Re-thinking ‘eyewitnesses’ in the light of ‘servants of the word’ (Lk 1:2)

In June 2009 the Michael Ramsey prize for theological writing went to Richard Bauckham’s Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. A leading criterion for the prize is that the book ‘somehow changes the theological landscape’. In this case that has not happened yet, but heads are turning. To install ‘eyewitness testimony’ in place of form-criticism or the historical-critical method in the process of interpreting a gospel would not only change a century-old theological landscape but would also have a capacity to change the lives of quite a number.

History and the Gospels

Turning the clock back and taking a reverse-cycle view of such processes within biblical interpretation, I recall from seminary days the shattering impact upon us theological students when, in a 1955 article in Theological Studies about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, David Stanley, S. J., assumed we all knew that Jesus did not say everything the gospels said he did. That era was not only pre-Vatican in its theological character, but in our seminary was pre-critical as well. Our professor still valiantly confined his teaching of the Scriptures within the narrow historical gridlines of the Syllabus of Errors issued by the Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition under Pius X in 1907, and gravely took note of similar recurrent directions from the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

What an embarrassment a few years later to be a member of an international college in Rome and hear Dutch confreres cavalierly dismissing the benighted views of us Australians as their talk centred on the grave need for a new council of the Church. And how difficult to comprehend why professors at the Pontifical Biblical Institute never mentioned the name Bultmann without first delivering a mini-lecture on the inadequate philosophical disposition that he brought to the application of Formgeschichte to the exegesis of the gospels.

Undoubtedly the professors knew more than we did about the perils of teaching Bultmann in a pontifical institute because, next, in 1961, from the relative safety of the Ecole biblique in Jerusalem, we read the Monitum of the Holy Office (the re-branded Inquisition) against ‘bringing into doubt the genuine historical and objective truth of the Sacred Scriptures ... even of the New [Testament], even to the sayings and deeds of Christ Jesus.’

Within a year the lionised Stanislaus Lyonnet and the cautious Maximilian Zerwick, both Jesuit professors at the Biblical Institute in Rome, had been suspended from teaching. Our rumours were that this was a victory for student gangs from some Latin nationalities, but TIME magazine identified three monsignori from the Vatican Curia as responsible for the coup, and also reported ‘a victory celebration in a Rome pensione’ the night of the suspension. The suspensions were the climax of what the account called ‘one of the most tempestuous internal fights the church has had in years’.

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1 Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2006)
The Second Vatican Council had by this time been convoked by John XXIII but was some months from sitting. Three years later, in the second last month of its life, it published the third of its four Constitutions, and this was devoted to *Divine Revelation*. Here we read the remarkable words (para. 12): ‘In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid, *inter alia*, to “literary forms for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing...”’. Addressing the gospels directly, the document stated (para. 19): ‘The sacred authors, in writing the four gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form, others they synthesised or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches....’ The last phrase, of course, was an allusion to the *Sitz im Leben*, the dreaded transformative concept Bultmann inherited from Hermann Gunkel.

In 1993 the Pontifical Biblical Commission published its succinct and much praised *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* with its first section devoted to ‘Methods and Approaches for Interpretation’. The first of these is the Historical-Critical Method. This method, it stated, had attained ‘an importance of the highest order’. The method ‘demonstrate[s] more clearly that the tradition recorded in the New Testament had its origin and found its basic shape within Christian community, or early Church, passing from the preaching of Jesus himself to that which proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ...’

And then in *Jesus of Nazareth* Pope Benedict XVI himself, writing as Joseph Ratzinger, reflected in his Foreword on issues relating to methodology, asserting, ‘The first point is that the historical-critical method... is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work.’ It is true in addition, however, that Joseph Ratzinger expressed a notable reservation in regard to the method and advocated drawing on ‘significant new methodological discoveries’ to make up for the method’s deficiency. What he sought was a means of bringing to light ‘the interplay between theology and historical method’. He illustrated the problem by querying whether the high Christology of the hymn in Philippians 2 could be ‘the fruit of anonymous collective formulations’. And so he goes on to ask, ‘Isn’t it more logical, even historically speaking, to assume that the greatness [of the Christology] came at the beginning, and that the figure of Jesus really did explode all existing categories...?’

Returning to the theme at the Roman Synod on the Bible in 2008, Benedict XVI – in an unscheduled address - identified ‘two methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological one’ which permitted one to speak of ‘theological exegesis’. The latter proceeds on the basis of ‘the hermeneutics of faith’. While such a proposal just about brings us full

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7 *Interpretation*, p. 38.
8 *Interpretation*, p. 37.
10 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. xiv.
11 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. xxii.
circle to where I and my student peers stood confused about how to read the gospels in the pre-Vatican II era, it also interestingly intercepts the trajectory outlaid by Richard Bauckham, who, also interestingly, has arrived at the same conundrum as Benedict but after travelling in the opposite direction.

**A pious hope**

Bauckham is disillusioned at where form criticism has taken gospel scholarship. It has brought us to the point where the one common result is ‘a Jesus reconstructed by the historian, a Jesus attained by the attempt to go back behind the Gospels and, in effect, to provide an alternative to the Gospels’ constructions of Jesus.’ This, of course, exposes the problematic dilemma confronted by Benedict XVI and voiced by Bauckham in the question on p. 4 of his 500 page book: ‘Must history and theology part company at this point where Christian faith’s investment in history is at its most vital?’

Confessionally perhaps but certainly academically, it is not possible for Bauckham to seek Benedict’s solution in a ‘hermeneutics of faith’. The only avenue of approach to the point where ‘history and theology meet’ has to be established by scientific tools. Unlike Benedict XVI, Bauckham eschews the historical-critical method. That is what has forced the gap he wants to close. Firstly he lights upon what seems an obvious place to start, which is the ‘eyewitnesses’ of the title and subtitle of his major study. These ‘eyewitnesses’ have always been oddly prominent, of course – in front of our noses, as it were, because Luke refers to ‘eyewitnesses’ in our translations of his preface (Luke 1:2).

Whatever exegetes now make of the ‘eyewitnesses’, Bauckham returns to the traditions about them in Papias and his like that were all we antipodean Roman Catholics had to go on in our student days. But, invoking skills from several disciplines – sociology, prosopography, historiography, psychology of recollective memory - Bauckham has argued that the essential ingredient in the making of the gospels – John as well as synoptic – is the testimony of eyewitnesses. These are the people mentioned by Luke, and they are ‘simply firsthand observers of the events’, ‘disciples who accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry’. The scope of their witness – ‘testimony’ – was ‘comprehensive, covering the whole story Luke’s Gospel had to tell’.

The faith-filled testimony of such people is what closes the gap for Bauckham between history and theology. Through the ancient services of these ‘eyewitnesses’ we are finally in a position to dispense with the conclusions of the form critics: ‘Understanding the Gospels as testimony, we can recognise [the] theological meaning ... not as an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts, but as the way the witnesses perceived the history... observable event and perceptible meaning. Testimony ... is where history and theology meet.’

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13 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 3.
15 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 5.
16 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 117.
17 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 30
18 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 124.
19 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 5-6.
‘eyewitnesses and servants’

If Bauckham’s conclusion appears too good to be true – at the book’s publication cheers began to ring out from the sidelines on the web, although progressively readers appear to have become selective in the areas of their appreciation20 - I think any assessment of this new-old situation should start from the only place in the New Testament where we have an instance of the Greek word for ‘eyewitnesses’ (autoptai).21 This is Luke’s preface (1:2). And for brevity’s sake, we will focus on the phrase ‘eyewitnesses and servants of the word’. However, to allow closer consideration of the Greek, I will represent the phrase from NRSV just cited in the following word order: ‘the from beginning eyewitnesses and servants being of the word’. For the following discussion the word order and the items additional to NRSV (the opening definite article and then the term ‘being /genomenoi’) are critical.

The terms ‘eyewitnesses’ and ‘servants’ are bracketed between ‘the’ and ‘being/genomenoi’. There is no separate ‘the’ for ‘servants’, and from this and the bracketing of ‘servants’ with ‘eyewitnesses’ we can only conclude that ‘eyewitnesses’ are also ‘servants’. Bauckham (p. 122) agrees, as perhaps most do, that the two designations apply to one group of people. He does entertain the possibility that the earlier ‘eyewitnesses’ later became ‘servants of the word’ because one might argue that genomenoi means ‘becoming’. This is a commonly accepted understanding, but can now be seen as a misconception.

The resources now available through the electronic Thesaurus Linguae Graecae reveal an unusual story about genomenoi and autoptai/‘eyewitnesses’. The TLG database of ancient Greek usage records that of the 57 instances of autopt prior to 100 CE, 54 instances occur in context with some form of gignesthai (the verb to which the participle genomenoi belongs). Exactly the same pattern repeats in 200 instances (over and above citations of Luke’s phrase in Christian writers) that survive from the next 400 years.

On the other hand, no instance of such a pairing (other than at Luke 1:2) occurs in the case of the Greek servant word (hypēret-).

Again we have a conclusion to draw. The participle genomenoi occurs in the phrase by reason of an extraordinarily consistent idiomatic connection between autopt- and one or other form of the verb gignesthai.22 This pairing of autoptai with genomenoi would appear to lend to Luke’s expression the force of a phrase like ‘being myself an eyewitness’.

Having the ‘servants’ within the bracket with ‘eyewitnesses’ has further implications. The designated individuals within the bracket are people with a dual function, namely, ‘being

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20 e. g., http://www.christilling.de/blog/2006/11/richard-bauckham-on-jesus-and.html
21 2 Peter 1:16 has epoptai, also translated ‘eyewitnesses’, but these are of a kind who experience sightings of the preternatural, like the author of this document in relation to the Transfiguration of Jesus. The term has no bearing on the above.
eyewitnesses’ and ‘being servants’. Both functions require further clarification, but before that we are to conclude from the phrasing, in the first place, that the individuals so designated have been responsible for the two functions ‘from [the] beginning’. We can say this because that idea is within the brackets as well. This is not something commentators normally allow, but the bonding of ‘eyewitnesses’ and ‘servants’ is such as to make the choice irresistible.

Similarly, and in the second place, the dual functions of these individuals are both to do with ‘the word’. This is a semantic factor that, with the disappearance of genomenoi in our translations, we have completely lost sight of, but this is the way the Greek has to work. Given that idiomatically genomenoi throws back to autoptai, it is the pair autoptai/hypēretai that looks forward to complete its meaning in the dependent phrase ‘of the word’. So we have an eyewitnessing function ‘of the word’ as well as a distinct function of being servant ‘of the word’.

**Are the autoptai ‘eyewitnesses’?**

An immediate reaction to a text that requires us to envisage ‘eyewitnesses ... of the word’ is to present us with the question of what is meant here. Even Origen asked himself that question in the third century. How can one see a sound, he pondered.23 (This brain-teaser arises, incidentally, from the fact that Origen has recognised something he cannot ignore: the idiomatic and semantic connection in the Greek between ‘eyewitnesses’ and ‘word’ that we have just argued.) His response comes from his own database of biblical text.

If the expression has biblical precedent, it must carry theological weight. He recalls Exodus 20:18 reporting that the people saw the sound of thunder and trumpet. This fact invited his theological reflection: what the Israelites were caught up in was the voice of God delivering the written Law, whereas something greater than the Law was here in Luke: the Word of God made flesh. In his further comment Origen admits to the ambivalence of ‘word /logos’ at this point of the preface, allowing that it designated either Jesus the Word or the logos as the message taught.

The latter option fits with the phrase ‘servants / hypēretai of the word’ because Luke himself applies hypēretēs along with martys to Paul as a title bestowed upon Paul by the heavenly Christ (Acts 26:1624). It is also a title Paul assumes for himself and fellow evangelists (1 Cor. 4:1). hypēretēs is, in fact, a term with a well established place in bureaucratic usage for minor officials.25 On the other hand, to comprehend how ‘autoptai of the word’ might work we need to look further afield.

Bauckham himself observes that ‘[t]he English word”eyewitnesses”, with its suggestion of a metaphor from the law courts, is a little misleading.’26 The Greek term has no forensic reference. Bauckham draws on Alexander’s work for a fuller understanding of the Greek

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24 Our translations have obscured the titular character of the designations by adopting verbal forms (‘serving’, ‘witnessing’).
25 See reference to such usage in the index to my *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: 1990; 2009), p. 362.
26 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 117.
term in ancient historiography but, although noticing Galen’s use of the term in reference to medical autopsy, appears not to want to go beyond considering the term as ‘firsthand observers of the events’. The same sources that provide this use, however, also provide instances of people seeing for themselves after the event, as in visiting foreign locations where events had happened in the past.

Other uses are more enlightening and more precisely relevant. They embrace objects that were not really events at all. Instances include observation of the course of a river (Herodotus 2.29.3); the texture of the lotus fruit (Polybius 12.2.1); attitudes of impiety against the Gods (Polybius 12.4d.2); a treasure horde (Polybius 18.35.5); a decadent culture (Polybius 29.21.8); a woman’s beauty (Josephus, AJ 18.342.2); an enemy’s corpse (Josephus, AJ 19.125.2). Why not, also, a logos as a document? Or ‘the logos’ as the documentary cache of the Christian tradition that Luke focuses on throughout the preface?

What kind of tradition?
In considering the tradition that Luke introduces in the preface, Bauckham has written helpful pages bringing together evidential elements that went into the making and maintaining of the tradition. Part of this is inspired by Kenneth Bailey’s account of the Palestinian oral tradition developed in the period pre-70 CE through ‘numerous eyewitnesses’ who functioned as ‘reciters in an assembly’ and so contributed to the community’s ‘informed traditions’. In addition, however, in Bauckham’s view, and as Luke’s use of ‘handed on/paredosan’ plausibly indicates, the development involved within the Gentile churches ‘some process of teaching and learning’ which was supported by ‘special authorised guarantors of the traditions’.

In Bauckham’s case, of course, this picture contributes to his construction of ‘eyewitness testimony’. However, it takes little more than a glance at the preface of Luke to realise that Luke’s focus is upon a literary tradition. Virtually the only element in the preface distracting us from that is the presence in our translations of ‘eyewitnesses’ and, to a lesser and uncertain degree, ‘servants of the word’. Weighing against any emphasis upon orality in the making of the tradition are the first words Luke writes. These are about the ‘many’ who had already turned their hands to writing a narrative. Such literary compositions have prompted Luke to plan and compose another one, which now lies before Theophilus.

The subject matter of the earlier writings constitutes the tradition that is central to the identity of the community out of which Luke is writing. He projects a keen awareness of the communal dimension of the activity, ‘us’ occurring twice, and all the activity being in-house. Two stages are apparent, which implies a considerable number of years: the writing of the narratives about affairs of the community (1:1) and the reception of the narratives within the community through the agency of the ‘autoptai and hypēretai of the logos’ (1:2). The reception of the narratives is an extension of the literary activity which produced them, and was itself literary: the narratives had to be read aloud to the community.

29 Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, pp. 265, 270.
The discussion that ensued would occasion reference back to the written word, but the demands such an exercise made on literary skills within the community were nothing compared with the level of literary skill required in the initial project. This was when the ‘many’ wrote about ‘what had been fulfilled among us’ (1:1). Not all commentators (or translators: RSV ‘accomplished’) understand the Greek as ‘fulfilled’ (NRSV and most). However, Luke’s own interest in this aspect of his own composition is both prime and supreme. He opens and closes the narrative by explicitly engaging the written tradition of Judaism. At 24:44 the Messiah himself states ‘everything written about me must be fulfilled’.

What characterises the earlier section of his narrative is a rich, complex and enlightening web of theologising about the messianic character of Jesus drawn from the Scriptures of Judaism. This web is by no means all of Luke’s contriving. Long before Luke Paul had evidenced his own need to draw upon the literary treasures of Israel for an understanding of the new dispensation, and the tasks of exploration and evaluation involved in such research and theologising were extensive and demanding of the highest literary skills. The books to be dealt with were not neat and concise but bulky and awkward. There was much handling and fingering of many volumes.

Of course Luke’s first story of the Messiah at his task is set within the synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus is reading from a book that he hands back to the person in charge of the Scriptures. This man is the community officer known from this passage and elsewhere as the hypēretēs. Similar ‘officers’ (NRSV, ‘servants of the word’ ) were at work in the community we hear of in the preface. But as well as handling the material, they also taught to it. The material is called ‘the logos’ and could as well be the written word as the spoken. This term logos is often elusive; we have noted Origen’s surmises in this regard. When Luke begins Acts, he refers back to his first logos or treatise (Acts 1:1). This is standard usage. Eusebius calls his Historia ecclesiastica a logos (1.2.2). More interestingly he refers to the ‘divine logos’ as having been proclaimed across the generations either by word of mouth or by the pen (1.1.1).

The final phrases in the preface perhaps continue this focus on the written word. In stating his objective in the writing of the book, Luke expresses the hope that Theophilus will gain assurance (asphaleia, not the alētheia/’truth’ [NRSV and all] that Pontius Pilate found always out of reach, John 18:38) ‘concerning the logoi about which you have received instruction’ (1:4). Like the earlier Greek word genomenoi, the plural term logoi has no rhetorical reverberation in our translations. Mostly we read of innocuous ‘things’. Instead, why not: ‘that you may learn to have a deeper appreciation (asphaleia) of what you have you read in the books (logoi) through which you were instructed’?

Whether we are free to be as literally specific as this, the text surely is asking us to stay close to the sphere of ideas, message, discourse. Whether written or spoken, these last logoi connect us back to the teachings contained in the earlier narratives of the ‘many’, in the function of the ‘servants of the logos’, and they turn our attention forward to the rich fare in the narrative about to open.

*autoptai* as guarantors of the tradition
And what have ‘the autoptai of the logos’ contributed to this process? These people have continued to perform the function complementary to – although prior to – their function as hypēreTai. They have responsibility for the library of the community, receiving and authenticating documents of the tradition. They are highly literate and have received their appointments from the community. They fill precisely the role Bauckham selected for his ‘specially authorised guarantors of the traditions’. What is more, they have done this ‘from the beginning’ of the community’s life as Christian disciples.

Among commentators much discussion has attended the relative date that should be allotted to this ‘beginning’. Most are attracted to the beginning indicated by Peter in Acts 1:22, which is the opening of the preaching of John the Baptist. This may sit well for those who see autoptai as ‘eyewitnesses’ ‘throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us’. However, as argued above, the unity of the phrase ‘the from beginning autoptai and hypēreTai being of the word’ requires that the autoptai and hypēreTai are one set of individuals with dual functions that they perform more or less contemporaneously. And while autoptai could, theoretically, have functioned for the community from the time of the preaching of John, the ‘hypēreTai of the word’ could not. In fact, in the context of discipleship of the living Master the phrase makes no sense.