

David M. Allen. *The Historical Character of Jesus: Canonical Insights from Outside the Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014.

Traditionally, historians of the life of Jesus limit themselves to the material found in such gospels as the canonized Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and sometimes other non-canonized works such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. David M. Allen bucks this trend in *The Historical Character of Jesus*. This aptly titled book asks what we may learn about the historical (or historian's) Jesus if we expand our data pool to include the rest of the New Testament outside the Gospels. What Allen presents is not so much bare-bone historical "facts" about Jesus, the sort of thing some seek to mine from gospels, but the "character" of Jesus, i.e., his mental and moral qualities, as he is remembered and proclaimed throughout the NT.

The book comprises nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The seven middle chapters examine how Jesus—most specifically the "earthly," pre-resurrection/ascension Jesus—is presented in Acts, the undisputed Pauline Epistles, the disputed Pauline Epistles (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastorals), Hebrews, James, the Petrine Epistles, Jude, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation. What emerges from these chapters is the relevance of this earthly Jesus for the early audiences of these books. The authors don't share information about his hometown or family, or about many of the central events in his life. Instead, they present Jesus' character as a model for his followers.

What Allen's work shows is that Jesus' suffering and death were central to how people remembered his pre-resurrection life. The "historical" Jesus of these works is first and foremost a Jesus who suffered and died. His moral example for Christian readers/hearers of these books is presented in order to inspire endurance in the face of persecution or other forms of opposition. Additionally, Jesus' teachings have been integrated into the preaching of these early Christians, sometimes with reference to Jesus (e.g., Paul in 1 Cor. 11:23) and sometimes as only an echo of him (e.g., James 2:8's reference to the "royal law" of loving one's neighbor as one's self).

The reader who approaches this volume under the impression that it will deliver the type of information often sought in other studies of the historical Jesus—e.g., whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem, whether he predicted the destruction of the temple, whether he self-identified as a messiah figure—may be disappointed. Allen admits that "if the aim of our exercise is to use the non-Gospel material to shed light on the life of Jesus, then we cannot venture too much further forward" (172). Therefore, this book is less a contribution to historical Jesus research in the strictest sense and more a contribution to canonical/NT Christology.

Yet it would be a mistake to say that it does not contribute to historical Jesus studies at all. Recent years have witnessed a concentrated effort to ask whether it is truly possible to parse the Jesus of history from the Jesus of tradition. Some scholars have begun to advocate an approach to the study of the historical Jesus that focuses more on "Jesus remembered," i.e., what traditions about Jesus tell us about the general impression Jesus of Nazareth left on his earliest followers. In this sense, Allen does offer something for scholars of the historical Jesus to consider: Does the "Jesus remembered" of the non-Gospel parts of the NT tell us anything about what sort of person Jesus was?

For students of the historical/historian's Jesus, Allen's book is valuable in helping them see what facets of Jesus' life were of central importance for those not writing biography-style gospels. In the canonical gospels Jesus' passion is arguably the most climactic event. For other NT authors this appears to remain the case. Jesus' suffering and death left a great impression on later followers of his message.

For general readers of the NT, and for students of Christian theology,

Allen's book will broaden one's Christology, placing center stage often marginalized or accidentally overlooked canonical literature. Similarly, for preachers and teachers in the context of the local church this book can function as a gateway to parts of the NT that are either ignored or read for purposes other than to find out what they say about Jesus. Allen establishes Jesus' centrality across the NT, even in places where many might not think to look.

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