



Le Donne, Anthony.

Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. xiv + 146. Paper. \$12.00. ISBN 9780802865267.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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When I first received Anthony Le Donne's book *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* I was poised to not like it. On the cover was a pixelated rendering of Jesus that I didn't find particularly attractive and the words sat atop gaudy pink, blue, green, and yellow boxes (the colors reminded me of a pair of LA Gears my sister had when we were kids that I absolutely hated!). What's worse is that some of the words said, "Foreword by Dale C. Allison Jr." I didn't care much for Allison's slim volume (also published by Eerdmans) on the Historical Jesus so I almost instinctively associated his book with Le Donne's. But you can't judge a book by its cover, right? So I opened the book and read Allison's foreword and my fears were not allayed. He enthusiastically supported the work and he did so with language that seemed to suggest that Le Donne's thesis was consonant with his own.

Again, I was expecting to completely hate this book but then something happened; I took a good long look at the cover and noticed something about the pixelated rendering of Jesus. Those pixels, pink, blue, green, and yellow as they were, reminded me of 3-D images from my childhood. As anyone even remotely familiar with popular culture knows, 3-D movies are en vogue once again, so I happen to have a few pairs of 3-D glasses sitting around the house since my daughter has 3-D DVDs and activity/coloring books. I proceeded to grab a pair of glasses, first the cardboard kind with the red and blue lenses, and look at the cover. It didn't seem all that different but I could tell

that something was going on. So I grabbed a second pair of glasses, this one made of hard plastic with clear lenses, and I looked at the front and back covers through those lenses and the words leapt off the page! Everything popped! Suddenly the color scheme made perfect sense; the ugly pixelated Jesus ceased to be gaudy and began to be witty, fun, and creative. My perception changed completely and with it my expectations.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading since Le Donne doesn't spend much time actually examining the Historical Jesus. Jesus instead serves as a foil for Le Donne to "examine the natures of human perception, memory, and history." (7) There are three sections composed of five chapters each along with introduction ("Beginnings") and conclusion ("New Beginnings"). Each section follows the same format covering: Questions; Perception; Memory; History; Jesus. Le Donne approaches his subject matter as a postmodern historian, or better yet, a student of the postmodern philosophy of history. "Postmodern" is a term that gets bandied about quite often yet is rarely defined, and unfortunately, Le Donne doesn't offer much in terms of definition. The best we get is that "For something to be considered *postmodern*, it must have reacted in some way against a modern approach." (6) But let's leave aside the elusive labels for a moment and get to the meat and potatoes of Le Donne's book.

Le Donne wants us to stop and reconsider how we think about, and subsequently do, history. There are plenty of things that factor into history, the most foundational thing being our perception of any or everything. "Every perception is necessarily interpreted by other familiar thought categories," Le Donne correctly tells us (21), but "Perception is not a simple act of data-input. What you perceive is (at least in part) shaped by your perception of previous experiences -- what we would commonly call 'memory.'" (23) If you'll go back to my introductory remarks you'll see how my memories (of my sister's sneakers and Allison's book) shaped my initial perception of the book in a less than favorable way. You'll also notice that upon further reflection my memories (of 3-D images) led me to take a harder look at the cover and helped to reshape my perception and make me more open to its contents.

Le Donne also tells us that "Memory is the impression left by the past, not the preservation of it" (24-25), and that "History, *as a discipline of knowledge*, is not what happened in the past, it is an accounting of how the past was remembered and why" (34); "historians are storytellers" (114) and they tell their stories based upon their memories or the collected/collective memories of others. He says, "As odd as it might sound, historians do not work with the events as they actually happened, nor should they suppose that any single account will provide a picture of this with certainty or objectivity. Rather, the historian's task is to account plausibly for the multiple

memories represented by those who interpreted past events.” (77) “Telling the stories of history requires much more than fact finding. Telling history requires analysis of how the facts have been mediated. The historian cannot separate the facts from the interpretations, nor should he/she try.” (80)

Where some scholars like to speak of memory “distortion” Le Donne prefers to forgo the negative connotation of the term and speak of memory “refraction” using a telescope as an example. Telescopes bend light and allow us to see things that are not visible to the naked eye by making them larger. “This is exactly what memory does for us. We are unable to see the past. It is not visible. However, we have a tool called ‘memory’ that focuses our attention onto present cognitive states associated with the past. Through the process of memory we are able to see an approximate image of the past.” (108)

Interestingly enough, Le Donne claims that where divergent memories exist, it’s actually evidence that a particular account actually occurred in history, so e.g., Mark and John both tell of Jesus’ remarks against the temple, and yet they carry said remarks in different directions. John interprets Jesus’ words metaphorically and Mark says that they have been misunderstood by Jesus’ accusers. The fact that the accounts are different shouldn’t alarm us; it should alert us to the probability that the words were said in the first place since they could create such “refracted memories” at all (see 125-31).

But it doesn’t end with perception, interpretation, or memory; one could say that it doesn’t necessarily begin with them either since “cultural narratives influence actions and interpretations long before the historian sits down to tell the story” (117); “narratives actually shape our perceptions of the world and bend our memories to make them intelligible.” (118) Le Donne craftily brings this point to light through a series of “Culture Focus” sidebars that appear throughout the chapters. Initially I thought that they seemed out of place but as I kept reading I saw how they shaped and reshaped my reading of Le Donne’s narrative. And he’s cognizant of this all, of course. He wants us to be aware of “ever changing and fluid” nature of interpretation and reinterpretation; he notices that it is circular without having to be viciously circular (see esp. 60-64).

Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It? is a tiny book that packs a big punch. It’s written for undergraduates, which means it’s extremely readable and easy to understand, and yet it contains ideas that students and scholars at every level should consider. Funnily enough, I didn’t see what was so postmodern about this approach to history. I suppose it

qualifies on the definition of being a reaction against modern approaches, but there's something familiarly premodern about it; it's not so different from typological readings of Scripture where the revelation and experience of Jesus reshaped the early Christians' readings of the Old Testament narrative and history. Le Donne certainly isn't unaware of the confluence of typology with his proposal (see e.g., 38-39; 90-91). Also, if one compares the ideas put forth in this book with Craig Keener's recent descriptions of ancient historiography in his *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, then they'll find plenty of similarities. The idea of circular or spiral interpretation also seems to jive with the epistemological project championed by Reformed theologians and philosophers like Cornelius Van Til and John Frame, whom I would never regard as postmodern. So I've said all this to say that potential readers shouldn't let the "postmodern" label throw them; this book deserves a careful reading by anyone interested in history or the philosophy of history.