

# **‘Martyr’ vs. ‘Witness’: On the Translation of the Greek *Martys*** **(or, Anyone can be a faithful witness, but it is not so with martyrs)**

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The witness box in a court of law. Truth is the issue.

## **A biblical witness**

The Greek noun *martys*,<sup>1</sup> as it was used in the New Testament, meant simply ‘a witness’; that is, a person who testifies, or who is in position to testify, of a matter that is within his or her personal knowledge.

The inaugural definition of *martys* in Joseph Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon* is “A witness – one who avers, or can aver, what he himself has seen or heard or knows by any other means.” In any court of law, justice depends upon the truthfulness of the witness. Solomon’s Proverbs in the Old Testament contain warnings about false witnesses who care not for truth, and who, in the courts of law or in the greater court which is this present life, will pervert justice.

Turning to William Tyndale’s 1534 New Testament, we find *martys* translated ‘witness’ at Acts 22:15, where Ananias is telling Saul,

The God of our fathers hath ordained thee before, that thou shouldest know his will, and shouldest see that which is rightful, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth: for thou shalt be his *witness* [*martys*] unto all men of those things which thou hast seen and heard.<sup>2</sup>

In modern English, this says,

The God of our fathers appointed you beforehand to know his will, and to see that which is rightful, and to hear the voice of his mouth; for you will be his *witness* to all men of those things that you have seen and heard.

From this passage we learn that Saul, who later came to be known as the apostle Paul, had been chosen by God to receive great revelations from him, and then to testify to all men of the things that he would see and hear. And it came to pass just as Ananias had foretold: Paul testified in person widely in Asia and parts of Europe. He then also testified by letters to Christian congregations, which letters comprise a large portion of our New Testament, and through them he has continued to testify to the world for almost twenty centuries. He was a very special witness, who gave unusual testimony of things that he came to know through spiritual visions and supernatural revelations. Paul himself, speaking about one such revelation, said he did not even know if he was in the body or out of the body (2 Corinthians 12:2).

The Lord's other apostles were witnesses who walked with him during his earthly ministry – eye-witnesses who had looked upon him with sight of flesh, and heard his voice in their ears day upon day while they kept company with him. They supped with him both before he was slain and after he was raised up from death in his body. They received miraculous powers from him, including the ability to cast out demons. We find Peter alluding to the importance of a personal testimony about these things at Acts 1:19-22, where he prays to God about replacing Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve. He emphasizes the need for a man who had seen and heard everything, because such a witness is undeniably competent to testify:

Wherefore of these men which have companied with us, all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning at the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained *to bear witness* with us of his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

### **About 'witness'**

*Funk and Wagnall's* dictionary gives two definitions for the English noun 'witness': (1) An act or fact of attestation to a fact or an event; testimony, evidence, and (2) A person who has seen or knows something and is therefore competent to give evidence concerning it; a spectator.<sup>3</sup> The first sense concerns the testimony itself. The second sense concerns the person who brings the testimony, and this is the sense of the Greek *martys*.

Following are examples of 'witness' used to translate *martys* in Tyndale's New Testament:

**Romans 1:9** For God is my *witness*, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his son.

**Revelation 1:4-5** Grace be with you and peace, from him which is and which was, and which is to come...and from Jesus Christ which is a faithful *witness*.

In his New Testament, Tyndale consistently translated *martys* as 'witness,' its simple meaning.

### ***Martys does not mean 'martyr'***

The simple meaning of a *martys* as a witness was later obscured in three New Testament passages as a result of revisers substituting the word 'martyr.' A witness is a different thing than a martyr. *Funk & Wagnall's* defines 'martyr' as (considering the relevant definition only), "A person who submits to death rather than forswear his religion; specifically, one of the early Christians who suffered death for their religious principles." Thus 'martyr' has to do with dying for one's faith, not with bringing a testimony. However, the substitution was made in the following Scriptures (in all cases, the Greek is *martys*):

#### **Acts 22:20**

Regarding the stoning death of Stephen, Tyndale had, "And when the blood of thy *witness* Steven was shed, I also stood by, and consented unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him."

The first revision was in the 1560 Geneva Bible, where 'martyr' was substituted. This was followed in the KJV in 1611.

#### **Revelation 2:13**

Tyndale put, "And in my days Antipas was a faithful *witness* of mine, which was slain among you where Satan dwelleth."

The first revision to 'martyr' was in the 1560 Geneva Bible. It was kept in the KJV.

#### **Revelation 17:6**

Tyndale had, "And I saw the wife drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the *witnesses* of Jesus. And when I saw her, I wondered with great marvel."

Wycliffe in 1380, the 1560 Geneva Bible, the 1582 Rheims, and the KJV all have 'martyrs' here.

James Strong, in his 1890 *Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible*, explains the translation 'martyr' in the above passages as an "analogy". His entry for *martys* says, "A witness (literally [judicially] or figuratively [general]); by analogy, a martyr." However, this so-called analogy is a problem. By 'analogy' is meant *an apparent agreement between things that are otherwise entirely different*,<sup>4</sup> but the analogy or apparent agreement between 'witness' and 'martyr' – which are indeed entirely different things – arose after the Scriptures were written. The original Greek did not convey such a sense. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains the later development of the analogical sense:

The original meaning of the Greek word *martys* was 'witness'; in this sense it is often used in the New Testament. Since the most striking witness which Christians could bear to their faith was to die rather than deny it, the word soon began to be used in reference to one who was not only a witness, but specifically a martyr.<sup>5</sup>

Although martyrdom is certainly a witness of sorts, and a significant one, that does not mean it is correct to translate *martys* by 'martyr.' Neither the fact that death is a "striking witness," nor the fact that over time *martys* came to be popularly used with reference to martyrs, justified the new translations. Further, the substitution of 'martyr' for 'witness' was not necessary to indicate the death of the witnesses, which was clear from the contexts. Quite simply, this substitution was not true to the original.

To be fair to earlier revisers, the on-line Oxford English dictionary supports the early use of 'martyr' as "one who testifies for Christ or the Christian faith," in a special sense apparently limited to testimony for the Christian faith. But this meaning is unknown today. 'Martyr' has lost any exclusive connection to Christianity that it may once have had, and therefore it really does not belong in modern English Bibles (even if it might be overlooked in older ones). And in any case, the New Testament authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, did not use *martys* in a special sense, so as to distinguish between witnesses who suffered death and those who did not.

### ***Three reasons why it matters***

Other issues and problems arise from the substitution of 'martyr' for 'witness':

(1) *The added emotional element.* 'Witness' is a neutral, secular word, but 'martyr' is emotionally charged in religious context, where martyrs are honoured heroes. We might speculate that the authors of the Geneva, Rheims, and KJV Bibles were moved to alter the Scriptures to honour men and women who died. The *1936 Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'martyr' reflects such a spirit:

**Martyr: Eccl:** A designation of honour (connoting the highest degree of saintship) for: One who voluntarily undergoes the penalty of death for refusing to renounce the Christian faith or for obedience to any law or command of the Church.

But this describes how 'martyr' came to be used in the English language as it developed, not how *martys* was used in the original Greek of the New Testament, which did not make of it a special "designation of honour." Further, the idealization of martyrdom can lead to grievous error. Some, as in Islam, are seduced by the apparent glories of it, even seeking the "honourable" death of a martyr, and are manipulated to ruinous ends.

(2) *The shift in emphasis from witnessing to truth vs. allegiance to a cause.* The change from 'witness' to 'martyr' shifts attention away from the identity of Jesus' disciples as witnesses who spoke divine truth (especially about him, the Son of God). 'Martyr' emphasizes instead a person's identity as a steadfast hero, loyal to his faith. The concept of allegiance to a Church or doctrine, rather than the concept of bringing truth, comes to the fore. This emphasis is reflected in *Funk and Wagnall's* definition seen above, which defines martyrs as those who die for religious principles but says nothing about witnessing to truth. It can be seen, also, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* explanation that "the most striking witness which Christians could bear to their faith was to die rather than deny it."

My concern is that this misses the point: the Lord's disciple Stephen died because he bore witness to the truth. Men rejected his testimony, and they rejected him, the witness. The stoning of Stephen was not reported in the book of Acts to give us an example of "striking faith," as if we might be moved to greater personal devotion ourselves. Rather, from it we can learn how a faithful witness will be received. Israel's religious leaders could not abide Stephen words, and they resisted him and sought ways to condemn him falsely (Acts 6). In the end, when he spoke of his vision of heaven and the Lord, they angrily stoned him (Acts 7). From such examples, the faithful can learn how their own testimonies might fare before men.

(3) *Any liar can be a faithful martyr.* Another problem with the use of the word 'martyr' is that the Christian significance that attaches to truthfulness is lost. We can make a distinction between a faithful and a false witness because the tacit issue is willing fidelity to known truth. But we cannot distinguish between a faithful and a false martyr, because the issue is not truthfulness; rather, the issue is devotedness – devotedness with suffering. There is no such thing as a "false martyr."

Truthfulness in the character of a martyr, though praiseworthy, would be incidental. Anyone who dies for any Church, faith, or cause is a martyr, regardless of his or her truthfulness. Indeed, any liar can be a faithful martyr; however, only a person who cares about truth will be a faithful witness. And Jesus's disciples are known by their love for the truth (John 18:37).

### ***Rejection of the testimony and of the witnesses***

Witnesses for the Lord, therefore, testify of what they have seen or come to know – if only through eyes of faith since Jesus went to be with God. When people accept the testimony of Jesus, that he is the Son of God who died for us, then God, by his Holy Spirit, will teach them (Jer. 31:33, 1Joh 2:27), and will establish them as witnesses who may then go forth to share what they know; particularly, to share the witness of Jesus Christ. Of course, from the Scriptures we understand that the world at large will not receive this witness. Nonetheless, justice requires a testimony.

The greatest testimonies might be expected to evoke the greatest wrath. We know what happened to the Master himself. History reveals that in the most terrible times, his witnesses will also suffer great persecutions. Such were the times when the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jerusalem, after their murder of Jesus did not silence the testimony of his word, went after his disciples. Stephen was first to be killed; then Peter and Paul and others were slain. Subsequently, many more were to die down the centuries, the great cloud of witnesses referred to at Revelation 17:6.

William Tyndale was, of course, one of the cloud of martyred witnesses. His unique and greatest testimony was his faithful translation of the Scriptures into English: a testimony which, through the KJV, has endured and witnessed to millions of English-speaking peo-

ple for more than four centuries.<sup>6</sup> His was a significant testimony, for which he would greatly suffer at the hands of men: hunted, forced to live in exile and in poverty, betrayed, imprisoned, ultimately strangled, his body burned, and suffering many accusations. Even to this day, his translations are frequently and wrongly accused by modern scholars as “inaccurate, neglectful, clotted,” and so forth.<sup>7</sup> But just this one issue, the translation of *martys*, proves Tyndale’s accuracy, care, and clarity. (I review and refute the false accusations against Tyndale, and also against Myles Coverdale, co-translator of the 1537 Mathew Bible) in my book *The Story of the Matthew Bible: The Scriptures Then and Now.*)

### ***Tyndale’s consistent use of ‘witness’ was correct***

In conclusion, ‘martyr’ was a poor translation of *martys*. It obscured a pure understanding of the nature and place of a true Christian testimony, and it altered the meaning of the Greek. Tyndale was right to use ‘witness’ consistently in his New Testament.

### ***Postscript re the two witnesses of Revelation 11***

Recently it came to my attention how translating *martys* by ‘martyr’ might have had an influence on the interpretation of Revelation 11. This chapter describes the two witnesses who were to prophesy in the earth and be slain, but after three and a half days would be raised up again by the Spirit of God. Many moderns believe these witnesses are literal martyrs who are yet to come. Perhaps so, but another interpretation was suggested to me, which I thought would be interesting and relevant to discuss here.

As to the identity of the two witnesses, years ago I read (in a work from about 1540 if I remember correctly) that they represent the Old and New Testaments (OT/NT). If so, then they represent the Hebrew/Chaldee “witness” and the Greek “witness,” as it were. To this day, I cannot help reading Revelation 11 in light of this OT/NT interpretation. The “three and a half days” could, according to the Hebrew manner of using numbers figuratively, represent one or more periods of years or ages that the testimonies of the Old and New Testaments were overcome, perhaps by pervasive false teaching (as in the Dark Ages), or political suppression (as in Communist Russia), or whatever.

Following is Revelation 11 as gently updated in the October Testament (New Matthew Bible):

**Revelation 11: 1-13** And then was given me a reed like a measuring rod, and it was said to me, Rise and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship therein. 2 And the choir that is within the temple, cast out, and measure it not. For it is given to the Gentiles, and they will tread the holy city under foot 42 months.

3 And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. 4 These are two olive trees and two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth. 5 And if anyone would hurt them, fire will proceed out of their mouths and consume their enemies. And if anyone would hurt them, so must he be killed. 6 These have power to shut heaven, so that it will not rain in the days of their

prophesying, and have power over waters, to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all manner of plagues, as often as they will.

7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, and will overcome them and kill them. 8 And their bodies will lie in the streets of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where our Lord was crucified. 9 And they of the peoples and kindreds and tongues, and they of the nations, will see their bodies three and a half days, and will not allow their bodies to be put in graves. 10 And they that dwell upon the earth will rejoice over them and be glad, and will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets plagued those who dwelt on the earth.

11 And after three and a half days, the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood up upon their feet. And great fear came upon those who saw them. 12 And they heard a great voice from heaven saying to them, Come up hither. And they ascended up into heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them. 13 And at the same hour there was a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell. And in the earthquake were slain names of men 7,000. And the rest were cast into fear, and gave glory to the God of heaven.

In the context of the OT/NT interpretation of the two witnesses, the question came up as to whether God is doing a work now, in these last days, to raise them up to new life again. This would come about by restoring the pure, original translations that we received in the early Reformation. As concerning the English Scriptures, these pure translations were contained in the 1535 Coverdale and 1537 Matthew Bibles. After examining the multitude of revisions made to the original translations since the Reformation, I have been struck by how their witness has been increasingly impaired. (I have shown this in my book *The Story of the Matthew Bible: The Scriptures Then and Now*.)

To restore the testimony of the original translations would be to bring to life again the OT/NT witnesses in and by the Spirit of God. This is the work that we are doing in the New Matthew Bible Project. Perhaps in France someone is working with Olivetan's 1535 Bible? Or in Spain, with Casio de Reina's work? Or in Germany, with Luther's work?

Of course, I cannot be dogmatic about the OT/NT interpretation, and I do not know how to reconcile all the figures of Revelation 11 with it. But I do wonder, is God is doing a work in other countries or languages, similar to our work in the New Matthew Bible Project, to restore the Old and New Testaments to the purity of the original vernacular translations of the 16th century?

On the other hand, am I exaggerating to suggest that the OT/NT witnesses of God's word are "dead" now? Yet, I know they are badly wounded in some modern English translations. And indeed, "slain" is an accurate description of what has happened to God's word in the worst of them. Then again, in present-day China the OT/NT witnesses are well-nigh dead through political suppression. One way or another – by false teaching, political power, or false translations – Satan is ever seeking the death of these two witnesses.

Again, I cannot be dogmatic. But the figurative meaning bears consideration. The biblical Testaments are witnesses of God that stand before him in the earth, and also speak to all the earth, as it is said. But this possible figurative meaning is little known today. Even though the translation 'witnesses' was kept in Revelation 11, moderns interpret the passage as referring to literal martyrs. This may be partly due to the translation of *martys* by 'martyr' in other Bible passages. If witness = martyr, then there is no room to understand the witnesses of Revelation 11 as the Old and New Testaments.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Or *martus*, Strong's # 3144.

<sup>2</sup> Tyndale's 1534 New Testament quotations are from David Daniell's modern-spelling version of *Tyndale's New Testament*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1995.

<sup>3</sup> *Funk and Wagnall New Practical Standard Dictionary*, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> *Consolidated Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary 1940* (1954 edition).

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 1969, s.v. "martyr," Volume 14.

<sup>6</sup> Tyndale's "witness" of God's word, through his Bible translations, lived on in the King James Version. Professor Daniell explains: *A computer-based American study published in 1998 has shown just how much Tyndale is in the KJV New Testament. New Testament scholars Jon Nielson and Royal Skousen observed that previous estimates of Tyndale's contribution to the KJV "have run from a high of up to 90% (Westcott) to a low of 18% (Butterworth)." By a statistically accurate and appropriate method of sampling, based on eighteen portions of the Bible, they concluded that for the New Testament Tyndale's contribution is about 83% of the text, and in the Old Testament [that is, as much as Tyndale was able to complete before he was killed] 76%. (Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2003), p. 448. Through the KJV, Tyndale's testimony has reached millions of people.*

<sup>7</sup> See *The Story of the Matthew Bible: Part 2, The Scriptures Then and Now*. In chapters 1 and 19 the accusers and their accusations are reviewed.