

## TESTIMONY IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

### THE PUZZLE OF 5:31 AND 8:14

Thomas W. Simpson  
([thomas.simpson@bsg.ox.ac.uk](mailto:thomas.simpson@bsg.ox.ac.uk))

### Summary

*Testimony is a central theme in John's Gospel and he has a developed view on how it works. This paper makes two contributions. First, I show the complexity and sophistication with which John handles different kinds of testimony in his narrative; this constitutes a category of evidence for the centrality of testimony not noted hitherto. Second, I address the central puzzle, namely the prima facie contradiction between 5:31 and 8:14. At issue is whether Jesus' testimony about himself requires corroborating testimony for it rationally to be believed. I argue that 8:14 has interpretative priority: according to John, no such corroboration is required.*

### 1. Introduction

Testimony is one of the central themes of the Fourth Gospel. This has been widely recognised by biblical scholars. Philosophers ought to have recognised this but have not. They have not recognised it because of a disciplinary myopia, with biblical writings presumed not to be sources of philosophical insight. They ought to have recognised it because the writer or final editor of the Fourth Gospel—henceforth *John*—answers some of the enduring questions of religious epistemology.

This paper seeks to remedy the lacuna. It makes two contributions. First, I show the philosophical sophistication with which John develops the theme of testimony. This constitutes a category of evidence for the centrality of the theme in the Gospel not noted hitherto by biblical scholars. Second, I address in depth the puzzle posed by two statements

attributed to Jesus which are in *prima facie* contradiction. These are 5:31, where Jesus declares that his testimony is not true if he bears witness to himself; and 8:14, where Jesus declares that his testimony is true even if he bears witness to himself.<sup>1</sup> I defend the conclusion that 8:14 has interpretative priority. Jesus' testimony about himself requires no further attestation by other testifiers for hearers to acquire propositional knowledge by believing him.

The puzzle has received only cursory attention from commentators. Yet resolving it is necessary for some vital questions of theological and philosophical interpretation. Its resolution is central to understanding John's views on how testimony works; that is, to understanding his epistemology of testimony. Most dramatically, its resolution also provides John's answer to the following question: under what conditions does Jesus' testimony make available the knowledge of God? Both questions are interesting; the latter, clearly, is of unusual importance. The conclusion defended here is thus an essential foundation for further work on these wider issues. While my approach is primarily philosophical, the results are of general interest and all technical terms are explained.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After surveying briefly the reasons conventionally adduced for the centrality of testimony in the Gospel, I identify aspects of the text which constitute a different category of evidence. John combines different kinds of testimony in varied tiers with a sophistication that is deliberate and subtle (§§2-3). I then state the puzzle of 5:31 and 8:14, and give reasons for supposing that the *prima facie* contradiction is deliberate (§4). There are two outline ways of ascribing a consistent view to John. I initially provide the argument for what I term the *no single testimony view* (§5), and counter it by proposing and defending the view which ought to be ascribed to John, the *sufficiency of self-testimony view* (§6).

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<sup>1</sup> To be explicit, this paper is not concerned with the historical accuracy of the Fourth Gospel. When I use 'Jesus', it should be understood that I elide 'as portrayed by John'. Similarly, 'John' is used as a definite description denoting the author or final editor of the Gospel, not as an assertion about that person's proper name. Clearly enough, neither of these qualifications precludes the accuracy of John's account nor of the tradition that so names the author.

## 2. Evidence for the Centrality of Testimony

Biblical scholars have noted the significance of testimony as a theme in the Gospel for some time. Three principal categories of evidence are adduced.

(i) *Frequency of word use.* While a blunt indicator, frequency of word use remains useful evidence for the importance of a concept or theme. The relevant word family in Greek is the *martur-* group. Words with this root occur 47 times in the Gospel. ‘Witness’ or ‘testimony’ translates the noun *marturia*, and occurs 14 times. ‘To witness’ or ‘to testify’ translates the verb *martureîn*, and occurs 33 times.<sup>2</sup> Thus Robert Gordon Maccini: ‘It is difficult to overemphasise the centrality of the witness words *martureîn* and *marturia* in John’.<sup>3</sup>

(ii) *Narrative position.* Another indicator of the importance of a theme is the location within the narrative of occasions when it comes to the fore. Does it occur at pivotal moments, or only in the margins? References to testimony and discussions of how it works in the Gospel occur at key moments. An example is its early occurrence. The prologue is a carefully constructed text. Its first theme is Jesus’ identity. Its second is testimony (1:6-8).<sup>4</sup> The testimony theme returns again in the prologue (1:15), which then segues into a section conventionally termed by Johannine scholars ‘the Testimony’ (1:19-51), such is the frequency of the theme there.<sup>5</sup> Arguably the two climactic moments of the Gospel, Jesus’ trial and death on the cross, are marked by summary references to testimony. Pilate’s famous question, ‘What is truth?’, ending the trial, is prompted by Jesus’ declaration that he was born and came into the world in order to testify (18:37). And Jesus’ death is confirmed by an appeal to eyewitness testimony (19:35).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985; tr. and abr. from German, 9 vols, 1933-73): 566; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000): 12.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gordon Maccini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses According to John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996): 49.

<sup>4</sup> All chapter and verse citations are from John’s Gospel except when stated. Quotations are from the NRSV unless stated otherwise. The Greek text used is the 27th Nestle-Aland edition.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Edwards, *Discovering John* (London: SPCK, 2003): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauckham argues for the importance of this verse, as John’s claim *qua* eyewitness to be qualified to be the ‘ideal author’. See Richard Bauckham, *The*

(iii) *Pervasiveness of theme.* John the Baptist and Jesus are two of the principal characters in the Gospel, and both are explicitly stated to offer testimony (1:15, 19; 1:32-34; 3:26; 5:33 and 5:31ff.; 8:14; 13:21; 18:37 respectively). But the theme is far from restricted to them; rather, it is broached across the breadth of the book. Others who explicitly offer testimony are the woman at the well (4:34, 4:39); the Father through the Scriptures (5:36-40); the Spirit (15:26); the miracles (5:36; 10:25); the crowd who had witnessed Lazarus being raised to life (12:17); the disciples (15:27); the witness to Jesus' death (19:35); and the author (20:31; 21:24).

The above is strong evidence that testimony is a central theme in John's Gospel. Johannes Beutler concludes that the preeminent uniqueness of John's work is 'the arrangement of the individual witnesses for Jesus within the Gospel...into a consistent and connected argumentation from testimony'.<sup>7</sup> Some of the evidence is quantifiable; that which is not requires little sensitivity to grasp. However, alongside this is evidence of a more subtle nature, but which nonetheless ought to be persuasive.

### 3. Varieties of Testimony

John carefully draws attention to layers of different kinds of testimony in his narrative. The way in which he does so strongly indicates that he wished to highlight this issue to the reader's attention. This constitutes further evidence for the centrality of the theme to his Gospel. I

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*Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007): 87-91.

<sup>7</sup> Johannes Beutler, *Martyria traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Knecht, 1972): 365; quoted from Maccini, *Her Testimony*, 55. Others who endorse the centrality of the theme include: B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1908); Robert H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Significance and Environment* (London: SCM, 1941): 173; Théo Preiss, *Life in Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1954): 15; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971); trans. from German, 1964): 48-49; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 1 (London: Burns and Oates, 1968): 251; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971): 89; John Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975): 90-91; Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975); C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978): 159; Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1981): 136; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010): 60.

represent the varieties of testimony which he gives schematically, so as to bring out their underlying structure, and give examples.

Four distinct kinds of testimony can be identified in the Gospel.

(i) *Simple testimony*. This occurs in the Gospel when John asserts that something occurred. There is no distinction here between John and the Synoptic writers; I note it for completeness. Schematically: '*p*'. (*p* refers to a proposition; the content is undefined.) An example: 'Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged' (19:1).

There are then the following variants on simple testimony. These are unique to John.

(ii) *Performative testimony*. This occurs when John explicitly draws attention to the fact that he, the writer, is giving testimony. He does this by using the verb 'to testify' rather than 'to say', 'to tell' or equivalents. Schematically: 'I testify that *p*'. I term this kind of testimony 'performative' as it is possible to insert 'hereby' while preserving the sense of the sentence. The function of the device is to make it explicit that an act has been performed. In J. L. Austin's famous *How to Do Things With Words*, he gives other examples of performativity: 'I hereby promise...'; 'I hereby name you...'; 'I hereby order you...'.<sup>8</sup> An example from the Gospel: 'This is the disciple who testifies to these things' (21:24).

(iii) *Self-attested testimony*. There is a third kind of testimony which occurs when John offers his own testimony, and at the same time tells the reader that his testimony is true. This is a form of self-attestation. Schematically: '*p*, and I tell you that *p* is true'. The one instance of this includes other variations, and is classified immediately below, (iv).

Now note that self-attestation and performativity can be combined. There is a further, fourth kind of testimony.

(iv) *Self-attested performative testimony*. Schematically: 'I testify that *p*, and I tell you that *p* is true'. Example: 'This is the disciple who testifies to these things ... We know that his testimony is true' (21:24).

The above four kinds of testimony—simple; performative; self-attested; self-attested performative—are variants of a two-place testimonial relation. The relation is that between John and his readers. But as well as giving his own testimony, John also tells his readers what other people have said. He gives testimony to others' testimony. So there are testimonial chains which can have varying numbers of

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<sup>8</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

layers, or tiers. Moreover, each layer of testimony permits the same variation in kinds noted for the two-place testimonial relation. To disambiguate, I term the second tier a ‘report’ of someone else’s testimony.

(v) *Reported Testimony*. John here simply reports what someone else has said. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> said “p”’. (‘S<sub>1</sub>’ refers to the speaker who is the source of the testimonial chain. John is implicitly ‘S<sub>2</sub>’.) Again, there is no distinction here between John and the Synoptic writers; I mention it for completeness. An example: ‘Jesus answered, “No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him”’; (6:44; also 1:23).

In addition to reporting others’ testimony, the same variations on simple testimony also occur for reported testimony. The variations can occur at both levels of the testimonial chain—either on the testimony which is reported, or on the report of the testimony. Variants on the former are as follows.

(vi) *Reported performative testimony*. John reports someone else’s performative testimony. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> said, “I testify that p”’. An example: ‘Jesus told them, “I testify that what [the world] does is evil”’; (7:7; also 8:18).

(vii) *Reported self-attested testimony*. This occurs when John reports someone else’s self-attested testimony. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> said “p, and I tell you that p is true”’. An example: ‘Jesus declared: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”’; (3:3). The ‘Truly, truly’ formula used by Jesus twenty-five times in the Gospel is a form of self-attestation, confirming his statement in the way that an oath does.<sup>9</sup>

(viii) *Reported self-attested performative testimony*. John here reports someone else giving testimony, who describes their own statement as ‘testimony’, and also offers their assurance to its truth. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> said, “I testify that p, and I tell you p is true”’. Example: ‘Jesus answered him ... “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen”’; (3:10-11).

Additionally, there is the following variation on the kinds of report of the testimony.

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<sup>9</sup> Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 32.

(ix) *Performatively reported testimony*. John explicitly draws attention to the fact that someone else has given testimony. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> testified, “p”’. An example: ‘John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him”’; (1:32; also 1:15, 1:19; 4:39). There are also instances where the testimony is summarised in the third person, but have the same structure. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> testified that p’. Example: ‘Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet’s own country’ (4:44; also 1:7-8; 3:32-33).

Not only so, but the variations on the report and on the testimony can be combined, leading to increasing complexity. There are a further sixteen possible variations, of which two occur. As the explanation of what is occurring should now be clear, I give only the schema and its example. They are the following:

(x) *Performatively reported performative testimony*. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> testified, “I testify that p”’. Example: ‘John testified: ... “I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God”’; (1:32-34).

(xi) *Self-attestation to performatively reported self-attested testimony*. Schematically: ‘S<sub>1</sub> testified: “p, and I tell you p is true”, and I tell you p is true’. The example is in the third person, but otherwise satisfies the schema: ‘He who saw [the water and blood come from Jesus’ side] has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth’ (19:35).<sup>10</sup>

The complexity increases yet further. There are instances where a third layer of testimony is introduced. Sometimes John testifies to someone else testifying to what a third person has testified. Call the third layer ‘testimony’. So in a three-link testimonial chain where the links are explicitly stated, there is testimony to reported testimony. I classify these occasions accordingly. (In the schema, John is now implicitly ‘S<sub>3</sub>’.)

(xii) *Testimony to performatively reported testimony*. ‘S<sub>2</sub> said, “S<sub>1</sub> testified, ‘p’;”’. The example is in the third person but otherwise conforms: ‘Jesus spoke to them, saying, “[T]he Father who sent me testifies on my behalf”’; (8:12, 18).

(xiii) *Testimony to self-attested performatively reported testimony*. ‘S<sub>2</sub> said, “S<sub>1</sub> testified, ‘p’, and I [S<sub>2</sub>] tell you p is true;”’. Again, the

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<sup>10</sup> I follow Richard Bauckham in taking 19:35 to be John referring to himself. See Bauckham, *Testimony*, 85.

example is in the third person, but otherwise conforms: ‘Jesus said to them ... “There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true”’; (5:19, 32)

(xiv) *Performative testimony to reported testimony*. ‘S<sub>2</sub> testified, “S<sub>1</sub> said, ‘p’;”’. Example: ‘John testified, “[T]he one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’;”’ (1:32-33).

To summarise: the complexity and the explicitness with which layers of different kinds of reportage are developed in the Gospel is compelling evidence that testimony is a central theme. It is more than that, however. It is also strongly suggestive that John thought carefully about how testimony works. So it is not anachronistic to suppose that he has a principled position on that issue. I turn now to address the central puzzle presented by his Gospel regarding that question.

#### 4. Is Jesus’ Self-testimony True?

The text poses a problem. The most important issue in the Gospel is the identity of Jesus—who he is and on what authority he speaks and acts (1:1; 20:31).<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, Jesus has something to say on the matter. Call this *Jesus’ self-testimony*. (For a speaker *S* to self-testify that *p*, rather than merely testify that *p*, the content of *p* must require *S* as a referent.) The problem is this: according to John, what is the epistemic status of Jesus’ self-testimony?<sup>12</sup> Does he think that Jesus’ self-testimony alone is sufficient for a hearer’s belief that Jesus is divine, or does it require supplementary corroborating testimony? The narrative twice explicitly addresses the issue and seems to give contradictory answers. At one point, Jesus declares, “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true” (5:31). At another, he states that, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is true” (8:14).<sup>13, 14</sup> What ought the reader to make of this?

<sup>11</sup> Also James Gaffney, ‘Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel’, *Theological Studies* 26 (1965): 215-41, esp. 226-29.

<sup>12</sup> I make the uncontroversial assumption that when John reports Jesus to have said ‘*p*’, John believed *p*.

<sup>13</sup> To ensure word-for-word consistency in translation, I have rendered *alēthēs* as ‘true’ in 8:14 rather than the NRSV’s ‘valid’. The same applies to 8:13, 16, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Note that 5:31 and 8:14 are formally contradictory only if the additional premise is asserted, that Jesus testifies on his own behalf. Both 5:31 and 8:14 are conditionals. On the semantics of the material conditional, they would thus be true if Jesus did not

There are three outline resolutions. One conclusion is that John contradicted himself actually, as well as *prima facie*. Many writers do, after all. Another conclusion is to give interpretative priority to 5:31, thus preserving consistency. Or one may do the same for 8:14, to the same effect.

Before addressing the issue, it is worth noting what hangs on it. If 5:31 has interpretative priority, Jesus' testimony makes available the knowledge of God only if there is additional, corroborative testimony available which a hearer must weigh. If 8:14 has priority, then John's claim is that Jesus' testimony *alone* is sufficient to allow a hearer to come to know the central propositions of Christianity. On the latter, the simple act of relating Jesus' works and words gives hearers reason to believe, reason which may be sufficient for knowledge. On the former, Jesus' testimony is a contributing part—perhaps central, but nonetheless only a part—of an argumentative case the conclusion of which is some central Christian claims.

I shall argue for the priority of 8:14, and give textual grounds for doing so. But it is not implausible to prioritise 5:31. Before arguing for the former, however, I give strong initial grounds for not supposing that John unwittingly contradicted himself. I also report some important cultural context.

Given the clarity of the contradiction, the burden of proof rests with those who take John to be consistent. This burden can be met. Here are four considerations to show why. First, there is a general principle of charity in interpretation. If there is a way of interpreting a text in such a way that it ascribes a consistent view to the author, that is more likely to be an accurate understanding of their position than one which ascribes gross stupidity. Further, the elegance and precision of John's Greek shows him to be educated and intelligent, making the plausibility of that ascription slim. Second, the Gospel was not dashed off in a rush. Richard Bauckham's detailed evidence for numerical patterns in the text, including *gematria*, shows that its composition was carefully planned.<sup>15</sup> The same evidence argues that there was at least a final editor who was also largely responsible for the content of the

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testify on his own behalf. But John clearly does believe the additional premise, that Jesus testifies on his own behalf, so there is a *prima facie* contradiction. I am grateful to Daniel Hill for the point.

<sup>15</sup> Bauckham, *Testimony*, 271-84.

text.<sup>16</sup> So it is incredible to suppose that John was unaware of the contradiction. Indeed, its very starkness is grounds for supposing that it is deliberate. Third, John uses *prima facie* contradiction elsewhere. Did Jesus come to judge the world? Compare the statements of 5:22 and 9:39 with those in 3:17 and 12:47; 2:23 and 12:37; 7:28 and 8:14; and 14:5 and 16:5. What purpose might such contradiction serve? At minimum, it serves as a ‘stop and think’ device. ‘It is typical of John to use apparent contradictions in order to draw the reader’s attention to a deeper truth’.<sup>17</sup> Fourth, a reading which shows how, on grounds within the text, either 5:31 or 8:14 should have interpretative priority is thereby also a reading which accommodates these points. Such readings are available and do not ‘stretch’ the text. There are strong grounds, then, for supposing that John is consistent.

Before turning to resolve the puzzle, a point of common knowledge for the first readers should be noted and which is assumed by Jesus’ seemingly contradictory statements. The Torah laid down principles which governed Jewish legal practice. Deuteronomy contains this instruction: ‘A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained’ (19:15; parallels in 17:6, Num. 35:30). Jesus refers to this directly in 8:17. Call this the *no single testimony condition*. This requirement was a cornerstone of Rabbinic law (*Mishnah Kethuboth* 2:9).<sup>18</sup>

In consequence, *alēthēs* in John’s Gospel may have a range of meanings. It is conventionally translated ‘true’, and it certainly can carry the usual meaning this has in English. On this, a statement is true if and only if the world is as described. But given the context, it may have another sense, that of affirming that a statement is valid; that is, it

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Craig Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003): xxvi; against, e.g. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (2nd edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 116-20.

<sup>17</sup> Pancaro, *Law in the Fourth Gospel*, 210.

<sup>18</sup> For discussion, see H. van Vliet, *No Single Testimony: A Study on the Adoption of the Law of Deut. 19:15* (Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, 1958). Jewish legal practice is such a significant aspect of John’s cultural context, and the internal evidence of the Gospel sufficient to show that he had a detailed knowledge of how it worked, that many scholars take John to be in essence portraying an extended trial of Jesus. See Preiss, *Life in Christ*, 11-22; A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1976); Raymond F. Collins, *John and his Witness* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991): 14-15; Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*.

is legally admissible. There is a third possibility too. We have a notion of validity even if a speaker's testimony has no legal consequences. This is just the epistemologist's standard concern with whether a belief is rational or justified, and thus (in this setting) with whether someone's testimony ought to be believed. The notion is distinct from the first sense, for sometimes it is rational to believe falsehoods. The notion is also distinct from the legal one, for it may be rational to believe what someone says even though their testimony is legally inadmissible. For example, in English courts of law a witness's report of claims made to them by a third party counts as 'hearsay evidence'. It is legally inadmissible. But it may sometimes be rational to believe hearsay reports. Legal validity is a higher standard than epistemic validity. So John may also have used *alēthēs* in the epistemic sense. The NRSV translators are ambiguous between these latter two senses when they translate *alēthēs* with 'valid'. 'Legal discourse serves as a model for situations less codified by social ritual but in which we can recognise the fundamental traits of the trial'.<sup>19</sup>

Here is the first resolution of the problem. It prioritises 5:31.

## 5. No Single Testimony

I term this resolution the *no single testimony view*. It takes the no single testimony requirement from Deuteronomy to deny both the legal and epistemic validity of Jesus' self-testimony. Thus it is the conjunction of two theses. The legal thesis: A court ought not to accept a single speaker *S*'s testimony that *p* as evidence for *p*. The epistemic thesis: A hearer ought not to believe that *p* solely on the basis of a single speaker *S*'s testimony that *p*. So Jesus' testimony is not admissible by itself and ought not to be believed without corroboration.

Does the text support this view? Here is the argument. Take 5:31 as it naturally reads, as making a normative claim invalidating self-testimony with the following gloss: 'If I testify on my own behalf (and my testimony is not supported by others), then it is not legally admissible'. *Alēthēs* must be construed in terms of validity, for it would be absurd to say that self-testimony is false without supporting testimony. In the rest of the dialogue, Jesus assumes the two witnesses

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<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *Essays*, 124-25; Trites, *New Testament Concept*, 222; Francis. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998): 266-67.

requirement from Deuteronomy and claims that there are supporting witnesses to his self-testimony. These include John the Baptist, Jesus' works, the Father testifying through the Scriptures and Jesus' life, and Moses. Further witnesses are adduced elsewhere in the Gospel. Given these supporting witnesses, his self-testimony must be valid—legally admissible. The qualification of 5:34 shows that, due to his divine status, Jesus does not accept that he must be vindicated by human trial. But because his hearers are bound by legal rules of admissibility, he adduces the supporting witnesses to show that his testimony is valid 'so that you may be saved'.

Chapter 8 then reinforces the point. In contrast to the normative claim of 5:31, 8:14 makes an existential claim. It should be glossed as follows: 'Even if I testify on my behalf, my testimony is legally admissible (because others testify in support of me)'. 'If' is here taken to function as a concessive conjunction, roughly equivalent to 'although'. Further, Jesus explicitly refers to the no single testimony condition at 8:17. As in the dialogue in Chapter 5, and to satisfy the requirement, he then adduces the Father's witness to the Son (8:18).

In sum, Jesus is committed to the invalidity of self-testimony because he is committed to the no single testimony condition. This resolution is defended by Leon Morris: 'Independent confirmation is required [in 5:31]. And that independent confirmation is available. ... Here [in 8:14] he is not going back on the position he there took up'.<sup>20</sup>

Epistemic validity and legal validity have the following relations. As noted, legal validity is a higher evidential bar than epistemic validity. So evidence which satisfies the former also satisfies the latter *a fortiori*. (Note that neither the legal nor epistemic validity of evidence entails that the evidence provides decisive support for the conclusion it supports. All things considered, countervailing evidence may be stronger.) But the converse does not hold; epistemic validity does not entail legal validity. The legal thesis and the denial of the epistemic thesis are thus compossible. So a reading which attributes a logically consistent position to John is possible, in which Jesus' claim of 5:31

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<sup>20</sup> Morris, *Gospel*, 324 and 436. Others who defend this resolution include: Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1940): 302; C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963): 297; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966): 340, 345; Maccini, *Her Testimony*, 59-60.

endorses only the legal thesis. But while the position would be logically consistent, there is no textual evidence for making the attribution. The natural conclusion is that John is concerned both with the legal and epistemic theses, in their application to the question of Jesus' identity and authority.

## 6. The Sufficiency of Self-testimony

Does John endorse the no single testimony view? No. The view I argue for in its stead prioritises 8:14, and I term it the *sufficiency of self-testimony view*. The view states that sometimes, a hearer may come to know that *p* by believing a speaker's self-testimony that *p*, and without the hearer knowing of any corroborating testimony or argument for *p* from a third-party. The speaker need not be Jesus only; anyone who knows what they are saying when they testify about themselves is a candidate.

The relation between the two positions is as follows. The sufficiency of self-testimony view is the contradictory of the no single testimony view's epistemic thesis. If the former is true, the latter is false; and if the latter is false, the former is true. (I note, though only to put aside as tangential, that the two views are themselves contraries. Although the truth of one entails the falsity of the other, it is possible that both are false. This would be so just if both the legal and epistemic theses were false.) The legal thesis is relevant for adjudicating whether Jesus' trial, as portrayed by John, was legally valid. But for present purposes, it is the epistemic thesis which is the interesting one. This is because resolving the interpretative puzzle is propaedeutic to at least the epistemological enquiry into the conditions under which Jesus' testimony makes available the knowledge of God. In regard to the epistemic thesis, the sufficiency of self-testimony and the no single testimony views are mutually exclusive. One, and only one, must be true.

Here is the textual argument for my view. The decisive consideration is this: the gloss that the no single testimony view gives on 8:14 is not what the text says. Jesus does not say that his self-testimony is *alēthēs* because there are others who witness on his behalf. He says it is *alēthēs* because he knows where he comes from and where he is going. This is irrelevant if the no single testimony view is correct.

It is pertinent if—and because the views are contradictories in regard to the epistemic thesis, also only if—the sufficiency of self-testimony view is correct. John obviously thinks it is pertinent, so he must endorse the latter and not the former.

There are a number of supporting considerations. First, note that John elsewhere uses a rhetorical trope in which a universal generalisation is made without qualification, and then subsequently excepted (e.g. 3:32-33). If the statements are juxtaposed outside the context of the conversation there is a contradiction. But within the conversation the latter simply qualifies the former, and this is then a presupposition for later dialogue. This occurs within pericopes. There is no reason it cannot occur across the text. If so, a later statement has priority over an earlier one which it contradicts. So there is a presumption that 8:14 takes priority over 5:31.

Second, the no self-testimony conditional of 5:31 need not be read as endorsed by Jesus. The text of Chapter 5 does not settle the matter. It is permissible to take it to be so within the context of Chapter 5 taken independently. But it is equally permissible not to, if there are reasons deriving from elsewhere in the text not to and there an alternative construal is plausible. The alternative reading of 5:31 is that it is an assumed statement for an *ad hominem* argument, to be glossed as ‘(You say that) If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true’.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, there is textual support from within the dialogue for this *ad hominem* reading; in 5:34 Jesus states that he does not accept human testimony, thereby exempting himself from the standards that his interlocutors apply to themselves. The rest of the discourse in Chapter 5 then aims to show that, given a premise which his opponents accept (even though Jesus himself does not), they ought to accept his self-testimony. The track record arguments elsewhere in the Gospel likewise take this ‘by your lights’ form. So too do the texts at 10:37-38 and 14:11. John’s view is thus that Jesus’ divinity is evidentially overdetermined. It is not that Jesus’ hearers should not believe his self-testimony on its own grounds. But even if they do not, there are other grounds on which they ought to accept his divinity.

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<sup>21</sup> Thus John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist: Homilies 1-47* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1957; tr. from Greek, c.389): 404; his reading endorsed by Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St John* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010; trans. from Latin, c.1272): 295-96.

Third, Jesus' allusion in 8:17 to the no single testimony condition is not an endorsement. But the no single testimony view requires that it is. Instead, 8:17 is a further premise adopted only *ad hominem*. For when the close of the conversation is rightly understood, it is evident that Jesus actually undercuts the principle. In 8:18 Jesus re-asserts that the Father testifies on his behalf, so the formal requirements of the law are met—the *ad hominem* point. But he then qualifies this in 8:19. His hearers will 'know' the Father only if they also 'know' Jesus. The claim is puzzling without context from elsewhere in the Gospel, where Jesus makes some striking transitivity claims. He states that the following attitudes, if adopted towards him, are thereby also adopted towards the Father: honour (5:23); 'reception' (13:20); belief-in, or faith (12:44); hate (15:23); and by implication belief-that on the basis of testimony (5:24). Given these transitivity claims, Jesus' statement that knowing him is a sufficient condition for knowing the Father, and that his immediate hearers know neither him nor his Father, is an allusion to the availability of the Father's testimony if his hearers trust Jesus' own testimony. '[T]he testimony of these two is one'.<sup>22</sup> 'The two testimonies of which he has just spoken, his own and his Father's, are *both* wrapped up in his own testimony—in short, his testimony is self-authenticating'.<sup>23</sup> In sum, Jesus subverts the Pharisees' view that his self-testimony is valid only if there is testimony additional to Jesus' own.<sup>24</sup> The effect is to deny that requirement.<sup>25</sup> When it comes to the epistemic issue of his identity, Jesus insists that his self-testimony is sufficient.

This transitivity claim shows why a rival reconciliation of 8:14 is textually possible but interpretatively otiose. The rival reading is this. Read 5:31 according to the no single testimony view; on this, *alēthēs* is understood in terms of validity. But in 8:14, *alēthēs* should be understood in its related but distinct sense, that of truth (against the NRSV). So the *prima facie* contradiction between 5:31 and 8:14 is

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<sup>22</sup> Trites, *New Testament Concept*, 106.

<sup>23</sup> Michaels, *Gospel*, 484. See also R. H. Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel: A Commentary*. ed. C. F. Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956): 190; Bultmann, *Gospel*, 266; Pancaro, *Law in the Fourth Gospel*, 276; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd edn; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999): 78.

<sup>24</sup> See also J. C. Hindley, 'Witness in the Fourth Gospel', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965): 319-37, esp. 327-28.

<sup>25</sup> Does this mean that Jesus denies the two-witnesses requirement from Deuteronomy? No. He says nothing about its legal validity; the issue here is epistemic.

dissolved because the word is used equivocally. Indeed, Jesus' explanation of why his self-testimony is *alēthēs* then reads entirely naturally: it is true because he knows where he comes from and thus what he is talking about.

This alternative reading is not a rival, for it affirms the interpretative point I am making. In virtue of the transitivity relation asserted later in the dialogue (8:17-19) between a hearer's knowing Jesus and thereby knowing the Father, the legal requirement of two witnesses is satisfied for Jesus' testimony *but without the hearer being aware of it*. The transitivity relation obtains regardless of subjective awareness. In consequence, on the view that John attributes to Jesus, it must be possible for a hearer rationally to believe Jesus' self-testimony whilst not being aware of the existence of corroborating witnesses. So regardless of whether *alēthēs* should be read in terms of validity or truth, the passage as a whole supports the sufficiency of self-testimony view.

Fourth, the sufficiency of self-testimony view explains why 8:14 succeeds the 'I am' saying of 8:12. On the no single testimony view, the content of the 'I am' saying is incidental to the dialogue. But on the sufficiency of self-testimony view, there is a close thematic tie. In 8:12, Jesus declares that he is 'the light of the world'. The Pharisees seek to discredit the claim by requiring additional witnesses, which Jesus denies by saying that his self-testimony is *alēthēs*. This is like light. Augustine identifies the parallel: 'A burning lamp is capable of making visible other things which were covered with darkness *and of showing itself to your eyes*. ... The light bears testimony to itself'.<sup>26</sup> Any of the seven 'I am' sayings in the Gospel would have been sufficient to prompt the charge of invalid self-testimony. But the light metaphor also anticipates the very point that Jesus will make in rebuttal, that his self-testimony is sufficient for knowledge about his identity.

Fifth, this view makes sense of other reports of testimony in the Gospel. As noted above, John frequently has speakers offer their own attestation for the truth of the report. Suppose self-attestation is

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<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993; tr. from Latin, c.416): 74; italics added. Also Barrett, *Gospel*, 338; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991): 339.

epistemically significant and not merely a rhetorical ploy.<sup>27</sup> The same thought supports both the epistemic value of self-attestation and the sufficiency of self-testimony view; namely that a speaker's word gives a hearer reason to believe her testimony.

Is the reading of 8:12-19 I have given above the only plausible one? No—but the alternatives make no philosophical difference. This is because rival possible readings still result in John's endorsement of the epistemic claim made by the sufficiency of self-testimony view. (There may be theological implications to these variant readings, of course.) The key question is whether one reads 8:14 as stating a normative principle which governs valid testimonial belief. If it does, then John denies that a hearer's justified belief of a speaker's testimony always requires additional corroborating testimony. A popular 'exceptionalist' reading follows the sufficiency of self-testimony view in taking 8:14 to have interpretative priority over 5:31. But it sees the justification of 8:14b as applying to Jesus only, rather than any speaker, on account of his divinity.<sup>28</sup> I do not endorse the exceptionalist reading because the transitivity relation of a hearer believing  $S_2$  by believing what  $S_1$  has said, when  $S_1$  was sent by or reports  $S_2$ 's testimony, is asserted elsewhere in the Gospel to hold for (non-divine) speakers other than Jesus (see 17:20). A. E. Harvey has a different variant which does not fall under the heads above. He argues that the law allows for a single testifier in defence but not in prosecution. So he reads both 5:31 and 8:14 normatively, the former as applying to the prosecution, the latter

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<sup>27</sup> Is this plausible? I think so. Self-attestation is a form of 'going on the record' regarding  $p$ . A speaker's practical reasons to testify truthfully give hearers epistemic reason to believe their testimony (see Thomas W. Simpson, 'Testimony and Sincerity', *Ratio* 25 (2012): 79-92). *Ceteris paribus*, the greater the negative practical consequences of lying or error for a speaker, the greater the epistemic reason hearers have to believe. 'Going on the record' that  $p$  is a way for a speaker to increase for herself the negative practical consequences of lying or error. So it is a way for a speaker to give her hearers greater epistemic reason to believe her testimony. The evidential mechanism is the same as that used by courts of law. The penalty of perjury there gives a speaker practical reason to tell the truth, thereby increasing the epistemic value of their testimony.

<sup>28</sup> John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist: Homilies 48-88* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1960; tr. from Greek, c.389): 52; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St John Vol I: I-VIII* (Oxford: James Parker & Co, 1874; tr. from Greek, c.428): 565; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847, tr. from Latin, 1553): 326; Westcott, *Gospel*, vol. 2, 4; Bultmann, *Gospel*, 280; Barrett, *Gospel*, 338; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005): 265.

to the defence.<sup>29</sup> Although compatible with the text, there is no evidence in favour of this reading. In neither of the dialogues, Chapter 5 or 8, is it obvious who is prosecuting and who prosecuted. This ambiguity is surely deliberate on John's part, making the theological point that the Pharisees are as much on trial as is Jesus. So the distinction is being made to fit the text, rather than as a result of exegesis. Nonetheless, in sum, neither the exceptionalist nor Harvey's alternative readings are of significance for the present enquiry, due to its epistemological focus. For each takes 8:14 to endorse the key epistemic claim, in allowing that at least one speaker's self-testimony is epistemically valid without corroboration; namely that of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Harvey, *Jesus on Trial*, 57-58.

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