

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#119 What's the Pastoral Use of Typology?

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Today's question: "I very much appreciate your keen eye for typology and the like. As a pastor, I continually find myself thinking "That's cool. So what?" I know that's what many of my parishioners are thinking, so I try to show the importance and application of intertextual connections. I'd very much like to hear your reflections on the pastoral value of typology."

You can read the Theopolis post on Jacob and David that I mentioned here:  
<https://theopolisinstitute.com/article/the-reopened-wounds-of-jacob>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:  
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### **Transcript**

Welcome back. Today's question is, I very much appreciate your keen eye for typology and the like. As a pastor, I continually find myself thinking, that's cool.

So what? I know that's what many of my parishioners are thinking. So I try to show the importance and application of intertextual connections. I'd very much like to hear your reflections on the pastoral value of typology.

It's a good question and an important one. It's one that I get asked from time to time. When I'm going through the text, if I'm looking through the story of Abraham, for instance, there are a great deal of intertextual connections that I'll draw attention to.

And many of them, it's not entirely obvious what we're supposed to make of them. The connections exist. They create neat parallels or some sort of bond between two texts.

But beyond that, what do they give us? I think that partly this can be a problem with us, that we're impatient with the text, that we want something immediately from it. And we're not prepared to just go on a deep dive and see what emerges as the text takes its own shape. So there's that.

That's part of it, that many readers are impatient. They want the text to answer their questions. So they come to the text with a host of different questions about this, that, and the other.

And they're not prepared to listen to the text on its own terms. And when you listen to the text on its terms, you often find surprising insight from places that you would not expect. And typology really requires a lot of patience in our Bible reading.

It requires listening to the text very closely, being extremely attentive, and not bringing our questions to the text immediately. And that holding back is not something that lends itself to the act of application. If you're wanting an immediate application, typology is not the natural place to go, it might seem.

It might seem to be just withholding any sort of application for quite a while because you're just having to listen to the text on its own terms. But yeah, that deep dive is a place, if you go deep into the text, you'll often find that you pull up treasures, things that you would not get were you not to go that deep down. One of the things that I find typology on a general level gives you is a sense of the unity of scripture.

That scripture is not just a set of isolated stories, but it's a unified narrative. And all these different stories are connected to each other in a host of different ways. And in that unity, part of what you're seeing is the unity of God's work in history.

That all these events display the work of God's handiwork, that God's control in history, that God's guiding of historical events. All of these events have a musical character, and in that musical character, you have a sense that there's a divine orchestration taking place. And that unity of historical events, that unity of events in scripture will also lead back to us ultimately, but I'll get to that shortly.

The other thing that it does is it gives us a sure grasp of the meaning of particular stories. So if you're looking to, let's say the story of the Acacia story, the Binding of Isaac, how do you interpret that? I just discussed that a few days ago. And it's hard to interpret that story just by itself.

What you have when people interpret that story just by itself, they will tend to read into that story a certain set of values that they have. I've attended churches before where every single week you'll get one of five sermons. And this particularly happens when people are preaching upon the narrative text of scripture, where there is a failure to get into the text itself.

And so people bring their systematic theology, they bring their ethical systems, they bring all these things to the text and then read them into the text. And so what the text becomes is a sort of body on the table that you have a sort of autopsy upon the text and you just read it in terms of your categories. But there's no sense of the text as a living entity that speaks by itself, that has life within itself, looks you directly in the eye and speaks to your situation.

The idea of a meaning deriving from the text itself is something that's lacking in that approach. What you have instead is people reading into the text a host of different meanings that may be quite alien to the text itself. So typology is one of the ways that we ensure that we are deriving our meanings from the text.

And typology is one of the ways that the text makes its meaning. It makes its meaning through literary structures, through clever word connections, through these sorts of things that help us to see this event is supposed to be read in parallel with this event. And as some have observed, any text of scripture taken in itself can be very poor in its meaning.

It lacks meaning. It's taken just as a single event, a small cluster of verses. It's very hard to discern what's taking place.

Where the meaning of scripture happens is often the different parts of scripture that are brought to bear upon that section of scripture, that are alluded to, or that speak back into that situation. So meaning discloses over time. And meaning is very much something that's dispersed throughout the text.

And typology is the way that we trace that. Helps us to recognise that scriptural meaning is very much like a root system. It's not like this big stake plumped into the ground in a single point.

It's just very often the way that we think about proof texts. We have the single text and it's driven down into the ground and that's where all the strength is based upon that one point. Now, people can often uproot those texts or they can become, seem to be weaker than they seem to be at the initial glance.

But one of the things that typology gives us is this great root system where any single point, any single piece of that root system will not bear the weight of the whole tree. But collectively, it bears a considerable amount of weight, much more than a single stake

driven into the ground, even if that stake goes very deep down. And typology is therefore a way of getting meaning throughout a vast cluster of texts brought into bearing upon each other.

It encourages us to read events in parallel. It also encourages us to make finer grained judgments and avoid simplistic readings. So, for instance, if you're reading a story such as that of the deception of Isaac, as Jacob deceives Isaac, that story is reversed, it's turned around, it's explored in a host of different ways later on in scripture, later on within the Genesis narrative itself.

It goes through about several different iterations and permutations and each one of those differences helps us to see something about the complexity of that original event. Now, when we think about understanding events, we often have these very abstract universal notions. But when you look at the concrete character of a specific set of events, it's all muddled together, it's ambiguous, it's complex.

And scriptural meaning is very much about unravelling those complex events and drawing out the different threads and helping us to get to the bottom of mysteries. So what is the weight of that particular event? What does it mean? Well, you see these events playing out later in the life of Jacob, in the life of his sons, and then in the life of other people further on down the line. For instance, the story of David plays out this pattern on a number of occasions.

And thinking about those stories in parallel with each other helps us to see something about the ambiguity of that original event, how that can be resolved, how it can be relieved, and help us to understand that the different roles that were played within that story. When we see these different permutations, for instance, the Achaeta story or the Binding of Isaac, you have a number of different permutations of that story that help us to see what exactly is going on. And each one of those stories will give us new potential to read in that original story with greater insight.

So for instance, when we read it in parallel with the story of the Shunammite woman, we can see the possibility of asking for a dead son back from the Lord. Now that gives us something to bring into that original story. And that example is an example of faith in the same way as the original story is an example of faith.

And in the same way, we have the story of Samuel. When we read the story of Samuel alongside it, it gives us a sense of the son as a sacrifice, someone who's offered up. What does that mean? Well, read those two stories in parallel, and you'll have a better grasp upon it.

But if you're just reading that single story by itself, you will struggle. And what will generally happen is you're reading into it meaning from your own moral system, which may not be that of the text itself. And also it tends to just be abstracted, more universal

categories.

And does it really deal with the complexity of concrete events? The narrative form has an ability to tease out moral truth in a way that something more abstract does not. When we actually experience events, they occur within the complexity and the ambiguity of a form to which narrative is more apt. We don't think and experience things in terms of law naturally.

The principles of law are very abstract. And how do you bring those down to bear upon specific events? Narrative is one of the ways that you see the moral import of specific actions and how those actions play out and then how those actions can be directed and related to deeper moral principles. It's also a way that we can see different types of persons.

So when we think about the reading of Genesis, for instance, we often think just in terms of characters who are good or bad, faithful or unfaithful, believing or unbelieving. And that's a very binary and unhelpful way of viewing the text. It's very limiting and it's not really one that gives us much to work with.

If we're thinking about a deeper understanding of the text, that's not the way to go about it. Rather, what we need is something that gives us an appreciation of the difference between a Reuben and a Simeon and Levi and a Judah and a Joseph. And what's the difference between an Isaac character and an Abraham character? All of these represent different types of persons.

And it's not straightforwardly faithful, unfaithful. There are different traits. Joseph, a key theme in his life is loyalty.

Is he going to be loyal to his father? And he's got his questions of loyalty to his original, to Isaac, then the question of loyalty to Potiphar. Is he going to be loyal when being loyal means that he will be thrown in prison? Is he going to go for true loyalty or the appearance of loyalty? And then the relationship with Pharaoh as well. Is he someone who is just loyal to the king that he serves? And he will do anything for whatever authority he's under, but never actually thinks about the deeper moral import and possibly the need to go against the authority figure.

These are big questions for the character of Joseph. For Levi, as we read through the biblical narrative, Levi is characterized by violent zeal. And that violent zeal is something that is much needed at certain points of crisis.

It comes into the fore in the story of the Exodus. But yet earlier on in Revenge for the Rape of Dinah, it's not a trait that is seen in an entirely positive light. But yet nor is it seen as entirely negative.

It's presented in contrast to Jacob's own failure to act. And then the act of Simeon plays

off against that. Is Simeon's violence just like the violence of Levi? Later on, we'll see Levi and Simeon coming into opposition and the difference between their two characters emerging at that point.

What about the character of Judah? Why is it that Judah ends up becoming the tribe of the kings? What is it about his character? And each one of these types is not just good, bad. It's a more complex assembling of characteristics. And in these characteristics, we begin to discern something about different traits, where they're useful, where they're not useful, where they're dangerous, where they have potential.

How do you order a nation with these different traits at that point of best use? Now, those aren't things that many pastors think about. And partly this is because we're not reading the text typologically. We're not thinking about the way that types are playing out.

We're thinking very much in terms of good, bad, very basic moral judgments. And we miss a lot as a result. And so our failure to tease apart morally ambiguous events and discern more complex characters and the very complex judgments that scripture casts upon events, that is something that typology can rectify or can at least remedy to some extent.

It equips us to make those sorts of judgments. And then it helps us to recognize God's hand in history, to see that God is acting in all these situations. When we go through the same pattern again, we think, I've heard this before.

This is an Exodus pattern. And obviously, we can see God's hand at work again. And we can expect certain things.

There is a sense of a pattern playing out, and we may be in the middle of it, and we're waiting for things to come. It also helps people to remember scripture better. Scripture isn't easy to remember.

But when you have a sense of types, you can cluster events together. And so when you're reading scripture, you're not dealing with just isolated events, just one in sequence after another. You're dealing with a more unified body of material that's glued together by all these different connections and cross connections.

Now, I've found I've done a lot of memory work in the past just for memorizing words, because I'm a word nerd. But when it comes down to memorizing words, you don't go through the dictionary and just memorize one word by one word. What you do is you memorize clusters of words.

So you can move from one to the other very quickly. So I used to learn large clusters of words. I'd learn a complete anagram set.

And then I'd do that for every five-letter word in the dictionary. And that was actually a pretty speedy process. And it enables you to move from one word to another very quickly and to retain them in your memory far better than you would do if they were just isolated.

And it's the same with scripture. If you want to really memorize scripture, if you want to really know scripture well, get involved in typology, because typology helps you to see that these aren't isolated events, but every single event is connected to others. And so you can move from one to another very quickly.

And these events start to become, as it were, a land rising out of the sea of forgetfulness. And each one connected draws other things out with it. That's the way to remember things.

More generally, it's the way to remember scripture, connect the stories together. Further thing, it reveals the way that scripture functions not just as bare history, but as myth, with deep archetypes being played out throughout time. Now, we often polarize the idea of history and myth, that myth is things that didn't really happen.

History is fact. But myth is not just about whether things happened or didn't happen. There can be such a thing as true myth.

And scripture is true myth. It's about things that happened, but in a way that discloses deep archetypes at play. So we can see the fall narrative playing out on several occasions.

We see it occurring at the end of the events of the flood, with Noah in the drinking of the fruit, with the wine and becoming naked and judgment and shame and all these sorts of things. We see it in the story of Israel and the golden calf. We see it in the story of Jacob and Esau and the deception and his giving up his birthright.

All of these stories have a fall pattern. And what we're seeing there is a deep archetype. We're also seeing the archetype playing out as the woman deceives the serpent figure.

Within scripture, we see this on several occasions. Women deceive serpent figures. And as they deceive the serpent figure, they're playing out something about the woman's enmity with the serpent.

And they're showing the way that redemption will come. All of these are ways that scripture works, not just as isolated events, but as a larger structure and pattern of events. And deep within those, we're seeing structures that are revealed through that.

So for instance, the sacrifice of the firstborn son, of the only begotten son, that's a pattern that's deep in scripture. It's playing out in the story of the binding of Isaac. It's playing out in the story of the exodus.

It's playing out on several other occasions. And then we get to the story of Christ, and we know that story already. In the same way as we read the sacrifices, and we see the sacrifices connecting to the narratives, and then the narratives and the sacrifices interpret what Christ does.

And so typology does lead us to Christ, but often it does so by a very circuitous route. It doesn't lead us directly to that. And very often, I think what people are looking for is the direct one-to-one correlation between an Old Testament event and Christ.

And so we read the story of the Old Testament, and then we point directly to Christ, and that's the meaning. But that's not how typology usually works. Typology works by connecting stories together in a lower level.

So if you're reading the story of David, you're supposed to connect it with the story of Joseph and of Jacob. And then when you read those stories in parallel, it reveals something about David. And then when you go to the New Testament, you see something about the son of David.

It equips us to derive ethical meaning as well. So myth is something that helps us to act. With myth, we're directed into patterns of action.

And when Scripture plays out these patterns over time, what you're seeing is ethical meaning being revealed, but you're also seeing ethical direction being given. It's how Scripture means, how its scriptural narrative makes its point. What we struggle with often is how do you get meaning from scriptural narrative? And for many evangelicals, it's just scriptural narrative is true.

It happened. And there's not much beyond that. I mean, what does it mean that it happened? Oh, it shows that God's powerful in history.

Yeah, it does that, but it doesn't really tell us a lot more than that. What you have a lot of the time is just using it as a place where we make our moral judgments. So David was faithful here.

David was unfaithful there. And at a point you think, well, did I really need the story of David to tell me this? Could I just read some other narrative and make judgments about that instead? Is there something within the text itself that is teaching me? And ethical meaning can derive from typology. So if you read the story of David, you'll see it playing off, as I've commented recently, against the story of Esau and Jacob.

And then you see the way that specific events play out. So David's sin with Bathsheba, as I wrote a piece on this a few days ago, published on the Theopolis website, that David's sin with Bathsheba leads to a number of typological events that connect him with the tragedy of Jacob's life, the tragic events that occurred to Jacob's sons. And when you see that connection, it helps you to cast a more discerning moral judgment upon



what just happened.

It also helps you to see that there are events in David's children that reflect his own sin. Amnon's sin with Tamar has many similarities with the sin that David commits with Bathsheba. Likewise, the sins of Absalom.

These characters are similar to each other. Absalom's sin with David's concubines takes place on the roof of David's house. Now, why is the roof of David's house significant? It's the same site where David himself stood where he first started his sin with Bathsheba.

Or he was in his bed beforehand. And Tamar is called in to visit Amnon, who's staying in his bed. Again, these are ways that help us to discern the meaning of David's action.

When you see the reflection of that action magnified in the next generation. And if we do not attend to those sorts of typological connections, we're just importing our own judgments and we're missing a lot of what the text is telling us about these things. It also helps us to disclose the deeper theological import of events.

So what does the event of Pentecost mean? When you read the event of Pentecost, is it just this four, mostly four verses telling you about rushing wind and tongues of flame and all these sorts of strange phenomena? And is that just it? Well, the meaning of Pentecost is found in the way that that narrative evokes so many other narratives. And each one of those narratives sheds a light upon what's taking place at Pentecost. Pentecost is a new temple, the descent of the spirit to fill this new house.

And within the rest of the New Testament, in the epistles, there's continued reflection upon what it means to be a living temple. Now, we are first disclosed to be a living temple in the event of Pentecost in its typological significance as connected with the descending to fill the tabernacle and the temple and all these different things that we see in the Old Testament. So Pentecost, the event in its typological significance, reveals the theological basis for the reflections that you have about ecclesiology in the epistles.

It teaches us that it's a new giving of the law. The leader of the people ascends to God's presence, receives something and gives it to the people about 50 days after the events of the Passover. That happens at Sinai and it also happens at Pentecost.

And there are other parallels and contrasts. So Pentecost is a site where 3,000 people are cut to the heart and brought to new life. Sinai is a place where 3,000 people are cut to the heart and killed as a result of their unfaithfulness.

So what you're seeing is a juxtaposition, the law and the spirit. And again, that's a theological theme that's playing out throughout the Pauline epistles. That theological theme is rooted in the typological meaning of an event.

It's a prophetic initiation. This is like one of those events that we see in Scripture with,

for instance, the events at the beginning of Ezekiel, the events in Isaiah 6, where the prophet is initiated in his mission, prepared his tongue, set alight, for instance, given this burning coal to prepare him to speak. This is what's happening with the tongues of flame descending.

It's preparing the prophet for the ministry. And the church has a prophetic ministry. And this is one of the things that again helps us to understand what the church is.

There's prophetic succession. Within Scripture, we see in the Old Testament, in 1 Kings 2, that the ascension of Elijah is the Pentecost of Elisha. Elijah ascends into heaven and his spirit, the double portion of his spirit, descends upon Elisha.

In the same way, Christ ascends into heaven and the church of the firstborn receives the double portion of the spirit and is equipped to continue the ministry and the mission that Christ started. It also relates to the events in Numbers 11 with Moses and the spirit of Moses being taken and placed upon the 70 elders. In the same way, we as the church are a body of people equipped with the spirit of Christ.

And so we act in the spirit of Christ. It connects to Mary bearing Christ in her womb. The spirit overshadows Mary and she bears Christ within her.

In the same way, the church is a mother, the mother of us all, and she's overshadowed by the spirit as she gives birth to her children. Again, this helps us to understand themes that are explored throughout the epistles. The epistles are working not with these abstract theological concepts, but with events and meanings derived from things that happen in history, from their typological connections.

We see again it's a reversal of Babel. It's bringing the nations together through the blessing. And it reverses what happened at Babel with the nations being separated as a result of a judgment.

It helps us to see that the blessing of Abraham is the gift of the spirit. And that's something that Paul explores in Galatians. It helps us to understand the church being anointed for ministry as Christ was anointed at the Jordan at the beginning of his ministry.

It's a receiving of the spirit of wisdom for rule. So if you read the story of first kings against the story of Acts, you'll see that the old king, the old Davidic king is on the scene preparing his successor. And then his successor has to set the stage for his ministry as king and remove certain people from office, place new people within office, et cetera.

And then receives the spirit of wisdom for rule. And in the same way as Solomon receives the spirit so he is wise for rule, the church receives the spirit of wisdom for rule. Now there are a dozen more things that I can mention about the story of Pentecost and its typological significance and how that plays into our theology.

But this is just a very basic aspect of what typology is about, how it helps us to see the meaning of events and what all of that implies for us. And it implies a lot for us because much of the import of typology is to show us that we are part of the story, that this story is one that we are part of, that the same connections that connect all these different narratives within scripture are connections that also reach out to us and grab us where we are, that we are part of the story. We are playing out these patterns.

Now how will we fit in with these patterns? When we play out these patterns it can be something like the repetition of the celebration of the Eucharist. Week by week we're celebrating the Eucharist, we're celebrating communion and every single week we're drawing, we're memorializing past events, that those events are becoming part of the rhythm of our lives. They're helping us to interpret our lives in terms of the structures and narrative forms of scripture.

It also helps us to do what Paul tells the Corinthians to do, to think upon the story of the Exodus for instance, as all these things happening to the people of Israel as examples for us, that this story is about us, that when we see these events in the wilderness they're not just about something that happened to some people back then that we can abstract some very vague lessons from as we reflect upon it and bring our own moral judgments to bear upon it. Rather our story is Exodus shaped and so as we see that our story is Exodus shaped we look back at all the other past stories of Exodus and we see what can we learn from these, how did they do it wrong, how can we play out the pattern in a positive way and learn from the bad patterns that were played out in the past. Likewise it's based upon a recognition that we are actually connected to these stories, that all these things happened to our forefathers, that this isn't just about another people another time, this is about our forefathers, Abraham our father.

Abraham is not just this guy back in the ancient near east who wanders around and has some strange things happen to him and is just a general example of a believer. No, he's our father and we walk in his footsteps, we follow his example, we are defined in relationship to him and typology is all about exploring family resemblances. Family resemblances that aren't exact likenesses but family resemblances that help us to recognize the fathers and the sons and learn the lessons of the fathers and take them on board and pass those on in turn.

So typology is a great import for pastoral ministry, it's something that needs to be used well. Often as you're going into a deep dive in the text you will not be able to take your congregation with you, you'll be going deeper than they can go. Often particularly when you're getting into the details of the Hebrew text at that point you should probably leave it and not lead your congregation to a point where they can't get back up again very easily.

Rather you need to go deep down into the text so that then you can help people to go to

the level that they can go to. There are many different levels that people can explore, some people it would just be a very basic level of seeing the rough analogies between Old Testament events and what happens in Christ and then how that connects to us but for others it will be deep patterns of deep matrix of events and how they are all related to each other in subtle ways that shed light upon each other and you can bring that understanding to bear upon people. You can draw your own applications and then use those applications to inform your judgments and teaching other people but you may not be able to explain all your working, that may take a bit more ability than the average person in the pew would have but everyone should be learning this stuff.

This is what helps us to understand a lot of liturgy, what helps us to understand the celebration of the sacraments. If you're just eating bread and drinking wine every week and it's just a bare picture, you're missing a lot of what will make that event make sense to people. Connect it to the Old Testament stories, connect it to the story of Passover, connect it to the story of Lady Wisdom's Feast, connect it to the story of Melchizedek, connect it to the story of the sacrifices, connect it to the story of let's say the baker and the cupbearer and the Joseph story.

All of these are Old Testament ways in which you can connect our story to the older story and they're valid ways, they're following routes that scripture itself maps out and typology is about tracing out these family resemblances, tracing the threads of the fabric of the biblical tapestry and as you trace those and threads you will learn a lot more about who you are, you'll learn a lot more about what our time is and then how to speak and act within it. Thank you very much for listening, Lord willing, you found this helpful and I hope you found this helpful. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow.

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