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## **What is Typology?: An Excerpt from *The Shadow of Christ in the Book of Job***

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“For your first lesson in typology, take out your laptop and place your pinky on the A key, your ring finger on the S key, and your middle finger on the D key...” Sighs and groans emanate from my students as I attempt this joke every year in the classroom, but that never stops me from trying it again the next year. On one occasion, a bright-eyed student carefully placed his fingers as instructed, and looked up at me anticipating further direction. I knew I had to begin at the beginning, and focus on the basics, which is what I hope to do in this chapter.

What is typology? In spite of its technical sound, and the many involved treatments of it, the crux of Biblical typology is not difficult to explain or understand. In essence, it is the way that God used history to bring His promises to life. God’s plan of redemption, brought to its fullness in the work of Christ, was not carried through history on words of prophecy alone, but touched down in the life and experience of God’s people, as particular individuals and events illustrated and animated the promises and provisions of God in the Covenant of Grace. More specifically, the person and work of Jesus Christ was imprinted on the history that led to His incarnation, through people and events that were invested with prophetic meaning by God, offering glimpses of the coming Savior, and reassuring God’s people of the promise of His coming.

This makes typology a vital link between the Old and New Testaments, and gives us a fresh reassurance of the continuing power and relevance of the Old Testament as a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Most words with the “-ology” suffix denote the study of a certain branch of knowledge, and “typology” is no different. In one sense, it refers to the study of Biblical types. However, typology is not merely an academic discipline. It is the term we use to describe the Bible’s own method of using people, events, or institutions, to foreshadow a greater reality yet to come. The *type* is the foreshadow; the *antitype* is the reality.

The English word *type* comes from the Greek word *typos*, which is used variously in the New Testament, usually translated as “form,” “image,” “pattern,” or “example.” It is used in such contexts as I Timothy 4:12, where the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy to “be an example (*typos*) to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” In some texts, however, it is clear that *typos* is used as a more precise term to designate those elements of Old Testament history that were designed to foreshadow New Testament realities. Paul refers to Adam as a “type of Him who was to come,” explaining how Adam foreshadowed Christ in his representative capacity (Rom. 5:14-21). The writer of Hebrews, contrasting the heavenly, high priestly ministry of Jesus with the earthly ministry of human priests, characterized the latter as those “who serve the copy (*typos*) and shadow of the heavenly things” (Heb. 8:4, 5). While *typos* came to have this technical sense in the New Testament, not all types are labeled with this term. By a simple metaphor, Paul posits the typology vested in the Paschal Lamb: “For indeed Christ, our

Passover, was sacrificed for us” (I Cor. 5:7).

To summarize, *typos* is a general term in the New Testament, but used in a more specific way to refer to elements of Old Testament history that foreshadow the person and work of Christ. We call these elements *types*. However, the foreshadowing of Christ by historical events, people, and institutions goes well beyond the few instances where the word *typos* is used to describe it. This system of foreshadowing we call *typology*.

What are the main characteristics of types, or, how do we know one when we see one? In his classic work *Typology of Scripture*, Patrick Fairbairn gives us an adequate starting point:

There are two things which, by general consent, are held to enter into the constitution of a type. It is held, first, that in the character, action, or institution which is denominated the *type*, there must be a resemblance in form or spirit to what answers to it under the Gospel; and secondly, that it must not be *any* character, action, or institution occurring in the Old Testament Scripture, but such only as had their ordination of God, and were designed by Him to foreshadow and prepare for the better things of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

The first element of typology identified by Fairbairn is “a resemblance in form or spirit” between the type and the antitype, which is a condition in need of a caveat. Not every superficial parallel between the Old and New Testaments is an instance of typology, but only that which substantively foreshadows the work of God in redemption. Typology does not amount to literary déjà vu, meant only to delight the reader with subtle connections. It is God’s method of illustrating and authenticating divine promises on the stage of history, and as such, typology will always reflect the promise and fulfillment of His work of redemption.<sup>2</sup>

Fairbairn’s second qualification is that a genuine type must be designed by God to foreshadow and prepare for the better things of the gospel. If it is designed by God, then Scripture can be our only infallible guide for identifying a true type, and understanding its significance. Typology is not the art of making creative or intuitive connections within the Bible. It is an exegetical discipline that must be textually controlled. If types are designed by God, they will be accompanied by Biblical evidence that substantially validates their typological purpose and meaning.

What, then, is the Biblical criteria for which we should look? Sidney Greidanus offers four helpful measures of a genuine type.<sup>3</sup> First, a genuine type must be *historical*. That is, it must be an actual event, character, or institution from Old Testament history. Second, it must be *theocentric*, meaning that the symbolic message conveyed by a type must directly relate to the character, works, or promises of God. Third, a type must exhibit *significant analogy* with its antitype in the realm of theological meaning, rather than in superficial details. Fourth, the relationship of the type to the antitype must exhibit significant *escalation*, meaning that the antitype is always superior in the qualities that were more dimly reflected in the type.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, *Typology of Scripture*, Foreword by Peter M. Masters (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Geerhardus Vos writes, “The bond that holds type and antitype together must be a bond of vital continuity in the progress of redemption. Where this is ignored, and in the place of this bond are put accidental resemblances, void of inherent spiritual significance, all sorts of absurdities will result, such as must bring the whole subject of typology into disrepute.” *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 146.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 256.

To these measures, a fifth criterion should be added, that Old Testament types are *prophetic* in nature, and were meant to be understood in tandem with, and as illustrations of, the literary prophecies and promises of the Old Testament. They were meant to have value, not only to those who see them retrospectively, but also to those who originally experienced them. After all, types are foreshadows, not aftershadows.

Of course, Old Testament believers did not have the advantage of the clarity of the gospel that dawned with the coming of Christ and the completion of the New Testament. It is certain that many gospel truths, which we see so clearly, were not nearly as distinct to them. We cannot say with certainty how much they understood or did not understand about the historical types and literary prophecies that made up their experience of faith, but there is little reason to believe that the typology of the Old Testament took place all around them while they themselves were utterly unaware of it. The types of the Old Testament are described as a “shadow of the good things to come” (Heb. 10:1), but a shadow is still a shadow, after all.

If we understand that types had original prophetic meaning and do not only serve a retrospective purpose, then two important implications follow. The first implication is that typology in the Old Testament is not necessarily circumscribed by the New Testament. In other words, there can be types in the Old Testament that are not identified or discussed as such in the New Testament. Granted, the apostolic writers lose few opportunities to point them out, but the presence of New Testament commentary is not an absolute criteria for identifying a genuine Old Testament type. There is no indication, and no reason to presume, that the types identified as such by the New Testament exhaust the typological content of the Old Testament. Geerhardus Vos comments:

The mere fact that no writer in the New Testament refers to a certain trait as typical, affords no proof of its lacking typical significance. Types in this respect stand on a line with prophecies. The New Testament in numerous cases calls our attention to the fulfillment of certain prophecies, sometimes of such a nature that perhaps we might not have discerned them to be prophecies. And yet we are not restrained by this from searching the field of prophecy and looking in the New Testament for other cases of fulfillment. The instances of typology vouched for by the New Testament writers have nothing peculiar to themselves. To recognize only them would lead to serious incompleteness and incoherency in the result.<sup>4</sup>

Great care must be taken, and substantial proof must be sought, when discerning Old Testament types not identified as such by the New Testament, but the prospect remains open.

The second implication is that Old Testament types will ordinarily be accompanied by some textual indication of their prophetic value in the original context, if indeed they had such value to their original audience. It may be faint, but *something* will give the original audience of the text an intimation, at least, when a person, event, or institution bears prophetic meaning beyond itself. A type in the Old Testament will show itself by how it is described, how it is reacted to, or how it impacts the life and faith of the believing community. The full meaning, or ultimate fulfillment of the type is never fully disclosed to its original audience, yet there is almost always some textual indicator that typology is in play, when the import of a particular person or event distends beyond its historical provenance into the realm of prophecy.

The purpose of Biblical typology may be discerned from two different outlooks, namely, from Old Covenant and New Covenant vantage points. From the former perspective, typology served to breathe life into the promises of God by personifying and illuminating the promise of

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<sup>4</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 146.

redemption. We may think of types as living sermon illustrations that brought the words of prophecy to life. Types are what gave the Covenant promises their movement and embodiment in history, so that divine promises became palpable, and anticipation became experiential. It is truly a wondrous method of divine reassurance that redemption was built into the very fabric of history, and that history itself was moving toward its crescendo in Christ.

From the New Testament vantage point, the outlook is different. Living in the full light of the Advent, we may wonder what present value the Old Testament types have in the life of faith and in our perception of the work of Christ. Why bother with shadows when the light has fully shined? Allow me to answer the question with an illustration.

When I was a boy, my mother used to take my brothers and me to a local park, where there is a beautiful covered bridge spanning a stream. We spent many summer days playing, swimming, and fishing in that stream. My mother was an amateur artist in those days – more talented than many “professionals”, in my opinion – and would often take her canvas, easel, and paints to pass the time while her boys explored the creek. Her efforts produced a beautiful rendering of that covered bridge, which hangs in my home to this day, and still conjures the most pleasant memories in my mind. To me, that painting is priceless. I would not trade it for the Mona Lisa.

Today, the park with the covered bridge is only a short drive from my home, and I can take my own children there on lazy summer days. The covered bridge and the stream are just as I remember them, and I am always delighted to take in that scene again. However, my mother’s painting – a mere image of the covered bridge and stream where I used to play – arouses thoughts of a different value. Even though I can return to the actual park itself any time I choose, the painting preserves my mother’s impression of it, along with the many memories of happy days spent there. Invariably, when I return to that scene in the park, I compare it to the painting in my mind’s eye, and relish every detail that coincides between the *type* and the *antitype*.

Our heavenly Father has, in a sense, painted the impression of His Son on the canvas of history. Christ has come in the flesh, but Old Testament types preserve historical reflections of Him that retain their own particular power to move our hearts and strengthen our faith. Typology adds historical depth to our understanding of the person and work of Christ, and just as a painting augments and interprets certain features of its subject, typology draws our attention to the features of the Gospel that God Himself meant to accentuate over the course of history. Therefore, the unique value of typology is not lessened by the coming of Christ. If anything, it continues to add to our complete understanding of His person and work, as He is revealed in His fullness over the span of both Testaments.

It is important, however, to recognize that there will be significant elements of contrast between the type and antitype, for this is part of what defines their relationship. Whatever points to Jesus Christ will necessarily be outshined by Him. When any mere man or earthly event is given the lofty purpose to prefigure Christ, we should expect to find a principal point of correspondence bundled in myriad details of contrast. A type is not only meant to reflect its antitype, but to bring praise to what is perfect through its own imperfection. Therefore, the study of Old Testament types is surely not an end unto itself. It achieves its purpose, and we receive its benefit, only if the Lord Jesus Christ is exalted as He should be.

Drawing the aforementioned points together, typology is defined as *God’s selective use of Old Testament people, events, and institutions to serve as living prophecies of His covenant promises, centering upon the Person and work of Jesus Christ, for the reassurance of the faith of His people in all ages.*