

The Allegorists Who Undermined the Normal Interpretation of Scripture

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*Taken from:
An Introduction to
Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*

For Classroom Use Only

In this chapter it will be shown that the early church was overwhelmingly premillennial. Many of the interpretative battles of today did not, of course, exist for the early church. Thus, they did not deal with the same hermeneutical issues. But they had philosophical wars that dealt with the deity and nature of Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit, and the nature of the Trinity. The church fathers argued, fought well, and won many doctrinal conflicts, thus establishing the teaching framework of the Word for generations to come. Allegory, however, became their Achilles heel. How did allegorical interpretation begin? Actually, it began before the church age.

Pagan Greek Allegory

By the time of Xenophanes in the sixth century B.C., the literature of Homer was under attack because the gods appeared too sinful and human. By the time of Plato, Homer's poems were taken as symbolic, to be read allegorically. Plato agreed but felt that the poems were too disgraceful to be read to children in their literal form.

By the first century A.D., Heraclitus taught the scandalous passages in Homer as allegory. To explain the behavior of the gods, Heraclitus wrote *The Homeric Problem*, in which he offers alternative poetic allegorical interpretations for the sexual affairs of Aphrodite and others.

For example, as Heraclitus saw it,

The ribald laughter of the gods at the hapless pair (Aphrodite and her lover Ares) signifies their joy at the cosmic harmony that results from the union of love (Aphrodite) and strife (Ares, the god of war). The passage can also be interpreted metallurgically. Fire (Hephaestus) unites iron (Ares) with beauty (Aphrodite) in the blacksmith's art.¹

With allegory the antics of the gods were purified, but who determined the allegorical interpretations? By whose authority were words and concepts changed? If there were no "guidelines" as to the meaning of the "new" message, how did readers know the authors' intentions? These problems consistently overshadow allegorical interpretation.

Alexandrian Jews Copy Allegorism

Following the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish rabbis fell into quasi-worship of even the letters of Scripture, adopting “letterism” as a springboard to allegorization and spiritualization. They committed the sin about which Paul later wrote: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). To their credit, not all the rabbis fell into letterism or, later, allegory. The majority held to a sane literalism whereby they took the Old Testament promises in a natural and normal way. Tan writes,

The Jewish rabbis did not really misuse the literal method. Literalism and letterism are two different things. It was the exclusion of any more than the bare letters of Scripture which set the rabbis on a tangent. Letterism is the premature (not extreme) form of literalism. The interpreter who is properly conversant with the literal method of interpretation can never be too literal in interpreting God’s Word.²

Tan further explains that the Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, had daily contact with the Greek philosophers of the day and noticed how allegory cleaned up the uglier exploits of the Greek gods.³ With distasteful portions of the Old Testament to deal with (such as Lot’s incest, Noah’s drunkenness, Jacob’s many wives, etc.), the rabbis began to allegorize certain passages. “Allegorism enabled the Alexandrian Jews to make Moses speak the beautiful philosophy of Plato and other Greek sages.”⁴

Who Was Philo?

The personality most cited for the change to allegorical interpretation is Philo (ca. 20 B.C.-A.D. 54), “A philosophical Jew who possessed both reverence for the Mosaic revelation and fondness for Grecian metaphysics, [who] aimed to explore the mystical depths of significances allegedly concealed beneath the Old Testament Scripture.”⁵

Philo taught that the milk of Scripture was the literal but the meat was allegory. Thus, there was a hidden meaning. The Word of God had two levels: the literal was on the surface, but the allegorical represented the deeper, more spiritual meaning. Therefore, anyone who simply interpreted the Bible in its most natural, normal way was simple and missing the great meanings of the Scriptures. Ramm writes,

Philo did not think that the literal meaning was useless, but it represented the immature level of understanding. The literal sense was the body of Scripture, and the allegorical sense its soul. Accordingly the literal was for the immature, and the allegorical for the mature.⁶

To reiterate, allegorical interpretation creates meaning through the interpreter. Accordingly, an allegorist believes the average person may be reading and interpreting wrongly without the help of a scholar or, in the case of Scripture, a wise, well-trained theologian. Often, even today, allegorists look down their noses at those who take the Bible at face value with a normal, literal hermeneutic.

In Philo’s writings are thousands of examples of his allegorization of the Old Testament. Only a few will be cited here. In the creation of Eve, for example, when Adam’s side was closed up (Gen. 2:21), Philo writes, “That is to say, he [God] filled up that external sense which exists according to habit, leading it on to energy and extending it as far as the flesh and the whole outward and visible surface of the body.”⁷

Genesis 2:24 reads, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Philo says,

On account of the external sensation, the mind, when it has become enslaved to it, shall leave both its father, the God of the universe, and the mother of all things, namely, the virtue and wisdom of God, and cleaves to and becomes united to the external sensations, and is dissolved into external sensation, so that the two become one flesh and one passion.⁸

The Negative Effects of Philo

Philo was a mystic and a Platonist, whose “tampering” with the meaning of Old Testament texts would have long range negative effects on Christianity. His writings were preserved by some of the Church fathers because he had resisted Greek authors and Hellenistic thought. But he would have great influence on many of the Alexandrian church fathers.

Is There a Connection Today Between Philo and Amillennial Theologians?

Varner correctly notes in regard to Philo’s legacy,

The Alexandrian method greatly influenced medieval hermeneutics and resulted in the displacement of premillennialism with amillennialism after Augustine.

While most of evangelical hermeneutics has abandoned the Alexandrian allegorical method as applied to the narrative portions of Scripture, it is still inconsistently applied to the prophetic portions of the Old Testament, resulting in spiritualized interpretation of such terms as Israel, Jerusalem, and Zion. On a more popular level, many sermons unconsciously reflect the Philonic emphasis on number symbolism and illegitimate spiritual interpretations of texts.⁹

Pentecost well concludes,

The allegorical method was not born out of the study of the Scriptures, but rather out of a desire to unite Greek philosophy and the Word of God. It did not come out of a desire to present the truths of the Word, but to pervert them. It was not the child of orthodoxy but of heterodoxy.¹⁰

Who Was Origen?

Origen (ca. A.D. 185-254), often called “Mr. Allegorism,” followed Philo in searching both Old and New Testaments for the deep and hidden spiritual meanings. Origen’s work, *On First Principles*, argues that if no spiritual significance is found on the surface of a Bible passage, it may be concluded that the verses are to be taken symbolically. Allegory, which was a legacy from Greece, dominated much of Origen’s biblical thought.

In a short time, Origen “made allegory the dominant method of biblical interpretation down to the end of the Middle Ages... It took no genius to recognize that such allegory was a desperate effort to avoid the plain meaning of the text, and that, indeed, is how Origen viewed it.”¹¹

How Did Philo Influence Origen?

In time, Philo's approach to Bible interpretation fell out of favor with the rabbis. But it lived long enough to be transmitted down to many Christian interpreters who accepted it enthusiastically. Origen probably became familiar with Philo's works, of which he thoroughly approved, through Clement. Trigg further explains,

The circumstances in which Christianity developed into a religious tradition independent of Judaism gave allegory from the very first a strong appeal to Christians. Christians retained the Old Testament, which for some time was their only Bible, as their sacred Scriptures, but they quickly found it appropriate to cease demanding literal observance of the commandments of the Torah. Allegory enabled Christians to justify their abandonment of the ceremonial law.¹²

Concerning biblical prophecy, Origen rejected the popular Christian hope of the coming earthly millennial reign of Jesus. As a result, he questioned the authenticity of Revelation, which so clearly speaks of such a millennium, and treated the book symbolically.¹³ He wrote, in fact, that Christ's coming in the clouds, as described in Matthew 24:30, referred to the Lord's coming into the souls of the openhearted when they accepted the basic truths of doctrine. In Origen's thinking, "His [Christ's second] coming" occurred when the mature Christian found Jesus in the hidden meanings of Scripture.

On some of Origen's other prophetic views, Trigg makes this most interesting comment:

The trials and tribulations the world must endure before the second coming symbolize the difficulties the soul must overcome before it is worthy of union with the Logos. The imminence of the second coming refers to the imminent possibility, for each individual, of death. Perhaps more radically, the two men laboring in a field, one of whom is taken and the other left when the Messiah comes (Matt.24:40), represent good and bad influences on a person's will, which fare differently when the Logos is revealed to that person. Although Origen did not openly deny the vivid apocalyptic expectations such passages originally expressed and still did for many Christians, he tended by psychologizing them to make them irrelevant. Although that was far from Origen's intention, the outcome of his work was to make the church feel distinctly more at home in the world.¹⁴

Trigg's last line has far-reaching implications. Crutchfield on Origen concludes,

Origen's allegorical interpretations, including his views on Bible prophecy, gained wide acceptance in the church of his day. His influence, followed by Constantine's acceptance of Christianity and Augustine's teaching in the fourth century, are usually cited as the principal causes of premillennialism's eventual replacement by amillennial eschatology. Though he was broken by the persecution under Decius in 250 and died a few years later at the age of sixty-nine, Origen's exegesis still colors prophetic expectations in modern times.¹⁵

Who Was Augustine?

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) was a godly, sincere follower of Christ. His most well-known works, *The City of God* and *Confessions*, have inspired believers for centuries. Despite good intentions, however, Augustine followed Origen into the crevice of allegorical interpretation. By Augustine's day, though, many had already adopted the pagan Greek system of approaching the meaning of Scripture. But this saintly church father developed a compromise in dealing with certain truths.

That is, he interpreted the non-prophetic Scriptures literally and the prophetic Scriptures allegorically. This dualistic method of interpretation represents a new twist to the allegorical interpretation then on a rampage. Unfortunately for the church, Augustinian dualism was accepted without much debate into the Roman Catholic church, and later also by the Protestant reformers.

Augustine, while rejecting the earthly, millennial kingdom accepted the literality of the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 and expected the second coming of Christ to occur around A.D. 650. This inconsistency in spiritualizing portions of Revelation 20 while literalizing its 1,000 years is an evidence that the church father did not give a reasonable exegesis to this subject.¹⁶

Augustine, despite his interpretative shortcomings, systematized the study of sacred Scripture by developing principles for approaching the Word of God. Ramm summarizes twelve of Augustine's most important guidelines:

1. A genuine Christian faith was necessary for the understanding of the Scriptures.
2. Although the literal and historical are not the end of Scripture, we must hold them in high regard.
3. Scripture has more than one meaning and therefore the allegorical method is proper.
4. There is significance in biblical numbers. The entire world of logic and numbers are to be regarded as eternal truths, with numbers playing a special role in human knowledge.
5. The Old Testament is a Christian document and is full of prophetic references concerning Christ.
6. The task of the expositor is to derive meaning from the Bible, not bring meaning to it. The expositor is to express accurately the thoughts of the writer.
7. The analogy of faith, the true orthodox creed, must be consulted when interpreting. If orthodoxy represents Scripture, then no expositor can interpret Scripture contrary to orthodoxy.
8. No verse is to be studied as a unit in itself. The context of the verse must be noted, i.e., what the Bible says on the same subject somewhere else.
9. If an interpretation is uncertain, nothing in the passage can be made a matter of orthodox faith.

10. The Holy Spirit cannot substitute for the necessary learning to understand Scripture. The able interpreter must know Hebrew, Greek, geography, natural history, music, chronology, numbers, history, dialectics, natural science, and the ancient philosophers.
11. The obscure passage must yield to the clear passage.
12. No Scripture is to be interpreted so as to conflict with any other—the harmony of revelation.¹⁷

Augustine and the Book of Revelation

The Alexandrian school of theology, represented by Clement and Origen, took an allegorical or non-literal view of the final book of inspired Scripture. Walvoord notes,

The more moderate form of allegorical interpretation, following Augustine, has achieved respectability and regards the book of Revelation as presenting in a symbolic way the total conflict between Christianity and evil or, as Augustine put it, the City of God versus the City of Satan.¹⁸

But Augustine also espoused the preterist (or past) view of Revelation. Walvoord calls preterist interpretation similar to allegory, yet it considers Revelation as a symbolic *history* rather than prophetic. But it is Lange who ascribes preterism to Augustine. “This theory is so styled as it was first propounded by the great Augustine in his *Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), xx. 79 [of Revelation]. It has been upheld in all ages of the Church since its first promulgation.”¹⁹ Lange summarizes Augustine on Revelation:

1. The period [of Revelation] began at the first Advent [of Christ], when Satan was bound and cast out of the hearts of true Christians and their reign over him ... began.
2. The Beast symbolizes the wicked world.
3. The first resurrection is that of dead souls to spiritual life, a resurrection continued in every true conversion throughout the period.
4. The thousand years is a symbolic expression of completeness appropriately indicating the entire period of the Messiah’s reign.
5. This period [is] to be followed by a new persecution of the Saints under Anti-christ; ... [then] the general judgment; after which will begin, in heaven, the glorious period of the New Jerusalem.²⁰

The Literal Millennial Kingdom Discredited

Cohn shows that with Augustine the interpretative climate would be finally and completely changed.

Early in the fifth century St. Augustine propounded the doctrine which the new conditions demanded. According to *The City of God* the Book of Revelation was to be understood as a spiritual allegory; as for the Millennium, that had begun with the birth of Christianity and was fully realized in the Church. This at once became orthodox doctrine.²¹

Crutchfield aptly concludes,

Augustine abandoned the premillennial position for the superficial reason that some millenarians had envisioned a kingdom age of unparalleled fruitfulness featuring banquet tables set with excessive amounts of food and drink (*The City of God* 20.7). He favored instead the position of his contemporary, the Donatist and lay theologian Tyconius who offered a spiritualized interpretation of the Apocalypse. Proceeding from this position, Augustine articulated an amillennial view in which no future thousand year earthly millennium was expected.²²

End Notes:

¹ Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen* (Atlanta, Ga: John Knox, 1983), 33.

² Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, Md.: Assurance, 1988), 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 27.

⁷ C. D. Yonge, trans., *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ William Varner, "Philo Judaeus," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 305.

¹⁰ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1961), 23-24.

¹¹ Trigg, *Origen*, 121.

¹² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

¹⁵ Larry V. Crutchfield, "Origen," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 289.

¹⁶ Tan, *Interpretation of Prophecy*, 50-51.

¹⁷ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 36-37.

¹⁸ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 37.

¹⁹ John Peter Lange, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 345.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 29.

²² Larry V. Crutchfield, "Augustine," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 59.