

**Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?**, Anthony Le Donne, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011 (ISBN 97808082865267), xiv + 146 pp., Pb \$12.00.

Within the field of New Testament scholarship, the sub-discipline of historical Jesus studies has had a long and interesting journey in multiple directions over the years. From Reimarus to Schweitzer, Bultmann to Käsemann, Perrin to the Jesus Seminar, and Wright to Horsley, the field has produced a voluminous and eclectic crop of research indeed! So much has been said about the historical Jesus, in fact, that one is sometimes given to wonder if anything is left to be said about him at all. Can there be a new paradigm in the field—or are we at the quest's end? It is precisely here, at this seeming impasse, that Le Donne looks back on a rich and varied tradition of historical Jesus research and pushes forward to a possible new epoch in the field.

Seeking to move the discipline further into the paradigm of postmodernity and the unique historiographical methods it has helped create, Le Donne begins his study of the historical Jesus by situating the inquiry in terms of orality, social memory, and memory distortion. Le Donne takes into account the media-cultural milieu of first century Palestine, and argues that the memories of Jesus were shared among members of the early Jesus movement as primarily oral compositions. As these memories of Jesus were held and shared by communities they became more and more interpreted (refracted or 'distorted'). Yet, Le Donne claims, this distortion of shared memories of Jesus is not grounds for dismissal of potential historical Jesus materials; instead he insists that '[t]he more significant a memory is, the more interpreted it will become' (37). Thus Le Donne's historiographical method does not dismiss out of hand the theological shaping of Jesus in the gospels but instead attends to the question of how those theological typologies preserve memories of the historical Jesus from among his earliest post-Easter followers.

Among the many highlights of *Historical Jesus* is Le Donne's clear and lucid description of complex epistemological theory, explained with the authority of an expert and the illustration and careful exposition of a good teacher. In this work a reader will find interaction with memory theory, tackling such questions as 'How does a person gain access to her thoughts?' (15) and how it is that human beings perceive anything at all (22-23). Heady stuff for a book primarily aimed at an educated laity or undergraduate audience, to be sure. Yet Le Donne does his readers a great service in clarifying his method using everyday examples, such as the author's experience of a Bob Dylan concert or a 'tickle test' with his daughter, to explain in relatively simple terms that which would have remained complicated, and perhaps misunderstood, by the uninitiated reader.

My only criticism of this work is that of formatting, which may well have fallen outside of the author's control and been imposed by the publisher. Though I did find useful the 'cultural focus' breakout-sections detailing important historical and cultural details of the first century, they were at first confusing, unrelated to the immediate context and at times felt like they broke the flow of the author's argument. It is important for readers to understand the historical milieu of first century Palestine in light of Roman imperial occupation, yet the culture focus section explaining this is oddly placed in the midst of an argument about perception and understanding.

In such a short book, I am not sure how these sections could have otherwise been placed, since they are all quite brief but well-stocked with important information for historical Jesus inquiry; perhaps a note of explanation in the introduction for their use throughout the book might have been enough to situate these culture focus sections a bit better. Of course, this is a small complaint against an otherwise excellent and important work.

*Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* flows out of Le Donne's wider project in historical Jesus studies (c.f. Le Donne's *Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David*, Baylor University Press, 2009) and popularizes his insistence that many of the old methods of historical Jesus research have indeed run aground. The author joins a growing number of biblical scholars who are unafraid to follow the postmodern turn and to concede that history-as-it-happened is not fully accessible to modern historians. This is not a cause of epistemological despair for Le Donne, rather it is the impetus for his call for a reinvigorated historical Jesus study, 'a new beginning that is rooted in the notion that the interpretation of memory refraction is the historian's best way forward' (134).

Throughout his treatise, Le Donne fluidly moves from method to application, from twenty-first to first-century in such a way that readers should have no trouble seeing how Le Donne's approach can be used to 'triangulate' historical Jesus materials through the careful interpretation of shared memories of Jesus. Despite its short length, this book is an important popularization of a growing movement in historical Jesus studies and, in retrospect, may well be seen as part of that new beginning in the field which the author hopes to help grow. *Historical Jesus* is a clear and lucidly-written book which helps to lay the foundation for a new line of inquiry towards the historical Jesus and adds new excitement to a very old field of biblical research. It would readily serve as a textbook to be used in a course on the historical Jesus and would be well-suited for use in both undergraduate and graduate settings.

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