

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Richard Bauckham. *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007. 313 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-801-03485-5. \$30.00.

The tides are turning in Johannine scholarship, and Bauckham is at the forefront of this shift. In this collection of essays, Bauckham, who is now Professor Emeritus at the University of St. Andrews, puts to use his expertise in the Gospel of John and extra-canonical Jewish and Early Christian literature to undermine the dominant trends in Johannine scholarship since the late 1970s. This book is therefore a compilation of twelve individually written essays, with an added introduction on a wide range of topics pertaining to the study of the Gospel of John. These essays have an overall goal of undermining what has been the *dominant approach* to Johannine studies.

The introduction helpfully outlines the dominant approach and major emphases of Johannine scholarship, and seeks to explain how each of the following essays relates to an alternative approach. In the first essay, “Papias and Polycrates on the Origin of the Gospel of John,” Bauckham adopts the thesis of Hengel’s *The Johannine Question* (1989), which postulated that the beloved disciple and author of the Gospel of John is to be equated not with John the son of Zebedee, but with John the Elder. The major point of contention that exists against this position lies in the apparent contradiction of the internal evidence with that of the external. However, Bauckham cogently argues that both witnesses are not incompatible, but that the apparent confusion arises from a conflation of John the Elder with John the Son of Zebedee in two Egyptian works, the *Epistle of the Apostles* and the *Acts of John*.

In his second essay, “The Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author,” Bauckham argues that the beloved disciple is to be viewed as the ideal author because he is portrayed in the Gospel as an ideal witness. This is evidenced through, first, the beloved disciple’s special intimacy with Jesus; second, through him being present during key moments in the narrative; and third, because he is depicted as a perceptive witness having spiritual insight into the meaning of events in the Gospel narrative. In Bauckham’s third essay, “Historiographical Characteristics of the Gospel of John,” he presents a case against the all too readily accepted view that states the Fourth Gospel is theology and not history. To correct this erroneous assumption, Bauckham quite rightly points out that one must first tackle the question of whether competent contemporary readers of this Gospel would have viewed it as historiography, since it is only after this question is answered that one may properly address the question of historical reliability.

Bauckham argues in his fourth essay, “The Audience of the Gospel of John,” against the two-level reading strategy introduced by J. Louis Martyn’s *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968). Through Martyn’s influence, the Gospel of John has been viewed as a product of a specific community, with intentions and purposes that are applicable and relevant only to this specific Johannine community. Bauckham has argued elsewhere that the Gospels were written with the intention that they would be circulated among other churches as well (see *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, 2008). There is an interesting corollary to Bauckham’s position: if this Gospel is not the product of a community (hence involving diachronic stratification of the Gospel), there is greater evidence to assume that this Gospel is the work of a single author (synchronic).

In the fifth essay of this volume, “The Qumran Community and the Gospel of John,” Bauckham questions the widely accepted view that the Qumran community influenced or is somehow connected to the Gospel of John. Bauckham convincingly argues that Johannine dualism does not derive from Qumran dualism, but rather suggests dependence on the Hebrew

Bible and general Jewish tradition. In Bauckham's sixth essay "Nicodemus and the Gurion Family," he cogently argues that the Nicodemus spoken of in John belongs to the aristocratic Gurion family. He notes that names were often repeated within a family, which may thus account for the Palestinian Jew called Gurion (Guria) or Nicodemus.

In his seventh essay, "The Bethany Family in John 11—12: History or Fiction," Bauckham contends that the account of Lazarus with his sisters Martha and Mary is unique to the Gospel of John, but that this family is not a Johannine invention. Key to the argument is the notion of "protective anonymity." Here is the understanding that members of the early Christian community would not have been identified in the Gospel accounts, because such identification could quite possibly have made them a target by those who were antagonistic towards the Christian faith. Hence, the reason why Lazarus is not mentioned in the Gospel of Mark, for instance, is for his protection; however, he is mentioned in the Gospel of John because these dangers have abated during the time and place of the Gospel's composition. This hypothesis proves very appealing, but one must ask the question of why the authors of the Synoptics left no trace of this miracle in their accounts. For instance, could they not have kept the miraculous account of Lazarus, but simply have omitted his name?

In the eighth essay of this volume, "Did Jesus Wash His Disciples' Feet?" Bauckham evaluates the historicity of the account of Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet in John 13, and also addresses the various views regarding how the practice of foot washing in the early Christian community arose. Bauckham notes that this practice may have originated with the early Christian communities that were inspired by the sayings of Jesus on humble service. John's story of Jesus' foot washing may then be an etiological myth; however, Bauckham notes that such speculation is better replaced with the understanding that Jesus washed his disciples' feet as an example for them to follow. Possibly the greatest obstacle to Bauckham's argument is the lack of evidence found for this practice in early Christianity. Bauckham makes reference to the sole possible New Testament

reference to this practice found in 1 Tim 5:10. However, it does not appear definitive that there is present in 1 Tim 5:10 a reference to an established practice of foot washing, but rather, foot washing was simply a common act of hospitality.

In Bauckham's ninth essay, "Jewish Messianism according to the Gospel of John," he notes that messianic ideas prevalent in Palestinian Judaism prior to 70 CE are congruous with the manner in which the Gospel of John presents them. This point helps to buttress the historical reliability of John's Gospel. Bauckham shows that the Gospel's presentation of a "wonder-working prophet like Moses" (26) is not a thought foreign to pre-70 Jewish Palestine.

The Gospel of John is distinctly known for its high Christology. In Bauckham's tenth essay, "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John," he makes the case that a high Christology is not unique to this Gospel, but is to be found throughout the New Testament canon. It must be said that, although a high Christology is not unique to John's Gospel, it is still to be distinguished from the typical presentations of Jesus found in the Synoptics: Jesus' claims to deity are not expressed in the Synoptics as explicitly as in the Gospel of John. Bauckham shows that, because the author identifies Jesus with "an entity intrinsic to the divine identity—God's Word" (242), Jesus can be identified with God without compromising the understanding of monotheism. Hence, the Fourth Gospel redefines Jewish monotheism as Christological monotheism without negating it.

In the eleventh essay of this volume, "The Holiness of Jesus and His Disciples in the Gospel of John," Bauckham makes a distinction between the terms "consecration" and "inauguration." The consecration of Jesus by the Father, then, does not parallel the inauguration of the temple or altar; rather, it parallels the consecration of temple or altar, which precedes the inauguration. More specifically, in John's Gospel, Jesus does not function as the presence of God *per se*, but as the one consecrated to be an offering of sacrifice. In the twelfth and final essay, "The 153 Fish and the Unity of the Fourth Gospel," Bauckham employs the numerical techniques of word counting and *gematria* to show

that the name of the beloved disciple has been cryptically encoded in the twenty-first chapter of this Gospel. Bauckham utilizes this information to argue that the twenty-first chapter is not an added appendix to the Gospel, and that the beloved disciple is the author of this Gospel. A major difficulty here with Bauckham's utilization of numerical techniques is that many of his examples are dependent on us possessing the original author's manuscript, or an exact facsimile of this original. Neither of which we have. Therefore arguments based on various numerical techniques are difficult to substantiate.

In the evaluation of this work as a whole, one may first wonder if there is any disparity among these essays, since they were written within a fourteen-year time frame. This, however, is far from what we have here. The essays appear to be almost seamlessly put together, in a very logical order, to support Bauckham's intention of redirecting the paths of Johannine scholarship. Readers of this work will be sure to find themselves questioning previously held assumptions, and may have new areas of possible research opened up for them. What makes Bauckham's work persuasive is not that all his ideas are unique to him, but that he is able to form, from that body of data, a persuasive thesis that is impossible to ignore. There is no one main discussion partner in this work, simply because of the various topics he addresses in these essays. However, Bauckham quite frequently interacts with the initial proponents of the dominant approach: Raymond Brown, J. Louis Martyn, and John Ashton. For support, Bauckham frequently mentions Hengel, since a few of his assertions are built upon his work.

Many of the discussions found in this compilation of essays are relevant to Historical Jesus research. For too long, the Gospel of John has been deemed an unreliable source in reconstructing the historical Jesus and has always been hidden behind the shadow of the Synoptic Gospels. In this collection of essays, and especially in chapter four, Bauckham convincingly shows that out of all four canonical Gospels, it is the Fourth Gospel which best satisfies the criteria of a work that would most-likely be deemed proper historiography. Hence, in my opinion this book quite successfully restores confidence in utilizing the Gospel of

John as a historical source in studies of the historical Jesus.

The overall thrust of this book has far-reaching implications outside the circles of academia. A low view of the historicity of the Gospel of John has even seeped its way into the pulpits and teaching of the church. Bauckham's convincing argument that the Fourth Gospel is just as historically reliable as the Synoptics, if not more so, will help restore confidence in the utilization of this Gospel for instructions and guidance in the church. This book is recommended to those who are already familiar with the various debates in Johannine scholarship, since it presupposes knowledge of many issues involved in this discussion. This book is then not for the common layperson, but rather for the informed layperson, serious student, or scholar.

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