

## Chapter 6: Typology and Coincidence

Look at the following statement:

### **Justification entails sanctification unto salvation.**

It conveys the idea that to be “justified” or found righteous before God requires being “sanctified,” that is, being cleansed of sin in the hope of being saved from eternal death. The sentence also happens to be an acrostic in which the initial letters of the words spell out the name “JESUS.” If we ran across these words and then noticed the acrostic code, how could we tell if it was planned rather than accidental?

The Christian theme of the phrase would have to count as a clue, but it would not be decisive. The preposition “unto” is archaic and may have been chosen in order to form the acrostic, but equally it may have been used simply to evoke the Elizabethan diction of the King James Bible. We could determine by surveying reading material that the sequence of initial letters J-E-S-U-S is rare. Still, having before us nothing but the phrase itself we could do no better than to say it was likely that the acrostic was intentional.

Let’s now imagine that we have read the phrase as part of a list of two or three dozen spiritual maxims. As we study the list we notice that many, though not all, are acrostic codes for Biblical terms such as “God,” “Lord,” “Christ,” “redemption,” “gospel” and “kingdom.” Suppose also that we found the list at the end of a treatise on Biblical doctrine, and that in the treatise it was stated that as an aid to memorization spiritual maxims might be composed as acrostics. Suppose the treatise even cited a few of the other maxims from the list and explained that they were acrostics. Given this setting, could we reasonably doubt that the particular acrostic above for J-E-S-U-S was intentional?

Finding our acrostic under the circumstances just described would make the probability of its being intentional so great that we would be unlikely to consider another explanation. Not only would we have the rarity of the sequence J-E-S-U-S and a correspondence of the subject of the maxim with the name in the acrostic, we would have a rare degree of compatibility with the context. It would defy imposing odds for a spiritual maxim containing an acrostic to appear purely by

chance in a document with the unusual—and appropriate—characteristic that it discusses maxims that contain acrostics.

Apart from the question of sheer probability, we would judge our acrostic to be intentional because of its functioning purposefully in its context. We could understand why a mind or minds would compose the maxim as an acrostic, list it with other similar maxims and include an explanation of the concept somewhere in the accompanying text. This quality of purposefulness is an important means of separating coincidences from consciously created patterns.

For example, plaques and posters have been produced for several decades listing what appear to be astonishing similarities between Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, two famous U.S. presidents both of whom were assassinated while in office. The correspondence between the two is an illusion, however, created by assembling every discoverable fact about each man and then selecting only those that agree. One similarity is that the names “Lincoln” and “Kennedy” each have seven letters. So many names have seven letters that it is one of the faintest parallels that could be drawn, nevertheless it is exactly by looking for any such resemblances, whether strong or weak, that an impressive list can be worked up.

### **Coincidence versus Purposeful Alignment**

Take the two names “Gilbert” and “Sullivan.” Besides being the names of two men who collaborated to compose light opera there would seem to be no other relationship between them. But look again. Each name contains five consonants (GLBRT and SLLVN) and the third letter of each name is L. It also happens that the last four letters of each name spell yet other names, the names “Bert” and “Ivan.” Each of those names, in turn, contains a word within it: the word “be” in the first case and “van” in the second. Finally, when the two words are strung together in order they form yet a fifth name, the name “Bevan.”

When I began writing the preceding paragraph I had no idea what points in common I could find between the names Gilbert and Sullivan; it was matter of surveying every possible characteristic and noting those that agreed. Do this with a large assemblage of historical facts and the appearance of a special pattern can be created, just as in

the Lincoln-Kennedy parallel.

Even if we assume for a moment that there are in fact strange correspondences between Lincoln and Kennedy, how could these be understood as purposeful? To what would we attribute the supposed relationship? All that comes to mind is “fate” or “destiny.” Aside from the vagueness of an explanation such as “fate,” notice its mindlessness. Believers in “fate” don’t conceive of it as a person who consciously plans the scheme of future events. Presumably, fate is an uncanny force occasionally recognizable for the patterns it creates. But this is what blind circumstance does, producing patterns by coincidence with a certain frequency.

To resort to “fate” or to any other unthinking cause of a phenomenon is to abandon any claim to purposefulness, since that quality is inferred not just from events lining up in a surprising way, but to their lining up in a way that indicates rational intent. Say we were to pick up the telephone to call a friend and found that the friend was already on the line trying to call us at precisely the same instant. We might be amazed at the coincidence but we would hardly be led to think that an intelligent agent had arranged it.

For a body of facts to be purposeful does not require that everything about it be understandable. Go back for a moment to our hypothetical treatise containing various acrostics, including J-E-S-U-S. To an atheist the theological treatise and its maxims would make little sense. But the atheist’s inability to identify fully with the thinking of the author would not keep him from recognizing thought as the process that gave rise to the document.

The typological codes we so far have examined possess the crucial characteristic of purposefulness, both individually and collectively. Chapter 2 cited typological prophecies that are explicitly identified as such in John 3:14 and 1 Corinthians 10:4. Chapter 5 referred to another, Matthew 12:40. The list could be extended by adding Acts 2:29-31, 1 Corinthians 5:7, Galatians 4:22-26, Hebrews 7:1-3 and others.

The word *allegoreo* with the sense of “to represent typologically” is found in the New Testament, as are the words *tupos* and *antitupon* with the meanings “prophetic type” and “prophetic antitype.”<sup>1</sup> Typological interpretation therefore is not an ad hoc method born of a search for Biblical curiosities.

It makes sense that the subject of coded portrayals is the redemptive work of Jesus, since the New Testament identifies Jesus as the focus of the sacred Hebrew writings.<sup>2</sup> Like our hypothetical treatise with maxims forming acrostics, the Scriptures contain not just encrypted prophecies but also an explanation of the concept accompanied by examples. To the four features of Biblical typology discussed in Chapter 2 we can now add a fifth and list them as follows:

- 1) General resemblance between sketches and fulfillments
- 2) Presence in the tradition of key symbol identifiers
- 3) Economy of distribution of typological material
- 4) Integration (interconnectedness) of coded sketches
- 5) Purposefulness of type coding within the tradition

If evidence continues to mount showing that Biblical coding has these five attributes, then the effort to explain it naturalistically will increasingly resemble an overloaded airplane trying to take off from a short runway. The last feature on the list, purposefulness, is especially telling. We have seen that its presence must flow from intelligence, and an Intelligence capable of orchestrating historical events over the course of centuries and millennia is one definition of “God.”

### **Homer and Mark: Manufactured Correspondence**

This does not mean that we are finished examining what accident combined with clever arrangement of material is capable of. It cannot produce a sound typological system, but it can produce a set of literary parallels that are easily mistaken for such a system. An example is found in the book, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, by Dennis MacDonald, a member of the Jesus Seminar.<sup>3</sup>

MacDonald speculates that the author of Mark’s Gospel created episodes for Jesus’ life based on events from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. He observes that in the first century Homer’s epic tales were used universally to teach the Greek language, so everyone who could read and write Greek was familiar with them. It was also a literary

fashion of the day to borrow plot elements or characters from Homer and disguise them to create new stories. Mark did this, MacDonald theorizes, in order to make Jesus seem equal if not superior to Homer's widely admired hero Odysseus.

MacDonald feels it necessary to show that Mark had access to Homer's epics and that borrowing from them was common among contemporary authors. His only evidence of actual borrowing from Homer by Mark, however, is resemblance. Besides setting certain episodes side by side to show their similarity, he points out unusual words or aspects of narrative style that in his view reinforce the proposed derivations.

MacDonald presents his argument well and succeeds in convincing many of his readers. What he does not do is acknowledge how easy it is to use his technique to create the appearance of Homeric inspiration in other material. I set out to produce sets of parallels between the *Odyssey* and literature that by no reasonable judgment was derived from it. Within a short time I had produced two such parallel studies. The first example correlates the episode of Odysseus and the sorceress Circe with the Old Testament narrative of Saul and the Witch of Endor from 1 Samuel 28. The second study correlates the same section of the *Odyssey* to an online version of the Grimm fairytale, "Hansel and Gretel."

When I showed the first of these parallel studies to an atheist acquaintance who had read MacDonald's book, he responded that perhaps 1 Samuel 28 is an imitation of the *Odyssey*! But the books of Samuel are a part of a thoroughly Hebrew tradition likely to be as old as the Homeric epics. From a secular perspective, it may be an open question whether Greek myth exerted a broad influence on early Hebrew narratives, but not that sequential, item-for-item literary copying took place across such formidable barriers of language, geography and culture. MacDonald himself stresses that borrowing from Homer may be alleged only where it is historically plausible, a requirement that cannot be satisfied for the books of Samuel as it can be, arguably, for the Gospels.

The flaw in MacDonald's approach is its deceptive elasticity. Narrative elements that do not contribute to a fit between compared passages are skipped over, regardless of their prominence in context. Once a rough correspondence is constructed any further shared

characteristics are expounded. Dissimilarities are rationalized as changes the borrowing author made to accommodate the original story to his own purposes.

This is not to say that a general likeness between literary texts is of no use in determining whether one is the source of the other. But the value of resemblance alone, even when punctuated by a few oddly similar details, is limited. That is why symbol identifiers are so important in Biblical typology. The resemblance of “Hansel and Gretel” to the *Odyssey* and of the patriarch Jacob to Jesus are by themselves little more than curiosities. Nowhere in the *Odyssey* or in *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, for example, do we find even a veiled identification to back up a proposed parallel between Odysseus’ band of men and Hansel and Gretel.

As we have seen in previous chapters, when it comes to coded prophecies relating to Jesus we have more than lists of resemblances. Outside the coded narratives themselves we find links between the Messiah and Jacob, for example, and between the Messiah and Moses. The need to establish such a prophetic rationale combined with specific identification of symbols imposes a discipline on typological decryption that is not present where similarity alone is the standard. Anyone who doubts this is free to set up parallels between narratives using, say, the tales of Chaucer as the source text and the plays of Shakespeare as the target text. He then can attempt to create a set of coded relationships verified by symbol identifiers using the same documents. Afterward he can judge for himself the relative difficulty of the two exercises.

### **How Flexible is Typological Coding?**

Biblical type coding has so far held up well under scrutiny. Two possible objections still need to be addressed, however. The first is that more than one symbolic association is sometimes available for a given type, allowing the interpreter to mold the resulting meaning to suit his own taste.

We have seen, for example, that water may symbolize God’s Spirit and its manifestations such as divine law, divine teaching and miracle-working. Water may by contrast represent crowds of violent people as well as death or the grave. In typological interpretation a

choice must be made between these, but the choice is not arbitrary. The sketches we have examined in which water is one of the symbols all contain clues as to whether water is taking on a positive or negative connotation. The distinction between water for quenching thirst and the threatening waters of a storm-tossed sea is so easy to draw that it can hardly be called subjective.

In practice Biblical symbols are too limited in their range of meanings to be made to tell any story we want them to. Only certain meanings make sense in combination with each other. The telephone keypad helps to illustrate. Each of the numerals 2 through 9 of the keypad is assigned three or four letters of the alphabet so that any word can be coded into numbers as a marketing tool and memory aid. A given combination of numbers therefore may encode several words, but the degree of flexibility is easy to overestimate.

Look at the keypad layout for two short words related to the subject of Biblical theology, “God” and “Lord”:

4	6	3	5	6	7	3
<u>G</u>	M	<u>D</u>	J	M	P	<u>D</u>
H	N	E	K	N	<u>R</u>	E
I	<u>Q</u>	F	<u>L</u>	<u>Q</u>	S	F

Few other words can be deciphered from the same number sequences, and none of them form a related pair comparable to our original two. The odds would be long against these number sequences occurring together by chance in a document, such as this chapter, that discussed keypad coding of theological terms.

The keypad exercise shows that even when a symbolic system is relatively elastic, creating thematic agreement between arbitrarily chosen groups of symbols is difficult. To turn this around, when we find that by choosing between symbol meanings we can achieve adherence to a pre-selected theme, as we can with coded sketches in the Bible, the odds are overwhelming that the coherence was built to the text from the start. If the potential for different meanings really were great enough to let the interpreter fashion them at will, it would not be as difficult as it is to find coded systems in non-Biblical literature.

The second objection is the same one we discussed briefly in the last chapter regarding typological alignment between what befell Jonah and the trial, execution and resurrection of Jesus. What would prevent sectarians in Jesus' time from interpreting stories from Hebrew Bible symbolically and then concocting the fulfillments? The first of many problems with this theory is that stories and identifiers would already have to exist by pure chance in order for such a scheme to be carried out. Then, to exploit this extraordinary circumstance, our hypothetical sectarians must have been exceptionally organized and deceitful.

Conspiracies, as we noted in the last chapter, tend to fail as historical explanations because they tend to fail, period. But a conspiracy is what we are left with, putting aside supernatural explanations. The conspiracy must have embraced Christian writers living in different areas and working during different decades between the middle and end of the first century.

How, exactly, are we to envision a plot on this scale, carried on by such articulate proponents? The conspirators could not have been misled by rumor and exaggeration about Jesus or even false reports of miracles generated by religious hysteria. Having dedicated their lives to what they knew to be a fraud, they nevertheless produced a system of fulfillments both dizzyingly complex and disarmingly subtle. The scheme would have been diabolical not only because it betrayed the truth it claimed to uphold but because of the pathological ingenuity required to carry it out.

A theory so laden with implausibilities falls short of a sound naturalistic explanation. It has no equivalent in our experience. It defies what we know of psychology and religious history. It proposes a daunting improbability regarding the Hebrew Bible and joins it to a literary crime so perverse and yet so artful that no one who reads the New Testament with anything approaching objectivity will find it credible. The case for Biblical inspiration—or for something equally removed from natural causes—looks increasingly formidable. But the case rests on the assumption that more coded sketches of the kind we have already examined are present in the Scriptures. That, in turns, leads us back again to the young man Jacob and his interest in sheep.



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- 1 Gal 4:24; Rom 5:14; 1 Pet 3:21.
- 2 Luke 24:27.
- 3 Dennis MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

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