

A Study of Biblical Typology

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One of the most fascinating areas of Bible study is that of typology - the study of Scripture "types." Few Christians have made any sort of in-depth investigation of biblical types. As a matter of fact, this field of study has fallen into disrepute in recent years and this can probably be accounted for on two bases:

First, the extravagant speculations of earlier typologists have left a bad taste for the study in the minds of many; they feel it has been discredited.

Second, the spirit of religious liberalism has silently assaulted the thinking of some. They thus tend to dismiss the supernatural elements of the Scriptures, and since typology relates to prophecy, it has been similarly discarded. The Bible itself, however, makes it quite clear that "types" are a vital component of Jehovah's redemptive plan.

The Term Defined

Exactly what is a type? Theologically speaking, a type may be defined as "a figure or ensample of something future and more or less prophetic, called the 'Antitype'" (E. W. Bullinger, **Figures of Speech Used in the Bible**, p. 768).

Muenschler says a type is "the preordained representative relation which certain persons, events, and institutions of the Old Testament bear to corresponding persons, events, and institutions in the New" (quoted in: M. S. Terry, **Biblical Hermeneutics**, p. 246).

Wick Broomall has a concise statement that is helpful. "A type is a shadow cast on the pages of Old Testament history by a truth whose full embodiment or antitype is found in the New Testament revelation" (**Baker's Dictionary of Theology**, p. 533).

We would, in summary, suggest the following definition, which we paraphrase from Terry. A type is a real, exalted happening in history which was divinely ordained by the omniscient God to be a prophetic picture of the good things which He purposed to bring to fruition in Christ Jesus.

New Testament Terms

There are several words used in the Greek New Testament to denote what we have just defined as a type. First, there is the term *tupos* (the basis of our English word "type"). Though this word is variously employed in the New Testament, it is certainly used in our present sense in Romans 5:14 where Paul declares that Adam "is a figure (*tupos*) of him that was to come", i.e., Christ.

Second, there is the word *skia*, rendered "shadow." In Colossians 2:17, certain elements of the Mosaic system are said to be "a shadow of the things to come" (cf. Heb. 8:5; 10:1).

Third, there is the term *hupodeigma*, translated “copy,” and used in conjunction with “shadow” in Hebrews 8:5 (cf. Heb. 9:23).

Fourth, the Greek word *parabole* (compare our English, “parable”) is found in Hebrews 9:9, where certain elements of the tabernacle are “a figure for the present time” (cf. Heb. 11:19).

Finally, one should note the use of *antitupon*, rendered “figure” (KJV) or “pattern” (ASV) in Hebrews 9:24, and “like figure” (KJV) or “true likeness” (ASV) in I Peter 3:21. This word, as used in the New Testament, denotes “that which corresponds to” the type; it is the reality which fulfills the prophetic picture.

Avoiding Extremism

One must be very cautious in his study of Bible types. There are some dangerous extremes to be avoided. On the one hand, as indicated earlier, some deny the use of biblical types altogether. Obviously, this is a radical view contrary to the teaching of the Bible itself.

Others, though, feel that the use of types in the Scriptures is quite limited. Accordingly, one can only identify a type when the New Testament specifically does so. This is an extreme position. If one followed a similar line of reasoning, he might assert that there are no prophecies in the Old Testament save those which are specifically quoted in the New Testament.

Still another extreme is the notion that virtually every little detail of the Old Testament system was typical of some New Testament circumstance. Thus, even the cords and pegs of the tabernacle were seen by some commentators as representing significant antitype New Testament truths. The truth is to be found between these extremes.

There are several interpretative principles that one should keep in mind as he begins a study of this subject.

1. It must be recognized that types are grounded in real history; the people, places, events, etc. were deliberately chosen by God to prepare for the coming of the Christian system. An old writer has wonderfully described it:

“God in the types of the last dispensation was teaching His children their letters. In this dispensation He is teaching them to put the letters together, and they find that the letters, arrange them as they will, spell Christ, and nothing but Christ.”

2. It must be clear (on the basis of reasonable evidence) that the type was *designed* by God to preview its fulfillment in the New Testament.
3. There is a graduation from type to antitype; of the lesser to the greater; from the material to the spiritual; the earthly to the heavenly.
4. One must distinguish what is *essential* in the type and what is merely *incidental*. A failure to do this can lead to some serious errors. Broomall notes, for example, that “Jonah’s expulsion from the great fish typifies Christ’s resurrection (Matt. 12: 40); but Jonah’s restoration to the land does not necessarily typify Israel’s restoration to Palestine” (**Baker’s Dictionary of Theology**, 534).

We are now ready to consider several different categories of Old Testament types.

Typical Persons

A number of Old Testament people, due to some character or relation which they sustain in redemptive history, serve as types.

- a. Adam is a type of Christ in that as the former introduced sin into the world, even so, through the latter a system of righteousness was made available for mankind (Rom. 5:19).
- b. Melchizedek, who was both king of Salem and a priest of God - *at the same time* (Gen. 14:18-20), was a type of Christ - who, at his ascension, began to reign on David's throne and to simultaneously function as our high priest (cf. Psa. 110:4; Zech. 6:12,13; Heb. 5:5-10; 6:20; 7:1-17). This point, incidentally, is disastrous for millennialism. If Christ is not yet king (as premillennialism asserts), then he is not yet a priest and we are *yet in our sins!*
- c. Moses, in his noble role of prophet, leader, and mediator for Jehovah's people, was typical of the Lord Jesus who functions in a similar, though more exalted, capacity (cf. Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:22; 1 Cor. 10:2; Gal. 3:27; Gal. 3:19; 1 Tim. 2: 5).

Typical Places

Several prominent places emphasized in the Old Testament appear to have a typical significance. Egypt represents a state of bondage such as holds the sinner prior to his conversion (Gal. 4:2; Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 10:1ff); Jerusalem or Zion typifies the church and finally heaven (cf. Gal. 4:25,26; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21:2); and Babylon, which held God's people captive in the Old Testament, pictures the condition of an apostate church that has departed from the simplicity of the New Testament pattern (Rev. 11:8; 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2ff).

Typical Things

Certain Old Testament objects preview New Testament truths. For example, Jacob's ladder, with the angels ascending and descending upon it (Gen. 28:12), apparently pictured Christ (cf. John 1:51), who provides both communication from the Father (John 1:18; Heb. 1:1-2) and access to heaven (John 14:6).

The brazen serpent, lifted up in the wilderness, through which the people found physical healing (Num. 21:8) was a type of the lifted-up Christ (John 3: 14; 12:32), through whom spiritual healing comes (Isa. 53:5).

As indicated earlier, the tabernacle and many of its features were typical of the present time (cf. Heb. 9:8-9). As the tabernacle was designed to be a "house of God," and since He is "Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24), it was proper that the tabernacle be composed of two compartments; one representing God's heavenly dwelling place and the other His earthly dwelling place. Accordingly, the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle represented Heaven (Heb. 6:19,20; 9:8,24), while the Holy Place was a type of the church (Acts 15:16,17; 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Tim. 3:15).

Typical Events

Several Old Testament events seem to represent things to come. The creation of light on the first day of Earth's history (Gen. 1:3) suggests the coming brilliant illumination of the gospel of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6).

The Flood of Noah's day (Gen. 6-8) typified the sudden destruction of the world yet to come at the end (Matt. 24:37-39).

The miraculous water from the rock in the wilderness (Ex. 17:6) was a preview of the life-sustaining water provided by our Lord (John 4:14; 1 Cor. 10:4).

The manna from heaven in the wilderness (Ex. 16:14-16) was a type of that spiritual Bread who came down from heaven to nourish humanity (John 6:32).

The deliverance of Noah's family from a corrupted world, by means of "water," prefigured our salvation, through baptism, from the power of darkness into the kingdom of Christ (cf. I Pet. 3:20-21; Col. 1:13).

Typical Offices

There were three offices in the Old Testament characterized by an anointing. Prophets (I Kings 19:16), priests (Ex. 28:41), and kings (I Sam. 10:1) were anointed in anticipation of the coming of the Anointed One (cf. Dan. 9:25,26) who is Prophet (Acts 3:22), Priest (Heb. 3:1), and King (Rev. 17:14).

We too, as Christians, have an anointing from God (2 Cor. 1:21) and we function as prophets (not miraculously, but simply as "forth speakers" of the Word of God - cf. I Cor. 11:4,5), priests, and kings (cf. I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6). The anointings of the Old Testament thus prefigured both the work of Christ and our service to Him.

Typical Actions

Certain ceremonial actions of the Old Testament system typified the atoning work of the Messiah. For instance, on the annual Jewish day of Atonement, amidst numerous other rituals, the High Priest presented two goats before the door of the tabernacle. After the casting of lots upon these animals, one was sacrificed as a "sin-offering" and the other was "set alive before Jehovah" (Lev. 16:9,10).

The blood of the slain goat was taken into the Most Holy Place where it was sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat. This, of course, was typical of the sacrificial death of Christ (Heb. 9:11,12). The High Priest then took the living goat, laid hands upon him and confessed over him all the iniquities of the people. Subsequently, by an appointed servant, the animal was led away into the wilderness (Lev. 16:21,22).

The two goats were, so to speak, two sides of the same coin; both constituted the solitary offering of Christ. The one signified his death and the atoning effect of his blood; the other his resurrection (cf. Rom. 4:25) and the complete removal of our sins (cf. Isa. 53:4,6; John 1:29).

Note also the similar ceremony in connection with the cleansing of the leper (Lev. 14:4-7). Two birds were selected; one was killed, and the other was dipped in its blood and let loose alive.

Typical Institutions

Many institutions of the Old Testament era were prophetic shadows of good things to come. The Passover, for instance, with its spotless lamb (Ex. 12:5) which was slain “between the two evenings” (12:6, ASVfn), i.e., between 3:00 and 5:00 P.M., without any bones being broken (12:46). It was a type of the death of Jesus (cf. I Cor. 5:7), who was without spot or blemish (I Pet. 1:19), who died at about 3:00 P.M. (Matt. 27:46), and who had none of his bones broken (John 19:33ff).

The feast of the firstfruits (Lev. 23:10), i.e., Pentecost, was a celebration in which the initial produce of the harvest was offered to God as a token of the full crop to follow. This ritual typified:

- a. the early influx of the Jews into the church of Christ (Rom. 11:16); and,
- b. the resurrection of the Lord Jesus as God’s pledge of the general resurrection to ultimately come (I Cor. 15:20, 23).

The feast of the tabernacles was instituted to commemorate Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness (Lev. 23:43). But it was also designed to remind us that we are but sojourners on this earth (I Pet. 2:11), and that someday we will lay aside this earthly tabernacle (2 Cor. 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:13,14) for a more permanent abiding place (cf. Heb. 11:9-13).

There are numerous other Old Testament types which cannot be discussed in the scope of this brief study. Surely, though, the reader can see from this limited survey what a thrilling area of biblical investigation this can be. Yes, it must be approached with judicious caution, but abuses should not deter the careful student from exploring such rich material. God intended for us to learn valuable lessons from Bible typology.

Note Paul’s statement after discussing the experiences of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. “Now these things were our examples (*tupoi*), to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted” (I Cor. 10:6; cf. 10:11).

May we truly attempt to learn the lessons of those pictures - those “visual aids” - which Jehovah incorporated into the text of his divine volume.
