yoke (Jer. 27–28). Prophets also testify through naming their children: to signal the coming devastation Isaiah names his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz ("the spoil speeds, the prey hastens") (Isa. 8:1), while Hosea names his children "Not pitied" and "Not my people" (Hos. 1:6, 9). As these cases demonstrate, prophetic witness provides a thoroughly theological perspective on history—one that often goes beyond words, with the prophets embodying this message in their own lives and the lives of others in their household.

Thus, while testimony emerges from what we might call a judicial context, significant differences exist between how the Old Testament uses this term and how we may use it today. Whereas we may expect impartiality and an exclusive focus on facts, testimony in the Old Testament moves beyond such restrictions. It is concerned more with recognizing meaning and discerning God's action and purpose than with simply relating individuals' experiences or recounting events with historical precision.

Scripture as testimony

Unlike most other prophets, Moses is portrayed in the end of Deuteronomy as *writing,* both the book of the law (*torah*) and a song (Deut. 31:9, 22, 24). As I will suggest below, Deuteronomy reveals several characteristics of scripture—perhaps even provides a biblical depiction of what scripture is in Judaism and Christianity, including its ability to speak across time, its nature as testimony, and its explicit link to a particular people.[3]

Its initial verses place Deuteronomy in the mouth of Moses, who is overlooking the land of promise from the far side of the Jordan (Deut. 1:1–5). It also introduces what follows as an explanation of the law to the next generation, and so immediately signals the need to honour yet reinterpret the tradition—a perspective that lies at the core of biblical self-understanding. A key introductory passage then trips over itself to emphasize that the law is addressed not simply to a previous generation but to the contemporary listening audience: "Hear, O Israel. . . . The LORD

our God made a covenant with *us* at Horeb. *Not* with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with *us*, who are *all of us* here alive today" (Deut. 5:1–3; compare 1:6).[4] The initial context, however, makes this assertion historically improbable: after all, the reason they wandered in the desert for forty years was so the disobedient generation could pass away and the next generation could enter the land. The same difficulty arises at the end of the book: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 29:2). But this generation had not been there during the Exodus from Egypt, just as it was not there at Horeb/Sinai. What is going on here?

The end of Deuteronomy sets up a partnership between this document and its people; the law becomes a witness *with* you pointing toward God and the divine will, a witness *among* you that prompts internal critique and debate, and a witness *against* you when you violate the covenant.

As chapter 29 reflects, Deuteronomy links covenant and law to the configuration and continuation of this group as God's people and also extends this connection over time: "I am making this covenant . . ., not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today. You know how *we* lived in the land of Egypt . . ." (Deut. 29:14–16a). In doing so, this book transcends time, extending the covenant proclaimed here into the distant future and the "we" of the current people into the historical past. In effect, the law (*torah*) has an eternal present tense that addresses this people, generation after generation, and this group in turn has the eternal task of choosing life through its embodied obedience (see Deut. 30:11–20).[5]

While this link between law and people cannot be overstated, the nature and function of written documents as an ongoing witness proves crucial. Moses instructs the Levites to institute the public reading of the law, teach it to children, and finally place this book beside the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:9–13, 26). Although translations commonly suggest that both the law and the song function as a witness *against* you (v. 19, 21, 26), the phrase could just as easily be translated as "beside you," "with you," or even "among you." The end of Deuteronomy sets up a basic partnership between this document and its people, who cannot plead ignorance; the law becomes an indispensable com-

panion on the journey as a witness *with* you pointing toward God and the divine will, a witness *among* you that prompts internal critique and debate, and a witness *against* you when you violate the covenant.

This background provides important insight into the nature of the law. In a contemporary legal context, one must be privy to an event under dispute in order to be a witness; "eyewitnesses" see an event, and simply hearing *about* something makes one's testimony inadmissible—hearsay. In Deuteronomy, however, the book of the law transcends its initial audience. By hearing the law, the Israelites witness the actions of God in the Exodus and the laws given at Sinai. In this sense biblical testimony proves profoundly contagious, since people become witnesses simply by hearing from another witness.

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Indeed, the nature of Deuteronomy as a witness and the book's connection to Moses become paradigmatic for scripture itself. While most contemporary scholars place the historical context of its finished version in the exilic or postexilic period, the ongoing significance of Moses is less often recognized. The book's link to Moses does not reflect a modern understanding of authorship. Rather, the person of Moses becomes secondary to the ongoing theological witness of the book(s) bearing his name, which in turn reflects the significant shift from seeking revelation by listening to prophets to doing so by interpreting written documents.[6] Thus, while Moses does not cross into the land with the Israelites, his didactic voice does, through the "law of Moses" (Josh. 1:7–8). In effect, Deuteronomy and then the entire Pentateuch become the testimony of Moses that continues to address future generations long after his death. If scholars are correct in their historical assessment, then the book of Deuteronomy already reflects this shift. Thus, the literary setting and link to Moses provided at the outset of Deuteronomy prove highly significant for understanding its ongoing witness, despite the relative neglect of this element in contemporary scholarship.

The Gospels also reflect their nature as a witness, concluding as they do with an anonymous communal endorsement: "*We* know

that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). As in Deuteronomy, this ending introduces a literary tension within the book (who is this "we"?) and then clarifies that the document should not be seen as an exhaustive account but as a sufficient, reliable witness.

Christian scripture can exist without us, but it cannot *function* as scripture without a people attentive to its witness and seeking to embody its call. We too enter into the ancient and ongoing people that transcends time.

Finally, though it often goes unnoticed, scripture's characteristic as a witness remains embedded within our language itself. References to Old and New *Testaments* signify covenant but also signal their character as witness and testimony. Indeed, "biblical witness" proves preferable as a general term to the commonly employed "biblical story," since the latter does not adequately recognize the large amount, diversity, or significance of non-narrative material in the Bible (legal material, psalms, proverbs, genealogical lists, and letters, to name a few).

Who'll be a witness?

Within the Old Testament, people witness to God's action and wisdom at home and abroad through word, deed, and sign action. But while biblical documents testify to God's revelation in the past, they also call for a faithful response in the present. So, in the words of the African American spiritual, the burning question remains: "Who'll be a witness for my Lord?" From an Old Testament perspective, however, the response to this query does not lie in an individual "I" but in the communal "we" of a committed, discerning people. Despite efforts to keep it in a historical past, the eternal present tense of the Bible continues to address and call the believing community to choose life.

Christian scripture can exist without us, but it cannot *function* as scripture without a people attentive to its witness and seeking to embody its call. As the church, we too enter into the ancient and ongoing people—the "we"—that transcends time. We too are called to be infectious witnesses of what *we* have seen and heard, not only in our own lives but as we emerge in the Exodus, stand at Sinai, and listen intently to another speech given on another mountain, by a carpenter from Nazareth. Will we be witnesses?

Notes

[1] Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 3.

[2] The book of Job employs but inverts this element, using legal terminology to place God in the docket.

[3] Gerald T. Sheppard, "Bible," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 178–80. I also owe the concept of scripture's "present tense" to Sheppard.

[4] While odd in English, the grammar here appears even more convoluted in Hebrew. Literalistically rendered, v. 3 reads something like: "Not with our fathers [ancestors] did the LORD cut this covenant, but with us—we, these [people] here today, all of us living" (Deut. 5:3; my translation).

[5] "Law" is used here to translate the Hebrew term *torah*, translated elsewhere as "teaching" or "instruction." As the New Testament phrase "the law and the prophets" reflects, this term refers not just to legal material but comes to be associated with the books Genesis through Deuteronomy. From a biblical perspective, an understanding of law that does not include the narrative accounts of creation in Genesis or emerging from Egypt in Exodus is too narrow.

[6] For a brief but insightful description of this shift already visible in the Old Testament, see Michael A. Fishbane, "From Scribalism to Rabbinism: Perspectives on the Emergence of Classical Judaism," in *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 64–79.

About the author

W. Derek Suderman teaches Old Testament at Conrad Grebel University College and the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario. He is a member of the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series editorial council and recently wrote Bible background essays for the *Gather 'Round* Sunday school curriculum entitled "Exile and Restoration" (Fall 2009).