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How the Church Fathers appropriated the Old Testament

The Christian Church Fathers employed Old Testament exegesis to determine the position of Christianity within their own contemporary religious and intellectual field of influence. Dr Hagit Amirav has been awarded a Starting Grant from the European Research Council to research this process.

Bible exegesis

The third till the fifth centuries of the Christian Common Era are generally referred to as the Church Fathers' golden age. During this time Christianity moulded its religion and religious doctrines. It was also the time when vast numbers of texts were produced in which Old Testament exegesis occupied a prominent position. Dr Hagit Amirav is researching these activities: 'Why was Bible exegesis so important? And why did they put so much effort into the question of whether the Old Testament should be incorporated into the Christian Bible?'



Dr Hagit Amirav: 'The Jewish Bible was the only external source affording Christianity its authority. Otherwise it would have been something entirely novel which was really no recommendation at the time.'

European Research Area

Amirav, a specialist in classical studies and ancient history, was educated in Tel Aviv, Toronto and Oxford where she obtained her doctorate under supervision of the famous Professor Dame Averil Cameron. After holding three post-doc positions and winning a considerable number of prizes, she has come to the Faculty of Theology of the VU University, Amsterdam.

She will set up her own research group using a prestigious starters' grant from the European Research Council which was founded at the beginning of 2007 as a stepping stone towards a European Research Area. She is looking forward to working in the Theological Faculty of the VU University. 'It is a strong group and I have a great deal of support from the Dean and Professor of Church History Wim Janse.' Moreover, the VU University has a strong tradition in the field of early church history, as may also be evident from the new Centre for Patristic Research that was established there recently under the leadership of Professor Paul van Geest, a specialist in Augustine.

Pagan intellectuals

Amirav will examine the Church Fathers' exegesis from a historian's point of view and, armed with a considerable supply of anthropological literature on cultural appropriation, the demarcation of borders between groups and the formation of identities. Amirav: 'Historians are not readily attracted to exegetical literature. But it is extremely interesting when analysed as the reflection of the demarcation and communication of an individual, all-encompassing Christian identity. This occurred in mutual debates but also in opposition to other players in the field: the Jews and the Hellenistic pagan intellectuals.'

Allegorical vs literal

Patristic Bible exegesis is usually classified into two schools: the Alexandrian and the Antiochene. The former school is known for its predominantly allegorical explanation of the Old Testament, the approach of the latter is usually termed 'literal'. 'But why did they have these two approaches?' Amirav wonders. She intends to investigate the founding of both these schools in the light of the formation of the identity of the Christian elite.

Cruel God

The stumbling block for all Church Fathers was the second century Marcion of Sinope, who held that Christianity could do without the Old Testament. To him it was barbaric and primitive, and its God was cruel and capricious. Marcion founded his own church and remained very popular well into the sixth century but even so he was much abused and denounced by the other Christians who wanted to retain the Jewish Bible books. Amirav: 'The Jewish Bible was the only external source affording Christianity its authority. Otherwise it would have been something entirely novel and that was really no recommendation at the time.'

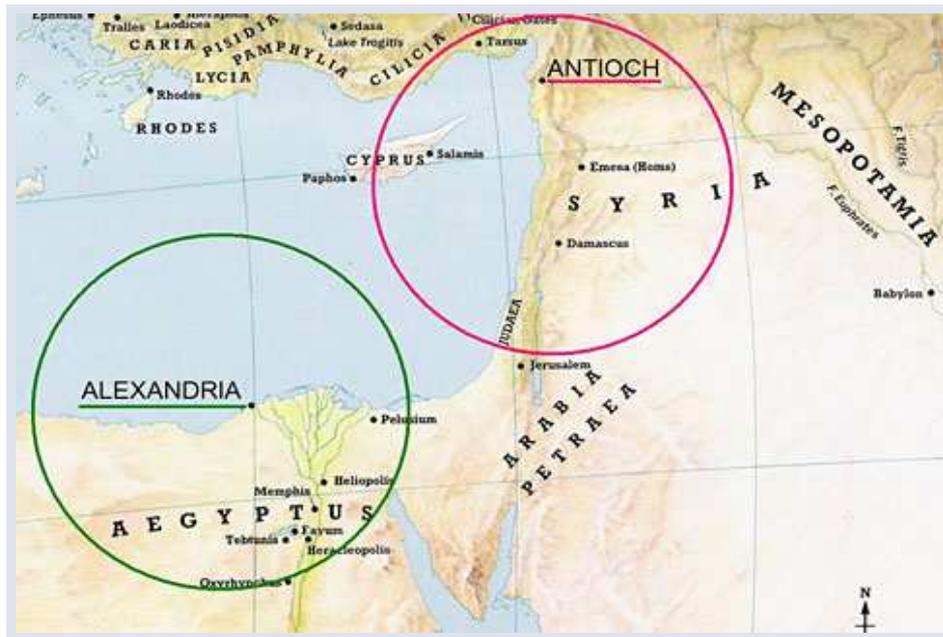
Origen

So the Old Testament had to be preserved for Christianity and to be incorporated into their own canon. 'But how could they justify this?' Amirav asks. 'That is the question. They might well think that, but how were they to show it?' The first method was by employing allegory. This connects the Alexandrian thinker Origen from the first half of the third century to this method. Amirav: 'By taking virtually everything in the Old Testament allegorically as a pointer to Christ, Origen was able to consider the Old and the New Testament as one entity, with one message.' A well known example is the interpretation of the Song of Songs as a text of Christ's love for the church rather than as human love poetry. The influential result of this sole message was that Christendom and not Judaism had to be considered as 'the true Israel'.



European Research Council

In February 2008, the European Research Council (ERC) will have been in existence for one year. The main objective of the ERC is to finance research which is initiated by top researchers who obtained their PhD between two and nine years ago, and who are working in or close to Europe. The Starting Grants, of which 300 were awarded in December, spread over 21 countries, give researchers the opportunity to establish themselves as independent research leaders. The grants are for a period of five years. More than 9000 applications were submitted for the first round. <http://erc.europa.eu>



'Against the Christians'

Allegorical exegesis appeared to offer the solution, and this method has become the Alexandrian school's trademark. But it met with a lot of resistance. Amirav: 'The allegorical method caused Christendom to encounter problems with the representatives of the pagan Hellenistic culture. This is a new element which I am introducing into the research. The pagans are often overlooked by modern scholars. But they definitely had an important say in this matter. They constituted a group which had a strong intellectual tradition offering powerful resistance. The fourth century Porphyry of Tyre, who wrote a sizeable work entitled 'Against the Christians' was an important neo-Platonic philosopher.

Antiochene school

The Hellenistic intellectuals protested against the Christian annexation of their allegorical method. Allegory was allowed, they claimed, but only when applied to myths, not to texts which presented themselves as history, such as the Bible. Amirav: 'With the Antiochene Church Fathers, you can see that they in fact made hardly any use of allegory at all. This had already struck me when I conducted my doctoral research on Chrysostom, an important exponent of that school. I had also noted that St Paul's letters were of great importance to him. At the time I wondered why. My present hypothesis is that it was an answer to Marcion, to the Alexandrians, and directed at the criticism of the pagans. Instead of employing allegory, the Antiochenes emphasized the moral interpretation of the Old Testament. To them, God was not the cruel and capricious Creator which Marcion had seen in the Old Testament, but a fatherly figure, sometimes angry and sometimes friendly, but always involved with humanity in a kind of educational role. I also want to show that St Paul was not only of great significance to Chrysostom but to the whole of Antiochene school as well: St Paul's letters created an alternative bridge between the Old Testament and the Gospel. By reading the Old Testament through St Paul's eyes, they were able to regard it as a historical text again. This popularity of St Paul's and the emphasis on moral issues have never really been examined cohesively.'