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In the Mouths of Two or More Witnesses

Review of Richard Bauckham. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. xiii + 538 pp. \$26.00.

NOEL B. REYNOLDS

For readers who have found the pervasive skepticism of twentieth-century scholarship on the four Gospels and the life of Jesus Christ tedious and even challenging, Richard Bauckham has produced a late-career tour de force that builds on other attempts to counter the skeptics while advancing a powerful and radically new refutation of that dominant approach. He lines up the skeptics' assumptions and systematically refutes them all, either by invoking and extending the arguments of other scholars or by developing his own arguments and forms of evidence. That alone would be a major achievement to be widely heralded. But Bauckham goes on to give us powerful and largely original arguments to establish credible direct control of the wording of three of the Gospels by recognized eyewitnesses, concluding that

1. Mark contains Peter's account of Christ's ministry as formulated by Peter and memorized by Mark and others who knew Peter;
2. Luke draws on both Mark's presentation of Peter's account and the accounts of other equally knowledgeable eyewitnesses, including especially the women in Jesus's life; and
3. John is in fact authored by John, another eyewitness from the beginning, but not the son of Zebedee.


Bauckham reviews the evidence for different authors and presents a strong argument for his conclusion that John the Elder, as he was known in first-century Christian circles, was the author of the Gospel of John and the three epistles that bear his name. This makes the Gospel of John the only one of the four Gospels to be actually authored by its principal eyewitness.

Although other conservative New Testament scholars have advanced important objections

and modifications to the dominant approach of form criticism, Bauckham aims at a complete refutation of the assumptions of the form critics that he sees dominating scholarly work on the Gospels. He specifically targets the idea that “the traditions about Jesus, his acts and his words, passed through a long process of oral tradition in the early Christian communities and reached the writers of the Gospels only at a late stage of this process” (p. 6). In spite of much evidence against that view, he sees it firmly in place: most scholarly work continues to assume that the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s ministry suffered “a long process of anonymous transmission in the communities” (p. 6) before their incorporation into the Gospels, which would have been written independently of any direct influence of the eyewitnesses. Against these assumptions, Bauckham presents evidence that the Gospels were written under the direct influence of living eyewitnesses, and he does this without any revision of the standard dating for their composition.

Using the recognized technique of *inclusio*, he argues that “the Gospels themselves indicate their own eyewitness sources” (p. 305). He also presents an elaborate study of memory and transmission evidence to support his conclusion that the eyewitnesses actually controlled a transmission process based on memorization to preclude the normal tendency to modify an account in the retelling. Extending the work of Birger Gerhardsson,¹ Bauckham develops a careful critique of the long-standing practice of form

critics treating oral tradition as folklore. In many ways he demonstrates the careless superficiality of this approach. He stresses the necessary reliance of all good history on eyewitness testimony. Bauckham’s argument builds on the work of Samuel Byrskog² to show how classic historians depended on eyewitness reports for both the facts and the interpretation or meaning of those facts. Bauckham sees the marriage of historical reporting and faithful interpretation in the Gospels’ use of testimony as a built-in solution to the long-standing tension between the historical and faithful approaches to New Testament scholarship.

Bauckham’s bold and challenging theories have already provoked both admiring and critical responses from other New Testament scholars.³ Many of his assumptions and evidentiary claims will be carefully evaluated in a process that may play out over a period of many years. But no one can claim that the issues he addresses are unimportant or that the arguments and evidence he advances are not deserving of the most careful examination. Bauckham has stirred a sensitive pot, and the fallout will inevitably be both interesting and enlightening for serious readers of the Gospels. 

Noel B. Reynolds (PhD, Harvard University) is a senior professor of political science at Brigham Young University.

1. Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 40.

2. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; Leiden: Brill, 2002).

3. For an excellent review of Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* from the perspective of a Latter-day Saint New Testament scholar, see Thomas A. Wayment in *BYU Studies* 48/2 (2009): 165–68.