

Richard Bauckham. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. 538 pages. \$17.16.

Bauckham has a penchant for taking on popular scholarly views, subjecting them to critical analysis on the basis of evidence, finding them wanting, and proposing a different view. In this book his target is the almost ubiquitous view among more liberal scholars, inherited from Form Criticism, that the New Testament Gospels are the end-product of multi-stage tradition that may have been initiated by Jesus' first disciples but quickly got disconnected from them, morphing into a process of sharing stories and teachings in community settings by anonymous speakers. "Some scholars would stress the conservatism of the process . . . others would stress the creativity of the communities . . . But . . . the eyewitnesses . . . appear to have nothing significant to do with it once they set it going" (6). Bauckham musters a wealth of arguments in criticism of this view. The most important points to make in a brief review are these:

First, it is not plausible that the disciples of Jesus dropped out after getting started the process of passing on the stories and teachings. As the Gospels anticipate, and as Acts depicts them, they surely served as the leaders of the church. While the average lifespan was relatively brief compared to today, people were known to live into their 80's; Polycarp being an example (35). At least some of Jesus' disciples could well have been active until the late 1st century, the time of the writing of the latest Gospels, as Papias shows in his naming of Ariston and John the Elder (17-18).

Second, a re-examination of the Prologue of Papias' work shows that he was at most two stages removed from the disciples of Jesus, having learned the traditions from the disciples of the elders who had plausibly known disciples of Jesus who had died, and in regard to two disciples having learned from those disciples who were still alive (15, 32).

Third, Form Criticism assumes an *informal, uncontrolled* mode of oral transmission, in which tellers and listeners readily adapt the traditions for present needs and have no interest in the past as past (258) and thus no interest in eyewitnesses. But leaning on the work of Birger Gerhardsson, Kenneth Bailey, and James Dunn, Bauckham observes that there are other modes of oral transmission grounded in an interest in the past as past. There is the *formal, controlled* mode, in which students memorize material under the direction of a designated teacher, as in the teaching of oral tradition by the rabbis as well as in much rote education throughout history (280). There is also the *informal controlled* mode, in which there is no designated teacher and student, but there are a number of recognized masters of the tradition and the listeners recognize the masters and correct errors. In this third mode, and even in the second (280f), control is exercised in varying degrees. For certain material – proverbs, poems – verbatim repetition is demanded. In the telling of parables and historical events, some amount of flexibility is permitted (255, 280f). This third mode suits the kind of repetition and variation we find in the Gospels, as Dunn has demonstrated. Bauckham's own contribution to point out that the same pattern of verbatim repetition of proverbs and poems and limited flexibility in the telling of parables and historical events can characterize a *formal* controlled mode of oral tradition. Bauckham argues that as long as the disciples of Jesus were alive they would have served as a designated, formal source of control. It is reasonable to assume that during the time they spent with Jesus, they

learned to repeat his teachings with a great degree of accuracy, and they experienced the events that it was permitted to tell with some degree of variation (282, 283). Besides the Twelve there would have been other disciples present during the entire course of Jesus' ministry as well as other people who had been present for only one or a few events and teaching sessions, such as Ariston and "the elder John," whom Papias calls "the Lord's disciples."

Fourth, ancient history writers preferred to get their material from those who had been eyewitnesses to the events about which they write. Bauckham argues that this is what Papias means when he says "I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice" (16, 21ff). This would plausibly have been true for the Evangelists as well as for Papias.

These arguments serve as mostly external evidence for Bauckham's argument. For internal evidence, Bauckham first examines Luke's naming of those who were eyewitnesses "from the beginning" as the source of his Gospel, the designation of the Beloved Disciple as the author of John in 19:35, 21:24, and Papias' claim that Peter as the source of Mark. Second, he proposes that the character who is the first and last to appear in a given Gospel (Gospel of Matthew excepted [132]) is the primary eyewitness source of the Gospel. He names this as a literary device, termed an "inclusion," that is found in other ancient sources and serves the same purpose (124ff). Third, he examines each Gospel in some detail for indications of eyewitness traditions. Fourth, he identifies five different factors that account for the variability we find among the Gospels, including (1) variations by Jesus himself, (2) translation variation, (3) variation customary to narration in oral traditions, (4) deliberate interpretive changes of memorized teachings required by a post-Easter context, and (5) changes necessary for integration the tradition into a narrative (286).

This is an impressive and erudite study and argument, drawing on and integrating a wealth of ancient sources and scholarly discussion. It demands a serious response. The Gospel for which I find it gives the least adequate account is the Fourth Gospel. Bauckham's proposal that the Beloved Disciple is Papias' John the Elder is quite convincing. But he has not addressed the question of the degree of variation and creativity in that Gospel. In what sense is the Beloved Disciple an eyewitness when he is absent from the Synoptic Passion and Resurrection narratives? If he was an eyewitness in the background, the role he is given in those narratives appears to be the product of creativity, not of history. The same must be said for the style and content of the discourses and dialogues. The kind of variation we find among the Synoptic Gospels fits the parameters of formal and informal controlled oral tradition. The kind of variation between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel does not.

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