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READING SCRIPTURE DEEPLY
MILLENNIALS TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT
THE BIBLE.

Edited by Richard S. Hess

And

E. Randolph Richards

CHAPTER 6

THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS TYPOLOGY IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

Joseph R. Dodson

After reading the Gospels for the first time, one of my students announced in class: “You know, Jesus reminds me a lot of Harry Potter.” I started to chuckle, but then I remembered as a kid being ridiculed for saying that Jesus reminded me of E.T.³² When I revealed this childhood scar to them, the students were emboldened to divulge the characters that reminded them of Jesus. They mentioned the likes of Superman, Gandalf, Forest Gump, and Doctor Who.

“Failing to notice these typologies might cause us to miss crucial truths about the Messiah that God intended for us to catch.”

I told my students that I was not sure if J.K. Rowling and Steven Spielberg intended for the boy wizard and the extra-terrestrial to remind us of Jesus. But the Gospels do use typology so that Jesus will remind us of certain Old Testament figures. It is as if the Evangelists wanted us to say: you know, Jesus reminds me a lot of Isaac, of Joseph, of David, and so on. As we walked through some of these typologies, my students began to notice that each one accentuates various characteristics of Christ and his

³² In my defense, I explained my adolescent reasoning: E.T. descended from another world. While on earth, he died, came back to life, and then ascended back into the heavens. For more on Jesus and E.T., see <http://markgoodacre.org/podcasts/NTPod57.mp3>

mission.³³ They also started to recognize that—in contrast to the Hollywood imitations—failing to notice these typologies might cause us to miss crucial truths about the Messiah that God intended for us to catch.

As mentioned in chapter 1, typologies occur when individuals or events in some manner foreshadow future people and events by describing parallel circumstances and the meaning that develop within them. Sometimes the Evangelists used typology to say that Jesus was “like” an Old Testament figure. At other times the authors did so to say that Jesus was “greater than” one of these characters. And as we will see below, sometimes it is to say that Jesus “is” a certain figure. Often what begins as faint echoes to an Old Testament figure turns into loud notes as a narrative progresses.

In this chapter, we will provide examples of how (1) Matthew presented Jesus as the prophet like Moses, (2) how Mark depicted him as a miracle worker like Elisha, and (3) how John presents the Lord as Lady Wisdom. Further, we will consider how (4) Luke goes the other direction and presents Stephen as a martyr like Jesus. (5) Finally, we will use Matthew’s presentation of Mary to demonstrate how the evangelists can use typology with respect to other characters besides Christ. These examples are meant to be representative rather than exhaustive. Moreover, they are intended to be introductions rather than in-depth studies.

Jesus reminds me of Moses

In Deuteronomy 18, Moses proclaims: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your own people. You must listen to him...”

The Lord said to me: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their people, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name (vv. 15, 17-19).

Because of this passage, by the time we get to the New Testament, the Jews expected this prophet like Moses in addition to a Davidic King. Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is both; but he uses typology to reveal the former.

Of the Four Gospels, only Matthew includes the story of the infanticide committed by Herod during Jesus’ childhood. From the angle of typology, the king’s plot to slaughter the Hebrew babies evokes the crime of Pharaoh and the similar situation surrounding Moses’ birth. It is as if from the start Matthew wants us to think, “You know, Jesus reminds me a lot of Moses.” And the hints keep coming. To flee Herod’s wrath, Joseph takes Jesus to Egypt—the place Moses was born and raised. Matthew even highlights the event by quoting Hosea 11:1, a verse that originally referred to the Exodus: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

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The parallels don’t stop there. As Moses spent forty years in the wilderness, Jesus stays there for forty days. While in the desert, Satan tempts Jesus three times. And three times Jesus responds by citing scripture: all of which originated from the mouth of Moses (Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:16; 6:13). One of the highpoints of Moses’ life was when he went onto a mountain to receive God’s Law. Interestingly enough, of all the Evangelists, only Matthew records Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5-7, Jesus goes upon a mountain and reinterprets Moses’ Law. Jesus insists, however, that he did not come to abolish the Law of Moses. He came to fulfill it. “Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (5:18).

In light of Deuteronomy 18, then, the audience’s astonishment at the end of Jesus’ sermon should not come as a surprise to us. They were “amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (7:28). The typology underlines the reason.

Unlike the teachers of the Law, Jesus is the prophet like Moses. He speaks the very words of God. He proclaims all that God has commanded him. The typology also sounds a warning from Deuteronomy 18:19: God will call to account everyone who fails to listen to the words of *his* Prophet.³⁴

Jesus reminds me of Elisha

Whereas the First Gospel depicts Jesus as the new Moses to emphasize the authority of his teaching, Mark presents Jesus as greater than Elisha to underscore the Lord's power. Of all the prophets in Israel, Elisha has arguably the most impressive resume for healings and miracles—that is, until we get to Jesus. With this in mind, when we read the story of Jesus cleansing the leper in Mark 1, we should be reminded of Elisha, the only other prophet attributed with healing a man from leprosy.

In 2 Kings, Naaman went to Elisha's house for help. The prophet commanded him: "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed" (2 Kings 5:10). It took some convincing, but the army commander eventually swallowed his pride and went down to the river to take his dips. As soon as he was finished, "His flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy" (5:14). Similarly, in Mark 1, a leper approached Jesus for help. In response, Jesus reached out his hand, touched the man and said: "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed (1:41-42). As you can see, both Elisha and Jesus cure the incurable disease, and in each case the leprosy quickly disappeared. But in contrast to Naaman who has to wash himself seven times in the Jordan, Mark's leper is healed by a single touch from Jesus.

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³⁴ Cf. Acts 2:22-23

Furthermore, the story of Jesus bringing the young girl back to life in Mark 5 should remind us of the similar story when Elisha resuscitates a young boy. In 2 Kings 4, a mother accosts Elisha so that he goes to her house to save her son. Upon arrival, he went into the room and found the boy dead on the couch. He shut the door on the two of them and began to pray.

He got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. (2 Kings 4:33-35)

Similarly, in Mark 5, a synagogue leader approached Jesus and begged him to come to his house and heal his daughter. When Jesus arrived, he took the child's father and mother as well as his disciples into the room to see the child. There, Jesus grabbed the girl by the hand and said "Rise up, little girl!" She immediately stood up and began to walk around. While Elisha had to give the boy mouth to mouth—eye to eye and hand to hand—resuscitation, Jesus simply took the girl by the hand. Elisha's healing of the boy was prolonged, but Jesus cured the girl instantly. For instance, whereas the prophet had to walk around the room before the boy was revived, the girl rose from her bed without hesitation and began to walk around.

Perhaps the most remarkable parallel between Elisha and Jesus occurs in 2 Kings 4:42-44 and Mark 6:37-42. In the former, Elisha commanded his servant to feed the crowd with the only bit of bread he possessed—twenty loaves. The servant demurred: "How can I set this before a hundred men?" But Elisha insisted, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" So the servant set the bread before them. And, as God promised: "they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord" (v. 44).

Likewise, in Mark 6, Jesus commanded his disciples to give the crowd something to eat (v. 37). But like Elisha's servant, the disciples pointed out the apparent flaw in the master's plan: there's only five loaves

of bread. Jesus takes the food anyway, gives thanks for it and hands it to the disciples to distribute. "They all ate and were satisfied" (v. 42). Unlike 2 Kings, however, Mark saves some of the final numbers for the end of the story to increase the dramatic effect. Whereas Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty loaves: with only five loaves, Jesus fed *five thousand*. While Elisha had some leftovers, Jesus had *twelve baskets full* of them. Therefore, the point of the typology becomes clear. Jesus is not simply a miracle worker like Elisha: he is a miracle worker greater than Elisha.

Jesus reminds me of Lady Wisdom

In Proverbs, Wisdom makes the extraordinary claim to have been with God at creation. She proclaims:

I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in humankind. (Proverbs 8:27-31)

We learn even more about Wisdom and her role in Genesis from a book in the Greek Old Testament called the *Wisdom of Solomon* (a popular work for Christians during the time of John). As other Jewish works around this time, the *Wisdom of Solomon* refers to God's "Wisdom" and his "Word" interchangeably.³⁵ For instance, in the parallelism of 9:1, it says

³⁵ Do not let Logos as Lady Wisdom throw you. That Logos was a masculine term while Wisdom was a feminine figure did not pose a problem for most writers. As far as I know, only Philo struggled with this.

God "made all things by his Word; by his Wisdom, he formed humankind."

What is more, the *Wisdom of Solomon* draws from Genesis and Proverbs 8 to present Wisdom and the Word less as an attribute of God and more as a personal being who shares in the Lord's divinity. According to the author, Wisdom is the breath of God's power, the pure emanation of his glory, the reflection of his eternal light. She is a spotless mirror of his work, the very image of his goodness (*Wisdom of Solomon* 7.25-26). Shining brighter than the Sun, Wisdom outshines all the stars, because she is greater than the light. Therefore, "she is not succeeded by the night," that is to say, "against her evil does not prevail" (7:29-30). According to the author, God sends Wisdom from his throne. She descends from heaven to proclaim what is pleasing to the Lord (9:10), to bring people near to God and to grant them everlasting life (6:18-19).

In light of this understanding of Wisdom, let's read the familiar passage in John 1:1-5. Keep in mind that the terms Wisdom and Word were used synonymously in the Greek Old Testament and other Jewish Wisdom Literature. The Fourth Gospel begins with these well-known words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The similarities are striking. In both the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the Gospel of John, Wisdom and the Word were with God in the beginning; they were agents of his creation; and they provide humanity with life and light.

John uses this typology *not* to say that Jesus is like a man. Christ is not presented as being like Moses or greater than Elisha. Moreover, John

Nevertheless, rather than separating them as distinct figures, Philo claims—despite her name—Lady Wisdom is masculine. In short, Philo gives Lady Wisdom a beard.

does not even use the typology to say that Jesus is simply *like* Wisdom, like the Word, or even like God. Rather, the typology proclaims that Jesus *is* the Wisdom and Word of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:24). Thereby, John's typology establishes a high Christology from the start: as Wisdom and the Word, Jesus is the one who shares in God's divinity.

Stephen reminds me of Jesus

In the examples above, Jesus is meant to remind us of Moses, Elisha, and Lady Wisdom. But New Testament authors can also go the other direction. For instance, in Acts, Luke depicts Stephen as a Christ-like figure. The typology starts with Luke's introduction of Stephen with lofty praise that attributes to him qualities that remind us of Jesus. "Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 7:8). As with Jesus, the religious leaders engaged Stephen in debate; and, as did Jesus, Stephen dominated his opponents in the theological contest (v. 10). Consequently, he too was forced to give an account in court as he faced accusations from false witnesses. So similar is the setting, it is enough to cause *déjà vu* among those who know the Gospels.

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In response to the charges, Stephen—with the bright face of an angel (v. 15)—launches into a sermon that incites the crowd to stone him. Here, the parallels become even more pronounced. Both Jesus and Stephen made proclamations about the Son of Man at God's right hand. During his trial, Jesus proclaimed: "From now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God" (Luke 22:69). Similarly, during his execution, Stephen calls out: "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). In case we've missed it, Stephen's last words confirm the typology:

- 1) "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), and

- 2) "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60).

In his Gospel, Luke records two sayings of Jesus that the other Evangelists omit:

- 1) "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" and
- 2) "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (23:34; 46).³⁶

Following the typological suit, Stephen's prayer requests help us avoid missing the connection Luke intends for us to make. Therefore, just as typologies can delineate an aspect of Jesus' character, they can also highlight the continuity of his character with that of his followers. Thus, Luke leads us to say, "you know Stephen reminds me a lot of Jesus."

Mary Reminds Me of Some "Scandalous" Ladies

There are other typologies at work in the Gospels and Acts that center on other figures besides Jesus.³⁷ For instance, the genealogy in Matthew 1 sets up a fascinating typology. Matthew cuts against the grain of many Jewish genealogies by including women in his. But he does not list the likes of Sarah, Rachel, and Rebekah as one might expect. Rather, Matthew points out the more provocative ladies in the line of Judah—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "Uriah's wife." Despite the diversity of these women, their stories have something in common: questionable sexual backgrounds.³⁸ Two of the women have a past in prostitution; one was involved in an indecent proposal and the other in an affair.

In view of typology, these stories set up the seemingly scandalous situation of the final woman listed in the genealogy—Mary, the mother of Jesus.

With the inclusion of these women, Jesus' family tree becomes shady. Why does Matthew choose to include these women in Christ's Genealogy? If we consider this question in view of typology, we see these

³⁶ The first of these sayings may not have been in the original manuscript of Luke.

stories set up the seemingly scandalous situation of the final woman listed in the genealogy—Mary, the mother of Jesus. But all of these women share more than seemingly illicit backgrounds. Each of them—to different degrees—was finally vindicated. In the end, Judah counts Tamar as righteous. Joshua presents Rahab as a paragon of faith. Boaz, the righteous man, marries Ruth. Bathsheba gives birth to Solomon—the wise heir of Israel’s throne.

And Mary is vindicated all the more. The angel of the Lord emphatically denies an illegitimate conception: “what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (When one realizes that it is God who is to be born, one is no longer surprised to find a virgin giving birth.³⁹) Like Ruth, a righteous man does not reject her. Like Bathsheba, she will go on to give birth to the Son of David. In contrast to Bathsheba, however, Mary gives birth to Israel’s everlasting king. As a result of Mary’s faithfulness, “Now one greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:42).”

Application

We began this discussion by mentioning a student in class who said Jesus reminded him of Harry Potter. At the end of the class, another student approached me. He was clearly upset. In contrast to the young lady who had only recently read the Gospels, he explained that he “grew up in church.” He bemoaned that even though he knew all these stories he had never seen the connections. I encouraged him to take heart because we often know facts without paying attention to them. I challenged him to go back through those old familiar stories with these typologies in mind so that what is clear to him about Jesus and the Gospels can become even clearer. As we have seen, we can read Scripture and be richly blessed without ever seeing these connections between stories, the allegories, or the typologies. Yet, when we read Scripture deeply and see these subtle treasures, we draw more benefit from our studies. As the student and I walked out of the classroom together I reminded him that the Evangelists underscored these typologies *not* so that we would only be informed about Christ but so that we would be significantly transformed by him—so much

³⁹ See Augustine, Sermon 370.3.

so that when people look at our lives they would say, “you know, they remind me a lot of Jesus.”