

Book Reviews

***Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria.* By David Dawson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. ISBN 0-520-07102-6. Pp. xi+341.**

David Dawson demonstrates that he is as comfortable with postmodernism and *Pilgrim's Progress* as he is with Irenaeus and the *Iliad*. His reading of allegory betrays a deep understanding of contemporary hermeneutical trends which he simultaneously critiques through his analysis of allegory in ancient Alexandria. He moves through these ancient texts with ease, using close readings to support his own theory of "allegory as cultural revision" against other contemporary hermeneutical trends. He argues that ancient Alexandrian allegorical readers did not intend primarily to interpret texts, but to revise culture. He presents Philo, Valentinus and Clement as examples of such writers for whom sociopolitical concerns lie beneath the interpretive appearances of their non-literal, counter-readings of Scripture. He continues to argue that it is often through these allegorical readings that the counter-hegemonic challenges integral to religion have frequently been mounted, methodically examining the texts and cultural contexts of each of the above writers to show conclusively the limitations of any reading that restricts itself to hermeneutics.

In the introduction, Dawson maps the three prevailing views of allegory that his analysis critiques. While the traditional theological model understands allegory as a means of plumbing Scripture's spiritual depths, it is viewed by the late modernist as the struggle to attain an elusive meaning and by the post-modernist as a celebration of the semantic void left by meaning's absence. All of these views refuse to look beyond the text, missing the possibility that these writers used the interpretive strategy of allegory as a mask for their own socio-political project. The body of the book opens with an analysis of allegory and etymology in the works of the Stoic philosopher Cornutus and the literary critic Heraclitus, and uses this pagan background to set the stage for the ensuing religious uses of the allegorical imagination.

Dawson's reading of allegory as cultural revision starts with Philo, whose approach centres completely around the text itself. His allegorical readings of this text allow him to associate systematically Hellenistic meanings with Jewish Scripture, and then to use this Hellenized reading of Scripture as the basis for a revision of Hellenistic culture. Thus, insists Dawson, Philo sought "to make

Greek culture Jewish rather than to dissolve Jewish identity into Greek culture.” Dawson has removed Philo from his traditional place in history as a Hellenistic interpreter of Jewish Scripture and placed him instead among the bold, Alexandrian cultural reformers of Hellenistic culture.

While Philo used “text” as the foundation of his allegorical assault on Greek culture, Valentinus received his authority from his own “vision.” Armed with the authority of this divine vision, Valentinus erased the line between source text and criticism, thereby inverting and dissolving the customary perceptions of reality, truth, goodness and ultimately temporality and narrativity themselves. Dawson refuses to limit himself to this analysis of method, however, for he pushes further to understand the relevance of Valentinus’ social context. He finds that Valentinus’ reinterpretation of reality must be read in the context of the catastrophic fate of Judaism and Jewish-Christianity in the mid-second century. Through their baptismal moment of conversion, Valentinians absorbed self, society and history into their mystical vision of the One, thereby inalterably revising their own position in society and their entire perspective on society.

Clement, Dawson’s last example, focused on neither text nor vision, but on a “voice-based hermeneutic.” Thus, all text is subordinated to the divine discourse, the logos, that lies beneath it. Clement used allegorical readings, therefore, to discover this hidden voice of God in a wide variety of texts thereby maintaining a fidelity to the emerging Christian orthodoxy and an openness to the appeals of a Christian gnosis. Though his argument for “allegory as cultural revision” is not as strong here as it was for the previous two examples, Dawson does show that Clement’s allegorical reading betrays an alienation from mainstream culture and a struggle to mediate between the two primary Christian groups of the day.

This book is not intended for the mass market or an introductory university course. Nevertheless, by drawing upon such a range of subject matter, Dawson makes the book accessible to specialists in different areas. Those trained in the history of ancient thought will find their traditional interpretive techniques submitted to modern hermeneutics, while those trained primarily in contemporary hermeneutics will see their techniques critically applied to ancient texts. Specialists in contemporary criticism of Biblical or ancient Greek literature will immediately be challenged by his originality, which challenges the dominance of both late modernist and postmodern hermeneutical approaches. In this sense, therefore, it allows the reader to get one foot in the door of a foreign specialization, opening ever so slightly the possibility of glimpsing something previously unfamiliar. And opening these kinds of doors is what scholarship is all about.