

# OpenTheo

## Scripture Teaches Us HOW to Think, Not Just WHAT to Think (Natural Law and Biblical Typology)

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Today, I discuss how a faithful reading of Scripture teaches us to follow the example of its authors and engage in both typology and reflection upon natural law.

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today, I want to talk about something that I've been discussing in various fora lately, which is the relationship between Scripture and the exploration of natural law. I just want to give a brief thought on the subject, which is that when people read Scripture, they can often read Scripture as if it were direct propositions given by God, without considering the way that those propositions were arrived at.

When we're reading, for instance, the typology that the New Testament authors engage in, should we read that as just a direct statement from God? Don't do this at home, guys. This is apostolic work here. Only us apostles who have been directly told by God that this is what this particular thing is connected to can come out with these statements.

And so if you want to see some connection between Jesus and Joseph, or Jesus and Samson, or Jesus and particular periods of David's life that aren't explicitly connected to him in the story of the Gospels, then that's out of bounds, guys. The important thing is that you only take the connections that the apostles give you, because that's the direct revelation from God. Many people have taken that sort of approach, wary in part that we might go beyond the text, that we might come up with these fanciful interpretations.

Now, of course, there have been many fanciful forms of typology that people have dreamed up, ways that they have connected the Old Testament text with the New, in ways that owe more to an overactive imagination than to actual study and in-depth exploration of the text. But if we are reading the text well, if we are studying what the apostles do, we should note that what they are doing is not merely relaying a direct proposition from God that declares some connection between an Old Testament text and a New Testament text. What they're doing is engaging in a reading of those texts.

They're connecting these things in a creative way. Now, clearly, they're doing that by the inspiration and with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, but they are engaged in a task of exegesis. And so we need to see how they got that from the Old Testament.

And if we're not seeing how they got it from the Old Testament, we're not truly understanding what they're teaching. So if we're reading, for instance, Peter talking about baptism and connecting it with the Ark of Noah, we need to go back to the story of Genesis, chapter 6-9, and think, how can we see the story of Christ in that? How can we see a connection between this and what baptism means? Now, that is part of what it means to take the argument of the apostle Peter seriously. That we're going to reconstruct the underlying work, the sort of foundations for the superstructure that we see, which is the biblical claim that there is a connection between the Ark of Noah and the practice of baptism.

And making those sorts of connections is something that, having seen the example of the apostles, we can do ourselves. We can go back to the Old Testament and read the stories there and see connections that are not explicitly flagged up. We've been taught how to read in part by the apostles.

Now, before the apostles came along and engaged in those sorts of readings, there were other people engaging in that sort of reading of the text. Not with the same inspiration or the guarantee that the spirit gave to their interpretations by illuminating their understanding, but they were seeing many of the same things. They were seeing the connections between characters like Jacob and someone like David.

Or between the ways that certain events recur over history. The story of the Exodus, for instance, and how that is patterned after events in Abraham's life and Jacob's life, etc. And so when we're reading scripture, we need to recognise that there is the surface of the text, but we should also be getting into the depth of the logic that gave rise to that

surface.

We're trying to explore not just the tip of the iceberg, that which is explicitly stated, but also the logic from which that arose. And then to consider what else that logic might bring up to the surface. What are some of the other parts of scripture that may not be explicitly typologically unpacked, but are there to be explored in much the same way as the apostles did? Now, bringing this back to the example, the case of natural law, we do the same thing with natural law.

When Paul says, does not nature itself teach you? Well, hasn't nature taught you that? The point is that he's arguing for a particular sort of reasoning, a certain sort of reflection upon reality. Now that's a direct statement that he's making, and he's illuminated in his understanding and his presentation by God. It's guaranteed in that sense, it's truth.

But he's engaging in a certain sort of reflection upon nature. We see the same thing in Proverbs. What is the locus of revelation in Proverbs? When we're reading the book of Leviticus, for instance, God gives direct speeches to Moses.

So it's more like divine dictation. These are truths directly stated to Moses, and Moses has to just accept them and relay them to the people of Israel. Whereas in the case of Proverbs, what we're seeing for the most part are statements that are made by someone reflecting upon the world.

And arriving at an understanding of it through consideration over time. Now they're doing that under the inspiration and illumination of the Holy Spirit, but they're engaging in the task of natural law. They're thinking about reality, seeing how things play out over time, seeing the connection between things and practices and their proper end, and their improper ends, and as a result, drawing moral inferences.

Now that is the practice of natural law. When we're reading something like the book of Proverbs or the book of Ecclesiastes, we're not seeing something that is completely different in nature from what the Egyptians, ancient Egyptians, were doing before that. When they came up with wisdom literature.

Or when we read something like Aristotle, he's doing the same sort of thing. He's reflecting upon reality, and in the reflection upon reality over time, in the feedback loop of engagement with reality, he's reflecting upon and deliberating concerning the art of living well. Now, when we read the book of Proverbs, one of the things the book of Proverbs should drive us to do is to engage in the work of natural law.

Not just to take, okay, these are these, not just to take the statements of Proverbs and say, these are divinely inspired, these are the statements that we must expect, that we must accept and live in terms of, but also to say, okay, we need to do this sort of exploration of reality ourselves. We need to reflect upon things over time. We need to

consider the outcomes, the ends of particular ways of life.

We need to reflect upon what yields good consequences and what doesn't. We need to consider what is good and what is evil from empirical reflection upon our experience. And to think over time what things lead to.

Now, of course, we're doing that in the light of scripture. We've reflected upon scripture. We've learned the principles of scripture.

And those give a light to our feet and a lamp to our path. And so as we're walking through life, trying to understand things, there are ways in which it will clarify things for us. It won't answer all the questions.

And we're still engaging in the task of natural law, much as people like Aristotle. But we're learning from the example of the biblical writers, much as when we do typology. We don't have the guarantees that the apostles did.

We don't have the guarantees, for instance, in if we did not have the book of John to connect Christ to the Passover lamb, it would be an argument that wouldn't be absolutely certain. You could have a lot of contestation of that claim. But it's given to us in scripture and it's an example that we can see the logic of it.

And we, on the basis of that example, should be able to make other sorts of arguments ourselves. Again, if we were not told that Christ and his death and resurrection were like Jonah in the big fish, would we be able to arrive at that understanding ourselves? If we can't, then maybe it's a sign that we're not reading the Old Testament very well. And the challenge of not just taking the text on surface level, taking its propositions, but learning to read the world and the scriptures in the way that the apostles and the other biblical writers did, that is the challenge that faces us as Christians.

Much of my work has been about learning to follow the example of the apostles, follow the example of people like Solomon, learn to read the grain of reality, learn to read scripture in terms of its inner logic. And having done that, to arrive at very similar sorts of readings in other areas that are not found explicitly in scripture, but are there in principle. Now all of this, I think, speaks to many of our current debates as well.

When people are talking about, for instance, the difference with a more broad complementary and a thin complementarianism, one of the things about a thin complementarianism is it's often just taking things at surface value. These are commandments that God has given us, and they should just be taken as, well, we don't know the reasons for them, but we must just obey them. Now that is a very shallow way of reading the text.

It's just looking at the tip of the iceberg without actually thinking about the logic that underlies it. And so when we're reading the text, what we should be doing is pursuing

the deeper reasons for these things, trying to understand that God's commandments are not arbitrary, just as the readings that we see in scripture of the Old Testament are not arbitrary readings. We believe that when the apostles come out with a particular reading of the Old Testament, they do it as faithful readers of the Old Testament.

And so we need to go back to the Old Testament, reread those texts, and follow their example. In the same way, when we're hearing the commandments of scripture, we need to go back to reality and think about why those commandments make sense, why they are not arbitrary, and then think about the deeper consequences and outworking of those commandments, of those principles, of those illuminations of certain aspects of reality, going further in recognising some of the ways that those principles play out than the explicit commands of scripture present. And often that's one of the struggles that we're having in current debates between certain ways of reading the Bible.

And one of the things I want to highlight here is that that difference is a very significant difference. It's a difference of posture towards the text more generally, a difference of posture between following the example of the apostles and the other biblical writers in reading reality and reading scripture in a deeper way and arriving at these principles, or just taking everything on the surface and not being willing to probe any deeper than that. We need to be like the readers of Paul who see does not nature itself teach you and who understand exactly what he means, who can go to nature and point out exactly what he's reflecting upon, exactly what he is highlighting within nature, and not just rely upon a biblical command.

Thank you very much for listening. If you have any questions or anything you'd like me to discuss, please leave it on my Curious Cat account. I don't answer quite so many at the moment because I'm doing a longer series on the book of Matthew which I'll return to soon.

But if you have any questions, I'll hopefully answer them bit by bit over time. There are quite a number of them in there at the moment, but I hope to get to a number of them in time. If you'd like to support this and other podcasts and videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts, or support me with books from my Amazon list.

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