

The Early Church and the Jesus of Testimony

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ONCE AGAIN Richard Bauckham has provided the scholarly community with a stimulating and provocative thesis that challenges long-received ideas about how to read and interpret the Gospels. In a breathtaking argument that ranges from the testimony of Papias on the origins of the Gospels, to onomastics (the study of names), to modern scholarship on oral history and memory, to the nature of “testimony” as a fundamental and indispensable historical category, Bauckham sets forth a twofold historical and theological thesis with respect to the Gospels: historically, the Gospels depend upon eyewitness testimony; theologically, “testimony” is the appropriate category both for interpreting these texts and for bridging the gap between history and theology—indeed, testimony “is where history and theology meet.”¹

Perhaps somewhat ironically, what makes *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* so provocative is that Bauckham seeks to achieve his task by reassessing the traditional reading of the Gospels that held sway throughout much of Church history up until the birth of modern biblical scholarship, namely that the stories in the Gospels derive from eyewitness testimony rather than from a lengthy process of oral tradition shaped and re-shaped by the early Christian communities. This reopening of the question of the traditional understanding of Gospel origins should not, however, be characterized as a reactionary rejection of modern scholarship. On the contrary, the argument of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* depends as much upon the

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 6. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent parenthetical page numbers in this essay refer to Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

internal evidence of the Gospels and interaction with contemporary scholarship in biblical studies and related fields as it does on a reevaluation of the second-century external evidence. It is this combination of patristics and biblical studies, of old and new, that makes Bauckham's latest work both an impressive piece of scholarship in its own right and an important stimulus to further research into how the two fields might be fruitfully brought together.

Evidence External and Internal

The amount of attention Bauckham devotes to the testimony of Papias, as well as to that of other second-century figures, is striking and, one hopes, a sign of a growing trend in New Testament scholarship to pay more attention to reception history, especially in the formative years of Christianity.² *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* provides a fascinating model of how scholars might go about integrating detailed historical work on the testimony of second-century figures with innovative arguments about the handing on of early Christian stories based on contemporary scholarship on the New Testament, memory, and testimony. In particular, Bauckham demonstrates that much material from this early period has been either misinterpreted or overlooked—or both. Two examples make the point clearly.

First, in his chapter on Papias and the eyewitnesses, Bauckham makes a crucial observation about this second-century writer's account of his reliance on "the Lord's disciples." Although many scholars have dismissed Papias's information since he most likely wrote no earlier than the beginning of the second century, Bauckham notes that the period Papias describes actually occurred much earlier, perhaps around the time that at least some of the canonical Gospels were being composed (14). It is not only the time period to which Papias refers that has been misinterpreted, however. Perhaps more importantly, Bauckham sees Papias's statement about preferring a "living voice" as in need of reevaluation. Again, whereas most scholars have interpreted the statement to refer to oral tradition, which according to classical form criticism shaped and re-shaped stories about Jesus in the early Church, Bauckham points out that Papias speaks not of some vague "oral tradition," but rather of specific named sources that he considers to be reliable eyewitnesses to the events in Jesus' lifetime:

² Representative in this respect is the chapter "Papias on the Eyewitnesses," in *ibid.*, 12–38. Along similar lines, see Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), esp. 161–88.

And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders—[that is,] what [according to the elders] Andrew or Peter said, or Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.³

Describing the period during which most modern scholars believe the Gospels were taking shape and by which time the eyewitnesses are thought to have disappeared and been replaced by communal oral tradition, Papias seems to indicate that, on the contrary, eyewitnesses still played a vital role in handing on stories about Jesus. Bauckham does not focus on the external evidence in isolation, however. Rather, he points out similarities between Papias's preference for a "living voice" and Luke's reliance on "eyewitnesses from the beginning" (Lk 1:2). If Luke was writing at around the time that Papias describes, then his preference for eyewitnesses most likely should be taken at face value, rather than as a reference to a nebulous community tradition. This is particularly true if some of these eyewitnesses were still alive, as is likely.⁴

Bauckham also draws on a second, more often overlooked figure, the second-century Christian apologist Quadratus. As is the case with Papias, although Quadratus wrote in the early second century, his writings most likely describe an earlier time, perhaps contemporaneous with the period of the eyewitnesses mentioned by Papias. More importantly, Quadratus's address to the emperor Hadrian provides independent support for the idea that the eyewitnesses, rather than quickly dropping out of the tradition process as many form critics have maintained for some time, continued to play a role well into the period during which the canonical Gospels were composed:

[T]he works of our Savior were always present, for they were true: those who were healed, those who rose from the dead, those who were not only seen in the act of being healed or raised, but were also always present, not merely when the Savior was living on earth, but also for a

³ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.39.3–4. The translation is Bauckham's own (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 15–6); I have removed the Greek words in parentheses in his text. See also Bauckham's lengthy discussion of the passage in the chapter cited in note 2 above.

⁴ Earlier in the book, Bauckham cites Vincent Taylor's well-known quip that "[i]f the Form-Critics are right, the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the Resurrection." Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1935), 41, cited in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 7.

considerable time after his departure, so that some of them survived even to our own times.⁵

According to Quadratus the recipients of healing miracles continued to serve as the tradents of their own stories. Again, though, Bauckham does not settle for letting the external evidence stand on its own. Rather, he combines it with a hypothesis about the named recipients of Jesus' healing miracles in the Gospels. Bauckham first notes that based on the standard source-critical assumption of Markan priority, Matthew and Luke tend to drop the names of individuals rather than to add them for narrative effect (42). Given this tendency, he then suggests that the names of those who were healed by Jesus survived in Mark because they most likely remained active in the early Christian movement and served as guarantors of those traditions, but dropped out of the other Gospels as they passed away or no longer were well-known (46–55). This hypothesis explaining the internal evidence dovetails with the external evidence: their function as guarantors of the tradition is precisely what Quadratus emphasizes in his description of those recipients of healing miracles who remained until his own day.

I have focused on these two examples from Papias and Quadratus because they exemplify one of the most innovative and promising methodological aspects of Bauckham's approach. For some time now, most standard commentaries on the Gospels have more or less ignored or dismissed the testimony of Papias and other external evidence with regard to the origins of the Gospels, drawing conclusions based solely on internal evidence.⁶ *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* proposes a better way, one that takes *both* internal *and* external evidence seriously but critically. Bauckham's work should serve as a starting point for further investigation into the earliest post-New Testament testimony about the origins of the Gospels. Indeed, one could argue that Bauckham does not follow his principles through enough, particularly with respect to Papias and the Gospel of Matthew, and this is one issue that should be revisited.⁷

⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 4.3.2. The translation comes from Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 53. As Bauckham notes, the reference to "our own times" most likely refers not to the time at which Quadratus wrote to Hadrian, but rather to an earlier period in his life.

⁶ With the exception of his discussion of the Gospel of John, even Bauckham for the most part limits his attention to Papias. One could well expand his methodology to reconsider the evidence of Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Origen, just to name a few. For a rare discussion of these figures and others with respect to the Gospel of Matthew, see R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 50–62 et passim.

⁷ I am grateful to Brant Pitre for emphasizing this point to me.

On the question of Matthean authorship, Bauckham's various criteria point in different directions. On the one hand, the Gospel of Matthew lacks the "*inclusio* of eyewitness testimony" that Bauckham finds in Mark, Luke, and John.⁸ On the other hand, both internal and external evidence suggest some connection between Matthew and the Gospel attributed to him. Bauckham rightly agrees with G. D. Kilpatrick that the addition of Matthew's name in two verses in the Gospel (Mt 9:9; 10:3) most likely did not lead to the attribution of the Gospel to Matthew.⁹ Is it possible, though, that the opposite is the case? In other words, is it possible that Matthew's name appears somewhat more prominently in order to indicate one of the sources of the material in the Gospel?¹⁰ Two external factors would support this suggestion. First, there is the testimony of Papias, who attributes the Gospel to an eyewitness and who was active in the Church at the time the Gospels most likely took shape. Given the closeness in time of Papias to the origins of the Gospels, should we take his testimony more seriously with respect to questions of authorship and seek other explanations for the apparent anomalies based on Bauckham's other criteria?¹¹ Second, there is the point that Bauckham himself notes: based on the manuscript evidence we have, as far as we know the Gospels

⁸ See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 114–54. The "*inclusio* of eyewitness testimony" refers to a literary device whereby an author of a historical work indicates the source of his or her information by mentioning this figure at or toward the beginning and the end of the work, thus showing that this source was reliable for the whole story he or she relates. Bauckham argues for the presence of this device in three of the four Gospels (Mark, Luke, and John). I must admit, though, that I am not yet completely convinced of the *inclusio* argument, especially with respect to the testimony of the women in Luke's Gospel. Bauckham would have to provide examples of other works that use an *inclusio* within a smaller segment of the text in order to make the case more persuasive. Moreover, more methodological precision would be helpful on the broader phenomenon of *inclusio*. Did an ancient work have to use the device in order to present itself as based on eyewitnesses? If so, then how does one explain Papias's claim that the Gospel of Matthew—which does not have such an *inclusio*—was based on eyewitness testimony?

⁹ Ibid., 111, citing G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1946), 138.

¹⁰ As noted below, Bauckham does consider this possibility briefly (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 301–02).

¹¹ It is striking that Bauckham devotes so much space to Papias's discussion of Mark and John (see *ibid.*, 202–39 and 412–37) and so little to his discussion of Matthew. Indeed, the chapter "Papias on Mark and Matthew" might be more accurately titled "Papias on Mark," as Bauckham refers to Matthew only briefly and primarily in relation to Mark.

at no point circulated anonymously.¹² Rather, from very early on (from the very beginning, if we are to trust Papias!), the Gospels were attached to the names of figures, at least three of whom did not play central roles in the early Christian movement.

Bauckham acknowledges that there must have been some connection between this Gospel and the apostle Matthew, but suggests that either the author made a pseudepigraphical claim or Matthew played an indirect role in the genesis of the text (302). The first explanation, however, is unlikely given the insignificant role Matthew otherwise plays in the Gospels. As we know from second-century Gospels attributed to Thomas and Peter, pseudonymous writers were more likely to choose figures with a higher profile in the early Christian movement. With respect to the second explanation, one would need to clarify the difference between Matthew as indirect source and Matthean authorship before such a theory could be affirmed or denied—would it be something like the role Peter is meant to have played to Mark in the formation of that Gospel? If so, how does this fit with the clear distinction Papias makes between the roles of Mark and Matthew in the writing of their Gospels?

The Gospel of Matthew is just one example of an area in which Bauckham's methodology could be pushed further and applied in different ways, perhaps leading to different conclusions. Nevertheless, Bauckham has wisely shown why the question of the external evidence should be reopened.

Form Criticism Reconsidered

The clearest target of Bauckham's argument in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is form criticism as classically formulated by Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolph Bultmann.¹³ Indeed, Bauckham does not mince words in his assessment of the method: "It is a curious fact that nearly all the contentions of the early form critics have by now been convincingly refuted, but the general picture of the process of oral transmission that the form critics pioneered still governs the way most New Testament scholars think" (242). Bauckham's work calls for nothing short of a complete overhaul of the form critical enterprise, retaining its advances but abandoning some of its inappropriate comparisons with

¹² Bauckham's treatment of the alleged anonymity of the Gospels (*ibid.*, 300–05) bears close reading and builds upon the work of Martin Hengel. See Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1985), 64–84; *idem*, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 2000).

¹³ For the full discussion, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 241–9.

folklore and questionable correlations between form and *Sitz im Leben*. Like the question of external and internal evidence, this reevaluation of form criticism could be pushed forward in several ways.

As Bauckham himself notes several times in the work, his hypothesis needs to be tested against the data of the Gospels (287, 351). *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* offers a paradigm-shifting proposal with respect to reading the Gospels, but because so much space is devoted to the theoretical arguments surrounding the external evidence and different modes of transmission, the book does not offer much by way of concrete examples from the Gospels. One of the most pressing tasks in light of Bauckham's argument will be to sort through the data in order to see how the thesis holds up. In this regard, his work suggests a number of avenues for further research.

First, if a revised form criticism is to play a role in Gospels research, then one *desideratum* is the discovery of more appropriate parallels to the Gospels than folklore.¹⁴ Bauckham rightly notes that one of the lasting contributions of form criticism is the observation that the Gospels are made up of smaller self-contained units that most likely resemble the form in which they were transmitted orally. In order to come to a better understanding of the function of these forms, it will be necessary to conduct further research on texts that more closely resemble the Gospels in genre. In addition, as Bauckham himself notes, more work on the process of storytelling and the formation of smaller narrative units would shed light on the purpose of these smaller stories within the broader narratives of the Gospels (351).

A second intriguing aspect of Bauckham's proposal worth further study is his suggestion that the stories in the Gospels fit under the category of "isolated" tradition.¹⁵ Bauckham provides good *prima facie* evidence for this thesis in the writings of Paul, who clearly distinguishes between the Jesus tradition he received and his own parenetic instructions. It is surprising, then, that Bauckham leaves out one of the strongest pieces of evidence in the New Testament to support his point, namely the Johannine literature. As many have noted, the Johannine epistles, though similar in style and theology to the fourth Gospel, never cite or allude to Jesus

¹⁴ A good starting point on this question is found in Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison With Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁵ Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 278) borrows this term from Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961), 335, who in turn received it from his teacher Harald Riesenfeld, "The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings," in *The Gospel Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 1–29. Bauckham also notes that it seems to have first appeared in the work of Gerhard Kittel in 1926, though he does not give the full reference.

tradition, either sayings or narratives. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that whoever was responsible for the letters knew of these traditions and yet chose not to use them. Bauckham's hypothesis that stories about Jesus circulated as "isolated" tradition seems to be the simplest and most likely explanation of this phenomenon, though more work could also be done on the significance of these smaller stories in early Christianity. It is no doubt true, as Bauckham suggests, that the broad outline of the Jesus story (or stories) was preserved because the early Christians believed that the salvation mediated through the Christ event "was fulfillment [sic] of the promises made by the God of Israel to his people Israel in the past" (277). Nevertheless, why the individual stories circulated in smaller units remains a problem worth further exploration.

As with the issue of authorship, the questions that Bauckham raises with respect to form criticism could also be developed by paying closer attention to early reception history. To begin with the question of "isolated" tradition, a number of early Christian texts outside the New Testament (e.g., 1 Clement; the letters of Ignatius) present parenetic material that occasionally cites what might fall under the category of "isolated" tradition. Further investigation of these texts with the questions of this revised form criticism in mind would provide another opportunity to test the accuracy of Bauckham's hypothesis. Moreover, these texts may also speak to the matter of narrative forms. As is well-known, the "citations" of Gospel material in many of these early texts (one thinks, for example, of the writings of Justin Martyr) are far from exact and so provide specific examples of the extent to which the forms developed and the uses to which they were put. At the very least a consideration of these early texts would provide a more concrete and reliable set of data than the speculative tradition histories upon which so much classical form criticism was built.

The Historical Jesus and the Church's Fourfold Gospel

If form criticism as classically conceived is the primary object of critique in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, the positive goal of the work is to rethink the question of the relationship between history and theology by means of the category of "testimony." Both in the introduction and in the conclusion, Bauckham proposes "testimony" as the category that properly captures the nature of the Gospels both historiographically and theologically. Indeed, testimony "is where history and theology meet" (6), and "[i]t is in the Jesus of testimony that history and theology meet" (508; one cannot help but notice the neat *inclusio* that bookends the argument!). To those who find Bauckham's case persuasive, at least two ques-

tions arise, one unique to the modern period and one that has puzzled readers of the New Testament from the beginning.

In the introduction to *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Bauckham discusses the ambiguity of the phrase the “historical Jesus,” an ambiguity that is as old as the quest that owes its name to the phrase. Does it refer to Jesus as he really was during his earthly life? Or does it refer to Jesus “insofar as his historical reality is accessible to us” (2)? Or, finally, does it refer to the Jesus who can be historically reconstructed, the real Jesus, as it were, lying behind the Gospels and awaiting to be (re)discovered by New Testament scholars? More often than not those who pursue the quest for the historical Jesus have operated with this third definition. Indeed, many have noted that the quest originated on the basis of skepticism toward the Gospel accounts and out of a desire to recover this “real Jesus.” Those who hold to this methodological skepticism are unlikely to find Bauckham’s argument convincing for a variety of reasons and will no doubt continue about their business as before, seeking to rescue Jesus from the “distortions” of the Gospels.

Despite its origins in skepticism, however, the quest has also witnessed numerous scholars who put more faith in the Gospels take up the task, whether as an apologetic endeavor or as an attempt to combat Docetism.¹⁶ It is these scholars who will be challenged by Bauckham’s thesis to rethink the nature of their enterprise:

From the perspective of Christian faith and theology, we must ask whether the enterprise of reconstructing a historical Jesus behind the Gospels, as it has been pursued through all phases of the quest, can ever substitute for the Gospels themselves as a way of access to the reality of Jesus the man who lived in first-century Palestine. (4)

Regardless of how much credibility one grants to the Gospels as historical sources, historical Jesus research as it has been practiced by the majority of

¹⁶ The danger of Docetism is perhaps the argument most often invoked by Christian scholars in defense of historical criticism broadly and the quest for the historical Jesus in particular. One wonders, though, if by this reasoning all Christians were Docetists until the rise of modern biblical scholarship. This is not to devalue historical criticism or the many gains that it has produced—it is simply to suggest that Christian scholars may need to rethink the arguments for its practice. For an excellent critique of the various anti-docetic arguments in favor of historical criticism, see A. K. M. Adam, “Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology: Why Historical Criticism Can’t Protect Christological Orthodoxy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 391–410. Adam raises many important points about the conceptual confusion surrounding the category of “docetism” in both the ancient Church and contemporary scholarship.

scholars inevitably results in another narrative about Jesus, one that by its very nature rivals the narratives of the Gospels because it cannot replicate them. For those who take the Gospels seriously as Christian Scripture, as that which nourishes the Church, then, the purpose and indeed the desirability of historical Jesus research will need to be reassessed. If the discipline can be reshaped in such a way as to respect the narrative shape and witness of the Gospels, then it may still have a role to play in Christian theology.

Regardless of the conclusions one draws about historical Jesus research, Bauckham's work still leaves another serious question open for further exploration: what is the relationship between these four witnesses and the one Jesus of the Christian faith? The question goes as far back as the second century, with Tatian's *Diatessaron* and Irenaeus's defense of the fourfold Gospel, and has continued to the present day.¹⁷ Assuming that we accept Bauckham's argument that all four Gospels rely in one way or another on eyewitness testimony, what are we to do with these four accounts? Bauckham is surely correct to say that the Church's Jesus has always been the Jesus of testimony, but how might the Jesus of testimony relate to the various testimonies that we have in the New Testament? One of the pressing questions that remain for Christian theology is how to maintain the integrity and distinctness of each of the Gospels while at the same time affirming their witness to the one Jesus of Christian faith. Bauckham's category of testimony certainly helps to move the discussion forward in that it provides a model in which history and interpretation belong inextricably together. Nevertheless, it still leaves open the question of how these different interpretations relate to one another and to the one historical figure to whom they bear witness.

History, Theology, and the Jesus of Testimony

The relationship of external and internal evidence, the reassessment of the form critical enterprise, and the relationship between the Jesus of testimony and the fourfold Gospel of the Church are just a few of the questions raised by *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. No doubt scholars will disagree with this or that aspect of Bauckham's argument. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that the book will receive the serious engagement that it deserves from biblical scholars and Christian theologians alike. Indeed, it is the fundamental questions the book asks about the relationship

¹⁷ Among the many contemporary works that address the question, see Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*; Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); and most recently Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

between history and theology—and the thoughtful answers it proposes—that will be its most lasting contribution. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* offers an understanding of the Gospels that takes them seriously as both history and theology. May it serve as a much needed reminder that Christian faith has always treated them as such and may it stimulate further research on the Gospels, their early reception, and the Jesus of testimony to whom they bear witness. **N-V**

