



God and Paul (in Christ) on Three Visits as the “Two or Three Witnesses” of 2 Corinthians 13:1

KENNETH BERDING

Talbot School of Theology, ken.berding@biola.edu

ABSTRACT There is no current consensus on how Paul employs his citation of the two-or-three-witness injunction in 2 Cor 13:1. After reviewing recent proposals, it will be argued that the most satisfactory solution to Paul’s problematic use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1 must include three elements: (1) God as witness, (2) Paul himself (in Christ) as witness, and (3) Paul’s three visits to Corinth (two past and one upcoming) as the three occasions when the testimony is given. Combining the witnesses of God and Paul-in-Christ with the three visits satisfies the demands of the literary context, avoids the weaknesses of other views, and offers real (nonmetaphorical) witnesses who validate the truth of Paul’s ministry against the accusations of the Corinthians.

KEYWORDS Apostle Paul, use of the Old Testament, witnesses, testimony, 2 Corinthians

Introduction

The apostle Paul in 2 Cor 13:1 writes: “This is the third time I am coming to you. ‘Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses’”¹ (Τρίτον τοῦτο ἔρχομαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς· ἐπὶ στόματος δύο μαρτύρων καὶ τριῶν σταθήσεται πᾶν ῥῆμα²). There presently exists no consensus on the identities of Paul’s two or three witnesses. This study will commence with a brief summary of current interpretive suggestions, followed by a reading that combines former

1. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations will be the English Standard Version.
2. Note that Paul’s use of Deut 19:15 is slightly abbreviated from the LXX (he omits the second “by the mouth of” and “witness”). But this shortening is merely the elimination of a redundancy, which means that Paul is abbreviating but not really changing the quotation in any meaningful way.

insights with new arguments to forge a more satisfactory explanation for Paul's difficult use of Deut 19:15 (cf. Deut 17:6 and Num 35:30) in 2 Cor 13:1. It will be argued that there are two or, depending on how they are counted, three witnesses who testify on Paul's behalf and indict the Corinthians. The two witnesses are: (1) God himself, who is both judge and witness and (2) Paul speaking *in connection with Christ*. (The second witness is treated as only one witness in this article, even though it could be argued that this witness is actually two separate witnesses—Paul and Christ—since Paul claims that his authority is based on being “in Christ” [1 Cor 12:19] and Christ speaking “in him” [2 Cor 13:3]). It will further be argued that Paul's two past visits and one upcoming visit must be factored in as a central element in any satisfactory solution. That is, on all three of Paul's visits, both the two in the past and the one being planned, God has been/will be standing as judge and witness at the same time (witness 1), while Paul also testifies on his own behalf and against the Corinthians because he speaks in Christ/Christ is speaking in him (witness 2). This combination of the two (or three) witnesses with the two past and one future visit satisfies the demands of the literary context, avoids the weaknesses of other views, and offers real (non-metaphorical) witnesses who validate the truth of Paul's ministry against the accusations of the Corinthians.

Current Proposals for the Identification of Paul's Two or Three Witnesses

No consensus exists on the identification of Paul's “two or three witnesses.” What are some of the current proposals? Perhaps the most common explanation of Paul's use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1 is that Paul's two or three “witnesses” are Paul's two past visits to Corinth combined with his upcoming third visit.³ The strength of this solution, and its attraction for many interpreters, is apparent from clauses that immediately surround the quotation containing the ordinals *third* and *second*. “This is the third time I am coming to you,” says Paul just

3. John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 169; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 371–73; Hans Windisch, *Der zweite Korintherbrief*, KEK 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1924), 413; Peter Balla, “2 Corinthians,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 780–83; M. E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2: 2 Corinthians 8–13 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 872–76; Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 128. Bernard S. Jackson, *Essays on Halakhah in the New Testament*, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 79–82, argues that a third visit was required to make it valid.

before he cites Deut 19:15. Then he quotes Deut 19:15 in a slightly abbreviated form and follows up in v. 2 with “I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them.” The ostensible connection of the numbers with the visits in the immediate context is the key observation in favor of this view.

A problem with this approach, and the one that has dissuaded a number of interpreters from adopting it, is that the Deuteronomic injunction was written specifically to *exclude* the testimony of a single person. Some interpreters are uncomfortable with the idea that Paul might employ an Old Testament citation in a way that could be viewed as disregarding its original context and intention.⁴

A second solution is that the “two or three” relates to Paul’s warnings, rather than to the visits *per se*; Paul cites this dictum to inform the Corinthians that he has given the necessary two or three warnings before prosecuting his case. H. van Vliet contends that the Deuteronomic rule of two or three witnesses was sometimes used in Palestine in connection with warnings that formal legal proceedings would soon be opened against someone. Others such as R. Martin support the idea of warnings but consider the “two or three” more generally to mean that ample warning has been given.⁵

A key problem with this view is that the quotation from Deut 19:15 refers to witnesses, not warnings. So if this is an attempt to keep Paul from

4. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 540, writes about the view that Paul’s own visits are in view, “Paul would also be taking strange liberties with the text of Deut 15:19 [sic] that clearly refers to person and not events if this view were accurate.” Laurence L. Welborn, “By the Mouth of Two or Three Witnesses: Paul’s Invocation of a Deuteronomic Statute,” *NovT* 52 (2010): 210, similarly states: “But it seems perverse to defend an interpretation which requires us to assume that Paul used a citation of Scripture contrary to its stated purpose and without consideration of its context.” Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 598 n. 23 writes, “The allegorical interpretation that Paul’s earlier visits are these witnesses (e.g., Calvin, 1969) is farfetched.”
5. H. van Vliet, *No Single Testimony: A Study on the Adoption of the Law of Deut. 19:15 Par. Into the New Testament*, Studia Theologica Rheno-Traiectina (Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, 1958), 53–62; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed., WBC 40 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 667–69; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1973), 333; David E. Garland, “Paul’s Apostolic Authority: The Power of Christ Sustaining Weakness (2 Corinthians 10–13),” *Review and Expositor* 86 (1989): 382 (but seems to have changed his position for his commentary, Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 541). R. Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 243, and Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 575, both argue that 2 Cor 10–13, that is, the letter itself, functioned as one of the warnings together with Paul’s second visit. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 908, and George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 630–31, combine the visits and the warnings.

haphazardly employing an Old Testament quotation, it actually generates a set of problems of its own.

A third solution is that some of Paul's coworkers such as Titus and Timothy, or perhaps Titus and the cryptic "brother,"⁶ are the witnesses Paul has in mind. A strength of this solution is that Titus and the "brother" are mentioned only four verses earlier (2 Cor 12:18). An additional strength is that these coworkers of Paul are real people, thus fulfilling the intended requirement of Deut 19:15 that the testimony of one witness is inadequate.

One obvious problem with this view is that it fails to factor in Paul's three comings, something deemed contextually important to many interpreters. Furthermore, the visits of Paul's coworkers to Corinth were for a different purpose from what Paul discusses regarding his upcoming visit in 12:20–13:10. The visit of his coworkers in 2 Corinthians was tied to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:6, 16–24; 9:3–5); that is, these coworkers of Paul went to Corinth with a different primary purpose from defending Paul and challenging the Corinthians.

A fourth solution is that Paul is alerting the Corinthians that he will bring formal charges against them in the setting of the congregation when he comes but uses this moment to assure them that he will follow the procedure prescribed in Deut 19:15.⁷

A problem with this solution (and with the following solution) is that this interpretation appears driven by a sense that the Deuteronomic injunction can only be invoked in connection with a setting where witnesses are called to testify before a formally constituted hearing. But formal court proceedings are not specifically mentioned anywhere in the letter.⁸ The examples from other New Testament passages and from Jewish literature outside the New Testament listed below will provide adequate evidence that there was some flexibility in the application of the two- or three-witnesses requirement and the settings in

6. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 541. Garland suggests "Titus and Timothy—and even God," the last of which nods to part of the solution argued in this article, though it is left unsupported by Garland. Niels Hyldahl, "Die Frage nach der literarischen Einheit des Zweiten Korintherbriefes," *ZNW* 64 (1973): 303–4 identifies Titus and "the brother."

7. Ernest Bernard Allo, *Seconde épître aux Corinthiens*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gabalda, 1956), 35; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 475; M. Delcor, "The Courts of the Church of Corinth and the Courts of Qumran," in *Paul and Qumran*, ed. J. Murphy O'Connor (London: Chapman, 1968), 76; Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1969), 675; P. Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 596–98; Paul Han, *Swimming in the Sea of Scripture: Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians 4.7–13.3*, LNTS 519 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 178–81.

8. Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, 575.

which it could be invoked. There also exists the problem whether Paul was respected enough by the Corinthians at the time he wrote 2 Corinthians to think that he could successfully convene formal proceedings and enforce a decision rendered at those proceedings.⁹

A fifth solution is that Paul's invocation of the two or three witness requirement is not directed against the troublemakers in Corinth at all. Rather, Paul is alerting the Corinthians that he plans to utilize the injunction to mount a defense of himself against an individual in Corinth who accused Paul of financial misconduct. L. Welborn, who has most fully argued this position, writes: "*Paul himself is the accused* who seeks protection under the Deuteronomic rule from pernicious accusation by a malicious witness."¹⁰

A problem with Welborn's approach is that it requires Paul to have been opposed by one particular person, because he envisions formal proceedings to be carried out against an individual who opposed Paul. There are, however, a number of textual clues that point away from a single opposing person.¹¹ In 13:2, Paul mentions "those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest"—all in the plural. This is confirmed by 12:21: "many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented." Further back in the argument from 2 Cor 13:1, but in the same broader context, are the references to the so-called super apostles who were obviously plural, whoever they specifically were (11:5; 12:11).¹² Furthermore, Paul has just mentioned sinners in the preceding verse (12:21) and warns them in the following verse (13:2), which suggest that at least a significant part of what Paul anticipates on his next visit will be directed against the Corinthians, not merely aimed at defending himself.¹³

J. Scott presents a sixth position which, at least in terms of the identification of the witnesses, is in line with the position argued here. Scott writes, "We must reckon with the possibility that the two (or three) witnesses to whom the

9. Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), 245.

10. Welborn, "By the Mouth of Two or Three Witnesses," 213. Similarly, R. V. G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 186; Calvin Roetzel, *2 Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 118.

11. This is a necessary inference based on the repeated plural indicators, despite the presence of some singulars in 2 Cor 11 and 12. The singular pronouns (τις) in 10:7 and 11:20 are indefinite and thus do not clearly indicate an individual, nor does the αὐτός that corresponds to the indefinite pronoun in 10:7. The singular participle of 2 Cor 11:4 (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) is similarly indefinite. The singular (φησίν) of 10:10 is normally (and rightly) translated as "they say," "it is said," or "some say," that is, in an indefinite way. These references on their own are inadequate to argue that an individual is in view, especially when other clear indicators of plurals are present.

12. See 10:10, 12; 11:12, 13, 15, 22–23 for more plurals.

13. Han, *Swimming in a Sea of Scripture*, 179 n. 106.

apostle appeals may be none other than himself and God (and Christ)."¹⁴ Still, avers Scott, "despite what appears at first to be a clear textual link between the two numbers," Paul's two or three visits have nothing to do with Paul's use of Deut 19:15. Scott appears to factor out the visits because of discomfort with the idea that Paul might be quoting this passage in a nonliteral way and because he does not think that the first visit to Corinth could be related to the current trouble between Paul and the Corinthians. Despite differences with Scott on this issue, this study supports Scott's identification of the witnesses while adding various additional arguments (Scott's discussion is limited to one paragraph). This study also will seek to factor in the three visits, something that Scott excludes from his solution.

Deuteronomy 19:15 in Its Own Context

Deuteronomy 19:15 appears shortly after instructions for how to adjudicate claims that a killing was either intentional (murder) or unintentional (manslaughter). Someone who unintentionally killed someone could flee to one of the designated cities of refuge and be judged there by the elders of the city based on the evidence of witnesses (Deut 19:1–13). This set of instructions is followed by the instruction that immediately precedes the two- or three-witnesses injunction, that is, that no one is to move an ancestral boundary marker (Deut 19:14).¹⁵

How can the elders determine which party is telling the truth in these cases? "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established" (Deut 19:15). The verses that follow the two or three witnesses directive (19:16–21) suggest that the central concern underlying the rule may have been protection against malicious witnesses, but one can imagine that this guideline could also be invoked when judges were concerned that a nonmalicious witness had simply made a mistake.

14. James M. Scott, *New International Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 249–50. Note also Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), 475–76, who combines the three visits with three witnesses (Paul, Christ, and the Corinthians themselves), which bears some similarities to my own conclusions, though it is supported with little argumentation. Note that I only came across the solutions of Scott and Seifrid after I had adopted the position of this article based on study of the text itself.

15. The placement of this instruction, as noted by M. Biddle, may be that "in a primarily agrarian society such as ancient Israel, to deprive one of the means of agricultural production is to deprive one of life. *Stealing can be killing.*" Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 306.

It should be noted that not only are the two or three witnesses stated as a requirement but the idea that a single witness might be sufficient is singled out and eliminated as an option. The passage is clear: it cannot be one witness alone; there must be two or three. The inadequacy of one witness is confirmed by two parallel passages that deal with capital crimes, Num 35:30 and Deut 17:6, both of which assert that no one shall be put to death “on the evidence of one witness.”¹⁶ It is also clear that the setting for the implementation of this injunction is a legally constituted court.¹⁷

Finally, we should note that cases in Israel were to be adjudicated before God, as C. Wright notes: “This text is notable, first for its insistence on great care and diligence in establishing the truth of each case, on the assumption that all matters of justice are decided *in the presence of the LORD*, the supreme judge.”¹⁸

Deuteronomy 19:15 in Jewish Literature

When the two or three witnesses’ injunction was later utilized, was it always applied literally? That is, did it always apply to a legal proceeding in which a single witness would be deemed inadequate and where two human witnesses (or better, three) were required?

H. van Vliet’s seminal study, *No Single Testimony*, traces the use of Deut 19:15 by later writers, including the authors of the New Testament.¹⁹ Some of the examples he highlights, especially from the rabbinic literature, demonstrate that the injunction was sometimes applied literally to exclude the testimony of a single witness, such as the well-known example from t. Sanh. 8.3:

With what object is this said? In order that the witness should not (for example) bring forward as evidence: “We saw the defendant with a sword in his hand running after his fellow; the latter thereupon fled into a shop followed by the other; we went in after them and found the one slain, and in the hand of the murderer was a sword dripping blood”.

16. “The law elaborated in these verses should probably be understood as an expansion of the apodictic prohibition of the ninth commandment (see 5:20).” Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 269 n. 16.

17. T. Chipman writes: “J. G. McConville’s observation that Deuteronomy presents a theology of mercy ‘for a people it knows to be already rebellious’ . . . offers a rationale for Paul’s citation of Deut 19:15 in writing to the church at Corinth.” Todd R. Chipman, “More Faithful than an Ox: Paul’s use of the Scriptures to objectify his Apostolic Faithfulness in Corinth,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 15.1 (2016): 119 n. 41, citing J. Gordon McConville, “Deuteronomy, Book of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 191.

18. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 224.

19. Van Vliet, *No Single Testimony*.

And lest thou shouldst say: "Is it not he then who did kill him?" take warning from the example of Shimeon, the son of Shatah, who said "May I not live to see the consolation if I once did not see a man with a sword in his hand running after his fellow; the latter thereupon went into a deserted building followed by the other; I entered after him and found the one slain and a sword in the hand of the murderer dripping blood. I said to him: Wicked man, who slew this one? May I not live to see the consolation if I did not see him; one of us two must have slain him. But what can I do, since your condemnation cannot rest in my hands? For the Law says: 'At the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall he who dies be put to death'. But he who knows the thoughts, he exacts vengeance from the guilty; for the murderer did not stir from that place before a serpent bit him so that he died."²⁰

But van Vliet also observes certain adaptations and additions to this restriction, such as discussions of pre-warnings in a few rabbinic texts, assimilation to non-Jewish legal contexts by authors such as Josephus and Philo, and various specific examples that seem to extend the application of the rule somewhat beyond its original intentional horizon.²¹ Van Vliet observes that the *Manual of Discipline* 6.1 (now usually referred to as the *Community Rule*, 1QS) "knows the necessity of reproof, but does not speak about the required number of witnesses . . . 'Indeed, a man shall not bring accusation against his fellow', thus opening the possibility that one man can bring a valid complaint, if the accused at least has been subject to previous reproof before witnesses."²² Concerning Gen. Rab. 85.13, "There are three persons whose word is accepted without further question and they are: a midwife, (a claimant to) a foundling, and a woman who declares her companion clean." Van Vliet cites this and follows up with, "Here the testimony of one only is accepted, because it refers to events of which

20. T. Sanh. 8.3, cited in van Vliet, *No Single Testimony*, 53, employing the translation of Danby. See pp. 60–61 for a helpful list of other places where the injunction is found in the rabbinic literature, mostly employed rather literally.

21. See van Vliet, *No Single Testimony*, 54–56 on pre-warnings, pp. 26–30 on Josephus, and pp. 30–33 on Philo. Van Vliet offers two examples on p. 29 in which Josephus stretches the application. The first is *C. Ap.* 2.209: "They reviled our legislator as an insignificant personage; his sterling merits have found a witness of old in God, and after God, in Time." Also *Ant.* 1.209: "God being witness and the woman's conscience." But van Vliet also ponders whether these might just be rhetorical devices; that is, he is skeptical about whether Josephus is actually trying to *apply* the Deuteronomic injunction. Concerning Philo, though van Vliet notes that Philo mentions the two or three witnesses in *Spec.* 4.53, he thinks that Philo may have meant only that a single witness was inadequate *when there was no other collaborating evidence* (p. 31). Regarding Ben Sira, "But nowhere do we find the advice to distrust the single witness and always to seek the testimony of two" (p. 44). See further examples of Jewish literature on pp. 34–44.

22. Van Vliet, *No Single Testimony*, 59.

‘they would naturally have particular knowledge.’”²³ Van Vliet concludes his survey of Jewish literature with the less-than-specific conclusion: “I don’t think it is hazardous to suppose that after the Exile the law of Dt. 19:15 was mostly interpreted as requiring good evidence before somebody was convicted.”²⁴

In addition to the examples given by van Vliet can be added CD 9.16–20:

Every sin which a man commits against the Law, and which his companion witnesses, he being alone, if it is a capital matter he shall report it to the Guardian, rebuking him in his presence, and the Guardian shall record it against him in case he should commit it again before one man and he should report it to the Guardian once more. Should he repeat it and be caught in the act before one man, his case shall be complete.²⁵

This text seems to allow for successive testimonies of a single witness to repeated commissions of the same crime. We can conclude from what we have observed so far that Deut 19:15 was often used literally to require two or three separate witnesses, but not always.

The apocryphal story of Susanna is instructive in a different way. Susanna was accused and convicted of adultery by two corrupt judges who purported to witness an act of sexual unfaithfulness. But the false testimony of the two judges was exposed by Daniel (whose name, appropriately, means “God has judged”²⁶), Susanna was acquitted, and the judges were put to death on the basis of a “sentence from God” communicated to Daniel (v. 55). Three things may be gleaned from the story of Susanna for our study: (1) the original conviction was on the basis of a literal reading of Deut 19:15, (2) judges could function as witnesses even though they were also judges, (3) God himself, the final arbitrator, was the ultimate and final witness to the truth of the matter.

23. Ibid., 88. Note also m. Yebam. 16.7, “They permit a wife to remarry on the testimony of a single witness [to her husband’s death] . . . and in the same discourse Rabban Gamaliel recalled that men were slain at Tel Arza, and Rabban Gamaliel the Elder permitted their wives to remarry on the evidence of a single witness.” Cited in Martin Pickup, “‘On the Third Day’: The Time Frame of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection,” *JETS* 56 (2013): 529. Pickup summarizes: “In this text Gamaliel the Elder . . . is credited with ruling that, in times of necessity, a single witness may verify a man’s death so his wife may remarry.”

24. Van Vliet, *No Single Testimony*, 48.

25. Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2004), 140. Note alternate translations (and interpretations) of this text in Jacob Neusner, “By the Testimony of Two Witnesses in the Damascus Document IX, 17–22 and in Pharisaical-Rabbinic Law,” *Review de Qumran* 8 (1973): 197–217.

26. “Susanna,” in Bruce Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 213.

It should also be noted that throughout the Old Testament God himself is commonly summoned as a witness (e.g., Gen 31:50; Judg 11:10; 1 Sam 12:5; 20:12, 23, 42; Jer 42:5; Mic 1:2).²⁷ This observation may bolster our contention that Paul invokes God as one of his witnesses in 2 Cor 13:1. Note further that God seems to be both judge and witness in the adultery test of Num 5:11–31, where the trial is decided by God without any human witnesses to testify to the purported misdeed.²⁸

Deuteronomy 19:15 in the New Testament Outside 2 Corinthians 13:1

The landscape of the New Testament's use of Deut 19:15 is similar in many ways to other Jewish authors. The requirement of two or three witnesses is sometimes applied literally in the New Testament, but occasionally the injunction appears to be stretched. Let us begin with more literal applications and move toward some uses that extend somewhat the application of the directive.

Hebrews 10:28 alludes to Deut 19:15 (or 17:12) and interprets it literally, though it does not apply it as an injunction. "Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses." This is part of an *a fortiori* argument that spans vv. 28–29. If the death penalty is the appropriate punishment for setting aside the law of Moses, writes the author, "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God?" (10:29).²⁹ Even though the allusion is in line with the original intention, it should also be noted that the author of Hebrews immediately finds himself mentioning God as judge (cf. 10:30–31).³⁰ This observation may be relevant for 2 Cor 13:1.

1 Timothy 5:19 instructs, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses." This also is a fairly straightforward application of Deut 19:15 into a church context.³¹ But again it should be

27. Similarly, Josephus (*Ant.* 4.46) comments that Moses appealed to God as both judge and witness on his behalf before the Hebrew people.

28. Note that this differs markedly from the river ordeal of ancient Assyria and Babylon where an accused person was only deemed innocent if he or she could survive a harrowing ordeal, say, by being cast into a bitumen well. In other words, the accused was presumed guilty unless he or she survived. In this text, by way of contrast, the assumption is that the accused is innocent and will survive unless God supernaturally steps in and displays guilt.

29. See development of the argument in Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), 536–41.

30. The first quotation in Heb 10:30 is cited from Deut 32:35 and the second, in light of the previous citation, must be from 32:36 (though in form the second is identical to Ps 135[LXX 134]:14).

31. This could apply to any old man, but in context it is probably a reference to a man who leads, preaches, and teaches, as mentioned in v. 17. See Abraham J. Malherbe, "How to Treat Old

noted that God as judge and witness (“in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus”) is invoked (1 Tim 5:21), despite the witnesses, an observation relevant to 2 Cor 13:1. Nevertheless, this is still an essentially literal application of the Deuteronomic rule.

The two false witnesses of Matt 26:60–61 who testified against Jesus at his trial may have been highlighted by Matthew in connection with the Deuteronomic requirement of at least two witnesses. But as with the story of Susanna, their role as false witnesses is emphasized. Nevertheless, this appears to be an example of a literal application of Deut 19:15 in the New Testament, even if the actual witnesses are false.

The two witnesses of Rev 11:3–14 are witnesses sent by God. The language of “two witnesses” (11:3) and “their testimony” (11:7) would not have been lost on a Jewish reader. The witnesses are described as doing powerful signs/miracles/acts and as “two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth” (11:4). Even though there is no consensus on the identification of the witnesses (or whether they are to be understood as living entities or somehow symbolic), this still can be viewed as a straightforward application of the rule, even if the setting is not a formal human-to-human legal setting.

Matthew 18:15–16 is mostly straightforward, though it extends the application of the principle somewhat. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”³² The scene is not a formal legal procedure, but the legal precedent is applied to the adjudication of a case in which a “brother” has been accused of sin by another.³³ The function of the witnesses is somewhat different between the original context in Deuteronomy and its use in Matthew, as D. Hagner notes: “The parallel is not exact . . . since in the OT the witnesses are witnesses of the deed itself, whereas here they serve as witnesses of the reproof and appeal for repentance or, if the person refuses to respond, of his or her recalcitrance.”³⁴

Women and Old Men: The Use of Philosophical Traditions and Scripture in 1 Timothy 5,” in *Scripture and Traditions: Essays on Early Judaism and Christianity in Honor of Carl R. Holladay*, ed. Patrick Gray and Gail R. O’Day, NovTSup 129 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 288.

32. Also v. 19, “if two of you agree,” and v. 20, “For where two or three have gathered together.”

33. Because the setting is not a formal legal setting, M. Menken refers to this use as an extended application along with 2 Cor 13:1: “That he does [use this outside a formal legal setting] is not surprising: we know of other extended applications of this rule in Matthew’s environment (see CD ix 22–23; Jon. 8.17; 2 Cor. 13.1; 1 Tim. 5.19).” Maarten J. J. Menken, “Deuteronomy in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *Deuteronomy in the New Testament: The New Testament and the Scripture of Israel*, ed. Steven Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 55.

34. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 532.

It may be instructive to note that this passage not only invokes two or three witnesses but it also brings up the idea of two or three visits to the sinning person.³⁵ This may have relevance to 2 Cor 13:1, where Paul employs Deut 19:15 in the context of three visits (two past and one future). Also relevant to the interpretation of 2 Cor 13:1 is the observation that, in the following verses (Matt 18:18–20), the idea that God is both witness and judge is present. Nevertheless, Matt 18:15–17 should still be viewed as a mostly literal application of the two or three witness requirement.

¹ John 5:7–8 seems likely to be dependent on Deut 19:15 because it begins with “For there are three that testify” and ends with “and the three are in agreement.” But in this case, the three that testify are “the Spirit and the water and the blood.” Though the interpretation of this phrase is widely disputed, even setting aside the complicated textual history of the text, it should be observed that of the three witnesses, only the Spirit is a living entity and, of course, not a human entity. In other words, the application of Deut 19:15 in 1 John is less than literal.

³ John 12 reads, “Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.” The three witnesses to Demetrius (who was probably the letter-carrier) in this verse are “everyone,” “the truth itself,” and “our testimony.” The second of these “witnesses” (“the truth itself”) is, of course, not a human witness.³⁶

Paul writes in Rom 8:16, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” G. Fee comments on this verse, “In saying this, Paul picks up the language of his heritage (‘out of the mouth of two witnesses’) and indicates that our *awareness* and *assurance* of this new relationship with God has the twofold witness of God’s Spirit together with our own spirits” (emphasis his).³⁷ If, as Fee suggests, this is dependent on the two-or-three-witnesses tradition in any way, it is a less-than-literal use.

The Gospel of John is replete with testifiers to Jesus, as often has been observed. Because Deut 19:15 is explicitly referenced in John 8:13 and 17 (cf. 5:31; more on this below), it is likely that some or all of these fall within an overall framework that includes the need for multiple witnesses based on Deut

35. This observation was made by my colleague Gary Manning in a personal conversation.

36. I. H. Marshall, following Westcott, Brook, Dodd, and Stott, suggests that the “truth” may not be “Christian revelation personified,” as it is commonly viewed; rather “it is possible that the elder simply means that the behavior of Demetrius, which was in accord with the truth, bore testimony to his uprightness of character.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 93. This might not be too distant from our suggestion that one of the witnesses of 2 Cor 13:1 is Paul testifying about himself.

37. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 567.

19:15. Some of the witnesses in the Fourth Gospel are humans, such as John the Baptist (1:7–8, 15; 5:33), the people touched by Jesus's ministry such as the woman at the well and the man born blind (4:29; 9:25), the disciples of Jesus (15:27), and the author of the Gospel (19:35; 21:24). But also among the witnesses in the Fourth Gospel are God the Father (8:18b), the Holy Spirit (15:26), the works that Jesus does (10:25), and Scripture (5:39).

Probably the most unusual use of the two or three witnesses in the New Testament outside 2 Cor 13:1 (and most intriguing for our study) is John 8:13–18.³⁸ Jesus clearly alludes to Deut 19:15 when he says, "In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true." But the "witnesses" he invokes are none other than himself and the Father who sent him. It appears that Jesus is saying something like *I myself have the authority to testify about myself (cf. 8:14), and if you have a problem with that, I call God himself as my witness. You have to admit that God is a good enough witness!* John 8:13–18 is similar to Paul's use of Deut 19:15 since Paul views himself as one witness (because he is "in Christ" and speaks on behalf of Christ) and God as his other witness.³⁹ The similar use of Deut 19:15 in John 8:13–18 also helps to legitimize Paul's own use, particularly if he was familiar with this saying of Jesus through the oral tradition (an assertion that cannot be proved or denied).⁴⁰

In summary, sometimes Deut 19:15 was used literally, and sometimes the application of that text seems to have extended somewhat beyond its original intention. The fact that some Jewish authors, both inside and outside the New Testament, had already used or would soon use Deut 19:15 in ways that stretched the character of the witnesses and the circumstances of their deployment, allows us to view Paul's application of this injunction to God and himself (in Christ) on his three visits not as haphazardly applying an Old Testament

38. The relevance of this passage to my study was first brought to my attention by my former student, Jamie Sommerville. It is also noted by Scott, *2 Corinthians*, 250.

39. John 5:31–36 is a parallel passage that supports the claim of this paragraph. "Both texts are connected," as M. Labahn observes, insofar as they mention multiple witnesses. But John 5 adds to the testimony of the one who sent his son (5:30–32) the witness of "John the Baptist in relation to Jesus' own works" (5:34–36). Michael Labahn, "Deuteronomy in John's Gospel," in *Deuteronomy in the New Testament*, ed. Moyise and Menken, 86.

40. I tend to give greater credence to the historical reliability of John's Gospel than do other scholars. On this, see especially the writings of Craig Blomberg, including "To What Extent Is John Historically Reliable?" in *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Robert B. Sloan and Mikeal C. Parsons, NABPR Special Studies Series (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 27–56; idem, "The Historical Reliability of John: Rushing in Where Angels Fear to Tread?" in *Jesus and Johannine Tradition*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 71–82; idem, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2002).

injunction but rather as knowingly making hermeneutical moves that were in line with the way the text was already being used in his day.

2 Corinthians 13:1 in Its Literary Context

More important than these other texts, though, are the clues in Paul's own literary context that signal how he is employing Deut 19:15. Paul's literary context can be viewed in concentric circles, which is how we will approach it here. The narrower and closer circles should be granted greater interpretive priority than the outer circles when interpreting a passage, though insights can still be drawn from circles further to the periphery. The closest context is the immediate unit where the citation of Deut 19:15 is found, 2 Cor 13:1–4. The second-closest context (which includes the former) runs from 12:11 to 13:10. A third and wider contextual circle (10:1–13:10) includes the previous two-and-a-half chapters. Even farther out, a fourth contextual circle encompasses all of 2 Corinthians.⁴¹ The final and widest literary circle for this study includes all the other letters of Paul.

Remember that the premise of this study is that the “two or three witnesses” of 2 Cor 13:1 are God and Paul (in his connection to Christ), each of whom have witnessed or will witness to the truth of Paul's apostleship and against the dissenting Corinthians on each of Paul's three visits. What is the evidence for this position in each of the five contextual circles laid out above?

2 Corinthians 13:1–4

In our narrowest circle are four significant clues for how to interpret our passage. The first is found in Paul's statement: “This is the third time I am coming to you.” This sentence is immediately followed by the quotation from Deut 19:15: “Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (2 Cor 13:1). The first thing that will likely strike the observant interpreter is that “third” (τρίτον) appears to be connected to the “of three” (τριῶν) of the quotation. Because this connection is found in the closest contextual circle, significant weight should be given to it. This strongly suggests that the three visits are part of the solution.

41. I am assuming the unity of 2 Corinthians. I am aware that many interpreters view 2 Corinthians as two or more letters joined together. For a defense of the literary unity of 2 Corinthians, see discussion in G. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 23–32. For a defense of the letter's unity employing systemic functional linguistics, see Christopher D. Land, *The Integrity of 2 Corinthians and Paul's Aggravating Absence*, New Testament Monographs 36 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015). In addition to Land's overall argument for unity, Land suggests (contrary to one underlying assumption of this study and, indeed, of most studies of 2 Corinthians) that Paul has neither a specific offense nor specific witnesses in mind in 2 Cor 13:1 but rather is generally enjoining the Corinthians to follow due process in dealing with offenses (see esp. pp. 227–37, 244–45).

A second pointer that connects the comings of Paul with the Deut 19:15 citation is found in v. 2: “I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them.” The presence of “second” (τὸ δεύτερον) connects this verse with the “two” (δύο) of v. 1. This is followed by “if I come again,” which is another way of saying “my third visit.” This is the second contextual clue that the visits are a necessary part of any interpretation of the two or three witnesses.

The third clue in this closest contextual circle comes from v. 3, “since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.” Paul’s disputation with the Corinthians originates from the Corinthians’ demand for some sort of proof (δοκιμή) that Christ speaks in Paul. Paul’s response, namely, that Christ does in fact speak in him, supports the notion that Paul *in connection with Christ* is a witness, found in the central contextual circle.

The fourth clue works together with the third; in 13:4, Paul describes himself as weak in Christ (“in him”) but in his dealings with the Corinthians he and his ministry partners engage their ministry “with him.” In other words, Paul invokes his union with Christ (“in him” and “with him”) to confirm his authority. This also lends support to the idea that Paul in connection with Christ is one of the witnesses.

2 Corinthians 12:11–13:10

The next-closest contextual circle includes the four verses above but also incorporates eleven verses before and six verses following (12:11–13:10). There are some clues in this next-widest context that the solution we are proposing for Paul’s difficult use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1 is correct.

The first indication is that Paul defends himself against the charges of the so-called super apostles throughout this section (12:11–13, 17).⁴² Specifically, he is providing *evidence* that he is himself a true apostle of Christ (12:12) while at the same time bringing an indictment against the Corinthians that they have sinned in tolerating and listening to these false apostles. That is, Paul provides *testimony*, testifying about *himself*, and arguing that the testimony about himself is correct. This signals that Paul may be part of the solution to the nature of the witnesses.

A second observation comes out of 12:14, “Here for the third time I am ready to come to you.” These verses must be viewed as closely tied up with the thought of 13:1–4, because Paul uses the ordinal *third* in reference to his visit, just as he

42. Along with many interpreters, I take the reference to the “super apostles,” mentioned in 11:5 and 12:11, to be Paul’s sarcastic labeling of the false apostles he mentions in 11:13: “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.”

will do again in 13:1, “This is the third time I am coming to you.” This confirms that the three visits are upmost in his mind and supports the notion that the visits themselves are part of the solution.

Furthermore, in 12:19 Paul directly names the two (or three) witnesses that I am arguing are the two (or three) witnesses of 13:1, “It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ.” That is, a mere three verses before his use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1, he states that “in the sight of God”—or as NLT translates this “with God as our witness” (witness no. 1, God who is also judge)—“we” (Paul and his companions) have been speaking “in Christ” (witness no. 2: Paul speaking in connection to Christ).

Furthermore, Paul’s expressed concern in 12:21, “I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you,” may indicate something about God’s role as one of the witnesses, though it is not as pronounced as some of the other pointers toward our solution in this passage.

In the verses that follow our central paragraph (13:1–4) but that are still in the second closest contextual circle, we notice that Paul’s concern to challenge the Corinthians about whether they are in the faith focuses on whether “Jesus Christ is in you,” in v. 5, which connects with v. 3 where he has already claimed for himself that “Christ is speaking in me.” Paul adds that he and his band are not unapproved—they do not fail to meet the test—even though he is concerned that the Corinthians themselves might fail the test (vv. 5–7).

Finally, in 13:10, Paul writes “in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me,” confirming his connection to Christ, which is part of our solution. His connection to Christ affirms his right to testify about himself. Note also that 13:10 connects Paul’s God-given authority with the various visits: “I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come.” This also should serve as a reminder that the visits should be factored in as part of the overall solution to Paul’s use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1.

2 Corinthians 10:1–13:10

In the next widest context (10:1–13:10), a context that incorporates the previous two-and-a-half chapters of 2 Corinthians, there are numerous hints that support our solution. But only a few will be highlighted here. The first is found in 10:18: “For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.” Paul points out in this verse that more important than any other person’s testimony is the testimony of the Lord. In 11:10–11, Paul includes the oath-like statement, “As the truth of Christ is in me” and concerning his love for the Corinthians, “God knows I do!”⁴³ These support the

43. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 763, writes, “If we define a biblical ‘oath of confirmation’ broadly as a direct or indirect appeal to the deity as the guarantor of the truth of a

idea that Paul's testimony in connection with Christ is part of the solution, as is God's role as knowing the truth and testifying to the truth of what Paul is writing. Similar appeals to God who knows and testifies for him appear in 11:31 ("The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying") and 12:2–3 ("God knows").⁴⁴

2 *Corinthians* 1–13

The next-widest context is the entire letter. And in this context, there are many expressions that point toward either God as witness, Paul speaking in Christ, or the three visits, all of which are required for a complete solution to our problem.

The first example comes early in the letter. In 1:12, Paul testifies about himself, using explicit testimonial language: "For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved with simplicity and godly sincerity . . . toward you." We should not be surprised to find Paul counting himself as one of the witnesses in 13:1 when he has already witnessed about himself using the language of testimony in 1:12.

One of the most striking pieces of evidence in the entire letter appears in 1:23: "But I call God to witness against me." This comment is found in the context of Paul's plan to come again to Corinth, which forges a strong bond between chs. 1 and 12–13. Because Paul repeatedly discusses his planned visit both at the beginning (1:15–2:1ff.) and the end of his letter (chs. 12–13), it seems reasonable to allow Paul's summoning of God as a witness against him, that is, if he is not telling the truth (and presumably his appeal to God as witness for him if he is telling the truth), to inform our understanding of who the witnesses are in 13:1. Notice also that both the early and later passages connect with each other through the use of "sparing" language (1:23, "it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth," which connects with 13:2, "that if I come again I will not spare them"). The "sparing" comment of Paul suggests a link between the two passages and supports the idea that God is one of Paul's witnesses. And because this comment appears in the context of the visits, it can be taken as further confirmation that the timing of the testimony is during the three visits that God has been/will be witness.

statement, especially one that the readers cannot verify for themselves, this verse constitutes an oath. . . . But on a narrower definition of an 'oath of confirmation' which would require an introductory verb of swearing . . . or a direct invocation . . . this verse is simply a solemn declaration."

44. Other potentially illuminating phrases for further study include 10:1 where Paul entreats "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ"; 10:7, "If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we"; 10:8, "our authority"; 12:6, "so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me."

Another supporting observation is that throughout the letter are statements about speaking “in Christ” or “before God” (cf. 2:10; 3:3; 4:6; 5:20 for other similar expressions). One example is 2:17, “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”⁴⁵ This kind of expression is notable because of the very similar expression (already highlighted in this article) in 2 Cor 12:19, only a few verses before Paul’s use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1.

Finally, in 8:2, Paul appeals to himself as a witness concerning the generosity of the Macedonians (“as I can testify”). The appearance of these connections bolsters our suggestion that Paul-in-connection-with-Christ is Paul’s second witness.

The Pauline Corpus

The widest Pauline context, of course, is all the letters of Paul. Because there are so many possible connections to be made, I will limit us to only a few that are relevant and that bolster observations I made above.

Paul calls God as his witness in 1 Thess 2:5 (“God is witness”; cf. 2:10) and again in Rom 1:9 and Phil 1:8 (“For God is my witness”). That is, Paul’s appeal to God as witness in 2 Cor 1:23 is not an isolated instance. These examples strengthen my contention that God himself is one of the witnesses of 2 Cor 13:1.

Expressions such as “in the sight/presence of God/Christ” appear elsewhere in Paul’s letters (e.g., 1 Thess 1:3; 2:19; 1 Tim 5:21; 6:13; 2 Tim 4:1), something I have already noted in 2 Corinthians. In addition, Paul sometimes uses the language of testifying for himself (1 Cor 15:15; Gal 4:15; Col 4:13; Rom 10:2). These all give broad support to my contention that Paul views his own testimony to be valid, bolstering my claim that he (in Christ) is a second witness.

In Rom 9:1 Paul writes, “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.” Here, Paul invokes a type of oath, employs the language of testimony, and adds that he is speaking the truth “in Christ.” This passage also supports my claim that Paul in 2 Cor 13:1 can view himself as an appropriate witness because of his connection to Christ.

Summary of Evidence

It has been argued that the most satisfactory solution to the problem of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1 must include three elements: (1) God as witness, (2) Paul (in Christ)

45. “God was not only the source of Paul’s commission; he was also the witness and assessor of his work. Although Paul discharged his God-given commission among fellow humans, he was ultimately accountable not to any human court (cf. 1 Cor. 4:3; 2 Cor. 10:12) but to a heavenly judge. Consequently, he spoke ‘before God,’ ‘in the sight of God.’” Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 255.

as witness, (3) Paul's three visits to Corinth (two past and one upcoming) as the three occasions when the testimony has been / will be given. Because this solution is somewhat complex and requires all three elements, and because arguments for the necessity of the inclusion of each of the three have appeared at various points in this article, here I offer a list of some of the most important indicators of this solution and their locations in each of the three categories (though I will leave them unexplained because I have explained them above).

God as Witness

- “in the sight of God” (2 Cor 12:19)
- “I fear that . . . God may humble me before you” (2 Cor 12:21)
- “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying” (2 Cor 11:31)
- “But I call God to witness against me” (2 Cor 1:23; note also the “sparing language” that suggests a link between 1:23 and 13:2)
- “in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2 Cor 2:17)
- “God is witness” (1 Thess 2:5)
- “For God is my witness” (Phil 1:8)
- God as witness and/or judge is alluded to in the near contexts of some New Testament passages where the two-or-three-witness requirement is invoked (Matt 18:15–20; Heb 10:28–31; 1 Tim 5:19–21)
- God is regularly invoked as a witness in the Old Testament
- God is both witness and judge in Susanna

Paul (in connection with Christ) as Witness

- “since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me” (2 Cor 13:3)
- “in him” and “with him” (2 Cor 13:4)
- Paul's defense of his apostleship as a general theme in chs. 10–13 (e.g., 2 Cor 12:12)
- “we have been speaking in Christ” (2 Cor 12:19)
- “I hope that you will find out that we have not failed the test” (2 Cor 13:6)
- “in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me” (2 Cor 13:10)
- “it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends” (2 Cor 10:18)
- “As the truth of Christ is in me” (2 Cor 11:10)
- “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved with simplicity and godly sincerity . . . toward you” (2 Cor 1:12)

- “in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2 Cor 2:17)
- “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 9:1)
- Jesus appeals to his own testimony on the basis of his connection with the Father (John 8:13–18)

Three Visits as the Time of the Testimony

- “Third time” connected with “three” in (2 Cor 13:1)
- “Second” of 2 Cor 13:2 connected with “two” of 13:1
- “Here for the third time I am ready to come to you” (2 Cor 12:13)
- “when I come again” (2 Cor 12:21)
- “I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come” (2 Cor 13:10)
- The connection of the “coming” discussion in ch. 1 (1:15–2:1ff.) with chs. 12–13
- Jesus not only mentions two or three witnesses but he also mentions two or three visits (Matt 18:15–16)

There remains one question to address. Is Paul’s use of Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1 (as interpreted in this article) a legitimate use of Scripture? Some interpreters, of course, will deny that even asking this sort of question is legitimate; our task, they will claim, is merely descriptive. That is, someone could claim that when Paul uses Scripture he does so as a participant in his own interpretive climate, a climate that makes him unconcerned with such questions.⁴⁶ I am happy to grant that Paul shares certain assumptions with other interpreters in Second Temple Judaism (while also diverging from them in some respects); nevertheless, I think we might be able to infer how Paul might respond if he could answer for himself. We draw our inference of how he might respond based on what we have already observed him actually doing. In other words, if Paul could explain his use of this Scripture to us, he would argue that his use of Deut 19:15 was entirely appropriate—*more* than appropriate in fact. Why?

(1) Paul’s two witnesses, God and Paul himself (in Christ) are not metaphorical, they are actual witnesses. Those who argue that the three visits are the two or three “witnesses” have to explain their metaphorical use of the passage,

46. E.g., Peter Enns, “Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment,” in *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 165–217; idem, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 113–65.

whereas this solution contains real witnesses. (2) The first of the witnesses, God, is *de facto* the most important witness, because he has the right to witness to the validity of Paul's ministry and message. An appeal to God as one of the witnesses allows Paul, if need be, to trump any summoning of human witnesses, because God is both witness and judge. (3) In calling on God as his witness, Paul follows in the steps of what others have done in the past, such as Samuel (1 Sam 12:5) and Jonathan (1 Sam 20:12, 23, 42). (4) In appealing to himself as a witness—but only because he is in Christ (2 Cor 12:19) and Christ is speaking in him (2 Cor 13:3)—Paul parallels the pattern set by Jesus, who testified to himself based on his connection to the Father (John 8:13–18; cf. 5:31–36). Paul's use of 2 Cor 13:1, then, is not only legitimate; it is a canonically rich explication of Deut 19:15 that fits the constraints of Paul's own literary context.

In conclusion, the two witnesses (or three if Paul and Christ are considered separate witnesses) of 2 Cor 13:1 are God himself and Paul speaking in connection with Christ. The occasions of the testimony are Paul's two past visits and his upcoming visit.