

BOOK REVIEW

Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). xxix + 588 pp. Hbk. US\$32.99.

In *Constructing Jesus*, Dale Allison, a well-known historical-Jesus scholar, attempts to construct the life of the historical Jesus one last time (he hopes) using a new approach. As is typical of Allison's work, the book is balanced in its assessment and its critique of other scholarly views, and provides ample supporting evidence and thoroughly sustained arguments. The six chapters of this volume, which are for the most part extensions of his previous works, are carefully researched and well documented. Each chapter contains much information and is an excellent resource for anyone interested in historical-Jesus studies.

The highlight of the book, however, lies in the author's novel approach to constructing the historical Jesus. Abandoning the traditional approach, which traces back at least to the higher criticism of the post-Enlightenment period, Allison states: 'I wish, throughout this book, to explicate my conviction that we can learn some important things about the historical Jesus without resorting to the standard criteria and without, for the most part, trying to decide whether he authored this or that saying or whether this or that particular event actually happened as narrated' (p. 10). His approach (a preferred term to 'method') is to identify 'certain themes, motifs and rhetorical strategies' (p. 15), 'general impressions' (p. 16) and 'larger patterns' (p. 460) across the primary sources to arrive at the best explanation. Allison's approach, however, is not without problems regarding how it is applied to the Gospel texts. Thus, critiquing this approach will be the focus of this review, after giving a summative overview of each chapter of the book.

Chapter 1 presents the author's approach to the study of the historical Jesus. Based on modern cognitive studies, Allison downplays the reliability of human memory, pointing out that it is 'neither innocent nor objective' (p. 1), and that it 'often leads us astray' (p. 2). He lists nine 'sins' of human memory and argues that it is more reliable to recon-

struct Jesus in broad strokes, focusing on the general and not on the particular (the features and words). Thus, he remarks: ‘The fallibility of memory should profoundly unsettle us would-be historians’ (p. 8).

Chapters 2 to 4 present three distinct topics that appear to be disjointed from the author’s overall goal of providing a rigorous application of his approach. Not only are these chapters of disproportionate size, but they also leave one wondering how they are even related to the author’s main argument. Chapter 2, which constitutes approximately 40 percent of the entire book, posits the apocalyptic figure as a fair representative of the historical Jesus in the Gospels. For Allison, calling Jesus an apocalyptic prophet means that ‘Jesus held what we may call, for lack of a better expression, an “apocalyptic eschatology”’ (p. 32). Following in the footsteps of Weiss and Schweitzer, he introduces nine considerations to support the idea that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. The remainder of the chapter covers other related topics, and ends with two excurses: (1) The Kingdom of God and the World to Come, and (2) The Continuity between John the Baptist and Jesus.

Chapter 3 seeks ‘to relate the methodological reflections developed in Chapter 1 to the genesis of Christology’ (p. 225). Allison provides a list of Synoptic texts as proof that our earliest sources for the Jesus tradition highlight Jesus’ significance during his time: ‘They constitute a family of traditions that requires explanation’ (p. 231). He argues that, even though some may object that Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man in the third person, the key point is that, on the basis of this ‘family of traditions’, one can find patterns and draw interesting conclusions, such as Jesus’ starring role in the eschatological drama. Allison further argues that Jesus promoted a version of his own Christology, but ‘what caused him to hold such a conviction is not subject to analysis’ (p. 303). This assertion is perhaps too pessimistic, especially since Allison himself seems to hold a high view of theology over history. Can we not extract anything from all of the Gospels as to why Jesus sees himself as the Christ? Moreover, one’s view of Jesus is definitely constrained by whether one believes that Jesus thought of himself as the Christ.

Chapter 4 first asks the question whether the Gospels are an anthology of isolated logia or composed of truly connected speeches. Convinced that the form critics were for the most part persuasive, such that Jesus’ speeches have become secondary elaborations, Allison believes that Luke’s Sermon on the Plain is one such discourse that cannot be

disintegrated. He, however, remains generally skeptical of most other speeches. He invokes a hypothetical Q 6.27-42 to show that this Lukan sermon contains close parallels with other canonical and non-canonical sources, and that it is 'largely a rewrite of Lev 19 and attendant traditions' (p. x). He concludes that Q 6.27-42 is more likely a stock sermon that 'incorporates recollection of a series of sentences that Jesus uttered on more than one occasion, or even uttered regularly' (p. 380). However, one may ask why this instance in Luke cannot provide precedence for other series of sentences that Jesus uttered on one or more occasion, especially when, as Allison acknowledges, mnemonic patterns aid memory in an oral culture.

Chapter 5 addresses the cognitive relationship between death and memory in the passion of Jesus. Is Jesus' passion 'history remembered' (Brown), 'prophecy historicized' (Crossan) or 'history scripturalized' (Goodacre)? Allison appears sympathetic to the third view: 'To bibli-cize is not necessarily to invent... A memory can be told in many languages, including the language of the Scripture' (p. 389). He shows that Paul knew a pre-Markan Passion Narrative based on correlations between Paul's letters and the Gospels (e.g. 1 Cor. 11.23-25//Mark and John *passim*). Because Jesus' death, in contrast to tedious and mundane life, was a tragic and cruel one, Allison claims that the event must contain some 'true-to-life memory' (p. 424), as it evokes people's emotions in powerful ways. He says that, since there is 'no obvious motivation for Christian invention' (p. 425), the argument that it is historical is substantive (although this claim seems to bank on the criterion of embarrassment). Given the fact that people tend to remember the death of a person better than that person's life, it is not altogether clear how Allison's 'general versus particular' theory relates to this.

Chapter 6 ties in with Chapter 1 in that Allison returns to his subject matter as he acknowledges that the discussion so far 'has moved forward with an unexamined assumption: the Synoptic evangelists were, for the most part, not writing creative fiction but rather reconfiguring traditions informed by the past' (p. 435). Acknowledging that previous works accept the possibility that the Gospels consist of purely metaphorical narratives or classify them into various genres (e.g. haggadic fiction), Allison contends that the Gospel writers believed in the stories they recounted. He notes that the quest has primarily produced negative results; thus, 'history is not what matters most' (p. 462). But can we downplay history in constructing the historical Jesus?

Several comments are in order as to Allison's modern cognitive approach. To be clear at the outset, I do not share the objections some might have to applying modern cognitive approaches to historical documents. First, Allison says that recollection of the past is (1) essentially 'a reconstruction' that is influenced by (2) a 'person's affective states and ongoing beliefs and goals', as well as (3) their 'sociocultural world' (p. 423). If this is so, I do not see why a rigorous cognitive theory cannot be applied to authenticate the solitary pieces of the Jesus tradition in the Gospels. If we allow for the fact that there were eyewitnesses contemporaneous with Jesus, their memories are likely reflected in the individual Gospel narratives, which, in turn, can be analyzed by using cognitive or social psychology models. But this is not what Allison appears to do—the theory lacks a procedure that enables it to be linked to his analysis. In fact, Allison admits that his approach resembles that of E.P. Sanders, who does not actually use a cognitive approach. Yet the conclusions Sanders generates by simply directing attention to primary source facts that can be established without reasonable doubt are not dissimilar to those of Allison's.

Secondly, Allison points out that 'our own memory, under social pressure, may conform itself to the expectations of others or to their erroneous recall' (p. 4). I suggest, however, that it is not one's memory that accommodates others but rather one's willful act to do so for the creation or preservation of one's social identity. Thus, it is probably inaccurate to say that 'just as we take on different roles for different occasions, so too do we shape our memories according to the varied settings in which we find ourselves' (p. 7). Human memory serves only as the 'data bank' from which one can tell his/her story, and s/he can subsequently decide either to invent the truth or to recount it.

Thirdly, I think that the assertion 'people can "remember" events that they never experienced' (p. 3) is an overstatement when applied to the Gospel accounts. Moreover, this theory has to reckon with (1) the possibility that there might have been some written traditions preserved in primitive forms, and (2) the efficiency of handing down traditions in an oral culture.

Fourthly, granted that finding more general patterns of facts about the historical Jesus is the safer route to take, this approach still cannot ignore the many individual items in the Gospel accounts that speak about the historical Jesus, since all of these smaller items contribute to the way one understands the larger patterns. In fact, the task of deliberately

selecting themes and patterns and discarding their details seems to be in and of itself a criterion of authenticity, although perhaps not of the *actual* words or actions of Jesus. If one wishes to be objective in their approach, they should not only focus on macrosamples but on microsamples as well. A top-down approach implies inversely a bottom-up approach. That is, if it matters that Jesus was a healer, it also matters that he particularly healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1.30-31), that he particularly raised Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11.43-44), etc.

Fifthly, arguing that memory is just a reconstruction or a vestigial impression is unpersuasive. The four Gospels, which constitute less than 100 chapters, do not actually give that much detail and are arguably just general impressions of actual events. Thus, if the Gospels say that Jesus named each of his twelve disciples, he most likely did so indeed. If he did not, then it is not due to memory lapses by the eyewitnesses but rather most likely due to an intentional fabrication by the Gospel writers. It only requires one to have an intention or purpose to 'count [and remember] the number of its [Parthenon] columns' (p. 11). If the people truly loved Jesus, such that they were truly attentive to his words and actions, what could perhaps have corrupted their accuracy in the Gospel accounts is not human memory lapse but the gaps and conscious or unconscious errors made in the transmission process.

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