

The Jesus of Testimony: A Convergence of History and Theology

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ONE OF THE most intractable problems of modern Gospel research is the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Does Jesus as the Gospels portray him correspond to the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth? Or, has the faith of the Church so informed the Gospel portrait of Jesus that there is no longer any continuity between Jesus of Nazareth (the historical Jesus) and the Jesus whom the Gospels proclaim (the Christ of faith)?

Those who reflect on this question understand its theological and historical ramifications. If there is no continuity between Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels and the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, then Christian faith is empty and in vain. Such a faith is no longer grounded in a historical person but in a mythic figure who never existed, a figure of religious imagination.

Given the importance of this problem, it is not surprising that modern biblical scholarship has invested so much time and effort in trying to determine the relationship between the person of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels and the person whom history calls Jesus of Nazareth. The attempt to resolve this problem has led to a quest for this historical Jesus that continues to this day.¹

¹ There have, in fact, been three periods in the quest for the historical Jesus: the quest that was undertaken primarily among German Protestant scholars in the nineteenth century; the quest that was initiated by the students of Rudolph Bultmann in the 1950s and 1960s; and the present quest, begun toward the end of the twentieth century, which has been led by American scholars. For an overview

Despite the time and talent that scholars have invested in this quest, New Testament scholarship has not been able to solve this most intractable problem. While some scholars insist that their analysis of the data essentially confirms the portrait of Jesus found in the Gospels, others have called into question the Gospels' portrait of Jesus and argued that the Jesus of history can only be reconstructed from the data of the Gospels by stripping away their theological interpretation of Jesus that purportedly distorts their portrait of him.

It is with this background that I present my reflections on Richard Bauckham's book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*.² Deeply aware of the cul-de-sac in which contemporary New Testament scholarship finds itself in regard to the problem described above, Bauckham has proposed a fresh approach that will be—somewhat ironically—familiar to the believer in the pew but new and surprising to some scholars. Maintaining 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” (6), Bauckham argues that New Testament scholarship needs “to recover the sense in which the Gospels are testimony” (5), by which he means the testimony of eyewitnesses who saw and heard Jesus. It is this testimony, deeply embedded in the Gospels, that provides us with the proper and “appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus” (5).

For me, the most significant aspect of Bauckham's project is the potential it holds for overcoming the gap between history and theology that plagues so much of contemporary biblical scholarship.³ For if the testimony of eyewitnesses is the proper category for approaching the Gospels, as Bauckham maintains, then the theological manner in which the Gospels interpret the person of Jesus is not “an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts,” but “the way the witnesses perceived the history” (5). Thus Bauckham concludes his book with this sentence: “It is in the Jesus of testimony that history and theology meet” (508). To explain the signif-

of this third quest, see Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure of History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

³ This gap between history and theology, to which I am referring, appears when scholars insist that the biblical text must be approached either historically or theologically, without allowing for the possibility that the text may be interpreted both historically and theologically. In the first instance, scholars approach biblical studies as merely an historical discipline whose purpose is to reconstruct what happened; in the second, they approach it merely as a dogmatic discipline that has little or no relation to what actually happened.

icance of this sentence and of Bauckham's project, I arrange my reflections under the following headings: (1) The Community and Its Eyewitnesses, (2) Tradition and Scripture, (3) John and the Synoptics, and (4) History and Theology.

The Community and Its Eyewitnesses

The first phase of the quest for the historical Jesus ended at the close of the nineteenth century. Although scholars had written hundreds of lives of Jesus during the nineteenth century, Albert Schweitzer's magisterial work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, showed that these works tended to reveal more about the values of the authors who composed them than they did about Jesus.⁴ At the beginning of the twentieth century, then, with the quest for this historical Jesus at an impasse, New Testament scholars turned their attention to a different project. Instead of trying to recover the Jesus of history, they sought to uncover how the traditions about Jesus had been transmitted in the early Church. Thus Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and Karl Ludwig Schmidt, working independently of each other, developed the methodology of "form criticism."⁵

The purpose of this new methodology was to study and classify the various literary forms present in the Gospels in order to understand how the Gospel tradition grew and developed in the early Church. By doing this, the form critics hoped to gain a deeper insight to the ways in which the early Church used its traditions about Jesus and eventually incorporated them into the Gospels we possess today. In focusing their attention on how the traditions about Jesus were transmitted in the early Church, the form critics shifted the attention of New Testament scholarship from the quest for the historical Jesus to an investigation of the earliest communities that produced the Gospels about Jesus.

The work of the form critics, however, drew a wedge between history and theology. As Bauckham notes, "It was a short step to assuming that the traditions were not only adapted to their functions in the Church but in many cases actually created for those functions" (244). In other words,

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: MacMillan, 1968). The German original, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, was published in 1906. Its incisive critique of the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus effectively ended the first quest.

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). The German original, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, was published in 1921. Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribners, n.d.). The German original, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, was published in 1919. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu: Literarkritische Untersuchungen zur ältesten Jesusüberlieferung* (Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1919).

having correctly understood that the community played an important role in the transmission of the traditions about Jesus, some form critics attributed a creative role to the community, arguing that the community composed many of the Jesus traditions in order to satisfy the missionary, cultic, and catechetical needs of the early Church. Thus the form critics tended to view the Gospels as folk literature that grew out of the community's various missionary, cultic, and catechetical needs. This, however, raised a new problem. If the Gospels arose from the theological and religious needs of the community rather than from traditions that could be traced to the testimony of eyewitnesses, the nexus between the historical Jesus and the Gospel portrait of Jesus becomes all the more problematical.

Bauckham, however, argues that the Gospels are not the creations of a community or of anonymous tradents who were more interested in responding to the needs of the early Church than in transmitting authentic traditions about Jesus. Focusing on his central category of testimony, he maintains that eyewitnesses "may have had an important role in the control of the traditions of the words and deeds of Jesus" (259). In the period between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the first Gospel (approximately A.D. 30–70), there were still a significant number of people (apart from the Apostles) who had been in personal contact with Jesus, for example, Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus, and Cleophas. If such eyewitnesses became members of the early Church, it is not unreasonable to assume that they would have exercised a certain control over the traditions about Jesus.

If Bauckham's suggestion is correct, the gap between Jesus and the Gospel portrait of Jesus is not as great as some suppose it to be. Not only would the continuing testimony of eyewitnesses have exerted a significant control over the earliest traditions about Jesus, it would have provided the Church with the theological interpretation of people who had seen, heard, and, presumably, benefited from Jesus' ministry.

Tradition and Scripture

If, as Bauckham argues, there were eyewitnesses in the early Church who guaranteed and controlled the traditions about Jesus that were eventually incorporated into the Gospels, then the handing on of these traditions played an important role in the early Church and in the development of the Gospels.

In order to exemplify the central role that tradition played in the early Church, Bauckham turns to Paul. Writing at a time when the Gospels did not yet exist, Paul was dependent upon the Church's traditions about Jesus for his knowledge of Jesus. That he knew such traditions and handed

them on to his churches is evident from 1 Corinthians 7:10–11; 11:23–26; 15:1–5, texts in which Paul speaks about Jesus' teaching on divorce, the Last Supper, and the Lord's death, resurrection, and appearances, respectively. That Paul would have had ample time to speak with those who had been Jesus' disciples is clear from Galatians 1:18, where he states that he spent fifteen days in Jerusalem with Peter. Moreover, since some of Paul's missionary companions (Barnabas, Mark, Silvanus) had been members of the church at Jerusalem, it would be surprising if the Apostle did not seek out traditions about Jesus from them. Bauckham correctly notes: "We should rather presume that Paul was becoming thoroughly informed of the Jesus traditions as formulated by the Twelve, learning them from the leader of the Twelve, Peter" (266).

Paul, however, was not merely the recipient of such traditions; he was also the transmitter of these traditions. In Bauckham's words, "He [Paul] therefore envisages a chain of transmission that *begins from Jesus himself* and passes through intermediaries to Paul himself, who has already passed it on to the Corinthians when he first established the church" (268). But in addition to his handing on these traditions to his community, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Paul entrusted the care of these traditions to certain persons within the Church who, as teachers within the community, had the responsibility of preserving and remembering the traditions about Jesus.⁶ Thus Bauckham notes that there would have been designated persons in each Pauline community who "knew the Jesus traditions through a chain of only two links between themselves and Jesus himself, namely Paul and the Jerusalem apostles" (270).

Before there was a Gospel then, there was a reliable chain of tradition about Jesus. It is this chain of tradition that preserved the Church's traditions about Jesus and eventually entered the Gospels. The Gospels, then, are not the arbitrary creation of a community, nor is there an unbridgeable chasm between the person of Jesus and the portrait of Jesus that the Gospels present.

This interplay between Gospel and tradition should be familiar to Roman Catholics who acknowledge the importance of both Scripture and Tradition in the communication of Revelation. And even though it is not Bauckham's purpose or intention to support this doctrine, what he

⁶ This concern for handing on tradition is especially apparent in the Pastoral Letters, in which Paul reminds his delegates, Timothy and Titus, of the gospel he has handed on to them, and then instructs them to hand on to others what he has handed on to them. Even if one calls into question the Pauline authorship of these letters, they still witness to the early Church's concern to hand on to future generations the teaching of the first generation of apostolic witnesses.

says about the role of tradition in the early Church is helpful for understanding what the Second Vatican Council affirms about Scripture and Tradition in its Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.⁷ The apostolic tradition about Jesus precedes the New Testament, and it is this tradition that eventually gives birth to the New Testament, assuring believers that the Gospel portrait of Jesus stands in continuity with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Roman Catholics believe that this living, apostolic tradition and Scripture “form a single deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church” (*Dei Verbum*, §10). Scripture and Tradition, then, witness to the Word of God that became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

John and the Synoptics

In their quest for the historical Jesus, most New Testament scholars have focused their attention on the Synoptic Gospels, making use of the Two Source Theory, which states that the Gospel of Mark was the earliest Gospel to be written (about A.D. 70), with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (about A.D. 85) dependent upon the Gospel of Mark and other oral and written sources.⁸ In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John has often been relegated to the sidelines of research into the historical Jesus, being viewed by some as too overlaid with theological interpretation to be of any historical value.

The Fourth Gospel is, in fact, quite different in tone and structure from the Synoptic Gospels. And there is little doubt that it presents a more theologically charged account than do the Synoptics. Indeed, the problem of the relationship between John and the Synoptics is somewhat analogous to the problem noted above about the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Is there continuity between John and the Synoptics? Or, is the Fourth Gospel and its portrait of Jesus alien to what is found in the Synoptic Gospels?

Here again, Bauckham offers a new way to approach an old and seemingly intractable problem. Approaching the Fourth Gospel from the perspective of testimony, he makes a forceful argument that the author of

⁷ “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are linked closely together and communicate with each other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way come together into a single current and tend toward the same end.” *Dei Verbum*, §9, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teaching*, ed. and trans. Dean P. Bécard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

⁸ These other sources are usually understood to be a collection of Jesus’ sayings, designated Q to which Matthew and Luke, but not Mark, had access, and special traditions designated M and L, on which Matthew and Luke drew, respectively.

the Gospel was an eyewitness: John the Elder, of whom Papias speaks. Papias, a man of the third Christian generation, sought out witnesses from the first generation in order to learn what he could about Jesus. Among the witnesses he sought out was John the Elder, whom Bauckham identifies as one of the Lord's disciples. Bauckham argues that this John was the Beloved Disciple, the author of the Gospel.⁹

If, however, the Fourth Gospel was written by an eyewitness, why is it so different from the Synoptic Gospels? For Bauckham the answer has to do with the different testimonies that stand behind John and the Synoptics. Whereas the Synoptic tradition is based upon the official witness of the Twelve, especially the testimony of Peter, who stands behind the Gospel of Mark, according to Papias, it is the testimony of the Beloved Disciple (John the Elder) and the particular circle of disciples in which he moved that stands behind the Fourth Gospel: "The circle includes a few of the Twelve, especially Philip and Thomas, but not the inner circle so prominent in Mark" (414). Other members of this circle would have included Nicodemus, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, all of whom lived in or near Jerusalem, suggesting "that the Beloved Disciple himself was a Jerusalem resident" (414).

One reason, then, that explains the difference between John and the Synoptics is the diverse testimonies that underlie these two great traditions. But according to Bauckham there is another reason, which is especially important for this essay, that is, examining the relationship between theology and history in the Gospels. The Fourth Evangelist's presentation of Jesus manifests a greater and more sophisticated theological interpretation than that of the Synoptics because this Evangelist was an eyewitness of what he recounts.¹⁰ Present at the cross when Jesus died, he witnessed "the key salvific event of the whole Gospel story, the hour of Jesus' exaltation, toward which the whole story from John the Baptist's testimony onward has pointed" (397). Thus the Beloved Disciple is not merely recounting the ministry of Jesus, he is interpreting it theologically in light of what he himself witnessed. But is such a theological interpretation legitimate, or does it distort what the Evangelist purports to be

⁹ *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 420–21. Eusebius discusses John the Elder in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.39.

¹⁰ While the witness of Peter stands behind the Gospel of Mark, according to the testimony of Papias, Mark was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, nor was Luke. While the Gospel of Matthew claims the authorship of Matthew, one of the Twelve Apostles, Bauckham and most modern scholars question the Matthean authorship of this Gospel because of its dependence on the Gospel of Mark. This means, if Bauckham is correct, that only the Fourth Gospel can claim the authorship of an eyewitness.

reporting? This question brings us to our final point, the goal toward which this essay has been moving.

History and Theology

The subtext of what I have been recounting based on Bauckham's book has to do with the relationship between history and theology. Can history and theology exist together, or is theology always and inevitably a distortion of history? Some of those who seek to uncover the historical Jesus would argue that the only access to the real Jesus is through the critical study of history.¹¹ To know what Jesus was really about, to know who he was, it is necessary to strip away the theological interpretation of the Gospels. This is why so many scholars focus their attention on the Synoptics rather than on the Fourth Gospel in their quest for this historical Jesus. For whereas the Fourth Gospel tends to present its Christology from above, beginning with the Incarnation, the Synoptic Gospels begin their Christology from below by beginning with the humanity of Jesus.

But if the Gospels contain authentic eyewitness testimonies to Jesus, as Bauckham contends, then the relationship between history and theology is more subtle than many suppose. Were the Gospels merely objective, historical reports of what happened during Jesus' ministry, we would know what happened but we would have little understanding of its significance. For example, suppose we knew exactly what occurred at Jesus' birth, or at his death. Would this historically accurate information provide us with a deeper understanding of what God was doing in and through Jesus Christ? There were, in fact, many people who came into contact with Jesus of Nazareth. They heard his teaching, they saw his mighty deeds, and they even witnessed his death. But not all of them understood or comprehended what took place.

History needs interpretation; and this, it seems to me, is the insight Bauckham brings to his discussion about Jesus. Those eyewitnesses who believed that God was at work in Jesus' ministry understood that it was not enough to simply recount what had happened. If they were to explain the significance of what they had witnessed, they needed to interpret the events they had experienced. No one understood this better and interpreted his experience of Jesus more insightfully than the Fourth Evangelist.

To be sure, one could object that these eyewitnesses got it wrong, that they were deluded, that they were mistaken. And so one might argue that it is necessary to start all over again and reconstruct the Gospels' witness to Jesus in order to get back to the Jesus of history. Historical events are,

¹¹ An example of this is the project undertaken by the late Robert Funk and the members of his Jesus Seminar.

and will always be, in need of interpretation. But what guarantee is there that such an historical reconstruction of purportedly distorted writings will itself get it right? And even if the reconstruction gets it right, will this reconstruction have understood the significance of what took place? Just as historians repeatedly write and rewrite history because they seek to understand the significance of what has taken place, so, in an analogous manner, the Evangelists interpreted the traditions about Jesus they received in order to communicate what took place.

Bauckham has shown us that the theological interpretation of the Gospel portraits of Jesus is not necessarily at odds with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Gospel portraits of Jesus, history and theology meet because those who testified to Jesus sought to explain the significance of the one to whom they testified. Without their theological interpretation, we would not understand God's action in Christ. With their theological interpretation of what happened, we begin to comprehend the transcendent mystery they encountered, a mystery they needed to communicate through a theological interpretation of the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth. **N V**

