

R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the eyewitnesses: the Gospels as eyewitness testimony*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 538 pp, ISBN 9780802831620, USD 58.99

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In this large and closely argued book Richard Bauckham of the University of St. Andrews contends that eyewitness testimony as a category of historiography is ‘an entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus’ (5). He sets out to supplement Samuel Byrskog’s *Story as history – history as story: the gospel tradition in the context of ancient oral history* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), which demonstrates that ancient historians considered the best kind of historical evidence to be eyewitness testimony deriving from personal involvement in events – by identifying eyewitnesses and eyewitness testimony in the Gospel tradition.

The point of departure is a passage that Bauckham comes back to repeatedly throughout the book. In a lucid analysis of an often discussed fragment of Papias (Eusebius, *HE* 3.39.3-4), he shows that the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor was probably collecting eyewitness testimony in about AD80-90 from the associates of church elders and disciples of Jesus living in Asia. Papias’ preference for ‘a living and abiding voice’ verifies the important role of eyewitness testimony (autopsy) in the *writing* of historiographic accounts and calls into question the form-critical assumption that oral tradition was passed on through an anonymous collective. A further point of significance is that after the death of eyewitnesses, ‘the value of orally transmitted traditions would soon decline considerably’ (30).

In chapters 3 and 4 Bauckham proposes that the names in the Gospels ‘are of persons well known in early Christian communities’ (47). The Evangelists associate traditions with individual disciples. Discrepancies between the women’s names in the resurrection accounts, for example, are to be explained because some decades after the events the writers ‘were careful to name precisely the women that were well known to them’ (51). The minutiae of synoptic relationships aside, this is reasonable. In the same way, individual traditions may derive from minor persons named in the Gospels. On the other hand, as Dunn observes, much of the tradition was transmitted without ‘explicit attribution to the first disciples’ (2008: 102). Therefore, to press the argument as far as Bauckham does assumes that the mostly implicit instances of attribution attest to a literary practice that was taken for granted.¹

The data of Ilan (2002) is then used to show that the most popular Jewish names occur in similar proportions in the Gospels and Acts and in Palestinian, epigraphic, literary,

papyrological, and earliest rabbinical sources. On this basis, Bauckham argues it is ‘very unlikely that the names in the Gospels are late accretions to the traditions’ (74). Drawing support from comparison with names in the volume of Jewish inscriptions from Egypt (Horbury & Noy 2007), he concludes that the names favoured by Diasporan Jews were different to those preferred in Palestine. However, the net should have been cast more widely to include Jewish inscriptions in volumes by Lüderitz (1983), and the three-part *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis* series (Noy 2004); they have been overlooked, even though the Asia Minor volume is footnoted (447 note 35).

Since the names of the Twelve are accurately preserved in the Synoptics, Bauckham argues that they function as ‘a body of eyewitnesses who formulated and authorized the core collection of traditions in all three Synoptic Gospels’ (97). They qualified as witnesses through having seen Jesus’ ministry from beginning to end. This is explicit in Acts 1:21-22 and Luke 1:1-4 and implicit in Jn. 15:26-27 and Acts 10:36-42. Three of the Gospels also use an *inclusio* literary device that presents individuals – Peter in Mark, the Beloved Disciple in John, and the women in Luke² – as ‘the main eyewitness source’ of their respective Gospels (131). This observation has been made before as regards Peter in Mark, but Bauckham suggests perceptively – with reference to similar devices in biographies by Lucian and Porphyry – that it functioned as a literary convention (146). Significantly, Luke appears to affirm and John to modify the Petrine *inclusio* in Mark.

Chapters 7 to 9 comprise an argument that Mark is dependent on early authorised tradition received from Peter. Mark writes his own narrative but manipulates the focalization so as to give readers the perspective of the disciples and Peter, when the focus narrows. This change from a first person plural to a third person plural narrative, first mooted by C.H. Turner, Bauckham calls a ‘singular-to-plural narrative device’. But the argument that Mark deliberately linked the singular-to-plural narrative device to his Petrine *inclusio* is difficult to prove. The idea of an early, authorised narrative source is further suggested by instances of anonymity in Mark, perhaps designed to protect living persons from punishment by the Jewish authorities. Bauckham also adduces a somewhat strained translation of the passage from Papias (*HE* 3.39.15) which describes the relationship between Peter and Mark. The most natural sense of the Greek text, at least in the case of ἐμνημόνευσεν, is that Mark and not Peter is the one doing the remembering. If Peter was sitting there while Mark translated his words (211), there would be no need to worry about leaving out or falsifying anything, τοῦ μηδὲν ὧν ἤκουσε παραλιπεῖν ἢ ψεύσασθαι τι ἐν αὐτοῖς. Subsequent arguments about order, particularly in Matthew, also tend to be speculative.

The next three chapters mount a sustained argument against form criticism and the more moderate model of Dunn. Instead of an informal controlled tradition, as

adopted from Kenneth Bailey, Bauckham argues that transmission of Jesus traditions was formal and controlled. The biblical foundation is quite solid. Paul presents himself as an ‘authorized tradent’ who received tradition from ‘competent authorities’ (1 Cor. 11:23-25; 15:1-8; 2 Thess. 2:15). ‘He thus places himself in a chain of transmission’ (265). This was probably the reason for two weeks spent with Peter at Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18). Thus, Paul was the connecting link between teachers appointed in the Pauline churches (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11) and the apostles at Jerusalem. In 1 Cor. 15:3-8 Paul takes it for granted that major (the ‘twelve’) and minor eyewitnesses to the resurrection ‘are alive and can be seen and heard’ (308).

Bauckham continues to follow Gerhardsson³ in arguing that transmission of Jesus tradition was not affected by proclamation or apologetic and only moderately affected by adaptations to later context (279). *Contra* Dunn, he argues that prior to the writing of the Gospels the tradition was not controlled informally by an anonymous ‘community’ (‘collective memory’), but formally controlled by eyewitnesses and ‘community teachers authorized as tradents’ using (varying degrees of) memorization and perhaps writing (293). Instead, Papias shows that the tradition was transmitted by individuals—from the disciples of Jesus, to the elders in the churches of Asia, to the associates of the elders. The same model of transmission is found in Irenaeus, Josephus, regarding Pharisaic tradition, and was also used in the Hellenistic philosophical schools. Writing Gospels had the aim of preserving eyewitness testimony beyond the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses (308).

In a critique of sociological and historical theories of collective memory, oral history is defined as primarily personal recollection, following Jan Vansina, while oral tradition is defined as ‘the collective memories of a group passed down across generations’ (313). Collective memory is, therefore, ‘traditions of a group about events not personally recollected by any of the group’s members’, which describes the period after the death of eyewitnesses. Bauckham wants to show that personal memories are not subsumed in collective memory, but the argument against form criticism may have resulted here in too sharp a separation. Byrskog argues that this separation restricts interpretative interaction between oral history and oral tradition (2008: 159-66). However, while Bauckham’s categories are rigid, he repeatedly states that testimony involves both history and its meaning or interpretation (e.g., see 221, 243, 279, 286).

A more significant criticism is that while the disregard of form criticism for the sources as eyewitness testimony is plainly evident, Bauckham still appears to accept, probably in deference to Dunn, the form-critical presupposition that orality completely dominated textuality in the period before the Gospels were written. While acknowledging that ‘writing and orality were not alternatives but

complementary’ (287), only 2.5 of 508 pages are dedicated to the subject of literacy and writing. As Gamble has shown, studies on ancient literacy have much to say about the limitations of form criticism (1995). Several of Bauckham’s reviewers have asked what happened as new Christian communities developed at a large distance from eyewitnesses?⁴ Bauckham’s response is that travelling teachers who had been instructed by eyewitnesses visited the churches. Such teachers might also have provided written texts of various kinds – testimony collections of Old Testament passages supporting Christian claims, portions of the Greek Old Testament (LXX), Pauline letters, sayings or miracle story collections, passion narratives, and so on – to new congregations. The great majority of early Christians were illiterate, but texts were probably central from the beginning of the movement.

After a survey of psychological theories of collective memory, nine factors that affect memory reliability (events that are unique or unusual, salient or consequential; events in which people are emotionally involved; frequent rehearsal; and so on) are discussed in relation to the Gospels (Chapter 13). Bauckham concludes that eyewitness memory of the history of Jesus scores highly in terms of these criteria of reliability (346). Theological developments inspired by post-Easter interpretative insight were also tempered by eyewitness memory. These are valuable insights.

A case is then outlined for the Beloved Disciple’s authorship of the Gospel of John on the basis of internal literary connections and the idiomatic Johannine use of the first person plural ‘we’ when ‘solemnly claiming the authority of testimony’ (380; see Jn. 21:24; 1:14-16[?]; 3:10-13; 12:38; 3 Jn. 9-12; 1 Jn. 1:1-5; 4:14). At this point, Bauckham admits that in ancient historiography and in the NT ‘the *marturēo* word-group does not itself come from historiographic usage’. In the case of the Gospel of John, seeing and reporting refer to ‘literal’ eyewitness and are not legal metaphors (unlike the English word ‘eyewitness’). This is a strange place, after almost 400 pages of close argument, to bring up a point that appears to speak against the cumulative argument being made.

The reason for doing so is to bring the counter-argument that the cosmic trial motif as found in Isaiah and adopted by John brings the Beloved Disciple’s witness ‘functionally very close to historiographic autopsy’ (386). This is fine as far as John is concerned, but a Luke-Acts connection (Acts 1:8 and Isa. 49:6) is much more tenuous, because it is undeveloped, in Luke. Further support is found by revisiting in more detail the *inclusio* of eyewitness testimony in John and by arguing that the Beloved Disciple qualifies as an ideal eyewitness (in comparison with Peter) because he enjoyed a special intimacy with Jesus, was present at key events, can provide observational detail, and is spiritually perceptive.

The lack of reference to the Twelve shows that the tradition in the Gospel of John was that of an individual. Bauckham argues that individual was ‘the elder John’ mentioned

by Papias. In the absence of any statement by the latter about the author of the Gospel of John, this can only be speculative. Bauckham's cumulative argument is quite strong, but in the end this is another scholarly detour that the book did not really need (as with most of chaps. 8 and 9). The impact that the book might have had is lost because the reader is forced to wade through demanding chapters that are peripheral to the issue at hand. There is also a general lack of signposting throughout the book. More effort should have been made to lead the reader by the hand.

In the final chapter Bauckham returns to the recently raised question of non-legal or natural/informal testimony. It is, he argues, fundamental to all human communication. Moreover, reliance on eyewitness testimony does not adversely disadvantage ancient historiography in relation to modern. The latter must adopt 'more critical attitudes' because historians do not have access to 'living eyewitness testimony' (481). The book is thus rounded out by the argument that such testimony bridges the perceived dichotomy between history and theology in Gospels scholarship. In contrast to a methodology that equates skepticism with historical rigour, Bauckham contends that a 'fundamental trust' in historical testimony is primary. 'Trust in the word of another, spontaneous and essential in everyday life, must in historiography coexist in dialectic with the kind of critical questioning that the archived testimony evokes' (489). This common sense proposal is far from an uncritical stance. Using the Holocaust as an example of a unique event 'at the limits' of human experience, Bauckham argues that its reality could not be understood without the testimony of survivors. In the same way, the Gospel story requires 'witness as the only means by which the events could be adequately known' (501). The uniqueness of the events is also theological in that 'it demands reference to God' (507). Thus, the theological interpretation of the Evangelists becomes 'only theologically understood history' (508).

In the final analysis, the book succeeds as a supplement to Byrskog's *Story as history – history as story*. Together they constitute an important corrective to those who find little that derives from the historical Jesus in the Gospels.⁵ The book makes a significant contribution, particularly in the biblical basis it provides for the Gospels as eyewitness testimony. The way forward is to try to ascertain how much variation was allowed in the transmission of the tradition (286-7), that is, to try to understand how far the Evangelists were prepared to go in modifying the direct and indirect eyewitness testimony which they incorporated into their Gospels.

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Endnotes

- 1 As S. Byrskog (2008: 159) notes, 'the abundant evidence from the ancient historians coupled with information concerning the Gospels from the early Fathers accumulates the impression that the presence and influence of eyewitnesses in early Christianity is historically plausible'.
- 2 On problems with an *inclusio* involving the women in Luke see Catchpole (2008: 176). Be this as it may, the contents of the Lukan prologue should not be forgotten.
- 3 It should be noted, however, that Bauckham does not adopt Gerhardsson's rabbinical model of transmission.
- 4 Cf. Dunn, (2008: 99): 'The point is that many of these churches at their foundation received their stock of Jesus tradition at second or third hand; Epaphras as the church-founder of the Lycus valley churches (Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis) is a good illustrative example (Col. 1.7; 4.12-13)'.
- 5 It is worth reading Bauckham's responses to his reviewers (2008a, 2008b)