What kind of biographies are the four gospels of the New Testament?

Since the early twentieth century, scholarly conventional wisdom has been that between Jesus’ lifetime and all four written gospels lies a long age of communal oral tradition. Memories of Jesus were handed down and shaped as folk wisdom before being collected and arranged by anonymous evangelists. So “form critics” investigate the gospels for influences this process has left in them, and theorize about both what these communities were like and what Jesus’ actual history may have been.

All this is so axiomatic now that terms such as “the Johannine community” and “apothegm” (a formulaic presentation of an aphorism or adage) trip naturally off of the tongues of New Testament scholars. Some, such as John S. Kloppenborg and Burton L. Mack, have gone so far as to write monographs about the discrete communities that must have been responsible for each of several “layers” of the traditions that found their way into “Q,” a hypothetical (and in my opinion probably non-existent) document that the writers of Matthew and Luke are presumed to have drawn on in writing their gospels. Even where these ambitious projects have been dismissed as speculation, the consensus is only that they have gone out too far on what is basically still a solid limb.

In his latest project, Richard Bauckham shows that there is no limb. He contends that the gospels at their heart are not crystallizations of oral folk tradition, but testimony arranged by writers who either had access to the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life or were the eyewitnesses themselves. It is these persons themselves, not community folklore, who span the decades
between Jesus’ life and the gospels’ publication with their own presence, reflections, and teaching.

This is of course what people had thought all along. Both the plain sense of the texts themselves (see, for instance, Luke 1:1-4 and John 21:24) and the corroborating accounts of Papias and other second-century chroniclers of early Christianity convinced earlier readers that the gospels spoke for people who had known Jesus directly. This assumption was largely abandoned under pressure from critiques of Papias’ historical trustworthiness, modern historiographical skepticism towards testimony, and widespread confidence that sociological models locating knowledge in the lives of whole communities explained the rise of Christian belief and narrative better than older “individualistic” accounts.

Bauckham refutes the form-critics’ arguments, denies the anonymity of the gospels, demonstrates the reliability of testimony in ancient as well as contemporary historiography, and rehabilitates Papias and other traditional sources on the gospels with fresh and careful readings. Yet he also uncovers fresh evidence that the gospels are eyewitness testimony, much of it unnoticed textual evidence from the gospels themselves. He uses all these to develop an understanding of the gospels’ character and origins that neither reverts to precritical naivete nor indulges in a postcritical “second naivete” (the term is Paul Ricoeur’s) that affirms the critical conventional wisdom.

Form critics regard pericopes as flexible folk traditions whose characters received names only when the evangelists were committing them to writing outside their original Palestinian setting. Yet the gospels’ patterns of naming and anonymity fit Papias’ picture better than critical conventional wisdom. Bauckham shows that the relative frequency of characters’ names in the gospels roughly matches the relative frequency and conventions of first-century Palestinian (but not Diaspora) Jewish names. He finds that, with commonsense exceptions such as public figures,
what distinguishes named characters in the gospels (for instance, the women at the cross, Jairus and Bartimaeus, Simon of Cyrene and his sons, and Jesus’ named brothers) from anonymous characters is that they likely became well known figures in the Christian movement who were still available to confirm the stories concerning them. Anonymity in later gospels (for instance, Salome is not named at the scene of the cross in Matthew or Luke) reflects their unfamiliarity or unavailability to each later gospel’s writer. Even the exceptions reinforce the gospels’ testimonial nature. Bauckham agrees with Gerd Theissen that Mark sometimes seems to use anonymity to protect the identity of living figures: For instance, the woman who anoints Jesus, whom John names Martha’s sister Mary, and the disciple who strikes the ear of Malchus in Gethsemane, whom John names as Simon Peter, would have been endangered by being named while they were still alive.

Form criticism adopts a folkloric account of oral culture that has already been nearly completely overturned. Its pioneers disregarded the role of witnesses as authorities who stabilize as well as shape oral traditions in their retelling, and whom ancient historians sought out. Moreover, its concept of “layers” of oral tradition is illegitimately literary rather than performative. Nevertheless, the presupposition of a long age of cumulative developmental flux in the Jesus traditions before their final inscription has continued to haunt critics’ imaginations. Bauckham draws on Kenneth Bailey and Jan Vansina to depict the prewritten gospel traditions as variable formal and informal retellings of stable historical testimony, in the custody of “elder” eyewitnesses who were available to the writers who arranged and preserved them in their *bioi* (ancient biographies) of Jesus. The texts quickly and uniformly bore the unusual titles of “the gospel according to” each author, distinguishing each among the four gospels the church knew and respected. The gospels are, in other words, what they generally say they are.
Much sociology has stressed “collective memory” at the expense of individual memory, whereas much psychology has done the opposite. Bauckham reviews recent improvements in both the sociology and psychology of memory to analyze the interplay of group and individual roles in recollection, particularly of relatively recent and personally experienced events: The most reliably recollected memories are of unusual events, consequential events, and emotionally involving events. They tend to feature vivid imagery, irrelevant detail, external as well as internal points of view, inaccurate dating, greater reliability of generalities than of specific details, and frequent recall. Socially conventional narrative structures maintain their integrity. As interpreters, witnesses struggle for insight into their meaning and shape their memories accordingly. All these factors fit the facts of the gospels much more accurately as records of eyewitness testimony than of arrangements of free-floating community oral traditions.

The gospels not only imply eyewitnesses, they appeal to them. Like Lucian and Porphyry, all four gospels but Matthew use the naming of witnesses through inclusio as a literary device to establish their credibility. And the Twelve (apostles) serve in Matthew, Mark, and Luke not as a later generation’s distant and hazy memory but as a collective body of witnesses to the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. They are named in three groups of four, with typical Palestinian Jewish names and only one name varying across the lists (Thaddaeus versus Judas son of James). Bauckham takes these two different names as likely referring to the same person (as Saul the Pharisee had the second Roman name of Paulus), rather than as a sign that the tradition of the Twelve is late or unreliable as many scholars conventionally assume.

New Testament scholars typically treat Peter’s character in the synoptic gospels as representative of the Twelve. However, in a variety of ways the material in Mark reflects Peter’s personal perspective in the way it tells stories involving him. Peter is not merely a personifying representative of the group but is often distinguished from the others. Moreover, besides Jesus he
is by far the synoptic gospels’ most fully characterized figure. These features are consistent with an active role for Peter in bearing, shaping, and passing along the testimony that is at the heart of Mark’s gospel and persists consistently through Matthew and Luke.

Likewise, literary evidence in the Fourth Gospel (some disregarded by scholars without linguistic or textual warrants to do so), its non-Petrine perspective, its consistent appeals to authoritative testimony, Papias’ rather Johannine perspective on the gospels, and later evidence from Polycrates and Irenaeus all point in Bauckham’s opinion to John the Elder (who is not the apostle John, son of Zebedee) as its author and as the anonymous Beloved Disciple who witnesses to its truthfulness. This would mean that the Fourth Gospel preserves the insights of another circle of disciples whose testimonies dovetail (and sometimes contradict) the inner circle of Mark’s. It would include the apostles Philip and Thomas rather than Peter, James, and John of Zebedee, along with Nicodemus, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. As a prestigious leader in Asia in his old age, John the Elder, his gospel, and his letters (1-3 John in the New Testament) would have been directly known to the youthful Papias and to many others.

As impressive as his evidence usually is, sometimes Bauckham can be a little too confident of his conclusions. Even scholars who want to name the evangelists will still disagree over which eyewitness wrote the Fourth Gospel. It is of the nature of history of antiquity that any one of these specific contentions can be doubted. However, in much biblical scholarship these inevitable uncertainties are magnified, collected, and treated as a preponderance of doubt that warrants radical skepticism. This contrasts with the more usual, and plausible, historical procedure of building a cumulative case out of relatively plausible details, in which independent confirmation of a thesis in each area, even if uncertain on its own, strengthens the whole case as well as the other areas – especially in the absence of disconfirming evidence.
To one who first read the gospels naively as personal testimonies, then was schooled in and accepted the academy’s conventional wisdom, the cumulative effect of these chapters is persuasive – and startling. It both vindicates rigorous historiography and exposes the insubstantiality of many of my guild’s governing methodological assumptions. In different ways Bauckham’s work challenges traditionalism, revisionism, fundamentalism, early and late modernism, many fashionable postmodernisms, and historicism. It is the kind of biblical scholarship that will force not only contemporary biblical scholars and historians of early Christianity but also contemporary theologians to rethink both our interpretations of Christianity’s founders and our susceptibility to ideological and intellectual fashions.

In his final, most constructive chapter, Bauckham explores the theological and historical import of testimony. He claims it is “both the historically appropriate category for understanding what kind of history the Gospels are and the theologically appropriate category for understanding what kind of access Christian readers of the Gospels thereby have to Jesus and his history” (473). We depend on testimony for almost all we know, and we regularly cultivate and test the trust it requires in the word of others. Testimony is fundamental to human knowing in ways that modernistic philosophy (excepting Reid’s “common sense” epistemology) and historiography tend to reject. This is especially true of hermeneutics of suspicion. R.G. Collingwood’s denial of historians’ dependence on testimony both mischaracterizes the historical task and feeds the exaggerated skepticism towards historical sources that is endemic in biblical historiography – as well as the backlash of anti-critical and anti-intellectual fundamentalism outside the academy.

Testimony is irreplaceable not just because we cannot directly verify things outside our own experience, but because its merger of reporting and interpretation communicates otherwise incommunicable experiences. This is particularly true of genuinely unique human situations, because “without the participant witness that confronts us with the sheer otherness of the event,
we will reduce it to the measure of our own experience” (492). In our age this is most obvious in Holocaust studies. There it is not the contextual and statistical information favored by a Collingwood that dominates, but testimony from both victims and survivors to events “at the limits” (Ricoeur again) of human experience and representation.

As “the Holocaust is an event whose reality we could scarcely begin to imagine if we had not the testimonies of survivors” (493), and whose participant-interpreters (for instance, Elie Wiesel) lend unmatched insight into its horrible significance, so in a very different way the gospels testify to an exceptional historical event that evokes wonder and thanksgiving. No reconstructive biography of the “historical Jesus” could substitute for the gospels’ unique eyewitness perspective that gives readers access to Jesus of Nazareth.

What kind of biographies are the gospels? They are accounts of a life that is sui generis. They embody personal knowledge of that one life, its end, and the new beginning that has inaugurated the final age of our world. They are trustees of what had been entrusted solely to the ones whose testimonies are at their heart. “We seem to be shown the extraordinary novum, the otherness of resurrection, through the eyes of those whose ordinary reality it invaded” (505). They display it for readers to consider, and perhaps to receive as good news and pass along as its beneficiaries.

The proper critical stance toward the gospels, then, cannot be to treat them as the ore from which “what really happened” can (or cannot) be extracted and independently verified. It is to determine whether their already refined testimonies are genuine and trustworthy, and to respond accordingly.

Moving from the first critical habit to the second would do more to set gospels scholarship back on a firm footing, and back into productive relationships with theology, history, literature, and the social sciences, than any other historical-critical movement of the last two
centuries. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is a brilliant and refreshing case for restoring what was once common sense. Bauckham’s work may herald an end to the eclipse of testimony in gospels scholarship, and the beginning of a new (and older) paradigm for studying the life of Jesus and the churches of the first few Christian generations.