

Catholic Biblical Typology

Question: What is the word for when something that happened in the Old Testament happens again in the New Testament? typology?

Answer: Biblical typology refers to when a person, event, thing, etc.—usually from Old Testament times—foreshadows someone or something or event, etc., in the New Testament/New Covenant era. For example, in the Old Testament, Jonah's three days in the belly of a whale prefigure Jesus Christ's three days in the tomb (Matt. 12:38-42). In addition, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine (Gen. 14:17-20) prefigures Jesus' offering of his body and blood, soul and divinity under the appearances of bread and wine in the New Covenant (Matt. 26:26-28; Heb. 5:7-10). So we see that a similarity must exist between the type and the archetype, and yet the latter is always greater. In addition, the destruction of the Jerusalem in 70 A.D., which Jesus prophesied, prefigures the end of the world.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

III. The Holy Spirit, Interpreter of Scripture

109 In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way. To interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.

110 In order to discover the sacred authors' intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current. "For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression."

111 But since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is another and no less important principle of correct interpretation, without which Scripture would remain a dead letter. "Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written."

The Second Vatican Council indicates three criteria for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Spirit who inspired it.

112 1. Be especially attentive "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture". Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover.

The phrase "heart of Christ" can refer to Sacred Scripture, which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But the Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted.

113 2. Read the Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church". According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ("... according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church").

114 3. Be attentive to the analogy of faith. By "analogy of faith" we mean the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation.

The senses of Scripture

115 According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses. the profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church.

116 The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."

117 The spiritual sense. Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.

1. the allegorical sense. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism.
2. the moral sense. the events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction".
3. The anagogical sense (Greek: anagoge, "leading"). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

118 A medieval couplet summarizes the significance of the four senses:

The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith;
The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny.

119 "It is the task of exegetes to work, according to these rules, towards a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture in order that their research may help the Church to form a firmer judgement. For, of course, all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgement of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God."

"But I would not believe in the Gospel, had not the authority of the Catholic Church already moved me."
– St. Augustine

The unity of the Old and New Testaments

128 The Church, as early as apostolic times, and then constantly in her Tradition, has illuminated the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through typology, which discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son.

129 Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. Such typological reading discloses the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament; but it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself. Besides, the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament. As an old saying put it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.

130 Typology indicates the dynamic movement toward the fulfilment of the divine plan when "God [will] be everything to everyone." Nor do the calling of the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt, for example, lose their own value in God's plan, from the mere fact that they were intermediate stages.

That Moses Thing

by Mark J. Kelly, *The Catholic Answer Magazine*

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks . . . some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. —Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, chapter 36

One of the great joys of teaching is learning from your students. Whenever I introduce a course on sacred Scripture, I usually begin with an exercise in practical typology, which involves viewing Scripture with Catholic eyes. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the critical importance of typology:

"The Church, as early as apostolic times, and then constantly in her Tradition, has illuminated the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through typology, which discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefiguration of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son" (128).

The use of typology brings the Old Testament to light in the New Testament. In its basic meaning, a biblical "type" is akin to first building a shed so you are familiar with the concept before you build a full-size house (cf. CCC 129–130). When you learn to look at Scripture in a typological manner, all of holy writ begins to look Catholic. Below is an exercise that can help you begin building your own house of biblical understanding on a firm foundation (cf. Matt. 7:24).

Most of my students have little to no experience reading the Bible. To start them on their way, we begin with a familiar passage. We then reflect on its immediate and its extended meaning. What begins as a short exercise for my students suddenly grows. They soon catch the spirit of Catholic biblical interpretation and add many things I have never noticed before—until suddenly I become the student. Some of my pupils have named this exercise “That Moses Thing.” When done right, it tends to leave an imprint that is filled in as the course progresses. In teaching typology, it is best to simply “do it” in a practical manner. Too much talk can lead you down the wrong path. The exercise gives my students an ancient and easy first step in addressing Scripture.

I begin my course in the Bible with a reading of chapters one and two of Exodus. This covers the birth of Moses, his being found as an infant in the reeds, his growth, self-discovery, exile, and marriage. I ask one of my students to come to the board and write his fellow students’ observations. This is an exercise I take very little part in. The students tend to find great reward in their discoveries.

We read Exodus 1 and 2 without comment, and I ask them to form a picture in their minds of what this Moses looks like. Then I ask them to raise their hands and give a basic observation of any event in the life of Moses—even the smallest, least significant fact is acceptable. Students take turns saying Moses did this or he accomplished that or such and such happened to him. The students are responsible for the answers. I offer a minimum of assistance in adjusting the wording of what goes on the board. From reading Exodus 1 and 2 and anything else they know about Moses, they write facts on the board. My latest exercise in “primeval” typology looked like this:

MOSES

- Evil king tried to kill him as a baby
- He was hidden from this evil king
- He was saved by women: his mother; Miriam, his sister; and Pharaoh’s daughter
- Pharaoh’s daughter, the princess, adopted him
- Therefore Moses was a prince
- Long period of silence from youth to adulthood
- He had a secret identity
- He saved Hebrews
- Went from prince to pauper
- Saved women at a well
- Saved Gentiles
- Became a shepherd

General Observations:

- Moses was a prophet
- Often rejected by his own people
- Led God’s people from bondage
- Led to the Promised Land
- Gave a law to live by from a mountain
- Knew God better than anybody else

After this, I ask the students to take one last look at Moses and then on the right-hand side of the board I write in large letters the name *Christ*. “Tell me what you know about the life of Christ,” I say. As the students respond, I inscribe on the right side of the board the corresponding connection, fulfillment, or parallel to the life of Moses from the life of Christ. In most cases, those calling out observations form their own insight, raise their hands, and ask, “What are you doing with this Moses-Jesus thing?”

Well before I answer the question of what they just saw and accomplished; they finish the simple side-by-side chart that eventually looks like this:

MOSES

1. Evil king tried to kill him as a baby (Ex. 1:22)
2. He was hidden from this evil king (Ex. 2:2)
3. He was saved by women: his mother (Ex. 2:3); Miriam, his sister (2:4, 7–8); and Pharaoh's daughter (2:5–10)
4. Pharaoh's daughter, the princess, adopted him (Ex. 2:10)
5. Therefore Moses was a prince (Ex. 2:10)
6. Long period of silence from youth to adulthood
7. He had a secret identity (Ex. 2:11–12)
8. He saved Hebrews (Ex. 2:11–12)
9. Went from prince to pauper (Ex. 2:15–19)
10. Saved women at a well (Ex. 2:16–19)
11. Saved gentile (Ex. 2:16–19)
12. Became a shepherd (Ex. 3:1)

General Observations:

1. Moses was a prophet
2. Often rejected by his own people
3. Led God's people from bondage
4. Led to the Promised Land
5. Gave a law to live by from a mountain
6. Knew God better than anybody else

CHRIST

1. Herod tried to kill baby Jesus (Matt. 2:16)
2. An angel said to hide the child (Matt. 2:13)
3. Mary saved and helped Jesus (Matt. 2:14, Luke 2:48), and other women help Jesus (Luke 8:1–3)
4. Joseph adopted him (Matt. 1:25)
5. Was the Prince of Peace
6. Long period of silence from youth to adulthood
7. The Messianic secret—Jesus healed and asked that it remain secret (Matt. 8:4)
8. Of course he did!
9. Went from owning the universe to being a common workman (John 1:1–3, Mark 6:3)
10. Saved a Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:6–7, 25–26)
11. Saved *all* gentiles (Luke 2:29–32)
12. Is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11)

General Observations:

1. Jesus is *the* Prophet
2. His own people rejected him
3. Leads us from bondage of sin
4. Leads into the Kingdom of God
5. Gave us the Gospels and the New Testament
6. Of course he does!

I explain that what they have just seen is typology, the time-honored Judeo-Christian way of looking at the Bible. Scripture is best viewed as an organic, connected whole. “Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart” (CCC 112).

The individual books of the Bible may seem disparate and unrelated. So might the organs of a dissected frog. We may lay out all its organs and say, “Look—there is the liver, there is the stomach, there are the intestines. These things constitute a frog.” The problem is, a dead frog catches no flies. We need to look at the living amphibian in order to see how the organs work together in order to give it life. Typology is the ancient and ever-new, organic way of looking at unified Scripture.

The exercise above not only teaches my students about typology but also has them participating in real Catholic interpretation. My students may never know Cyril of Jerusalem or even come close to correctly pronouncing his seminal work *Mystagogic Catechesis*, but they will be able to interpret sacred Scripture much like he did. Freshmen and sophomore high school students with little to no knowledge of the Bible made more than half of the christological connections listed on this page. They simply looked at the passage with Christian eyes. The exercise gives them confidence and a beginning in mining the depths of Scripture.