

Accordance: The Scriptures of Israel as Eyewitness

CHRISTOPHER SEITZ

University of Toronto

Wycliffe College

Toronto, Ontario

Quests for Jesus and Testimony

AT PRESENT several large-scale conceptual models exist to explain the relationship of the New Testament to Jesus. Aspects of these models must deal with the literary genesis of the Gospel accounts, the relationship of the Gospels to one another, the synoptic problem and the separate status of John, the way the Old Testament is a factor in the composition of the Gospels and also in the appraisal by Jesus and his disciples as to his mission and purpose—this appraisal then imprinted in the literary witness in a variety of ways. And finally, there is the question of the relationship of the Gospel accounts to the earliest reception of them in the Church Fathers, as well as the accounts they themselves may offer as to how we have testimony to Jesus Christ. I leave to the side the matter of the canonical texts and their relationship to the various ancient sources which have not circulated as centrally with them (the non-canonical writings and Jesus).

Richard Bauckham's new work is such a large-scale conceptual model, and as such it too addresses these various aspects to greater and lesser degrees.¹ Bauckham had already, in a previous work, offered a fresh perspective on the fourfold Gospel account by raising the question of John and a readership that he argued was to assume Mark as a related witness, thus raising afresh both the character of the synoptic problem and also John

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

in relationship to it.² In this work Bauckham also questioned the idea that gospels were written for specific communities, and therefore that the task of interpretation and exegesis of necessity obliged one to reconstruct them and thus stipulate the horizons toward which the intention of the author was constrained in the nature of the case.

In this work, sustained attention is paid to areas of interest not traditionally fore-grounded in Gospel research, most especially, the earliest reception history of the Jesus tradition and the way it may usefully be tested and appropriated so as to give account of the testimony to Jesus. This leads to the major thesis of the work, and the subject matter of the title: the way living witnesses, after the death of Jesus, testified to his activity and passed on the traditions about him, until they were consolidated and retold by key apostolic figures, and then put into literary form. The alternative reconstruction of form-criticism is thereby rejected, whereby traditions emerged in oral traditions and are shaped anonymously in various situations-in-life after the death of Jesus. It will not be my purpose to rehearse the details of this kind of criticism, as reviews can be consulted that do this in comprehensive and effective ways.

Another large-scale conceptual model has been proposed by N. T. Wright. It sits far more easily to the details of literary reconstruction, than the model undertaken in this new work by Bauckham, or in the model that tends to dominate academic research, that is, the positing of an original sayings source, which finds its way into Mark, and then is reshaped by Luke and Matthew due to material special to them. This textbook account is readily available and the defenders of it have seen much in Bauckham's new work which cannot be accepted, accommodated, or defended—a matter that Bauckham foresees and accepts in turn.

By contrast N. T. Wright's model understands the Old Testament as providing a kind of narrative story line, which in turn directs the mental life of Jesus and gives rise to his self-understanding, as well as the traditions that will arise to give account of that. On Wright's model the significance of the Old Testament in the testimony to Jesus is central, though controversially so for other scholars because of the particular story line selected by him, and the ability of this narrative line (among other things) to account for the widely varied and substantively divergent appearances of this "accordance with the scriptures" factor, as the New Testament unreservedly displays it. But the relevant point is that Wright does not try to relate his large-scale intuitive approach—a critically realistic posi-

² Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 147–71.

tivism—to the details of the traditional synoptic problem and its literary and form-critical adventures. This has brought critique from people like Luke Johnson, who in his turn accepts the necessity of giving account of this genetic dimension in classical form, but who then asserts that what is crucial in the end is the Christ of the Church's present believing.³ The details are not important here. What is significant is the relationship of these various proposals to the traditional business of form and literary criticism of the New Testament, and the way any new large-scale model must handle these problems by picking up a different end of the stick, and not throwing the stick entirely away. Wright picks the stick up at the middle, and Bauckham at a different end entirely.

Wright's interest in Jesus and the New Testament tends to focus on the New Testament as a subject matter unto itself, over against its subsequent reception history (and most decidedly against the later reception-history, about which he often registers very negative judgments). Bauckham sees not only continuity between the New Testament and the earliest reception history: the latter proves decisive for his conceptual model and for his understanding of eyewitnessing as a very specific kind of historical accounting. On this understanding, Bauckham is very much the consummate historian, weighing and probing the antique records with thoroughness and care, believing that this kind of history telling, in the period at question, deserves to be assessed as its own specific contribution. Critics have argued that he has not played by the rules of the historical-critical quest, but it remains unclear whether that is its own form of anachronistic tyranny, or whether, and how, one defines history and historical reporting as such. My own view is that it is fair to judge the literary and exegetical conclusions on their own merits, and to keep separate the question of "rules of the game" (historical quest), or the character of history as a philosophical question. I have registered my own views on the character of history in several works, most recently in *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*,⁴ and will not rehearse that here. Suffice it to say, I agree with the questions about history and history writing Bauckham raises, independently of the success of his literary and hermeneutical conclusions about the canonical Gospels collection in its present material form.

Wright's model posits a narrative line that becomes the chief explanatory tool for a critical realist account of Jesus, and here the centrality of the Old Testament is crucial, as has been noted. Like Bauckham, he does

³ See his essay "A Historiographical Response to Wright's Jesus," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1999), 206–24.

⁴ Christopher Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

not believe the details of form-critical and literary-critical research have been altogether useful, though his reasons differ from Bauckham. This is primarily because of Bauckham's belief that the earliest reception history is in continuity in important ways with the canonical record itself, and this means that Bauckham assesses the Church historical record with a different kind of thoroughness and toward a different end than does Wright. Wright has a strong intuition, based upon his reading of the New Testament, about the central kinds of motives that exist and are applying their pressure to give rise to the New Testament in its present form.

In Accordance With the Scriptures

I rehearse this to pick up on one aspect of Bauckham's work I would like to focus on, which is otherwise intuitively, if highly selectively or even altogether wrongly, deployed in the conceptual model of N. T. Wright: that is the "accordance with the scriptures" aspect of the New Testament record and so, on Bauckham's account, with testimony to Jesus himself. The form-critical model could retain this aspect on a variety of accounts. So, it would be in the context of Church life, after the death and resurrection of Christ, that the scriptures of Israel would come to influence the oral and literary formation of traditions about him. These scriptures were the main testimony to the work of Christ insofar as they described God's work within Israel with which Jesus was in accordance, and this in a variety of ways: prophecy and fulfillment; figural anticipation; the moral life, in Christ; and so forth. In helpful essays on Acts 15, Markus Bockmuehl and Bauckham himself have shown clearly how the Old Testament was used not just to "preach Christ" but to provide moral categories for new Gentile believers, templates for the apostolic office, sacraments, and so forth. The rich variety of usage in the Gospel record would testify to just such a scriptural imprinting from the side of the Old Testament. (Of course, this aspect could be taken as crucial in order to question the historicity of the events respecting Jesus, in the hands of someone like Crossan; and Frei rightly identified some time ago that proof from prophecy and the use of the Old Testament in the New were the twin neuralgic points leading to what he would call the eclipse of biblical narrative.)

As the New Testament would only gradually come into being, and later still, find its canonical status by analogy with this single scriptural inheritance (so a New Testament together with a now-Old Testament), these scriptures of Israel were the texts heard in early Christian assembly. In its present form, the New Testament gives indication of this role of the scriptures of Israel (Rom 15:4; 2 Tim 3:15), and Luke's account of Jesus' opening the scriptures of Israel to indicate the things about him is para-

digmatic of the practice of the Church, we may assume, from its earliest moment (Lk 24:27, 32).

The question raised by the eyewitness model as the chief stimulus for the testimony to Jesus is how one is to understand the “accordance with the scriptures” that so thoroughly affects the presentation of the Gospel record in its present form. One thinks of the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew, for example, with their rich figural atmosphere (the moving star that stops, the gentiles and their gifts, descent into Egypt, Herod and Balak) or explicit scriptural linkages (the Song of Hannah and the Magnificat).⁵ Or what of the stories of healings which draw on Old Testament analogies, or the role of Moses or the Suffering Servant, which many see as ingredients in the Gospel accounts at the most integral level of their literary unfolding? And one considers as well the passion narratives, with their rich allusions to the Psalms, down to the minutest details; or the parables which derive their logic from scriptural precursors; feeding stories and the wilderness accounts of Exodus and Numbers; the Twelve themselves, as representatives of Israel, or the collective of “minor prophets.”

Bauckham does not deny that this accordance with the Old Testament is a factor; rather, he does not deal with it as a topic unto itself in any chapter of his account of testimony. He discusses the passion narrative (in its pre-Markan form) strictly from the standpoint of establishing the possibility or likelihood of its being traced to the young man who fled naked from the scene (with reference to Theissen’s discussion). Did the young man (was it Simon Peter?) amplify the references to the Psalms, and was this pattern extended by individual witnesses in the other passion accounts? Is that a pattern one can trace elsewhere—eyewitness supplies the accordance dimension—in the variety of literary forms in the Gospels? Because the scriptural aspect is so pervasive, it is hard to see so much attention to establishing historicity and reliability (of a particular kind) without any account of this dimension. The index provided for scriptural citations shows how little this aspect of Gospel formation forms a part of his reconstruction.

Moreover, with the emphasis on eyewitness testimony, and especially a concern with memory (which has to do with temporal distance and recollection), where do we locate this aspect—accordance with the scriptures—of the Gospel narrative? Was it supplied by those testifying to what they remembered, and if so, how, and why? Where does this aspect belong in a model which wants to fore-ground the reliability of testimony due to

⁵ Christopher Seitz, “The Lectionary as Theological Construction,” in *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 300–18.

the eyewitness factor? With the focus on reliability and personal witness, a byproduct is the loss of this larger social dimension: the eye-witnessing to Jesus provided by the scriptures, said to promise his appearing, confirm his mission, and open our eyes through the vehicle of their plain sense, to the mystery of Christ's earthly work.

It might be helpful to think about this aspect in the Synoptics by considering other accounts, in John and in the early Church. This might help us get a purchase on the accordance factor in the Gospel presentation in its four-Gospel form.

John's Gospel: Location and Accordance

Bauckham's treatment of John is at points very illuminating. It may be that the testimony model really gains momentum within the fourth Gospel, whatever one may say about its persuasiveness elsewhere. This is true not least at the level of explicit reference. The author tells us with energy that he is an eyewitness. I have also argued, following Trobisch's evaluation of the final verses of John (21:24–25), that the editorial function of the Gospel is not restricted to its own single witness, but to the fourfold Gospel collection itself. Moreover, at issue are the hermeneutical and theological implications of eye-witnessing and of providing for future generations an account that is both reliable. Such an account obviates the need to believe that one requires a personal encounter with the earthly Christ for the sufficiency of testimony to him, through a written account, to find its force. One could multiply stories, testimonies, about Christ, endlessly, beyond what John and the Synoptics have written, but as with the ending of Ecclesiastes (12:12–14), the danger would be in believing that wisdom consists of having more information, rather than a will conformed by the Holy Spirit to hear what God says and to obey. The Gospel presentation is sufficient and does not require eye-witnessing for corroboration of further evidence.⁶ Bauckham in his own way underscores that the difference is not between live or oral accounts as "the real thing" and written accounts as derivative, but embraces in complementary ways reliability through both media.

In John's Gospel one is made aware that the Holy Spirit's work entails the opening of the scriptures of Israel as their own kind of empowering testimony. This is seen at the death of Jesus: the author (as Bauckham has it, and I agree), having witnessed the living water of the Holy Spirit and the blood of sacramental new birth pour from the side of the Paschal

⁶ Christopher Seitz, "Booked Up: Ending John and Ending Jesus," in *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 91–101.

Lamb, lifts his voice, as it were, with a particular energy. He it is who bears witness to these things, and he knows that what he says is true. What follows then is not an eyewitness account of the death of Jesus, important because of its reliability and its details in confirming what the apostolic circle, which fled, cannot. Rather, the eyewitness testifier wants us to know that the Holy Spirit has *opened his eyes* to see the truth of this death from the standpoint of God's eternity, that is, from the perspective of God's work, in type and in promise, in the scriptures of Israel. This happened that the scriptures might be fulfilled.

That this theme is central to John is made clear when, at various points in his account, he explicitly tells the reader that the scriptures should have made this or that episode in the life of the earthly Jesus open up its deeper significance (2:22; 5:39; 12:16ff.; 14:8ff.; 16:12ff.; 16:31). Scriptural testimony did not fail to do this because it lacked the capacity. Rather, there was a veiling consistent with the purposes of God. This allows the author of the fourth Gospel to go his own specific direction with the accordance factor when it comes to the testifying which now consists in his unique narrative form, over against the Synoptics, and in relation to them in crucial ways as well. The theme of accordance is handled in direct ways, as a theme unto itself. In the Synoptics, the material accounts of the activities of Jesus make reference of course to fulfillment and the "it is written" dimension, but they also show clear signs at the point of composition of having been imprinted with this scriptural effect. It remains unclear whether Bauckham's emphasis on eye-witnessing and reliability can do justice to this aspect in the material witness.

This also has significance for the question provoking the discussion, on the matter of reliability and on closing the gap on witness and event through the vehicle of memory and personal testimony. I have argued that John's Gospel sees this question explicitly, and introduces its resolution by means of the hermeneutical effect of the present location at the close of the fourfold Gospel account. Reliability of testimony is assumed by the author of John's gospel in the nature of the case, and that holds true as well for his understanding of antecedent testimony such as now exists in the Synoptic accounts. John knows that many other accounts have been written and that the world could not contain everything that might be written down. (With Calvin, I take this in an admonishing and exhortatory sense.) Elsewhere Bauckham has carefully described the way in which John can adjust, update, fill out details given in the account of Mark's Gospel, for example, without in any strong way implying its inaccuracy or unreliability.⁷ But

⁷ Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," 147–71.

what is crucial to note is that for John the greater problem is not reliability or falsity, but how the claims of the Gospel make their force felt, what closes the circuit, as it were.

In my judgment what John is concerned about is precisely the kind of empiricism and evidentialism that animates so much of the Gospel questing. The material form of the Gospel presentation, in its awkward and complex, interpenetrating fourfold form, is completely and utterly competent to give rise to faith, on just those terms. There is, in other words, no surer way to know Jesus Christ, to understand and accept his significance in God's time and purposes, than through the material testimony to him in its present and given form. Indeed that is precisely what it means for John to be a testifier, and not an apostle like the Twelve. The full hermeneutical significance of this must be grasped. Here Bauckham's point is sound. The canonical implications have, however, not been adequately assessed. And of course for John, the scriptures of Israel always had this deep capacity for witnessing, *and they would go on doing this in their own unique form as soon as the Holy Spirit had made their point of focus clear*. I take this to be the significance of Luke's final Easter scene with Jesus opening the scriptures: modeling the Church's work of interpretation yet to come.

Indeed, it would be the work of scriptural exegesis and interpretation in the Church's lived life of preaching and teaching that would continue to uncover and yield forth riches well beyond what might be said of these scriptures and the use of them within the limits of the New Testament's plain sense (*pace* Hans Hübner and some other modern accounts). There is a *Vetus Testamentum per se* that speaks of Christ in its own idiom, beyond a *Vetus Testamentum in Novo Receptum*—that is, the New Testament as circumscribing or delimiting in its material form what the Old Testament as Christian Scripture indeed is. It points rather than delimits.

On this account, then, it is hard to know whether the deep concern for reliability in Bauckham's account is consistent with the formal question of how Jesus is known within the Gospel's own present form, the character of which cannot be established by means of corroboration and the multiplying of evidence alone—crucial though that may be. I take that to be part of the concern registered by Stephen Evans in his monograph account of the issue, and in response to N. T. Wright and others.⁸

In the course of his discussion, Bauckham helpfully provides an assessment of Irenaeus's report concerning the aged Polycarp. Importantly, here and in the case of Papias as well, Bauckham is keen to demonstrate

⁸ Stephen Evans, "Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship," in Newman, *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 180–205.

that at issue is precisely not the preference for oral reports over against textual transmission of the same, but rather the kind of account this form of oral truth-telling takes. I was struck, in the account Irenaeus gives of Polycarp, by his mentioning one particular detail. Even in the second century, and even in possession of this kind of direct testimony to Jesus, Polycarp, it is recorded, gave his reports in public *in accordance with the scriptures*.⁹ Leaving aside the implications of this for Bauckham's own reconstruction of the material form of the New Testament (that is, consistent with, for example, Von Campenhausen's reconstruction, the New Testament is here not yet scripture in the same sense as the received "oracles of God," the scriptures of Israel), what is striking is that possession of the memory of living testimony to Jesus Christ still is brokered in relationship to the scriptures of Israel. This I take to be consistent with John's point, or with the Emmaus Road story of Luke and the first Bible study of the Risen Lord himself. "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Not only is the accordance dimension critical from the very inception of speech about Jesus Christ; not only is this true when ironically unseen or unacknowledged, not only true of the earthly and the Risen Jesus, but true at the earliest moments of the Church's life and in its interpretative practices ever since.

Richard Bauckham has reconnected, through a critical and very detailed assessment, the New Testament and the earliest reception history of the Jesus tradition in the records of the early Church, and elsewhere. He has sought to explain, in a creative but also in a carefully argued manner, the role of the living witnesses to Jesus who, as he so clearly states, must have been many in number and certainly would have been concerned to see that the testimony to Jesus was accurately preserved. It has not been my intention to assess the success with which he has done this, and the wider implications for the investigation into the genesis of Jesus traditions and their final literary stabilization in an amazing and *sui generis* literary form: the fourfold Gospel collection, a collection which would soon achieve the kind of stabilization of form that took centuries in the case of the Pentateuch, and after which resisted any further alteration.

My concern here has been to raise the question of reliability and testimony from the standpoint of the Gospel's own form and its own attention precisely to this question. But this was not a question faced on its

⁹ Polycarp "would declare *in accordance with the scriptures* what the things were which he had heard from [the elders] concerning the Lord, his mighty works and his teaching, . . . as having received them from the eyewitnesses . . . of the life of the Logos." Bauckham's rendering in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, emphasis added.

own, for its own sake, but because of the significance of the dimension of accord—ance—the Old Testament as eyewitness to Jesus, in the manner of its own capacities and eventual fulfillments—as this makes its force felt in the compositional history of the New Testament and with explicit theological reflection in John's Gospel and elsewhere. Testimony does indeed involve reliability and a sensitive portrayal of just what history is and means to be, when the subject of its accounting is Jesus Christ. But this Jesus Christ is testified to by a word which preceded the New Testament's formation, and which the New Testament saw as absolutely critical to a full appreciation of who Jesus was and is and will be, a testifying that continues as the Old Testament opens up its riches, the Holy Spirit and the witness of Jesus himself pointing the way. That remains true for us on different terms, but in exactly the same spirit as an aging Church Father, treasuring and retelling the stories of Jesus as these had been passed on to him, in accordance with the scriptures. The New Testament ably and providentially occupies the space of that aging bishop, and the Old Testament speaks of accord—ance and of figures in the providentially given character of its own deep witnessing. N V