

## **Bridging the Gap Between the Old and New Testament**

### **By Greg Clarke and Joshua Ng**

Christians often don't know what to do with the Old Testament. We know that Jesus has 'fulfilled', 'abolished' and 'reinterpreted' its teaching; but we also know that "all Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" ([2 Tim 3:16](#)). So how are the food laws in Leviticus going to train us in righteousness? What kind of rebuke do we get from the elaborate temple descriptions at the end of Ezekiel? Questions like these lead us to push the Old Testament aside. It's just too obscure, we tell ourselves, and stick with more familiar literature such as the New Testament epistles. We sense a huge gap between the Old and New.

In the article '[Jumping the Gap](#)' (*Briefing #217*), we concluded that it is wrong-headed to feel there is an insurmountable cultural gap between the world of the New Testament believer and the world of the twentieth century Christian. Biblical theology shows us that we both live in the same age, the 'last days', and our common faith outweighs our peripheral differences. We also began to explore the way God's Old Testament promises and purposes are fulfilled in the New, and what that says for how we ought to treat the Old Testament. One of the key ideas which was raised was how the two Testaments are related through *typology*.

In this article, we look at what typology is, and how it can help us to interpret the Old Testament with confidence. In fact, as we shall discover, typology demonstrates that the temporal and theological gap between the Old and New Testament is not a *hindrance* to our Bible reading, but a *help*. In fact, it is an essential part of understanding the Bible as a whole.

### **The art of typology**

As we stated in 'Jumping the Gap', God's revelation develops and unfolds throughout Scripture, culminating in Jesus Christ and the Gospel accounts. While Jesus is the pinnacle of God's plan and revelation, the Old Testament gives us the categories of thought we need in order to understand Jesus. Old Testament events, people and institutions serve as examples and patterns so that when we reach the Gospels, we can clearly understand who he was and what he came to do. These patterns and examples are also known as *types*. They function like visual aids; they do more than tell us about an historical event or person—they suggest that the event or person is *typical* of certain characteristics. For example, the tabernacle and the whole sacrificial system are types. As well as being God's instituted means of relating to his Old Testament people, they also symbolise the truth that sinful humanity cannot approach a holy God, except through a God appointed human mediator, who offers an acceptable animal sacrifice to cleanse mankind's sin. They are typical of how human beings and God must relate.

The most important aspect of a type is that it is incomplete. It always points beyond itself to some greater reality; we often call types 'shadows', since they reveal the form of reality but aren't themselves complete. The sacrificial system was never enough to establish holy relations between God and his creatures; its inadequacies are made obvious throughout the Old Testament (e.g. [Ps 40:6-8](#); cf. [Heb 10:5-10](#), [Ps 51:16-17](#); [Isa 1:10-17](#)). But without the type, we wouldn't know that something greater was required. Since we know about the sacrifices which God required for atonement for

Israel's sin (Lev 16-17), we are prepared for the coming Sacrifice who will atone for the sins of the world. This kind of corresponding New Testament fulfilment of a type (or shadow) is known as an *anti-type* (or reality), where 'anti' means not 'against' but 'in place of'.

The all-pervading New Testament anti-type is Jesus. As Paul puts it, all of God's promises are 'yes' in him; he is our great 'Amen' to all of God's plans ([2 Cor 1: 20](#)). He is both the real high priest and the acceptable sacrifice: he enables sinful humanity to approach God in heaven by offering himself on the cross; his bloody death cleanses us from all sin (Heb 9-10). There is thus a strong connection between the type and the anti-type. Most importantly, while the anti-type is similar to the type, it is yet different and *greater*, just as a real plane is greater than a plastic model. Thus the real Holy Place is heaven itself (anti-type), not an earthly tent (the tabernacle type); Jesus is a sinless and eternal high priest (anti-type), unlike the sinful and mortal Levitical priests (type); Jesus' death is effective once for all (anti-type), while animal sacrifices were ultimately ineffective (type—see Heb 7-10). The type is thus referred to as a 'copy' or 'shadow' of the real thing—recognisably related, but lesser in meaning and significance ([Heb 8:5, 10:1](#)).

### **Typology bridges the gap**

Typology bridges the time and theology gap between the Old and New Testaments. It is a magnificent bridge, made with intricate craftsmanship, and lanes running in both directions. The Old Testament provides the types for the New; the New reveals the reality of the Old. This typological way of reading the Bible is indicated too often and too explicitly in the New Testament itself for us to be in any doubt that it is the right approach to interpreting it. In bridging the gap between the Testaments, typology shows us which aspects of the Old Testament are still appropriate for Christians to follow (continuities) and which aspects are no longer relevant (discontinuities).

#### Continuities

Firstly, typology forges the lines of *continuity* between the type and the anti-type—between God's word in the Old Testament epochs and God's word in Christ. Thus the reason why God's word to the exodus generation can be applied so directly to the Corinthian Christians is because they are undergoing the same experience. For just as the exodus generation had been saved from slavery in Egypt, and fell while en route to the promised land ([1 Cor 10:1-5](#)), so Christians have been saved from slavery to sin, and face the real danger of falling while en route to heaven ([1 Cor 9:24-10:14](#); compare Heb 3-4). The exodus event is thus a type of the salvation event which Christians experience. We are in the same situation as they were—not because our cultures are similar, but because of the way God is fulfilling his unfolding history of salvation. Clearly, our eternal salvation from judgement is greater than their earthly salvation from Egyptian slavery.

The relationship between Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 is also a type. Just as Adam had authority over the woman, so Christ is the head of his bride, the church (Eph 5). Christ and the church is the anti-type—the real marriage of which the partnership between Adam and his wife is merely a copy ([Eph 5:31-32](#)). Yet this does not do away with human marriages, nor with the need for the wife to be in submission to her husband. Because marriage is a type, it must reflect the structure of its anti-type. The

real meaning of marriage, as Ephesians 5 tells us, is to reflect Christ's relationship with the church. It should then not surprise us that this authority structure in the family is reflected in the church, since one of the key images of the church is "God's household" or family ([1 Tim 3:5, 15](#)). It is within this context that Paul applies God's word in Genesis 2-3 to the role of women in church. Again, the 'hermeneutical gap' is bridged not by seeking to align our cultural particulars with those of the Bible, but by appreciating how God reveals himself through types and their fulfilment.

### **Discontinuities**

Typology also explains the lines of *discontinuity* between God's word in the Old Testament and God's word in Christ. Thus, it is because Christ's death (the anti-type) is the all sufficient sacrifice for sins, that the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament (the type) have become obsolete and are no longer to be practised. This is an example where in fulfilling the type, the anti-type actually replaces the type. Similarly, on the issue of Levitical food laws, typology holds the key as to why they have become outmoded. The laws regarding clean and unclean food were types symbolising the truth that cleanliness (or holiness) was crucial in approaching God. These laws marked out the Old Testament Jew as distinct, holy and set apart from the pagan nations around them. With the coming of Christ, there are no longer to be any distinctions between Jew and Gentile, for both are one in Christ (Acts 10, Gal 2-3). The kingdom of God is not about what we do or don't eat, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit ([Rom 14:17](#)). Again such Old Testament laws have become obsolete.

However, this does not mean that we no longer need to read the Old Testament laws regarding animal sacrifices or food laws. They are not irrelevant to us, for they still function as patterns so that we can fully understand Christ and what his death has achieved. They have instructive value for us, but there is no value in observing them. They are not part of the way we now relate to God; they do, however, *educate* us about how we relate to God. For instance, while we are no longer to make sacrifices for sin, we are to offer our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God, worshipping him with the sacrifices of praise and good deeds ([Rom 12:1-2](#), [Heb 13:15-16](#)). And while food laws are no longer applicable, we are still to "be holy as he is holy", being different from the pagans—not in what we eat, but in our godliness of life ([1 Pet 1:13-16](#)).

The question is begged at this stage: How do we know which types have become obsolete and which continue to have value? Why, for instance, did we mention [Galatians 3:28](#) without suggesting that the typology of male and female has also become obsolete, since Paul mentions this alongside Jew and Greek, slave and free? The answer is that the Bible tells us which types continue and which don't. We are told that food laws no longer apply (e.g. [Mark 7:19](#)); that division between Jew and Gentile no longer applies (e.g. Acts 10-11)<sup>1</sup>; that structured relationships between men and women and parents and children *do* still apply (e.g. [1 Cor 11:1-16](#); [Eph 5:22-33](#)). We need to use Scripture itself as our guide to how an anti-type fulfils its type, and not apply external criteria to work out what living in the age of fulfilment ought to involve.

### **Written for us**

For typology to play its role in an unfolding story, there must be a significant passage of time between the displaying of the types and the revelation of the anti-types. Time

and reflection are required to show how the types operate, their structures and significance, and their incompleteness—the way they point towards future fulfilment. The passing of time from Old Testament to New Testament is, therefore, not a hindrance to comprehending the Bible, but an aid to understanding. The passage of Israel from the days of the patriarchs, through slavery and exodus, promise and prophecy, blessing and curse, provides for the New Testament reader a whole series of ideas and images and symbols with which to understand the work of Christ.

And what a rich storehouse it is! There is almost no aspect of the gospel which does not call upon an Old Testament type for its meaning: Jesus as temple, Jesus as sacrificial Lamb, Jesus as Word of God, the exodus of sinners from spiritual slavery, the Promised Land of the New Jerusalem, and so on. It is legitimate even to look closely at particular events and see them as anti-types of Old Testament types. For example, the beginning of Matthew's Gospel tells of Jesus' birth and early ministry in terms of a new exodus. As a baby, he is exiled to Egypt due to Herod's slaughter of the children, and later returns to his homeland (Matt 2). He undergoes temptation in the wilderness, and remains firm where Israel failed (Matt 4). Such typology is typical (of course) and comprehensive in the New Testament.

The complaint might be made at this point that we are not letting the Old Testament speak for itself—that we are imposing interpretations upon it that could never have occurred to its authors or original readers. To this charge, we must plead guilty. For Christians, the Old Testament does *not* stand alone. Its true meaning is not found outside of reference to the New Testament. In fact, the original readers of the Old Testament are not even its intended readership. Certainly, God did speak to the Israelites in the Old Testament; certainly they learnt true knowledge of God through his law and prophets; certainly they understood something of the truths which their types represented. But they also knew that their understanding of what they were hearing or speaking or writing was far from complete:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them [the prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you. ([1 Pet 1:10-12](#))

While the Old Testament people were the first to hear God's word, that word to them was but the preparatory part of what God was intending to say to us who live in the age of fulfilment, the age of the anti-type, the age of the gospel of Jesus. Those who hear the first four parts of a five-part joke might have heard it first, but if the punch line has been withheld from them they can hardly be viewed as the intended audience. It is we who are privileged to hear the punch line who are the real intended audience!

The New Testament is very explicit about the purposes of Old Testament events. For instance, the wilderness judgements on the exodus generation "happened to them as *types* and were written down as warnings *for us*, on whom the *fulfilment* of the ages has come" ([1 Cor 10:11](#)). Paul is at least asserting that those judgements are *still relevant for us*. But he is saying more than that. The judgements upon them were but types which pointed forward to the potential anti-type, namely the judgement that will

come upon us in the age of fulfilment if we too fall into idolatry. While those judgements served as a warning sign for the Old Testament people ([Num 26:10](#); Ps 95), they were preparatory, written down in preparation for the warning that God is now giving to Christians. It is not just that the Old Testament record of these events is *still relevant for us*, but in God's revelatory plan they were *primarily intended for us*.

Finally, it is only in the age of the gospel that the Old Testament itself is activated to reveal what had previously been hidden in it. Consider Paul's doxology at the very end of Romans:

Now unto him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. ([Rom 16:25-27](#))

There is a mystery, a secret, that has been hidden from Old Testament times, and is now revealed in the gospel age. If we had been writing to the Romans, we most likely would have said the mystery had been revealed 'in the gospel'; Paul writes that it was "made known through the prophetic writings"—through the Old Testament itself. By God's command, the Old Testament now reveals things that were there previously, but hidden. The light of the gospel illuminates the shadowy events and figures of the Old Testament; through the anti-types, we recognise the types.

The implications of this are profound. God used the passage of time in order to develop a deep and far-reaching system of types which would help us make sense of who Jesus is. He revealed himself gradually, then ultimately in Christ, the Image and Word of God who brings together all of God's promises and purposes. The New Testament explains for us the ways in which the Old Testament types have their anti-type in Christ. When we examine the Old Testament in the light of this unfolding typology, its application to Christians today becomes more apparent. We live in the age of fulfilment, so we focus not upon the types, but upon the anti-types. In them we have true and liberating knowledge of God.

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