

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies* (old series) can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

NOTES AND STUDIES

THE TWO WITNESSES.

THE vision of the Two Witnesses is one of the noted difficulties of the Apocalypse. They are introduced as if familiar in figure or in common speech: 'I will give unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days' (xi 3). They are then identified with the two olive trees of the vision of Zechariah iv 3, which is varied by the substitution of two lamp-stands for one, and their appearance is attended by a wealth of symbolic detail.

There can be no doubt, for any careful reader of the book, that the vision is intricately mystical or allegorical. But neither can there be any doubt, I think, for one who has considered the method of the writer and the nature of his visions, that he had in mind some real event, supplying the material of his imagery. If the book be dated from the Neronian persecution, there is an incident that will obviously fit into this place. The two witnesses, slain by the Beast, whose carcase lies 'in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt' (xi 10), will be the Apostles Peter and Paul, whose martyrdom at Rome had just seemed to indicate the coming of the last days. But to suppose the details of the vision a close description of the actual event, or to interpret them literally as expressing the hopes of the seer, would be to misunderstand the scope of his prophecy. The conspicuous martyrdom of the two great leaders afforded him material for a figure; but the meaning of the figure must be sought deeper. It is the conception of the Christian witness that calls for examination.

It is needless to insist on the prominence of the idea of *witness* in the Johannine writings. I think it is now becoming equally needless to insist on the connexion of those writings. The exact relation of the Apocalypse to the Gospel and the Epistles I do not mean to discuss; it is sufficient for my purpose that they belong to the same section of early Christianity, issue from the same group, and contain, in spite of remarkable differences, many ideas in common. I turn to the other Johannine books, to search in them for something that may throw light upon this mystery of the Two Witnesses.

Why are they two? There is a possible answer in the Fourth Gospel, where the Pharisees cavil against our Lord in the true legalist temper; 'Thou bearest witness about thyself, thy witness is not true' (viii 13). The reply is a repudiation of the legal narrowness: Though I bear

witness about myself, my witness is true' (viii 14); but there is almost immediately an acceptance of the legalist standpoint on its positive side: 'It is written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true' (viii 17). It seems to be allowed as a concession to prejudice: if men will not believe except on legal evidence, they shall have such evidence. But the particular duality invoked is startling: 'I am one that bear witness about myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness about me' (viii 18).

Thence I turn to another passage of the Gospel where there is some insistence on a twofold witness. It is in the last discourse on the night of betrayal: 'When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth which proceedeth from the Father, he shall bear witness about me: and bear ye witness also, because ye have been with me from the beginning' (xv 26). Here is an obvious parallel to the duality already noted. The Son bears witness about Himself: so those who have been with Him from the beginning are to bear witness about Him; their testimony is a continuation of His own. On the other side, the Father which sent Him bears witness: so too the Spirit proceeding from the Father is to bear witness, continuing that testimony. Into the meaning of the witness of the Father I will look presently; it is sufficient for the moment that two testimonies are conjoined, which may be described as earthly and heavenly. The Son on earth bears witness about Himself, and afterwards, when the time is come for Him to depart out of this world and go to the Father, He leaves behind Him chosen witnesses on earth. The Father in heaven bears witness, and afterwards sends forth the Spirit to testify.¹

The conception of the Apostles as witnesses, though characteristically Johannine, is not peculiar to the Johannine writings; it is, of course, prominent in the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Moreover this precise duality is found in the speech of Peter at the meeting of the Apostles and Elders described in Acts xv, where also the outpouring of the Holy Ghost is identified as the witness of God: 'Ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, which knoweth the heart, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us' (Acts xv 8).

What is meant by the witness of God? First, there is an obvious sense—obvious, at least, to the thought of the time. The Scriptures of the Old Testament bear witness to Jesus as the Christ, and this is God's direct testimony. The assertion in John v 37, 'The Father

¹ The passage in John v 31-36 seems to shew the pressure on the writer's mind of the idea of twofold witness, but it is concerned with a different set of circumstances.

which sent me, he hath borne witness of me', is immediately explicated by the words, 'Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me.' The same idea is familiar in other writers. St Paul (Rom. iii 21) speaks of the righteousness which is through faith in Jesus Christ as 'witnessed by the law and the prophets'. St Peter, in Acts x 43, says 'To him bear all the prophets witness'. In the Epistle to the Hebrews (x 15) is a phrase yet more germane to my subject—'The Holy Ghost also beareth witness to us'—introducing a quotation from Jeremiah.

But this obvious interpretation is very far from exhausting the sense of the witness of God. In Acts xx 23 are attributed to St Paul the words: 'The Holy Ghost testifieth unto me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.' That is clearly a reference to inspired utterances like that of Agabus at Caesarea. In Hebrews ii 4 is found a similar use of the word, which brings us back sharply to the double witness. Speaking of the message of salvation, 'which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard'—here is the witness of our Lord Himself and of the Apostles—the writer continues, 'God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Ghost' (Heb. ii 4). Here is what we may call the living witness of God, as distinguished from the past witness of the same kind enshrined in the letter of Scripture.

If now we return to the Johannine writings we find this witness of the Spirit treated as more ordinary and as more intimate. I refer especially to the First Epistle. In the Apocalypse the message of the Spirit to the Churches seems to be a prophetic message of the old kind; and this is still recognized in the Epistle, if only in the warning against false prophets, and the spirit of the antichrist; but there is here a wider conception of general inspiration. 'Ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and ye know all things' (ii 20). 'The anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you' (ii 27). I need not dwell on the question whether these words imply, as I think they do, a general practice of unction at or after baptism; the point is that such unction, if practised, was considered symbolic of an inner enlightenment of the Spirit shared by all the faithful, an ordinary endowment of the disciple. We are far away here from any special charisma of prophecy. The same thought reappears towards the end of the epistle, bringing back the particular phrase that we are examining: (v 9) 'The witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness concerning his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself.' I do not hesitate to read *αὐτῷ* with Westcott and Hort, though the Revisers fell back upon

the *ἀντὶς* of Tischendorf and Tregelles. It is an interior witness of the Spirit common to all believers. He has just before said 'It is the Spirit that beareth witness' (v 6).

But we must look also at what there is in the Epistle about the twofold witness. The Apostolic witness is nowhere more definitely asserted than in the prologue to the Epistle: 'That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also'; and the purpose of it is defined: 'that ye also may have fellowship with us.' The assertion is repeated in iv 14: 'We have beheld and bear witness that the Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.' The acceptance of this witness is intimately connected with the possession of the inner witness of the Spirit, for it is immediately added: 'Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God' (iv 15). It will not be doubted that *δμολογεῖν* signifies that open and public profession of faith that is implied in having fellowship with the Apostolic witnesses. This dependence upon the external witness, the witness of men, seems hardly consistent with the words, 'Ye need not that any one teach you' (ii 27), and the repeated words, 'I write unto you because ye know' (ii 21); but the two ideas must evidently be co-ordinated, and a synthesis will be found in the thought that believers in the external witness of the Gospel pass on to the witness of the Spirit, which confirms it and renders them independent of further corroboration. That thought is summarized in the words: 'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater' (v 9).

It is necessary to look at the immediately preceding words: 'There are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood' (v 8). At first sight this threefold witness seems to stand in contrast with the twofold witness elsewhere proposed; but on looking closer we find that the witness is still twofold. 'The water and the blood', taken together, stand for Jesus Christ. 'This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ: not in the water only, but in the water and in the blood' (v 6). I need not stop to ask the meaning of this remarkable mysticism: the fact stands out clearly enough that the witness of the water and the blood is the witness of Jesus Christ Himself, as distinguished from the witness of the Spirit: therefore also, I cannot doubt, it is the witness of the Apostles. The abrupt expression 'There are three who bear witness' I take to be the flashing out of a sudden thought that the twofold witness is even threefold, and therefore the stronger, since one of the two witnesses appears to be mystically duplicated.

Thus there runs through the whole web of the Epistle the idea of a twofold witness which appears elsewhere in the Johannine writings. The idea is coherent. On the one hand there is the witness of men

on earth, the witness of our Lord Himself, and of the Apostles whom He sent. On the other hand is the witness of God, given first by the Spirit of prophecy in the ancient Scriptures, given secondly by the Spirit of prophecy in the preachers of the Gospel, given in the third place by the Spirit abiding in every faithful believer. Is there any suggestion that the witness of men is confined to the Apostles themselves? I think not, any more than it is suggested that the enlightenment of the indwelling Spirit was a gift exclusively to the first generation of believers. This last is treated as the ordinary endowment of Christians as such: the witness of men is set over against it as equally ordinary. It is the witnessing of a continuing fellowship. We may illustrate this, if we will, from the Prologue of St Luke's Gospel, where the writer evidently regards himself as continuing the testimony of those who 'from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word'. To pass to modern language, the Apostolic witness is the witness of the Church, the Christian fellowship. But even this is not very modern, if we may so interpret—and I think we must—the saying of 1 Tim. iii 15 about the Church or household of God, which is 'the pillar and stay of the truth'.

We may therefore infer that the ordinary equipment of Christianity includes a twofold witness to the Gospel: the witness of men, which is for us the tradition of the Christian Church, and the witness of the Spirit dwelling in the hearts of believers. I suggest that this is the meaning of the two witnesses of the Apocalypse, who prophesy for the mystical period of twelve hundred and sixty days, which I will not venture to expound, any more than I will speculate on the meaning of the death and revival of the witnesses. I am concerned only with the Johannine conception of Christian evidences, which seems to be different from that commonly current in our day.

But there still remains one thing to be considered—the relation of the two witnesses to each other. This also is clearly conceived in the Epistle. I have remarked that the witness of men, when once received, seems to be in a sense superseded by the witness of God, so that, as the writer says, 'Ye need not that any one teach you' (ii 27). The witness of God is greater than the witness of man. But on the other hand, the witness of the Spirit, or what seems to be such, is to be tested. 'Believe not every spirit' it is said (iv 1), 'but prove the spirits, whether they are of God.' This seems to be said in particular of prophetic manifestations, a warning against false prophets; but it can hardly be restricted to such a sense. There is equal need for testing what seems to be the inner enlightenment of the Spirit. But how shall those who are taught by the Spirit sit in judgement on the Spirit? And how shall those who are moved, as they think, by the Spirit of

God distinguish between this and the impulse of the spirit of the antichrist? This witness is to be tested by comparison with the other witness. The writer proposes a specific test to those whom he is addressing: 'Hereby know we the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus is not of God' (iv 2). He can hardly mean that the open profession of one abstract truth is the only test of divine inspiration: still less can he propose this as a test for all time. His real meaning appears below. 'We are of God: he that heareth God heareth us; he who is not of God heareth us not. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error' (iv 6). It is a tremendous claim made without hesitation. The Apostolic witness told that Jesus Christ was come in the flesh: that testimony was evidently being impugned; it was, for the moment, the *articulus stantis aut cadentis*; he who accepted it accepted the Apostolic witness, he who rejected it rejected that witness. But no man could be moved by the Spirit of God to reject that witness, for the two witnesses must agree. That is evidently the argument. The interpretation is borne out by another passage (ii 19): 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest, that not all are of us.' Abandonment of the fellowship is proof of misleading. The result is striking. If the witness of God is greater than the witness of man, it is none the less the witness of man by which what seems to be the witness of God is to be tested. In modern phrase, a movement of the Spirit is to be judged by its conformity to the tradition of the Church. St Paul said that 'the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets' (1 Cor. xiv 32): you are not to let yourself be carried away by spiritual emotion. The Johannine mysticism is subject to a still more objective control: the believer is not to let himself be carried away by spiritual emotion from Christian fellowship and tradition. There is a presupposition here which must not be lost sight of: it is presumed that the witness of men, the Apostolic witness, is more easily and more securely discerned than the witness of the Spirit. But over against this must be set the presupposition running throughout the Johannine writings, that the external witness of the Church can become effective only when corroborated by the internal witness of the Spirit. The two witnesses interact, and only by their interaction can true belief be generated.

T. A. LACEY.