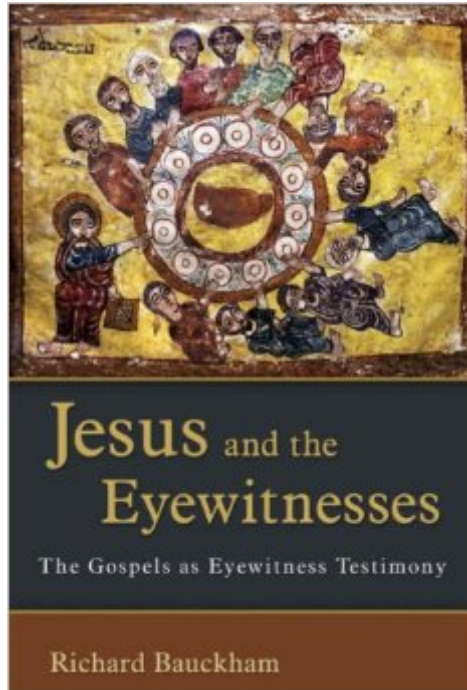


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Jesus And The Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony



Synopsis

'Jesus and the Eyewitness' argues that the four Gospels are closely based on the eyewitness testimony of those who knew Jesus. The author challenges the assumption that the accounts of Jesus circulated as 'anonymous community traditions', asserting instead that they were transmitted in the name of the original eyewitnesses. To drive home this controversial point, Bauckham draws on internal literary evidence, the use of personal names in first-century Jewish Palestine, and recent developments in the understanding of oral tradition. Jesus and the Eyewitnesses also taps into the rich resources of modern study of memory, especially in cognitive psychology, refuting the conclusions of the form critics and calling New Testament scholarship to make a clean break with this long-dominant tradition. Finally, Bauckham challenges readers to end the classic division between the 'historical Jesus' and the 'Christ of faith', proposing instead the 'Jesus of testimony' as presented by the Gospels. Sure to ignite heated debate on the precise character of the testimony about Jesus, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses is a groundbreaking work that will be valued by scholars, students, and all who seek to understand the origins of the Gospels.

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Customer Reviews

Anything by Bauckham is likely to get a high rating from me, simply by the sheer quality of his work. In this book, he presents several lines of evidence to support his contention that the Gospels constitute or rely upon eyewitness testimony. Before I get into that, though, I'll give you the table of

contents:1) From the Historical Jesus to the Jesus of Testimony2) Papias on the Eyewitnesses3) Names in the Gospel Traditions4) Palestinian Jewish Names5) The Twelve6) Eyewitnesses "from the Beginning"7) The Petrine Perspective in the Gospel of Mark8) Anonymous Persons in Mark's Passion Narrative9) Papias on Mark and Matthew10) Models of Oral Tradition11) Transmitting the Jesus Traditions12) Anonymous Tradition or Eyewitness Testimony?13) Eyewitness Memory14) The Gospel of John as Eyewitness Testimony15) The Witness of the Beloved Disciple16) Papias on John17) Polycrates and Irenaeus on John18) The Jesus of Testimony

Bauckham engages in an extensive treatment of Papias. For those of you who don't know, Papias was an early Christian writer who may very well have been contemporaneous with the disciples of Jesus, as he professes to have been. He makes a number of statements about the Gospels, as do other early Christians. Papias, Bauckham contends, has been somewhat misunderstood and dismissed in recent scholarship. Not only does Bauckham defend Papias by showing his usage of historiographic terms and the notions of historiography at the time, he also provides a better understanding of what Papias is saying.

Two months ago, I attended a seminar in which the presenter kept referring to the "oral tradition" supposedly behind the Gospels. This has long been one of my pet peeves. Ten years ago, in *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus*, I pointed out that my grandmother wrote poetry at an age when, were she the little girl Jesus raised from the dead, would correspond to 110 AD! So I asked the presenter: "Why use the language of 'oral tradition' when the eyewitnesses would still most certainly have been around?" In a close-knit community like the early Church, given that Jesus' disciples would mostly have been young, even a high mortality rate (inflated by diseases of infancy) would leave many eyewitnesses still alive, and no doubt scattered through churches around the eastern empire, when the Gospels were written. Yet talk about "oral tradition" seems ubiquitous in NT studies, on all sides of the argument. The assumption that the gospels were NOT based on eyewitness accounts, is often made explicit by skeptics. Aside from the problem of timing, an even graver problem with this sort of talk is the nature of the Gospels themselves. Put simply, however one redacts and Qs and triple Qs and invents editorial communities and reads the minds of people one has never met or even heard of, the fact is these documents LOOK uncannily like genuine records of real people experiencing actual, and profoundly significant, events. That is the case I tried to make. (I also argued that there seem to be no genuine parallels in the ancient world to the Gospels.) Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* takes several independent and more rigorous paths to a similar conclusion. As other reviewers have noted, this book is not easy reading.

I heard many good things about this book, and Richard Bauckham is a terrific New Testament scholar, so I ordered it. His thesis is that the gospels are largely records of eyewitness testimony. He rejects the form critical conclusions of Bultmann and others, and argues that the gospels are more indebted to oral traditions and oral history. He bases a lot of his views on the reliability of the early 2nd century church father Papias. Papias heard testimony from those who were with the first century Christians. He was told that the Gospel of Mark was a repository of the apostle Peter's memories. He also says that this gospel was the one with the least chronological order. He also sees John as being the eyewitness testimony of the beloved disciple, who Bauckham takes to be John the Elder (not John the apostle, son of Zebedee). Bauckham talks a lot about the differences between personal memories and collective memories and relates this to the study of the gospels. Bauckham also has an interesting chapter about the names in the gospels. He arrives at the dubious conclusion that Levi the tax collector in Mark's Gospel is not the same as Matthew the tax collector in Matthew's gospel, believing that the author of Matthew changed the name to apply Levi's story to a bona fide member of the Twelve apostles. Kind of strange. It is more likely to me that Matthew changed his name from Levi to Matthew because the name "Matthew" is close to the word mathete, meaning "disciple," and Matthew wanted his name to reflect his changed status as a disciple of Jesus. Other than that, the book was loaded with dense argumentation and analysis, and I had to really concentrate to follow the discussion. This is definitely not light reading.

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