



Allison, Dale C., Jr.

The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus

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Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus was written in preparation for the Kenneth W. Clark lectures that Allison gave at Duke University in February of 2008. He describes this work as his "personal testimony to doubt seeking understanding." (p. 5) If I'm honest, the book reads like an apologetic for agnosticism, with Allison repeatedly telling the reader that the quest for the so-called Historical Jesus is flawed in both its method and its results, results that we can never be ultimately confident in. He repeats what George Tyrell (speaking of Adolf von Harnack) noted a century ago, namely that scholars will always find a Jesus who is reflection of themselves. Allison doesn't leave himself unindicted from this charge and throughout the book he is extremely candid, making his presuppositions known and confronting them on every page.

Now I realize that such writing will generally be well received, after all, who doesn't appreciate brutal honesty and a scholar who's willing to throw himself in with those whom he criticizes? But as I read this short book I found myself extremely bored by Allison's oft repeated skepticism mingled with appeals to his being a churchgoer and believer in Jesus. It's not that the two are incompatible, but they exist in an uneasy tension that I myself could never be comfortable with. One wonders how it is that Allison can favor Christianity over let's say Islam or Judaism based on his beliefs about the Bible and Jesus. His understanding is that we can't know any specific thing that Jesus said or did with confidence, although we can know in a roundabout way the types of things he said and did. Okay, fine, I'm willing to acknowledge that something like that is

possible, but if the Gospels are devoid of true history, as Allison seems content to argue, then how do they commend themselves above any other holy book?

I also have to admit that I grew tired of the spiel in which we can't be confident that this or that historical event happened, but we can be confident that this one and that one didn't. Allison is rather confident that the events and sayings of John are definitely not historical but for the Synoptic Gospels we just can't know one way or another. I realize that this is standard fare for historical-critical scholars but it's all so arbitrary. Nonetheless, Allison finds plenty of theological import in otherwise uncertain historical writings. Whether or not the events actually happened is beside the point, the point is that these episodes teach a lesson, and this is how I suppose that Allison has been able to maintain his faith for all these years. While it's not the way I would go I can't knock him too much for it because at the end of the day he believes.

The book ends by Allison noting all of the opposites that make up the Bible's portrait of Jesus, but his concluding remarks were the best of the entire book:

Although Jesus may be the coincidence of opposites, he does not reconcile or unify them. For him, death and life are not like summer and winter, the one always coming after the other, in an eternal return, without victor. He may believe in the devil, but he believes far more in God. Jesus' dualism is relative, not absolute. There can be no tie, for evil is bound to lose. The divine love and goodness must triumph over all else. So the opposites are not complementary but antagonistic, not equal but sequential: in the end, the good undoes the bad. And in this, as in so much else, Jesus' life instantiates his teaching. For the resurrection does not balance crucifixion and the grave. It defeats them. (p. 119)

While I didn't personally enjoy this book because I found that I learned more about Dale Allison, Jr. than I did about the Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus, I realize that I'm probably in the minority here. Readers of this blog will more than likely get a lot more from Allison's brief work than I did, but I'd recommend trying to get a hold of the lecture before purchasing this book. From what I've heard they're almost identical.