

Dale C. Allison, Jr. *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*. Baker, 2010. 588 pages. \$54.99.

This approach to reconstructing the historical Jesus will be comforting to most preachers, since we must preach from the Gospels as we have them and primarily to congregations who are inclined to trust the Gospels as witnesses to the historical Jesus. Taking modern research on human memory as the starting point of his method, Allison affirms that the general impressions of Jesus widely attested in the Gospels are trustworthy. He does not affirm the accuracy of the details, the particulars of the stories and teachings by which the general impressions are conveyed. Human memory is quite fallible when it comes to details, according to modern memory research. In discussing particular texts, Allison is consistently agnostic about whether a given event or saying can be traced back to Jesus. Memory is widely susceptible to modification when it comes to details, and there is plenty of evidence that the Jesus traditions in the Gospels have been modified. But those modifications are inclined to be generated within the boundaries of accurate general impressions.

One of the most widely attested characteristics of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels is that Jesus was an eschatological prophet. The Jesus Seminar, however, rejects this widely attested view. Rather than starting with what is widely attested, the Seminar begins with a handful of aphorisms excised from their present literary and ancient cultural and religious contexts and, in accord with a hermeneutics of suspicion, interprets against the grain of the general impressions conveyed in the Gospels. This leads the Seminar to the conclusion that Jesus was a secular sage. Allison notes, however, that “[i]f . . . Jesus was a ‘secular sage’ little concerned with ‘the last things,’ . . . , then the Synoptic tradition, which everywhere depicts a *homo religiosus* and a man who frequently promotes an eschatological vision, is mnemonically defective in a massive way.” The ironic consequence is that such a defect renders the Synoptic tradition so unreliable that it can hardly be the basis for concluding that Jesus was in fact a secular sage who was not interested in eschatology. The Jesus of the Seminar is, then, almost completely the product of a modern scholar’s imagination (14-15). Modern memory research shows such radical skepticism about the tradition to be invalid. Consequently Allison approaches the Gospels with an eye to gathering materials that generate general impressions.

Allison does not stop with identifying a general impression, however. Once we have concluded from the many evidences that Jesus was a person with an eschatological vision, we can go on to adduce good reasons for believing another widely attested detail, that he did in fact appoint twelve disciples. Bringing to bear what we know from other witnesses about the Judaism of Jesus’ time, it would make a lot of sense that his eschatological vision led him to make an appointment that would symbolize the Israel that was on the horizon (20-21). The names of the twelve he appointed is another matter. About that detail the tradition contains different lists – no surprise in light of modern memory research. But this step beyond the most general of impressions is a reasonable one to take.

In response to the radical skepticism of the Jesus Seminar about the historical value of the Jesus tradition in the Synoptic Gospels, therefore, Allison is very skeptical. He devotes this book to elucidating and defending the historical trustworthiness of the impressions engendered by the repeated patterns in the New Testament Gospels.

The first project in the book, therefore, is to show grounds for believing that the historical Jesus was indeed a prophet with an apocalyptic view of the present and the future. In a massive chapter of almost two hundred pages, he interweaves a host of lines of evidence from the Gospels and responses to numerous objections, mainly from members of the Jesus Seminar. He considers, for example, the question whether the citation of eschatological prophecies from the Hebrew Bible to interpret Jesus' life are the work of Jesus' followers and wholly without precedent on the part of the historical Jesus himself, or whether in contrast Jesus' followers picked up this widely attested pattern of thinking from Jesus (78-82). This approach is typical of his style of argument. He sets forth alternative possible assessments of the Gospel evidence and names the consequences of each decision. Time after time he argues against the view of many members of the Jesus Seminar that, whatever the main tendencies of the Synoptic tradition may be in regard to Jesus, Jesus himself was of another order. He draws on more than modern memory research that commends the general patterns as trustworthy. He places tendencies in the depiction of Jesus in the context of those same tendencies elsewhere in Jewish religious culture, for example the preaching of Qumran and John the Baptist (79, 82-83). He draws on modern cross-cultural research about the tendencies of millenarian movements that show the plausibility of how the larger patterns in the Synoptics portray Jesus (85-55). And then he takes up and responds to numerous arguments that have been mounted against the Synoptic portrayal of Jesus as an eschatological prophet: seeming contradictions between that portrayal and other elements in the Jesus tradition such as moral teachings for the present (97) and declarations that the kingdom of God is present as well as future (98-116), conflict between the Synoptics and the witness of a widely respected reconstruction of the earliest lay of the Q source and the *Gospel of Thomas* (118-134), and more.

Many preachers have kept up with the work of the Jesus Seminar and its popular authors like Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. We have been influenced by a widely expressed skepticism about and objections to the picture of Jesus conveyed by the New Testament Gospels or construed by readers of who are alienated from the more popular manifestations of the modern Christian Church. For preachers, Allison's study is a gold mine of insight into the many ingredients of the present discussion. He not only names arguments mounted in the academic discussions of the past several decades but offers an impressively reasoned response from himself as someone who shares many of the conclusions about the Gospels reached by the academic scholarship of the past few centuries, but who finds the arguments for radical skepticism implausible. This is therefore a very important study for preachers who may find themselves caught between the assumptions of their listeners and a highly influential stream of recent scholarly work.

The exposition and defense of the New Testament picture of Jesus as a prophet who proclaimed an imminent turn of the ages is only the first step in Allison's study. In three succeeding chapters he applies the same method to the Synoptic presentation of Jesus' understanding of himself and his mission, to the style of his teaching, and to the narratives of Jesus' death and resurrection. Again eschewing claims to proof, he assesses different proposals in terms of how plausible they are in the light of modern research, especially of memory, and what research teaches us about ancient Jewish culture.

Allison's final words in this book are his own assessment of what he has achieved. They remind this reviewer of a cartoon in which the final words of the

preacher's sermon are, "But then again, what do I know?" In my opinion, Allison's work has more to offer than that. Given the tension between the assumption of most Christians that the picture of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels is basically true to who he was, on the one hand, and the widely expressed radical distrust of those witnesses promoted by a significant stream of modern scholarship, preachers are well-served by a well-reasoned evaluation of the Gospels in relation to those expressions of radical distrust. Allison is extraordinarily fair in his presentation of those with whom he disagrees. He shares many of their views. But he also throws light on the agendas that seem to lie behind the reconstructions of Jesus offered in place of the general picture that emerges from the Gospels. In the course of history Christian interpreter's have often distorted and misused and misread the Gospel accounts and done significant damage that modern study goes a long way to correcting. But even skeptical scholarship is inclined to accept a damaging distorted reading and then reject the Gospel account as though the Gospels themselves were guilty of the same toxic view. Not every attempt to show that the Evangelists do not share some of the objectionable perspectives attributed to them are acts of desperation designed to rescue the Gospels as grounds for a more traditional view. It may be that both objectionable traditional interpretations and more attractive radically new ones are at least questionable. When a scholar can lay out the ingredients of the debate as clearly as Allison does, the preacher is in a position to read both the Gospels and the debate with new eyes and discover new insights.

What is clear from Allison's study is that our quest for God cannot expect to arrive at certainty while we live in this age. We are on a pilgrimage that requires a lot of trust, but also a lot of sharp observation and openness to the unexpected. As we make our way along the path, sometimes moving forward and sometimes moving back or weaving from side to side, we need to use all our resources, including our reason and commitment to discerning our prejudices and uncovering sometimes inconvenient truths. Such a view of our preaching vocation seems appropriate to the God a widespread number of witnesses attest to meeting in the Bible: a God who is living and calling us to relationship, who can be known yet is always surrounded by mystery that puts in question what we think we know. If we are to meet this God in Jesus, the New Testament, especially the Gospels, play a primary role in that encounter. Any study that trains us in judicious reading and understanding as part of a larger community that is straining to know God renders us a great service. It is this service that I find rendered by Allison's new book. I commend it to preachers as a resource for their own continuing formation.

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