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Evaluating the Authenticity of the Gospels

We live in an age of great skepticism. Nearly everything we do or believe requires proof. While doubt certainly protects people from jumping to conclusions, it can also prevent people from drawing final conclusions. Doubt, especially in high stakes matters, has become a hideout for those who are scared to confront the results of their investigations. Unfortunately, this mentality has penetrated the most important decisions of our lives – even our decisions regarding the authenticity of the Bible.

Today, moderns, as well as biblical scholars, have a hard time accepting the possibility that the Gospels are authentic. The idea that a document composed two thousand years ago could be trusted is dismissed as absurd. However, this assumes that there is no evidence suggesting the contrary. Richard Bauckham, in his book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, rejects this “gratuitous doubt”¹ and provides a novel contribution to our knowledge of the historical Jesus. This book has awakened scholars to the possibility that the skepticism of form criticism is not only uncritical but also unwarranted. *Contra* to popular opinion in the field of New Testament scholarship, Bauckham argues that before the Gospels were written, the Jesus tradition was intimately connected to specific eyewitnesses and teachers who functioned as guarantors of the Word. More specifically, he rejects the form critics’ claim that the Gospels were subject to the creative collective of early Church communities and presents compelling evidence illustrating that these traditions were actually transmitted in a formally controlled manner. While opponents of

¹ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006. 205.

Bauckham's thesis claim that his work tries to prove too much, I think the author fails to go far enough in his analysis of the data collected. In this essay, I will present a summary of Bauckham's strongest arguments for the authenticity of the Gospels and evaluate the counter arguments presented by his critics. Furthermore, in an attempt to strengthen the author's thesis, I will argue that the Gospel of Mark actually reflects the way in which the human brain encodes memories with high fidelity, thereby demonstrating the faithful transmittance employed in the communication of the Jesus tradition.

I. Preparing for the Argument

The main thrust of Bauckham's argument is rooted in the historiographical claim that eyewitness testimony was integral to the transmission and integrity of the information within the Gospels. In order to prepare his audience for his argument, the author begins by addressing the skepticism surrounding eyewitness testimony and dismisses this concern as unfounded. To illustrate this point, he provides several examples of ancient historians and, more importantly, early Christian writers that valued eyewitness testimony over secondhand sources. Bauckham writes, "...for Greek and Roman historians, the ideal eyewitness was not the dispassionate observer but one who, as a participant, had been closest to the events and whose direct experience enabled him to understand and interpret the significance of what he had seen."² Showing that this belief was not exclusively held by people of a certain region, Bauckham references Papias, a third generation Christian, who said, "For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much from a living and surviving voice."³ It is clear that there was a cultural precedent set for eyewitness testimony. Considering this fact, it would make sense that a people who relied on this form of knowledge transmission would also take particular

² Ibid., pg. 8.

³ Ibid., pg. 15.

interest in the veracity of a given claim. While this does not eliminate the subjective nature of eyewitness testimony, it does point out the fact that society had a vested interest in making sure that what was reported was actually true. For this reason, I believe that Bauckham can rightly claim that "Trusting testimony is not an irrational act of faith..."⁴ but rather something that Christians took personal interest in.

II. Bauckham's Argument

Having characterized the importance of eyewitness testimony within early Christian communities, Bauckham develops his thesis by highlighting internal evidence within the Gospels. This author makes the bold claim that the Gospel writers had their own way of indicating eyewitnesses and the formally controlled way in which the tradition was communicated. The author cites many pieces of evidence, the strongest of which I will analyze in this essay: (i) The irregular pattern of names within the Gospels, (ii) the list of the Twelve within the synoptic Gospels, and (iii) the continuity of certain characters throughout Gospel accounts.

(i) To his first point, Bauckham argues that the pattern of named and unnamed characters within the Gospels suggest a special function for those who are named, specifically that they served as eyewitnesses for a particular Jesus tradition. He focuses his attention on those named individuals who were neither public officials nor one of the Twelve. Considering the early Christian community's interest in eyewitness testimony, it seems completely reasonable to believe that when it came time to write the Gospels down that the authors would indicate the names of those people with whom particular stories were connected.

⁴ Ibid., pg. 4.

Bauckham emphasizes this point by providing examples of rather interesting name usage that could only serve to indicate the individual's eyewitness testimony. For example, he highlights the specific name of the woman who discovered Jesus' empty tomb (Mary Magdalene) and the seemingly random man who witnessed the Passion (Simon of Cyrene). The author strengthens this point by noting that the most vivid stories within the Gospels are those linked with a named character. This would suggest that those traditions associated with a named character were more fully developed because the individual was capable of retelling their story. Thus, Bauckham has proposed a rather convincing way in which the authors of the Gospels indicated their eyewitnesses. But can we be sure that these stories were protected from the subjective influences of the collective memory?

(ii) Similar to the way in which the named characters served as eyewitnesses to specific traditions within the Gospels, Bauckham argues that the list of the Twelve in Matthew, Mark, and Luke indicate their function as eyewitnesses and as an official body of guarantors for the tradition. This point deserves particular attention. Bauckham is not only arguing that there were individuals responsible for particular traditions, but that there was also a group of people responsible for maintaining the integrity of the tradition as a whole. While the author underplays the significance of his observations —this was done in an attempt to appear more moderate than Gerhardsson who made a similar claim— we should still acknowledge the ramification that this claim, if true, would have on the way we understand the period before the Gospels were written.

Bauckham's foundation for this claim is rooted in the fact that the group is listed in each of the Synoptic Gospels in a relatively conserved order and that most of them do not reappear in the text after this point. He argues that the list in each text was meant to indicate the Twelve's importance to the story and tradition as a whole. He says:

That the lists are intended to portray the membership of Jesus' group of Twelve during his ministry is shown by the fact that they include Judas Iscariot, but at the same time the fact that Judas is placed last in all these lists with the explanation that he was the one who handed Jesus over to the authorities show that this is a retrospective view of the Twelve from a perspective after Jesus' death.⁵

The authors of the Gospels clearly meant to indicate which men witnessed the entirety of Christ's ministry. Unlike the other named individuals in the Gospel who were identified to indicate their connection to a particular tradition, the Twelve are named to indicate their authority over the entire tradition. We know that these men were not named as characters of the story because most of them are never mentioned again. Given this fact, Bauckham proposes that these lists were meant to document the historical appointment of the Twelve and indicate their witness to the entirety of Jesus' life and ministry.

Strikingly, Bauckham's exegesis of the text is corroborated by historical data, furthering the claim that the apostles were capable of overseeing the transmission process in a post-Easter Church. Howard Marshall, a biblical scholar, notes that the apostles were in contact even after the death of Jesus: "Some three years after his conversion (which cannot have been long after the death of Jesus) Paul could meet Peter in Jerusalem, and they were also in contact in Antioch about 14 years thereafter. Likewise James and John were part of this circle..."⁶ I was initially not convinced by the author's argument. However, after considering the historical data in combination with the fact that these lists indicate membership to Christ's group, I think it is highly plausible that the Twelve functioned as an official body of witnesses and guarantors for the tradition. This successfully argues for the controlled transmission of the Jesus traditions and

⁵ Ibid., pg. 96.

⁶ Marshall, Howard I. "A New Consensus on Oral Tradition? A Review of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008): 188.

weakens the claim that eyewitness accounts (or even anonymous accounts) circulated without regulation throughout the early Church.

Similar to the way in which the skeleton structures and protects the integrity of vital organs, the Twelve appear to have structured and protected the integrity of eyewitness testimony in the early Church. In order to more completely counter the fragmented view of the transmission process, Bauckham begins his literary analysis of the text to show that there is continuity within the eyewitness testimony of the Gospels.

(iii) Serving as a third blow to the claim that the Gospels lack sufficient eyewitness testimony, Bauckham posits that the authors of the texts actually acknowledge eyewitnesses that were present for most, if not all, of the documented traditions. More specifically, the author identifies the use of *inclusio* to indicate principal eyewitness. The author constructs an argument showing that this literary device is employed in Mark, Luke, and John. However, in the interest of time I will only describe and evaluate the argument Bauckham builds for Mark.

According to this thinker, the author of Mark's gospel intentionally mentions Peter at the beginning (1:16) of the gospel and at the end of Gospel (16:7), thereby placing an *inclusio* around the entire narrative. This was done to show that Peter was the principal eyewitness for the events recorded within the Gospel. Although this is a very subtle way to indicate the Gospel's source, Bauckham builds a cogent argument to convince his audience of Peter's hand in the narrative. He begins by acknowledging the frequency at which Peter's name appears in the Gospel—a striking 24 times. It seems as if this character's involvement in the story would suggest that he could have been the author. If he had dictated these stories to Mark he would most likely recount those events in which he was involved. Bauckham acknowledges the centrality of this claim to his thesis and writes: "Furthermore—a point of considerable

importance for our argument that Mark's Gospel claims Peter as its principal eyewitness source — Peter is actually present through a large proportion of the narrative from 1:16 to 14:72.”⁷

While this inference is convincing as it stands, Bauckham is determined to push forward and cites Papias work:

“Mark, in his capacity as Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he recalled from memory —though not in an ordered form— of the things either said or done by the Lord. For he [Mark] neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but later, as I said, Peter, who used to give his teachings in the form of Chreiai, but had not intention of providing an ordered arrangement of the logia of the Lord.”⁸

It is clear that Petrine testimony is the foundation of Mark's Gospel. This fact, in combination with the fact that Peter's name is not bracketing any of the other three Gospel narratives, makes it increasingly plausible to believe that the Gospel authors used *inclusio* to identify the principal eyewitness.

In toto, Bauckham presents a sound argument that thrusts the importance of eyewitness testimony within the Gospels to the center stage of New Testament scholarship. He challenges the assumption that the Jesus traditions were transmitted by anonymous individuals among early church communities and transformed by the creative collective of those groups. While Bauckham certainly does not account for every issue within the Gospel narratives, I think that each point of his thesis, when taken together, provides a compelling case for the authenticity of the Gospels. This investigation has revealed what is on the horizon for biblical studies. Bauckham has given his colleagues a reason to move on from asking if the Gospels were based on controlled eyewitness testimony. Now, scholars should focus their efforts on figuring out how this could have happened. I will attempt to explore this question after analyzing the merits of the opposing arguments that still question the authenticity of the Gospels.

⁷ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006. 126.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 203.

III. *Critically Analyzing the Opponents Arguments*

The main gripe that Bauckham's respondents have with his thesis is that it attempts to prove too much. Of those critics, I will analyze the strongest arguments presented by Patterson, Byrskog, and McCormick.

In his article entitled *Can You Trust a Gospel? A Review of Richard Bauckham's Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Patterson attacks the way Bauckham uses *inclusio* to demonstrate continuity within eyewitness testimony. In the previous section, I examined how this literary technique was used to bracket the Gospel, indicating the presence of a single individual present from the beginning to the end of Jesus' ministry. Patterson takes particular issue with this proof and references holes within the Gospel of Mark to weaken Bauckham's claim. He says, "Peter drops out of Mark's narrative just before the most crucial events in his story, and most pointedly is not a witness to Jesus' death or the empty tomb."⁹ Using this point to spearhead his argument, Patterson reduces the literary device of *inclusio* to a character randomly being named at the beginning and end of the Gospel. He refuses to believe it is meant to indicate the principal eyewitness.

Byrskog, like Patterson, believes that Bauckham's argument is well worded but fails to definitively prove anything. More specifically, this respondent is hesitant to accept Bauckham's confident claim that the Gospels were transmitted in a formally controlled manner. He believes that Bauckham fails to account for the subjective nature of eyewitness testimony and that this undermines the historicity of the Gospels. Byrskog's encapsulates this worry as he says, "My question is essentially, and perhaps surprisingly, to what extent his emphasis on eyewitness

⁹ Patterson, Stephen J. "Can You Trust a Gospel? A Review of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008): 201.

testimony brings us close to history, that is, to the facts of history.”¹⁰ He believes that we cannot account for “...what happened when eyewitness testimony distanced from the lips and ears of the early followers in Jerusalem and moved into other social contexts and geographical areas.”¹¹ It is clear that Byrskog is most troubled by the influence that a single individual or community would have on the facts being transmitted.

Echoing the concerns of Byrskog, Matthew McCormick, the author of *Atheism and the Case Against Christ*, focuses on the subjective nature of eyewitness testimony and insists that this completely compromises the integrity of the Gospels. Contrary to Bauckham, he denies that there was any sort of formally controlled process of transmission available to early Christian communities. On the grounds that the tradents of this tradition were not Jewish high priests, but rather uneducated lay people, McCormick adopts a form critic-esque distrust of oral history. He limits his understanding of effective verbal communication to rabbinic oral tradition and uses this as a reason to discount the oral history of the early Christian communities. McCormick says,

The oral tradition preserved for exposition of a set of specific laws given to the Jews by God from Moses. These laws were to be committed to memory and passed on in a very deliberate fashion from rabbi to student under specific circumstances...It's far fetched, to say the least, to suggest the Jews would violate the centuries of old customs of this tradition and quickly fold in a story about a renegade Jew with some radical teachings that overthrow a number of vital Jewish religious doctrines.¹²

In this regard, Bauckham and McCormick would certainly agree. Individuals who studied rabbinic memory techniques did not record the Gospels. However, unlike Bauckham, McCormick believes that because the first generation disciples were not Jewish high priests, the

¹⁰ Byrskog, Samuel. "The Eyewitnesses as Interpreters of the Past: Reflections on Richard Bauckham's, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008): 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 166.

¹² McCormick, Matthew S. *Atheism and the Case against Christ*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2012. 108.

Jesus traditions were transmitted, and consequently transmuted, in way similar to the child's game of telephone.

In light of Bauckham's argument outlined in the previous section, it is very clear that these counter points attempt to either directly, or indirectly, undermine the thesis of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by attacking individual aspects of the argument instead of the argument as a whole. This makes for poor argumentation. Bryskog, Patterson, and McCormick all display a fundamental distrust for the eyewitness account, pointing to different areas of vulnerability within oral history. While Bryskog and Patterson take particular issue with the internal evidence for eyewitness testimony within the Gospels, McCormick attacks the entire transmission process. We will start with the counter-arguments presented by Bryskog and Patterson's because they pose the greatest threat to Bauckham's thesis. However, it is very clear that none of these criticisms hold any weight.

Despite Bauckham's evidence rich support for internal evidence of eyewitness testimony within the Gospels, Patterson still takes issue with the author's use of *inclusio*. The respondent notes that Peter's hypothetical eyewitness testimony lacks continuity and believes that the author should, therefore, abandon this piece of evidence. This comment is uncritical and misunderstands Bauckham's intention in making this case. Bauckham was not trying to prove that the author's use of *inclusio* meant that one individual witnessed every single act, but that one individual was present from the beginning to the end of Jesus' ministry. To this point, I believe that the author of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* proves his point. Patterson could have made his argument even stronger if he evidenced gaps in Petrine testimony for which eyewitness testimony could not account. However, it is very clear, according to Bauckham's irregular name pattern hypothesis,

that the named individuals during the Passion and the empty tomb could have relayed their account to Peter.

Next, Bryskog's argument follows in the footsteps of Patterson's in that it fails to address the entirety of Bauckham's thesis. Focusing on the subjective nature of eyewitness testimony, and not the evidence indicating the existence of an official group of guarantors, this respondent refuses to believe that historicity can be preserved. This critique is weak because Bryskog fails to acknowledge the subjective element of almost all the information we receive. For example, we know that there is even a subjective component to sight: Our eyes take in visual information but our brains interpret this information in light of our previous experiences. Additionally, most of early history, as Bauckham notes, was recorded through eyewitness testimony. Should we then discard all the information we have on the grounds that it is partially subjective? I think Bryskog would answer, no. A stronger argument, if he could have made a case for it, would have acknowledged that there is a subjective element to all experiences and that the transmission of the Jesus traditions lacked the fail-safes necessary to preserve the integrity of the information. However, even the beefed up form of this argument fails. Bauckham goes to great lengths to prove that early Christian communities not only cared about eyewitness testimony but also controlled the process of transmission through the authority of the Twelve. Similar to the way in which information on Wikipedia is crowd sourced and verified (by experts), the Jesus traditions were compiled and verified (by the Twelve).

Finally, while McCormick does not explicitly respond to Bauckham's monograph, he does present an argument that challenges the formally controlled transmission process. This opponent provides a potent commentary but his surface level investigation of oral history reveals that his argument can be reduced to rhetoric. McCormick's thesis fails because he does not

entertain the possibility of other reliable means to transmit information besides those techniques taught by rabbinic Judaism. His distrust of gentile oral history even prevents him from exploring the most probable explanation for the transmission process: that there were eyewitnesses still alive when the Gospels were written. Despite his disinterest in exploring this topic more fully, McCormick's work brings us back to the pressing question that I posed at the end of section two: How, specifically, were the Jesus traditions reliably transmitted?

IV. A Novel Contribution to the Argument

For the reasons mentioned above, I do not believe that the respondents posed any threat to the cogent case presented in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. However, their skepticism provides an opportunity for further clarification and investigation. It is very clear that Bauckham's novel contribution to field of New Testament scholarship has awakened biblical scholars to the evidence supporting the place of eyewitness testimony within the Gospels. The contention, very clearly, is to what extent we can reasonably verify the involvement of individuals who witnessed the acts and words of a historical Jesus. While the respondents believe that Bauckham attempts to go beyond what can be reasonably verified, I think we can use his work as a foundation to build an even stronger case for eyewitness testimony and the formally controlled process of transmission. More specifically, I believe that an analysis of Mark's seemingly disorganized narrative reveals a structured story that mirrors the way in which a person would normally recount an eyewitness testimony had it been memorized.

Critics frequently attack the historicity of Mark's Gospel by drawing attention to the fact that the narrative is not in chronological order, especially when compared to the Gospel of John. Acknowledging this problem, Bauckham says:

Since John was himself an eyewitness, he was competent to put the material in proper chronological order, and he has done so in a way that conforms to best historiographic practice by shaping his material into a continuous literary whole, with chronological and geographical precision and with a developing plot that builds to a climax.¹³

People like Bryskog and Patterson believe that this is reason in and of itself to question the authenticity of the Gospels. It is a valid concern. How could we trust the testimony of an individual who has recounted a journey that is both geographically and historically unfeasible? This question would certainly be damaging to Bauckham's argument if the sole purpose of the Gospels is to provide a historical understanding of Jesus Christ. However, it is very clear that this is not the case and we cannot, therefore, discount this Gospel simply because of the narrative arc. We must remind ourselves that the historical aspect of the Gospels functions second to their role as Holy Scripture. For this reason, in my opinion, it is highly likely that chronology was an afterthought to developing the thematic understanding of Christ's life and ministry. If we can account for this apparently disordered narrative within the Gospel of Mark, then we could consider this observation a sign of the work's authenticity. How could we account for Mark's apparently poor historicity?

Bauckham only takes us so far in answering this question. In the second section of this essay, I presented the author's evidence indicating that Mark functioned as Peter's translator when the apostle recounted his eyewitness testimony. Bauckham focuses in on this dynamic between Peter and his translator and says: "...the difference in order between John's and Mark's Gospels was explicable by the fact that, whereas the former was in correct chronological order, Mark, working only from Peter's preaching, was unable to arrange much of the material in accurate chronological order."¹⁴ Clearly, this does not account for the chronological discord

¹³ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006. 234.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 234-235.

within the Gospel but it does remind us of the fact that Peter was relaying, from memory, the Jesus traditions that he witnessed. This would imply that any issues with the chronology of the narrative must be the result of the way in which Peter gave his testimony.¹⁵ Wouldn't this suggest that Peter had a reason for giving his testimony this way? The assumption in the criticism of Mark's Gospel is that this disordered narrative lacks intentionality. However, I, along with biblical scholar James R. Edwards, acknowledge that there certainly is a structure to Peter's narrative. It may not have the same structure as John but there still seems to be a purpose to the way in which Peter recounts the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In fact, the story appears to be very systematic.

Edwards, in his book, *The Gospel According to Mark: Pillar New Testament Commentary*, posits that, "Above all, Mark's portrayal of Jesus is characterized by three factors: his divine authority, his mission as the suffering Servant of God, and his divine Sonship."¹⁶ When we read the Gospel of Mark we can sense a tripartite organization: In Mk 1:1-8:26 the focus is on the Galilean ministry, in Mk 8:27-10:52 it is Jesus discussion with his disciples, and in Mk 11:1-16:8 it is the passion.¹⁷ We can almost imagine Peter recounting his story to Mark, carefully recalling Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with an organized narrative. Each subsection functions as a central point within a web of stories. But is there reason to believe that this testimony is reflective of a memorized story?

Modern cognitive psychology would suggest that Peter's testimony in the Gospel of Mark is reflective of the way in which we know humans to structure information for long-term memory. This gospel account, as established above, has a very structured and systematically

¹⁵ Furthermore, the respect and a precedent set for eyewitness testimony within early Christian communities makes it likely that Mark would have translated the story in the order it was dictated.

¹⁶ Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans ;, 2002.

¹⁷ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/64496/biblical-literature/73434/The-Gospel-According-to-Mark-unique-structure>

organized narrative. I would propose that this is Peter's attempt to impose order on at least 10 years of history so that it could be recalled with high degree of accuracy. In fact, his tripartite narrative seems to reflect the memory technique of "chunking." This form of memorization was first described by Dr. George A. Miller, a famous psychologist from Princeton University, in his paper *The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information*. Miller demonstrated that the brain could encode greater amounts of information when it was divided into chunks. These chunks are a "collection of elements having a strong association with one another, but weak associations with elements within other chunks."¹⁸ Not surprisingly, this is an efficient way to remember information. The organization of Peter's narrative suggests that he chunked his eyewitness testimony. Each distinct section of the Gospel functions as a thematic umbrella, under which a "collection of elements having a strong association" is grouped.

Critics may take issue with such a claim, as it seems hard to believe that a fisherman would be capable of memorizing this much information. However, there is evidence within the Bible suggesting that the disciples did memorize traditions. Bauckham points to Paul's letters where the disciple claims to have received the tradition "from the Lord," implying a chain of transmission. Although Bauckham does not point to any evidence within the Gospels to indicate how the stories were memorized he notes, "...there were persons expressly designated as teachers in the Pauline churches (Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28-29; Gal 6:6; Eph 4:11)."¹⁹ The reference to "teachers" suggests that some sort of memorization occurred with the Jesus traditions. Given this fact, I think it is reasonable to say that Peter may have "chunked" his

¹⁶Gobet, F., Lane, P. C. R., Croker, S., Cheng, P. C. H., Jones, G., Oliver, I., et al. (2001). Chunking mechanisms in human learning. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 5, 236-243.

¹⁹ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006. 268.

testimony. I believe that the information provided by Bauckham and the seemingly abnormal structure of the Gospel of Mark suggests that the narrative was memorized with precision.

V. Concluding Remarks

Given the analysis outlined above, I think that it is completely reasonable to believe that the historical Jesus is the testified Jesus. With Bauckham's investigation of eyewitness testimony within the Jesus traditions, there is an incredibly strong argument for the authenticity of the Gospels. It is clear that in regards to this topic of conversation, there is no longer room for "gratuitous doubt." However, in the midst of all of the arguments, we cannot forget what it must have been like to be a part of the early Christian community. The decision to believe eyewitness testimony regarding the Jesus traditions could have been the difference between life and death. It was, therefore, in these peoples' best interest to verify the authenticity of a given claim. In many ways, we should be eternally grateful to the people of the early Church because they purified the Gospels that we know today. These people had to look at the facts and make a decision. They could not afford to just remain doubtful. We need to follow the lead of the people from the early Church, consult the facts, and make a decision as to whether or not the Gospels are authentic.

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