

## Chapter 2: “All Things Occur as Parables”

As we saw in our study of Jacob and his sheep, a “type” is a person or object that is used to stand for someone or something else. Types are often used outside the Bible in novels, plays or movies as part of the technique of foreshadowing. The 1999 film *The English Patient* offers an example. In the movie an archaeologist named Katherine Clifton reads a story to a group of her colleagues who are on an expedition in North Africa. The story anticipates what will happen to Katherine, her husband and one of the other men in the group.

Since the author of a work of fiction is free to plan the storyline from beginning to end, it is easy for him or her to use foreshadowing to tie it together. The Bible, however, is not the product of a single human author but was written by dozens of men over the course of many centuries. How could these men have coordinated their efforts to create what we have referred to as “typological coding”?

Literary critic Frank Kermode says that if typological foreshadowing was not “forced or even faked” by the Bible writers, then perhaps Christ actually was prophesying about himself in “accurate figures” in the Old Testament. Perhaps, but we can never know for sure, according to Kermode, because imagination is our only guide.<sup>1</sup> But is Kermode right? Does imagination alone tell us when a human author is using the technique of foreshadowing? Does the Bible leave us no signposts about coded types?

Consider how we might determine whether a screenwriter has consciously employed foreshadowing. Our example is another movie, *On the Waterfront*, from the 1950s. The main character is a New York City dockworker, Terry Malloy, whose brother is an accountant for the longshoremen’s union. The union leadership is made up of mobsters who care only about extracting money from union members and who resort to bribery, extortion and even murder to hold on to their power.

When one of Terry’s friends, another dockworker, agrees to testify against corrupt union officials, the friend is killed by union thugs. Later when Terry is walking in the park with the friend’s sister he makes a comment having to do with his hobby of keeping racing pigeons. “You know, there are a lot of hawks in this town,” he tells her. “They sit up on the tops of the big hotels and they spot a pigeon in the park and then—right down on it!” On the surface the comment

has nothing to do with corruption in the longshoremen's union.

We have good reason to suspect that what Terry Malloy says about birds really has to do with union gangsters and the workers they prey on. Later in the film, the camera looks steeply upward at the union bosses smoking cigars as they peer down at workers in the hold of a cargo ship. In the same scene a local Catholic priest accuses the bosses of wearing expensive suits and diamond rings paid for by dues and extortion money.

The wealth of the bosses also seems to be reflected in Terry's remark about where the "hawks" like to perch—"on the tops of the big hotels"—since that is also where penthouses and luxury suites are located. The close resemblance between the hawks and pigeons Terry refers to and the union bosses and workers is enough to make it more than likely that the writer is using the birds as types. There is also another clue, however, that confirms our suspicion. A couple of scenes after Terry's comments the corrupt union president and his henchmen find Terry and tell him that another worker has agreed to testify for government prosecutors. "The little pigeon," says the union chief with contempt, "he ought to have his neck wrung." By actually calling one of the workers a "pigeon" the scriptwriter has provided a marker or identifier. The odds that both a close resemblance of one thing to another plus an identifier would occur by chance in the same work are small.

This combination of circumstantial resemblance and symbol identifiers was also what helped us decode the meaning of Jacob and his sheep. Circumstantial resemblance refers to features of one character or event that remind us of another. Resemblance is strengthened by the occurrence of identical words, or words that can be shown to be synonyms, in the descriptions of the objects being compared. Symbol identifiers are passages that equate one thing with another.

We would not demand that every feature of a type sketch in a novel or movie be confirmed by an identifier before we would accept that it was intentionally created, so we cannot make that demand in the case of the Bible either. Still, the presence of at least some identifiers is necessary because resemblance alone can occur too easily by chance. It is even possible that resemblance plus an identifier or two could occur by chance, but the odds of this

happening are so small that if we found the combination of resemblance and identifiers over and over again in the same work, the odds approach zero. And, as was noted in the previous chapter, typological coding in the Bible has the additional characteristics of economy of distribution and interconnectedness. This four-way combination of factors will become apparent as we explore the subject further.

### **Typology in a Parable**

Typology exists in the Bible alongside ordinary metaphors and parables. The relationship between God and his ancient people, the Israelites, is compared to a king and his subjects, a shepherd and his sheep, a father and his children, a mother and her baby, and a husband and wife in various passages. In Isaiah 5, God is a farmer and Israel is a vineyard he creates by turning over the earth, clearing away stones and planting vines. The farmer also builds a tower in the vineyard, digs a well and sets up a wine press. He waits patiently for a good crop, but the grapes turn out to be of poor quality. “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah,” God says to his people, “judge between me and my vineyard.” What will the farmer do? “I will take away its hedge,” God warns, “and it will be destroyed . . . The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.”<sup>2</sup>

Illustrations such as the vineyard parable depend on approximate rather than precise resemblance. God’s provision for his people and his expectations of an obedient response bore comparison in certain respects to a landowner owner tending his vines in hopes of a successful grape harvest. When Jesus later repeated the parable he wanted to emphasize the responsibility borne by Israel’s leadership. He also wanted to point beyond destructive judgment on the fleshly nation to the emergence of a new kind of people defined not by ancestry but by an obedient response to God’s grace.

To get these points across Jesus introduced hired cultivators to represent judges and priests, and servants to represent the prophets sent by God to correct Israel. He also introduced a son of the vineyard owner to represent himself. In the expanded story the owner sends his

servants to receive the harvest only to see them mistreated and his son murdered by the hired men.<sup>3</sup>

Both the original vineyard parable and Jesus' retelling of it contain important prophetic details. The version from Isaiah leaves no doubt that God's disappointment with Israel is deep and that his patience is not inexhaustible. Catastrophe is predicted if the nation does not alter its course: "I will break down its wall and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland."<sup>4</sup> A generation or so after Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah alludes to the parable and indicates that its terrible conclusion is imminent.<sup>5</sup> Such a destruction, including a literal demolition of Jerusalem's wall and razing of Yahweh's temple, did take place in the sixth century BC by the Babylonians.

By reviving Isaiah's story Jesus implied that the nation was due for a repeat of the cataclysm experienced centuries before. And indeed the parable proved durable when, forty years after Jesus' death, Roman armies suppressed the First Jewish Revolt and, like the Babylonians, breached Jerusalem's walls and tore down its temple. However, Jesus' modifications to the story include a new ending. Instead of describing the destruction of the vineyard's wall, Jesus says that the evil caretakers will be swept away while the vineyard itself will survive in order to be leased out to faithful tenants.

To the Jewish establishment of Jesus' day the horrific message had been clear: the blessing of God that had rested on the nation for more than a millennium was going to be transferred to another people. Once replaced by something new, the system of national worship centered on the holy city of Jerusalem and its temple would become obsolete.<sup>6</sup> The point was not anti-Jewish in any racial sense, since like Jesus the Christian apostles and early disciples were themselves Jews. The suggestion nevertheless was so abhorrent to Jewish sensibilities that it galvanized opposition to Jesus into a conspiracy seeking his execution.

The vineyard parable is effective at focusing attention on certain facts—the spiritual history of the nation, the antagonistic response of the Jewish establishment to Jesus' ministry, the rift between Judaism and the first century church, the eventual devastation of Judea by Roman armies—and organizing them into a coherent picture of the divine purpose at work. This would remain true of the parable even if, as some scholars presume, it was not

actually told by Jesus but was attributed to him fifty years later.

At the moment we simply note that the story works well despite its mechanical imperfections. Take the chronology of its conclusion, for example: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”<sup>7</sup> Punishment comes before the property changes hands because if murderous men were to occupy a real vineyard it would hardly be possible to usher in new tenants before overpowering the criminals. But in the fulfillment contemplated by the evangelists, the spiritual leasehold is transferred to the apostolic church shortly after Jesus’ death, decades before Roman troops lay siege to Jerusalem. In spite of the small glitch the parable resembles the reality closely enough to showcase critical information.

In another parable, Jesus tells about a farmer sowing seed. Some of the seed either fails to germinate or withers before maturity because of having fallen on rocks, among weeds or beside the road. Other seed falls on fine soil and produces grain. After Jesus relates the parable to the crowd, he explains to his disciples that what the farmer sows is “the word,” meaning the gospel message. Some people hear the message but the devil snatches it out of their hearts the way birds eat seed that falls on the hard-packed roadside. Others hear the word and respond at first but in the end bear no fruit. Finally, there are those who, “like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop.”<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the parable, the “seed” seems to represent hearers of the word and not just the word itself. This slight shift violates a rigid equation of typical and antitypical objects, but not illogically. The story effectively shows that the process of spreading the gospel or “good news” is much like scattering seed to produce a crop. Typological coding of New Testament salvation history in the Old Testament likewise may lack mathematical precision in every detail and yet be recognizable for what it is—and be impossible to explain other than as the result of divine inspiration.

### **Snakes, Poles and the Logic of Metaphor**

When evaluating the symbolic value of historical episodes in the Old Testament, we must remember the characteristics of

typological stories that we know were deliberately created. Like the parables of the vineyard and of the sower, effective typology must be brief and pointed, not encumbered by excess detail. Minor incongruities are to be expected. By its very nature it cannot be pressed beyond the limits of illustration, yet it will reveal connections between seemingly isolated facts.

Our example above, the vineyard narrative, is openly presented as a parable both in its original Old Testament context and in its retelling by Jesus. From it we turn to a historical incident with no obvious prophetic meaning that nevertheless is claimed by Jesus to be messianic. As recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus is referring to an event from Israel's long years of wilderness wandering as recorded in the Old Testament book of Numbers. The people complain bitterly against God and Moses, calling the miraculous bread that sustains them "miserable food." As a punishment God sends poisonous snakes into the Israelite camp. When the people cry out in anguish, God tells Moses to take a sculpture of a snake and mount it high on a pole. Anyone who is bitten merely has to look at the figure of the snake in order to survive.<sup>10</sup>

The way Jesus applies the story defies expectation. Jesus compares his own crucifixion, during which he will be nailed high on an executional stake, to the raising of the bronze serpent on a pole. A couple of elements in the odd comparison do make sense. In John, where the application is found, Jesus accuses the devil of being a murderer, implying that death is the result of the devil's having lured the human family into sin.<sup>11</sup> Since elsewhere in the Scriptures the devil is compared to a serpent or snake, death could be likened to a poisonous snake bite.<sup>12</sup> Further, John equates "looking to" Jesus with believing in him as God's Son and the Savior of mankind, the only one who can reverse the process of death and decay.

In these respects the picture of Israelites dying of snakebite and looking upward at God's provision for healing is an understandable portrayal of dying humanity looking toward Jesus, the crucified one, for everlasting life. What does not seem appropriate is the equivalence between Jesus hanging on the cross and the figure of a

snake, a symbol more appropriate to Satan than to God's Son.

The solution to the riddle of the snake on the pole is found in two passages from the writings of Paul. "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us," Paul says, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."<sup>13</sup> He writes elsewhere that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'"<sup>14</sup> In the second passage Paul quotes from Deuteronomy, which says that a criminal whose body is "hung on a tree" should not be left out after dark. "Be sure to bury him that day," the Law commands, "because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."<sup>15</sup>

Paul's argument has come under fire from critics who complain that the Mosaic Law never contemplates vicarious punishment, in which one person can take upon himself the sins of others. Further, they say, the command from Deuteronomy has more to do with the vileness of exposing a corpse than with divine justice.

We will not take time here to deal with these objections in detail. Although substitutionary atonement, like other profound realities, can be understood only upon reflection, it is easy to grasp the general truth that to help someone in the grip of evil is to accept a measure of suffering oneself. As for the passage in Deuteronomy, undeniably it assumes public execution of heinous criminals to be just as well as horrific. Rather than setting aside the procedure for punishing wickedness the Mosaic Law insists that it be concluded swiftly and sin's grisly debris not left long before the eyes of God and man. Paul is on firm ground when he argues that Jesus' death on an executional tree is a repugnant one under the Law.

The statement about someone hanging on a tree or timber being under a curse acts as an identifier to unlock the allegory of the serpent on the pole. In the Hebrew Bible the serpent is the only animal specifically placed under God's curse. The familiar narrative of the temptation of Adam and Eve includes God's sentence against the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!" He continues, "You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."<sup>16</sup>

Some people are repulsed by snakes, but as part of God's

creation snakes are no better or worse than other animals. As noted earlier, the serpent in Genesis chapter three serves as a visible cipher for God's invisible adversary, calling attention to the low moral level on which Satan chooses to exist. When "offspring of snakes" occurs later in the Scriptures it describes, not legless reptiles, but lying, murderous human beings who show themselves to be "children of the devil" in a metaphorical sense.<sup>17</sup> In English usage "snake in the grass" continues to denote a malicious schemer.

God's instructions to Moses about putting a bronze serpent on a pole therefore had been a puzzle from the beginning. Why would God use the image of a cursed animal, symbolic of evil, to provide life and healing to his people? According to Paul, it is because Jesus had to assume the full weight of God's condemnation of sin in order to lift it off of mankind. He had to be seen as the human version of a serpent, namely a liar, rebel and blasphemer who deserved to die nailed to a rough wooden frame in public view. For an agonizing moment the moral order of the universe had to turn upside-down.

We will see later how many other allegories reveal themselves in light of the paradox that Jesus, the most innocent man who ever lived, suffered a punishment appropriate to the worst of criminals. In the case of the serpent on the pole the significance is veiled to a degree by language.

The original Hebrew for the curse pronounced on the serpent is *arar*, whereas the word used in Deuteronomy to describe the curse upon an executed criminal is *qelala*. The two words are close in meaning, however, as can be seen from passages where they are exchanged for one another in parallel phrases.<sup>18</sup> In the Septuagint Greek Old Testament both *arar* and *qelala* are translated by the Greek word *epikataratos*. By a happy coincidence the verses leading up to Paul's statement about Jesus becoming "a curse" demonstrate the equivalence of the two original Hebrew terms:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed [*epikataratos*, from Heb. *arar*] is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law' . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed [*epikataratos*, from Heb. *qelala*] is everyone who is hung on a tree.' —Galatians 3:10-13.



Just as in the account of Jacob's sheep, in the serpent-on-the-pole story we are confronted with an Old Testament narrative that corresponds typologically to one of Paul's teachings about the redemptive role of Jesus. Uncovering the mystery is easier because the identifier at John 3:14-15 is a flashing neon sign pointing us in the right direction. And from this example alone we would suspect that typology is not limited to fictional illustrations like the vineyard parable of Isaiah, but that prophetic meaning underlies a number of other Old Testament narratives as well.

A different line of reasoning leads to the same conclusion. The Gospels claim that in teaching the crowds Jesus "did not say anything to them without a parable," but that "when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything."<sup>19</sup> With Jesus' fondness for parables in mind, consider his claim that he did nothing on his own initiative, but only what he observed his Father to do.<sup>20</sup> If Jesus depended so heavily on parables or allegories that he virtually never taught without them, and if his teaching methods reflect those of God the Father, then the implication is that the Father himself has never spoken apart from illustrations of one kind or another.

The history of the Old Testament period was sculpted by God into representations that lie open only to those who, like the disciples, turn toward Jesus for their explanation. And as and we have already begun to see, these episodes, which we referred to earlier as type sketches, do not stand apart from each other but are cross-linked like the strands of a finely woven net.

### **Water in the Desert**

Nowhere is the linkage between typological episodes more apparent than in another historical event, the provision of water during the Exodus wandering. Like the serpent on the pole, this story too is claimed in the New Testament to have a prophetic dimension. Paul says that "our forefathers," the ancient Israelites, "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" at the time of the exodus from Egypt. "They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink," he says, "for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."<sup>21</sup>

"Rock" or "stone" is a symbol of solidity and strength in both

## Gospel Mysteries / 2-10

Old and New Testaments, used of God, of the Messiah and of prominent servants of God such as Abraham and Jesus' apostles. Paul sees Jesus prefigured in the rock outcrops that God caused to split open and pour forth water for the Israelites. The miracle was performed once shortly after the departure from Egypt and again decades later after the Israelite people refused to enter the Promised Land and were condemned to sojourn in the desert for forty years.

In both instances the people react to lack of water not by entreating but instead by angrily denouncing Moses, at which Moses in fear for his life beseeches Yahweh: "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." God instructs Moses to take in his hand the staff he had used to strike the Nile River during the Egyptian plagues and to summon the elders of the people to a large rock face at or near Mt. Horeb (probably another name for Mt. Sinai). "I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb," God tells him. "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." Moses performs this act "in the sight of the elders of Israel" and water erupts from the crag.<sup>22</sup>

In the second occurrence, Moses and Aaron his brother, who has since been installed as High Priest, are again besieged by the people over the issue of water. At the entrance to the makeshift temple, the tabernacle, Moses is told once again to take his staff in hand and, along with Aaron, to gather the assembly in front of a large rock. Moses is to speak to the rock so that water will begin to flow from it. "So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him." Moses angrily asks the crowd if he and Aaron must bring water out of the rock for them. "Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank."<sup>23</sup> If viewed prophetically, the double occurrence of the water miracle serves to give it emphasis.<sup>24</sup>

Foremost among several symbolic meanings of water in the Scriptures is as a representation of the miraculous power of God's Spirit. "I will pour out water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground," God declares in Isaiah. "I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants."<sup>25</sup> Since divine knowledge is communicated by means of the Spirit—giving rise to the term "inspiration"—such knowledge or teaching is also likened to water. "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not

return to it without watering the earth . . . so is my word that goes out from my mouth.”<sup>26</sup> Proverbs adds, “The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.”<sup>27</sup>

The image of water coming out of the rock suggests various manifestations of God’s Spirit coming from Messiah, the “stone laid in Zion” by Yahweh.<sup>28</sup> And indeed the Gospels present Jesus as the source from which miraculous power, including healings and divine knowledge, pours forth. The correspondence continues to hold when we examine the details of the Exodus stories.

Moses was commanded to procure the water both by striking the rock and by speaking to it. The second instruction is significant in that the healing power of Jesus was generally available to those who asked for it either by their words or actions. In a story from the Gospels, a blind beggar is told that Jesus is passing by and begins calling out loudly for Jesus to show him mercy. Bystanders rebuke the blind man and try to silence him, but he cries out the more. Jesus stops to speak with him and in the end he is cured of his blindness.<sup>29</sup>

The meaning of Jesus’ parables likewise was given to those who took the trouble to ask. Before providing an interpretation of the parable of the sower, for example, Jesus is approached by the twelve and certain others who want an explanation. “He told them, ‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside, everything occurs in parables so that “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving.” ’ ”<sup>30</sup> Instructions on prayer also come after a disciple says, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”<sup>31</sup>

If these and other examples leave any doubt that spiritual water was available to anyone who spoke receptively to the Messiah, a familiar story from John’s Gospel settles the question. Jesus is resting next to a well and a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. When Jesus asks her for a drink, she wonders aloud why he is willing to engage in conversation a member of a race despised by Jews. “Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.’ ”

The word used by Jesus to say that he would “give” living water, *didomi*, is the same word used in the Septuagint Greek Old Testament at Numbers 20:8 to say that the rock would give its water

when Moses spoke to it. When the Samaritan woman speaks further to Jesus and asks for the water he describes, he responds with miraculous knowledge of her past followed by a disclosure that he is the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>32</sup> The realization that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ, the unique Son of Yahweh and Lord of heaven and earth, is an insight representing deep spiritual waters.<sup>33</sup>

The significance of Jesus' bold self-identification to the Samaritan woman can be appreciated by remembering that most of the time Jesus took pains to avoid it, much to the frustration of his adversaries.<sup>34</sup> He finally offered the information to his opponents at his trial when they angrily bound him to do so under judicial oath. "Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'"<sup>35</sup>

The audience for this proclamation, the Sanhedrin, is described by Luke as "the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law," the counterpart of the assembly consisting of the elders of Israel who were present when Moses caused water to come forth from the rock.<sup>36</sup>

### **A Double Blow Against the Messianic Stone**

It is now apparent how God's instruction, "Speak to that rock and it will pour out its water," was fulfilled in Jesus. Even more prominent in the Hebrew Scriptures, however, is God's first command concerning the provision of water: "Strike the rock with your staff." On the second occasion, in fact, Moses strikes the rock twice to get water, even though he has been commanded only to speak to it. We have a head start on what the striking of the rock means because of what we understood from the story of Jacob's sheep, that "rod" or "staff" as a symbol is most often representative of legal authority. The implication is that the Jesus would be attacked by means of law.

The Hebrew word for "struck" in the passages about water from the rock is *naka*, a word that is found in at least three passages that may concern the Messiah. Isaiah says of God's "servant" that "we considered him stricken by God, smitten [*naka*] by him, and afflicted."<sup>37</sup> Micah foretells, "They will strike [*naka*] Israel's ruler on

the cheek with a rod” and Zechariah says to “strike [*naka*] the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”<sup>38</sup>

The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah was widely seen as descriptive of Jesus by the early church, as for example at Acts 8:32-35, but not because of a connection with what Exodus and Numbers say about the striking of the rock. The same is true of the Zechariah passage, applied by Jesus to his own impending execution at Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27. Although the water-from-the-rock narratives had nothing to do with the original application of these verses to Jesus by Christians, under scrutiny the coded meaning reveals itself.

Micah 5:1 is not applied to Jesus in the New Testament, however, the very next verse of chapter five, which says that the ruler of Israel will be born in the town of Bethlehem, was considered to be messianic by both Jews and early Christians.<sup>39</sup> The “rod” that Micah says would strike the Messiah is translated from the Hebrew *shebet*. We saw in the previous chapter that this is one of several Hebrew words may be translated “rod” or “staff.” The word for “staff” in the water-from-the-rock stories is *matteh*. Isaiah furnishes us with a verse to confirm the equivalence of the terms when it declares, “Woe to the Assyrian, the rod [*shebet*] of my anger, in whose hand is the club [*matteh*] of my wrath!”<sup>40</sup>

This text from Isaiah equating *matteh* and *shebet* further illustrates that “rod” as a symbol of legal power entails the ability to inflict punishment on lawbreakers, as God used the Assyrian empire to punish the faithless northern ten-tribe kingdom of Israel. The southern kingdom of Judah with its capital at Jerusalem escaped destruction by Assyria, but eventually came under Babylonian, then Persian, Greek and finally Roman domination.

Rome allowed the Jews a vassal dynasty in the house of Herod the Great (who probably was not even ethnically Jewish), and permitted local institutions such as the Sanhedrin to exercise certain law-enforcement functions. But in the early years of the first century, unrest among the Jews led Rome to tighten its grip on the Jewish capital, removing Jerusalem from the jurisdiction of Herod’s son Archelaus and installing a Roman “procurator” or governor instead. The key events are recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus:

And now Archelaus’s part of Judea [including Jerusalem] was

## Gospel Mysteries / 2-14

reduced into a province, and Coponius, one of the equestrian order among the Romans, was sent as a procurator, having the power of life and death put into his hands by Caesar.

—Wars of the Jews, 2.8.1.

One of Coponius's successors was Pontius Pilate, whose administration of Jerusalem posed an obstacle to Jewish leaders when they sought to execute Jesus. According to John, when Pilate demands to know the charges against Jesus, the elders say that if he were not a criminal they would not be handing him over. Pilate tries to dismiss them, telling them to deal with Jesus according to Jewish law. “‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ the Jews objected.”<sup>41</sup>

In practice the Sanhedrin could get away with extralegal execution of someone of low social status such as the disciple Stephen.<sup>42</sup> Jesus on the other hand was popular enough that the Jewish leadership earlier had feared an outbreak of rioting if he were arrested near the temple during daylight hours. Execution of a public figure in defiance of Roman authority was too risky, so instead the elders had to induce the Roman governor to do the killing.

The elders might well have expected that Pilate, who had a reputation for responding savagely to the least infraction, would be easily persuaded to dispose of one more troublesome Jew. It is the fashionable albeit naive opinion even of many contemporary historians that Pilate would automatically have conferred a death sentence on any Jew who was brought to him. But as the Gospels tell it, Pilate was suspicious of the Sanhedrin's motives and resistant to being manipulated. What other than jealousy had led the Jewish leadership to accuse this itinerant rabbi, who was not known to him as a rebel? And what kind of disturbance might his execution provoke?

Pilate must have known that when Jesus had entered Jerusalem the welcome he received from his followers was enthusiastic but not riotous. If Pilate knew that Jesus had created a disturbance at the temple, he is just as likely to have heard from the Roman-sympathizing party followers of Herod that Jesus had supported—with careful qualification—the paying of taxes to Caesar. Finally, the charge that Jesus claimed to be God's Son seems to have aroused Pilate's superstitious fear.

Pilate decided to fob the problem off on the brother of Archelaus, Herod Antipas, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover

festival. His rationale was that Jesus came from Galilee, which was under Herod's jurisdiction. Herod might take Jesus into custody and then remove him to Galilee for execution, imprisonment or even release. Like Pilate, the Jewish ruler felt no particular threat from Jesus and was hoping to be entertained by one of the Nazarene's famous miracles. Yet, as a politician he scarcely would have been anxious to make enemies in the Sanhedrin. Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate, thereby casting doubt on the charge of sedition but in practical terms upholding the high council's decision.

Unable to dodge the issue, Pilate finally understood that there was greater danger in letting Jesus live than in ordering his crucifixion.

The maneuvering to have Jesus killed resulted in his being tried and convicted on two different charges under two different authorities, one Jewish and the other Roman. The charge against Jesus under Jewish law was blasphemy, for his having claimed to be the messianic Son of Man destined to judge the world. The charge under Roman law was sedition, for making himself a rival to Caesar by claiming to be a king. The final arbiter of Jewish law, in this case Herod Antipas, silently upheld the charge against Jesus, as did the administrator of Roman law, Pontius Pilate.

The apostles' prayer from book of Acts draws attention to this double condemnation. "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city," it says, "to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed."<sup>43</sup> Herod and Pilate are paired together, as are the two classes of people they represent, namely, Jews (Israel) and Gentiles in the form of the Romans. In fact, on the night of his arrest Jesus was held alternately in the custody of Jewish temple police and Roman soldiers and endured beatings at the hands of both.<sup>44</sup> The "double blow" fulfills the detail from the Numbers narrative that says Moses struck the rock twice with his staff.

If we take another look at Matthew's account of Jesus' beating by Roman soldiers we find further confirmation of the symbolism of Jesus, the "rock," being struck by the "staff" of the law. The soldiers ridicule the idea of Jesus as king by draping him in a royal cloak (possibly the one put on him earlier by Herod<sup>45</sup>), setting a crown of thorns on his head and finally placing in his hand a mock scepter—the

symbol of legal sovereignty—with which they then hit him repeatedly.

The Greek word for the object put in Jesus' hand is *kalamos*, which often describes a fine reed used as a pen. In Greek literature, however, *kalamos* also is used of a fishing pole and of the shaft of an arrow, which shows that it can denote a stick heavy enough to raise welts if used to strike someone on the face and head. The Bible book of Revelation, in the first verse of chapter eleven, refers to a measuring stick as “a reed [*kalamos*] like a rod [*rabdos*].” In turn, “rod,” *rabdos*, is the word used in the Septuagint Greek Bible in both Exodus and Numbers to describe the staff with which Moses strikes the rock.

### **Streams from the Rock**

At the conclusion of the water-from-the-rock stories, water gushes forth and the people drink. We saw that even before Jesus' death, spiritual refreshment poured forth from him for those who requested it. But these early manifestations of God's Spirit were limited in comparison with the “water” that would become available after his death.

As reported in John, Jesus announces at the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem that anyone who is “thirsty” can come to him and “drink.” “Whoever believes in me,” he says, will have “streams of living water” flowing within him. John then adds, “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”<sup>46</sup> Showing that the glorification of Jesus and therefore the sending of the Spirit depended upon his sacrificial death, Jesus later tells the disciples that “unless I go away [in death], the Counselor [the Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”<sup>47</sup>

The infusion of “power from on high” into the tiny Christian congregation of Jerusalem took place at the Jewish festival of Pentecost a few weeks after the crucifixion.<sup>48</sup> Believers received the miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages, allowing them to witness to Jews who had traveled to Jerusalem from the far corners of the Roman empire.<sup>49</sup> The apostle Peter explained the manifestation by citing an Old Testament verse that, like Isaiah, uses language about the “pouring out” of the holy Spirit as if it were water:



Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people.’”

—Acts 2:14-17.

Peter links this “pouring out” to the death and resurrection of Jesus, saying that he was put to death according to God’s purpose and foreknowledge but afterward raised to life. “Exalted to the right hand of God,” Peter continues, “he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”<sup>50</sup> John and Acts therefore leave no doubt about how water for the spiritually thirsty resulted from the striking of the rock.

An important note to this typological episode is what John reports about Jesus’ final moments on the cross. When at the end of the day Roman soldiers find that the two crucified robbers are still alive, they break their legs, a procedure that caused a victim’s own weight to compress his rib cage and bring about death by suffocation. Jesus appears lifeless, but to make sure he is dead one of the soldiers jabs his side with a spear, “bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.”<sup>51</sup>

The water that came from Jesus was probably in the form of clear fluid that had gathered in the chest or abdominal cavity. Some commentators have tried to determine the precise physiological condition involved while others have questioned its plausibility. The truth is that we have too few details to make a firm medical judgment about the source of the fluid. Our present interest lies in the event as the equivalent of the soldiers beating Jesus with a mock scepter, that is, as a dramatization of a larger fulfillment underway. Significantly, one text in the Hebrew Bible, Habakkuk 3:14, demonstrates that in rare instances the Hebrew word for Moses’ staff, *matteh*, can refer to a shaft with a point for piercing—in other words, a spear.

The story of water pouring from the rock intersects that of Jacob’s sheep by using the same symbol, the rod, to stand for law. The two prophecies are therefore mutually reinforcing. In a later chapter we will consider a more detailed typological sketch that also shares

## Gospel Mysteries / 2-18

symbolism with the water-from-the-rock episode. And certain texts we have already considered will be revisited in the course of deciphering yet other prophecies, since these passages serve as anchor points from which lines of meaning radiate outward.

By now we should have put behind us any objection that the typological method, carefully applied, is alien to the Bible text. In the examples from this chapter the plain language of the Bible itself at John 3:14 and 1 Corinthians 10:4 put us on the trail of typological meaning.

The remarkable consistency between story and fulfillment in these cases we have examined justifies the expectation that, even where coding is unheralded, clues in the text may show it to be present. And clues are nowhere more sought after than in the matter of whether Jesus of Nazareth was whom his disciples claimed him to be. A traveling rabbi, no matter how gifted, would hardly seem to qualify as the warrior-king expected by Jewish people. Can typology settle the question of messianic credentials? That is the question we will consider next.

## Gospel Mysteries / 2-19

- 1 Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 106-7.
- 2 Isa 5:1-7.
- 3 Matt 21:33-41 and parallels.
- 4 Isa 5:6.
- 5 Jer 12:10.
- 6 John 4:21; Heb 8:13.
- 7 Mark 12:9.
- 8 Mark 4:13.
- 9 John 3:14-15.
- 10 Num 21:4-9.
- 11 John 8:44.
- 12 Rev 12:9.
- 13 2 Cor 5:21.
- 14 Gal 3:13.
- 15 Deut 21:22-23.
- 16 Gen 3:14-15.
- 17 Isa 59:4-5; Matt 12:34; cf. John 8:44.
- 18 Gen 27:12-13, 29; Deut 27:13-15.
- 19 Mark 4:33-34.
- 20 John 5:19.
- 21 1 Cor 10:1-4.
- 22 Exod 17:4-6.
- 23 Num 20:6-11.
- 24 Gen 41:32.
- 25 Isa 44:3.
- 26 Isa 55:10-11.
- 27 Prov 18:4, *NASB*.
- 28 Isa 28:16.
- 29 Luke 18:35-43.
- 30 Mark 4:10-11.
- 31 Luke 11:1-2.
- 32 John 4:6-26.
- 33 Matt 16:16-17.
- 34 Mark 8:29-30; John 10:24.
- 35 Mark 14:60-62.
- 36 Luke 22:66-67.
- 37 Isa 53:4.
- 38 Micah 5:1; Zech 13:7.
- 39 Matt 2:6.
- 40 Isa 10:5-6.
- 41 John 18:28-31.
- 42 Acts 7:57-58.
- 43 Acts 4:27-28.
- 44 Mark 14:64-65; Matt 27:27-30.
- 45 Luke 23:11.

## Gospel Mysteries / 2-20

- 46 John 7:37-39.
- 47 John 16:7.
- 48 Luke 24:49.
- 49 Acts 2:7-11.
- 50 Acts 2:23-24, 32-33.
- 51 John 19:34.