

BOOK REVIEW

Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). x + 126 pp. Pbk. US\$11.31.

In spite of his continued uncertain conclusions with respect to the historical Jesus, Dale Allison has set out to complement his historical-critical inquiries with theological deliberations, because he wants to inspire his theologically motivated pastoral students at Pittsburg Theological Seminary. Together with his enduring desire to discover and evaluate the evidence, especially when he joined a group of fellow scholars at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, Allison describes his book as ‘my personal testimony to doubt seeking understanding’ (p. 5). Thus, Allison must carefully balance historical and theological integrity in an effort to be unbiased in his assessment.

The first three chapters of Allison’s work reflect upon the more significant issues and debates involved in *historical* Jesus research. In the next two chapters some of the difficult issues typical of the historical quest are presented, including Allison’s own personal impressions regarding the *theological* Jesus. Noticeably, Allison’s effort to avoid bias can be seen in his ample presentation and balanced assessment of the historical evidence from previous studies, although I find that at times some of his assertions seem either problematic or an overstatement of the case.

Stating his motivations for writing the book in the preface, Allison expresses his own theological confusion and anxiety about historical Jesus studies and introduces the aim of his book: ‘What are the religious implications of the quest?’ (p. 3). While he makes it clear that this volume is not ‘a cartography’ of historical Jesus research studies, Allison provides a short historical overview of previous studies. He concludes with the assured convictions that ‘informed changes of mind should be welcomed, not feared’, and that ‘the unexamined Christ is not worth having’ (p. 5). This last assured conviction, however, needs clarification. When can we truly say that we have adequately examined

Christ so that he can be worth having? The first-century Christians who had witnessed Jesus, as well as many Christians today, may not have critically examined Christ. Yet they believe that Christ is worth having by pure faith. In fact the author himself believes that it is ‘the biblical texts, not the reconstructed history’ that ‘have nurtured Christians through the centuries’ (p. 44).

Chapter 1 addresses the problem of theological utility. Allison presents the major players in the discipline and their continuing disagreement. He then points out that almost all of the ‘big books’ on Jesus come with what we may call a ‘built-in theology’ (p. 15). As such, Jesus’ identity is different to different people. He closes the chapter by emphasizing the fact that the perceptions and memories of people who knew Jesus (i.e. Jesus’ social identity) constitute part of his personal identity. Therefore, Allison argues that separating the actual texts *of* Jesus from the texts *about* him is a crude procedure, for if we ignore the texts about him, we ignore his social identity.

One of these ‘texts about him’ that the author cites is 1 Corinthians 13. He writes, ‘Jesus wrote nothing to the Corinthians, but without him 1 Corinthians 13 would not have been written’ (p. 28). This assertion is problematic. If Paul’s Scripture is the Old Testament (LXX), the language about love in 1 Corinthians 13 may have been quoted from Deut. 6.5 and/or Lev. 18.19, from which Jesus’ words in Mt. 22.37-39 and Mk 12.30-31 might also have originated. While Paul may likely have been well-informed about Jesus’ teachings and character, it does *not* necessarily follow that he ‘so strongly recalls Jesus’ words and behaviour in the Gospels’ (p. 28).

Chapter 2 takes on the task of answering some disputed questions. Allison argues that history does not carry its own meaning; theology is a result of interpreting history. He asks: how much history does theology require or how much history can historians establish? Furthermore, the way they treat the Gospel texts differs. In any case, Allison concludes that even if the canonical texts cannot represent the total history behind them, the Gospels’ portrayal of the historical Jesus may not be so far-fetched. Subsequently, while this portrayal of the historical Jesus is theologically significant, people have different ways of coming to know Jesus. And from this epistemological question (how do we come to know him?) is the ontological question (who exactly was Jesus?).

So the author suggests that since there are different ways of knowing Jesus, people have different conceptions of Jesus’ identity. True,

however, I find his differentiation of the textual Jesus of antiquity, Jesus of the first century, modernity's so-called historical Jesus, Jesus of church history and tradition, and Jesus as he is now in his post-mortem existence that people have claimed to have encountered, overly sophisticated. I find no distinction between the earthly Jesus of the first century, the Jesus of the church and tradition, and the now resurrected Jesus. People either acknowledge him as a divine being and/or as an historical figure. This is the *sine qua non* that confronts both the historical Jesus research and debates, and the church.

Chapter 3 argues that due to the defectiveness of current historical Jesus research methods, nothing radically new and plausible can be produced in future research, even if the so-called 'third quest' insists that they have manufactured a better product. Allison claims that the so-called criteria of authenticity are the wrong tool for the wrong job, since they are 'more like the rules of language: you can use them to say just about anything' (p. 58)—'different methods, with and without criteria of authenticity, have produced the same result' (p. 60). Thus, he proposes that we need not think Jesus said or did this or that, but rather, Jesus said and did things *like* this or that. This chapter concludes by affirming that the miracles of Jesus underline his unique status.

There seem to be some contradicting statements here. On the one hand, Allison claims that various methods have produced the same result. On the other hand, he also says that 'the Jesus of one book does not look much like the Jesus of another book, even when those books employ more or less the same method' (p. 57). Secondly, the statement 'We wield our criteria to get what we want' (p. 59) is an allegation that needs supporting evidence. While speaking of a 'third quest' is arguably questionable, the suggestion that we should not use any criteria at all is perhaps an exaggeration. For instance, Porter articulates linguistic criteria of authenticity in his book *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical Jesus Research* (2000), of which Allison may not be aware. Similarly, does not Allison's suggestion of a pattern for the Gospel texts constitute a criterion for authenticating that Jesus said or did something *like* this?

Chapter 4 selectively traces both high and low christological formulations from past to present to highlight that orthodoxy 'served christological agendas instead of historical truth' (p. 85). He argues that historical facts have little or no bearing on whether one has a high or a low Christology, although Allison contends that Jesus had an exalted

self-perception. And since there are textual patterns that characterize the sources as a whole showing Jesus was an apocalyptic/eschatological prophet, this indicates that the first-century people, including Jesus, understood their eschatology more literally than do modern people. It further indicates that honouring the apocalyptic Jesus means coming to terms with imminent eschatology. Nevertheless, even if Christology and eschatology may influence our thoughts about the particular sayings of Jesus, the context of these sayings irretrievable.

Here I only wish to point out that although the context of Jesus' words is elusive, the contention that we cannot directly or indirectly determine words that originated from him may go either way. For since the author repeatedly asserts that 'the Synoptics are not primarily records of what Jesus actually said and did but collections of impressions' (p. 95), these impressions can also come directly or indirectly from him; hence, the need for criteria of authenticity. Actually, even if we cannot provide the detail of his words with robust confidence, the outcome of the quest is not necessarily negative.

In Chapter 5 Allison advises his readers to follow Jesus' words and life, which are characterized by a relentless hope in the living God and eternal life, despite human suffering, since the present life is not everything they will ever experience. This implies that we ought not to accept the present world as the real world. While there may be this coincidence of the opposites 'good' and 'bad' at present, they are not complementary but antagonistic and sequential; the resurrection defeats the crucifixion and the grave. Allison seems to emphasize the so-called 'greater good' response to the problem of evil in this closing chapter. To justify his position, he concludes that 'Jesus' life instantiates his teaching' (p. 119), such that human experiences become unsurprisingly ordinary, as Jesus himself is familiar with the same experiences. The hope of a new world to come puts contemporary suffering in sharper relief.

This concluding chapter not only validates Allison's description of his book as 'my personal testimony to doubt seeking understanding' and his goal for the book 'What are the religious implications of the quest?' but it also serves as a good reminder for every faithful student of the historical and theological Jesus Christ.

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