

Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2011), 388-392.

The Alexandrian fathers

Christian scholarship at Alexandria flourished from the late second to mid third century. The most notable figures there were Clement and Origen, Origen being the more prolific and influential. Origen distinguished between the 'letter' and the 'spirit' of the Old Testament, with priority given to the spiritual meaning and purpose of the text. He did not deny the historical and literal meaning of the Old Testament, but argued that often the literal sense of a story or command was simply *impossible* and concluded that the Spirit must have *intended* the reader to look for a hidden spiritual meaning. The Word could use historical stories to teach spiritual truths, but could also weave into the narrative things that did not happen, or into the law things that could not be obeyed. The reader is thereby forced to seek the higher sense worthy of God.

Origen also made a distinction between two parts of the law—the ceremonial and the moral (though in his commentary on Romans he listed six ways in which Paul talks about the law!). The first part came to an end in Christ, but the second was retained and amplified by Christ. This distinction, subsequently expanded by the identification of a third category, namely Israel's civil or judicial law, has remained as a major hermeneutical [that is, interpretive] framework for handling Old Testament law right down to the present day.¹

Since the main characteristic of the Alexandrian school was the belief that there was a spiritual meaning already there, intentionally hidden in the text of the Old Testament by the Spirit, they had to devise a method for getting at this hidden meaning and expounding it. The allegorical method of exegesis and interpretation was their solution. Though it has become that for which Alexandria is most famous, it should be remembered that this allegorical method was essentially just a tool, and was later discarded or modified by the heirs of their tradition. The more important legacy of Alexandria in relation to Old Testament hermeneutics was the presupposition of continuity and harmony between the testaments. The Hebrew scriptures, since they had come from the same Spirit who had inspired the New Testament, must also have Christian spiritual significance. This led to a fairly static conception of the Bible, with little weight given to historical development between the testaments.

The Antiochene fathers

The rival school of Antioch flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries, and includes such names as Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and Diodore of Tarsus in its broad tradition.

Whereas Alexandria subordinated the literal, historical sense of the Old Testament to a higher, moral and spiritual sense (the *allegoria*), Antioch gave priority to history, and looked for higher principles only secondarily. They used the term *theōria* or *anagōgē* for such secondary principles. They strongly and vociferously rejected the allegorical methods of Alexandria, and also questioned the twofold division of the law that stemmed from there.

Chrysostom argued that a whole new dynamic had entered the world with the arrival of the gospel in Christ. In the light of that, he did not accept that the Old Testament law had

¹ [See *Westminster Confession of Faith* 19.3-4.]

ongoing moral authority for Christians. Even things that had been allowed by the law in the Old Testament could be rejected by Christians because of the newness of life in Christ. He applied this argument to slavery—being one of the earliest to suggest that although the Old Testament allowed it, that fact did not of itself justify the practice for Christians, who must take Galatians 3:28 into consideration.

Diodore of Tarsus, in his commentary on the Psalms, however, did see the ethical value of the Old Testament, provided it is carefully grounded in historical reality and a literal reading of the text. He refused all allegory. Theodore of Mopsuestia in his commentary on Galatians emphasizes the two covenants, through Moses and through Christ, and sets up a very clear law-gospel contrast.

The Antiochene school thus emphasized the historical development within the Scriptures and the importance of redemptive fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New. This led to a less static and more dynamic approach to biblical authority, in which Old Testament perspectives could be set aside in the light of the 'new thing' of the incarnation and kingdom of God in Christ. Both Alexandria and Antioch believed in the continuity between the Testaments, but whereas Alexandria saw sameness and made the Old Testament say Christian things, Antioch saw development and allowed the New Testament to override the Old where necessary....

The influence of Alexandria lives on in Calvin and the Reformed tradition—not in its allegorical treatment of the Hebrew Bible, which Calvin definitely rejected in favour of a careful historico-grammatical exegesis. Rather, it is seen in the commitment to the unity and continuity of the Testaments, such that the Old Testament is read as unquestionably Christian scripture to be interpreted and obeyed in the light of Christ. Its influence can be seen in the Puritans' emphasis on the 'third (moral) use' of the law in the Christian's life. A static kind of unity is pushed to its ethical extreme in the theonomist movement ... which asserts that the moral authority of the Old Testament applied with as much force for Christians as the law did for Israel, since it is God's law for all time for all humanity. Whereas, however, the Alexandrians made Hebrew law relevant by allegorizing it, theonomists wish to make it relevant by literal application as far as possible.

The Antiochene antipathy to allegory surfaced again in Luther's bold rejection of medieval scholastic theology. Luther was also more Antiochene than Calvin in allowing the new wine of the gospel to dispense with the old wineskins of the Old Testament wherever he sensed a conflict. Where Calvin sought consistency and harmony, Luther was content with a very free and sometimes inconsistent handling of the Old Testament ethically, which arose from his dynamic and ebullient glorying in the primacy of the gospel as over against the law. As for modern examples of the Antiochene spirit, I think I would point to the heirs of the radical Reformation, such as those Mennonites who are concerned and active in social issues, who stress a radical discipleship and have a strongly New Testament, messianic orientation in both theology and ethic, while emphasizing the importance of the distinctiveness of the people of God, which is a value most strongly inculcated in the Hebrew scriptures.