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## How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research

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In his controversial 2006 publication *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham outlines his theory that accounts of Jesus' life and ministry that appear in the NT are eyewitness testimonies or very close to eyewitness testimonies.<sup>1</sup> In saying this, he opposes the generally accepted view of form critics that the Gospels are records of collective communal traditions that were in circulation in the early church for quite some time before they were written down, and that in the process of transmission and recording they were redacted to serve the theological purposes of the different communities from which they arose.<sup>2</sup> Based on this more generally accepted understanding, scholars who have looked at what we can know about the historical Jesus from the Gospels have generally decided that the answer is "not much."<sup>3</sup>

I would like to acknowledge the advice provided by several people who read earlier drafts of this article: my two doctoral advisors, Prof. Majella Franzmann, University of Otago, New Zealand, and Prof. Lynda Garland, University of New England, Australia; my mentor and friend Prof. April DeConick, Rice University, U.S.A.; Prof. Paul Trebilco (Theology) and Prof. Geoffrey White (Psychology), both of University of Otago; and especially Dr. Bruce Stevenson (Psychology), University of New England, who facilitated my entry into the psychological literature and provided valuable early feedback on the psychological aspects of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 197–214.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 241–46.

<sup>3</sup> Bauckham credits Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann with pioneering form criticism (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 242) and especially has problems with Bultmann. See also Bauckham, "In Response to My Respondents: *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* in Review," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008): 225–53, here 244.

Bauckham suggests that this is not so. Basing his premise on Samuel Byrskog's work on the historical methods of ancient historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus, he asserts that historians of the time used eyewitness testimony as the preferred source of information for their histories and that the Gospel writers would have looked for eyewitnesses to the events that they recorded rather than simply recording community traditions.<sup>4</sup> He says that the eyewitnesses "remained the living and active guarantors of the traditions" in whose name they were transmitted, and that "[t]estimony offers us . . . a theological model for understanding the Gospels as the entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus."<sup>5</sup> He also argues that research into oral transmission shows that custodians of oral tradition are able to transmit large blocks of material very accurately over time.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Bauckham suggests that we can be (significantly) more confident than form critics suggest about the historicity of the Gospel accounts.

I will not attempt here to evaluate the technical aspects of Bauckham's argument about which parts of the Gospel are likely to be eyewitness accounts or close to eyewitness accounts and who the eyewitnesses might be. These aspects have recently been evaluated effectively by a number of scholars in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus (JSHJ)* and the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament (JSNT)*.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I pose this question: What consequences does accepting (parts of) the Gospels as eyewitness accounts have for biblical studies? In doing so, I ask:

- What light does psychological research shed on the extent to which information obtained from eyewitness accounts could be considered to be accurate information about the historical Jesus?<sup>8</sup>
- What consequences does this have for the way biblical scholarship might treat eyewitness accounts?

<sup>4</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 24, citing Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 48–65.

<sup>5</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 290, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 246–63.

<sup>7</sup> See the following articles in *JSHJ* 6 (2008): James D. G. Dunn, "Eyewitnesses and the Oral Jesus Tradition," 85–105; Samuel Byrskog, "The Eyewitnesses as Interpreters of the Past: Reflections on Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," 157–68; David R. Catchpole, "On Proving Too Much: Critical Hesitations about Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," 169–81; I. Howard Marshall, "A New Consensus on Oral Tradition? A Review of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," 182–93; Stephen J. Patterson, "Can You Trust a Gospel? A Review of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," 194–210; Theodore J. Weeden Sr, "Polemics as a Case for Dissent: A Response to Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," 211–24. See also the following articles in *JSNT* 31 (2008): Jens Schröter, "The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony? A Critical Examination of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," 195–209; Craig A. Evans, "The Implications of Eyewitness Tradition," 211–19.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term "accurate," in the sense of "true" or "correct," rather than the term "reliable," which Bauckham uses, because the latter has a technical use in psychology that is not, I believe,

In the course of answering these questions, there is a need to move somewhat beyond what psychologists define as eyewitness testimony to include an examination of research into retelling stories. Psychology would not consider this to be eyewitness testimony, because the events being recounted in the story are not part of the lived experience of the person telling the stories. In the context of Jesus' teaching, however, the *content* of the story is as important as is the fact that he told it, so a faithful eyewitness testimony needs to include the content of the stories, even if they are fiction rather than fact. Thus, any consideration of eyewitness testimony to Jesus' ministry also needs to include what might be termed "earwitness" testimony—how people reported Jesus' words.

### I. EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Most people perceive eyewitness testimony to be accurate, presumably because the eyewitness was present when an event occurred and therefore must know what happened. There are, however, a number of court cases where someone has been wrongly convicted on the testimony of an eyewitness despite the availability of conflicting evidence from other sources.<sup>9</sup> In research published in 1904, William Stern demonstrated that eyewitness testimony is not necessarily accurate.<sup>10</sup> Since then, many researchers have contributed to our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of eyewitness testimony in providing us with an accurate account of what really happened at a particular event. This information is of potential use in the study of those parts of early Christian documents that are presented as eyewitness testimony, and therefore history, in the canonical and noncanonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and some parts of the epistles. In using this information, however, one must recognize that research conducted in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western contexts is not necessarily directly transferable to first-century Palestine, because the different cultural contexts and levels of literacy will have significant effects on memory processes. Bearing this in mind, let us look at the relevant research findings.

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what Bauckham intends. In psychology, reliable results are simply results that can be reproduced. If the design of an experiment is poor, the results might be highly reliable but incorrect.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 91–93; Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 1–19; Gary L. Wells, Amina Memon, and Steven D. Penrod, "Eyewitness Evidence: Improving Its Probative Value," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 7 (2006): 45–75; Gary L. Wells and Elizabeth A. Olson, "Eyewitness Testimony," *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (2003): 277–78.

<sup>10</sup> William Stern, "Realistic Experiments," in *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts* (ed. Ulric Neisser; San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1982), 95–108, originally published as "Wirklichkeitsversuche," *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Aussage* 2 (1904): 1–31.

Most psychologists consider that eyewitness memory is autobiographical memory. It is concerned with specific life events experienced by the person who remembers them.<sup>11</sup> Because information represented in it is about specific events, objects, places, and people, it is context-bound. It is normally organized either chronologically (by time of occurrence) or spatially (by place of occurrence). Its source is perception of personal experiences and life events, and its focus is on subjective reality (the self).<sup>12</sup>

Autobiographical memory has three major components: verbal narrative, imagery, and emotions. Autobiographical memories are often recalled as stories told to others. The images associated with them lead to the specific, concrete details that make them seem more accurate and believable, while the emotions associated with them can have profound effects on how effectively people can retrieve autobiographical memories.<sup>13</sup>

Remembering involves a three-stage process of acquisition (encoding), retention (storage), and retrieval.<sup>14</sup> Changes in content can be introduced at all of these stages, and there are significant numbers of different factors that can cause these changes. I will consider only those factors likely to be relevant to the production of accounts of Jesus' life and ministry.

### *Factors Affecting Memory Acquisition*

In order for an event to be accurately recalled, it must first be accurately perceived so that accurate information about it can be encoded for storage in memory. Much of how we perceive (and also retain and retrieve) events can be explained in terms of schema theory, first developed by Frederic C. Bartlett in his work on remembering stories.<sup>15</sup> A schema is a mental representation that incorporates all knowledge of a particular type of object or event gained from past experience.<sup>16</sup> Schemas are used to interpret new episodes, enabling us to anticipate how to react in particular circumstances.

<sup>11</sup> William F. Brewer proposed using "recollective memory" for this kind of autobiographical memory ("What Is Recollective Memory?" in *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* [ed. David C. Rubin; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 19–66). While there has been some uptake in the literature, I will use the more widely used "autobiographical memory."

<sup>12</sup> Gillian Cohen, "Everyday Memory," in Gillian Cohen, George Kiss, and Martin E. Le Voi, *Memory: Current Issues* (Open Guides to Psychology; Buckingham [England]; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993), 50–51.

<sup>13</sup> David C. Rubin. "Introduction," in idem, *Remembering Our Past*, 2–3.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, xii.

<sup>15</sup> Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge Psychological Library; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 199–204.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, "Everyday Memory," 27.

For example, our schema for “winter” is determined by the winters we have previously experienced and perhaps also by what we have read and heard about winters. Even if we have never seen snow, a snow scene would fit into most Westerners’ schemas for winter and thus for Christmas. Hence, many people visualize the shepherds who visited the stable where Jesus was born as coming in from snow-covered fields. In fact, no shepherd willingly takes animals out into the snow, let alone keeps them there overnight, so this scenario is not logical in the context of the event.

Some important behaviors predictable from schema theory are the following:

- A piece that matches a schema will be recalled with fewer omissions and changes in order and content than one that does not.
- Changes in recall of a particular detail will make it more like the schema, both in order and content. Thus, if a detail cannot be recalled, or does not fit the schema, it will often be replaced with a common substitute from the schema.
- Schemas allow listeners to draw inferences about omitted portions of a piece that they already know.
- The aspects of a piece that are better recalled and responded to more quickly are those that are more central or more important to the schema.<sup>17</sup>

To illustrate: someone who is asked to recount what s/he did before 9:00 A.M. on the day on which s/he is being questioned is likely to be able to produce an accurate and fairly detailed account. If asked to tell what they did before 9:00 A.M. four Wednesdays ago, most people would be far less sure, but could use their Wednesday morning schema to provide a believable account of an “ordinary” Wednesday. If the account includes having a shower, the hearer will use her/his shower schema to know that this involves standing unclothed under running water and if the teller says that s/he drove to work in a Kia or a Prius or a Lamborghini, most hearers will have a vehicle schema that indicates that these are car equivalents, but will not necessarily recall the make of car later.

Memories are acquired by individual eyewitnesses and a number of variables affect witnesses’ ability to perceive accurately. The ones that are relevant to this paper are the following:

1. *Expectations.* What witnesses expect to see or hear can affect the way they perceive an event.<sup>18</sup> Expectations can be shaped by culture, stereotypes, past expe-

<sup>17</sup> David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Jerome S. Bruner and Leo Joseph Postman, “On the Perception of Incongruity: A Paradigm,” *Journal of Personality* 18 (1949): 206–23.

rience, or personal prejudice.<sup>19</sup> Seeing things that run counter to our expectations makes them surprising and thus memorable. Hence, we can consider that Gospel accounts of actions that run counter to cultural stereotypes or to what we would predict to be personal experiences of the people of Jesus' day are more likely to be remembered than supplied from schemas. Negative portrayals of the Romans or positive portrayals of the disciples could as easily have come from schemas as from actual events, while countercultural pictures of social outcasts in Jewish society such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) and the stories of the woman at the well (John 4:39–45) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) are more likely to have come from actual memories of events than from schemas. This does not, however, guarantee the veracity of the surprising material and cannot be extrapolated to indicate that the more surprising an event, the more likely it is to be a historic event.<sup>20</sup> It simply suggests that it has not been unconsciously inserted into the story to replace details of the actual event that the storyteller cannot remember.

2. *Type of fact.* People tend to find it more difficult to remember things that they need to estimate such as height, weight, distance, numbers of people in large groups, and duration of activities or events.<sup>21</sup> This may explain the variations among Gospels in the size of the crowd that was miraculously fed by Jesus with bread and fish (Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14). In contrast, the time at which an event occurred is often accurately remembered, because people use temporal cyclic schemas to place an event in time, for example, time of day, day of the week, season of the year. Thus, events that occurred during Jewish worship would normally be remembered as happening on the Sabbath. They can, however, be displaced in time, so that the person who remembers a winter event may remember it happening a year or two before or after it actually occurred.<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon may help to explain the discrepancy between the Synoptics and John about the timing of the cleansing of the temple. The Synoptics place it at the end of Jesus' ministry (Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48), while John has it at the beginning (John 2:13–22). All four, however, situate it in time shortly before Passover.

3. *Event significance and detail salience or prominence.* In order to remember something, a person needs to attend to it, and, since it is impossible for an indi-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.; Gordon W. Allport and Leo Joseph Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), 97, also 102; Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 37–39, 40–42, citing Albert H. Hastorf and Hadley Cantril, "They Saw a Game: A Case Study," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology/Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 49 (1954): 129–34. See also Schacter, *Sins*, 153–57.

<sup>20</sup> Catchpole ("Proving," 175) argues against this last.

<sup>21</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 27–31.

<sup>22</sup> Steen F. Larsen, Charles P. Thompson, and Tia Hansen, "Time in Autobiographical Memory," in Rubin, *Remembering Our Past*, 129–56.

vidual to attend to all the stimuli in his or her environment at any given time, s/he selects those things to which s/he will attend, often unconsciously. Normally these are stimuli that are noticeable, sudden, surprising, or interesting; those that are potentially important; and those that are continuous with what has already happened.<sup>23</sup> An event that a witness considers insignificant is often inaccurately and incompletely remembered compared to one to which a witness attaches significance. Witnesses who perceive events to be insignificant are not motivated to bring the selective process of paying attention fully to bear on those events.<sup>24</sup> The resultant poor encoding reduces the likelihood that the events will later be able to be retrieved. This also applies to which details of an event are remembered—the prominent or salient details will be remembered, while others will not.<sup>25</sup>

4. *The personality and interests of the witness.* Both of these factors affect how significant and salient particular events and the details of those events are to a particular eyewitness. All people are better at remembering some things than others, but the strengths and weaknesses vary from person to person.<sup>26</sup> Ulric Neisser suggests that this results from both individual differences and individual experience.<sup>27</sup> The personalities and interests of eyewitnesses will determine what each finds interesting, surprising, potentially important, and therefore more memorable, as Bauckham recognizes in his response to I. Howard Marshall.<sup>28</sup> Bartlett comments that material that is associated with a witness's interest is "sure to reappear" in the retelling of events. Material pleasing to the witness is likely to be elaborated on while displeasing material is likely to be distorted.<sup>29</sup> Gordon W. Allport and Leo Joseph Postman's work demonstrates that a group of army personnel remembered the

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Norman Haber and Lyn Haber, "Experiencing, Remembering and Reporting Events," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 6 (2000): 1057–97, esp. 1060–62; Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 25–27.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Buckhout, "Eyewitness Testimony," in Neisser, *Memory Observed*, 116–25, here 117; originally published in *Scientific American* 231 (1974): 23–31. Raymond S. Nickerson and Marilyn Jager Adams demonstrate how poorly U.S. citizens recall the detail of the appearance of a U.S. penny, despite its familiarity ("Long-Term Memory for a Common Object," *Cognitive Psychology* 11 [1979]: 287–307, reprinted in Neisser, *Memory Observed*, 163–75). See also Maria Meo, Maxwell J. Roberts, and Francesco S. Marucci, "Element Salience as a Predictor of Item Difficulty for Raven's Progressive Matrices," *Intelligence* 35 (2007): 359–68.

<sup>25</sup> Schacter (*Sins*, 12–60) outlines the various mechanisms by which people forget details. Transience is caused by a combination of interference by other memories and deterioration of the neural pathways originally formed by the memories. Absentmindedness is caused by poor initial encoding.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, "Everyday Memory," 21.

<sup>27</sup> Neisser, "Memory: What Are the Important Questions?" in idem, *Memory Observed*, 3–19, esp. 16.

<sup>28</sup> See Bauckham, "In Response," 241.

<sup>29</sup> Bartlett, *Remembering*, 90, also 62.

names of towns and their distances from a signpost in a picture far better than persons whose professional lives did not require this kind of information.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the personality and interests of eyewitnesses are a source of unconscious bias.

Events that are very surprising and have a high level of importance or emotional arousal give rise to *flashbulb memories*—memories that are especially vivid and appear to be frozen in time, as though in a photograph.<sup>31</sup> People may have flashbulb memories of where they were and what they were doing when they heard about public events like 9/11 or the first moon landing, as well as similarly significant but more private events like the birth of a baby or the tragic death of a loved one.<sup>32</sup> Eyewitnesses to Jesus' miracles and to his postresurrection appearances would be expected to have formed flashbulb memories of these events. Flashbulb memories are often considered to be exceptionally accurate, yet research indicates that, like other memories, they deteriorate over time and are not always as accurate as the person remembering thinks they are.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, recent evidence suggests that flashbulb memories actually develop over the first week after the event, taking into consideration what is learned from discussion with others.<sup>34</sup>

5. *Observational point of view and perceptual adequacy*, or how well the observer can see and hear what is happening. Many scholars explain the differences between two different Gospel accounts of what appears to be the same event as the result of redaction. In some cases, an alternative explanation would be that

<sup>30</sup> Allport and Postman, *Rumor*, 84–86. Their research involved a person who was looking at a picture describing it to someone who could not see it, who then described it to another person who could not see it and so on down a “rumor chain” of six or seven people. See also Haber and Haber, “Experiencing,” 1062–63.

<sup>31</sup> The classic paper on this is Roger Brown and James Kulik, “Flashbulb Memories,” *Cognition* 5 (1977): 73–99, with the prototype memory being hearing of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

<sup>32</sup> Harper A. Roehm, Jr., and Michelle L. Roehm, “Can Brand Encounters Inspire Flashbulb Memories?” *Psychology and Marketing* 24 (2007): 25–40.

<sup>33</sup> Annette Bohn and Dorthe Berntsen, “Pleasantness Bias in Flashbulb Memories: Positive and Negative Flashbulb Memories of the Fall of the Berlin Wall among East and West Germans,” *Memory & Cognition* 35 (2007): 565–77; Daniel Greenberg, “Flashbulb Memories: How Psychological Research Shows That Our Most Powerful Memories May Be Untrustworthy (False Memories),” *Skeptic* 11 (2005): 74–91; Martin A. Conway et al., “The Formation of Flashbulb Memories,” *Memory & Cognition* 22 (1994): 326; Neisser, “Snapshots or Benchmarks?” in idem, *Memory Observed*, 43–48; David C. Rubin and Marc Kozin, “Vivid Memories,” *Cognition* 16 (1984): 81–95; Jennifer M. Talarico and David C. Rubin, “Confidence, Not Consistency, Characterizes Flashbulb Memories,” *Psychological Science* 14 (2003): 455–62; Brewer, “Recollective Memory,” 37. However, Charles P. Thompson and Thaddeus Cowan (“Flashbulb Memories: A Nicer Interpretation of a Neisser Recollection,” *Cognition* 22 [1986]: 199–200) and Greenberg (“Flashbulb Memories”) provide evidence for the enduring accuracy of flashbulb memories.

<sup>34</sup> Charles A. Weaver III and Kevin S. Krug, “Consolidation-like Effects in Flashbulb Memories: Evidence from September 11, 2001,” *American Journal of Psychology* 117 (2004): 517–30.

the people who were the sources of the two accounts were standing at different places with respect to the action and so saw and heard different things.<sup>35</sup>

### *Deterioration and Change during Storage and Retrieval*

Losses of, and changes in, memory come about in part through what happens during the passage of time. As time passes, details and even whole events may disappear from the memories of eyewitnesses. In addition, the way a witness thinks about an event over time can affect the way s/he recalls it. A witness's thoughts tend to bend in a direction that would be advantageous to her/his purposes.<sup>36</sup> Bauckham mentions an example—Rossini's memory of his attempt as a young man to see Beethoven. Rossini's early account was of a very frustrating occasion on which he had difficulty gaining entrance to Beethoven's house and could not communicate because of the language barrier. In later life, he told a story of a wonderful encounter in which the great maestro praised and encouraged him.<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to what happens in the acquisition stage, a significant amount of what affects memories during storage and retrieval is a function of the individual as part of a community. Eyewitnesses can be provided with information after the event (postevent information) from a variety of sources. This may reinforce their memories, but it may also alter them and even cause things that did not take place to become incorporated into a memory. Talking to other people who also witnessed the event may change how each individual recalls it, and people are not very accurate in their ability to remember whether it is something they experienced or something they were told about.<sup>38</sup> There is also evidence that many people do not remember previously held attitudes or beliefs when they come to a new position.<sup>39</sup> All these factors make postevent information a common source of alteration of eyewitness testimony, especially given the likelihood that the oral tradition about Jesus originated as groups of people touched by his ministry talked to each other about it.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Haber and Haber, "Experiencing," 159–60.

<sup>36</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 78–80.

<sup>37</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 320.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 54–79; Schacter, *Sins*, 88–111; Haber and Haber, "Experiencing," 1068–70; Helen M. Paterson and Richard I. Kemp, "Comparing Methods of Encountering Post-Event Information: The Power of Co-Witness Suggestion," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 20 (2006): 1083–99.

<sup>39</sup> Marcia K. Johnson, Shahin Hashtroudi, and D. Stephen Lindsay, "Source Monitoring," *Psychological Bulletin* 114 (1993): 3–28; George R. Goethals and Richard F. Reckman, "Recalling Previously Held Attitudes," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 9 (1973): 491–501.

<sup>40</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "Social Memory and the Oral Jesus Tradition," in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity: The Fifth Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium (Durham, September 2004)* (ed. Stephen C. Barton, Loren T. Stuckenbruck, and Benjamin G. Wold; WUNT 212; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 179–94, 189–91.

In addition, most people, most of the time, are not concerned about preserving an accurate record of what happened in their past. Memories help people to make sense of the world and of themselves, and the stories they tell tend to focus on what happened to them and what that event meant to them.<sup>41</sup> In fact, one purpose of reconstructing autobiographical information, as is done in eyewitness testimony, may be to construct and reconstruct the story we wish to be known because it justifies our being, our culture, our way of life.<sup>42</sup> This is done at a subconscious rather than a conscious level—eyewitnesses do not consciously develop an account that fits how they wish to be known.

Factors that influence memory after the event include the following:

1. *Memory enhancement.* If someone mentions some facet of an event to another witness, that facet is more likely to be remembered subsequently.<sup>43</sup> For example if, immediately after an event, one eyewitness comments to another about the color of a participant's clothing, the color of the clothing is more likely to be remembered by the eyewitness who had not consciously noticed it.

2. *Collective memory processes.* As one would expect, a group of people working together will be able to retrieve more details of a particular event than any one member of the group working alone. If, however, the individual memories of each person are pooled, the sum of items and details remembered is higher than the sum of the items and details remembered by a collaborative group. Group memory appears to be more stable over time than individual memory, though, and there are differences in the way in which material is organized within the group.<sup>44</sup> This is probably because the items remembered by individuals are incorporated into the memories of the group members.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes, however, things that did not happen may be incorporated because one person in a group made a mistake.<sup>46</sup> If one eyewitness talks about the event in a confident way, this confidence can influence other witnesses to agree with her/him even if his/her perception is incorrect.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Haber and Haber, "Experiencing," 1066.

<sup>42</sup> Craig R. Barclay, "Autobiographical Remembering: Narrative Constraints on Objectified Selves," in Rubin, *Remembering Our Past*, 94–125.

<sup>43</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 55–56; Paterson and Kemp, "Comparing Methods," 1083–99.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Susan Weldon and Krystal D. Bellinger, "Collective Memory: Collaborative and Individual Processes in Remembering," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 23 (1997): 1160–75; Mary Susan Weldon, "Remembering as a Social Process," in *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation: Advances in Research and Theory* (ed. Douglas L. Medin; San Diego/London: Academic Press, 2000), 67–120.

<sup>45</sup> Haber and Haber, "Experiencing," 1085.

<sup>46</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 56–58; Paterson and Kemp, "Comparing Methods," 1083–99; Buckhout, "Eyewitness Testimony," 122; Henry L. Roediger, Michelle L. Meade, and Erik T. Bergman, "Social Contagion of Memory," *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 8 (2001): 365–71.

<sup>47</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 72–74; Daniel B. Wright, Gail Self, and Chris Justice, "Memory Conformity: Exploring Misinformation Effects When Presented by Another Person," *British Journal of Psychology* 91 (2000): 189–202.

3. *Avoidance of cognitive dissonance.* Most people will go to considerable lengths to avoid cognitive dissonance—the discomfort that comes from having conflicting thoughts and feelings.<sup>48</sup> Because of the factors listed above, the memories of several eyewitnesses to the same event will almost invariably differ. One option in this circumstance is to develop a compromise memory, which includes everything that anyone remembers.<sup>49</sup> If some remembered details conflict with others sufficiently to make compromise difficult, each witness will make a decision about whether to accept the earlier or later information, although their decision will not always be correct.

Whether witnesses develop compromise memories or make a choice is affected by culture. When faced with a conflict between two opposing perspectives, individuals from independent cultures (such as most Western cultures) are more ready to choose a “correct” option from those available. Individuals from interdependent cultures tend to try harder to find a way in which all pieces of information can be combined.<sup>50</sup> Thus, when faced with information that caused cognitive dissonance, eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry could be expected to use a strategy that developed compromise memories rather than making choices.

4. *Timing of postevent information.* The time when a witness is provided with postevent information makes a significant difference to whether it is retained. Misleading information that is given immediately after an event has less effect on memory than misleading information that is given later.<sup>51</sup>

5. *Guessing.* In a situation where a witness feels pressured to produce a definitive answer, s/he may guess and then, over time the guess may be remembered more confidently as the witness remembers previous interpretations of the event rather than the event itself. This is likely to happen if the witness has not effectively encoded how certain s/he was about the answer first given.<sup>52</sup>

6. *Freezing effects.* One problematic aspect of the effect of intervening thoughts is that errors can become “frozen” in the memory.<sup>53</sup> Participants asked to

<sup>48</sup> Schacter, *Sins* 143–44.

<sup>49</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 58–63; Schacter, *Sins*, 112–17. Factors including the authority and confidence of the people making various assertions will affect what choice is made.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer L. Aaker and Jaideep Sengupta, “Additivity versus Attenuation: The Role of Culture in the Resolution of Information Incongruity,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 9 (2000): 67–82; Jennifer L. Aaker, “Accessibility or Diagnosticity? Disentangling the Influence of Culture on Persuasion Processes and Attitudes,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 26 (2000): 340; Sheena S. Iyengar and Mark R. Lepper, “Rethinking the Value of Choice: A Cultural Perspective on Intrinsic Motivation,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (1999): 349–66; Michael W. Morris and Kaiping Peng, “Culture and Cause: American and Chinese Attributions for Social and Physical Events,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67 (1994): 949–71.

<sup>51</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 64–68.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–84; Reid Hastie, Robert Landsman, and Elizabeth F. Loftus, “Eyewitness Testimony: The Dangers of Guessing,” *Jurimetrics Journal* 19 (1978): 1–8.

<sup>53</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 86.

read and reproduce a short account, were able to reproduce 70 percent of the content accurately, but only about 30 percent of the actual words. When asked to continue reproductions at weekly intervals, a number of participants continued to reproduce their original mistakes. A stable form of the story, complete with inaccuracies, was rapidly established and not much influenced by repeated rereading of the original version. *The differences between participants were sufficiently large and consistent to allow a number of external “judges” to identify correctly which series of reproductions belonged to each participant.*<sup>54</sup> When accounts are transmitted orally, there is no option of revisiting the original, so it would be even more difficult to correct errors.

7. *Type of retrieval and question wording.* More errors in recall occur when people are asked specific questions than when they are allowed to retell a story in their own words, especially if the questions are worded so that they anticipate a particular answer.<sup>55</sup> Thus, “tell me about your trip” will elicit certain information, largely accurate. Questions that ask when, where, or how something happened may elicit answers that provide more detail, but the detail is not necessarily accurate.<sup>56</sup> A more credible or authoritative questioner will also evoke more detailed but potentially less accurate information.<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Loftus suggests that the tendency to volunteer more information that they are sure is correct is motivated by witnesses’ desire to be helpful, not to deceive.<sup>58</sup> It is difficult to know under what circumstances eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry recalled their stories, but since avoiding leading questions in the gathering of evidence requires specific training, it would be surprising if their audiences did not ask questions that resulted in “contaminated evidence.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Harry Kay, “Learning and Retaining Verbal Material,” *British Journal of Psychology* 46 (1955): 81–100; John S. Shaw III, Sena Garven, and James M. Wood suggest that this freezing of testimony may be caused by social demands to be consistent (“Co-Witness Information Can Have Immediate Effects on Eyewitness Memory Reports,” *Law and Human Behavior* 21 [1997]: 503–23).

<sup>55</sup> Helen Mary Cady, “On the Psychology of Testimony,” *American Journal of Psychology* 35 (1924): 110–12; Jack P. Lipton, “On the Psychology of Eyewitness Testimony,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 62 (1977): 90–95; Julian A. E. Gilbert and Ronald P. Fisher, “The Effects of Varied Retrieval Cues on Reminiscence in Eyewitness Memory,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 20 (2006): 723–39.

<sup>56</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 94–97; Schacter, *Sins*, 112–37; Gilbert and Fisher, “Retrieval Cues,” 723–39; Rachel Sutherland and Harlene Hayne, “The Effect of Postevent Information on Adults’ Eyewitness Reports,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 15 (2001): 249–63.

<sup>57</sup> James Marshall, *Law and Psychology in Conflict* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 41–63; Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 98; Gerald Echterhoff, William Hirst, and Walter Hussy, “How Eyewitnesses Resist Misinformation: Social Postwarnings and the Monitoring of Memory Characteristics,” *Memory & Cognition* 33 (2005): 770–82.

<sup>58</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Wells, Memon, and Penrod (“Evidence,” 55–60) summarize the cognitive interview process that was developed to minimize bias introduced by questioning techniques.

8. *What one has previously recalled.* If only some aspects of an incident are retold, the aspects that are not retold are much more likely to be forgotten, although when the remembering is done while the person concerned is in a negative mood, this effect seems to be far less severe.<sup>60</sup> There is a difference between a laboratory situation where emphasis is on total and accurate recall, and conversational recall. In conversation, speakers may well wish to catch and maintain the interest of their audience or to justify their actions, and they will alter their accounts accordingly. Research indicates that “what people remember about events may be the story they last told about those events,”<sup>61</sup> and what they last told may well be only those aspects that they thought their audience wanted to hear.

### III. PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND REMEMBERING STORIES

As indicated earlier, in order to assess all the Gospel materials, in addition to looking at eyewitness accounts of action events we need to look at how stories are remembered—the “earwitness” accounts. Bartlett tracks how a number of participants remembered folktales over a period of time.<sup>62</sup> While these were exercises in written, rather than oral, retelling, Bartlett’s findings are potentially useful in that he found that:

- Accurate verbatim reproduction was very unusual. This is likely to be true even in oral cultures where better recall of oral data might be expected.
- The great majority of changes introduced into a story came into being very early in the chain of reproductions.
- Frequent retelling resulted in the form of the story and items remembered rapidly becoming stereotyped and stable.
- Infrequent retelling resulted in either:
  - omission of details; simplification of events and structure; and/or transformation of items into more familiar ones *or*
  - elaboration, with importation of details from other sources and/or invention used to fill out the details that could no longer be remembered.
- Retelling after a long period resulted in accurate preservation of general setting and striking detail, but much of the less-striking detail was inferred from schemas.

<sup>60</sup> Karl-Heinz Bäuml, “Semantic Generation Can Cause Episodic Forgetting,” *Psychological Science* 13 (2002): 356–60; Schacter, *Sins*, 31, 81–82; Karl-Heinz Bäuml and Christof Kuhbandner, “Remembering Can Cause Forgetting—but Not in Negative Moods,” *Psychological Science* 18 (2007): 111–15; Schacter, *Sins*, 163–65.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth J. Marsh, “Retelling Is Not the Same as Recalling: Implications for Memory,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16 (2007): 16–20.

<sup>62</sup> Bartlett, *Remembering*, 118–76.

- Details that fitted the interests and tendencies of the storyteller were remembered and tended to take a progressively earlier place in the narrative.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, the retelling of stories has much in common with the retelling of life events.

It can therefore be seen that the community perception about eyewitness (and “earwitness”) testimony is incorrect. It does not provide us with a complete and accurate account of the events witnessed or stories heard. While eyewitness accounts provide useful information about what happened, many factors can influence both how accurate and how complete any account might be. What happens at the time of the event and afterwards can affect the accuracy and completeness of the account. Let us now return to Bauckham’s claims about the Gospels and examine how this information affects our understanding of the Gospels if we accept them to be or to contain eyewitness testimony.

#### IV. EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY AND THE GOSPELS

Bauckham contends that while the eyewitnesses were still alive they controlled the stories of Jesus’ life and teaching; and that the people who eventually wrote down the Gospels would have checked the accuracy of their accounts with the remaining eyewitnesses rather than simply relying on circulating accounts of his ministry. This, he argues, makes it possible for us to regard the Gospels as reliable sources of information about the historical Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

Regardless of how convincing his arguments are about the control that the eyewitnesses may have had over the Gospel accounts, as we can see from psychological research, eyewitness control is no guarantee of accuracy. It is probably not even reasonable to assume that the eyewitnesses aimed for complete historicity. In addition, Byrskog indicates that, although the ancient historians were aware that eyewitness testimony could be biased and that some were very concerned to find the factual truth, investigative procedure cannot be separated from interpretative procedures. Furthermore, interrogation of eyewitnesses was not necessarily neutral, which could skew the information obtained from them.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Bauckham’s failing to take into account sufficiently the interpretative role of the ancient historian is one of Byrskog’s criticisms of Bauckham’s work.<sup>66</sup>

This does not deny that some people have very good memories that are accurate over considerable periods of time, as Bauckham demonstrates in his account of the man who remembered very accurately details that he had read in a newspa-

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 93–94.

<sup>64</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 5–11.

<sup>65</sup> Byrskog, *Story*, 176–198.

<sup>66</sup> Byrskog, “Interpreters,” 158–66.

per seventy years earlier,<sup>67</sup> but the psychological research suggests that this is quite unusual and cannot be relied on. In addition, the method of encoding information from newspaper articles is different from that of encoding memories of lived experiences. Newspaper reports can be reread, but events cannot be relived.

Eyewitness accounts do not guarantee historicity, but Bauckham also points to research that demonstrates that in Jesus' day, oral transmission was far more accurate than it is today. This will be examined in more detail in the next section.

## V. EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY AND ORAL TRADITION

Bauckham uses models of oral tradition, especially the work of Birger Gerhardsson, Kenneth Bailey, and James D. G. Dunn, to argue that oral transmission of tradition can be very accurate.<sup>68</sup> This is not in dispute. Work done by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, as well as by Gerhardsson, Bailey, and Dunn, demonstrates that appropriately trained people in oral or verbomotor cultures are capable of remembering very large amounts of material accurately.<sup>69</sup> (The term "verbomotor" refers to the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and surrounding cultures that knew some writing but remained basically oral and word-oriented in lifestyle.<sup>70</sup>) The accuracy, however, is with respect to content—transmission is very rarely verbatim, except sometimes in ritual settings.<sup>71</sup>

It should be noted that the work of Parry and Lord was done with oral poets who, as Parry demonstrates, needed to fit the storytelling into the standard meter

<sup>67</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 321–23, citing Alan D. Baddeley, *Your Memory: A User's Guide* (London: Prion, 1982), 136–40.

<sup>68</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 246–63.

<sup>69</sup> Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (ed. Adam Parry; Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); 13–29, 99–123; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity; with, Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Livonia, MI: Dove Booksellers, 1998), 71–89; idem, "The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition," *NTS* 51 (2005): 1–18; Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *AJT* 5 (1991): 34–54; idem, "Middle Eastern Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *ExpTim* 106 (1995): 363–67.

<sup>70</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New Accents; London/New York: Methuen, 1982), 68, citing Marcel Jouessee in *Le Style oral rythmique et mnémotechnique chez les Verbo-moteurs* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1925). The term *verbomoteur* (verbomotor in English) was coined by Jouessee.

<sup>71</sup> See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 57–68, for an overview of research in this area.

required by the particular culture (in Homer's case, hexameter).<sup>72</sup> Since most people do not spontaneously speak in a standard meter, the need to adhere to one would mitigate against the ability to quote speakers verbatim. Thus, the original words of speakers almost certainly did not have the importance in these societies that is given to the original words of Jesus in some Christian circles today.

There are, however, various features of poetry that make it easier for the hearer to repeat it verbatim. Work by Robert K. McIver and Marie Carroll indicates that extended prose transmission, which is not limited by the need to maintain a particular meter but does not have rhythm, rhyme, assonance, and other poetic devices to aid memory, has different levels of verbatim transmission.<sup>73</sup> David C. Rubin analyzes epics, ballads, and counting out rhymes in detail and warns that, while Parry's work provides insights into the workings of oral traditions, the process of transmission of Homeric epic can only be generalized to new genres if the constraints of the new genres are considered.<sup>74</sup>

Oral tradition comes in a multiplicity of forms, including poems, songs, legends, parables, jokes, genealogies, liturgical material, and incantations. These traditions contain a wide variety of informational content and perform a range of functions that may include both teaching and entertainment. Furthermore, different cultures and subcultures handle their traditions differently, as seems appropriate to the purpose of the members of the culture.<sup>75</sup> Thus, it cannot be assumed that features of one particular type of oral transmission in one particular culture will hold true for all oral transmission in all cultures.<sup>76</sup>

Hence, the assumption that Bauckham makes about the accuracy of oral transmission needs to be nuanced in view of the kind of material that is found in the Gospels. In addition, Bauckham fails to take into consideration in his work that inaccuracies can, and almost inevitably will, arise in eyewitness testimony before it *becomes* valuable community tradition that is seen to be in need of preservation. If Scripture is to be believed, most of the people who witnessed Jesus' teaching, especially those close to him, were not skilled oral tradents but ordinary members of first-century society with varying abilities to remember and retell their experiences. Although they were doubtless accustomed to using memory rather than written

<sup>72</sup> Parry, *Homeric Verse*, 9–16.

<sup>73</sup> McIver and Carroll, "Experiments to Develop Criteria for Determining the Existence of Written Sources, and Their Potential Implications for the Synoptic Problem," *JBL* 121 (2002): 667–87; eidem, "Distinguishing Characteristics of Orally Transmitted Material When Compared to Material Transmitted by Literary Means," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 18 (2004): 1251–69.

<sup>74</sup> Rubin, *Oral Traditions*, 194.

<sup>75</sup> Travis M. Derico, "Upgrade and Reboot: A Re-appraisal of the Default Setting" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2004 in San Antonio, Texas), 22–25.

<sup>76</sup> David E. Bynum, "Antiquitates vulgares, Folklore, Oral Theory, and What Matters" (2007), <http://enargea.org/vulgares/vulgares.html> (accessed November 9, 2008).

notes to retain information, and thus their memories were likely to be more efficient than those of twenty-first-century literate people, they are unlikely to have had the training and experience required for the high levels of accuracy produced by the storytellers observed by Parry, Lord, and others.

The existence of many of Jesus' teachings in more than one form across the four Gospels indicates that if, as Bauckham, following Gerhardsson, suggests, Jesus trained his disciples to remember his teachings as the third-century rabbis taught the Torah (that is, to result in verbatim recollection of text), one of three things has happened: they were far less successful students than the trainee rabbis; the authors of the Gospels did not receive their material from one of these trained disciples; or it has been significantly changed by the author of the Gospel (redacted) to fit the theological purposes of the Gospel. Therefore, regardless of whether the rabbis of Jesus' time were using the method described by Gerhardsson and named as anachronistic by his critics, if it was used by Jesus to train his disciples then Bauckham's contention that eyewitness transmission guarantees accuracy is untenable.

The changes described in psychological research occur within hours, days, or weeks of the event, so the importance of most "Jesus events" as community tradition would not have been established before many of the "eyewitness effects" outlined above occurred. It therefore seems highly likely that there would have been an initial period during which eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry were functioning much as eyewitnesses in any other setting function, with their testimonies, whether about Jesus' actions or about his words, prone to the vagaries that are part of any eyewitness testimony.

In other words, it seems likely that the answer to the question How much can we reliably know about the Jesus of history from the Gospels in the light of Bauckham's work? is *still* "not much." Even if, as Bauckham suggests, at least parts of the Gospels as accounts were controlled by eyewitnesses until very close to the time at which they were recorded, this does not give them a greater probability of accuracy than does the notion that they are the highly redacted documents that are argued by the form critics. It simply reduces the potential role of the redactors in producing variations.

Something that psychological research on memory and eyewitness testimony does do, however, is to demonstrate that some of the differences between Gospel accounts that are cited by form critics as evidence of redaction (i.e., a conscious process) to fit the redactor's theological perspectives could just as easily have been the result of normal processes of memory. Schema theory makes it clear that one of the factors that would affect these changes would be the theological perspectives of the storytellers, but the changes that come about as part of the normal processes of remembering are unconscious, not the deliberate decisions suggested by the form critics.

What Bauckham's work *could* do, therefore, is to provide a different perspective on the inconsistencies that occur between accounts of the same events in dif-

ferent Gospels. Rather than automatically assuming that they are the result of a redactor wishing to achieve a particular theological purpose, we should ask whether they can be explained as variation due to the eyewitness effect.

## VI. BAUCKHAM AND HIS RESPONDENTS

As noted above, in the second half of 2008 a number of scholars published responses to *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. The first of these was Dunn in *JSHJ* in an article that looks at both Bauckham and Gerhardsson's critiques of his own book *Jesus Remembered*.<sup>77</sup> Since then, both *JSHJ* and *JSNT* have also published reviews of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, together with Bauckham's responses to the reviews. In general, the respondents have focused on the technical aspects of the book, and I do not propose to address these. I will, however, address a number of points raised by the respondents and by Bauckham, in response, that are significant for the subject matter of this article.

Possibly the most significant is the interaction between Bauckham and Byrskog, since Bauckham bases his work so strongly on Byrskog's *Story as History – History as Story*. Byrskog observes that his interest in writing was in eyewitnesses as interpreters, whereas Bauckham's is in eyewitnesses as sources of history.<sup>78</sup> Although Bauckham recognizes that interpretation is involved in the Gospels, he seems to minimize its significance. The psychological literature suggests that a better approach would be to accept that remembering always involves interpretation and to ask how much of the interpretation in the text is unconscious, a result of the "eyewitness effect" outlined above, and how much is intentional (redaction).

Byrskog makes the valid suggestion that Bauckham's adoption of Jan Vansina's distinction between oral tradition (developed by a collective) and oral history (coming from an individual eyewitness) is not helpful. Collective tradition involves significant input from individuals, and, as soon as an observation becomes a testimony, interpretative forces begin to work.<sup>79</sup> Anthony Le Donne puts this more forcefully when he says, "*memory is distortion*. This is so regardless of any claims to veracity," because it is not possible to view an object from every perspective or to recall an event without emphasizing some details.<sup>80</sup> Mary Susan Weldon and Krystal D. Bellinger point out that all remembering happens in a social context and that societies teach their members to use their memories in particular ways.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Dunn, "Eyewitnesses," 96–105.

<sup>78</sup> Byrskog, "Interpreters," 158.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>80</sup> Le Donne, "Theological Memory Distortion in the Jesus Tradition: A Study in Social Memory Theory," in Barton et al., *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity*, 163–77, esp. 168.

<sup>81</sup> Weldon, "Remembering," 67–120; Weldon and Bellinger, "Collective Memory," 1160–75. Weldon contends that all remembering happens in a social context.

Byrskog further suggests that Bauckham does not pay enough attention to rhetoric, which Byrskog sees as very important in the formation of the Synoptic Gospels. He outlines what he sees as evidence of the use of formal rhetorical method in the development of Mark's Gospel and notes that most scholars of oral tradition largely neglect the fact that rhetoric was "the most disciplined way of communicating orally during the first century CE."<sup>82</sup> He therefore suggests that any eyewitness testimony that might be present in Mark will have been altered in the light of specific rhetorical persuasive strategies. Rhetoric, however, is a formalization of methods that have been found to be effective when trying to inform and persuade an audience. As Bauckham notes, any good storyteller who is trying to persuade will select information to include and omit in order to achieve his or her objective.<sup>83</sup> A trained rhetorician will simply do this according to a particular set of rules. Byrskog's point about the skewed content of eyewitness testimony is true, but does not require the assumption of the use of formal rhetorical method.

It appears from a reading of Bauckham's comments to the various respondents to his book that he accepts that all the historical writings of the first century C.E. were subject to a range of "compositional devices [that] belonged to the normal freedom of an ancient storyteller and were not considered at odds with a historian's faithfulness to his sources" and that the Gospels are thus no different in the historicity of the picture they present of Jesus.<sup>84</sup> He therefore suggests that we should not immediately assume that there is a theological reason for every narrative variation in the Gospels.<sup>85</sup> Thus, in saying that the content of the Gospels was controlled by eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry until shortly before the accounts were recorded in written form, he is *not* suggesting that we have in the Gospels the *ipsisima verba Jesu* for which conservative Christians would like to find empirical proof. This position is much clearer in his *JSHJ* article than it is in the book, and it is clear that a number of readers of the book, including me, read from his words in the book a much stronger belief in the verbatim historical accuracy of the Gospels than he appears now to be claiming.<sup>86</sup> It is also clearer that none of the historical documents of the time comes with a guarantee of total accuracy.

Nevertheless, his response to David Catchpole about trusting eyewitnesses and that to Jens Schröter about the difference between trusting something and relying on it suggest an overly optimistic assessment of the accuracy of the text. Bauckham appears to take the position that if an eyewitness is deemed trustworthy, we

<sup>82</sup> Byrskog, "Interpreters," 184–85.

<sup>83</sup> Bauckham, "In Response," 228.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 235–37.

<sup>86</sup> Byrskog, "Interpreters," 157–68; Catchpole, "Proving," 169–81; Patterson, "Can You Trust," 194–210; Schröter, "Eyewitness Testimony," 195–209; Weeden, "Polemics," 211–24.

should trust (that is, accept as accurate) his or her testimony in its entirety.<sup>87</sup> This is at odds with psychological research, which shows that, although trustworthy witnesses would have no desire to deceive their audience, their particular interests, experiences, and personalities would result in testimonies that were more likely to be accurate at some points than at others. This is especially the case when we are presented with information from someone who is known to have a vested interest in or bias toward a particular position or outcome.<sup>88</sup> If it is the only information we can access, we must rely on it, but we should certainly not trust it to the point where we accept it uncritically. We should still question those aspects of the testimonies of trustworthy witnesses that strike us as unusual. They are reliable in that they tell us *what they believe to be true*. This does not necessarily make it true.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Theories of NT criticism that depict the canonical Gospels as highly redacted documents imply that the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry were shaped by and designed to shape the theologies of the communities for which they were written. Psychological research into memory supports Bauckham's contention that at least some of the differences attributed to redaction in fact arise from the normal processes of remembering, and that the editing may have contributed far less to the content than the form critics suggest. Taking this seriously suggests that the Gospels were more spontaneous expressions of theologies that already existed within the communities out of which they arose than documents designed to shape community theology.

In contrast, psychological research into eyewitness testimony makes it clear that Bauckham's work in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* does not provide strong evidence for the historical accuracy of the content of the Gospels. Although it is clear that transmission of stories in oral cultures is remarkably accurate once a community decides that something should be preserved and skilled oral tradents are entrusted with the task of preserving it, many of the inaccuracies in eyewitness memory come into being within hours, days, or weeks of the event being witnessed. Furthermore, these eyewitness accounts come from within a faith community formed around the subject of the stories, which adds a particular source of bias not present in other histories of the time.

<sup>87</sup> Bauckham, "In Response," 238; idem, "Eyewitnesses and Critical History: A Response to Jens Schröter and Craig Evans," *JSNT* 31 (2008): 221–35, esp. 223–28.

<sup>88</sup> Hastorf and Cantril ("They Saw a Game," 129–34) detail how observer bias can produce two very different sets of eyewitness accounts of the same event, without deliberate intention to mislead.

In his response to Catchpole in *JSHJ*, Bauckham says that in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* he proposes that the variations among the different Gospels can be adequately explained by the hypothesis of a formal controlled tradition in which eyewitnesses play an important part. He contends that there is no need to hypothesize a long period of uncontrolled creative development by anonymous community processes.<sup>89</sup>

While the psychological data would support the notion that a substantial proportion of the variations between parallel Gospel accounts can be explained by normal variation in eyewitness memory, the variations present significant challenges for any attempt to ascertain the historical Jesus behind the Christ of faith presented in our texts. The Gospels are about the founder of the faith community out of which they arise, which makes them different from other historical documents of their time. It is not possible, therefore, to say, as Bauckham does that “[t]estimony offers us . . . a theological model for understanding the Gospels as the entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus.”<sup>90</sup>

The continued presence in Christian communities of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry until the time when these events were recorded is a guarantee only of the preservation of the community’s agreed version, not of the exact details of the event itself. Bauckham’s work does not provide any empirical evidence for the historicity of the Gospels. As has been demonstrated above, however, the eyewitness effect provides us with an alternative explanation for conflicts between Gospels that does not require an assumption of alteration of content by a redactor. As such, it merits further investigation in order to determine which variations are more likely to be the result of redaction and which the result of eyewitness effects.

<sup>89</sup> Bauckham, “In Response,” 231, referring to *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 264.

<sup>90</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 5.