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“Baptized in the Sea”

An Invitation to Typological Interpretation

Keith D. Stanglin

The typological interpretation of the Bible—that is, when a person, object or event in an earlier narrative (the type) is seen as analogous to or representing a later counterpart (the antitype)—is a venerable exegetical tradition. And there is no greater, more richly symbolic and captivating or more ubiquitous typology in all of Scripture than the Exodus story.

From the crossing of the Red Sea to the crossing of the Jordan River, the Exodus narrative is a paradigmatic account of salvation. By the time of the prophets, the Exodus story had already become a model (*typos*) for interpreting Judah’s release from Babylonian captivity and restoration to the promised land. The Gospels interpret aspects of Jesus’ life in light of the Exodus. The apostles relate the atonement, the church and the sacraments to miracles of the Exodus. Quite simply, much of the Bible cannot be understood or fully appreciated without knowledge of this ancient story of salvation.

With the rise of the Enlightenment and modern exegetical principles, however, typological interpretation fell out of fashion. As the exegetical emphasis shifted to the sole pursuit of human authorial intention accompanied by increasing fascination with the literal sense of Scripture, spiritual or figurative meanings were either marginalized or overtly rejected. Anything that smacked of a doctrinal or allegorical reading was no longer fit for academic study of the Bible, a discipline whose practitioners spent a couple of centuries successfully purging it of so-called dogmatic theology. If spiritual readings were to find a home at all, it was in the pulpit, from which scholarly exegesis had become aloof.

Since its heyday, the historical-critical method and the Enlightenment assumptions that undergird it have been roundly criticized and supplemented by unashamedly theological interpretations of the whole canon of Scripture. Yet both educated ministers and churchly scholars still struggle with the relationship between, on the one hand, the academic study of the biblical texts and, on the other hand, the doctrinal and moral application of the church’s Scripture. How can one person practice both disciplines? How do these hermeneutical methods integrate?

Over the years, this tension has filtered down into what is common wisdom among many at least since the time of the Reformation—that the New Testament writers’ use of allegory and typology is acceptable, but we have no warrant to go beyond it in our search for the author’s meaning. Thus I remember being advised as an undergraduate, “Typology is permissible as long as you don’t find Christ under every rock.” What I could never understand, though, was why it should be an apostolic privilege to identify Christ as an Old Testament rock (1 Cor 10.4), but off-limits for every other Christian. Rather, there is no reason to exclude such texts as examples of faithful exegesis and application.

The concern, of course, is with allegory run amok, which in the history of the church has been an instrument for supporting controversial doctrines such as papal supremacy. Typological and allegorical interpretation, however, is rightly practiced with limits and controls. The rule of faith and use of other Scriptures provide limits in biblical interpretation. In addition, one should never seek to defend a point of doctrine based solely on an allegorical interpretation. Finally, the acknowledgment and use of typology should not effectively efface the original type and its meaning.

This last caution pertains to the most common occupational hazard of typology, that might lead someone to think first and only of baptism when she hears about the flood (1 Pet 3.21) or, more commonly, that one would jump immediately and exclusively to the crucifixion of Jesus when reading about the suffering servant. Attention to the meaning of both “Act 1” (Old Testament) and “Act 2” (New Testament), to the neglect of neither, is necessary as we consider the significance for “Act 3” (our story). A Christian reading of the Old Testament must retain its integrity, but always in light of the New Testament and of Christ. Research into the original meaning must not preclude but instead enhance the spiritual and doctrinal applications that are gleaned, in keeping with the rule of faith.

Despite the best efforts of our Enlightenment predecessors, elaboration of the Exodus typology never ceased in the church. A brief survey of hymns is proof enough of the lingering power of this story. “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,/ Pilgrim through this barren land...”; “...Though I walk through the wilderness,/ Blessed be your name”; and the countless songs that invoke the Jordan and Canaan—these all testify that the events of the Exodus, wilderness wandering and entrance into the promised land still help us interpret and live the Christian life.

As already noted, the Bible itself uses the Exodus as a template for interpreting later events, most notably the return from exile and the life of Jesus Christ. But the primary hermeneutical point of departure for the connection between the Hebrew and Christian journeys is 1 Corinthians 10.1–4, where Paul engages in a typological interpretation of the Exodus. By means of this text, we are invited to see our story through the lens of the Exodus story.

Although I grant the legitimacy of allegorical and typological interpretations that go beyond what is explicit in Scripture, in this article I offer a short homily on this Pauline typology of the Exodus as an example of typological interpretation for the church. It was preached in the assembly of a small church plant that was led by Danny Mathews’ family and mine. We initiated the group partly for the purpose of liturgical renewal, bringing the best practices of the ancient church into the present context, with an emphasis on communal participation, listening to Scripture and sharing in the Lord’s Supper.

Since it incorporates elements of traditional exegesis, the following homily fit well into the classical liturgy. Its specific setting was before the baptism of Taylor Mathews in 2010, which also included a full baptismal liturgy and Eucharist. The latter detail is not an insignificant addendum, for the preaching of the word, communal confession of faith and baptism culminated in the Eucharistic sharing of milk and honey—all of which are meant to proclaim the gospel in a way that unites believers with one another and with the Exodus event and the Christ event, thereby connecting worshipers to the past, present and future.

Homily

There are some stories in the Bible that capture the human imagination more than other stories. You can find evidence for this by noticing the stories that make it onto the big screen and the small screen. I have yet to see a movie about Israel’s covenant renewal at Mount Ebal or about Israel almost exterminating the Benjaminites. These could potentially be riveting stories to tell, but they don’t draw our attention as easily as other biblical dramas.

Clearly, the life of Jesus, and particularly his suffering, is the greatest box office attraction the Bible has to offer. And in the Old Testament, the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt has been depicted on film in memorable ways. These are the stories that pull us out of our twenty-first century pew, and into the world of the Bible. So what do the story of Jesus and the story of the Exodus have in common, besides just making great movies? They are stories about salvation. They show us the lengths to which God goes in order to save his people. These stories testify to the grace of God, a gift he offers to people who don’t deserve it and to people who often don’t even want it.

If you were to ask Jews to recall a biblical story that testifies to God’s grace and salvation, they would without hesitation mention the Exodus. What the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ mean to us now, the *Exodus* meant to God’s people before Christ. The New Testament itself draws a parallel between the salvation of the Exodus and our salvation in Christ. Listen to the following summary of the stories—and ask yourself which one is being described, the Exodus or our salvation in Christ?

God chose a people (who were often stubborn) to save out of slavery, for the purpose of serving him. When their destruction seemed imminent, he saved them through the water. He entered into a covenant with them. God gave them spiritual food and drink as he led them by his presence toward their destination. At the end of their pilgrimage, he brought his covenant people to settle in the promised land that flows with milk and honey.

Is this the Exodus story or the gospel story? Yes—it is both.

Let us now focus on one element of that story, the water. Let us meditate on the mystery and meaning of water from God's word (Exod 14.10–14, 29–31):

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. ¹¹ They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

¹³ Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."...

²⁹ But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. ³⁰ That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. ³¹ And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

This story is certainly very familiar to most believers. But it is also worth recounting, in order to focus on it and draw some important points out of it. The primary point I want to make is this: the water represents the end *and* the beginning.

First of all, the water marks the end of Israel's slavery. This is the culmination of God's preceding actions. All the plagues, the Passover lamb—all of it—was intended to harden Pharaoh, rescue Israel and bring glory to God's name. Standing at the shore of the Red Sea, with the Egyptian army pressing in behind them, God's people had come to a significant moment. Some of the Israelites thought, "This is the end all right—the end of us!" So they complain to Moses and to God: "I don't want to get run over by a chariot. And I don't know how to swim or tread water. Boy, is anyone here old enough to remember the good old days in Egypt, when we were slaving over those bricks, before Moses came along and messed up everything?" That kind of service seemed preferable to this disastrous end.

Yet, this water represented a different end—the culmination of God's saving plan for Israel to rescue them forever out of bondage. It meant rescue for the weak. For those who could not fight, Moses said in verse 14, "Stand still and be quiet; the Lord will fight for you." In the water, while we stand still in silent awe and wonder, the Lord defeats our enemies and brings new hope to us by bringing us safely through. The creator God, like he did in the beginning, separated the waters and brought dry ground out of the midst of chaos. The redeemer God brings new life from the clutches of death. This water event represents a new creation.

Even so, not only is the water the end of one phase, but it is also the beginning of another phase. It was the beginning of a new life. This new life was for Israel something exciting and scary. They were freed, but they were *not* independent. They were rescued, but not without purpose. Coming through the water meant that they no longer belonged to Pharaoh, or even to themselves—they now belonged to God. Far from independence, it meant that now they must depend on God for their every need: drink, food, even their laws.

Because God saved Israel, verse 31 says that they now feared God and put their trust in him. Because God delivered them, he entered into covenant with them and gave them teachings that would be for their benefit. They were now freed to be slaves of God. The trials and temptations would continue. But they were God's people. As long as they remained God's covenant partners, he would be on their side.

Because the water is an end and a beginning for Israel, the water was a liminal event; going through the water meant a transition made possible by God's grace. Borrowing language from Exodus 19 and Hosea, we can say it was a transition from slavery to royalty, from an alien people to a distinct nation, from Pharaoh's possession to God's own possession, called out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2.9–10).

Now, I have been speaking *exclusively* of the implications of God saving Israel from the Egyptian army through the water of the Red Sea. For those of you who are very perceptive, you recognize that everything I've said relates equally well to the moment of Christian salvation, visibly realized at the water, at baptism. Remember 1 Corinthians 10.2—Paul, speaking of Old Testament Israel's exodus, says that they were baptized in the sea. Then he goes on to draw parallels between the disobedience of the baptized Israelites and the disobedience of the baptized Corinthians. So Paul invites us to consider the similarities between Israel's salvation and ours.

For hours or weeks or years, God's actions through the Holy Spirit soften our hearts, leading us to the shore, the culmination of his saving plan. As Paul says in Romans 6, immersion marks the end of slavery to sin. Since Scripture makes the comparison, I will too. Some people claim that baptism cannot be salvific without it being a work! Which leads me to ask: Was Israel's crossing of the Sea *their* work? Did they earn their salvation by putting one foot in front of the other and walking on that dry ground? It would be ludicrous to even suggest such a thing, so let us not say such things about baptism. Like the crossing of the sea—which was God's grace, his gift, his work—baptism is not our work. Far from it! It is the gracious gift of God to his people.

Baptism is God's work! As we stand still on the shore, with nowhere else to run, we look on with silent awe and wonder at God's salvation. It is a moment of fearing God and trusting in him. Baptism is the confession of our own inability to save ourselves, and the confession of our faith in God's ability and willingness to save us. It is rescue for the weak.

And this is not only an end to slavery, but also a new beginning. Like ancient Israel, as we come out of the water, we enter a new phase of existence, exciting and scary. We are rescued for the purpose of serving God. We depend on God for our spiritual food and drink, submitting our lives to his will. We enter into covenant with God, following his laws, not out of compulsion but out of joyful gratitude. It doesn't take long to realize that trials and temptations continue. Sometimes they even *increase*, for Satan knows that he is losing. But God is on our side. We are now God's kingdom of priests, a holy nation, God's possession.

And so, to sum up, this parallel between the Exodus and the gospel on which we have been focusing is the mystery of the water. But the water is not an end in itself. The water always points us to Christ, who makes the sign of baptism effective, who himself is the beginning and the end, the one who pioneers and completes the faith (Heb 12.2). Christ, who himself stood at the shore to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. Christ, the Passover lamb of the Exodus and the Lamb of our salvation, whose blood washes away our sins, making our garments clean and white before God.

The water pointed Israel to the one who saved them. And so after the Israelites passed through the parted Red Sea, they sang a song in Exodus 15 that applies equally well to the context of baptism and to the God who loves us: "The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him" (Exod 15.2).

The water represents a *transition* made possible by God's grace. This transition, this watershed moment, is well put in a song by William Sleeper:

Out of my bondage, sorrow and night...
 Into thy freedom, gladness and light,
 Jesus, I come to thee.¹

1. "Jesus, I Come," lyrics on *RUF Hymnbook Online Hymn Resource*, April 23, 2013, <http://www.igracemusic.com/hymnbook/hymns/j02.html>.

Suggestions for Further Reading

My own insights on the controlled use of allegory and typology in biblical interpretation have developed over the years simply by reading, along with the Bible, large chunks of premodern biblical interpreters and a few scholarly works on premodern biblical interpretation. If a person has only twenty minutes to devote to this study and can read only one thing, do not neglect:

Steinmetz, David C. "The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis." *Theology Today* 37/1 (1980), 27–38.

The following list contains a few more or less accessible books that should stimulate further thoughts along these same lines.

Froelich, Karlfried, ed. *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. Sources of Early Christian Thought; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. A brief collection of excerpts from biblical interpreters of the early church.

Hanson, R. P. C. *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*. Introduction by Joseph W. Trigg. 1959. Reprint, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. A classic study of the ablest biblical interpreter of the early church.

Leithart, Peter. *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009. Chapter 2 is on typology.

Legaspi, Michael C. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Chapter 1 contains a compelling account of the shift from premodern to modern exegesis.

Thompson, John L. *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. Discusses a number of difficult biblical texts and how they have been handled in the history of exegesis, dealing with typology throughout.

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