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Typology, How the Old Testament Prefigures the New

Talk #3

Foundations of Biblical Typology



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3. Foundations of Biblical Typology

The past two centuries have witnessed a large-scale rejection of the typological interpretation of Scripture. In large part this stems from an implicit rejection of the doctrinal foundations on which the spiritual sense of Scripture rests. As John O’Keefe and R. R. Reno have written, “allegorical interpretation offends by what it presumes and not by how it proceeds.”¹ Or again:

When contemporary readers object to patristic typology, we are convinced that the true target of their objection is not typology itself but the presumed divine economy across which patristic typology functioned. In other words, the objections are theological rather than methodological.²

Which teachings does typological interpretation presume? The foundations of the spiritual sense are 1) God’s providence over history and His power to intervene in it; 2) a robust understanding of the inspiration of Scripture; and 3) the development of the history of salvation in a progressive sense, so that earlier events point to and prefigure later events. The earlier events are those of creation and the history of Israel, whereas the later events are the Incarnation and the Church militant and triumphant. If one were to deny God’s power to shape and intervene in history (which includes His primary authorship of Scripture), the spiritual sense of the Bible would disappear. Likewise, if one were to deny that the relationship between the Old and the New Testament is essentially that of promise and fulfillment, there could be no typology. This indicates that an eclipse of the typological sense of Scripture would be a symptom of a larger loss of faith.

God’s Power to Miraculously Intervene in History

The largest factor, in my opinion, in accounting for the eclipse of the typological sense of Scripture is the philosophical position of Naturalism, which we can define as the rejection of a supernatural order and of miraculous events, understood as concrete divine interventions in human history. Since the Enlightenment it has become not uncommon for people to reject the very possibility of miracles, for the reason that the laws of nature are supposedly inviolable. This position would strike at the very heart of Christianity’s claim to credibility.

Various reasons are given for supposing miracles to be impossible. In the eighteenth century, the empiricist philosopher David Hume gave a famous argument against miracles in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

1 John J. O’Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore/London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 109.

2 *Ibid.*, 85.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. . . . There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.³

Hume makes an *a priori* argument against any miracle. He claims that the experience we have of nature’s regularity ought to outweigh the evidence of any miracle that could be proposed to our consideration. Our experience of the regularity of the laws of nature ought to make us hold any report of a miraculous event as unworthy of belief.

Notice that Hume’s argument gives too much weight to the perceived regularity. In inductive reasoning, of which this is an example, the perceived regularity that one observes does not entitle one to have metaphysical certainty that that regularity must *always* prevail.

Hume does examine the possibility of an exception. It would be reasonable to believe a miracle only if it would be still more miraculous if it were supposed to be false.

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.⁴

This, in fact, is a reasonable position. One should accept the evidence for a miracle only when the evidence for it is greater than the evidence against it. The only problem is that Hume thinks this never occurs, based on his belief (for which he offers no proof), that God is limited to establishing and sustaining the laws of nature. But what is the evidence for that? The non-existence of miracles? Hume’s reasoning is really circular. No miracle could be persuasive for him, for his Deistic conception of God does not allow for such a possibility to ever seem reasonable.

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton has a magnificent paragraph on when it is reasonable to believe that a miracle has occurred:

3 Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 104–5.

4 *Ibid.*, 106.

But my belief that miracles have happened in human history is not a mystical belief at all; I believe in them upon human evidences as I do in the discovery of America. Upon this point there is a simple logical fact that only requires to be stated and cleared up. Somehow or other an extraordinary idea has arisen that the disbelievers in miracles consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way. The believers in miracles accept them (rightly or wrongly) because they have evidence for them. The disbelievers in miracles deny them (rightly or wrongly) because they have a doctrine against them. The open, obvious, democratic thing is to believe an old apple-woman when she bears testimony to a miracle, just as you believe an old apple-woman when she bears testimony to a murder. . . . If it comes to human testimony there is a choking cataract of human testimony in favour of the supernatural. If you reject it, you can only mean one of two things. . . . You either deny the main principle of democracy, or you affirm the main principle of materialism—the abstract impossibility of miracle. You have a perfect right to do so; but in that case you are the dogmatist. It is we Christians who accept all actual evidence—it is you rationalists who refuse actual evidence being constrained to do so by your creed. But I am not constrained by any creed in the matter, and looking impartially into certain miracles of mediaeval and modern times, I have come to the conclusion that they occurred.⁵

Another related objection to the possibility of miracles comes from the philosophical notion of physical determinism, which claims that every state of the universe is the necessary and pre-determined outcome of all prior states. The great French mathematical physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827) rejected miracles for this reason:

We ought then to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its previous state and as the cause of the one which is to follow. Given for one instant a mind which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings that compose it . . . it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.⁶

Stephen Hawking in *The Grand Design* rejects miracles on the same grounds of the absolute determinism of physical laws:

Given the state of the universe at one time, a complete set of laws fully determines both the future and the past. That would exclude the possibility of miracles or an active

role for God.⁷

He continues: “This book is rooted in the concept of scientific determinism which implies that . . . there are no miracles, or exceptions to the laws of nature.”⁸ Later in the book, he repeats, as if it were a conclusion: “These laws should hold everywhere and at all times; otherwise they wouldn’t be laws. There could be no exceptions or miracles. God or demons couldn’t intervene in the running of the universe.”⁹ It should be noted that this is not a scientific conclusion of his investigation, but a (false) philosophical presupposition.

Ironically, the “concept of scientific determinism” is not actually scientific at all (at least in the sense in which “scientific” refers to empirical science). This is because empirical science cannot ever empirically test the hypothesis of physical determinism. If scientists hold it, they do so as a kind of a priori dogma that lacks the possibility of verification or falsification through the methods of empirical science. Therefore the question of whether the general laws of nature completely determine every event in the universe is outside the bounds of empirical science. This is a question more properly addressed by philosophy and theology.

A closely related rejection of miracles is based on the idea that miracles are incompatible with the scientific view of the world, and are tied with the intellectual infancy of mankind. Richard Dawkins gives a good example of this way of thinking:

The nineteenth century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment. When pressed, many educated Christians are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know that it is absurd, so they would much rather not be asked.¹⁰

Many Christian theologians of the past two centuries have also rejected the possibility of miracles based on the idea of physical determinism. Probably the most famous is Rudolf Bultmann, who said: “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”¹¹ Why not? Bultmann cannot believe in miracles because he *believes* there is a closed causal network of natural causes that admits no intervention by God:

The historical method includes the presupposition that

7 Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2010), 30.

8 *Ibid.*, 34.

9 *Ibid.*, 171.

10 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 187.

11 Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, selected, edited and translated by Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 4.

5 G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 223–224.

6 Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, trans. F. W. Truscott and E. L. Emory (New York: Dover, [1812] 1951), 4. This claim of absolute determinism has been disproven even in the field of physics by quantum mechanics. However, even if there were an absolute determinism in the mechanics of closed physical systems, it would not mean that God could not intervene through miracles, nor rule the free actions of beings endowed with a spiritual and rational nature.

history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. [This continuum] cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers.¹²

This tenet seems to be held as a kind of unproven dogma that belongs not to modern science *per se*, for no scientific principle is given to refute miracles, but only to a certain kind of worldview—known as Deism—that has become common among some intellectuals since the Enlightenment. This worldview holds that God must stay out of His creation. He is forbidden to trespass on the world that He has left subject to our dominion. It is not difficult to see that a powerful motive for this view can be found in man’s disordered desire for complete autonomy, first evidenced in the original sin.

I think that in practice, the last objection is the most important. Whether a person is willing to accept miracles depends in large part on the disposition of his soul. If he desires freedom understood as autonomy as the principal value, he will not be disposed to favor the idea of God intervening in history. But if he is yearning for something—a divine love—beyond this world, then it will not seem unreasonable that God would want to intervene and show His hand and voice in the world.

Once God is understood as He Who Is, the Creator who has dominion over all created being, it is not hard to accept the possibility of miracles. God as the First Cause can cause directly anything that any secondary cause can. All creatures are obedient to God if He wishes to move them directly and not just through the mediation of other created causes.¹³ Through His dominion over being, God guides the events of history, but without prejudice to the gift of free will given to men and angels.

Divine Inspiration and the Two Principles of Biblical Interpretation

The second foundation of Biblical typology mentioned above is divine inspiration, or the belief that God is the principal author of Scripture. Every text of Scripture is the work of both God and man. This twofold origin of the Bible gives rise to two fundamental principles of Biblical interpretation. (1) Since every book of Scripture has a human writer, every text must be interpreted in light of its historical context and original language, with attention to everything that can help us understand the mentality, cultural and historical context, language, and literary forms or genres used by the sacred author. Exegesis therefore must make use of the human sciences of philology, history,

¹² Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, ed. Schubert Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 291–92.

¹³ St. Thomas and Scholastic theologians refer to this power of creatures to obey God (as in all miracles) as *obediential potency*. For the notion of obediential potency, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010).

and archeology.¹⁴ (2) But no less importantly, since God is the Author of Scripture, every text must be understood also in light of the unity of the entire Bible and the faith of the Church. Thus the Old Testament should be read in the light of the New. In general, every part of the Bible should be read in the light of every other. All of it, finally, should be read in light of the Church’s Creed, life, and worship.

(1) The fact that Scripture has a human author means that exegesis must consider the natural order, on which inspiration builds, and which theology uses as a handmaid. (2) The fact that God is the principal author of Scripture means that the exegete must use the supernatural method proper to theology as a science belonging to the supernatural order. Only with the proper understanding of and balance between the human and divine dimensions of Scripture can Biblical interpretation fulfill its great task in the Church. *Dei Verbum* 12 explains these two fundamental principles:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. . . . For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.

But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.

The elucidation of the spiritual or typological sense of Scripture pertains to the second principle of Biblical interpretation according to which one seeks to understand Scripture in light of its profound unity and “the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.”

If Biblical interpretation were to favor the first principle over the second, that is, natural principles over those deriving from supernatural faith, then Biblical typology would be neglected or ignored. It is not difficult to see that this is the case in large areas of academic Biblical studies in the last century, in which the historical-critical method is used in a rather exclusive sense, without being sufficiently balanced by a complementary theological method of interpretation. Pope Benedict XVI alluded to this danger of imbalance between these two principles in his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* 34–35:

34. While today’s academic exegesis, including that of Catholic scholars, is highly competent in the field of

¹⁴ See, for example, Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, nn. 16-17.

historical-critical methodology and its latest developments, it must be said that comparable attention needs to be paid to the theological dimension of the biblical texts. . . .

35. In this regard we should mention the serious risk nowadays of a dualistic approach to sacred Scripture. To distinguish two levels of approach to the Bible does not in any way mean to separate or oppose them, nor simply to juxtapose them. They exist only in reciprocity. Unfortunately, a sterile separation sometimes creates a barrier between exegesis and theology, and this “occurs even at the highest academic levels.” Here I would mention the most troubling consequences, which are to be avoided.

a) First and foremost, if the work of exegesis is restricted to the first level alone, Scripture ends up being *a text belonging only to the past*: “One can draw moral consequences from it, one can learn history, but the Book as such speaks only of the past, and exegesis is no longer truly theological, but becomes pure historiography, history of literature.” Clearly, such a reductive approach can never make it possible to comprehend the event of God’s revelation through his word, which is handed down to us in the living Tradition and in Scripture.

b) The lack of a hermeneutic of faith with regard to Scripture entails more than a simple absence; in its place there inevitably enters another hermeneutic, a positivistic and secularized hermeneutic ultimately based on the conviction that the Divine does not intervene in human history. According to this hermeneutic, whenever a divine element seems present, it has to be explained in some other way, reducing everything to the human element. This leads to interpretations that deny the historicity of the divine elements.

c) Such a position can only prove harmful to the life of the Church, casting doubt over fundamental mysteries of Christianity and their historicity – as, for example, the institution of the Eucharist and the resurrection of Christ. A philosophical hermeneutic is thus imposed, one which denies the possibility that the Divine can enter and be present within history. The adoption of this hermeneutic within theological studies inevitably introduces a sharp dichotomy between an exegesis limited solely to the first level and a theology tending towards a spiritualization of the meaning of the Scriptures, one which would fail to respect the historical character of revelation. All this is also bound to have a negative impact on the spiritual life and on pastoral activity.

In interpreting the Bible, the theological principles that spring from the divine inspiration of Scripture must be the principal tools and foundation of Biblical interpretation. The human means are presupposed and are necessary, but they must not be allowed to dominate. Otherwise the interpretation will be purely natural, arid, and lacking in piety. If they are not only allowed to dominate, but to conflict with theological principles, the interpretation will not only be arid but erroneous.

An exegete must be first and foremost a theologian, and not a historian or expert in languages. Biblical exegesis is a part of *theology*. The recent document of the Pontifi-

cal Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), rightly stresses this point, saying: “Catholic exegesis does not have the right to become lost, like a stream of water, in the sands of a hypercritical analysis.” Today not a few exegetes consider exegesis to be a “pre-theological” discipline, which would be basically historical and philological; scientifically neutral and free from religious presuppositions. In such an optic the typological sense of Scripture will disappear from view.

Progression in Salvation History and Connection between the Two Testaments

The study of typology is based on faith in the profound relationship between the Old and the New Covenant. This would be an application of the third foundation of Biblical typology mentioned above, which states that the history of salvation is progressively developed.

In the first two centuries of the Church, this relationship between the two Testaments was under attack from Gnostic heresies that sought to sever the relationship of Christ and the Church with the Old Testament. Many Gnostics went so far as to deny the identification of the God of the Old Testament with that of the New. In such an interpretative framework, typology can have no place. The logical result is the irrelevance of the Old Testament for Gnostic Christianity. One form of Gnosticism, that of Marcion, took this position to its logical conclusion, and excised the Old Testament from the canon of Scripture! Not surprisingly, Marcion also had to excise the majority of the New Testament as well on account of its citations of the Old, leaving only Luke and some letters of St. Paul.

The fact that the Old Testament was read typologically in the Church saved it from receiving the fate given it by Marcion. Pope Benedict XVI commented on the importance of typology in this regard in an audience on Origen:

It was especially on this route that Origen succeeded in effectively promoting the “Christian interpretation” of the Old Testament, brilliantly countering the challenge of the heretics, especially the Gnostics and Marcionites, who made the two Testaments disagree to the extent that they rejected the Old Testament.¹⁵

Given that typology has increasingly fallen out of the consciousness of modern Catholics, it is not surprising that the Old Testament has become an object of profound ignorance and neglect to many.¹⁶ An understanding and

15 Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience of April 25, 2007, “Origen of Alexandria: Life and Work,” in *Church Fathers from Clement of Rome to Augustine*, 36.

16 See G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 17: “It is true, perhaps, that so far as the ordinary reader is concerned the consequence of this great change has been to present him once more with the dilemma which confronted the Church of the second century: either the typological and allegorical method of dealing with the Old Testament, so as to make it readable as a Christian book, or the more drastic solution advocated by Marcion.

A good example of the interpenetration of prophecy and typology is Moses' prophecy of a "new Moses" in Deuteronomy 18:15–19:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed. . . . And the Lord said to me, ". . . I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him."

This prophecy alludes to the fact that at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the people of Israel were afraid they would not be able to bear it if God spoke to them directly, and so they begged God to speak to them through the mediation of Moses.¹⁹ Here Moses is saying that God will do something similar for Israel in the future. He will raise up a new prophet like Moses to act as a mediator between God and men, whom the people will have to believe and obey in the same way.

The literal sense of this particular text points to a typological sense of much of the book of Deuteronomy, together with Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. The future prophet foretold here who will mediate between the people and God, cannot be understood without typological reflection on the entire figure of Moses, his unique contemplation of God and his role as lawgiver, judge, mediator, and liberator.

Another example of the blending of prophecy and typology is found in Psalm 110:4. This messianic psalm speaks of the Messiah as "priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." The literal sense of this text assigns a mysterious priestly role to the protagonist of the psalm which is to be understood not in the sense of the Aaronic priesthood, but rather through the type of Melchizedek. This typology is greatly developed in Hebrews 7.

Typology Is Christocentric

Typology manifests the fact that the divine plan centers on Christ. Typology connects events occurring before and after Christ with the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery. Salvation history before Christ is essentially a preparation for Christ, and so prefigures Him. The Christian life after Christ is even more closely connected with the Incarnation, for the Church lives the life of Christ through the gift of the Spirit and the sacraments through which the Spirit is given. History culminates in heaven, in which Christ will be "all in all." Typology, therefore, is always pointing to Christ. This pointing is of three kinds: pointing to the Incarnation (allegorical sense), pointing to the participation

minster, MD: London: Burns and Oates, 1961), 153–154, who stresses the intimate connection between messianic prophecy and the typological interpretation of history.

¹⁹ See Ex 20:18–19.

of the Church militant in Christ's life (moral sense), and pointing to the more perfect participation of the Church triumphant in that same life (anagogical sense).²⁰

Typology thus enables the whole of Scripture to be Christocentric, even when the literal sense is not referring to Christ. In controversy with the Manicheans who ridiculed the Old Testament, St. Augustine writes:

All those passages speak of Christ. The head now ascended into heaven along with the body still suffering on earth is the full development of the whole purpose of the authors of Scripture, which is well called Sacred Scripture.²¹

Rejections of the centrality of typology, therefore, imply a loss of Christo-centric perspective. This cannot fail to be a most serious symptom of a crisis of faith.

²⁰ See De Margerie, *History of Exegesis*, 1:9: "But it appears, in the light of the Letter to the Hebrews, that the figures of the Old Covenant point toward a single reality in three stages: Christ and his already passed history, Christ in his present Church (image), Christ in his future manifestation or reality. Christ thus appears as both the eternal and prior *archetype*, and the final *teleotype* illuminating our present and historical experience in the Church."

²¹ St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22.94, trans. R. Stothert, NPNF, 1st series, 4:310.