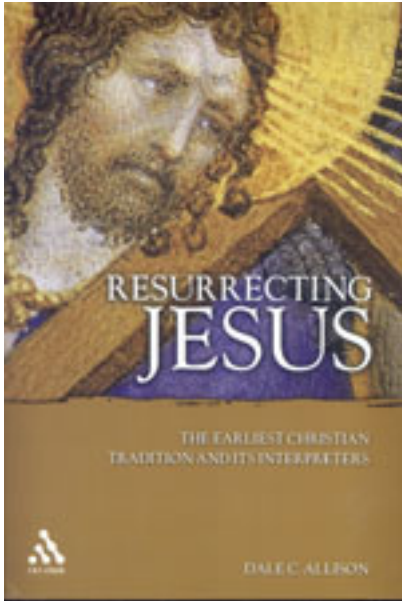


RBL 08/2006



Allison, Dale C.

Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters

New York: T&T Clark, 2005. Pp. xi + 404. Paper.
\$34.95. ISBN 0567029107.

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Resurrecting Jesus clarifies, qualifies, and expands upon Allison's earlier volume *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (1998). He admits that the present volume is a collection of fragments rather than an encompassing portrait of Jesus. It is not an exclusive treatment of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, although nearly one half of this volume treats the question. Chapters 3–5 are rewritten and expanded lectures.

In chapter 1 Allison writes on the secularizing of Jesus. Texts that have received theological interpretations for two thousand years are now being reinterpreted by some with little or no theological meaning. For example, most scholars have recognized that in the parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenant Jesus is offering a strong warning to the Jewish leaders of his day, as the Synoptics portray. However, Malina and Rohrbaugh propose that this warning was later added by the church and that Jesus' original meaning was merely to warn landowners. Allison suggests that, although studies in the social sciences can provide insight, most of what we are seeing from this field today are the results of less-theological scholars and that we are again like the liberal scholars of a century ago looking down into the well and seeing a reflection of our secularized selves. This growing secularity may actually constrict our ability to find a religious Jesus.

In chapter 2 Allison addresses the problem of audience. “That Jesus said different things to different people, and that he did not ask everyone to do exactly the same thing, may seem so commonsensical as to be banal” (41). Allison notes the example of the Sermon on the Plain in Q 6:27–49, which showcases mercy, and Jesus’ discourse with the Pharisees in Q 11:39–52, which is full of judgment. Although these could have different speakers, as Robinson and others have contended, there is an equal likelihood that the same speaker, Jesus, uttered them to different audiences. Allison says that considerations for intended audience show that Robinson’s invention argument is even weaker than it first appears. We may rightfully imagine that Jesus spoke to his disciples differently than he did to mixed crowds, to whom he probably spoke to differently than he did to his opponents. He adds that this demonstrates the weakness of invention arguments rather than the authenticity of any particular sayings of Jesus.

The problem of Gehenna is the subject of chapter 3. That Jesus spoke of divine judgment seems secure. Statements by Jesus regarding postmortem and eschatological judgment are multiply attested, being found in Q, Mark, M, and L. However, Allison adds that this could likewise be attributed to a popularity of the doctrine of divine judgment among the early Christians. One could “apply the criterion of dissimilarity to discredit attributing to Jesus words about divine judgment” (75). So, how is the historian to decide? Allison answers with candor: “The older I become, the less I trust anyone’s ability to answer this sort of question, to trace the history and origin of particular sayings” (76). Notwithstanding, he has an opinion on the matter of divine judgment: “We cannot deny that the Bible has a hell, nor that Jesus preached judgment.” However, the most certain doctrine is that the character of God is perfect love and equity, and we are justified in rejecting anything that is inconsistent with this belief, such as a divine justice that requires a divine violence (96). Allison suggests that, when Jesus mentioned divine judgment, he may have mentioned hell to motivate sympathizers and the undecided or simply to bring closure on a topic and move on to the next.

In chapter 4, “Apocalyptic, Polemic, Apologetics,” Allison seeks to determine whether Jesus believed the final judgment was imminent. Within the New Testament Jesus promises to return very soon (Mark 9:1; John 21:22–23; Rev 22:7, 12, 20), and 2 Pet 3 addresses scoffers who asserted he had not kept his promise. Some address this tension by arguing that Jesus was speaking of eschatological expectations in metaphorical terms (à la Wright) or that he was mistaken regarding the time of the parousia. Allison holds the latter and later admits that he also does not see eye to eye with Jesus on everything (147). He discusses the sobering topics of the horizon and bias of the historical Jesus scholar:

[W]e may justly suspect that many or even most New Testament scholars hold the view of Jesus that they do because it was instilled in them at a young age by their

education. And once they came to see things a certain way, they found it difficult to change their minds. Intellectual inertia can be obstinate. Ask yourself: Can you name any important historians of Jesus whose views in their fifties or sixties were radically different from their views in their twenties or thirties? ... We all see what we expect to see and want to see.... If we hold a belief, we will notice confirming evidence, especially if we are aware that not everyone agrees with us. Disconfirming evidence, to the contrary, makes us uncomfortable, and so we are more likely to miss, neglect, or critically evaluate it. (135–36)

Allison admits that if “in the near future, someone truly demonstrates that my sort of Jesus cannot be the historical Jesus, others would no doubt be quicker than me to home in on the truth. I would have to reconfigure my entire reconstruction of early Christianity, a task requiring courage and prolonged intellectual effort. Maybe I would not be up to it. I find this troubling. It raises embarrassing questions to which I have no answer. I am stuck with nothing better than what Chesterton says somewhere: ‘The nearest we can come to being impartial is to admit that we are partial’ ” (137).

Allison requests the reader’s patience as he explains how his past has contributed to his current horizon. Having been raised by parents who were liberal Presbyterians, he discarded biblical inerrancy but “wanted the canonical Gospels to be better sources for Jesus than Bultmann allowed” (140). He found a home in Pannenberg’s writings. Because of Jeremias’s influence, Allison regarded Perrin’s Jesus as suspiciously modern and believed that Crossan read too much into the few texts that survived his critical eye, the other texts that happened to conflict with his own view of Jesus having been conveniently eliminated. Embarking upon graduate studies at Duke, he had such a “predilection for the Schweitzerian tradition” that he was immune to critiques of Schweitzer offered by the professor with whom he worked, W. D. Davies. “I have not changed a lot since then. I believe now what I did then,” in terms of Jesus’ eschatological hope (145). However, he confesses that his theology has changed to accommodate his historical conclusions, which have essentially remained unchanged from what he had learned prior to graduate school (146).

In chapter 5 Allison takes a look at Jesus from a different angle. “Jesus was neither a conservative nor a liberal because he was both” (195). The New Testament portrays a Jesus who is completely committed to the Torah. Notwithstanding, he plays with honoring one’s parents and observing the Sabbath. In some cases he is stricter than what is in the Torah, and at other times he seems to be more relaxed, even appearing to set aside Moses for his own teaching. Perhaps Jesus was unclear in his own understanding, or perhaps we have a rhetoric charged with shock value. Is Jesus doing this when, instead of saying “Honor your father and mother,” he says “Hate your father and mother”?

“Whatever else they may be, these words of Jesus are loud and daring rhetoric.... If you are sleeping, it is going to wake you up” (183). Allison suggests that Jesus believed that revelation can become dated and that certain ethical imperatives resist harmonization. This belief led Jesus to have a critical stance toward certain aspects of the Torah. Allison sees in Jesus a “theological precedent” for those such as himself who recognize tensions between the Testaments (197).

This leads us to chapter 6, the final chapter, which concerns the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus and constitutes nearly half of the book. The “prize puzzle of New Testament research” is this: since the Roman and Jewish authorities intended for Jesus’ death to terminate his cause, and it did not, “what surprising series of events frustrated their expectation” (200)? Before tackling this question, Allison is public with his personal hopes. Although a deist, he wants to believe that Jesus was resurrected, since among other things it suggests a good God and a hope for our own immortality (214–17).

Allison lists as relevant data the primitive oral traditions, the appearance stories, and the traditions about the empty tomb. He holds that, outside of the details in 1 Cor 15:3–8, the historian’s tools are too blunt to yield more. However, what is known is important: several individuals reported Christophanies, and there were group experiences on more than one occasion that were interpreted as appearances of Jesus. How are these facts to be explained? Allison considers apparitions, which he calls “strong sense of presence” or SOP (273). Citing numerous studies published in professional psychology and medical journals as well as independent surveys, Allison contends that 10–40 percent of Westerners have experienced apparitions of the dead and that bereaved widows and widowers constitute a minority of this group. He provides examples from his own life in which he twice experienced an apparition of a good friend who had been tragically killed in an automobile accident and of his father, who after dying of brain cancer appeared individually to Allison’s wife, son, brother, mother, daughter, then collectively to two friends. Citing several reports, Allison contends that apparitions of the dead are frequently of a physical and solid nature and sometimes experienced by groups. Although apparitions of the dead appear to have a lot in common with the resurrection appearances, Allison admits that they are different in a number of ways. They are not accompanied by a claim of an empty grave. The little if any content communicated by the apparition over a very brief appearance is far different from the specific content attributed to the risen Jesus. They do not eat or drink and do not appear to more than five hundred at one time (283). Yet Allison admits, “I make no pretense to having some grand, reductionistic theory that presumes to cover all the facts” (284). Although he eschews apparitions of Jesus as an adequate explanation for what the earliest Christians experienced, they are helpful and lead us in the right direction (285). Allison holds that psychological explanations can neither be proved nor disproved.

What about the empty tomb? Allison first takes a look at seven common arguments against its historicity and finds that only two carry weight. He then takes a look at seven common arguments for the historicity of the empty tomb. He concludes that there exists a “decent” case for the empty tomb and a “respectable” case against it (331). Notwithstanding, he judges the position that the tomb was empty to be “the slightly stronger possibility,” since the best two con arguments are “hypothetical and suggestive,” while the best two pro arguments are “concrete and evidential.” Nevertheless, the empty tomb remains a “tentative” historical fact, and its cause is even more so (332).

In the end, Allison believes that our surviving data can only be interpreted within systems and that adjudicating between systems is not feasible. For example, should we interpret the appearances of Jesus as the result of God raising him or that some aliens were playing a joke on humanity? Our worldview determines our answer, since there are no evidential reasons for choosing between interpretations (339–40). The historian is, therefore, forced to hand over the discussion to philosophers and theologians (351).

The book concludes with a coda and excursuses in which Allison comments (1) that true religion is based on experience and conviction and cannot depend upon historical evidence or doubts; (2) that Joseph of Arimathea was probably a historical figure who buried Jesus; and (3) that the disciples’ bereavement led them to construct stories in which Jesus was memorialized. In terms of what actually happened to Jesus, Allison concludes, “Shortly after his death, the followers of Jesus saw him again [something akin to an apparition], sensed his invisible presence, overcame their guilt by finding sense in his tragic end, idealized and internalized their teacher, and remembered his words and deeds” (375).

It is easy to admire Allison for his transparency and respect him for his sincere and skillful attempts to solve perplexing issues within historical Jesus research. Allison shows an impressive knowledge of a vast amount of literature over a broad range. He values historical Jesus research from past years as much as present research and is thoroughly acquainted with both. He is even acquainted with contributions from the hypercritical community of which several members question or deny the existence of Jesus. His experiences with the paranormal may have been what motivated him to read literature in the disciplines of medicine and psychology. This book provides a read that is both enjoyable and informative. While many will not agree with Allison on a number of points, this volume will not disappoint.

On a negative side, Allison’s confession that he is unable to transcend his horizon may be truer and more complex than he is aware. He confesses that he holds what he desires: that the canonical Gospels contain more accurate tradition than is usually conceded by many

scholars. However, his “cryptic deism” appears to lock him in a position where he is unable to follow where the products of his research appear to be leading him. In other words, his horizon pulls him in opposite directions. The result is an epistemological agnosticism where he does not think one can know and is unhappy with all who think otherwise. Therefore, he scolds deist Antony Flew and conservative Christian Gary Habermas for being overly confident in their conclusions (339). Consider also the following statements: “Even if we naively think [the Gospel narratives] to be historically accurate down to the minutest detail, we are still left with precious little” (338). How can this be? If it could be demonstrated that every detail of the Gospels are accurate, we would know quite a lot about Jesus, even though numerous questions would remain. He also states, “Let us say, although it cannot be done, that someone has somehow convinced us, beyond all doubt, that the tomb was empty and that people saw Jesus because he indeed came to life again. Even this would not of itself prove that God raised him from the dead,” since it could just as easily be explained as a cosmic joke played on humanity by aliens (339–40). Allison is certainly correct in the strictest sense. However, William Lane Craig seems correct to me in a professional sense when he writes, “Only a sterile, academic skepticism resists this inevitable inference [that if Jesus was raised it was God who did it]” (Craig, *The Son Rises*, 1981, 137). This reader could not help but wonder if Allison is influenced more than he realizes by his deistic worldview and possibly from a fear to commit to one way or the other.