In Honour of Jesus: Objectivity Is Overrated (Eyewitnesses and the Gospel)

In January of last year, I did an issue on the authorship of John's gospel, based on a book by Richard Bauckham (the answer, it turned out, is not as simple as that phrase, *the author of John*, might suggest). I finished with this statement, a mental note to myself: "On my reading list: Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses." After reading Bauckham's study of John, I very much wanted to read his book on all four gospels.

Little did I know that it would take me more than a year until I would finally get around to it. But now I did, and an exhilarating read it was. In order to fully appreciate Bauckham's effort, we need to know a little bit about what is called *form criticism*. Formerly a formidable

force in New Testament studies and still influential today, it is what Bauckham argues against.

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Form Criticism

Obviously, the gospels consist of numerous individual stories that may well have circulated independently of each other. Form criticism recognized that these stories can be classified in different types (the *forms* in *form criticism*) and argued that each form had its own specific use (*Sitz im Leben*) in the early church (something that is doubtful and remained unproven).

More importantly, these stories had in many cases been created or invented by the church for these varying purposes. This took place over a long period of time, as stories were passed on orally, by word of mouth, all the while developing and evolving as they were adjusted to the changing needs of the church. These stories, so form critics, tell us a lot about the communities that crafted them, that is, the early church, but not much about the historical Jesus.

Form
critics pointed to oral tradition as it exists in many people groups as a clear parallel to this process of gospel formation. Ironically, form criticism did not actually study oral tradition in the real world; the parallel between the evolving gospel tradition and oral tradition was based on theoretical considerations. Form critics were therefore
unaware of two notable features of oral tradition.

First, such traditions can be remarkably stable over time;
one does not easily create or invent a new tradition.

Second, such traditions were passed on over generations, not
merely a few decades. In fact, it does not make sense to speak of oral tradition if the generation who experienced the events is still alive. When the gospels were eventually written down, at least some of the eyewitnesses and many who had heard them first-hand were still alive. Oral tradition, therefore, is not a parallel to gospel formation. As
Bauckham points out:

> We imagine the traditions passing through many minds and mouths before they reached the writers of the Gospels. But the period in question is actually that of a relatively (for that period) long lifetime. (Bauckham 2006: 7)

> If, as I shall argue in this book, the period between the “historical” Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths, then the usual ways of thinking of oral tradition are not appropriate at all. (Ibid.: 8)

Papias In Pursuit of Witnesses

Bauckham repeatedly turns to the very little (a few fragments) that has survived of the writings of the Church Father Papias, and for good reasons. Papias lived from approximately AD 60 until 130 in the Roman province of Asia. He is our earliest source outside of the Bible for the authorship of the gospels.

Papias personally knew two of the daughters of the evangelist Philip and many of those who had been taught by the original disciples of Jesus and their successors. As a young man, he eagerly sought them out to learn what the apostles and other disciples of Jesus had taught. In these cases, he was therefore only one or two steps removed from the original source.

What we find in Papias is nothing like an anonymous tradition creating stories out of thin air, but instead a strong desire to get as close to the original witnesses (known by name) and their testimony as possible.

The Twelve as Witnesses

This hardly comes as a surprise, considering that Jesus called the 12 disciples explicitly for this specific role: to be witnesses. They were to be the “guarantors of the core of the gospel traditions” (Bauckham 2006: 108). Each of the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) includes an exact list of these 12. With this, they document the authoritative source of the traditions they are writing down.

> It is the contention of this book that, in the period up to the writing of the Gospels, gospel traditions were connected with named and known eyewitnesses, people who had heard the teaching of Jesus from his lips and committed it to memory, people who had witnessed the events of his ministry, death, and resurrection and themselves had formulated the stories about these events that they told. These eyewitnesses did not merely set going a process of oral transmission that soon went its own way without reference to them. They remained throughout their lifetimes the sources and, in some sense that may have varied for figures of central or more marginal significance, the authoritative

guarantors of the stories they continued to tell. (Ibid.: 93)

As Luke put it, these were “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,” who had “delivered [these things] to us” (Lk. 1:2). Presumably, he knew many by name. The Greek word translated “delivered” in Luke 1 is a technical term for the passing on of a tradition. Paul uses the same terminology when he speaks of receiving and delivering the gospel tradition (1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 2:6; 2 Thess. 3:6; cf. Bauckham 2006: 264). When the time came to put this tradition in writing, the eyewitnesses were still known and served as guarantors of what was written down.

The Gospels as Eyewitness Accounts

In the gospel of Mark, the first disciple named is Peter (Mark 1:16). He is also the last one named (Mark 16:7). This forms a so-called *inclusio* around the bulk of the gospel. Bauckham (ibid.: chapter 6) points to parallels in Greek history writing to argue that this shows Peter to be the main source for Mark's gospel. Interestingly, Luke, who appears to have borrowed much from Mark, has his own *inclusio*, different from Mark but with the same effect: Simon is the first disciple mentioned in Luke 4:38 and the last one in Luke 24:34 (ibid.: 126).

Matthew does not have such an *inclusio*, but John does (ibid.: 127-9). In John 1:35ff, one of the first two disciples who follow Jesus remains anonymous (the other one is Andrew, the brother of Peter). A strong case can be made that this is the one later described as the disciple whom Jesus loved, who will turn out to be the author of this gospel. As such, he is the last disciple mentioned, in John 21:24.

In each of these three cases, the *inclusio* identifies the main source, the most important witness for the respective gospel.

John is even more subtle. Right after the first appearance of the unnamed disciple Peter appears for the first time (John 1:38). Right before the last reference to the unknown disciple Peter appears for the last time (John 20:21). Assuming the unnamed disciple is John (either the apostle or the elder), the *inclusio* is therefore *John Peter / Peter John*, suggesting the unnamed disciple is in an even better position to be a witness to Jesus than Peter. Bauckham (ibid.: 127-129) points to additional linguistic parallels between John 1:35-38 and John 21:20-24 that make the *inclusio* even stronger.

Ancient Historiography and Eyewitnesses

The above shows the gospels to be in line with what would have been considered 'best practice' in ancient history writing. Ideally, the author would himself have been involved in the events described and would have experienced them first-hand. Obviously, what was valued was not objectivity but an inside

perspective. If the author was not himself an eyewitness, he should seek out those who were and base his account on their testimony, the way Luke does.

This helps us to make sense of a statement by Papias that has often been misunderstood:

> For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice. (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3-4, quoted in Bauckham 2006: 16)

Papias is not referring to oral tradition. He does not mean that he would rather hear something passed on by word of mouth rather than have it in writing. The “living and surviving voice” is an eyewitness, someone who was there and can speak from personal experience. Papias wants to hear what those who were present when it happened, those who had been with Jesus, had said – from a reliable second- or third-hand source if necessary, but as close to the original voice as still possible.

Since each document had to be copied by hand, writing could easily be tampered with. This is of course true for oral tradition as well, but not for direct eyewitness testimony. Provided the witness was reliable, this was the most trustworthy source of information available. This is what Papias was pursuing and what the gospels are based on:

> In this book, I have followed Samuel Byrskog in arguing that the Gospels, though in some ways a very distinctive form of historiography, share broadly in the attitude to eyewitness testimony that was common among historians in the Greco-Roman period. These historians valued above all reports of firsthand experience of the events they recounted. Best of all was for the historian to have been himself a participant in the events (direct autopsy). Failing that (and no historian was present at all the events he needed to recount, not least because usually some would be simultaneous), they sought informants who could speak from firsthand knowledge and whom they could interview

(indirect autopsy). (Ibid.: 479)

Best Practice: "Involved" beats "objective"

‘Best Practice’ in Ancient Historiography

Best practice included other features beyond basing an account on eyewitness testimony. The account should show chronological order, literary arrangement, and elucidation. It should provide a coherent, continuous, and comprehensive account starting from a properly chosen beginning.

Papias felt Mark and Matthew lacked this sophistication of order and arrangement, but nevertheless defended them. (We don’t know what Papias thought of Luke; Bauckham 2006: 421.) In Mark’s case, it was because Mark had not himself been an eyewitness. He did the best he could by faithfully recording the stories told by Peter. Since he was not an eyewitness, he could not do more. In Matthew’s case, the original had been written in Hebrew (so Papias seems to have believed) and had been translated by different people who had not been eyewitnesses. In the process, the original order and arrangement had been

largely lost. Whether Papias was right in this is a different matter, but such were his convictions.

By implication, this suggests Papias would have considered John's gospel superior (so Bauckham argues; ibid.: 225-228). I don't think it is helpful to argue about which gospel is the greatest (Jesus is the greatest, not any one gospel), but that is not the point here. It is interesting that Papias may indeed have had a favourite and even more so why that would be.

It is because John gave us an eyewitness account in order (John pays substantial attention to chronological detail) and with significant sophistication. He provides a more continuous narrative than the other gospels and gives profound insight in who Jesus was and why he did what he did. In other words, more than the other gospels, John fulfilled the expectations of good history writing. In addition to 'facts,' he also gives us his own understanding and interpretation of Jesus. Since John had an insider perspective, both his facts and his interpretation are trustworthy. Here is Bauckham's own statement of this thesis; it is dense, so you may have to read slowly:

> The greater selectivity of events recorded, the more continuous narrative with its more strongly delineated plot, the lengthy discourses and debates—all these distinctive features of the Gospel of John, as compared with the Synoptics, are what make possible the much fuller development of the author's own interpretation of Jesus and his story, just as comparable features of the works of the Greco-Roman historians enable the expression of their own understanding of the history, making their works much more than mere reports of what the eyewitnesses said. But in the case of the Gospel of John these characteristics are linked with its claim to be entirely the testimony of an author who was himself an eyewitness. In this case, the whole historiographic process of eyewitness observation and participation, interrogation of other eyewitnesses, arrangement and narrativization in the formation of an integrated and rhetorically persuasive work – all this was the work of an eyewitness, whose interpretation was, of course, in play at every level of the process, but in what one might think of as a cumulative manner, such that the finished Gospel has a high degree of highly reflective interpretation … The more reflectively interpretative Gospel of John does not, by contrast, assimilate the eyewitness reports beyond recognition into its own elaboration of the story, but is, as it stands, the way one eyewitness understood what he and others had seen. The author's eyewitness status authorizes the interpretation. Thus, whereas scholars have often supposed that this Gospel could not have been written by an eyewitness because of its high degree of interpretation of the events and the words of Jesus, by contrast with the Synoptics, in fact the high degree of interpretation is appropriate precisely because this is the only one of the canonical Gospels that claims eyewitness authorship. (Ibid.: 410-411)

Nugget 1: No Anonymous Gospels

It has become a long issue, but there are three more things from the book, three nuggets I want to share. First, it becomes clear that the gospels are not anonymous (ibid.: 300ff). To be sure, none of them tell us in the text itself who the author is. The titles by which we know them (the gospel according to …) are old but not original; they first appeared around AD 200. However, they are likely to be accurate. For one, no gospel was ever associated with a different name.

More importantly, each community that first received a particular gospel upon its completion by the author would have known who that author was. And as soon as any church had more than one gospel, they would have had to distinguish between the scrolls. The traditional titles are therefore likely to be older than the manuscripts in which they first appear. There was never an anonymous gospel or an anonymous oral gospel tradition circulating in the early church.

Nugget 2: Seven Witnesses in John

It is well-known that the gospel of John is structured according to seven signs that Jesus did. It also includes seven “I am” statements. New to me is that John 1-12 includes seven witnesses (listed in ibid.: 387).

Nugget 3: Jewish Names

Bauckham devotes an entire chapter (4) to Jewish names used in Palestine between 330 BC

and AD 200. The six most common names are Simon, Joseph, Judah, Eleazar, Yohanan (or John), and Joshua or Jesus (Bauckham 2006: 70). These six names account for roughly 40 percent of the names of a little more than 2,500 Jewish males in Palestine whose names are known to us from that time period.

Although these names do appear in the Hebrew Bible, Bauckham argues that they were not given for this reason. Rather, they appear because (except for Joshua and, possibly, Joseph; see ibid.: 75) they are the names of the sons of Mattathias. Also known as the Maccabeans, they are members of the Jewish priestly family that rose up in rebellion against the Seleucid oppressors in the second century BC.

This tells us something about Jewish aspirations and the strength of Jewish nationalism at the time. The name of Joshua, of course, as the one who defeated the Canaanites and took possession of the land of Israel, fits right in.

It is also noteworthy that certain biblical names do not appear, at least not in Palestine. We do not know of anyone named Moses, Elijah, or David during these centuries (ibid.: 77). Since, according to varying messianic expectations, each of these three was expected to return, it may have been thought too presumptuous to name one's son after one of these coming liberators.

In Honour of Jesus

One more thing. Why did I title this, "In Honour of Jesus"? It is not related to Bauckham's book. This is issue number 60, which means: next month I complete five years of Create a Learning Site. In other words, I have a celebration coming up, and I am reminding myself whom this is for. Thank you, Jesus!

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