

BOOK REVIEW

Dale C. Allison, Jr, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). vi + 282 pp. Hdbk. US\$34.99.

Allison, considered by some to be North America's most complete Matthean scholar, offers thirteen essays in this volume, which are divided into two parts. The first part, which contains six essays, Allison labels 'The Exegetical Past'. These essays (published here for the first time) cover an assortment of topics in Matthean studies: 'The Magi's Angel (Matt. 2:2, 9-10)', 'Seeing God (Matt. 5:8)', 'Murder and Anger, Cain and Abel (Matt. 5:21-25)', 'Darkness at Noon (Matt. 27:45)', 'Touching Jesus' Feet (Matt. 28:9)', and 'Reading Matthew through the Church Fathers'. These essays are both fascinating and illuminating because they discuss how difficult exegetical questions arising from Matthean texts have been answered through the history of their interpretation. Part two, labeled 'Literary and Historical Studies', contains seven essays, three of which are revisions of articles published in various journals, and one a revision of an essay published in a Festschrift for Frans Neiryck. The essays are 'Structure, Biographical Impulse, and the *Imitatio Christi*', 'Matthew's First Two Words (Matt. 1:18-25)', 'Divorce, Celibacy, and Joseph (Matt. 1:18-25)', 'The Configuration of the Sermon on the Mount and its Meaning', 'Foreshadowing the Passion', 'Deconstructing Matthew', and 'Slaughtered Infants'. These essays do not rely as heavily on the distant exegetical past (though citing it where applicable), but instead offer fresh perspectives on other challenging topics in Matthean studies. Here I will highlight a representative sample. The three essays highlighted below were not selected because I consider them to be better than the others; I randomly chose these three, and only three because of space limitations.

'The Magi's Angel' is about what exactly the magi saw that led them to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem (Mt 2.2, 9-10)—that is, what is meant by 'star' (ἀστήρ). Before surveying the exegetical past with regard to this text, Allison summarizes for the reader the three main proposals put

forward by moderns: (1) it was a planetary conjunction; (2) it was a comet; and (3) it was a supernova (new star). These proposals are, says Allison, 'ill-grounded' and beset with 'insuperable difficulties' (p. 18), since none of these three astronomical phenomena can do what Matthew says the ἀστήρ did (i.e. it 'went before' the magi, 'it stopped over the place where the child was'). From there, Allison surveys the comments of the Fathers as well as other ancient exegetes. A common interpretation appears: the ἀστήρ was not interpreted to be astronomical; rather, it was assumed to be an angelic being that led the magi to the newborn Messiah. Allison then gives support for this interpretation from both Jewish and Christian literature, which includes recurring motifs such as angels acting as guides, the brightness of angels and angels descending to earth in order to complete a divinely-ordained task (he lists many of these texts in an appendix, pp. 36-41). But, according to Allison, alternative interpretations arose for at least two reasons. First, when in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries the teachings of Origen—who believed that heavenly bodies were alive and had rational souls—were condemned, there was a move away from identifying the ἀστήρ as an angelic being. Secondly, the advent of modern astronomy appears to have had the most devastating effect on the angelic interpretation. As Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and others discovered and described astronomical phenomena, their descriptions became authoritative to the point that any vestiges of belief in an animate heaven were abandoned. In fact, Allison reports, after the Renaissance, 'fewer and fewer exegetes entertained identifying Matthew's star with an angel' (p. 34) and more and more attempted to describe it as a natural astronomical phenomenon, though many were quick to describe the event as 'unusual'. The assumption of moderns is that the ἀστήρ must refer to some inanimate heavenly phenomenon. Allison counters this with the argument that such an interpretation may be reading modern notions back into the ancient text and culture. Further, it may be that ἀστήρ was the best way for the ancients to describe the phenomenon they observed. In the end, Allison says he is inclined to believe that the story of Matthew's star 'is to be reckoned a haggadic-type legend whose meaning is to be found elsewhere than in its correspondence to the historical facts' (p. 36).

The third essay, 'Murder and Anger, Cain and Abel', is a discussion of Mt. 5.21-25. While this text is fraught with difficulties (Allison summarizes many of them, pp. 65-67), the focus of this chapter is on an

issue of intertextuality, namely ‘whether or not Matt. 5:21-24 is designed to send informed readers back to Gen. 4, the story of Cain and Abel’ (p. 66). Allison turns first to the history of interpretation of the text and notes that interpreters such as Cyprian, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Chromatius, Babion, Paschasius Radbertus, Rupert of Deutz, Hugh of St Cher, and Albert the Great all recognized an intertextual link between Mt. 5.21-25 and Genesis 4. He also mentions that, from less distant days, Hugo Grotius and Matthew Henry, as well as the modern scholar Hans Dieter Betz, also see an intertextual connection.

Having noted this precedence and being informed by it, Allison undertakes his own look at the texts. First, he notes a strong thematic connection between the two texts. Here he concludes, ‘In short, Matt. 5:21-24 concerns the affiliation of murder and anger, and it depicts a circumstance in which someone, while offering a gift on an altar, is upset with his brother—all of which is strongly reminiscent of the story in Gen. 4, where Cain offers his gift, becomes angry, and attempts no reconciliation with his brother, whereupon murder ensues’ (pp. 69-70). Following this section, Allison touches briefly on the development of the Cain and Abel tradition, which supports the assumption that Matthew’s audience would have known the story and would have been capable of making, if not likely to make, the connection between the two texts. Here he cites the following for support: Wis. 10.3 (‘But when an unrighteous man departed from her [wisdom] in his anger, he perished because in rage he killed his brother’), several works of Philo, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Targum Neofiti*, *Jubilees*, *Life of Adam and Eve*, and *1 Clem.* 4.1-7. Each of these works demonstrates how the Cain and Abel story was relied upon for illustration, even if merely ‘alluded to’. Allison expounds further on the prominence of Genesis in Matthew’s Gospel, and even the possible influence of 1 John 3 on the Matthean text, before finally discussing the significance of the Cain allusion for Matthew’s text and audience, and gives three suggestions regarding its impact (pp. 76-77). First, the allusion provides additional support by means of hyperbole for Jesus’ (and Matthew’s) argument that anger is to be avoided. Secondly (which could have been combined with the first), the connection between harboring anger and the archetypal murderer implies that failing to heed Jesus’ injunctions is to take sides with Cain, with whom no pious reader of Scripture would want to identify. Thirdly, the allusion aids the reader in drawing the conclusion that in the Matthew text, the anger problem lies to some degree with the

one bringing the offering. The essay could have ended at this point (and probably should have), but Allison chooses to argue that gender-inclusive English versions of this text obscure the intertextual connection because they translate ἀδελφός as ‘brother or sister’ instead of ‘brother’. Oddly, Allison assumes it ‘unlikely’ that a ‘biblically literate person’ would see the connection if ‘brother or sister’ is rendered here. This is clearly an overstatement, since many times intertextual connections are not based on shared lexis alone, of which his study of the Cain tradition and thematic allusions should have clearly informed him (cf. Wis. 10.3, where ‘brother’ does not even occur!). In fact, intertextual connections depend less on shared lexis and more on thematic formations; texts may be connected intertextually without sharing any lexis at all (see esp. J.L. Lemke, ‘Intertextuality and Text Semantics’, in Peter H. Fries and Michael Gregory, [eds.], *Discourse in Society: Systemic Functional Perspectives* [Advances in Discourse Process, 50; Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1995], pp. 85-114).

The seventh essay is about the structure of Matthew and its literary type. The essay begins with a brief overview of the two major camps regarding Matthew’s structure: the tripartite camp, which places emphasis on the twice-repeated phrase ἀπο τότε ἦρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς in 4.17 and 16.21, resulting in the division of the Gospel into three large parts (1.1–4.16, 4.17–16.20 and 16.21–28.20), and the five-fold division camp (based in varying degrees on Bacon’s theory), which emphasizes the recurring phrase καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς κτλ (7.28-29; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1). After very briefly (four bullet points) describing the ‘defects’ of the tripartite scheme, Allison places himself generally in the five-fold camp, but only to the extent that it recognizes Matthew’s alternation between narrative and discourse. He prefers to evaluate each narrative and discourse section ‘on its own terms’ (whatever that entails), from which both the structure and the plot apparently ‘emerge clearly’ (p. 138). This results in the following arrangement:

Chapters	Type	Plot
1–4	Narrative	Introduction: main character introduced
5–7	Discourse	Jesus' demands upon Israel
8–9	Narrative	Jesus' deeds within and for Israel
10	Discourse	Ministry through others' words and deeds
11–12	Narrative	Israel's negative response
13	Discourse	Explanation of Israel's negative response
14–17	Narrative	Founding of the church
18	Discourse	Teaching for the church
19–23	Narrative	Commencement of the passion
24–25	Discourse	The future: judgment and salvation
26–28	Narrative	Conclusion: Passion and resurrection

The latter portion of this essay is about what kind of text (genre) Matthew is (Allison classifies it as biography), and Matthew's 'biographical impulse'. Having been influenced by R. Burrige, Allison is inclined to think that Matthew's Gospel is an instance of Greco-Roman biography. Yet he does not think it is biography simply because Matthew follows Mark or because of the prevalence of biographies in the Greco-Roman world; rather, it is the content of the gospel—the content of the author's Christian faith—that explains why the first Gospel is a life of Jesus. 'The distinctiveness of Matthew's thinking over against that of his non-Christian Jewish contemporaries is the acceptance of Jesus as the center of his religion: it is around him as a person that his theological thinking revolves' (p. 144). Particularly because he is (presumably) a Jew, argues Allison, for Matthew 'revelation belongs supremely to a life' (p. 144). In order for the teachings of Jesus to be properly understood, they must not be devoid of the context of his life. 'Speech requires biography' (p. 147). Allison further argues that as biography, Matthew's Gospel is not without a purposeful message, even a message regarding morality. He discusses how Matthew made Jesus a model for emulation (p. 149). Support for this point is marshaled from many texts in Matthew, not least of which are the Beatitudes, teachings regarding demands for righteousness, and especially calls to discipleship, which are essentially, explains Allison, calls to emulate the life of Jesus. Thus, Allison is able to close this essay with a quotation from André Maurois, who wrote, 'biography is a type of literature, which, more than any other, touches close upon morality' (p. 153).

Though I do not necessarily agree with Allison on every conclusion, I wholeheartedly recommend this book for anyone working in the Synoptic Gospels generally and Matthean studies specifically. Allison is a thorough scholar and a lucid writer. This book should appear in the bibliographies of future Matthean studies as a key reference.

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