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Dale Allison, Jr., is Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. His first book touching on what can be known historically about Jesus’ resurrection was published in 1985. This present book represents the results of years of continuing study, refining his arguments and adjusting his conclusions since then. Allison, Jr. writes here as a historian seeking to determine what historical inquiry can determine about the events that gave rise to faith in Jesus’ resurrection. He begins with a typology of nine different conclusions regarding this. He then moves into the New Testament materials, beginning with the summary formulas “God raised Jesus from the dead” and “Jesus died and rose again.” These represent very early Christian confessions but say little about Jesus’ resurrection as a historical event. The refrain that this happened “on the third day” indicates partly that the first Christians believed that it happened shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion. According to Allison, Jr., biblical passages like this were used to describe something that happened. They “interpreted and sustained” belief in Jesus’ resurrection but did not create it. From here he moves into 1 Corinthians 15: 3–8, arguing that the formula behind this goes back to Christian beginnings and noting the structural similarity between it and Acts 13:28-31. 1 Cor. 15: 3–8 shows that Paul and others before him had some interest in the historical nature of Jesus’ resurrection, in who had seen the risen Christ, and “the temporal order of their experiences.” He also notes that despite all the differences between this account and those in the Easter narratives, these share a pattern of events. He concludes that some of Jesus’ followers came to believe that he was risen soon after his death and that Jewish eschatology was their matrix for interpreting the meaning of this.

From here he moves to the accounts of Paul’s conversion in Acts and argues that these may contain elements of historical memory going back to Paul. Similarly, the accounts of an appearance to Mary probably also contain elements of early historical memory. Next come the Easter narratives, beginning with Mark’s account of the empty tomb. Allison, Jr.

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focuses on Matthew 27: 51b–53 to argue convincingly that early Christians did fabricate some fictions to express their convictions about Jesus’ resurrection. The empty tomb could be an example of this. However, the awkward fit of Mark 16:1-8 with what proceeds it, the way the empty tomb narrative was revised and expanded by others, and the involvement of Mary Magdalene and other women in it, lead him to argue that Jesus’ tomb probably was discovered to be empty shortly after his death, although this judgment must remain tentative. Turning to the Easter narratives, he argues that while Jesus’ own teachings and actions probably generated eschatological expectations that helped shape Easter faith, this faith was based upon appearances of the risen Jesus. The overwhelming testimony of the sources is that something “earth-shattering occurred in the days immediately after the crucifixion.” Easter faith was based on appearances of the risen Jesus, on the empty tomb and on pre-Easter eschatological expectation.

Having established this, Allison, Jr. then turns to studies on bereavement, reports of appearances of the dead and later appearances of Jesus, the shroud of Turin, accounts of vanishing bodies in Tibet and other “metanormal” experiences. Skepticism about Jesus’ resurrection is often based on the principle of analogy. Allison, Jr. turns this around, finding analogies between reports of visionary experiences of deceased people, such as he himself has had, and the New Testament reports of appearances of the risen Jesus. He notes that the Easter narratives themselves, particularly that of Luke, attempt to differentiate appearances of the risen Jesus from sightings of ghosts, and argues that to “protest the parallel is to acknowledge it.” He concludes that while there are similarities between the Easter appearances and experiences of appearances of deceased people, still there are significant differences between the Easter events and other paranormal events. He also has an interesting section arguing that studies of bereavement processes may shed light on how early Christians came to remember Jesus as risen and describe his resurrection.

He concludes that historical conclusions can be drawn from the New Testament evidence that support its truth claims about Jesus’ resurrection as a historical event. But these are unlikely to convince skeptics and there are no arguments that sweep away all doubts and banish skepticism tout court. As he notes, the Easter narratives themselves report that doubt typically accompanied faith in Jesus’ resurrection. Furthermore, he argues that historical conclusions and arguments themselves do not lead inexorably to faith in Jesus as the risen Christ. Allison, Jr. has
assessed what can be known historically about Jesus’ resurrection in a thorough and even-handed way. His use of literature about bereavement, appearances of the deceased, etc., helps make his study distinctive and is similarly even-handed. Arguments for and against the veracity of the historical truth claims made by the Easter witness are part of a larger discussion about the rationality of Easter faith. The relationship of the Easter appearances to other human experiences is also part of this. The strengths of this book are its thorough investigation of New Testament sources regarding what can be known historically about Jesus’ resurrection, its careful, balanced assessment of the evidence, the distinctive background of paranormal experiences which Allison, Jr. compares Jesus’ resurrection to, and the limited claims he makes on the basis of this.

This book is written so that educated lay people can profit from it as well as scholars. It will be useful for anyone interested in what can be known about Jesus’ resurrection as a historical event. Every theological library should have it.