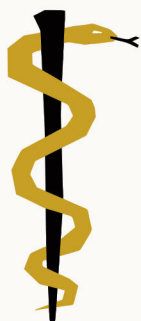
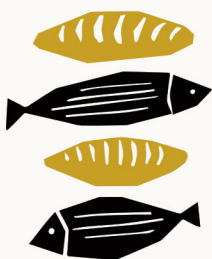


# BIBLICAL



# TYPOLGY



HOW THE OLD TESTAMENT POINTS TO CHRIST,  
HIS CHURCH, AND THE CONSUMMATION

## VERN S. POYTHRESS

“I am delighted to see Vern Poythress’s book on biblical typology. His knowledge of the Scriptures and the interpretive principles necessary to handle them responsibly is unsurpassed. He presents the complex topic of biblical types clearly and simply so that laypeople and scholars alike will benefit. This is a book that you will not want to miss.”

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“As readers learn how the New Testament relates to the Old, they will encounter the subject and language of typology. I’m grateful for Vern Poythress providing this accessible resource so that interpreters can think about how the patterns and shadows of the Old Testament point to Christ, the church, and the new creation. The divine author of Holy Scripture is summing up all things in his Son. Let Poythress help you identify key symbols and types along the storyline of redemption.”

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## *Biblical Typology*



# Biblical Typology

*How the Old Testament Points to Christ,  
His Church, and the Consummation*

Vern S. Poythress

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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*To my wife, Diane*





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# Introduction: What Is Typology?

WHAT IS *TYPOLGY*? Typology is the study of *types*. This study belongs to the larger subject of principles for interpreting the Bible. And what is a type? Roughly speaking, a *type* is a symbol specially designed by God to point forward to a fulfillment.<sup>1</sup> The word *type* is used here as a technical term. It is not to be confused with the more common meaning of the English word *type*, such as when we say, “A nail is one *type* of fastener,” that is, one *kind* of fastener, one *category* of fastener.

## Priests as Types

What is one example of a type? The priests in the Old Testament are *types* pointing forward to Christ. God specially appointed Aaron, the brother of Moses, and Aaron’s sons, as priests (Num. 8–9). The priests

<sup>1</sup> There is more than one way of defining the technical word *type*. And there are disputes about whether it should encompass a wider or narrower group of events and institutions and personages, together with the texts that discuss them. The simple description that we have just provided can suffice for a starting point. It has an affinity to Patrick Fairbairn’s description, which singles out two elements: resemblance and divine design. Under the aspect of design he says, “[Types] were designed by Him to foreshadow and prepare for the better things of the Gospel” (Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture: Viewed in Connection with the Whole Series of . . . The Divine Dispensations* [New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1911], vol. 1, book 1, ch. 2, p. 46 [1.1.2.46]; we will include volume, book, and chapter numbers to help readers who may have a different edition). Fairbairn includes in his picture the idea of temporal unfolding in the history of redemption. He also affirms that types are “symbols” (1.1.2.52).

Complexities will be considered later. For more on the underlying Greek words, see our appendix B. For the relationship with analogy, see chapters 15, 25, and 29, and appendix C.

were symbolic personages. They symbolized the need that people have for a mediator to represent them and reconcile them to God through the forgiveness of their sins. Christ is the final great priest, who actually accomplished forgiveness and reconciliation by his own death and resurrection (Heb. 4:14–10:39). Before Christ came, God appointed priests to symbolize what Christ would do. That is the basic idea: a type symbolizes something beforehand. It *prefigures* or foreshadows something else still to come.

### The Larger Picture

In this book we explore how to find types in the Bible and how to interpret them. Our exploration is for practical purposes. We want to understand the Old Testament more deeply and to profit spiritually from it. We want to be able to show others how to grow in understanding it. This book is for ordinary readers of the Bible and for pastors and teachers who guide others in understanding the Bible. It builds on a long and helpful history of interpretation of biblical types. That history must be left to other books.<sup>2</sup> Readers who want to know how this book differs from past studies of types are referred to appendix C.

2 Fairbairn, *Typology of Scripture*, 1.1.1.1–41; Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Τύπος Structures* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 17–93; K. J. Woollcombe, “The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology,” in G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology*, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 22 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1957), 39–75; Jean Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1960); Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 23–58. For an analysis of the recent state of discussion, see G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 13–27.

PART I

---

INTRODUCING THE  
CHALLENGE OF THE  
OLD TESTAMENT

*It is a major challenge to see the relevance of the Old Testament to our lives in Christ. Types are one important way in which we may read the Old Testament as a testimony to Christ, not merely as historical records or instances of moral examples.*



## Understanding the Old Testament

BEFORE WE FOCUS MORE DIRECTLY ON TYPES, let us consider briefly a larger question: Why is it important to understand the Old Testament?

### The Challenge of Jesus's Understanding of the Old Testament

On two separate occasions, recorded in Luke 24, Jesus indicates that the Old Testament is about him. The first of these occurred as he encountered two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And *beginning with Moses and all the Prophets*, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things *concerning himself*. (Luke 24:25–27)

Later, he spoke in similar terms to a larger group of disciples:

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything *written about me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand *the Scriptures*, and said to them, "*Thus it is written*, that *the Christ* should suffer and on the third day

rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47)

It is worth looking at these two passages more carefully, especially the second one. “The Scriptures” here are the Old Testament. The Jews of Jesus’s time recognized three major divisions in the Old Testament. The “Law of Moses” contains the first five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy. “The Prophets” includes both what the Jews call the “Former Prophets,” namely the historical books Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings; and the “Latter Prophets,” the prophetic books Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea through Malachi. The third division in the Jewish reckoning is “the Writings,” which is more miscellaneous and includes all the other books of the Jewish canon (Ruth, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and Daniel). The Psalms is the most prominent in this third group, “the Writings.” According to Jesus, all three groups testify to his suffering and his resurrection. In Luke 24:44–47, the phrase “Thus it is written” introduces a summary of the thrust of the whole Old Testament, that is, “the Scriptures” that existed at the time when Jesus spoke, the time before the composition of any New Testament books.<sup>1</sup>

We may believe that what Jesus said is true, but still not see *how* it is true. How can it be that “the Scriptures” as a whole are about his suffering and his resurrection?

After Jesus spoke with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (v. 32). They saw the true meaning of the Old Testament, and they were transformed. But we were not there with them to hear what Jesus said.

Jesus, however, taught not only these two disciples, but, as we have seen, a larger group, during the time between his resurrection and his ascension (Luke 24:44–51; see also Acts 1:3). Among these people

1 Iain M. Duguid, *Is Jesus in the Old Testament?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 9.

were some of the human authors of New Testament books. The New Testament was written by people inspired by the Holy Spirit. Jesus sent the Spirit to continue his teaching, and this includes teaching them the meaning of the Old Testament:

“I [Jesus] still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will *guide you into all the truth*, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12–15)

So through the New Testament we have instruction that enables us rightly to appreciate the Old Testament. And that appreciation means understanding how the Old Testament points to Christ.

### **The Old Testament Designed for Us**

We should understand that God gave us the whole Bible for our instruction, not only the New Testament. Romans 15:4 says,

For whatever was written in former days was written *for our instruction*, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Likewise 1 Corinthians 10 indicates the value of the record of Israel in the wilderness:

Now these things [written in the books of Moses] took place as examples *for us*, that we might not desire evil as they did. (v. 6)

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down *for our instruction*, on whom the end of the ages has come. (v. 11)



## Other Approaches to the Old Testament

God designed the Old Testament Scriptures for us. But *how* are we supposed to profit from them?

Luke 24 indicates that their meaning is found in their pointing forward to Christ. But in the church through the centuries, this meaning has not always been fully understood. We may consider various alternative paths that Christians have followed.

### *1. Use Just the New Testament*

One path is to use just the New Testament. Quite a few pastors give sermons and teaching almost exclusively from the New Testament. Likewise, ordinary Bible readers may ignore the Old Testament and read only from the New.

The New Testament is indeed the word of God. But it makes up less than a third of the whole. This strategy of ignoring the Old Testament is not compatible with what God himself says in Romans 15:4 and elsewhere about the continuing value of the Old Testament.

### *2. Use the Old Testament for Moral Examples, Good and Bad*

A second path is to use the Old Testament as a series of moral examples. This approach is called “exemplary preaching.” How should we evaluate it? Indeed, there are good and bad moral examples in the Old Testament. And there are quite a few mixed examples as well. There are people like Abraham and David who are examples of faith but who had serious moral failures at some time in their life. There are people like Ahab who were wicked, but who humbled themselves (1 Kings 21:27–29). The mixed examples are in fact quite confusing if what we want are clear, black-and-white moral examples.

But the main trouble is deeper. Such use of the Bible runs a serious danger of seeming to have a message that says we are supposed to save ourselves by our own strength in moral striving. “Be good like these good examples.” It ends up being moralism, with the message, “Save yourself;” not the good news of what God has done in Christ. Man, not

God, ends up being at the center of the picture. The Bible does contain moral examples, but the point in recording them is never *merely* to be an example. There is instruction about God and his ways, ways that come to a climax in the work of Christ. Christ is the Savior. He, not our own moral striving, rescues us from sin and death.

### *3. Use the Old Testament Simply as a Historical Record*

A third path is to use the Old Testament simply as a historical record. The Old Testament records what people said and did long ago. If we choose to, we can read it merely for information. Some people enjoy reading history. There is nothing wrong in studying the Bible for its historical information. But if that is *all* we do, we are treating the Bible as no different from any other record of the past. So this path of study is not adequate.

### *4. Use the Old Testament for What It Teaches Us about God's Nature*

A fourth path is to use the Old Testament to teach us about God. The Old Testament does teach us about God. And God is the same throughout all time. So the Old Testament teaching about God is relevant to us now. Still, this approach does not yet do justice to what Jesus indicates in Luke 24—that the Old Testament is not just about God in general, but more specifically about Jesus's suffering and glory. It points forward to the redemption that he accomplished in history, once and for all.

### *5. Be Clever: Find Strange Secrets*

A fifth path is to find special secrets in the Old Testament. Some people study the Old Testament to find secrets. They find things there that few other people have found. Their interpretations are clever and colorful, but strange. The trouble here is the obvious one: Are the “secrets” that they claim to find, secrets from the mouth of God, or are they secrets invented by the cleverness and overactive imagination of the person who is searching for them?

## The Accessibility of the Bible

How do we evaluate the idea of secret messages? We might consider again the key passages in the New Testament about the value of the Old Testament: not only Luke 24, Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 10:1–11, but also Matthew 5:17–20, 19:3–9, 2 Timothy 3:15–17, and others. Such passages confirm that God caused the Bible to be written for everyone, not just for a special spiritual elite who allegedly would have secret access to secret truths. The New Testament writers were specially inspired by the Holy Spirit. But when they appeal to a passage from the Old Testament, the atmosphere is one in which they expect their audience to see the truth on the basis of what the Old Testament passage actually says. For example, the Bereans in Acts 17 are commended for “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (v. 11). And as a consequence, “Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men” (v. 12). The Old Testament passages they examined had meanings open to examination, not secret meanings that had no connection with what an ordinary person could see.

We must also pay attention to a complementary truth. The work of the Holy Spirit is essential in bringing to life people who are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). Concerning Lydia, the seller of purple goods, the Bible says, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). The Holy Spirit has to work. His work is essential if people are going to be saved by placing their trust in Christ. But the hearts and minds of the hearers are also active. Lydia paid attention.

A similar principle holds for us as modern readers. We are supposed to ask God to help us and to send his Holy Spirit to open our hearts. We are not going to understand as we should unless the Holy Spirit gives us understanding:

[Paul prays] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the *Spirit* of wisdom and of revelation in the *knowledge* of him, having the eyes of your hearts *enlightened*, that you may *know* . . . (Eph. 1:17–18)

In addition, as the Holy Spirit works in us, we are supposed to “pay attention.” Lydia paid attention to what Paul said, words inspired by the Spirit. We are supposed to pay attention to everything the Bible says. The problem is not that the message of the Bible is inaccessible, but that our hearts can be hardened by sin.

### **How to Use the Old Testament Wisely**

In sum, the alternative paths do not really do justice to the role that God intended the Old Testament to have. We need to grow in our ability to understand the meaning of the Old Testament in relation to its fulfillment in Christ. One of the principal paths for this purpose is typology, the study of *types* (in the special sense of the word). The main purpose of this book is to develop skill in the study of types.

