

BOOK REVIEW

Anthony Le Donne, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). xiv + 146 pp. Pbk. US\$12.00.

While the title of this book may strike readers as that of yet another standard work devoted to historical Jesus research, the author makes a provocative contribution to this field of study through his innovative approach. Le Donne does not begin with evaluating a Jesus narrative or saying in the Gospels, but instead establishes a philosophical framework that serves to guide his enquiry into the historical Jesus and to justify its outcomes. ‘In order to do justice to the “Jesus of history”, I have to know *what* it is that I’m looking for, *how* to go about looking for it, and *why*’ (p. 4). Referring to this philosophical framework as postmodern historiography, he specifically seeks to examine the nature of contemporary philosophy about human perception, memory and history, so as to apply it to ancient history. He believes that this approach can provide plausible statements about the past and the historical Jesus against those who are skeptical about or have abandoned the notion of historical certainty. According to Le Donne, this historical certainty hinges on the continuity between Jesus’ historical presence and historical impact. His main concern in the book is to find out how Jesus was remembered by his contemporaries.

Each of the three major sections of the book begins with a set of questions that introduce the subject of discussion. Some of these questions are, perhaps, unique, while other questions are commonly asked in this field of study. They are discussed under the three sub-sections *Perception* (how the ancients perceived Jesus), *Memory* (how they remembered him) and *History* (how both perception and memory affect history). In each of these sub-sections, the author states the theory for his case, followed by a corroborating illustration and biblical or extra-biblical evidence. Subsequently, in the last sub-section, *Jesus*, Le Donne cites specific elements from the Gospel narratives that he argues

to be historically plausible given his postmodern theories of perception, memory and history. These historically plausible narratives are justified further by several of the traditional Criteria for Authenticity.

The three major sections are prefaced with an introduction, titled *Beginnings*, where the author defines and contrasts his use of the term 'postmodernism' from 'modernism'. Le Donne explains how applying a postmodern theory to a pre-modern Jesus is justifiable. In the rest of the chapter, the author notes some of the possible oppositions from both conservative and liberal quarters and acknowledges the limitations of his book. The final chapter, entitled *New Beginnings*, closes with a suggestion as to the best way forward for both the historian and historical-Jesus research—one that is construed under a postmodern paradigm and that does not lament over an unknowable ancient past.

While one may see the strength of the author's postmodern philosophical approach, a few important issues need some critical comments. I will first highlight the author's method of enquiry in the three major sections of the book and then give my comments where appropriate. Needless to say, this book is a must read for both the general and the academic reader who is interested in the reliability and veracity of the Jesus narratives. Moreover, for the academic reader, this volume may serve as a model for how a fair scholarly work on future historical Jesus studies may be done, one that generates results out of a defined working theory.

Part One opens with an array of questions pertaining to Jesus' personhood and the various familial, supernatural and psychological perceptions people have of Jesus. To answer these questions, the author asserts that one must first understand that perception (our sense of the world around us) is filtered through our minds. On this he argues against Descartes, Plato and Russell's line of philosophical reasoning that a person's perception is non-perspectival, meaning that there is no 'barrier' or 'filter' between a person and his or her thoughts. Accordingly, if perception requires interpretation and is not merely a simple and straightforward act, the two extremes of characterizing the Gospels as something like a courtroom transcript or something of a wholesale invention could be avoided.

If every new perception is shaped by our perception of previous or common experiences, this is due to human memory. Le Donne believes that 'memory is the impression left by the past, not the preservation of it' (pp. 24-25). As such, memory perceives the impact the past has on

the present. He gives 'wedding' as an example of a collective social memory, wherein, although having forgotten much about his own wedding, he better recalls that special moment with every new wedding he attends. Therefore, Le Donne contends that history must be understood in terms of human memory, which, in turn, requires perception.

History, for Le Donne, is not what happened in the past, but is rather a recollection of the past through the human memory. The historian's own memory and his audience's corporate memory as a community play in tandem. This allows for the revision of memories by the historian, in order to perceive history more accurately; accordingly, 'the more significant a memory is, the more interpreted it will become' (p. 36). The question is, can human memory be revised? The quote in the preceding sentence even implies that the author believes that it is interpretation (or perhaps perception) that is being revised; memory (what has been registered in the mind) perhaps remains relatively constant.

With these theories of perception, memory and history in place, the author evaluates several embarrassing stories about Jesus, particularly Jesus' apparently unpleasant relationship with his own family members (cf. Mk 3.20-27, 31-35; Jn 2.1-11). He suggests that since these stories contain embarrassing details about Jesus (Criterion of Embarrassment), but, at the same time, cohere with other memory-stories (Criterion of Coherence; cf. Lk. 11.27-28) and are attested in extrabiblical literature (Criterion of Multiple Attestation; cf. *Gos. Thom.* 79), they are probably not invented but historically plausible stories. He does, however, point out that the postmodern historian must further ask the *why* of these stories, if these authenticity criteria are to be useful.

Part Two conjectures how readers understand Jesus' belief and teachings about the spiritual world and about his earthly mission. Using Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle, the author posits that understanding is always gleaned from a preconceived thought category; thus, every new perception requires and implies a reinterpretation of previous interpretations. For the postmodern philosopher, therefore, 'interpretation is ever changing and fluid' and is 'like a circle in constant motion' and in concert with perception (p. 60). This cyclical motion is then thrust forward by memory. Because human memory can recall large amounts of data with high accuracy, and because Jesus lived in an oral culture, his words and deeds were remembered with both variation and stability.

If every new perception is a reinterpretation assisted by memory, the ‘unremembered and uninterpreted past is not history’ (p. 77). In saying this, the author again is distinguishing between ‘what happened’ (actual reality) and ‘what people said happened’ (‘reports’ of reality). He compares Gotthold Lessing’s doubt about historical certainty based on human testimonies with the Criterion of Plausibility, and argues that plausibility is the most compelling way to adjudicate historical reliability. Le Donne claims that the postmodern historian is not concerned with reconstructing an original ‘history’, but rather with all interpretation, whether it is ‘factual’ or not.

The author here, however, seems to be making the same point as in Part One that memory requires perception and that perception requires interpretation. Le Donne points out that this theory is a recurrent cycle; thus, a ‘reinterpretation’ of previous ‘interpretations’. He also claims that the ‘unremembered and uninterpreted past is not history’, a claim that seems to divide ‘events’ from ‘history’. Such an assertion raises the question of whether Le Donne follows a continental philosophical stance of taking an ‘event’ as a disjunction with history in order to establish a new reality or subject. Further, one can also argue that history is simply history, even if some things were recorded or remembered and others were not. Perhaps ‘history’ is too broad a term for the author’s contention.

Returning to the set of questions in this section, the author points out that a common theme (Criterion of Multiple Forms) in Jesus’ time was the kingdom of God, inaugurated by John the Baptist and continued by Jesus. Jesus, however, preached a non-violent and non-revolutionary gospel, which was contrary to the people’s expectation from what they had previously heard from John. The reason for this is found in Jesus’ perception of the spiritual world, wherein he saw the demons standing between Israel and God’s kingdom.

Part Three asks questions about Jesus’ self-perception and the historical reliability of the Gospels. By attributing a saying of Adolf Hitler to Martin Luther King Jr., he points out that knowing the source of a saying significantly changes people’s perception; thus, ‘who says it matters’. He concludes that perception is manipulated both by design and accident. Because people are told what they are likely to perceive, they often perceive what they have already expected to hear.

Speaking again of memory, the author adds that memory is distortion or refraction. Like the lenses of a telescope designed to bend the light

between the object from afar and the eye, memory—by design—also ‘bends light’ between the invisible past and the present. However, I find the single technical function of the telescope and the multifariously dynamic functions of memory (including feelings, tastes, visualization, etc.) to be an incongruent comparison. From this Le Donne asks, does the truth of a story result from collectively remembered events or from how the events were told? By pointing out that the *Schindler’s List* story remains a real event even as it moves from memory to a film, he argues that historians, like writers, filmmakers and poets, also tell their stories chronologically and creatively. Without a doubt, ‘both perceptions and memories of Jesus were cast along narrative patterns in order to measure his historical significance and project meaning onto his legacy’.

Consequently, since narratives shape history, there is editorial interpretation. Memory (or perhaps interpretation) is reframed to suit the needs of the new narrative context. Le Donne cites Mk 14.56-59 and Jn 2.18-21 as two counter-memory refractions of Jesus’ temple saying with different interpretations, perspectives and emphases. It is, therefore, a historically reliable account showing a similar saying along two diverging patterns.

While it is clear that the author wants to proceed from a general theory of perception and memory to its more intricate details, I found his basic syllogism on p. 25 sufficient for his arguments and overall purpose. In fact, his basic theory may be to simply distinguish history from historiography or events from history, although he seems to want to call both by two different definitions of history. What could have been an outstanding contribution was how his postmodern philosophical theory corroborates (or disputes) the Criteria of Authenticity, and not vice versa, considering that these traditional criteria have received well-known objections in this field of study. Nonetheless, the author’s unique approach still demonstrates itself as a good contribution to historical-Jesus research.

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