

BOOK REVIEW

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). xiii + 538 pp. Hdbk. US\$32.00.

Much of modern New Testament scholarship, through the use of tools such as redaction criticism, has developed a particular view of the development of the Gospel tradition: the written Gospels are the result of many years of oral tradition, where each community shaped the traditions according to its needs and the original eyewitnesses played only a very small part. This is seen, for an extreme example, in the Jesus Seminar's judgment that only a small portion of the words of Jesus reported in the Gospels are authentic to Jesus of Nazareth.

Richard Bauckham's book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, seeks to challenge these assumptions, attempting to offer a fresh picture of the development of the Gospel tradition. Bauckham puts forth the claim that the written Gospels contain much eyewitness testimony, and that they should be taken seriously for their historicity and not just for what they say about the theology of the communities that produced them.

One of the key parts of Bauckham's argument is a re-evaluation of the Papias traditions as found in Eusebius and other sources. While Papias is dismissed by many scholars, Bauckham notes that the traditions accepted by Papias may go back close to the time of the writing of the Gospels and therefore contain valuable information. Bauckham begins by investigating Papias's claims of having sought out sources, especially relying on a 'living and surviving voice'. Papias used traditions passed on by the Apostles, by the elders (those who had learned from the Apostles), but especially by the surviving disciples of Jesus, Aristion and John the Elder. Papias's reliance on eyewitness sources requires a re-evaluation of the Gospels' own use of eyewitness material. Bauckham suggests that individuals who are named in certain stories (e.g. Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus, etc.) were the ones responsible for passing on their own eyewitness testimony. That eyewitness testimony was

important in the early church is clearly demonstrated in Paul's account in 1 Cor. 15.3-7.

Bauckham also accepts Papias's claim that the Gospel of Mark is based on the testimony of Peter. This is not just because Bauckham has faith in Papias. Bauckham also relies on internal evidence such as the role of Peter in Mark and *inclusio* sections at the beginning and the end of the Gospel, where Mark seems to indicate a special role for Peter. Bauckham concludes that Papias was correct, in that Mark included Petrine testimony without any chronological adjustment outside of the basic outline of baptism to crucifixion.

From there, Bauckham works on how the Jesus tradition was passed on. Helpful warnings are given concerning over-reliance on modern oral cultures, since their oral traditions have been developed over hundreds of years, while the Jesus traditions were passed on orally for only a few decades. Bauckham demonstrates that during the oral phase, the tradition was not passed on by anonymous communities but by named individuals who had control over any variations in the story that might develop. In this, Bauckham also shares some interesting results from current research on human memory and reveals the surprising accuracy of memory, even after many years.

Bauckham spends a lot of time with the Gospel of John. Although Papias (in surviving texts) does not discuss the authorship of John, he seems to have accepted that, unlike Mark, John put his account into proper chronological order. It is here that Bauckham breaks away from much New Testament scholarship. Many scholars, based on John's more developed theology, assume that John is less historical than the Synoptics. According to Bauckham, John is more developed because he was one of the eyewitnesses and had the freedom to interpret the Jesus tradition, while Matthew (Bauckham does not accept Matthean authorship, although the author most likely relied on accounts by Matthew), Mark and Luke, who were not eyewitnesses, had to take a more conservative role with the eyewitness testimony that they were using as sources. In this, John may actually be more historically reliable than the Synoptics.

Bauckham also discusses the authorship of John's Gospel. He accepts the Beloved Disciple as the author, but rejects the identification with John the son of Zebedee. Bauckham suggests that the reason that Eusebius left out Papias's view of John's authorship is that it differed from Eusebius's own strong view that the fourth Gospel was written by

the son of Zebedee. Bauckham agrees that the Gospels received their titles very early, but thinks that the fourth Gospel is named after John the Elder, who was a disciple of Jesus but not one of the Twelve. Bauckham shows that early Church Fathers, such as Polycrates and Irenaeus, never identify John of Ephesus, who wrote the Gospel, with John of the Twelve. Bauckham also demonstrates that early on, Christian writers began to confuse New Testament figures with the same name, such as Philip of the Twelve with Philip of the Seven, and that it was natural that, by the third century, the church would accept John son of Zebedee as the author of the Gospel rather than the lesser-known John the Elder.

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses is an impressive undertaking, but there are some shortcomings. At times, Bauckham seems to want to overwhelm the reader with evidence and uses examples with questionable value. For example, he attempts to show that the *inclusio* of eyewitness was a known technique to identify sources. The two examples offered include Lucian's *Alexander* and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Besides the fact that both post-date the New Testament, Bauckham confesses the hazard of using *Alexander*, which is a parody, and the *Life of Plotinus*, which may in fact be modeled after the Gospels. Also, in attempting to hold on to the full ending of John, Bauckham uses the fact that the Prologue has 496 *syllables* and the Epilogue has 496 *words* to show that it is all original to the Gospel. While that may have been the author's intention, in light of the quality of the rest of Bauckham's evidence, the speculative nature of this theory is distracting. It would also have been helpful if Bauckham had spent more time on Matthew, fleshing out the process of its development the way he does with the processes behind Mark and John. Some reflection on how the eyewitness theory fits with ideas about Q would also have added to the value of this book.

Overall, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is an important addition to Gospels scholarship. Bauckham questions some long-standing assumptions and demonstrates that some earlier theories regarding the origins of the Gospels were rejected prematurely. His investigation into the origins of Mark and John are fascinating and will open the door for further conversation for years to come. Whether one agrees with the designation of John the Elder as the Beloved Disciple, Bauckham's study of the various Johannine traditions is well worth reading. In addition to Bauckham's excellent New Testament scholarship, he also includes

helpful material from other disciplines such as scholarly studies of memory, oral traditions and testimonies. If Bauckham is correct in his thesis that the Gospels contain much eyewitness testimony, this is a great challenge to historical-Jesus scholarship that comes to the Gospels with much historical skepticism. Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is a very important book that should be read by all students of the New Testament.

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