

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

—2 Timothy 2:15

How to Read and Study the Old Testament, Part 1

Preliminary Questions

- What makes the OT difficult to understand?

Potential Methods for Reading and Studying the Old Testament

1. **Looking for Christ:** Using the OT “Christologically” means to relate as much of the OT as possible to the person and work of Christ.
 - **Strength of this approach:** The NT declares explicitly that the OT provides the foundation for our understanding of the person and work of Christ
 - **Luke 24:26–27** And He said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.
 - **Romans 3:21–22** But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.
 - **Conclusion:** If you fail to see Jesus in the pages of the OT, you’ve missed the point of the OT!

The church can understand the significance of Jesus' life only when it understands the legal system established in the Torah. New Testament presentations of Jesus as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, NIV) and Christ's body as the curtain through which people must pass to enter the Most Holy Place (Heb. 10:19–20) indicate that the church is expected to interpret at least certain details of the Mosaic cultic law as "a shadow of the good things that are coming" in Christ (Heb. 10:1, NIV). The New Testament leaves no doubt that aspects of Israelite worship were divinely intended to be representative of realities found uniquely in the person of Christ.

—Robert D. Bergen, "Preaching Old Testament Law,"
in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle: Preaching the Old Testament Faithfully*,
ed. by George L. Klein (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 63.

- **Danger of this approach:** Attempting to find Christ everywhere in the OT can quickly turn from drawing Jesus out of the pages of the OT to reading Jesus into every page. Never look for something in the text that wasn't *intended* to be there!

Once we truly grasp the message of the New Testament, it is impossible to read the Old Testament again without seeing Christ on every page, in every story, foreshadowed or anticipated in every event and narrative.

—Michael Horton

○ **EXAMPLE:** Christ and the Tabernacle linens

- **Exodus 26:1** "Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twisted linen and blue and purple and scarlet material . . ."
- "Fine twisted linen" prefigures Christ's spotless life
- "Blue" linen signifies the heavenly character of Christ
- "Purple" linen denotes Christ's royalty
- "Scarlet" linen points to the suffering of Christ

It should be evident that we must not read the incarnate Christ back into the Old Testament text, which would be *eisegesis*, but we should look for legitimate ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament in the context of the New.

Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 227–28

2. **Looking for Types:** Typology is the process of seeking to discover the ultimate spiritual meaning of events, persons, things, or places in the Old Testament—things which foreshadow in some way a deeper spiritual truth found in the New Testament.

- **Strength of this approach:** Biblical types do exist in Scripture and it is important to identify them and understand them if one is to properly understand the significance of an OT event, person, place, or thing.

- **EXAMPLE:** Adam and Christ

Romans 5:14 Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, **who is a type of Him who was to come.**
- Adam (as head of the human race) foreshadows the role of Christ as the head of all who believe, making Adam a *type* of Christ. Adam represented everyone in *him* when he sinned (all humanity) just like Christ represented everyone in *Him* when He died and was raised (all believers).
- **Danger of this approach:** It is easy to cross the line from identifying *true, divinely intended* types and begin identifying “types” that were never intended to be taken as such. **This kind of practice is nothing more than *allegorical interpretation*.**
 - **EXAMPLE:** Joseph and Christ
 - Both hated without cause (Gen 37:4, 8; John 15:25)
 - Both ridiculed (Gen 37:19; Luke 22:63)
 - Both plotted against (Gen 37:20; John 11:53)
 - Both stripped of robe (Gen 37:23; John 19:23-24)
 - Both sold for silver (Gen 37:28; Matt 26:14-16)
 - Both lied about (Gen 39:14; Matt 26:61)
 - Both placed in captivity with two guilty men (Gen 40:1-3; Luke 23:32-33)
 - Both unrecognized by his own (Gen 42:8; John 1:11)

The parallels seem compelling and “spiritual”

But, are they *intended* by the biblical author?

And, how would one *know* if they are intended unless the biblical text indicates that they are?

The problem with this [allegorical] method, however, is obvious—the texts themselves give no indication that they mean what the allegorist claims. The authority of the allegorizing preacher is thus seriously undercut. If, after all, the real authority of the preacher is the Bible, what weight do his words carry if they do not legitimately arise from the text? The allegorist works under the *pretense* of preaching a passage in order to proclaim his own ideas. He may amaze an audience with his cleverness, but the actual meaning of the text will be lost to his listeners.

—Duane A. Garrett, “Preaching Wisdom,”
in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle: Preaching the Old Testament Faithfully*,
ed. by George L. Klein (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 111.

Another practice in medieval and early reformation times was to assume that many, if not most, things in the Old Testament were types of something else in the New Testament. Now there are real types in the Bible, but all true biblical types have clear divine designations shown in the same contexts with the alleged type from the Old Testament. Consequently, a person, an institution, an act, or an event that can claim by divine designation in the Old Testament that it is a partial picture of a greater reality to come can be recognized by all true interpreters as a type. But the problem arises when everything in detail, such as all that is in the tabernacle, is made a type of something else. Surely, as one of my professors wisely remarked one day in class, some of the ropes and pegs in the tabernacle were meant to hold it up and to help it stand up erect! The problem with typology is that many take it far beyond what we have biblical authorization to do.

—Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 43–44

- **Safe typology** is limited to those types specifically identified by Scripture.
 - **Risky typology** looks for types and hidden meanings beyond those identified in Scripture.
- 3. Looking for Examples:** This could also be called the “moralizing” approach because it seeks to find examples of good living. In sermons this often takes the form of biographical messages and sketches, but it is often done with isolated texts, *especially in OT narrative*.
- **Strength of this approach:** people and events in the OT clearly provide NT believers with examples of how to (as well as how not to) live.
 - **1 Corinthians 10:11** Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction
 - **Danger of this approach:** The liability of reading the OT simply to find examples for living is that it becomes so easy to extract any given narrative from its larger literary and theological context. In other words, you end up with a small moral tale at the expense of a much greater theological lesson.
 - **EXAMPLE:** Be like Joseph (Gen 38-49)
 - *Flee Immorality:* Potiphar’s wife entices Joseph
 - *Work Hard:* The jailer and the Pharaoh assigned work to Joseph
 - *Forgive others:* The brothers mistreated Joseph

By focusing on Joseph’s *actions* we inevitably lose sight of the larger unfolding events. In reality, it wouldn’t have mattered one bit if Joseph had ran from temptation or given into it, *God wanted him in prison*. The overall theological story involves God’s sovereignty over the events of life for his own purposes.

○ **EXAMPLE:** Be like Esther

- Esther is commonly used as a model for courageous Christian living (especially for young women)
- By focusing on Esther's positive example, we must dismiss her sinful actions
- By focusing on Esther's positive example, we miss the theological message of the book
- By focusing on Esther's positive example, we end up with a story that says that unrighteous living may be justified by successful, happy results.
- Esther teaches that God works in the background of events even when it appears He is absent
- Esther teaches that God can even use imperfect, disobedience instruments (i.e., Esther and Mordecai) to accomplish His purposes
- Esther teaches that God continued to protect His people in faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham even while they were in exile for their *unfaithfulness* to their covenant with Him.

Sermons that focus primarily on the behavior or character of an individual in the narrative . . . *may* miss the passage's broader theological teaching. Some narratives do prescribe behavior, but the Joseph story does not merely present a model of how young people should be or behave. If the preacher is looking for an exemplar and settles on the Joseph story, he has exchanged the story's unifying structure for his own conceptual structure. He chooses the narrative only for the sake of certain details within the story. Joseph's behavior may well be part of the message, but the preacher has made it the whole message.

—David C. Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative,"
in *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically*, by John MacArthur et al.
(Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 231.

Summary

- If you don't see Christ in the OT, *check your glasses!* If you see Christ *everywhere* in the OT, check your glasses
- The OT does foreshadow spiritual realities that became clear in the NT. But, don't get swept up in looking for "hidden" or "secret" meaning in the text. If the text says it points to something greater, then obviously it does!
- Be careful about moralizing OT narratives. Most of the time, biblical narratives are given to tell us *what* happened (descriptive), not *how* things *should* happen (prescriptive). When a narrative is prescriptive, the text will make it clear.