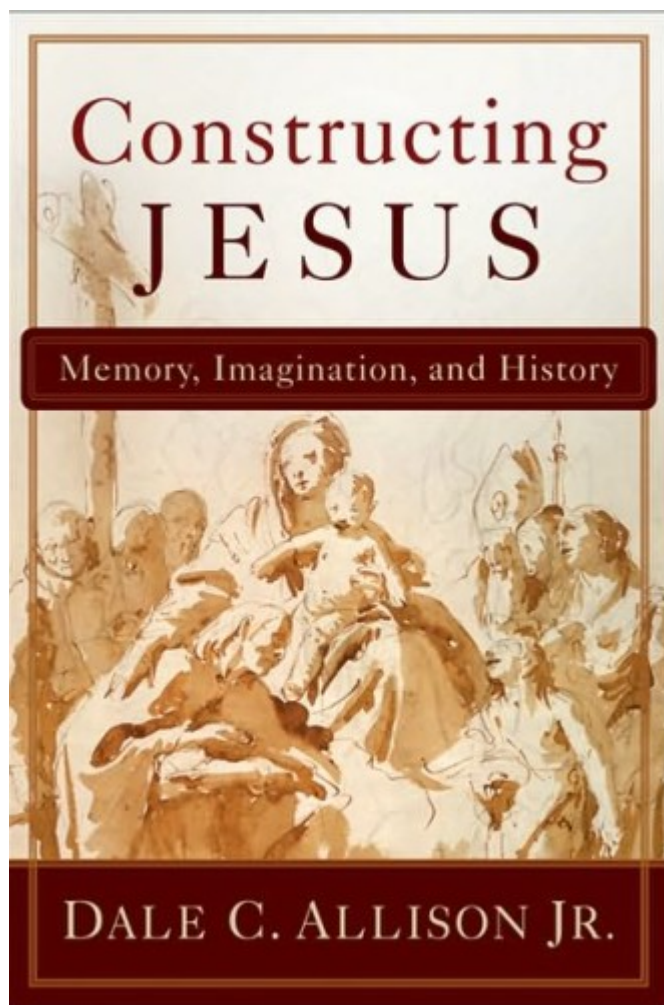


Constructing Jesus, by Dale C. Allison Jr.

reviewed by [Mark Allan Powell](#) in the [May 3, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Constructing Jesus

By Dale C. Allison Jr.
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Two years ago, after Dale Allison published a short book on historical Jesus studies that seemed to question the legitimacy of the enterprise, Scot McKnight, a prominent Jesus scholar, declared that the book had convinced him to abandon the discipline altogether. Indeed, McKnight praised Allison's *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* for sounding a renewed death knell for a renewed enterprise that Albert Schweitzer had tried to put down back in 1906. Thanks to Allison, McKnight averred, the so-called "third quest for the historical Jesus" was officially over.

That judgment appears to have been premature. Allison is back with a volume that makes it clear that he thinks not that the quest has ended but that the manner in which it has been conducted must be rejected or at least thoroughly revised.

The traditional approach has relied heavily on source criticism (for example, on reconstructions of the biblical source called Q) and has sought to authenticate sayings or deeds attributed to Jesus through appeals to various criteria (such as multiple attestation and dissimilarity). After decades of research, however, scholars have failed to reach consensus on many matters.

The bombshell that Allison drops into this already fractured territory consists of recent research into human memory. Numerous studies demonstrate that memory, especially communal memory, is a function of self-interest: it is reconstructive and involves imagination; it is highly selective, given to conflation and sequential displacement; it yields freely to the imposition of meaningful patterns and narrative conventions. Basically, in terms of literal recall, memory is far more fallible than has typically been supposed. Even in an oral culture, reliable historical data cannot be preserved for as long as one generation. Jesus studies have failed to take this into account, Allison maintains, naively applying criteria to sources that cannot bear the burden of proof expected of them.

Nevertheless, Allison continues, memory's primary failings have to do with the particular. Memory tends to be more trustworthy with regard to general impressions. Thus we may never be able to know if Jesus actually told the parable of the Good Samaritan, but we might be able to discover whether he was the sort of person who would have encouraged the values that parable espouses.

Against this backdrop of limited expectations, Allison argues for certain general impressions of Jesus that he regards as possessing a high degree of historical probability. Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who expected the kingdom of God to

come soon in a cataclysmic way, ushering in a new era in which the righteous would be rewarded with heavenly bliss and the wicked punished forever in hell. Jesus also believed that he himself was the agent (possibly the Messiah, or the Son of Man) whom God would use to execute the eschatological judgment and bring the kingdom to pass. Exactly how he thought his own death might fit into this plan is unclear, but it is fairly certain that he accepted the inevitability of his death, with a certain confidence that it would benefit humanity and advance God's cause.

All of these "general impressions" of Jesus are disputed by many prominent Jesus scholars. For example, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan question the authenticity of all of the materials that present Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. Their mistake, according to Allison, lies in their focus on particulars: the parable of judgment preserved in Luke 12:42-46 may lack multiple attestation, but "sayings about a coming judgment" (considered as a general category) are found at every level of the tradition, in virtually all sources and across all genres.

Accordingly, Allison concludes that if Borg, Crossan and others think that these general points regarding Jesus lack authenticity, they should abandon the quest altogether: if the tradition has been so thoroughly corrupted, then we should admit that Jesus is lost to us.

One might make the case that the church got to Jesus too soon and redacted all of the materials concerning him to such an extent that even the most universally attested perceptions are inauthentic christianized caricatures. What does not make sense is to assume that this happened and then imagine that the subtraction of Christian theology will somehow yield an occasional nugget of historically preserved data. It goes against everything we now know about memory to assume that the tradition got the general impressions wrong but certain particulars right.

Allison's thesis will gain a hearing because he has come to be recognized as one of the most cautious, reasonable and honest scholars working in the contentious field of Jesus studies. He always seems willing to consider evidence and to go wherever it leads, sometimes siding with radical skeptics and other times granting the wisdom of conservative apologists. He is able to acknowledge his own presuppositions, and he is willing to reconsider them. *Constructing Jesus* is a long book in part because its pages are peppered with caveats, disclaimers and sober consideration of objections that Allison grants might reasonably be offered.

Thus the book also seems to advance another thesis: that nothing is certain. Historical research allows only for degrees of probability, and given the fallibility of memory, those degrees are never going to be particularly high for a figure like Jesus. If the purpose of the quest for the historical Jesus has been to establish a historically secure foundation for theology and faith, then the implications of Allison's work may be that, so construed, the quest has failed.

I am not sure how great a loss that would be. No one, to my mind, holds faith in Jesus on the basis of historical study alone. Our faith is always based on story as much as on history. There is always some kind of appeal to a doctrine of scripture or to tradition or to communal experience or to spiritual inspiration or to *something* other than the cold, hard facts of historical research.

In the 20th century, numerous theologians were drawn to historical research not because they thought it might confirm traditional faith but because they hoped it would provide a basis for transforming that faith. A new vision for Christianity emerged based on a narrative that toned down apocalyptic enthusiasm and belief in supernatural occurrences while highlighting the spiritual significance of metaphor; it also denounced concepts of religious privilege or naive trust in God while encouraging ethical responsibility, radical inclusivity and sacrificial commitment to social justice. This vision, endorsed by Borg, Crossan and many others, does have appeal, but its claim to be derived from or sustained by a more historically accurate accounting of the tradition may not hold up. Allison at least shows us that such a foundation cannot be established with anything approaching certainty.

I do not think that matters. All it means is that those who hold to this version or vision of the faith will be in the same boat as the rest of us: they too will have to look beyond historical data to authenticate what they believe. Personally, I doubt that many people have been drawn to this vision primarily because they thought it was the one best supported by objective historical research anyway. They have found it appealing for other reasons, some of which may be legitimizing.

So what about the quest for the historical Jesus? It may have purposes tangential to theological interests. Many people who do not believe in Jesus are nevertheless interested in him, and historians frequently study ancient figures for reasons that have nothing to do with legitimation of contemporary ideological postures. Accordingly, Christian historians whose faith in Jesus is based on things that transcend historical scrutiny may exercise their vocation as a service less to the

church than to the world, in order to discover as much about this important and interesting man as the record will disclose.

Such data are worthwhile. They are useful educationally in a post-Christian society and provide for a better informed populace (someone has to decide what children in public schools should be taught about Jesus). They offer bases for interreligious dialogue. Sometimes they simply satisfy curiosity.

The problem, I suspect, is that historical Jesus studies suffer from an identity crisis as a discipline. The field is almost always regarded as a subset of religious studies, and most scholars active in the field are theologically trained. In retrospect, the discipline should perhaps have developed as a branch of classical studies or of world history in general. If it had, much of what Allison says in this book would, I suspect, have been simply taken for granted. Historians can be more comfortable than theologians with accepting the limits of their discipline, even when that means presenting conclusions as possibilities, marked by degrees of uncertainty.