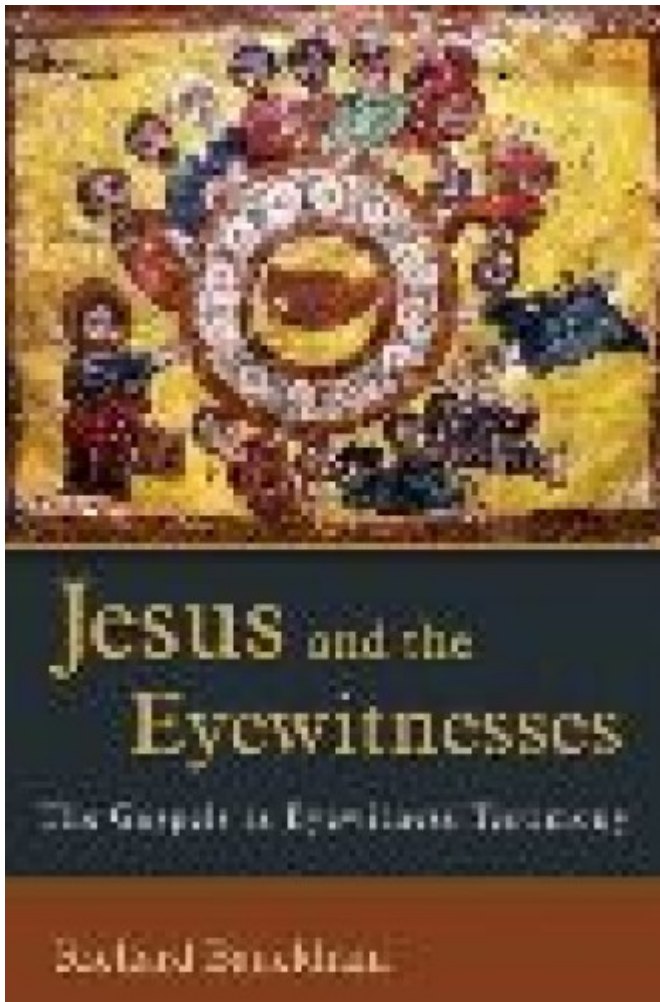


# Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

reviewed by [Werner H. Kelber](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

Richard Bauckham  
Eerdmans

Richard Bauckham, professor at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, poses a severe challenge to form criticism, the highly influential 20th-century methodology that deals with the oral transmission of the biblical stories. Instead of postulating a lengthy process of anonymous oral transmission preceding the formation of the Gospels, as form criticism does, Bauckham situates the Gospels in close proximity to those who witnessed the events they recounted: "Not oral tradition but eyewitness testimony should be our principal model," he writes.

Bauckham's book raises major theoretical issues related to form criticism, external versus internal evidence, Gospel narrativity, and testimony versus memory.

*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* deals primarily with the Gospels of Mark and John and only tangentially with Matthew and Luke. Bauckham's theory concerning the assignation of eyewitnesses is not a new one, but essentially a replay of the thesis advocated by Bishop Papias of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (d. ca. 130 CE). Principally Bauckham asserts that the three synoptics embody the shared eyewitness testimony of the Twelve, plus additional attestation from female disciples, from people who experienced Jesus' healings and from anonymous individuals mentioned in the Gospels. Mark, relying on the eyewitness Peter, wrote the earliest Gospel. The Gospel of John, according to its own affirmation, was written by the "beloved disciple," an eyewitness and intimate of Jesus. Bauckham identifies the beloved disciple as John the Elder, whom Papias mentioned but did not explicitly link with John's Gospel.

Bauckham is entirely correct in pointing out the shortcomings of form criticism. His judgment is widely shared, although a systematic reflection on the rise and fall of form criticism is still lacking. But can one now replace oral tradition with eyewitnesses?

To the extent that Bauckham acknowledges tradition at all, his key designation for its operation is "control." Tradition is a matter of memorization, and memorization is essentially an exercise of control by individuals. Bauckham does not take his readers to the core problem of form criticism: designed to come to terms with speech and oral tradition, it remained patently culture-bound and captive to the print mentality of a post-Gutenberg intellectualism. His principal source on orality studies is Jan Vansina, whose *Oral Tradition as History* (1985) has rightly been hailed as a pioneering work. What is absent from *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is a consideration

of the work of Albert Lord, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Ruth Finnegan and John Miles Foley, among others, who have produced a massive amount of new knowledge about the technicalities and aesthetics of oral tradition.

Bauckham's volume relies heavily on external evidence. Few will be able to rival his knowledge of Papias and numerous other early patristic sources. Additionally, Bauckham buttresses his argument with internal evidence furnished by the Gospels themselves. He writes that the list of the Twelve in the synoptics corroborates those apostles' status as "the official body of eyewitnesses who had formulated and promulgated the main corpus of these Gospels traditions," and he claims that individual characters in the Gospel narratives also function as eyewitnesses in the sense that Bartimaeus and the young man who fled naked, for example, would have reported their own stories.

Moreover, Bauckham points out that the names of most individuals in the Gospels are popular names in Palestinian Judaism and cannot, therefore, be later accretions of tradition. He says that Mark's Gospel offers the perspective of different disciples, especially that of Peter. Perhaps most important, Bauckham places great weight on the device of the *inclusio*: Peter is the first and the last disciple to be named in Mark's narrative (1:16; 16:7), and the beloved disciple is likewise the first and last disciple named in John (1:37; 21:20-24), indicating that they were the historical eyewitness authorities.

An evaluation of the internal evidence brings us to the issue of Gospel narrativity. Bauckham acknowledges narrative patterns in the Gospels. He writes approvingly of "Mark's masterly composition of his narrative," and he views the Gospel narrators "as sophisticated authors who ordered and shaped their traditions into narrative wholes." But does Bauckham have sufficient understanding of the Gospels' thoroughgoing employment of incidents and agents in a temporal configuration?

From a narrative perspective, it is difficult to see why the Twelve, the escaping young man, Bartimaeus or any other named or anonymous character should count as evidence for their own roles as historical sources for the narrative content. As for Mark's assumed Petrine perspective, could one not say that a full narrative reading of the Gospel encourages the point of view of Jesus—a point of view that insistently draws hearers and readers away from the points of view of the failing disciples? At the beginning of the narrative, hearers and readers are focused on Jesus' programmatic opening words (1:14-15), and at the end they will be stunned by the

women's failure to communicate with the disciples (16:8).

As for the Johannine *inclusio*, the identity of the anonymous disciple (1:37) seems far too uncertain to build an argument for him being an eyewitness. Moreover, as Bauckham knows, even if we grant the presence of the beloved disciple in 1:37, he disappears from the narrative until 13:23. Whether he witnessed any events that are reported from 1:38 to 13:22 is not important for the narrator. But it is an issue that must concern us if we wish to operate with an empirical concept of eyewitnesses. What if the internal evidence does not match the external evidence?

One of Bauckham's significant achievements is moving memory from its banishment under form criticism almost to center stage. The "defining characteristic of memory," Bauckham writes, is that it "straddles past and present in such a way that the past influences the present at the same time as the present affects the way in which the past is recalled." Precisely! Applied to the Gospels this concept suggests that the deepest impulse driving the composition of the Gospels is the retrieval of the past of Jesus for the benefit of the present of Markan, Matthean, Lucan and Johannine hearers and readers.

It seems unfortunate that Bauckham allows the concept of testimony and its correlate, eyewitnesses, to eclipse memory. Both are potent theological concepts, but memory conceived as a balancing of past and present interests seems the more appropriate category for understanding the Gospels. Even Papias might agree. In his prologue to "The Sayings of the Lord," he never referred to Peter as an eyewitness. Instead the bishop twice stated that Mark wrote down what "Peter recalled from memory." In effect, then, for Papias the Gospel is rooted in memory.