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## Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

Richard Bauckham

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Richard Bauckham. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses:  
The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony.*

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006

Reviewed by Thomas A. Wayment

Undoubtedly, Professor Richard Bauckham's most recent contribution will add life to an already thriving scholarly discussion on the historical foundations of the New Testament Gospels, particularly the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Like others who have contributed to this field of study, Bauckham (professor of New Testament studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland) sets out to describe the sources used by the authors of the canonical Gospels, and, in doing so, provides a viable theory that has been met by exuberant praise and will certainly encounter significant rebuttals. In his own words, he states:

It is the contention of this book that, in the period up to the writing of the Gospels, gospel traditions were connected with named and known eyewitnesses, people who had heard the teaching of Jesus from his lips and committed it to memory, people who had witnessed the events of his ministry, death, and resurrection and themselves had formulated the stories about these events that they told. These eyewitnesses did not merely set going a process of oral transmission that soon went its own way without reference to them. They remained throughout their lifetimes the sources and, in some sense that may have varied for figures of central or more marginal significance, the authoritative guarantors of the stories they continued to tell. (93)

In this volume the reader will be treated to an admirable display of scholarly acumen and original insight. As the above-cited thesis implies, the author proposes to establish a causal link between the eyewitness tradition about Jesus and the later authors who recorded those early testimonies and stories about Jesus. In order to establish this, Bauckham first discusses the criteria for writing history in first-century Judea and in the larger Mediterranean world. Then, after surveying the appropriate secondary literature, chapter 2 reviews Roman and Greek historians concerning their views about what constitutes valid historical writing. The author

arrives at the tantalizing conclusion that credible history was not written by those who had only a bookish knowledge of events, but rather by eye-witnesses to those events. In this regard, he reconsiders the vital testimony of Papias, who states:

And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other disciple of the Lord, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord, were still saying. For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice.<sup>1</sup>

Typically, this statement of Papias is viewed as a late-first-century skeptical appraisal of the written Gospels because scholars have assumed that they had become so untrustworthy in the sub-apostolic era. Bauckham, however, sees this statement in the context of ancient historiography and the art of writing history in the Roman period. From writing treatises on philosophy to medicine, history was considered an expression of eye-witness testimony. Drawing largely upon the earlier work of Loveday Alexander, Bauckham concludes that Papias relied upon what he had himself learned from the eyewitnesses and that, like his contemporaries, he viewed the written word as less authoritative.<sup>2</sup> Following this line of reasoning, Papias must have had access to those who had met Jesus personally or who knew those who had met Jesus personally. This rereading of Papias's statement is both articulate and intriguing.

From this point, Bauckham launches into a study of the names recorded in the New Testament and in surviving documentary texts outside the canonical tradition. He establishes a lengthy list of the most common names for males and females in the first century and shows that many of the names in the synoptic tradition are rather obscure names. He uses this point he uses to discount the Bultmannian proposition that the names in the Gospels were supplied by second-generation Christians who were trying to lend credibility to their texts. Bauckham, however, shows that this unlikely conclusion is based on the fact that names tend to drop out from earlier to later sources—from Mark to Matthew—and that rather than choosing common names only, the authors of the Gospels used names that fit well with the profile of names of Judean society at the time of Jesus. In other words, the names that survive in the Gospels appear in roughly the same frequency as those same names appear in texts outside the New Testament.

Perhaps the most novel contribution regarding named persons in the New Testament is the observation that names appearing in the earliest source (Mark) drop out in later accounts where the same stories are

recorded and where it would be natural to include the name. The reason for the disappearance of names in the later accounts, Bauckham argues, is that those persons had passed away and could no longer lend credence to the stories as living voices and surviving eyewitnesses. This contention is likely the most unique feature of the volume.

Moving on, Bauckham rounds out the volume with a study of orality in first-century Christianity and models of oral tradition, particularly among Jesus' followers. These latter chapters are more heavily dependent upon secondary literature and are incorporated to bolster an already strong thesis presented in the first nine chapters. Bauckham gives a strong critique of earlier studies on oral cultures and how they shaped traditions. He observes that earlier scholars have drawn parallels to cultures where oral traditions developed over many decades and centuries, whereas in the New Testament the time between the writing of the Gospels and the death of Jesus is much shorter.

The final portion of the book deals with the Gospel of John and its apostolic witness to the life of Jesus. Bauckham arrives at the somewhat controversial opinion that the author of the fourth Gospel is not John the son of Zebedee and brother of James, but is rather the Presbyter or Elder John mentioned in Eusebius. One of the primary reasons for this identification is that Bauckham finds it inconceivable that the author of the fourth Gospel would have hidden or obscured an apostolic witness. This is in line with the thesis of the volume as a whole, that named individuals served to bolster the eyewitness claims of a text. In this vein, it is unthinkable that someone would hide an eyewitness as prominent as one of the sons of Zebedee.

One of Bauckham's underlying criticisms is that the form-critical approach to the origins of the Gospels, namely that the Gospels were authored in nameless communities by second-generation Christians who were trying to develop a myth of the saving power of Jesus, is wrong. Behind these nameless form critics, who Bauckham rarely cites, are scholars generally associated with the Jesus Seminar and the now fractured History of Religions School. His contribution to this ongoing discussion is both timely and well researched. It will be difficult for Bauckham's so-called form critics to ignore this work.

Overall, the author should be applauded for his careful scholarship and faithful and respectful handling of sources. Indeed, the book gives the impression that Bauckham's concern is to establish a Christian community founded upon authoritative teachers—the Twelve and other disciples—that sought to propagate a universal gospel message rather than a unique community-based Christian identity. In other words, Christianity

began as a tight-knit group of followers who were profoundly devoted to Jesus, and then that same community of followers evangelized others. In the process of evangelizing the Gentiles, they solidified the story of Jesus by writing the gospels through the authoritative tradition of eyewitnesses.

Significantly, Bauckham creates and then critiques a single viewpoint represented by unnamed form critics. Certainly there are many scholars who hold the positions challenged by Bauckham, but those who hold such views are not unified in their positions on many of the matters discussed in this volume. It would have been more helpful if Bauckham clearly identified those scholars whom he had in mind rather than relying on a nameless form critic. One might also add that Bauckham's critique of studies that draw upon oral culture to explain the development of the synoptic tradition is somewhat tardy. Following the studies of Milman Parry in the 1920s and then later Werner Kelber in the 1980s, research into oral culture and the creation of the New Testament Gospels was a major focus of scholarly inquiry. However, since the heyday of the 1980s and early 1990s, studies in orality have waned and scholars have returned to thinking of the Gospels as developing in a more academic environment with a greater emphasis on textual borrowing and manipulation.

The evangelical publication *Christianity Today* awarded Bauckham's volume its highest award for biblical studies in 2007, making it a must read in evangelical scholarly circles. For that reason alone it will make a lasting impact.

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1. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 102.

2. See L. A. Alexander, "The Living Voice: Scepticism towards the Written Word in Early Christianity and in Graeco-Roman Texts," in D. J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter, eds., *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1990); L. A. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).