

THE TESTIMONY TRADITION: ANOTHER APPROACH TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

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I. What Is It?

Soon after the death of Jesus, some of the members of the Christian group discovered passages in the Old Testament which in their opinion fitted, more or less closely, the career and work of Jesus. The early Christians employed the Testimony Tradition, as collections of these proof passages have been called, to describe the person and office of Christ and to give instruction for Christian living. The Testimony Tradition probably developed in the following manner: When an individual discovered an Old Testament proof passage he would commit it to memory. Just as important, he would also remember how the passage was to be used, i.e., how it should be applied to the life of Jesus. Other members of the community discovered other passages which could be used in a similar manner. By comparing notes, as Papias said he did when he met any of the Brethren who had heard and known the Apostles, the various passages were combined. As a result of the pooling of knowledge about the Old Testament passages referring to Jesus, the Testimony Tradition was gradually enlarged. When a number of Old Testament passages had collected around a certain incident, or idea about Jesus, it became necessary to write them down since the memory could not retain too long a combined passage. Such a composite section is Romans 3:10-18.

The next obvious step was to combine the different Testimony lists so that more than one incident or idea was included within the same list.

When this step was taken the Testimony Tradition had come into being in a rather advanced form. All that remained to be done, from that point onward, was to enlarge the tradition by adding more passages within the individual units and to add more Testimony units to the already existing tradition.

Thus, the tradition resulted in a grouping of Old Testament passages extracted from the Old Testament itself to form separate documents. One such document was in the possession of Rendel Harris at the time he presented the last volume of his two-volume work entitled "Testimonies," but he was unaware of its existence. It was in a box of unexamined papyrus fragments in his library and was not discovered until after his death. C. H. Roberts' published the fragment and called attention to the fact that the Testimony fragment was another bit of data pointing in the direction of Harris' theory.

Such documents, because they were **extracted from and composed of** Old Testament passages, were considered by the Christians as retaining all the sanctity of the Jewish Scriptures themselves. Thus, the Testimony book became a religious book, hence, something to be preserved and copied. These circumstances gave the Testimony tradition a textual history of its own, quite apart from that of either the Old or the New Testament. In the "Testimonia" of Cyprian, quotations from the New Testament have been added to those of the Old Testament.

¹ Rendel Harris and Vacher Burch, *Testimonies*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1916-1920) 2 vols.

² C. H. Roberts, *Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, (Manchester: The Manchester University Press, 1936) pp. 47-62.

Burkitt¹, Vollmer², and Swete³, while making statements that pointed toward the Testimony theory, did not follow up their earlier work and develop it into a well-defined position. Rendel Harris and Vacher Burch, in their two-volume work⁴, were the first to present the theory in a broad outline but they filled in only a few of the areas in that outline. Because of their failure to present a more complete picture of the process, the theory has not received the attention it deserves. Special techniques are needed for working in the field. Since Harris and Burch did not present a well-worked-out theory, it is of little wonder that when others, who had not developed those techniques, looked at their work it appeared inconclusive. The result has been that scholars have for the most part based their judgments of Harris' work upon his conclusions rather than upon his method. They have either accepted or rejected his theory without examining the details.⁵

The exceptions to the preceding statement have been the work of Benjamin Bacon⁶ and Lukyn Williams.⁷ Benjamin Bacon has criticized the results in most instances but he has discussed the theory in more detail than many have done. For example, he takes particular exception to Harris' hypothesis that the "Logia" of Papias was the Testimony Book.⁸ Lukyn Williams has given a brief critique of Harris' theory.⁹ His attention was attracted to the anti-Judaic factor in the Testimony tradition, since he himself has been interested in all of the early anti-Judaic works.

II. Where Is It?

The Testimony Tradition is to be found in much of the early Christian literature. The most obvious instance of the tradition, among extant early Christian documents, is to be seen in the "Testimonia" of Cyprian. He avow-

edly attempts to produce a book that is supposedly reproduced from memory. It was to be short enough so that his readers would remember it as they would not be able to do if it contained the entire Scriptures.

Much of the same tradition found in Cyprian's work may be traced, also, in the writings of Justin Martyr and of Paul. In a few of the instances in which Justin and Paul employ the same Testimony section, Justin's employment of the Testimony reveals an earlier stage of the tradition than Paul's use. This shows that the Testimony Tradition had a history even before the time of Paul. This means, then, that this process was at work within the first decade and a half after the crucifixion of Jesus.

If the theory as Rendel Harris presented it is accepted—i.e., that the Testimony Tradition was a written document from its inception—it is difficult to understand how such a well-defined process could develop within so short a period. This, in fact, has been

¹ Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, Cf. p. 126.

² Hans Vollmer, *Die Alttestamentlichen Citate bei Paulus*, Leipzig, 1895.

³ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1908), p. 2.

⁴ Harris and Burch, *Testimonies*, 2 vols.

⁵ Cf. F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1922) Pt. 1., Vol. II, p. 94; Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 270.; and, Sherman E. Johnson, "The Biblical Quotations in Matthew," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, April 1943. p. 140.

⁶ Benjamin W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1930), pp. xv, 160, 449 f, 500.

⁷ A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Judaeos*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1935)

⁸ Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*, p. 449 f.

⁹ Williams, *Adversus Judaeos*, pp. 3-13.

the strongest objection raised to Harris' theory. However, if the first stage of the process is considered to be one of oral transmission of the individual gospel pericopes, the assembling of the Old Testament passages could have taken place much faster. However, the fact that Justin Martyr, in chapter 27 of his *Dialogue with Trypho*, presents the same Testimony section found in Romans 3:10-18, except in a more primitive stage of development, indicates that some portions of the tradition had already been committed to writing before the time of Paul. Paul, then, used a revised and larger list in this instance than that to which Justin had access.

In the Synoptic Gospels, another Testimony tradition is discovered. The same Testimony outline runs throughout the three gospels and forms a framework upon which the pericopes are arranged. The writer may rearrange the sequence of events, as in Matthew, but he did not change the sequence of Testimony tradition. A number of the early Christian documents touch upon this particular tradition at numerous points but the Synoptic Gospels provide the best early evidence for the Testimony Tradition, for they present a unit of Testimony Tradition not found in such complete form in the other early writings.

The other areas of the New Testament could be discussed in detail but it is sufficient to state that Rendel Harris has shown that most of the books of the New Testament contain evidence of Testimonies.

In non-canonical early Christian literature of the first four centuries, the following are among the early writers who employed the Tradition: Justin Martyr, I Clement, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Cyprian and Eusebius. Of course the most conclusive evidence is the "Fragment of a Testimony Book" published by C. H. Rob-

erts. While this is a fourth century manuscript, the Testimony Tradition presented therein seems to be earlier even than the traditions found in the New Testament. If it is not earlier, then the differences between the traditions must be explained on the basis that the "Fragment of a Testimony Book" developed in a locality entirely isolated from the communities in which the New Testament books were written. In its development after the time of the New Testament writers, the Testimony Tradition gradually grew to include more and more passages; and New Testament, as well as Old Testament, passages were brought into the Tradition. Cyprian, for example, in his third book of "Testimonies," employs New Testament passages beside Old Testament passages within the same section. This indicates that, by the middle of the third century, the Christians had augmented their Tradition by additions from the Christian Scriptures. These additions emphasized the difference between the Christian Testimony Tradition and any Jewish traditions, oral or written, of the same type, that may have been in use.

The following corrections of Harris' theory of the Testimony Book are included for those who may have read his theory and are thinking of it as they read this article.

1. Both Harris and Burch thought they could prove that the Apostle Matthew was the author of the Testimony book. They had not carried their investigation of the Synoptic Gospels far enough to discover that the same Testimony Tradition is basic to all three gospels. In the few Testimony examples which they did examine from the Synoptics, they found a more consistent tradition in Matthew than in Mark or Luke. If, however, they had carried their investigation further, they would have discovered that all three of the Synoptics employ the same basic

Testimony Tradition, and when it can be demonstrated that the writer of the book of Matthew used Mark as one of his sources, the data indicate the impossibility of assigning the authorship of the Testimony Tradition to the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, whether that be the Apostle or not. Such an assignment of authorship would, of necessity, call for a rather unified Testimony "Book" even in the early years. Burch would be forced to assign Matthew an earlier date than that of the other Synoptics or Paul, since in all of these sources the Testimony Tradition plays an important role.

2. Harris and Burch both call the Testimony Tradition a Testimony "Book." They seek to find a written source dating from the very beginning of the process, i.e., that Matthew wrote down a list of anti-Judaic Old Testament passages and this group of passages comprised the Testimony Book.

In the light of New Testament study within the past twenty years, this part of the theory will need to be reconsidered. Paul, while in some instances using portions of the same Testimony tradition as the Gospel writers, also employed other traditions familiar to the non-canonical writers. In some areas he agrees with certain writers more than others, thus indicating a similarity of underlying tradition with some writings but not with others. Also, each Synoptic writer, while employing an underlying tradition common to all three, nevertheless shows the use of independent traditions in other areas. Thus, no one writer can be given credit for the Testimony tradition. Instead there was a whole network of interweaving traditions known in part by most of the early Christians.

A better explanation, in light of the wide-spread employment of the Testimony Tradition and its appearance in

many different forms seems to lie in the following direction, namely, that it is more accurate to speak of a Testimony **Tradition** than of a Testimony **Book**. The Tradition probably took shape from an accidental oral development rather than from a well-thought-out plan on the part of the Apostle Matthew. It is easier to account for the rapid development of the Testimony **Tradition** as a product of the Christian community than to think of it as a product of one or two leaders. More of this will be mentioned in the next section of the paper.

3. From the preceding criticism of Harris and Burch it is to be seen that, in the light of the New Testament scholarship of the last twenty years, volume **one** of their **Testimonies** has more lasting value than volume **two**. However, volume two has served the purpose of presenting a theory of the connection of the Testimony tradition to the New Testament and to the Fathers. It is the duty of subsequent studies to refine and correct the work already done.

III. When Was It Formed?

This section of the paper will of necessity repeat many items already stated in the earlier sections. In this way, however, the theory will be placed in better focus.

The history of the formation of the Testimony Tradition is easily traced if one will but reconstruct the history of the growth of the primitive church and consider the Testimony Tradition as "growing-up" with the church. The immediate followers of Jesus were Jews and at the very beginning of the movement the members of the church were Jews. The social class first attracted to the new Christ-cult was composed mostly of poor people who probably could not afford books. The only opportunity of seeing or hearing the Scriptures would be in the Synagogue

service. In those services the Scripture was read in the Hebrew tongue, and probably even at this early date, as in later periods, the practice had been established of paraphrasing the Scriptures into the common tongue of first century Palestine, i.e., Aramaic.

Harris surmised that probably Jesus was the originator of the Testimony method. However, he failed to distinguish between the **Words of Jesus** and **Jesus' Words as reported by the Gospel writer**. For instance, as a Palestinian Jew, Jesus would most certainly have used the Hebrew Scriptures, or Aramaic Targums based on the Hebrew. Yet, the Gospel writers have often reported a quotation by Jesus from the Old Testament in the words of the Septuagint version rather than from the Hebrew text. However, according to the story of Jesus as told by the Gospel writers, Jesus made use of many Old Testament quotations as illustrations in his teachings. He may thus have drawn attention to the Old Testament as a source of teaching material for the Christian group. Harris and Burch thought that it was necessary to show that Jesus used anti-Judaic Testimonies to prove that he was the originator of the Testimony method. This, however, is not necessary. The anti-Judaic character of the Testimony Tradition was only **one** characteristic of the Tradition. The **main character** of the Tradition was that it was composed, in its earliest stage, of **Old Testament** passages designed to tell the story of Jesus and to explain theories about his person. Later, it explained and defended the movement that had grown up in his name.

As the Church expanded, Gentiles came into its membership. The newcomers, of course, did not know the Jewish Scriptures. Neither did they know Hebrew and probably only a very little, if any, Aramaic. Thus, the Hebrew Old Testament was not avail-

able to them and they could gain but little help from the Targums. The Gentiles, however, used the Greek language and could gain access, therefore, to the Scriptures through the Septuagint. When the Gentiles became affiliated with the Christian movement they found a list of Old Testament passages which had been employed by the Jewish Christians in describing Jesus. Since this technique was already in use, it was only natural that the Gentile Christians should take up the same technique even though they had not grown up in the tradition of the Jewish Scriptures. Thus, for the Gentiles, the Testimony Tradition was "Scripture." They were no doubt aided by the Jewish Christians in memorizing the original Testimony lists in the Hebrew, but they soon would begin thinking of the ideas in their own tongue. As they added more verses to the Tradition they would do so from the LXX version. Hence, the Testimony tradition took on a **bi-lingual** character. When the Gentiles translated the earlier Testimony Tradition, received from the Jewish Christians, into Greek, they translated literally so that even though translated into Greek it still retained the characteristics of the Hebrew text. If the Aramaic paraphrases had become a part of the Testimony tradition, doubtless its character would likewise be kept.

Thus, when Paul came into the movement he found a Testimony Tradition containing Hebrew and Greek characteristics. However, the characteristics would not manifest themselves as Hebrew or Greek, nor as coming from two different traditions, unless the reader or hearer were to compare the Testimony Tradition with the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew Scriptures, for all it was now in Greek; and Paul employed the Tradition as Greek source. Those who contend that Paul had been trained at the feet of Gamaliel, must consider his employment of Scripture

as the strongest objection to such a view. A trained Rabbi would have employed the **Hebrew**, but Paul used the **Greek**.

By Paul's time, some of the lists had been written down. Such a stage in the development of the Tradition automatically crystallized the state of the text more rigidly than when it was in the oral stage. This also provided an opportunity to correct the Testimony Tradition, with the Old Testament itself, by those who were competent to do so.

Such a process of correction in the Testimony Tradition may be observed in the use of the commandments by Paul, in Romans 13:9¹, and Theophilis, a second century bishop, in his treatise "To Autolycus" III:9. Paul and Theophilis both used the following order of listing the commandments:

Exodus 20:14
Exodus 20:13
Exodus 20:15

Theophilus, while using the same order for the commandments, made certain corrections in the tradition. He inserted the commandment concerning false witnesses and the commandment concerning coveting he quoted in the long form as in the Old Testament. The passage in Romans 13:9 reflects the form of the **oral** stage of the Testimony Tradition when the passages were as condensed and shortened as possible. The Theophilus passage shows the **written** stage in which comparison had been made between the written tradition and the original commandments;

corrections were then accordingly made in the Testimony Tradition.

The corrections were not always made in the Testimony Tradition in case of variation from the Old Testament text. For instance, in the tradition employed in Romans 13:9, the commandments are given in a different order than in the Hebrew or LXX text of Exodus and Deuteronomy, except for the text of Vaticanus (B) where the text of Deuteronomy has the same order as Romans 13:9. This indicates that the scribe of Codex B was more familiar with the Testimony Tradition than with the original form of the commandments. Hence, the scribe placed the revised Testimony order in Deuteronomy 5:17-21 instead of following his text of that passage. In other words, he was reluctant to follow his exemplar for he had always heard the other order. Since his exemplar did not use the familiar Testimony order in Exodus 20:13-17, he was sure that it must be the correct order for Deuteronomy 5:17-21. If the objection is raised that the scribe of Codex B may have correctly followed his exemplar and found the revised order in his source, then the comments expressed above will be transferred to the exemplar, or if need be to the exemplar of the exemplar. Codex B did the same thing in the handling of the material in Romans 3:10-18. This passage is formed from the following Old Testament passages: (LXX).

¹ Luke 18:20, James 2:11, and the Stephanus text of Mark 10:19 also record the commandments in the order of Exodus 20:14,13.

Old Testament Passages of The Testimony Tradition in Rom. 3:10-18.

ENGLISH VERSION	HEBREW	SEPTAUGINT
Psalms 14:1-3	Psalms 14:1-3	Psalms 13:1-3 (13:1-3a B LXX)
5:9	5:10	5:10
140:3	140:4	139:4
10:7	10:7	9:28
Isaiah 59:7a	Isaiah 59:7a	Isaiah 59:7a
Prov. 1:16	Prov. 1:16	Prov. 1:16
Isaiah 59:7b, 8	Isaiah 59:7b, 8	Isaiah 59:7b, 8
Psalms 36:1	Psalms 35:2	Psalms 35:2

The scribe again was reluctant to follow his exemplar; instead he incorporated the whole of the Testimony tradition from Romans 3:10-18 into Psalms 13:1-3.

Paul also had some knowledge of the Scriptures, apart from the Testimony Tradition. He added new passages, in his letters, to the already existing tradition—passages which for the Christians of the next century became part of their Testimony Tradition.

Thus, the Tradition grew. Every Christian could take part in the shaping of the Testimony Tradition. That is, they all had such an opportunity if they were willing to exert themselves sufficiently to use the tradition and keep their attention fixed on whatever new passages they heard so they could add it to what was already in the Tradition as they knew it.

IV. How Can It Aid New Testament Study?

In the past, the period from the death of Jesus to the beginning of Paul's ministry has been passed over as rather uneventful and unimportant. Probably the cause for this has been the summary fashion in which this period is treated in the first twelve chapters of Acts. Part of the cause for this view of the period has been that tools have not been available for the study of the Pre-Documentary period from 29 A.D. to 50 A.D. Within recent years more attention has been drawn to that period, with a certain amount of success.

During the past two decades, New Testament study has been directed toward the discovery of what happened in the Christian movement between the time of the crucifixion of Jesus and the writing of the books of the New Testament. This study has been made, for

the most part, in the Synoptic gospels. Bultmann and Dibelius blazed the trail which has led to very fruitful results in the recovery of much knowledge about the Pre-Documentary Christian group. The study of the Gospels by following the principles of **Formgeschichte** has revealed certain types of material out of which our Gospels were formed. These types were thus pre-Gospel or even Pre-Documentary types. Since the Pauline letters and the Gospel of Mark were the earliest of the New Testament books to be written then any type that is older than these is thereby to be considered as Pre-New Testament.

The Testimony Tradition can also be of aid to the New Testament student in this attempt to isolate Pre-New Testament types and thereby go at least one step behind the earliest of the New Testament documents. The statement is so simple that it is very obvious, yet it is necessary to call attention to the fact that the Old Testament quotations within the New Testament books form a large source of pre-New Testament material.

The study of the Testimony Tradition and its isolation can help in understanding the movement before the writing of the earliest extant Christian literature. By looking at the Testimony Tradition and examining the way it was employed by the different writers, we have a standard by which the theology of the early church can be judged in its fluctuation. By regarding the Testimony Tradition as separate from the literature in which it is found, we can discover what **Primitive Christianity** was thinking and doing in its attempt to spread the new Faith.