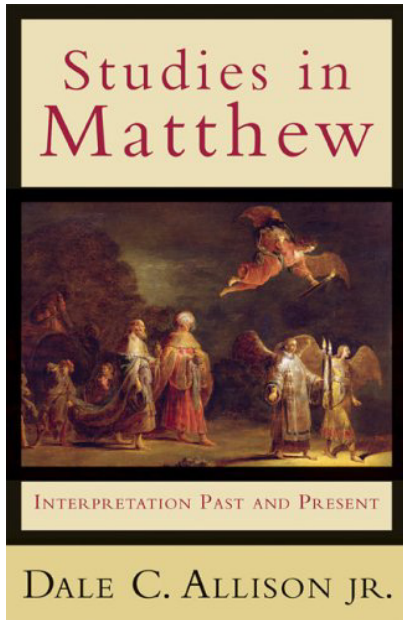


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Allison, Dale C., Jr.

Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present

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It can be said with confidence that *Wirkungsgeschichte*—usually rendered into English as “reception history”—has become recognized as a legitimate and necessary part of biblical studies. English-speaking scholarship boasts of three series of biblical commentaries concerned with *Wirkungsgeschichte*: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; The Church’s Bible; and the new Blackwell Bible Commentaries, described as “a new series of commentaries on individual books of the Bible that focus on their impact history.” A more rigorous project from Germany, *Novum Testamentum Patristicum*, will make its publishing debut in 2008, with a volume on 1 Peter.

Professor Allison’s *Studies in Matthew* offers an excellent contribution to this field. Of course, those interested in *Wirkungsgeschichte* are not the only ones with cause to celebrate the publication of this fine volume of biblical exegesis. The large section of “Literary and Historical Studies” (roughly the second half of the book) contains a series of articles combining—characteristically, for Allison—erudition and insight, exhaustive survey of scholarship and theological reflection. Several of these have appeared in biblical journals between 1987 and 1994; in their present form they are, in the words of the author, “thorough rewrites that reflect changes of mind, introduce new observations, and take account of recent scholarship” (10).

For this reviewer, however, the main value of this books lies in its first part, entitled “The Exegetical Past,” which contains five new studies illustrating the contribution of reception history to biblical scholarship and a concluding essay of methodological reflections. Allison typically sets the stage by laying out the exegetical problem (e.g., “what is the ‘star’ of Matt 2:2?”; “what does ‘seeing God’ mean in Matt 5:8?”) and presenting the current state of scholarship. At this point, commentaries are usually ready to move on. For Allison, however, this is only the beginning of a journey through the history of interpretation, in which the reader is presented with an exhaustive survey of the exegetical options proposed by interpreters along the centuries. For the sake of convenience, these are grouped under different headings. This is, however, a mere artifice in the economy of the article, since Allison insists on the complementarity of multiple meanings. The final step is that of reflection on the theological value of exegetical history.

The first essay, “The Magi’s Angel” (17–41), demonstrates, on the basis of overwhelming evidence (the avalanche of prooftexts from Jewish, Christian, and “pagan” sources continues even after the article is over, in a six-page appendix!) that ancient readers identified the star of the magi with an angelic apparition: not a star in the astronomical sense, but rather “a starry likeness,” to use the phrase of a ninth-century Syriac author (33). Even after the church’s condemnation of the equation of heavenly bodies with angels, prominent in Origenistic circles, the interpretation of the “star” as angelic apparition remained in force. It was bound to succumb, however, once the animate cosmos was replaced by the scientific astronomy of the post-Renaissance era. This paradigm shift brought with itself the unfortunate but stubborn attempts to consider Matt 2:2 in light of what is known of astronomical phenomena such as stars, comets, supernovas, and the like. Speculations of this sort are as widespread and recurrent as they are misguided, being rooted in the exegetical *peccatum originale* of “reading ancient text with modern minds” (35). In “Seeing God” (43–63), which discusses Matt 5:8, Allison notes the relative disinterest in the topic of vision of God characteristic of modern commentaries and embarks once again on a tour through the history of interpretation. He retrieves a rich collection of exegetical possibilities (vision of a bodily deity; vision of God as metaphor for spiritual insight; vision of God as vision of the perfected creation or the perfected neighbor; vision of God as experience of God), all of which he judges to be quite cogent and, more importantly, complementary. A similar approach occurs in the study of Matt 28:9 (“Touching Jesus’ Feet,” [107–16]). In this case, even though the widespread tradition, according to which ghosts either have no feet or do not touch the ground, would suggest that the reference to “grabbing Jesus’ feet” was meant to reinforce the belief in Jesus’ bodily resurrection, Allison still concludes that one should not therefore reject other interpretations of this gesture (affection; submission; worship). In “Darkness at Noon” [79–105]), Allison notes that the intertextual reading predominant in

the history of exegesis, which connects the Matthean reference to the darkness at the time of Jesus' crucifixion with biblical texts such as Gen 1:2, Exod 10:22, Amos 8:9–10, or Jer 15:9, seems less cogent than the intratextual connection with the eschatological scenario laid out in Matt 26–28. Nevertheless, seeing Matthew's crucifixion account as an eschatological event is "in continuity with primitive Christian theology" (88). Another study, "Murder and Anger, Cain and Abel" (65–78), proposes an interpretation of Matt 5:21–24 ("if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift") in light of the Genesis story of Cain and Abel. This connection, ignored by modern scholarship, is convincing not only because it clarifies the ambiguities of the Matthean text, and coheres with echoes of Gen 4:1–16 elsewhere in the Gospel (e.g., the antithetical parallelism between Matt 18:21–22 and Gen 4:24 LXX), but also because, as Allison shows, this is one of many *forgotten* solutions proposed by early Christian interpreters.

The first section of the book closes with an essay entitled "Reading Matthew through the Church Fathers" (117–31). This piece, complemented by some of the concluding sections of the earlier studies, constitutes a valuable contribution to the study of biblical *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Allison notes that biblical texts should be understood as points on the lines of developing traditions. Since they are like "a frame in a motion picture" (61), biblical "texts cannot be divorced from the traditions that birthed them or from the traditions they in turn begot" (63). The Bible itself is "not a homogeneous product once and for all delivered to the saints, but ... an intertextual wonderland full of revisions and reinterpretations" (63). Following the same pattern, the exegetical history of biblical texts is a process of "ceaseless and creative application of the Scriptures" (62), requiring a continuous negotiation between "the stability of meaning along the centuries," on the one hand, and the need to meet readers' cultural and religious expectations, on the other. Since, as in the case of Matthew, biblical texts are often "intertextually, intratextually, and theologically dense, and so signify several things at once," and since new readers inevitably bring new meaning to the texts, exegetes should abandon the prejudice that "a text must, like a one-way street sign, send us in one direction only," and return to the hermeneutical principle of Christian tradition: biblical texts have multiple and complementary meanings (115).

Studies in Matthew is also a plea for humility in the face of the "condescending attitude towards the past" that assumes that "today's work makes yesterday's obsolete, so that we don't have to bother much with writers who have expired" (117). This view, Allison notes, rests on the "illusion that exegesis progresses like hard science" (117). Quite the contrary is true, however, and some of the solutions and breakthroughs appear new only because we have forgotten the exegetical labors that lie beyond the last century or so of

scholarship. As a result, we must accept that, “because the exegetical present confronts the selfsame text as the exegetical past, repetition must be the rule, novelty the exception” (104).

What needs revisiting is not only older critical scholarship, but also the distant past of patristic exegesis. The point here is not an uncritical exaltation of the past, a type of recourse to patristic exegesis that would be the equivalent of political or cultural conservatism (130). In truth, the fathers’ reading of the Bible can be theologically edifying, spiritually uplifting, homiletically useful, as well as full of bad judgments, dated opinions, and intolerable prejudices. The point, rather, illustrated abundantly by the first six studies, is that patristic exegesis often “hits a target that we have missed” (130–31) and that biblical scholarship cannot ignore the valid insights of the exegetical past. In addition, “commentaries should quote the Fathers regularly, because the Fathers often said the right things in ways that have not been surpassed. They constitute a rhetorical treasure” (130).

Allison’s invitation “to move forward by going backward” (131) is not only a plea for humility but also an invitation to hard labor. One wonders how someone can possibly “keep up with what is going on now if one is still catching up with what went on then—if one is spending time, let us say, with books from the fourth or sixteenth centuries” (117). The concern is valid. Allison’s response consists in his own body of work, which shows that the task is not altogether impossible. I suppose that one of the sincerest compliments to a scholar would be to emulate and continue his or her efforts. It seems, however, that the task of the biblical interpreter at this time more and more requires the type of team projects that we see emerging worldwide in the area of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.