

A “Truer” History: Reflections on  
Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses:  
The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*

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IN HIS BOOK *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Richard Bauckham presents the most recent, comprehensive account of the origins and development of the Jesus tradition.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on eyewitness testimony as the decisive key-category, he has convincingly demonstrated the one-sidedness of the old form-critical approach to tradition and transmission and confirmed the view that history was not mediated and censored by the collective forces of the early Church but communicated by eyewitnesses who had been deeply involved in the decisive Jesus event. Instead of arguing about details of Bauckham's use of the sources, it might be of more interest here to ask about the broader ramifications and implications of his investigation. I have elsewhere discussed some aspects of his book that relate to the eyewitnesses as interpreters of the past.<sup>2</sup> Here I take the opportunity to reflect somewhat further on the notions of historical truth that arise from his proposal that history and theology meet in the Jesus of testimony.

**Oral History as Truer**

Testimony is a slippery category when it comes to questions of historical truth. Paul Thompson, a leading expert on modern oral history, discusses the reliability of the evidence of oral history. “Oral evidence,”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See my review essay in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (forthcoming).

he says, “by transforming the ‘objects’ of study into ‘subjects’, makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid, and heart-rending, but *truer*.”

In what way is it truer? Thompson is not so much concerned about the brute facts of history as the social contexts of those who convey the past to the present, and he thinks of historical truth more in terms of the thoughts and emotions of the eyewitness in her or his present social setting than in terms of what actually happened. Oral evidence from eyewitnesses is truer because it represents better than the distanced historian how history was experienced by those who were involved. Eyewitness testimony is thus an intriguing category for history and theology, being located *between* the past and the present, and mediating between them in a way which shapes the facts of history into something that connects the past to the present.<sup>3</sup>

### The “Truth” of Ancient Historians

In antiquity, no one was more concerned about eyewitness testimony and historical truth than the historians. An adequate appreciation of the role of eyewitness testimony in early Christianity therefore requires a full picture of its role among the historians, in particular its relation to the old debate concerning historical truth and falsehood. A historian such as Polybius emphasized historical truth but was keenly aware that there were several other historians who performed their task differently. In polemical fashion he stressed the importance of truth. “For when one or two lies are found in the writings, and these prove to be deliberate ones, it is evident that nothing of the things said by such an author is any longer certain or reliable” (*The Histories*, 12.25.2). He wants others to apply the same strict criteria when they evaluate his own work (*ibid.*, 16.20.8; 29.12.12).

Bauckham is aware that not all historians lived up to the ideals of, for instance, Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus, and Tacitus (pp. 8–9). But the debate was more intense than merely a failure among some historians to do what other good historians did. They were accused of being liars. A few decades after Polybius’s emphatic words about the truth of history, Cicero calls Herodotus the father of history, but not without a sarcastic nuance (*De legibus*, 1.1.5). About a century later, in an odd writing, Plutarch expresses his disgust against Herodotus’s “fictions and fabrications” (*De malignitate Herodoti*, 854f). Tertullian, another century later, is upset about Tacitus’s aspirations on Christians and Jews and calls him

<sup>3</sup> *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

"that most articulate of liars" (*Apologia*, 16.3). This critique was not always merely a sporadic mistrust towards separate statements. Seneca, the stoic philosopher, expresses at some length his skepticism towards all historians. "It is no great effort to destroy the authority of Ephorus," he claims. The reason is simple: "he is a historian" (*Quaestiones naturales*, 7.16.1). He confronts the practice of history as mere entertainment and accuses all historians of lying:

Some [historians] win approval by relating the incredible, and a reader, who would go and do something else if he were led through ordinary things, they excite by means of the marvelous. Some are credulous, some are negligent. On some falsehood creeps unawares, some it pleases; the former do not avoid it, the latter desire it. What the whole tribe has in common is this: it does not think its own work can achieve approval and popularity unless it sprinkles that work with falsehood. (Ibid., 7.16.1–2)

As it appears, at the time of Seneca several popular and sensational historians made extensive use of rhetorically beautiful and persuasive strategies, to the extent that the reporting of what had happened became secondary. The stories about the past were entertaining configurations of what was seen as rhetorically plausible. To some this was good history, even true history; to some it was a lie.

### Speaking the Truth and Speaking Persuasively

Where should we, according to Bauckham, locate the Gospels and the eyewitnesses of early Christianity in this spectrum of discussion? In what sense is the history they depict true? It is not unlikely that the Gospel writers were aware of the debate indicated by Seneca and purposely composed their writings in relation to it. The old tension between speaking the truth and speaking persuasively was not only a matter of debate between philosophers and sophists, as in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Phaidros* and other writings, but had to do also with how to relate to and communicate the past. The development towards the rhetorization of history is intensified when we approach the skeptical Seneca and the Gospel writers. There are fragments which indicate that two well-known rhetoricians of the first century B.C., Caecilius of Calacre and Theodorus of Gadara, composed handbooks in how to write history.<sup>4</sup> In Livy's account of Roman history the rhetorization of history reached a climax. It is not by accident that Quintilian praised him for the eloquence of the speeches

<sup>4</sup> Felix Jacoby, ed., *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, and Leiden: Brill, 1923–58), §§183 F 2 and 850 T 1.

and the representation of the emotions (*Institutio oratoria*, 10.1.101). Livy regarded history writing as a rhetorical pursuit, aiming to make the story of Rome more readable and persuasive than anyone else had yet done. A true story was a story with a convincing narrative. Livy was extreme, but he was not alone. Quintilian advised aged lawyers who were trained and experienced in the art of oratory to spend their time with, for instance, writing history (ibid., 12.11.4). For Quintilian history writing was a subsection of rhetoric (ibid., 10.1.31).

Cicero had set the tone. Things that concerned history should be expressed in the manner of Isocrates and Theopompus (*Orat.*, 61.207). Only the voice of a skilled orator will bring immortality to history (*De oratore*, 2.9.36). He returns to the issue several times in *De oratore*: “What kind of an orator, how great a master of speech, do you think should write history?” (*De oratore*, 2.12.51) “[D]o you see how great a task history is for an orator?” (*De oratore*, 2.15.62) In *De legibus*, 1.2.5, he tries to convince Atticus to write history: “[N]ow, you are certainly able to do this, since, as you have at least usually believed, this kind of work is closest to oratory.” A good story becomes *truly* interesting when it is presented in the form of a persuasive narrative.

The rhetoricians have recommendations which could easily be misunderstood. In *De oratore*, 2.7.30, Cicero claims, with the voice of Antonius, that rhetoric depends on falsehood. The activity of an orator has to do with opinion, he says. Speakers discuss matters of which they might be ignorant and maintain different opinions on identical issues in order to argue their case. It is permitted, he says in *Brutus*, 11.42, to lie in order to say something clever. In *De inventione*, 1.21.30, he expresses his view as to how the orator should employ the material to his own benefit:

Therefore, to avoid this fault [viz., to help the opponent], the speaker must twist everything to the advantage of his case, by passing over those things that contradict it which can be passed over, by touching lightly on what must be mentioned, by telling his own story carefully and clearly.

Even for Quintilian the goal of narration was to convince the audience rather than to inform them accurately about the matter at hand. In front of the judge the lawyer should not narrate like a witness but like an advocate (*Institutio oratoria*, 4.2.109). Depending on one’s point of view, it might be necessary to make a murder appear impetuous or the opposite (ibid., 4.2.52). Points can be denied, added, altered, or omitted according to what is considered most persuasive (ibid., 4.2.67). Entire fabrications can, if necessary, be employed, “for it is sometimes permitted

also for a philosopher to tell even a lie" (ibid., 2.17.27). If this does not help, he continues, if there is no other way the judge will be led to justice, the orator should try to excite his passions. All that is said should be presented in such a manner that it wins belief.

The influence of rhetoric on history writing had aroused the old tension between speaking the truth and speaking persuasively. There is also another side to it. The rhetoricians sometimes indicate how to balance the intricate relation between speaking the truth and speaking persuasively. The orator, says Quintilian, should build his speech on a kind of learning which is similar to the one of the historians, because they have the advantage "derived from knowledge of fact and precedent" (ibid., 10.1.34). Quintilian therefore gives detailed recommendations concerning how one should interrogate witnesses and evaluate their testimony according to their character, motives, and sources (ibid., 5.7.9–32). Cicero reflects an awareness of special rules for history writing. In *Ad familiares*, 5.12.3, he asks Lucceius to write favorably of him and enhance his merits even to exaggeration and bestow on them love a little more than truth permits. Since Lucceius is involved in the work of history, Cicero feels obliged to ask him in that respect to disregard the laws of history. A few months later, in *De oratore*, 2.15.62, he praises the art of history and explains that although it does not have a separate treatment in the rhetorical handbooks, everyone knows about its rules:

For who does not know that the first law of history is not daring to say anything false, next, not daring to refrain from saying anything true, that as you write there should be no suspicion of prejudice, nor bias?

This interplay between impartial reports and rhetorically embellished accounts surfaced among the historians. Already Thucydides's criteria of reporting speeches according to what seemed appropriate or necessary or what was actually or truly (*alētheōs*) said added the criterion of truth as a participial clause that expresses a concessional circumstance of conforming the speeches to the situation (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.1). Much later we find an interesting example of how this might have looked. Tacitus gives his version of Claudius's oration in favor of the admission of Gallic nobles into the Senate (*Annals*, 11.24). In comparison with the account of the same speech on the bronze table from Lyons,<sup>5</sup> it is evident that he strongly rearranges and condenses the speech in order to sharpen its rhetorical argumentation, but a kernel of material

<sup>5</sup> Hermann Dessau, ed., *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, 3 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892–1916), §212.

remains the same. The pastness of the speech was not insignificant to the rhetorical concern of Tacitus.

### **Eyewitness Testimony between the Past and the Present**

In what way, then, is history truer when we approach it through the stories of the eyewitnesses? I have repeated and somewhat expanded what I have said elsewhere about historians and eyewitness testimony in order to show the complexity of the ways in which we can envision the way from a historian and his writing back to the historical event itself. Eyewitness testimony stands in between the present writing and the past event as a category that needs to be evaluated in relation to what is past and what is present. The question arises where do the eyewitnesses of early Christianity belong within this broad range of different ways of negotiating between the past and the present? Bauckham has focused on one aspect of this spectrum—mostly, in my reading, that which is concerned with the pastness of the testimony—and convincingly shown that eyewitnesses played a significant role. But considering the existence of other prominent ways of relating to the past among the historians, including those who claimed to use eyewitnesses, and the debate of these practices and the notions of historical truth outlined above, a few questions that need further reflection might be mentioned.

1. Granted the Gospels belong within the flexible biographical genre of antiquity, which was often more encomiastic than history writing, how do we conceive precisely *the generic conjunction between biography and history in the Gospels*? The two overlap, to be sure, but would our appreciation of oral history and eyewitness testimony change significantly if we made the generic similarity between the Gospels and the Greek *bioi* decisive for the choice of comparative material? In my view the Gospels are historicizing *bioi*. I have compared them to historians of various kinds, because they were most out-spoken concerning how to relate to the past. I have also tried to take seriously the influence or rhetoric. This influence becomes even more pronounced in the biographical literature. How would Bauckham cope with the criticism that he looks more towards the historians, and then only to certain historians, than to the biographical literature? I am uncertain to what extent Bauckham takes seriously the biographical aspect of the Gospels, with its strongly encomiastic character.
2. This leads to the next question. To what extent, and why, are we to compare the Gospels and the pre-Gospel tradition with historians

who were critical of rhetoric rather than the perhaps more common, rhetorical branches of history writing during the first century A.D.? After all, it is possible to argue that the overlap between biography and history writing was more significant among authors who had a strong rhetorical ambition than those who adhered to the—in fact unrealistic—ideal of only reporting the past.

3. What is historical truth in all this? If we take seriously the oral history approach, and the importance of eyewitness testimony, we might wish to reconsider history as a reality "out there" and approach it from the perspective of a dialogue between ourselves and the testimony about the past, and look at its connection to theology from a pronounced hermeneutical approach to history. Is not Bauckham's attention to the Jesus of testimony a call to abandon the optimistic search for the brute facts of history—at least when it comes to theology?
4. What is then the connection between testimony and theology? If testimony relates to history only to the extent that it remembers and integrates the past into the present of the eyewitnesses, we might wish to argue that theology should be equally concerned with the various testimonies of the same historical event during several centuries of interpretation and soften the heavy emphasis on the first eyewitnesses. Is the first always the best historically? And more importantly, is it the best theologically? What is truer historically and theologically? Is it time, generally speaking, to move away from history as *re-construction* and pay more explicit attention to history as (narrative and rhetorical) *re-configuration* in dialogue with the past *and* the present?

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