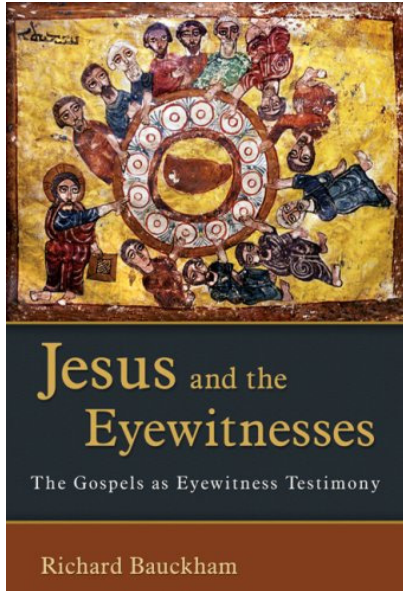


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Bauckham, Richard

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

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Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* begins with a premise: that Christian believers need to be able to trust the Gospels. He writes: "Christian faith has trusted these texts. Christian faith has trusted that in these texts we encounter the real Jesus, and it is hard to see how Christian faith and theology can work with a radically distrusting attitude toward the Gospels." The question is, trust them for what? For many years critical scholarship has argued that the Gospels can be trusted to give us the voice of an Evangelist telling a story of Jesus in a particular time and place, in a way that addresses the circumstances of the community for which the author was writing. In an earlier volume, Bauckham challenged this basic idea, arguing instead that the Gospels were written with a more general Christian audience in view (*The Gospels for All Christians* [Eerdmans, 1998]). In this volume Bauckham presses on more deeply into the form-critical paradigm, challenging the idea that not only the Gospels but the oral tradition behind the Gospels was itself culled, formed, and shaped by the communities in which the stories of Jesus were told and retold in the service of various *Sitze im Leben*. The form-critical project, in Bauckham's view now thoroughly discredited, ought to be abandoned once and for all in favor of a new paradigm. He proposes that we replace it with another category: *testimony*.

The Gospels are based upon the *testimony of certain eyewitnesses* whose recollections are to be trusted as the authentic witness to Jesus. Thus, Bauckham's basic thesis:

In general, I shall be arguing in this book that the Gospel texts are much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is commonly envisaged in current scholarship. This is what gives the Gospels their character as testimony. They embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, not of course without editing and interpretation, but in a way that is substantially faithful to how the eyewitnesses themselves told it. (6)

That last sentence contains an important caveat. Bauckham does not understand eyewitness testimony to be strict reportage—history “wie es eigentlich gewesen war”—a point that he reiterates repeatedly throughout the book (e.g., 221, 243, 279, 286). Testimony involves both history and the assertion of its meaning—fact and interpretation, if you will. Bauckham explains:

Theologically speaking, the category of testimony enables us to read the Gospels as precisely the kind of text we need in order to recognize the disclosure of God in the history of Jesus. Understanding the Gospels as testimony, we can recognize this theological meaning of the history not as an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts, but as the way the witnesses perceived the history, in an inextricable coinherence of observable event and perceptible meaning. Testimony is ... where history and theology meet. (5–6)

When read carefully, one can see that Bauckham is not really proposing a dramatic revision in our *historical* evaluation of the Gospels. This is, after all, not far from what James M. Robinson argued a generation ago in announcing the reopening the quest for the historical Jesus among the post-Bultmannians. Robinson, recall, argued that the (then) recent shift away from the older, positivist model of doing history toward the notion (in, e.g., Collingwood and Dilthey) that history is the past remembered meaningfully, not just the *bruta facta* but the past *interpreted* (*The New Quest of the Historical Jesus* [rev. ed.; Fortress, 1983], 48–72), was what made the new quest possible, where the old quest had foundered. The shift here contemplated is not away from the notion of interpretation; it is, rather in the *locus* of interpretation: for the form critics, it was the community that drove the interpretation; for Bauckham, it was certain individuals, eyewitnesses to the events they were interpreting.

Bauckham offers three basic arguments for seeing the Gospels as eyewitness testimony. The first has to do with the naming of minor, seemingly insignificant characters in the narrative, amid so many anonymous characters (39–66). Why should Cleopas be named

in Luke 24, for example, or the two Marys and Salome in Mark's empty tomb story (Mark 16)? The naming of the Twelve also belongs to this phenomenon (93–113). Bauckham's answer is that these named individuals were actually eyewitnesses to the events in which they are depicted, and the Twelve were, as Birger Gerhardsson described them a generation ago (*Memory and Manuscript* [Uppsala, 1961]), "an authoritative collegium" with responsibility for formulating, transmitting, and policing the development of the Jesus tradition. The questions raised are more than obvious. If Cleopas is named to reassure us that an eyewitness was there, why is the other disciple in this story *not* named (assuming that two witnesses are better than one). Or, if the Twelve were those witnesses charged with assuring the accuracy of the accounts (96–97), how did we end up with such widely divergent accounts as Mark and John? And how did it happen that the Twelve come off so badly in the narratives themselves? And is there any indication anywhere in the tradition that this was in fact the function of the Twelve? If the pre-Pauline formula of 1 Cor 15:3–5 is any indication, the Twelve originally were noted for their encounter with the resurrected Jesus, not their memory of his earthly words and deeds.

His second basic argument involves something he calls the "*inclusio* of eyewitness testimony" (114–54). Bauckham notes in Luke's preface the words "eyewitnesses from the beginning" (*hoi ap' arches autoptai*) and argues that we should regard this as reflecting a literary device used by ancient writers of history to convince readers of the veracity of the events being described: their account was credible because they had witnessed the whole thing, "from the beginning." These witnesses, in theory, should appear early in the work and remain present throughout the narrative so that the reader can be reassured that there was someone present to witness and recount all that is being narrated. In Mark this is Peter (124–27); in John, the beloved disciple (127–29); and in Luke it is Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (129–32). It will not go unnoticed that in Mark, Peter is indeed present for much of the action, but he (and before him the rest of the apostles) disappears from the narrative just when the most important events of the Gospel begin to unfold: the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even the women who were to tell him of their discovery of the empty tomb, *according to Mark*, do not do so (16:8). In Luke, the women alleged to be eyewitnesses (*from the beginning*) do not appear until Luke 8:3 and then are not mentioned again until 24:10. As for John, the beloved disciple does not enter the narrative until chapter 13, then not again until the crucifixion (19:46) and resurrection (20:2). Bauckham's elaborate theory for identifying the unnamed disciple in John 1:40 as the beloved disciple is unconvincing. In any event, a cloaked beloved disciple cannot very well function to reassure the reader that an eyewitness is indeed present "from the beginning" when he is not uncloaked until chapter 13.

The third basic argument builds on an observation made in 1925 by the Oxford scholar Cuthbert Turner ("Marcan Usage: Notes Critical and Exegetical on the Second Gospel V.

The Movements of Jesus and His Disciples and the Crowd,” *JTS* 26 [1925]: 225–40). Turner called attention to twenty-one instances where Mark uses a plural verb referring to the movements of the disciples as a group, followed immediately by a singular verb referring to Jesus alone. For example: “On the following day, when *they* came from Bethany, *he* was hungry...” (Mark 11:12). Turner’s argument was that these third-person plurals must have originally been *first*-person plurals, reflecting the narrative point of view of a member of Jesus’ band of followers (Turner, 226; Bauckham, 158). Bauckham himself adds the observation that this narrative pattern occurs “on the first and last occasions Jesus goes anywhere with a group of disciples (1:21; 14:32)” (161), thus forming an *inclusio* that “parallels closely ... the *inclusio* formed by the references to Peter” (162). This coincidence leads Bauckham to conclude that the use of the plural in these instances serves to focalize the narrative through a Petrine point of view. It is “Mark’s way of deliberately reproducing in his narrative the first person perspective—the ‘we’ perspective—from which Peter naturally told his stories” (164). The obvious question to this theory is why we never actually hear the first-person voice in Mark (or in any of the New Testament Gospels, for that matter). If the intention of the author was to create a “we” perspective, why has this “we” been completely erased from view? On the other hand, might not these grammatical patterns be due to the fact that the Gospels relate a story that is about a (singular) teacher with (plural) disciples?

It would be easy to mistake Bauckham’s interest in making these arguments for a simple evangelical or fundamentalist piety that would require of the Gospels that they be an accurate account of the facts gleaned from trustworthy eyewitnesses. This seems not to be the case. For even in Bauckham’s understanding the Gospels come out as a mix of history and interpretation. He allows that there are variations in the Jesus tradition that “must be deliberate interpretive alterations or additions, by which a tradent sought to explain or to adapt the teaching when the post-Easter situation seemed to require this” (286). Furthermore, the Evangelists made changes in order “to integrate the traditions into the connected narrative of their Gospels” (286). He does not argue for an infallible historical record. Anyone who looks to this volume for that (and many undoubtedly will) is sure to be disappointed.

What Bauckham does want is a different paradigm from that which Bultmann initiated a generation ago. Much of this book is a struggle against form criticism, or what Bauckham presents as a version of the form-critical perspective that permits only an extreme historical skepticism. A student of Bultmann’s *History of the Synoptic Tradition* will not recognize this description of Bultmann’s work, but Bauckham does describe a small number of principled skeptics for whom form criticism and its model of oral tradition throws up an impenetrable barrier for the historian. Much of what Bauckham says in this regard makes plenty of sense. It is true, for example, that as long as people like James,

Peter, or Mary Magdalene were still on the scene, the shaping and transmission of the tradition would not have been accomplished in the strict anonymity of community groups. People who actually remembered Jesus could have been around for a long time. Moreover, he is right to insist that the necessities of community life would not have overridden entirely the memory of the past, altering the tradition beyond all recognition. Brief aphorisms, for example, appear to have been remarkably stable in transmission, even though the *chreiai* in which they were embedded could be quite malleable. These are features of the Jesus tradition that make historical work possible.

But Bauckham extends his argument beyond these quite reasonable claims to others that will invite greater criticism. He embraces, for example, Kenneth Bailey's notion of a "formal controlled tradition," (*Asia Journal of Theology* 5 [1991]: 34–51) and argues (contrary to Bailey himself) that this the model that best explains the Jesus tradition behind the Gospels (264–89). This is a model that involves teachers with students using writing and memorization to ensure the accuracy with which the tradition is passed on. This is a formal process that, Bauckham argues, began "already during Jesus' ministry" (285). After the death and resurrection of Jesus, this process would have continued. Paul, he argues, would have been tutored by Peter in a "formal process of learning" (271), in spite of Paul's apparent objection to this version of history. To the contrary, in a well-known passage (Gal 1:12) he says explicitly that he did *not* receive (*paralabon*) anything from any person, nor was he taught (*edidachen*) his gospel; his education, so to speak, came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

In all of this Bauckham does engage in a dispute that should be recognized to have legitimate dimensions worthy of reasonable debate. To what extent was the tradition generated and shaped by contemporary events and concerns unfolding in the life of the early Jesus communities, and to what extent does it preserve a real memory of the words and deeds of Jesus himself? Bauckham places Bultmann at one extreme in this debate, but Bultmann himself in reality took a more mediating position *on the historical issues*, ascribing quite a lot to the historical Jesus, even while later arguing for its diminished significance *for Christian theology*. The new debate will need to take in all that has been done since Bultmann on the issue of oral tradition and ancient literacy. Bauckham brings some of this discussion to bear, but there are important, critical omissions (Walter Ong, for example, and William Harris) that have really altered the discussion. Until all of these issues are aired out, there will be little chance that Bauckham's work can effect the paradigm shift he hopes to achieve. But his work is thoughtful and provocative. It has, if nothing else, awakened sleeping dogs and brought to life a number of questions that are perhaps not as settled as we once thought they were.