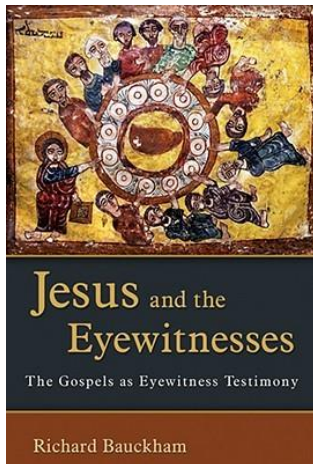


Richard Bauckham

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses



Richard Bauckham (b. 1946) is a towering presence in New Testament scholarship and, in this intriguing book, against prevailing academic attitudes, encourages us to reclaim confidence in the accuracy of the Gospel witness.

Typically, New Testament scholars believe stories of Jesus circulated semi-independently within communities, maintaining a high degree of accuracy but inevitably modified and honed in the telling until they are collected and edited into the forms we have today. Bauckham sees the appeal of this but contends that even conservative dating of the Gospels means there is not a sufficient time-gap for an oral tradition to have developed. Indeed, it would have been possible for people to check the written record with those who had known Jesus personally. In support of this he suggests that minor characters in the Gospels are named precisely because they are still known in the Early Church and are the source of the particular story being told.

He maintains the theory that Mark's Gospel is the result of notes taken by the character named Mark in Acts (a companion of Paul) from the mouth of Peter, though he accepts Mark has then edited the anecdotes into some sort of structure and also with the intention of trying to make sense of this as a story of salvation rather than as a simple biography. Mark is known for the literary device known as 'inclusio' - or 'sandwiching' - placing an important story in the middle of another one. Bauckham notes that Mark's Gospel is 'sandwiched' by Peter (if we accept the authenticity of the verses beyond 16:8): the first apostle to appear and the last to be mentioned by name. Luke's Gospel has the 'inclusio' of women, John's with the unnamed 'Beloved Disciple' - if he is the companion of Andrew in John 1. The Gospel writers are, in this way, indicating their primary sources.

Bauckham is particularly convinced by the witness of the Beloved Disciple. He identifies him not with the son of Zebedee but with a character known to history as John the Elder: a man from a Jerusalem - possibly priestly - family who ended his days in Ephesus. John's Gospel is markedly different from the other three. It mentions only seven of the twelve apostles by name but has a lot to say about other disciples: the Beloved, Nathaniel, Nicodemus, Lazarus, Mary and Martha - and of course is the only Gospel to give us the detailed stories of Thomas. He shows Peter as the man of action, but the Beloved as a man of perception and whereas Mark's Gospel is constrained to report Peter's words without too much embellishment, maybe John - as an actual friend of Jesus - feels freer to interpret Jesus more fully.

Bauckham is hoping to find the glue between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith and he believes he has achieved this with his category of Testimony. He reminds us of the powerful testimony of those who survived the Holocaust. Simple rapportage is inadequate to encapsulate such unique events which need a form of verbalized experience and he

suggests the Gospels display this same sort of quality. Indeed, to strip away the Testimony to reveal mere facts is to distort the profound truth of the narrative.

So, what sort of trust can we place in the Gospels? The category of Testimony is a compelling one. But Testimony necessarily incorporates personal reaction and reflection on history and is designed to deliberately convey a particular perspective. Also, the fact that Bauckham accepts the idea of two main sources for the Gospels (Mark and the source known as Q) implies that there is more going on here than simple eye-witness reporting. The variations between the Gospels seem too significant to be the result of differing ways of story-telling or translating. Bauckham makes a very convincing case to locate the written records about Jesus very closely to those who knew him personally, but allows that they remain what at least John's Gospel claims to be - accounts carefully created to teach the profound truths about the Lord Jesus.