

Samantha Wanta

The Truth in History

Samantha Wanta is a sophomore studying Linguistics at the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin. After she graduates, she plans to attend graduate school in pursuit of a research degree. In her free time she enjoys reading, running, and spending time with family.

The search for the historical Jesus began with a broad set of people acting as historians: the philosophers of the twentieth century, the scientists of the industrial revolution, and the authors of our text books. Their noble quest was to find empirical truth: pure, objective history. It has been a meandering search, each foundational block of fact exposes a crack in another. Students are often asked to put themselves in the places of these modern historians: to read what they wrote and think what they thought and struggle as they struggled. In doing so, we quickly end up learning about Jesus' historical context, Roman and Jewish; the narratives of his birth, told differently in all four of the Gospels; and the reliability of the Gospels themselves, Who are the authors? What are their sources? When did they write? Why were they writing? It seems that we, and these modern scholars, aren't exactly sure what we should be looking for: history or truth? This fundamental question lies at the heart of all of our questions about Christianity, and it keeps us running in circles, never allowing us to actually find the man whose Truth changed the world. Clearly, the search for the historical Jesus begins at the distinction between history and truth.

The authors of the Gospels wrote the story of Jesus for a reason. Contemporary historians often look to other works from the same time period and compare the literary practices of each in order to discern for what purpose each work was written. For example, Josephus Flavius is a well-known first century historian. By comparing his writing style to the writing style of the Gospels, scholars agree that none of the Gospels were intended to be historical accounts. Unfortunately, this analysis seems to suppose that since they are non "historical", their truth is compromised.

Let me introduce here an unexpected contribution to the discussion. In one of his religious analyses, Sigmund Freud observes that ancient historians were not overly concerned with being historical at all. He writes, "At first [historians] shaped their accounts according to their needs and tendencies of the moment, with an easy conscience, as if they had not yet understood what falsification signified"¹. He was talking specifically about sources like Josephus, whose own writing, according to Freud, is filled with rhetoric and intention. So, why do modern historians hold on to the expectation that ancient "historians" were somehow objectively true? Granted, ancient historians weren't liars: they were recording *their truth*. While empirical history did not exist within the methodology of these ancient historians, as scholars we know that these sources possess academic value despite of their lack of historical credibility. If we remain within the borders of our modernist forefathers' impossible desire for purely objective truth, we will never conceive the broader, undeniable truth that encompasses both subjective (ancient) and objective (modern) realities. So instead of searching for the *historical* Jesus, perhaps we should conduct a postmodern search for the *true* Jesus.

Unfortunately, modern historians did not try to distinguish which works were written with the intention to be truthful (albeit not historical). In fact, most of these historians mistakenly assumed that history and truth are synonymous concepts. E.P. Sanders clearly fails to make the distinction when he writes, "[in reference to the Synoptic Gospels] There are no sources that give us the 'unvarnished truth'; the varnish of faith in Jesus covers everything"². While the "varnish of faith in Jesus" might make it impossible to find an objective, modernist history, it certainly doesn't prevent us from finding truth within the Gospels.

Take, for example, the Gospel of Luke. Many historians read this Gospel and see that it is written in a style similar to an ancient romance novel: the language, the characters, and the plot all seem to fit the mold. But just because Luke wasn't trying to write *history*, doesn't mean he wasn't trying to record *the truth*. For example, compare Luke's Gospel, or romance novel, to the works of French novelist, Proust. Proust believed that "While art and science both dealt in facts ("the impression is for the writer what experimentation is for the scientist"), only the artist was able to describe reality as it was actually experienced"³. With his famous description of a madeleine cookie, Proust intuited what scholars today are starting to realize: reality is "ultimately spiritual, and not physical". In the same way, Luke's "fiction" communicates a truth that no textbook could ever convey.

Considering Luke and Proust can show that, even within the fictional novel, there may be an element of unassailable truth, whether it be historical, symbolic, thematic, cultural or social. So while it is only *likely* that Jesus existed in the "varnished" history that Sanders decries, he clearly exists in story and legend. If we limit ourselves to only analyzing the Jesus in the modernist, objective history many have already declared impossible, we inherently lose some of the truth that exists within his story.

As students, we are sometimes thoughtlessly asked to reconcile these two worlds: the modernist world of empirical truth and the ancient world of subjective truth. And from this impossible reconciliation we are expected to withdraw history! Certainly, there is something to be learned; something to be concluded. But is it history? As our modernist forefathers make their grand exodus from academia, perhaps, just as the *historical* Jesus needed to become the *true* Jesus, history itself needs to be redefined.

In his introduction to Anthony Le Donne's work, *Historical Jesus*, Dale C. Allison Jr. writes, "For far too long, New Testament Scholars have operated with simplistic antitheses, such as event vs. interpretation, memory vs. legend, fact vs. fiction[...] It is time to rethink much"⁴. Indeed, it is time to recreate what history means, and how it effects our perception of the Truth. Anthony Le Donne defines the new, post-modern history as: "[...] not what happened in the past, [but rather] an accounting of how the past was remembered and why"⁵. In essence, history is nothing more than memories of ancient interpretations of events: every historical account is therefore inherently many times removed from the actual event, even if it is written by an eyewitness. If history is based on interpretations and memories, why would it have any more weight than an ancient romance novel? Proust seemed to be asking himself the same question: "[...] the moment we finish eating the cookie, leaving behind a collection of crumbs on a porcelain plate, we begin warping the memory of the cookie to fit our own personal narrative"⁶. Clearly, looking for the historical Jesus is futile: he doesn't exist. Just like Proust's cookie, the historical Jesus ceased to exist the day he was crucified. The only Jesus that exists historically is the one we find in memory, perception, and story.

We might be, in fact, talking about, or more specifically, the "science of mind". The post-modern view of history reflects what contemporary neuroscience is beginning to understand about memory:

The memory is altered in the absence of the original stimulus, becoming less about what you remember and more about you. So the purely objective memory, the one "true" to the original taste of the madeleine, is the memory you will never know⁷.

With this new found understanding of how memory works, we cannot go on working within the framework of modern history. Not only is objective truth hard to come by from our sources of the past, but it is also impossible for the brain to apprehend: because objective truth doesn't exist in history, or our minds, it doesn't exist at all.

As students in the post-modern era it is our time to redefine how to study history. While this task may seem daunting, we have the benefit of learning from our pre-modern and modern predecessors, and our biggest lesson should be that we can't limit ourselves to either objective history or subjective history: truth only exists on the line in between the two. And, especially in studying the historical Jesus, we have to recognize our role as historians: "The historian is essentially the interpreter of memories. Because memory is interpretation from the start, historians are interpreters of previous interpretations"⁸. With the birth of post-modern history, the *true* Jesus finally has a chance of being discovered, and indeed, it is only through him that we have a chance of discovering the Truth.

¹ Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Random House, Inc., 1939. 85.

² Sanders, E.P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin, 1993. 73.

³ Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007. 77.

⁴ Le Donne, Anthony. *Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011. ix.

⁵ *ibid.* 34.

⁶ Proust. 82.

⁷ *ibid.* 85.

⁸ Historical Jesus. 40.