



## *Hermeneutics And Typology*

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'Typology', like 'eschatology', is a term which has come to be used imprecisely and with so wide a variety of meanings that, unless it can be carefully defined, its use serves only to confuse a theological argument. Professor Alan Richardson, in his *History, Sacred and Profane*, gives it a very wide meaning indeed; so wide, in fact, as to embrace every kind of historical writing. 'All historical writing as such necessarily involves the seeing of the significance of the beginning from the end. This is the very character of the biblical writings as historical documents.... This is what is meant in theological language by typology.... It is essentially what all history "in the full sense" unavoidably is.' In other words, 'typology' means an interpretation of history which seeks to make sense of an otherwise chaotic assortment of disconnected events by interpreting the significance of the past in the light of later developments and, in turn, explaining the meaning of the

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latter by reference to what preceded them. History is then seen as a pattern of 'fulfilments'. Professor Richardson offers an example: 'Bismarck... can be historically appraised only in the light of 1933 and 1945.'

In this extremely general sense typology is a necessary principle for the historian, including the historian of Israel and the Church. For this principle, however, to deserve the theological designation of 'typology' a vitally important qualification has to be added. Typology depends upon a particular interpretation of history, according to which the present is related to the past not merely by a process of development which, although the historian may discern in it a certain inner logic, could have happened otherwise, but by the consistent and unchanging will of a personal God. The pattern of fulfilment is consciously determined; fulfilment corresponds to divine promise. This is the prophetic view of God's self-revelation in history which is the foundation of all the historical writing in the Scriptures. Typology is a method of applying the prophetic interpretation to historical events by discerning the relationship of fulfilment to promise in an analogy between present events and those of the past. The consistent purpose of God, determined by his own steadfast faithfulness, is revealed in a correspondence in history between one event and another. This kind of typology, or, as perhaps we ought rather to say, this aspect of the typology of the New Testament and the later Christian exegetes, is the only one which can be of any value for biblical hermeneutics today.

From very early times, however, this interpretation of history in terms of promise and fulfilment, with a corresponding analogy between the present and the past, was combined in Christian thought with another aspect of typology. This is both more limited and more complex. In part it arises out of the prophetic view of history. Jesus himself saw his mission as the climax and the end of the prophetic succession in which God had declared his judgement and mercy towards Israel; his death was the necessary fulfilment of the divine purpose declared in the Scriptures; it is probable, though disputed, that he identified himself, in some sense, with the figure of the Son of Man in Daniel's vision. His followers, believing that the promises of God had been uniquely brought to completion in him, interpreted his Lordship, declared to them in their experience of the Resurrection, in terms of what they read in the Scriptures. In the light of the Law and the Prophets they sought to interpret the paradoxical tradition of the earthly abasement of him whom they now knew through the Spirit to be the glorified Lord of all the world. They came thus to believe that they were taught by the risen Christ himself to understand the Scriptures in a new way: that his life of obscurity and particularly the scandal of his crucifixion happened in fulfilment of what had been written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, because these things were written about *him*. In his story of the exposition by the risen Christ of the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures, beginning from Moses and all the prophets, Luke condenses the complex but rapid process by which the primitive Church came to read the Old Testament as a book about Jesus. The Church's testimony was based upon the Scriptures, where it claimed that it found 'written' the divine purpose which included, as Luke 24<sup>46-7</sup> expresses it, the suffering of the Messiah, his

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resurrection on the third day, and the proclamation in his name of repentance for remission of sins to all the nations.

The Church's own understanding of itself and of the gospel by which it lived was drawn from the Scriptures. Even more essential to its mission was the use of the Old Testament for its apologetic. Its preaching to Jewish audiences had to be carried on in terms of the promises of God and their fulfilment in Christ as these were both to be discerned in the sacred writings. The Christian claim was that 'these are they which testify' about Jesus, and the Lucan picture of the Jews at Beroea examining the Scriptures to test the truth of the apostolic preaching is typical of the entire missionary approach to Jews in the first century and for long afterwards, as Justin's *Dialogue* and Cyprian's *Testimonia*, among a great quantity of other Christian literature, bear witness.

At the point, however, where the Old Testament has become a Christian book, the prophetic view of history has come to ally itself with a particular attitude to the written word of the Old Testament which exercised a profound influence on hermeneutics, of a highly unsatisfactory kind. This attitude rests on four main assumptions. The first of these is that the Scriptures are a collection of divine oracles. They are a library of divine truth, communicated through the external form of historical narrative, legal enactments, prophetic utterances, psalms and wisdom sayings. The variety of outward forms means that the oracles of God are often presented in symbols and riddles. The exegete, however, who can penetrate behind the literal sense can discern the underlying unity of the entire body of the sacred oracles. This unity consists in the fact that the whole is a system of spiritual

truth, often presented under the disguise of symbolism in which the inner meaning has to be apprehended through the recognition that the apparent sense of a passage, its place in its context, and the original intention of the author in applying it to his contemporary situation are all at best of secondary importance and that beneath the outward 'letter' every part of Scripture contains a hidden truth of religion or morality which the Spirit who inspired the writings can reveal to those whom he enlightens to perceive it.

This attitude to the Scriptures is, of course, the basis of allegorical exegesis. For the allegorist the prophetic interpretation of history has ceased to matter. It is no longer the principle which gives unity to the Scriptures. Scripture is no longer primarily the record of divine purpose and fulfilment. In consequence of this the exegete no longer looks for actual correspondence between the events of the past and those of later times to illustrate the analogy between God's self-revelation in his promises and his disclosure of their full meaning in the events which bring them to completion. His concern is rather with the relation of the earthly counterpart, the outward or literal sense, to the eternal spiritual truth which it embodies. The text of Scripture has become a quasi-sacramental mystery. Such exegesis is grounded not upon the biblical writer's own prophetic understanding of the historical process, but rather upon Platonizing notions about the relation of the sensible to the intelligible, upon the tradition of the Alexandrian allegorists in their interpretation of Greek mythology and the Homeric poems (an apologetic weapon for the adherents of philosophical schools), upon Philo's ethical and cosmo-

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logical interpretations of the Old Testament, and to a lesser extent upon the rabbinic appeal to Scripture in disregard of the original meaning and the historical context of particular passages.

In the New Testament itself there is little pure allegory of this kind. Paul's application of the Mosaic prohibition against the muzzling of the threshing ox so as to make it the ground for his directions about the proper financial support for Christian missionaries is one of the rare examples. What is much more common is a combination of the assumption that the whole Bible is, in every part, oracular with the belief that it is, in every part, a book about Christ. The prophetic-historical interpretation of events which sees Christ as the climax of God's fulfilment of the promises in the Old Testament, and so as the key to the true meaning of Israel's history, comes to be combined with the idea that the scriptural writings conceal a spiritual meaning under the apparent sense. Allegory of the purely unhistorical kind is uninterested in the correspondence of events: Philo's analogy between the wanderings of Abraham and the spiritual progress of the individual, or between the high-priest's robe and the cosmos, rests upon symbolism which has nothing to do with history. It could therefore be applied to any literature and need not be confined to the Bible. Some of the Gnostics in fact employed pagan mythology for this purpose. The combination, however, of the presuppositions of allegory with the assumption that all Scripture speaks directly of Christ is common in the New Testament as well as in the later Christian literature. It springs from the biblical belief in promise and fulfilment; it cannot be applied outside the Scriptures; but its method is unhistorical. It attempts to discern correspondences which are not between the Old Testament records, understood in their literal sense, and their fulfilment in the gospel, but are rather between the shadow and the reality, the symbol in the Old Testament oracles and the truth of the gospel to which it

points.

Examples of this method of exegesis abound in the New Testament itself as well as in the Fathers. The use by the writer to the Hebrews of Melchizedek as a type of Christ offers a good illustration. It cannot be maintained that any real analogy between them is suggested by the prophetic interpretation of history. Christ does not recapitulate, or renew and repeat in some more profound sense, any work done by the Old Testament priest-king. Elsewhere, the same writer does employ typology to demonstrate a genuine fulfilment in the gospel of the purposes of God disclosed in Israel's history; Christ does recapitulate and renew in a far more profound sense the restoration of fellowship between God and sinful men which it was the object of the ancient priesthood and sacrifices to effect. The work of Moses as the human agent of God in saving his people and bringing them into a covenant with himself is parallel, though inferior, to that of Christ as the mediator of a new covenant. The only correspondence between Melchizedek and Christ, on the other hand, lies in the fact that the former is described as being king of Salem and priest of God Most High. It was proper for Christians to recognize Christ as their king, and to find in him the one true priest; but this does not constitute any historical analogy between the two. Still less is there any historical relationship, in terms of promise and fulfilment, between the absence of any genealogy of Melchizedek in Genesis and the uniqueness and eternity of

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Christ's priesthood. It is only on the basis of an allegorizing exegesis that any correspondence can be discovered, and this allegorism rests in turn on the idea that the Scriptures are a complex of symbolism which can be made to yield oracular indications of Christ at any point irrespective of the literal historical sense. The artificiality of this particular instance of typology becomes still more marked when the symbolism is extended to make 'Salem' denote 'peace', Abraham's payment of tithes indicate the superiority of Melchizedek over Levi and his priestly descendants, and the bread and wine brought forth by Melchizedek prefigure the Eucharist.

Not only, on this view, does the whole of Scripture speak about Christ, so that any and every text can be interpreted Christologically (as the writer to the Hebrews applies Psalm 102 to Christ, apparently on the ground that any saying addressed to *Kyrios* may be referred to him); it can also be applied directly to the Christian Church and the individual believer. The Old Testament is a book about the Church as well as about Christ. Hence Clement of Rome can find direct authority in the prophecies of Isaiah for the institution of bishops and deacons in the Christian communities of the end of the first century. Anything, therefore, in the Old Testament which suggests the slightest verbal or pictorial association with the person and work of Christ or with the life of the Church or its members can be legitimately applied to them, whether in preaching and teaching directed to Christian believers or in apologetic, especially against Jewish opponents. It is on the basis of this principle that the scarlet thread of Rahab becomes a symbol of the blood of Christ, the 318 servants of Abraham a type of Jesus and the Cross, the rod of Moses a prefiguration of the Cross, and the stages of the wanderings of Israel in the desert are seen in Origen's Philonic allegory of the Book of Numbers as depicting the progress of the Christian in his spiritual life.

In exegesis of this kind it is extremely hard to draw a firm line of demarcation between

typology and allegory. For the most part the ancient Christian writers combine the two. The Antiochene theologians tried to preserve the distinction between a typology based on the prophetic interpretation of history, in which the literal sense of Scripture is vitally important because it is a record of actual events which are fulfilled by God's acts in Christ, and, on the other hand, allegorism which ignores the literal meaning in favour of the supposed spiritual truth which it conceals. Yet even an Antiochene such as Theodoret reproduces what had become by his time the familiar equation of the water from the rock with the blood of Christ, the rod of Moses with the Cross, the Egyptians overthrown at the Red Sea with the demons drowned in the font. Given the double assumption that the Old Testament refers at every point to Christ and the Church, because Christ and the Church fulfil God's purposes disclosed in the Scriptures, and that every part of Scripture contains a spiritual meaning, it was virtually inevitable that typology should become artificially strained and pass over almost imperceptibly into a form of typically Hellenistic allegory.

The danger that typology of this kind might eliminate the literal sense of Scripture altogether was partly realized in the early Church: not, with the exception of certain Antiochene exegetes such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, in respect of the interpretation of the Old Testament, but in relation to the

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problem of the New Testament itself. On the Platonic principle that the literal and historical sense is but a cloak, or perhaps a vehicle, for an inward spiritual meaning, the gospels themselves were as fruitful a source of allegory as the Old Testament, as we can see from the well-known interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan in terms of Christ, the Church and the sacraments. Origen himself was aware of the danger, at least to some extent, and, unlike Heracleon with his Gnostic interpretation of the woman of Samaria as a figure of the won Sophia, he was careful not to deny that the historicity of the gospel narratives was fundamentally important. Nevertheless, if correspondences may properly be discerned between the acts of God in the Old Testament and those recorded in the New it is not easy to deny that there may be similar analogies between the acts of God in the ministry of Jesus and his acts in the ongoing life and mission of the Church. The former then tend to be regarded as no more than foreshadowings and anticipations of the latter. Thus Christian apologists, from Origen onwards, hard pressed by their opponents on the argument from Christ's miracles, tend to assert that the miracles, especially the healings and raisings from the dead, are a kind of symbolical anticipation of the greater works which Christ performs at the present time, through the Spirit, in raising men from the death of sin and imparting to them new life. From this position it is no long step to the view that the miracle-stories of the gospels are parabolic; pictures, in the form of historical narratives, of the present spiritual experience of the believer. Such an interpretation is in many ways attractive. It may seem to harmonize well with the New Testament, and especially Johannine, belief that the works of Jesus are reproduced in a greater degree in the Church through the power of the Spirit. It accords well, too, with the insight of form-criticism that the gospel narratives read back into the life of Jesus the situation and the experience of his people in the post-Pentecostal age, and that in a sense they are therefore types to which the Church and the believer, in their present communion with the ascended Lord, provide the antitypes.

The prophetic view of history can rightly allow us to see a typological correspondence

between the events of the gospels and the life of the Church and its members. In this way we are led to interpret the New Testament existentially. The danger, once again, however, is that a non-historical typology, passing over into allegory, may dissolve the literal sense altogether, and the question of historicity, even in respect of the central gospel event of the Resurrection, may come to be dismissed as irrelevant.

The third assumption which underlies the combination of typology with non-historical allegory is that the New Testament stands in a relationship of absolute continuity with the Old. Thus there need be no hesitation in applying any and every passage of the Old Testament indiscriminately to Christ and the Church. The consequences of this assumption can be very clearly seen in the Fathers when, for example, the Old Testament priesthood comes to be identified *simpliciter* with the Christian ministry, so that what is said in the Scriptures about the high priest can be referred directly to the bishop, or when the Christian Eucharist comes to be expounded in terms of the Old Testament sacrifices. The roots of this identification, which in post-

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Reformation times has produced the idea that the new Covenant is a kind of republication in modified form of the old Covenant, so that the two are really one and indivisible, are to be discerned even in the New Testament. A sound historical typology could properly see a fulfilment of the ancient sacrifices in the death of Christ; but the tendency is already present to take the former as a sufficient category for the interpretation of the latter and to try to fit the meaning of the Cross into a pattern of Old Testament thought.

In fact, of course, the New Testament is a record of discontinuity as well as of continuity. The divine purposes for Israel are fulfilled in it, but in paradoxical and unforeseen ways. The old is superseded as well as brought to completion, and much in Israel's past was judged and condemned by God's act in Christ. Indeed, in the light of the fulfilment it could be clearly seen that the Old Testament was in part a record of man's rejection of God's plan and his frustration of the divine purpose. New Testament writers therefore discern a typology of rebellion and judgement as well as of promise and fulfilment. The speech of Stephen points to a false succession as well as a true. There is a correspondence in history between Joseph's brethren, those who rejected Moses, the idolaters in the wilderness, Solomon who built the static permanent Temple, and the spiritually uncircumcised leaders of contemporary Judaism, as well as a correspondence between Joseph, Moses, the prophets and Christ himself. This sharp distinction has tended to be overlooked, and from early times the continuity of the two covenants has been over-emphasized. A typology has thus been evolved which presupposes a uniform pattern of divine acts in history. 'Pattern,' indeed, though a favourite term among writers on this subject (and I must admit to my own fondness for it), is probably better avoided. There is a pattern to be discerned in the promises of God and their fulfilment; but it is not uniform or smooth. It involves sharp contrasts as well as harmonies; and its consistency is determined by the steadfastness and faithfulness of God, over-ruling in his mercy the disobedience of men and their rejection of his counsels. The underlying unity of the 'pattern' is not, as it were, a built-in necessity unrelated to the sovereign freedom of God and the freedom of the human will to hinder the divine plan. God, throughout history, is continually bringing in the new and unexpected, and he has done this, above all, in his new covenant in Christ. The types of the Old Testament cannot usually be referred to the New Testament fulfilments on the same level

at which they originally stood. Fulfilment involves transformation as well as similarity. Even those Old Testament images which dominate all Christian interpretation of Christ and his work, such as the Levitical priesthood, the Passover, and the sin-offering, have to receive a new and more profound content if they are to prove adequate to interpret the gospel. Especially is this true of the type or image of 'messiah'.

The last of the assumptions which support this sort of typology is the belief that certain historical events were pre-ordained by God in order to represent what was to come afterwards. In themselves and in their own historical context they are of no importance. They were designed, in the providence of God, as symbols. This theory could sometimes serve to overcome the difficulty presented by those Old Testament passages whose literal

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sense would cause scandal: such as the polygamy of the patriarchs, which had already been allegorized by Philo. Following the same general line of thought, the Epistle of Barnabas regards the literal interpretation of the mosaic food-laws as foolishness; God never intended the prohibitions against eating unclean animals to be understood literally, for these laws had been given, from the first, as symbols of spiritual truths which the gnosis of the Christian exegete could enable him, unlike the Jew, to understand correctly. God forbade the eating of pork, not because to abstain from doing so was of any value but to teach us not to associate with swinish men. History, again, has been eliminated.

Such unhistorical typology is useless for hermeneutics. The study of the methods of the ancient typologists is, of course, of immense value for the exegete and for the student of all early and medieval Christian literature, for without it neither the New Testament nor the later commentaries on it can be understood. To study it in order to gain insight into the minds of past generations is one thing. To use it today is quite another; and even to employ it for sermon illustrations is to mishandle Scripture. This is because it denies, in the last resort, the reality of authentic history as the medium of God's self-revelation.

It is otherwise with that more general form of typology which deals with historical events themselves rather than with the text of the Bible, and which finds analogies between events rather than between words and phrases. For typology, in this sense, is an expression of the prophetic view of history. It discerns in history a revelation of the constant faithfulness of God. Successive events disclose the activity of a God who acts consistently in judgement and mercy. His purpose does not take effect automatically. It must not be supposed that the working out of his plan is predictable in the sense that man can take it for granted and presume on it; this is the constant error of false prophets. It is only faith which can discern the acts of God in history. Yet faith may build upon present and past experience; and prophetic faith may make the revelation of God's judgement and mercy in past and present events a ground of hope and confidence that the God who is faithful to his promises will fulfil them by similar acts of judgement and mercy in the future.

The prophet looks in faith to the future; but the basis of his faith is the history of the past acts of God, such as Israel commemorated, and in a sense re-lived, in its round of liturgical festivals. Thus the prophet is a typologist, in the historical sense, seeing past, present and future linked in a series of correspondences which reflect the steadfast consistency of the living God. So the Second Isaiah sees the coming redemption from exile as a repetition of

God's great act of redemption in the Exodus, and redemption in turn as a renewal of his original act of creation. The Christian sees God's supreme act in Christ as the central point in history which determines the interpretation of all that preceded it and all that has happened or will happen after it. The Christian is a typologist, in this sense, like the Old Testament prophet, seeing history as determined by promise and fulfilment and interpreting the past so as to evoke the response of repentance and faith towards the judgement and mercy of God which encounter him in his present situation. As the preacher, or his hearers, look in this way to the past to awaken

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faith in the present and hope for the future, they can properly discern correspondences that are relevant to their life as Christian disciples. Without misrepresenting the historical situation of Israel in the desert, they can find a parallel between that situation and their own, as members of the pilgrim people of God. Trust and obedience, and refusal to tempt God, are demanded of them because, like Israel, they are called to follow the guidance of God in faith. To go beyond this, however, and imagine a correspondence in detail is to reduce the Old Testament history to the status of an edifying fantasy, comparable with *Pilgrim's Progress*; and to do this is to falsify the Word of God.

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