

CHRISTIAN TYPOLOGY: MEDIEVAL, RENAISSANCE, PURITAN

The Old Testament contains [Christ] in the Hieroglyphics of Sacrifices, and Types, and Ceremonies; the New, in legible and ordinary characters. (from John Stoughton's *Choice Sermons*, 1640, quoted by C.A. Patrides.)

Typology is an interpretive method developed early in Christian history; its purpose is to relate the events of the *Old Testament* to the events of the four gospels, i.e. the *New Testament*. The basic problem that the Church fathers faced was this: how does one relate a series of texts that speak of god within a militaristic, nationalist setting to the *Gospels*, which describe a god and a Christ who do not seem to fit easily within the older context? Typology is based upon an idea that one can trace all the way back to *Genesis*: the idea that the whole world is the work of god and that he *spoke* the world into existence. If the world came into being as god's act of language, then, would not the world, and all that happens in it, stand in need of interpretation as a symbol?

Together, Thomas Aquinas and Dante Alighieri give us a concise, if incomplete, account of the typological method. Aquinas says that there are four levels of meaning to be drawn from certain statements in the bible: These levels are:

- 1) the literal or historical level, which is simply the event itself.
- 2) the allegorical level, which relates the literal event to events in the New Testament.
- 3) the moral level, which explains the abstract moral lesson to be drawn from the literal event.
- 4) the anagogical level, which relates the literal event to heavenly things.

It should be noted that the literal meaning is crucial to the interpreter. Aquinas insists that the bible is a true record of real events. As he says in the *Summa Theologica*, "it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible things, because all our knowledge originates from sense" (Adams 117; *Critical Theory Since Plato*). The spiritual significance of an event presupposes that event's literal validity. Only through interpreting the true, literal event does one arrive at its spiritual significance.

Dante applies this method not only to the bible but to literary works as well. He, too, says that a work is polysemous; that is, he says that it signifies on more than one level. In his system, a work may be read on at least four different levels of meaning. Here is Dante's fleshing-out of the basic method of typology:

"When Israel came out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judea became his sanctification, Israel his power" (*Psalms* 114:1-2). For if we inspect the letter alone the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses is presented to us; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the grief and misery of sin to the state of grace is presented to us; if the anagogical, the departure of the holy soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory is presented to us. (Adams *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Revised ed., pg. 121.)

According to C.A. Patrides in his edition of George Herbert's *The Temple*, the first purpose of typology is to confirm that historical events are non-recurring and irreversible (i.e. that Christ changed history); its second purpose is to confirm that historical events imply providential design (i.e. to show that the created order progresses in accordance with God's will); and its third purpose is to confirm that historical events are meaningful "only in so far as they are seen to relate to the advent of Christ." (*The English Poems of George Herbert*. Ed. C.A. Patrides. London, J.M. Dent, 1974. 26.)