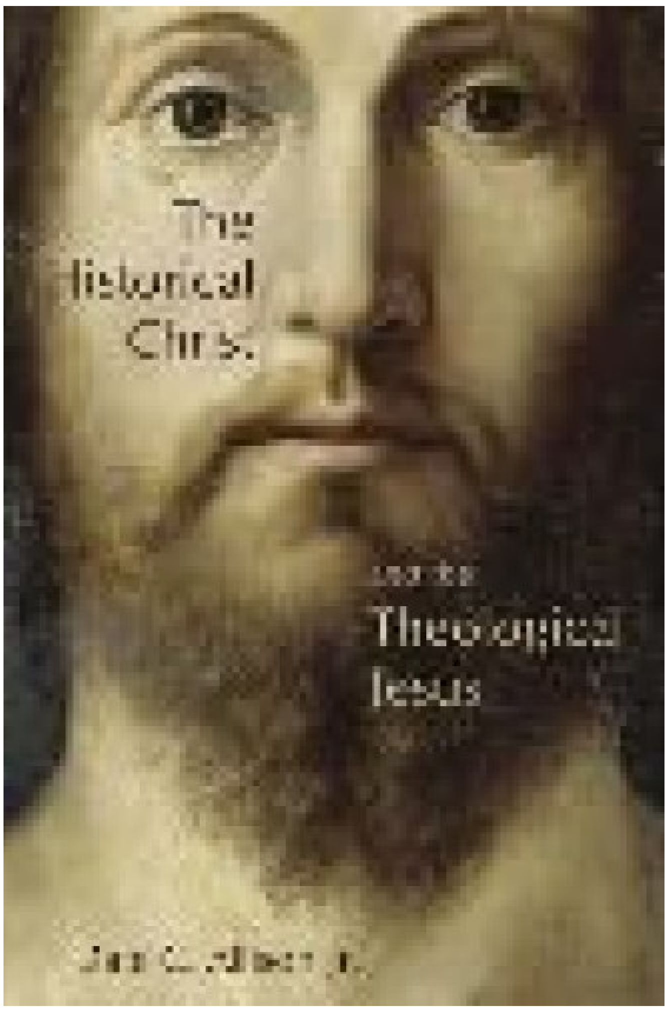
The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus

reviewed by Daniel Migliore in the January 26, 2010 issue

In Review



The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus

Dale C. Allison Jr.
Eerdmans

There have been so many quests for the historical Jesus that most of us have lost count. Albert Schweitzer famously ended the 19th-century quest by showing that the quest authors had succeeded only in finding their own reflections in their portraits of Jesus. The second quest, inaugurated in the 1950s, was essentially a rebellion against the thoroughgoing skepticism of Rudolf Bultmann. In the latest quest, whose most publicized voice belongs to the Jesus Seminar, we continue to meet a bewildering variety of faces of Jesus.

Against this background and writing with wit and verve, Dale Allison, professor of New Testament Exegesis and Early Chris tianity at Pittsburgh Theo logical Semi nary, acknowledges the limitations of what we can know about Jesus from modern historical study while insisting on the importance of such study for faith and theology. The very title of Allison’s brief but engaging book signals that just as believers cannot be completely indifferent to the historical study of the Gospels without closing their faith to new challenges and insights, so historians, even if they are unbelievers, cannot escape the deeply theological nature of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Allison is both refreshingly robust in his appraisals of the work of colleagues and disarmingly honest in his self- criticisms. On several occasions, he relates how his mind has changed, sometimes quite markedly, from earlier, optimistic assessments of the historical Jesus project.

Despite his many criticisms and reservations, Allison insists that the quest has not been entirely “futile and inconclusive.” It has assisted theology by exposing some of the exegetical fantasies in which even the most sophisticated and influential theologians have occasionally in dulged; by setting Jesus more firmly in his first-century Jewish context; and by describing Jesus, at least in Allison’s interpretation, as an eschatological prophet who remains, as Schweitzer said a century ago, a “stranger and an enigma” to conventional and soothing portrayals. “What good is Jesus if he does not trouble our theological dreams?” Allison asks.

Allison is no historical positivist, not a “just the facts, ma’am” historian. He is keenly aware of the subjective side of historical research. He contends that all historians inevitably bring presuppositions to their work, that they necessarily make use of their imagination if they are not mere chroniclers, and that they have to labor at the interpretation of often ambiguous texts whose precise contexts are no longer known.

Allison also rightly argues that reliable knowledge of the past depends greatly on the testimony of eyewitnesses and those intimately involved in the events rather than exclusively on independent verification by later investigators. Moreover, knowledge of persons must take into account the ongoing impact of their life—their *Wirkungsgeschichte*: the way their life was perceived by and how it influenced others.

Allison clearly wants to make room for a hermeneutics of trust as well as a hermeneutics of suspicion. He argues that fruitful Jesus research will do more than apply preconceived criteria of authenticity to individual texts. Instead, the historian should “contemplate the big picture,” look for “repeating patterns” and make inferences from these patterns that “characterize the sources as a whole.” Allison insists that “we can be confident of finding Jesus above all in the repeating patterns,” and he includes the Pauline letters as well as the Gospels as sources in his search. Although the particulars of the Gospel witness may be faulty, there is no reason to doubt that Jesus indeed said and did the “sorts of things” reported. Otherwise, we would have to conclude that we can know nothing of the historical Jesus.

While there is surely some truth in Allison’s point that trustworthy “general impressions” of persons and events can be conveyed in stories with faulty details, one might well ask whether the distinction, wielded too broadly, obscures the coincidence of particular detail and theological meaning in the Gospel witness—for example, that it was in the house of Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector, that Jesus stayed; that it was the daughter of Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, whom Jesus healed; that it was Judas, one of the twelve, who betrayed him.

An equally important question for this reader is whether Allison consistently follows his own advice about the significance of patterns in the New Testa ment witness. The author says surprisingly little about the accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection in the Gospels. Readers will surely want to know, beyond the few hints provided, the extent to which the repeating patterns of the passion and resurrection narratives contribute to the historian’s knowledge of Jesus. A historian of Christian doctrine might also want to ask whether the patterns of the New Testament witness have prospective as well as retrospective significance. Can these patterns be of assistance in differentiating the sound from the deviant developments in later theological interpretations of the person and work of Jesus?

Noting that “when historians are done . . . theologians are just getting started,” Allison suggests a direction in which a contemporary Christology might move. He speaks of the need to hold together Jesus’ eschatological hope and his humanitarianism, his joy in God’s loving-kindness and his familiarity with the reality of suffering and evil, his experience of God’s absence as well as God’s presence, and his confidence in the ultimate victory of life. Unfortunately, Allison says little about christological developments in the postapostolic church. If the historical Jesus is in fact also the theological Jesus, we would do well to consider the possibility that the church at Nicea might have gotten some very important things right about the Gospel witness—that it might have been closer to the mystery of Jesus’ identity than was Arius in the fourth century, Adolf von Harnack in the 19th or the Jesus Seminar in the 21st.

Critical literary-historical study of the Gospels can indeed be a valuable help and corrective to faith and theology. It can shake up entrenched and complacent orthodoxies. It can remind the church of the full humanity of the incarnate Lord. It can expand the church’s awareness of the richly diverse testimony to Jesus in the church’s foundational documents. But one thing is clear to both Allison and this reviewer: the picture of Jesus constructed by historians who seek to go behind the Gospel witnesses can never substitute for the Jesus attested to by those witnesses and confessed by Christians in all times and places as Emmanuel, Savior, and crucified and risen Lord. It need be no insult to the labors of Gospel historians to affirm, as Allison rightly does, that “the Gospels should be preached as they stand, as canonical literature.”

Refusing to replace the Jesus of the canonical Gospel witness with any of the pictures offered by the Jesus historians has nothing to do with an anxiety to protect fossilized dogmas. On the contrary, it is only when the Jesus attested to in scripture is recognized as embodying both our true humanity and the sovereign grace of God that faith and theology are deeply and permanently radicalized, far beyond the purported radicalism of every quest for the historical Jesus.