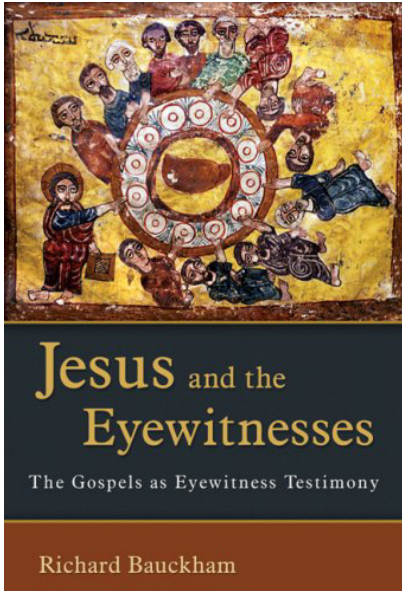


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Bauckham, Richard

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

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Christopher Tuckett
University of Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

The phrase “tour de force” is perhaps an overworked one at times, but it seems to be an apt description for this latest wide-ranging study by Richard Bauckham. This is a hard-hitting book that pulls no punches. Its main aim is to attack what Bauckham sees as the principal tenets of form criticism (and still reflected in much contemporary Gospel study), namely, that the Gospel tradition underwent a long process of adaptation, and at times creation, by anonymous faceless “communities” in the early church. Bauckham’s argument is that this (alleged) fundamental tenet of form criticism has not done justice to the role of eyewitnesses in the early church; it also fails to recognize the relatively short time span of the period from the events of Jesus’ lifetime to the writing of the Gospels (potentially no more than a single lifetime). Thus Bauckham argues that the early church exercised a controlling influence on the Gospel tradition throughout the time before the Gospels were written: eyewitnesses (the Twelve and others) were present and ensured that the tradition was preserved; historians, as was usual in the ancient world, set a high store by eyewitness testimony (Bauckham explicitly builds on the work of Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story* [2000]) and hence would have resorted to the original eyewitnesses in their retelling of the Jesus story.

Bauckham develops his case through eighteen closely argued chapters. Much space is devoted to patristic evidence, especially Papias: Papias clearly shows his preference for direct eyewitness testimony (over against written sources), a viewpoint that was widely held in the ancient world. Further, Papias's well-known reference to questioning earlier authorities refers to a time earlier than Papias's own writing and hence takes us back to the (approximate) time the Gospels were probably written.

Two chapters are devoted here to names and named characters in the Gospels. Many named characters in the Gospels probably joined the early Christian movement, were well-known to other Christians, and may have provided eyewitness testimony for the events in which they participated. Bauckham also gives a full discussion of Jewish-Palestinian names, showing how the names used in the Gospels match well with what we know of the usage and popularity of Jewish names in Palestine: hence, "all the evidence indicates the general authenticity of the personal names in the Gospels" (84).

Bauckham then moves on to consider the role of the Twelve, arguing that they constituted an "authoritative collegium" in the early church (94, borrowing Gerhardsson's phrase), an "official body of eyewitnesses" (96) who acted as the guarantors of at least the overall shape of the Gospel story. They were eyewitnesses "from the beginning," a claim reflected not only in Acts 1 but also in John 15:27. Bauckham also finds this reflected in the references to Peter in Mark 1 and 16, acting as an *inclusio* showing that "Peter is the witness whose testimony includes the whole" (125). Similar claims are made for the role of Peter in Luke and the Beloved Disciple in John.

Bauckham then discusses Mark and claims to be able to detect Petrine influence in Mark's Gospel. Building on C. H. Turner's essay of many years ago, he claims to be able to identify a specifically Petrine perspective, though with Peter as a member of the Twelve (and hence both a part of the group as well as having an individual role within that group). He then turns to the Markan passion narrative and argues (following and developing suggestions of G. Theissen) that some of the unnamed characters in the story may be anonymous to provide them with protection in potentially dangerous situations later. Bauckham concludes this part of his book focusing on the Synoptics with a detailed discussion of the statements of Papias about Matthew and Mark, arguing in particular that if there is any comparison of Mark (especially) at work (in the well-known reference to Mark's possible deficiency in "order"), it may be in relation to John's Gospel.

Two main chapters deal more generally with what Bauckham calls the "models of oral tradition," where he develops more fully his critique of classic form criticism as well as discussing the more recent work of Dunn. He then considers issues about the transmission of Jesus traditions. And in a chapter entitled "Anonymous Tradition or

Eyewitness Testimony?” he comes down firmly in favor of the latter alternative. The Jerusalem church had “central significance” throughout Palestine and the Diaspora, so that “it becomes obvious that it must have had a key place in the formulation and transmission of Jesus traditions.... We should probably envisage a carefully compiled and formulated collection of Jesus traditions, incorporating other eyewitness testimony as well as that of the Twelve themselves, but authorized by the Twelve as the official body of witnesses” (299).

In four chapters toward the end of the book, Bauckham develops his own (previously published) theories about the Fourth Gospel, arguing that it is (all) the work of the Beloved Disciple, identified as John the Elder of Papias and as the anonymous disciple called (along with Andrew) in John 1:35–40. As such he is an eyewitness of the events (though not one of the Twelve) and gives his own testimony to this in the penultimate verse of the Gospel (21:24: the “we” there is taken as the equivalent of a first-person singular). Much weight is again given to patristic evidence, focusing on the evidence from Papias, the Muratorian Canon, Polycrates, and Irenaeus.

In a final chapter that takes up important themes from the first chapter, Bauckham develops further the idea that the Gospels should be seen as based on the accounts of eyewitnesses: in particular, they are eyewitness *testimony*. Testimony requires trust to be accepted. Bauckham clearly believes that the testimony of the (canonical!) Gospels deserves this trust, and he delivers some forceful (even slashing) attacks on the mistrust and skepticism shown by others. He traces this back to the individualism of the Enlightenment, referring at one point to the “modernist arrogance” of some modern historians. Rather, we should, like medieval scholars, be more ready (than many moderns) to respect the giants of the past and be prepared to accept the testimony that the Gospels offer us. “Radical scepticism of testimony is a kind of epistemological suicide.... Gospels scholarship must free itself from the grip of the skeptical paradigm that presumes the Gospels to be unreliable unless, in every particular case of story or saying, the historian succeeds in providing independent verification” (526).

I have spent some time in this review seeking to describe—inevitably inadequately—what Bauckham has given us. It is impossible to summarize, with any justice, over five hundred pages of closely argued material. It is equally impossible to seek to respond to all the claims made here. They are many and varied and would need perhaps five hundred more pages to review fully! I offer then just a few comments by way of example.

Much is made of the attitude of writers of history in the ancient world, valuing wherever possible eyewitness testimony. However, Bauckham notes in passing that on occasions historiographers, despite their ideals, may not always have been able to attain their ideal,

and some of the claims to have consulted eyewitnesses may have been untrue (e.g., 120 on Plutarch writing pseudonymously a fictional account of an earlier sixth-century B.C.E. symposium; or see 296 on gnostic claims to have lines of tradition going back to the original apostles). If an appeal to eyewitnesses was a conventional historiographical topos, we cannot necessarily deduce that Christian claims to this effect (see especially Papias or perhaps by implication Luke or John) necessarily correspond with historical reality.

The discussion of named characters may also go further than the evidence will allow. Certainly claims that the named characters in the Gospels mostly later became Christians seems to go beyond anything we can ever know (rather than simply postulate, at least with our present body of evidence). Further, much of the information given here about names is very interesting, but whether it can justify Bauckham's claim about the "general authenticity of the personal names in the Gospels" (84, cited above) must remain doubtful. It shows that the Gospels represent life-like stories. That is rarely doubted (in many respects). But whether the details about individual names are in fact historically authentic is quite another matter. (One does not need to be a literary genius or, for that matter, an exact contemporary of the events concerned, to avoid giving names such as Wayne or Sharon to characters in a story set in nineteenth-century England or in modern-day Japan!) Bauckham's claim that it would be "*impossible* to explain" (84) the names in the Gospels as inventions from outside Palestine is based on the usage of actual names outside Palestine, but what would be needed for such a claim would be evidence of the knowledge and/or awareness, or rather *lack* of any awareness, of Palestinian names by those outside Palestine (rather than actual names used in the Diaspora), and such evidence by its very nature would be hard to find.

Certainly, at times Bauckham's argument seems to depend on a groundswell of rhetoric that appears to make claims with an assurance that seems unjustified by the available evidence. To take one example (of a number of possible ones), in making his suggestions about the role of the Twelve as an authoritative body, Bauckham claims that "*confirmation* of this hypothesis that the Twelve constituted an official body of eyewitnesses may be found in the lists of the Twelve" (96), but how the lists "confirm" anything in this respect is not clear, at least to this reader, given that the lists themselves never give any suggestion of such a role for the Twelve. Bauckham goes on to say "*it could well be* that the Twelve are listed at the official body of eyewitnesses" (97; no doubt "*it could be*," since [almost] all things are possible, but whether "*it could well be*" may not be so clear to some). He then says that "this group was *evidently* so important for the transmission of gospel traditions..." (97), but the "evidently" will seem to many to outstrip any actual "evidence" adduced here by quite some way. Similarly, in Bauckham's comments on the (alleged) "central significance" occupied by the Jerusalem church (299, cited earlier; one may note that Bauckham deals briefly, some might say too briefly, with

the problems that the Pauline letters might provide for such a view!), he moves with almost lightning speed to the further claim that it “becomes *obvious* that it [the Jerusalem church] *must have* had a key role in the formulation and transmission of Jesus traditions” and that “we should probably envisage” a carefully compiled and formulated collection of Jesus traditions authorized by the Twelve (299, noted above). Whether it is quite so “obvious” and “must” have been the case will not be so clear to all; no doubt we “could” envisage this, but whether we “should” do so might be regarded as questionable for some.

Finally, one may note the slightly unclear picture that emerges in some of Bauckham’s comments on form criticism (directly or indirectly). “Form criticism” is clearly the *bête noire* here, yet at times rather different aspects of the multifaceted work that is (all) placed under the heading “form criticism” seems to be confused in the onslaught here. One of the basic claims of form critics was that the traditions about Jesus were *used* in the early church for perhaps more than antiquarian interest: they were felt to be useful and valuable for Christians in *their* day. The extent to which Christians may have modified (or even created) traditions in this process is perhaps another issue (although it is primarily this claim of [some] form critics that forms the main target for Bauckham’s critique: see, e.g., 244). Yet why, then, did Christians preserve the Jesus tradition? Bauckham at times seems to waver between different views. At some points, it seems, the Jesus tradition was unrelated to early Christians’ own contemporary lives: he cites approvingly the work of Lemcio, for example, in arguing that Christians did *not* read back their own ideas and categories into the Gospel stories (275–77), and he borrows (again with approval) Gerhardsson’s phrase (in turn borrowed from Kittel) of the Jesus tradition as an “isolated” tradition in the early church (278–79, although it is not quite so clear whether Bauckham shares Gerhardsson’s view that Jesus tradition was *not* used in, e.g., paraenetic teaching in the church.) Further, he claims that the tradition was preserved to recount the events of the *salvation* wrought by Jesus (277–78).

Yet at another point Bauckham declares that those who appropriated the Jesus tradition (rather than teachers) “would not be at all interested in accommodating it to social contexts and live audiences. They simply wanted to remember it for its practical value” (283). But what would its “practical value” be if divorced from contemporary life (i.e., the “social contexts” of Christian daily life)? If the Jesus tradition had “practical value,” this presumably was because it was used (in some context or other). Early Christians may (or may not) have been less “creative” than (some) form critics postulated, but the issues of creativity and usage should perhaps be kept separate.

There is no time here to engage in any detail with Bauckham’s views on the Fourth Gospel or on his broader hermeneutical claims in his first and last chapters. Certainly in relation to the latter, some will find the attitude of “trust” in relation to the Gospels (at times with

an explicit Christian reference; see 2–3) appealing; others will find it off-putting. And some of his claims in the final chapter (especially on the influence, not always for good, of the Enlightenment) are a little startling.

There is much food for thought here. Undoubtedly Bauckham's theories will generate much debate. Certainly many of the issues he raises are among the most important in Gospel studies today.