

5:31-47 Witnesses to Jesus

Jesus' discourse now turns to the theme of witness, which figures prominently throughout the Gospel of John.⁴⁶ Jesus marshals an impressive array of witnesses who will speak on his behalf, including John the Baptist, Jesus' own works, the Father, the Scriptures, and Moses. Nowhere is the specific content of their witness restated or elaborated; for example, how and what the Scriptures say about Jesus (5:39) is not explained, nor is it explained just how God bears witness to Jesus (5:37). But Jesus calls to his defense those very witnesses—Moses, the Scriptures—who might have been enlisted as his accusers, based on his Sabbath healing and his assertion of his God-given prerogatives and unity with God. It was, after all, Moses and the Scriptures that spoke of God's resting on the Sabbath; yet Jesus calls them to his defense. Similarly, his work of healing the man on the Sabbath and commanding him to pick up his mat was held up as accusing evidence against his claim to be doing God's work, and it is precisely this work, God's work, that Jesus calls to his defense.

5:31 If I bear witness concerning myself, my witness is not true. 32 There is another who bears witness^a about me, and I know that the witness that he bears^a is true. 33 You sent to John; and he has borne witness^a to the truth. 34 But the witness that I receive is not from human beings; rather, I speak these things in order that you may be saved. 35 That one was a kindled and shining lamp, and you rejoiced for a while in his light. 36 But I have a witness greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete—these works bear witness that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has borne witness about me. But you have never heard his voice, and you have never seen his form. 38 You do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe the one whom he has sent. 39 You search the Scriptures, because you think that through them you have eternal life. But they themselves bear witness concerning me! 40 And you do not want to come to me in order that you might have life.

41 I do not welcome^b glory^c from human beings. 42 But I know you, that you do not love God.^d 43 I have come in the name of my Father, and you do not receive me. But if another were to come in his own name, you would receive him. 44 How can you believe when you welcome glory from each other, but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you have set your hope. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. 47 But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe my words?

46. See esp. Harvey; Lincoln 2000.

The Life-Giving Prerogative

a. The Baptist bears witness (memartyrēken, perfect present).

b. Or "receive" (cf.

c. *Doxa* may also refer to

d. "Do not love God; you do not have the love of God's love in you."

[5:31-35] Although the will of the one who witnesses himself cannot establish the witness, the witness cannot provide the testimony (v. 39). Through the testimony (v. 37) of the witness, Jesus turns first to the beginning of the witness" (*martyria*) the one on whom the witness is based (3:26-27). Ironically in John's light, though John would see the "light" might seem instead turns to a witness many about Jesus' life and "bearing witness."

[36-40] In the name of God, and on the healing narrative witness "great given me." As the final judgment, the Father has indeed

47. Josephus

48. For God's love, 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23;

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a. The Baptist bears witness (*martyrōn*, present tense) and has borne witness (*memartyrēken*, perfect tense, connoting past action with continuing results in the present).

b. Or "receive" (cf. 1:11, "his own did not receive/welcome him").

c. *Doxa* may also be translated as "honor" or "praise."

d. "Do not love God" translates *tēn agapēn tou theou ouk exete en heautois* ("You do not have the love of God in you"). This could also be rendered, "You do not have God's love in you."

[5:31–35] Although Jesus judges justly because he listens to and seeks the will of the one who sent him (5:30), he concedes that his own witness about himself cannot establish its validity. According to the Scriptures a single witness cannot provide sufficient testimony for conviction of a crime (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15), especially in capital cases. Later Jewish sources broaden this proviso, so that the witness of a single person cannot constitute valid testimony at all, particularly if the witness concerns oneself.⁴⁷ On that principle, no single witness can ensure a favorable verdict. Therefore Jesus calls on other witnesses, including John the Baptist (vv. 33–35), Jesus' works (v. 36), and the Scriptures (v. 39). Through their testimony to Jesus, one may hear and accept God's own testimony (v. 37).⁴⁸

Jesus turns first to invoke the witness of the Baptist (vv. 33–35). From the beginning of the Gospel, John "has borne witness" (*memartyrēken*) and "bears witness" (*martyrei*, 1:15; cf. 5:32) to Jesus as the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the one on whom the Spirit has descended, the one sent by God (5:36–37; cf. 3:26–27). Ironically, while people "were willing" (*ēthelēsate*, 5:35) to rejoice in John's light, they are not willing (*ou thelete*, 5:40) to come to Jesus, even though John was a lamp that was lit and went on shining precisely so that people would see the "true Light" (cf. 1:7–8). Because John's human testimony (5:34) might seem inadequate to confirm that Jesus speaks on behalf of God, Jesus turns to a witness "greater than John's" (v. 36). Even so, John's human testimony about Jesus was intended to lead people to have and see the true light of life and "be saved" (v. 34).

[36–40] In summoning witnesses, Jesus next calls on his own works, on God, and on the Scriptures to bear witness to him. Jesus' works, including the healing narrated in 5:1–9 and the work of giving life and judging, constitute the witness "greater" than John's because these are "the works that the Father has given me." As works that embody the divine prerogatives of giving life and of final judgment, they are part of the Father's witness to Jesus, testimony that the Father has indeed given this Son these distinctive divine prerogatives (v. 36).

47. Josephus, *Ant.* 4.219; *Life* 256; *m. Roš Haš.* 1:7; 2:6; 3:1; *m. Ketub.* 2:9.

48. For God as a witness, see Gen 31:50; 1 Sam 12:5–6; Jer 42:5; Mic 1:2; and in the NT, Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23; Phil 1:8.

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While Jesus next refers to the witness of the "Father who sent me" (v. 37), the text does not specify exactly how the Father bears such witness. But Jesus does emphatically deny that his accusers have ever heard the Father's testimony.

Three statements—you have never heard his voice, you have never seen his form, you do not have his word dwelling in you (vv. 37-38)—evoke, apparently by denying, the traditions of God's speaking the law to Israel at Sinai. According to Deuteronomy, God spoke to Israel so that they "heard the sound of words but saw no form [LXX, *homoiōma*]; there was only a voice" (4:12, 15, 33, 36). But in John, Jesus denies that "the Jews" have heard God, seen God, or have his word within them, because they do not believe in the one whom God has sent (5:38). John does not thereby discount the entirety of the "historic revelation to Israel,"⁴⁹ but he links the manifestation of God with the mission of Jesus, so that to see the Son is to see the Father; to hear the Son is to hear the Father. Jesus' sweeping assertions do not deny that there has ever been knowledge of God in Israel, but they inextricably link knowledge of God with Jesus since his advent. In seeing Jesus' signs and hearing his word, one sees and hears the Father because Jesus both embodies and speaks God's word.⁵⁰

Exactly what it means to "see God" (v. 37) is not spelled out. There are numerous biblical descriptions of various visual encounters with God: Jacob saw God face-to-face; Moses saw a burning bush and God, passing by in his glory; Isaiah had a vision in the temple; Ezekiel saw a heavenly chariot; Daniel spoke of seeing the Ancient of Days.⁵¹ While God can be seen in certain forms, such visions of God are radically different from seeing a fellow creature: they are difficult to describe and often disorienting. Here God is spoken of as having "form"⁵² but not as having flesh or body. The "form" of God makes it possible to "see" God, although how and what one sees are not further explained.⁵³ But any and all such visual apprehensions of God are denied to Jesus' opponents here. In Jesus, the embodied Word of God, one may see the Father, mediated and indirectly (14:9). There are no other visions of God available. Similarly, those who have not attended to the words of Jesus cannot claim now to be hearing a word from God, either in "the Scriptures" or from Moses, that does not finally point to Jesus (5:39, 47). These sweeping claims for the singularity of

49. As D. Moody Smith rightly notes (1999, 141).

50. On "seeing" and "hearing" in John, see also 1:18; 6:46; 8:38; 12:37-43; 14:9; and comments there.

51. See also Matt 5:8, "They will see God"; 1 John 3:2; Rev 4-5.

52. According to Gen 32:30, Jacob calls the place where he has seen God face-to-face "Peniel"; according to 32:31 LXX, Jacob calls it "the form of God [*eidōs theou*], for I have seen [*eidon*] God face-to-face." Cf. Bockmuehl 1997.

53. Regarding Deut 32:39 LXX ("Behold! Behold! It is I!" [*idete idete hoti egō eimī*]), Philo denies that the living God can be seen with one's eyes, but should rather be perceived "by the eyes of our mind, through his mighty works done in the world" (*Post.* 167-68).

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the knowledge of God made available through and in Jesus are grounded in his identity as the incarnation of God's own Word (1:1–3, 14).

Because Jesus has both heard and seen the Father, because Jesus thereby has full knowledge of the Father, he can speak the truth. Jesus' accusers have not believed the witness of Jesus' works (v. 36), nor have they received God's witness (v. 37), because they have failed to heed the revelation and word that Jesus has brought (5:38–40, 43).⁵⁴ They have neither the knowledge of God gained by direct apprehension (as Jesus does) nor indirect apprehension (through listening to Jesus, the Scriptures, or other witnesses to him).

They "search the Scriptures" (5:39).⁵⁵ Thus they are portrayed, like Ezra the scribe, as one who has "set his heart to study [*lidrôš*] the law [*torah*]" (Ezra 7:10; cf. Isa 34:16). Scripture, properly understood, bears witness to Jesus (John 5:38–39);⁵⁶ but unless one is taught by God (6:45), reads Scripture in light of the resurrection of Jesus (2:17, 22), and is guided by the teaching of the Spirit of truth (14:26; 16:13, 14), one hears the Scripture not as a witness to the identity of Jesus as the life-giving Word of God, but as an accusing witness, a judge.⁵⁷ These are strong and potentially offensive claims, underscoring the point that emerges repeatedly from John: there is no neutral perspective on Jesus. Obviously not all persons who read the Scriptures, then or now, read them as pointing ultimately to Jesus. But the claim that Scripture bears witness to Israel's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, is foundational to the Gospel of John, the entirety of the New Testament witness, and the early Christian apologetic tradition.⁵⁸

[41–47] Having invoked the witness of the Baptist, Jesus now calls upon Moses, who bears witness to Jesus. Jesus does not, however, seek human adulation or praise. The glory or honor (*doxa*) which he would welcome consists of the proper acknowledgment of his mission as the one who comes in the name of the Father, the one to whom prophets and Scriptures bear witness. The evidence for Jesus' stinging assessment that his questioners do not love God is that they fail to welcome the one whom God has sent (5:23). Since honoring Jesus and honoring God are two facets of one response, those who do not welcome and honor Jesus violate the basic command to love God (Deut 6:4).

54. For the superiority of seeing to hearing as the basis for witness in the ancient world, see Byrskog 2002, 146–76, on "The Eyewitness as Interpreter."

55. *Eraunate* can be imperative or, as the context demonstrates, indicative: they search *because* they think they have eternal life in or through them. Philo invites his readers to "examine" or "investigate" (*ereunēsōmen*) some aspect of Scripture (*Det.* 141; *Cher.* 14); cf. the Hebrew *dāraš*, "to seek, ask," which in the DSS refers to the interpretation of Scripture (1QS V, 11; VI, 6; VIII, 15; 4Q174 (4QFlor) I, 11, 14; CD VI, 7; XX, 6).

56. John 1:45; 2:22; 7:38, 42; 10:35; 13:18; 17:12; 19:24, 28, 36–37; 20:9.

57. Lincoln 2000, 54–56.

58. See, e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 58.11; cf. also 78.10; 92.1; 100.2; 119.1.

But some obviously believe that to honor Jesus as one honors God is to participate in Jesus' own blasphemous act of making himself equal to God. For their defense, they may well have called on Moses, Israel's great prophet and leader, the friend of God, who bore witness to *the only God* (v. 44).⁵⁹ But John portrays Moses as the accuser and not the defender of those who do not honor Jesus, for Moses actually wrote about Jesus (v. 46). Moses appears in the law-court as a witness for Jesus and against those who do not believe in him. While Moses was traditionally known to intercede for Israel, and thus protect it from God's judgment, here John turns Jewish tradition on its head.⁶⁰ Still, Jewish authors also knew that Moses could be called as a witness *against* the people of Israel (*L.A.B.* 19.4-5), that they sometimes did not believe him (4 *Ezra* 7.106) and often paid no attention to the prophets sent to them.⁶¹ If they had believed Moses and the prophets, they would have believed Jesus. Throughout the Gospel, Moses, the Law, and all the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus, so that to hear Moses' words (John 5:47) and to be Moses' disciple is in fact to hear Jesus' words and become his disciple (9:28). As elsewhere, "Moses and the prophets" (1:45) point forward to Jesus. Unless they are grasped in that way, those texts will not be rightly interpreted, and to press John's point, God cannot be fully known. The word of God that came to Israel has its climactic turning point in the narrative of the Word embodied (1:14-18).

The healing of the man at the pool and the subsequent discourse lay out the heart of Johannine Christology pointedly and succinctly, underscoring who Jesus is and how he is known. First, in relationship to "the only God," Jesus is the one who has and exercises the prerogatives of God, specifically the unique divine prerogatives of giving life and passing final judgment on all things, which God has granted to him. Second, Jesus is known through the witness that others—John the Baptist, Moses, the Scriptures, and ultimately God—bear to him. One must search the testimony of Scripture, hear the words of Moses, and receive the witness of God in order to grasp the identity of Jesus. For John, receiving Jesus does not repudiate Israel's God, its Scriptures, or its people; rather, receiving Jesus properly honors God, hears the Scripture aright, and orients the people to their Messiah. That this is so cannot simply be read off the surface of Jesus' ministry or assertions or the texts of Scriptures. This is the

59. For various descriptions emphasizing the singularity or uniqueness of God (*monos*), see Deut 6:4; 2 Kgs 19:15, 19 (*kyrios ho theos monos*); 2 Macc 1:24-25; 7:37; Pss 71:18 (72:18 ET); 85:10 (86:10); Isa 37:16, 20; Dan 3:45 LXX (Pr Azar 22).

60. For Moses as Israel's intermediary or defender, see *Jub.* 1.19; Philo, *Mos.* 2.166; 4 *Ezra* 7.106; *L.A.B.* 12.8-9; *T. Mos.* 11.17. Satan is traditionally Israel's accuser (e.g., Zech 3:1; Rev 12:10).

61. For Israel's rejection of its prophets, see 1 Kgs 18:13; 19:10, 14; 2 Kgs 17:13, 23; 21:10; 24:2; 2 Chr 24:9; Jer 7:25-26; 25:4; 26:5-11; 29:19; 35:15; 44-45; Neh 9:6-38 (esp. v. 26); *Jub.* 1.12; in the NT, Matt 23:37-39; Luke 11:47; 13:34.

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witness from faith for faith; but for John, it is the witness of faith to the historical significance of Jesus' mission and person.

6:1–71 Jesus, the Bread of Life: Signs at Passover

The feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' discourse on the bread of life draw on the biblical account of God's provision of manna for the people of Israel, thereby presenting Jesus as the true "bread from heaven" who gives life to the world. Even as God provided manna for Israel in the wilderness, so God now provides the "bread from heaven" that grants eternal life. While Jesus' discourse looks back to God's provision of heavenly manna for his people, it may also allude to a promise found in Jewish literature anticipating the return of manna from on high in the age to come. The narrative of God's provision for Israel in the past and the anticipation of God's blessings in the future are both reconfigured in Jesus and his life-giving work for all the world. This work climaxes in Jesus' death and resurrection; it is remembered by his followers as they eat the Lord's Supper. Jesus' action is presented in John not merely as a deed in the past, but also as an act that was further explicated by, although not limited to, eating and drinking (the Lord's Supper) together, where those who eat and drink remember that they are still fed by Jesus. Even as God fed the Israelites in the wilderness, so God continues to sustain his people.

The narrative of Jesus' "walking on the water," or crossing the sea, lies between the account of the feeding of the multitudes and the discourse on the bread of life. In this account, Jesus comes to the disciples struggling in crossing the lake, and when they do not first recognize him, speaks the reassuring words identifying himself to them: "It is I" (*egō eimi*). This simple self-identification anticipates the first of Jesus' characteristic "I am" sayings in the Gospel ("I am the bread of life," 6:35).⁶² Echoing patterns of divine speech in the Old Testament, this group of sayings underscores the identity of Jesus as the one who lives and remains with his people, and through whom the one sovereign God's life-giving work is accomplished.

But just as the Israelites murmured and grumbled, even after God had delivered them, so in his long discourse Jesus' claims to give God's life to the world provoke increased murmuring and grumbling about him (6:41, 60). Their grumbling increases the more that Jesus focuses on his identity as the means of receiving God's life, and on the necessity of his death in his life-giving work (6:41, 52), leading even many of Jesus' own followers to abandon him (v. 66). The chapter sounds a final ominous note when, for the first time, it mentions

62. John 6:35; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1. See Excursus 5: "The 'I Am' Sayings of John."