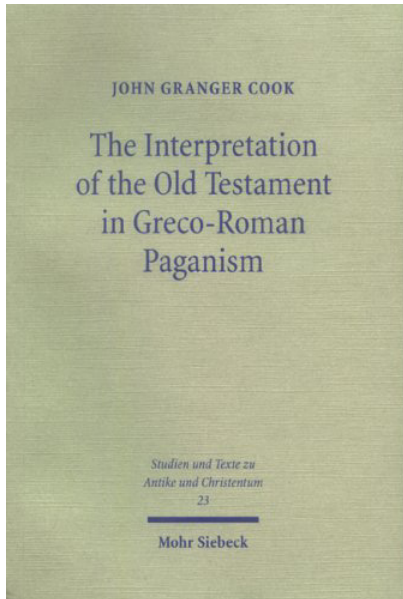


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Cook, John Granger

The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism

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David Lincicum
Keble College, University of Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

In this monograph, John Granger Cook, Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at LaGrange College, Georgia, has made a rich and fascinating contribution to our understanding of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Bible in the first centuries C.E. The careful scholarship and judicious conclusions make this volume a fitting sequel to his earlier *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (2000) and a worthy complement to the equally helpful studies by Giancarlo Rinaldi: *Biblia Gentium* (1989) and *La Bibbia dei pagani* (2 vols.; 1998).

A lengthy introduction surveys “The Septuagint’s Reception in the Greco-Roman World” (1–54), concluding that the evidence for pre-Christian Greco-Roman usage of the Septuagint is negligible, although not entirely absent. While traditions from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament are mentioned occasionally in early pagan authors, Cook argues that specifically *textual* engagement with the Old Testament is largely a reaction to the emergence of the Christian movement and its success in winning converts. In other words, the interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman paganism is by and large a polemical encounter, operative at the level of late antique “culture wars.”

The remainder of the book surveys, in three long chapters, the critiques of the Old Testament by Celsus (55–149), Porphyry (150–247) and Julian (248–344) in their respective treatises against the Christians. Any effort to understand these thinkers is complicated by the fact that their work survives only in excerpts from those who sought to refute it. This means, in effect, that, while other subsidiary voices are occasionally introduced, these chapters chart a series of dialogues between especially Celsus and Origen, Porphyry and Jerome, and Julian and Cyril of Alexandria. That the Christian thinkers have the last word in chronological terms does not deny the force of the pagan objections, and this monograph does a good job, in Bakhtinian terms, of preserving the fundamentally nonmonological character of the exchange.

Cook demonstrates that Celsus knew mainly Genesis and perhaps Exodus and some prophetic traditions. Celsus expended a great deal of energy demonstrating the foolishness of Gen 1–11. Often these critiques stem from philosophical objections to the portrayal of God in anthropomorphic or anthropopathic terms or from a negative comparison of Genesis with Plato's *Timaeus*. Celsus also adduces at least two arguments that recur in later anti-Christian polemic. First, granting the legitimacy and even propriety of following one's ancestral customs (as Cook notes, widely considered to be an ideal in the ancient world), the Christians have in fact forsaken their own ancestral customs and exchanged them for those of the Jews. Celsus's attack on the Old Testament is therefore designed to persuade Christians to return to their proper ancestral customs, that is, to abandon Christian nonsense. Second, Celsus and others engage in arguments about "cultural plagiarism," that is, debates about whether Moses borrows from Plato or vice versa, whether circumcision is originally an Egyptian custom or a Jewish one, and so on. Further, like Porphyry after him, Celsus remained unconvinced by Christian attempts to employ allegorical or typological reading strategies to circumvent some of the major problems in the Old Testament. Again, the attack on the Old Testament is an attempt to undermine the foundation of the growing Christian edifice and its increasingly deleterious effects on Greco-Roman culture.

In contrast to Celsus, the Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry expressed some admiration for the God of Genesis, although he still harbored some major disagreements with its mythical dimensions. Porphyry, however, focused his polemic rather on the use of Daniel to support Christian claims; in particular, he opposed any eschatological reading of the book as a reference to the antichrist rather than to the events surrounding Antiochus (as has often been remarked, Porphyry thus anticipated some positions later embraced by historical criticism). Cook suggests that Porphyry held some sympathy for Judaism and the God of the Jews that he did not extend to the Christians. In fact, Porphyry may have written his *Contra Christianos* in the service of imperial persecution, and this may explain both some of the apparent inconsistency in Porphyry's stance

toward Jews and Christians as well as the rising pressure that was felt at the success of the ascending Christian movement. His reading of the Old Testament is much more careful and rigorous than Celsus's. In fact, Cook demonstrates that Jerome's chief contention with Porphyry's exposition of Daniel was with Porphyry's refusal to allow Antiochus to serve as a type of the antichrist.

Julian ("the Apostate") had more sympathy for Judaism as an ancient religion but objected to Christians abandoning Hellenic ancestral traditions for those of the Jews. His argument, Cook suggests, "is with the interpretive trajectory from LXX to NT to ancient Christian church and not with the trajectory that goes from the OT to ancient Judaism" (249). Like Celsus and Porphyry, Julian found aspects of the creation narrative to be repugnant to his philosophical sensibilities, but, unlike the former two, he was prepared to countenance allegorical interpretation in certain cases. The laws of the Old Testament, however, should not be allegorized. The legislation was admirable as ancestral tradition for the Jews and should not have been abandoned by the Christians. While Julian demonstrates a more far-reaching engagement with Scripture than either Celsus or Porphyry, he alternately objects that its narratives are foolish, on the one hand, or that Christians have not taken its form of religion seriously enough, on the other.

A short concluding chapter (345–50) brings the work to a close, emphasizing in broad strokes the contours of the pagan critiques and Christian responses to them. In a short syllogism, Cook expresses the general form of pagan argument: "1. Christians base their faith on the LXX. 2. The LXX does not support Christian belief and practice and is itself riddled with problems. 3. Therefore, Christianity has no foundation and should be rejected" (349–50). This is followed by fifty pages of impressive bibliography and full indices.

This monograph, then, provides rich fodder for the recent concern with reception history. From its beginning, the Bible has been a controverted set of texts. While much recent discussion has laudably focused on Jewish-Christian interaction with Scripture in the patristic era, Cook's monograph brings a helpful focus to the pagan encounter with the Old Testament as well. Indeed, one suspects that interesting work remains to be done in setting these pagan and Jewish polemical encounters side by side and examining the multifaceted ways in which the Old Testament served as a public document in the patristic era. Another area of potential interest is the question of what form of the text reached these pagan critics. While this is clearly complicated by the convoluted textual history of their own works, where scriptural quotations do occur, occasionally more focused textual analysis than Cook provides could prove to be valuable in ascertaining the form in which the Septuagint was available. Further, while Cook's monograph does not press the theological aspects of the patristic response to these attacks, it is difficult to miss

the importance of typological and allegorical reading for theological ends. Origen, Jerome, and Cyril of Alexandria resist purely historical readings of the sacred text, and this is surely not without interest in recent debates about the theological interpretation of Scripture.

In short, in the span of 350 pages of workmanlike (indeed, sometimes paratactic) prose, Cook has offered a well-researched and stimulating account of a neglected encounter with Scripture in late antiquity. Those seeking a way through these complex and bewildering sources will find a competent guide in this work.