

## *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony*

By Richard Bauckham

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**R**ichard Bauckham, professor of New Testament Studies and Bishop Wardlaw Professor at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, is one of the leading New Testament scholars of our time. This fascinating, groundbreaking and momentous book of 538 pages, including 17 tables, is witness to the author's wealth of knowledge concerning the world of the early Judaism and Christians.

Although Bauckham acknowledges the legitimacy of the historical study of Jesus and the Gospels, he questions whether the enterprise of reconstructing a historical Jesus behind the Gospels can grant access to the real Jesus who lived in Palestine in the first century, the Jesus of the Gospels in whom Christians believe. In this publication he proposes a way forward "in which theology and history may meet in the historical Jesus instead of parting company there" (5). In order to do this, he challenges the basic assumption of form criticism that the traditions about Jesus and his words circulated for a long time as anonymous community traditions with the result that the role of the eyewitnesses from whom the traditions originated is totally diminished. Bauckham makes a case that the period between the "historical Jesus" and the Gospels was spanned "not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses" (8). This emphasis on the role of the eyewitnesses builds on and develops Samuel Byrskog's *Story as History – History as Story* who emphasized that according to Greek and Roman historians a historian, had to be a participant in the narrated events, or else at least had to rely on eyewitnesses testimony (autopsy).

In chapter 2 Bauckham carefully discusses the witness of Papias on the origins of the Gospels that has been largely ignored as not in line with contemporary scholarly views on these matters. In this discussion he also touches on Vansina's distinction between oral history and oral tradition. His conclusion is that Papias was not interested in collective memory as such, but in the eyewitnesses still available through named informants. This correlates with Bauckham's contention that in the period up to the writing of the Gospels, known and named eyewitnesses of the teaching and events in Jesus' life were still connected to these traditions, not only as the formulators of the stories, but as remaining throughout their lifetimes the sources and authoritative guarantors of the stories they continued to tell. Due to the assumptions of form criticism, the role of named individuals in the tradition was also largely ignored.

Whereas someone like Birger Gerhardsson focused rather exclusively on the Twelve, in chapters 3 and 4 Bauckham discusses other eyewitnesses too in the context of names in the Gospels and in Jewish Palestine. He provides tables of the anonymous and named persons in the Gospels, the 99 most popular male names among Palestinian Jews, the 31 most popular female names among Palestinian Jews, and various other lists of names. There is a tendency in Matthew and Luke to omit some of the names found in Mark probably because at the time of the writing they had become too obscure to be retained. The names retained are probably people known in the early Christian community, as well as being eyewitnesses behind stories in the Gospels. The study of Jewish Palestinian names brings to light that about half the population of Jewish Palestine was called by only about a dozen personal names giving rise to a variety of ways of distinguishing between people with the same personal name. Due to the different pattern of Jewish names used in the Diaspora, the addition or invention, at a later stage, of frequently used names in the Gospels would be highly unlikely, pointing to the authenticity of the personal names in the Gospels.

In chapter 5 Bauckham returns to the role of the Twelve as an authoritative collegium. He notes the carefully preserved lists of names and epithets of the Twelve (with their variations) in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, although, remarkably, seven of these names in Mark and Luke (and six in Matthew) are never again mentioned in these Gospels. Bauckham also challenges the traditional identification of the tax collector, Levi son of Alphaeus, with Matthew on the grounds of the virtually unparalleled phenomenon of a Palestinian Jew having two Semitic names ("Levi" and "Matthew"). This identification is usually based on the fact that in Matthew 9:9 the Gospel of Matthew changed the name of the tax collector "Levi son of Alphaeus" (in Mark 2:14) to "Matthew", and as the only Gospel in Matthew 10:3 added "the tax collector" to the name "Matthew" in the list of the Twelve. Bauckham then proposes that the Gospel of Matthew transferred Mark's story of Levi's call to Matthew, making it a story of Matthew's call instead. This implies "that the author of Matthew's Gospel intended to associate the Gospel with the apostle Matthew but was not himself the apostle Matthew" (112). It is interesting that whereas Bauckham is confident that the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John use the literary convention of the *inclusion* of eyewitness testimony to highlight the role of eyewitness as sources for their narratives, the Gospel of Matthew does not claim the authority of any specific eyewitnesses.

Contrary to the tendency to deny any connection between the Gospel of Mark and Peter, Bauckham claims that Mark's Gospel is predominantly told from Peter's perspective on the basis of several literary features used to give the readers/hearer's Peter's point of view (internal focalization). At the back of this Gospel lies Peter's teaching, not his personal reminiscences.

Bauckham states that the presence of anonymous characters is quite normal and that the presence of named characters should actually be explained. He argues that the eyewitness sources of particular traditions in the Gospels are in general indicated by names. With reference to the anonymous persons in Mark's passion narrative, he then takes as point of departure Theissen's suggestions about "protective anonymity", and draws attention to several persons who are anonymous in Mark, but in John are named (such as the servant of the high priest, Malchus in John 18:10). At the time when John wrote, the real danger that threatened certain characters for many years in the early Christian community in Jerusalem would have passed already. In this respect he makes the interesting proposal that the naked youth that fled from Gethsemane (Mark 14:52) could be Lazarus, especially if Papias is taken seriously that Mark neither heard nor was a disciple of Jesus. This could be another

example where the need for “protective anonymity” may have been stronger than the convention of naming eyewitnesses.

In chapter 9 Bauckham again carefully looks at the statements attributed to Papias about Mark and Matthew. He observes a parallelism and contrast between what Papias says about these Gospels pointing to two stages: One the activity of an eyewitness, the other the activity of one or more non-eyewitnesses. This could mean that Peter (an eyewitness) spoke in Aramaic and Mark translated and wrote the Gospel in Greek, while Matthew (an eyewitness) wrote in Aramaic or Hebrew and others translated it into Greek. Bauckham then makes the point that Papias was contrasting the lack of order in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew with the order of the Gospel of John. While Papias commended the Gospel of Matthew for its literary order, his criticism of Mark’s lack of order is (according to Bauckham) probably exaggerated.

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the implications of the role of eyewitnesses as original sources of the Gospel traditions, but also as people who remained accessible and authoritative guarantors of these traditions. He sets out acknowledging the significant and valid insight of form criticism that individual units of the Synoptic Gospels are close to the original oral forms. Nonetheless, he continues to list a number of stringent criticisms of the form critical enterprise and concludes that (unfortunately) the real enduring legacy of form criticism is “the impression of a long period of creative development of the traditions before they attained written form in the Gospels” (249). He then deals with Gerhardsson’s radical alternative to form criticism – a model that was criticised for being too rigid and assuming too much control by the Twelve in Jerusalem. A middle way proposed by Kenneth Bailey was favourably adopted by NT Wright and James Dunn. Bailey distinguishes three types of oral transmission: Informal uncontrolled tradition (presupposed by form criticism), formal controlled tradition (Gerhardsson’s model) and informal controlled tradition (which Bailey considers more helpful). But Bailey’s model of a tradition controlled only by the community as a whole is not entirely appropriate, and even Dunn (according to Byrskog and Bauckham) has problems fitting the eyewitnesses into the Bailey model, although recognizing the importance of individual eyewitnesses.

This leads Bauckham to pay more attention to the role of the eyewitnesses in a formal controlled tradition in the following chapters. He recalls Vansina’s (*Oral tradition as history*) significant distinction between historical *tales* (treated as fictional) and historical *accounts* (treated as truthful accounts of the past). According to Bauckham this refutes the claims made by form criticism that no distinction was made in the process of transmission between the past time of the history of Jesus and the present time of the early Christians (273). And although moderate adaptations of the tradition to the later context of the Christian community did take place, the Gospels would be hard to explain without the oral Jesus traditions that existed “isolated” from other Christian tradition. It is in this respect that the mechanism of control through the different degrees of memorization becomes important, as well as the written support to oral teaching. Bauckham dissents from the role ascribed by Bailey and Dunn to the community in the transmission of the Jesus tradition by underlining the role of the eyewitnesses and community teachers who learned the tradition from the eyewitnesses, as well as pointing to Papias’ emphasis not on the anonymous community, but on individuals. Bauckham also challenges the widespread assumption that the Gospels were originally anonymous, endorsing Hengel’s view that as soon as the Gospels were circulated in churches knowing more than one Gospel, they were accompanied by their traditional author’s names. He contends that three of the Gospels (Mark, Luke and John) used the literary device of *inclusio* of eyewitnesses testimony to give an indication of their eyewitnesses sources linked to specific authors.

In dealing with the category of memory Bauckham reminds us that memory is fallible, but nevertheless often also reliable enough. He draws on the research on recollective memory indicating that recollective memory has a reconstructive element and is "capable of very accurate, though inevitably selective, reconstruction" (330). His conclusion is that according to the research on recollective memory's criteria for reliability, the memory of eyewitnesses in the Jesus traditions score highly.

In the last couple of chapters Bauckham deals with issues relating to the Beloved Disciple and the authorship of the Gospel of John. He argues that the Gospel was designed to end as it does, and never existed without the claim of John 21:24-25 that the Beloved Disciple was both the primary witness as well as the author of the Gospel of John. He proposes that the Beloved Disciple was a lesser known disciple, not one of the Twelve, and not John the son of Zebedee, as is still maintained by quite a number of scholars. Bauckham again wants to take Papias' statements in this respect more seriously than is usually done and therefore argues that the author of the Gospel of John is Papias's John the Elder, the disciple of the Lord. This John was known by some second century writers not to be John the son of Zebedee, although in the course of time the two became identified.

Bauckham's historical argument is throughout that in the case of the Gospel of John an eyewitness himself authored his own Gospel, while the other three Gospels served as literary vehicles to the testimony of the eyewitnesses. In his final chapter he argues that "t(he) Jesus the Gospels portray is Jesus as these eyewitnesses portrayed him, the Jesus of testimony" (472). The category of "testimony" bridges the dichotomy between the so-called historical Jesus and the so-called Christ of faith – it does the most justice to the Gospels as both history and theology. Eyewitness testimony offers us inside knowledge from involved participants as it offers us testimony to radical and uniquely unique events such as example the Holocaust. Bauckham closes his remarkable publication with the following statement: "testimony is the theologically appropriate, indeed the theologically necessary way of access to this 'uniquely unique' historical event. It is in the Jesus of testimony that history and theology meet" (508).

This is surely in many ways a provocative publication. Bauckham not only challenges basic assumptions operative for many years in New Testament research, but he carefully argues and builds his case in a manner making it almost impossible to put the book down. Like a good detective story he adds various pieces of evidence in chapter after chapter, all along challenging and dialoguing with many well established points of view. He has a remarkable grasp of historical, rigorous and imaginative literary approaches and is well aware of a broad scope of research dealing with recollective memory and oral tradition – and oral history research. As careful as he argues his case, it cannot be denied that he also has to work in many cases with assumptions, probabilities and implications, but that is the nature of historical research. That this book will give rise to debate for a long time to come on many of the issues he raises, will serve as a fitting tribute to a work of such depth and breadth. This is truly a remarkable contribution to New Testament scholarship.