



The Competing Hermeneutical Schools: The Allegory of Clement & Origen at Alexandria vs. the Literal of Theophilus & Diodorus at Antioch

The essence of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the Church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's employment of normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well. (p. 47)

10. The deviation away from the literal-grammatical-historical approach to Scripture led to the failure to truly discern the primary purpose of God in creating mankind and in saving mankind. The *sine qua non* of the plan of God is His glory and this can be accomplished only by the believer who through spiritual growth becomes a star witness for the Prosecution in the appeal trial of Lucifer.
11. To miss this important point is to emphasize the means to the end rather than the end itself. When theologians allegorize and spiritualize the Word of God they place emphasis on man and his good works, and all of this leads to human good and evil.
12. When the Rapture, the Second Advent, and the millennial kingdom are explained away through allegory then the integrity of God is blasphemed by asserting that He does not keep His promises to either Israel or the Church.
13. One of the early proponents of the allegorical method was Origen who was influenced by the school of Alexandria. This school was founded by Clement who applied the allegorical method of Philo to explain passages of Scripture that were in opposition to Greek philosophy. Origen and the Alexandrian school are summarized by:

Couch, Mal (ed.). *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology.* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 145, 289:

Clement believed that God intentionally placed stumbling blocks to the reader in the literal meaning to awaken people's minds to find the hidden truths buried beneath the surface of the text.

Origen (c.185-254), the most influential teacher of the Alexandrian school, was drawn to the allegorical method of Philo because it allowed him to reconcile Scripture. While Origen believed that spiritual truth was self-consistent and accurate, he argued that the historical accounts were sometimes inconsistent and inaccurate. From the modern hermeneutical perspective, these issues seem rather naïve; however, to Origen, they were unresolvable with the literal method. Origen attempted to resolve these alleged inconsistencies and other historical-exegetical dilemmas through the allegorical method: the (biblical) stories do not mean what they say; their real meaning lay in the allegorical level. According to Origen, the difficulties of Scripture suggest the existence of a deeper meaning. (p. 145, Gordon H. Johnson)

Origen was the first church leader of stature to challenge the premillennial orthodoxy of the early church. Completely dedicated to the allegorical method of interpretation like his mentor, Clement, Origen spiritualized virtually every Christian doctrine. Under Origen's influence, the blessed hope of the Christian apologists—Christ's imminent return to establish His kingdom—began to yield to the spiritual hermeneutics of Alexandria.

Origen maintained a theoretical three-level understanding of the meaning of Scripture: the literal, typological, and spiritual. The literal method, which Origen considered crude and unreliable, was allowed to the weak of intellect, the mass of Christians in general. The spiritual method, extolled by Origen, was reserved for a few like himself "on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the word of wisdom and knowledge."



NOTE: It is this kind of arrogance that is fostered by the allegorical method. Several religious organizations have actively discouraged its followers from reading the Bible by asserting that a literal reading does not result in a clear understanding of the passage. Only those few whom the Holy Spirit has bestowed the “word of wisdom and knowledge” are able to do so. It is true that pastor-teachers should know more than their parishioners, but the flock would pick up more knowledge than that of the allegorist pastor-teacher by reading an English translation literally.

Origen's method of exegesis was so subjective that it allowed for an almost infinite number of symbolic meanings and interpretations of the biblical text, most of which bore little resemblance to the plain meaning of the words.

Origen's allegorical interpretations 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 principle causes of premillennialism's eventual replacement by amillennial eschatology. (p. 289, Larry V. Crutchfield)

14. The counterattack against the allegorical method occurred in the third century with the founding of the school of Antioch of Syria. Origen's allegorical method of hermeneutics was considered by this school's leaders to be unacceptable. The school at Antioch offered a curriculum which stressed literal interpretation. A summary of the Antiochians' hermeneutic is provided again by:

Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 145:

The school of Antioch began to develop the historical-grammatical approach: they stressed the importance of Hebrew and Greek exegesis and historical backgrounds and recognition of figures of speech. In contrast to the multiple meanings generated by the allegorical method, the Antiochians argued that every passage has only one plain, simple meaning conveyed by its words and grammar.

While the Alexandrians claimed that the literal meaning of a text did not include its metaphorical meaning, the Antiochians insisted that the literal meaning cannot exclude metaphor. While the Alexandrians employed allegory to defend the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the Antiochians based this unity upon directly predictive prophecy and indirectly predictive typology viewed retrospectively through progressive revelation.

15. Dispensationalists claim that the literal-grammatical-historical system to biblical analysis is the approach originally applied by the early church Fathers. Couch introduces us to two such proponents who were associated with the school at Antioch.

Couch, 146-47:

In contrast to the allegorical method of the Alexandrians, **Theophilus** \thē-äf' a-las\ of Antioch (c. 115-188), stressed historical-grammatical exegesis.

In contrast to the Alexandrians who denied the historicity of Old Testament narratives, Theophilus stressed that the Old Testament was an authentic historical record of God's dealings with the Jewish nation. While the Alexandrians allegorized Old Testament laws, Theophilus interpreted the laws in a historical-grammatical manner, and used many parts of the laws as guidance for the Christian life.

Diodorus \dī-a-dōr' as\ of Tarsus (d. 393) made three important contributions: (1) He wrote the first systematic treatment defending and explaining the literal historical-grammatical method. (2) He affirmed the validity of a historical-typological method. (3) He was the teacher of **Theodore** of Mopsuestia \māp-su-es' chēa\ and **John Chrysostom** \kris' as-tam\, who would become the greatest exegetical and expositional exponents of the school of Antioch.



Diodorus's most important publication, *What Is the Difference Between Insight and Allegory*, denounced the Alexandrian method and set forth basic principles of the historical-grammatical method. According to Diodorus, the key to interpreting Scripture was not allegory, but *theōria* [θεωρία]: insight.