

---

Review of Benjamin H. Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

Kristi Upson-Saia, Occidental College

---

Benjamin Dunning's *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity* is a welcome addition to the slew of new scholarship on the construction of identity in early Christianity. This volume focuses specifically on how and why early Christians claimed an alien status—calling themselves strangers, sojourners, foreigners, and/or resident aliens—in order to conceptualize and articulate certain contours of their identity. Although past scholarship has demonstrated that such tropes constructed notions of difference between early Christians and their neighbors, Dunning more pointedly asks: What *kind* of difference was illuminated by this trope? What particular *aspects* of the alien experience or status were put to use? And how was the trope recycled over and over again to serve *different* social and communal purposes? This book aims to identify the trope's range of possible meanings and connotations and traces how it was variously deployed in five early Christian texts: *1 Peter*, *Hebrews*, *Epistle of Diognetus*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Apocryphon of James*.

Before turning his attention to these specific texts, Dunning first describes his methods and theoretical influences. His aim is distinct from past scholars who have read early Christian claims of alien status as a clue to their socio-political marginalization (and possible persecution). Their goal has been to reconstruct the social and political circumstances of early Christians that would presumably lead them to articulate their identity in outsider terms. While Dunning does not aver the profitability of these texts as sources for social data, he locates the social data *within* the text rather than beyond or behind the text. Following Foucault, he asserts that “speaking, claiming, or otherwise articulating one’s alien status needs to be recognized as itself a type of social practice, one that could be strategically put to use for varying purposes” (p. 15). Thus, Dunning’s focus is more squarely on the rhetorical “usability” of the alien topos (a concept and phrase he borrows from R. Laurence Moore’s examination of religious outsiders in the U.S. context) and on tracing how early Christians variously constructed notions of the self and other through this trope.

Leaning on Pierre Bourdieu, Dunning first attempts to delimit the field of discourse—the constellation of connotations related to aliens, sojourners, foreigners, and resident aliens—in order to map out the “range of possible uses and positions for the alien topos in antiquity” (p. 18). He quickly finds that the alien figure was rhetorically productive because of the flexibility of the image. First, it was by no means totalizing: one’s status as citizen or alien could be defined according to legal-political, ethnic, or racial measures. Second, the alien figure was regarded with both derision and desire, opening the trope to the possibility of being used to vilify or valorize. Early Christians capitalized on the ambivalence surrounding the figure of the foreigner by deploying the alien topos in remarkably variant ways, as best suited their particular needs.

In Chapter Two, Dunning explicates how the alien topos was put to use in the homily to the *Hebrews*. In this text, Abraham is portrayed as a sojourner, and it is through his sojourning that the patriarch is able to evidence his faith and obedience to God. This representation of Abraham is not meant to be merely encomiastic, but rather to be an example for all Christians to imitate. In fact, the text sets up a lineage that traces the sojourner motif from Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob (his heirs), to the audience of the address so that readers/hearers of *Hebrews* would be prompted likewise to appropriate the alien status of their forefathers and to live as sojourners until they finally enter their eschatological homeland. Although the homily encouraged readers/hearers to

conceptualize a communal identity of marginality, it did not ask them to act in ways that would be considered subversive according to Roman values, ethics, and social order. Dunning here illuminates how the alien motif could create difference out of nothing. Nonetheless, the motif was quite productive: it prompted Christians to articulate the distinctiveness of the group and strengthened group solidarity, while all the while eliding conflict with outsiders.

In Chapter Three, Dunning examines the *Epistle to Diognetus*, whose view of Christians' alien status seems to be predicated on their opponents' assertions of Christians' marginality. The letter maintains that Christians are indeed different from non-Christians, but not—as they say—because they are inferior. Rather, *Diognetus* reinterprets Christian difference to be based in their superior ability to uphold Roman social mores. In this use of the trope, the focus is not on Christians' longing for the eschatological homeland, but rather on the distinctive *manner* in which Christians live in the earthly cities here and now: they are alien because they outstrip their non-Christian counterparts. Moreover, the trope has an additional function. While crafting a communal identity, the trope of the Christian outsider is here additionally employed to critique the Roman insider. Although *Diognetus* shares the assimilationist stance of the homily to the *Hebrews*—affirming traditional Roman social ideals—it is not *entirely* friendly in that it implicitly denigrates non-Christians who fail to live up to their Christian neighbours' virtue and, moreover, indicts them for their unjust, antagonistic stance toward, and persecution of, Christians.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* employs the alien topos in an even more decisively contentious way, as Dunning shows in Chapter Four. This text juxtaposes Christians who are properly detached from the world with non-Christians who accrue and relish real estate, property, and luxury goods. The text frames non-Christians' economic commitments and behaviours as “alien” in order to vilify such practices and to encourage its Christian readers to avoid them so that they might advance toward salvation. Thus, in Dunning's words: “The text uses the rhetoric of foreignness not so much to highlight a valorized outsider identity [of Christians] as to cast ... a set of economic practices which it finds objectionable in a marginal and distasteful light” (pp. 87-88). In this chapter, I think Dunning underplays the way in which this trope might function on multiple levels. He argues that the use of the alien trope in this text “stresses not the self as other, but rather *the other* as other” (p. 88), but why not both at the same time? As the text paints Roman values as “other”, it throws into contrast the boundaries of the Christian insider, prompting Christians to police their own behaviour and, in turn, fortifying group boundaries and solidarity. Moreover, Dunning himself admits that *Hermas* advises Christian readers to safeguard themselves from becoming contingent upon worldly possessions, focusing their loyalty rather on the eschatological city. Might this text be framing the Christian and the non-Christian (implicitly and explicitly) as both alien, though in different ways?

In Chapter Five, Dunning analyses the radically different use of the alien topos in the *Apocryphon of James*. According to Dunning, one of the main aims of this text is to illuminate Christians' misunderstanding of soteriology; it attempts to shift the focus away from Jesus' death and toward Jesus' teaching, which emphasizes Christians' own agency in achieving salvation. Within this broader theme, James and Peter are rebuked for claiming an alien status—for unnecessarily asserting their marginal status—when “they already belong to the true city and need only assert that identity for themselves” to enter its gates (p. 99). Rather than use the alien topos to conceptualize Christian identity positively or to bolster group cohesion, this text invokes the trope to criticize those who wrongly understand the path to Christian salvation, those who fail to lay claim to their rightful place in the eschatological city.

In the Conclusion, Dunning ponders the historiographical and theological implications of his study. First, he asks: How does this study help us to understand early Christianity better? He concludes that his findings—which demonstrate that early Christian appeals to the alien topos varied widely and served different social and communal goals—fall in line with the recent trend to attend to the diversity of early Christian communities. This book provides a platform for “the rival

claims and multiple voices that both produced and constituted the early [Christian] movement”, especially with regard to how early Christians positioned themselves in relation to the broader society. In Dunning’s words: “‘alien identity’ becomes not a flat historical reality ... but rather ‘an imaginative space created by rhetoric,’ one that allowed Christians to maintain their distinctive identity—even as they situated that identity in relation to Roman society in complex ways, to varying degrees both assimilationist and resistant” (p. 108).

Finally, Dunning provocatively analyses the ways in which the alien topos lingers in contemporary theological discourse, how it continues to be a rhetorical resource that enables Christians to articulate their counter-cultural stance or that urges Christians to act in particular ways (as an expression of their counter-cultural stance). While Dunning identifies the continued usefulness of the trope, he also raises what he views to be its potentially problematic underside. Although he himself has demonstrated the rich and variable uses of the trope in early Christian sources, he notes that the rhetoric of alien status has the potential for unreflexive rigidity. First, he (with Alan Wolfe) points out that the claim to alien status elides the manifold ways in which Christians “are quite at home in the culture around them ... the rhetoric that insists that ‘believers have no place at the table of modernity’ is absurd, even somewhat perverse” (p. 113). Second, when Christians position themselves at the margin of society—as essentially counter-cultural—their beliefs and behaviours that make them distinct from traditional social conventions become impervious to self-critique because they are necessary for the identity claim to function. He writes: “Thus, while by no means an inevitable result, an alien identity stance can offer a rhetorical justification to ignore the need for critical reassessment of one’s own practices and ways of thinking—both individually and institutionally” (p. 115). Third, Dunning notes that although the trope can at times facilitate a group’s solidarity with other marginalized groups, it can also distance one’s position from all other groups, “strangl[ing] the space needed to take seriously the alterity of others who are not ourselves” (p. 116). In the end, he hopes that by demonstrating the variable uses of the alien topos in early Christian communities, that contemporary Christians might “think with greater nuance, complexity, and self-reflexivity about what they are doing when [they] make the decision ... to draw upon the topos to construct religious identity” (p. 114).

*Aliens and Sojourners* is an outstanding book. It is assiduously researched and well-argued. Most impressively, Dunning adeptly integrates theory with a careful reading of early Christian sources that is steeped in the scholarly commentaries on those sources. Although a sophisticated work, it is readable, and is certainly an appropriate text for graduate and advanced undergraduate courses on early Christian history.