

# Typology in Hebrews: A Response to Buist Fanning<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

I am deeply grateful for Buist M. Fanning, not least because of what I learned in his second semester Greek class in the spring of 1997 when I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). Over the years Professor Fanning's words of encouragement to me, his affectionate way of telling me he appreciated the work I was doing or something I had written, has meant a great deal. My enormous respect for him gave weight to his kind words.

I agree with and appreciate the way Dr. Fanning describes and defines typology, and I find the examples he discusses stimulating and insightful. Dr. Fanning's discussion exhibits the care and exegetical acumen that I have admired since I first sat in his class over twenty years ago.

Being so much in agreement with what he has done makes it difficult for me to know exactly how to respond. What I would like to do by way of response should not be understood as a critique but as an attempt to supplement the argument.

If I can adapt Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 3, like a skilled master builder Dr. Fanning has laid a foundation. I am going to attempt to build on it with gold, silver, and precious stones, but I'm glad for this opportunity for Dr. Fanning to let me know if he thinks I'm using wood, hay, and stubble! That is to say, I take it upon myself to add to what Dr. Fanning has done, recognizing that he may or may not appreciate these additions.

Dr. Fanning has mined diamonds from the letter to the Hebrews. He has done so with skill and care. What I would like to do is place a black cloth under the diamonds he worked so hard to find and remove from the mine, then turn a bright spotlight on them to highlight their beauty. In terms of this metaphor, the black cloth is the Old Testament (OT) background, and the bright spotlight is the narrative undercurrent the author of Hebrews seems to assume as he makes his statements.

The metaphor is not entirely helpful, of course, because the OT is more than a backdrop, and the author's interpretive perspective is more than a spotlight. Let us therefore attempt to leave behind every entanglement and press on better things.

### **THE OT STORYLINE**

My thesis here is that the author of Hebrews has read the OT a certain way: he has read it correctly, that is, in accordance with the intentions of the OT's human authors. From that reading of the OT the author of Hebrews has learned a master story. He has then assumed the master story he learned from the OT and applied it in his letter. In doing this, he expects his audience to have read the OT the same way he has, and he assumes they will therefore understand his typological interpretation and application of that story to the Christian life.

I do have a twofold critique here, but it is not a critique of Dr. Fanning but first of Christian OT scholarship and second of the separation of the disciplines. This critique applies to Dr. Fanning only to the extent that these realities have impinged upon him.

Much Christian OT scholarship has not read the OT the way the author of Hebrews does. Reading the OT some other way than the NT authors do is out of step with the idea that the Holy Spirit inspired the author of Hebrews. The ideas that God breathed out the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16) and

that the prophets spoke from God as they were carried along by the Spirit (2 Pet 1:20–21) entail the idea that the Holy Spirit did not allow error to enter the later biblical author’s interpretation of earlier Scripture. A working presupposition for evangelicals, then, is that the author of Hebrews has correctly understood the OT.

I am going to attempt to sketch in the way the author of Hebrews read the OT. I may very well make errors as I try to trace out his intellectual steps, but he made none as he took them. Because he did not show all his work—spelling out his assumptions and explaining his exegetical moves, in order to understand how the author of Hebrews interpreted the OT we must fill in some of the blanks. What the author of Hebrews had in those blanks was inerrant; in my attempt to reconstruct the content of those blanks, on the other hand, I could be making mistakes. Still, I contend that Christians who believe Hebrews to be inspired should be trying to read the OT the way its author did.

This relates to the separation of the disciplines. Because we have “OT Studies” and “NT,” those who teach the one do not typically teach the other, because those who do PhDs in the one do not do PhDs in the other. I suspect that those who read the original languages of the one do not always stay on top of the language of the other. My brothers, this should not be.

To speak of my own experience at DTS: it would have been a better Bible Exposition (BibEx) course that had Dr. Fanning as its teacher, even if that BibEx course had been on the Pentateuch. And from my own limited experience of getting to teach from both Testaments, I think teaching the Law, Prophets, and Writings would only have enriched Dr. Fanning’s teaching of everything from Elementary Greek to Exegesis of Romans. But alas, the guild is what it is, and what is bent is not easily straightened (Eccl 1:15).

To the OT story as the author of Hebrews reads it.

***What Reading of the OT Makes Sense of What the Author of Hebrews Says?***

God created the world as a cosmic temple, and within that cosmic temple he placed his living image and likeness. His purpose was for the image and likeness to reign as king in his stead, mediating the knowledge of him to others as a kind of priestly prophet. Adam is thus a prototypical king-priest. Adam was also made in the likeness of God in the same way that Seth, son of Adam, was in his father Adam’s image and likeness (Gen 5:1, 3). This implies

that Adam being in God's image and likeness means he was, in some sense, God's son. Luke seems to have read Genesis this way (Luke 3:38).

Seeing these important Adamic roles gives us perspective on why Moses would include Melchizedek in the Genesis narrative. Unlike other significant figures in Genesis, the king of Salem's genealogical line is untraced and his parents, birth, and death go unmentioned (Heb 7:3, "he is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life").

The author of Hebrews sees in Melchizedek a royal priest who worships the creator, "God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:19). Moses has already established in Genesis that God will bless those who bless Abram (Gen 12:3), and Melchizedek blesses Abram (14:19). The author of Hebrews may have read Moses presenting Abram immediately using Melchizedek's terminology to describe God (Gen 14:22) as an indication that Melchizedek instructed Abram, and he certainly saw significance in the tithe Abram rendered to Melchizedek (Gen 14:20; Heb 7:4–10). The author of Hebrews seems to suggest that Melchizedek served as a priest between God and Abram.

We can note here, too, that Melchizedek's blessing of Abram (Gen 14:19–20) recalls Noah's blessing of Shem. Noah himself was a new Adam (Gen 9:1, 7; cf. 1:28) who had a new fall that exposed shameful nakedness. Like Abram after him, Noah built an altar and offered sacrifice (8:20–21), almost like a royal priest himself.

Adam had royal and priestly roles in the garden, and Noah was an Adamic royal priest. Melchizedek was a royal priest standing between God and Abram. God then made the nation of Israel a royal priesthood (Exod 19:6), a royal priesthood he had earlier identified as his son (Exod 4:22–23).

Israel, God's son, had been liberated from Egypt at the exodus, and the whole complex of events became paradigmatic for the way God would continue to intervene on behalf of his people. Everything from the descent into Egypt with Joseph having been "sent ahead" (Ps 105:17) to the burning bush, the plagues, the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven and water from the rock, the law and tabernacle at Sinai, the pilgrimage through the wilderness, the conquest of Canaan, and the allotment of the land to the tribes—all of it figures into the paradigmatic pattern of events. Israel's past becomes the schema that Israel's prophets and Psalmists use to interpret her present and point to her future.

Along the way God raised up David as king, promising him both a house—a dynastic line of descent—and a seed whose throne would be established forever. This descendant of David would be a son to God, and God would be a father to him. David seems to have understood this royal sonship in Adamic terms (see esp. Pss 2 and 8). The seed of David would be a son to God in the sense that Adam and Israel were. The son of David would be a son to God as the new Adam and patriarchal head (and thereby the federal head) of the nation of Israel.

In the buildup to the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 it becomes evident that the future king from David's line (2 Sam 7:13–14) would be the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) who would bring about the blessing of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) as the king from Judah's line (Gen 49:8–12) in fulfillment of the Balaam Oracles (esp. Num 24:9, 17–19). Thus would be the Adamic kingship of the seed of David, seed of the woman.

Will the future king from David's line have a priestly role? In the Pentateuch the only things to be anointed are the tabernacle (and things associated with it) and the priests (e.g., Exod 28:41; 29:7, 36; 30:26, 30; 40:9–11, 13, 15). This means that in Israel's foundational body of literature, the only *people* the Torah instructs Israel to anoint are her priests. Because of this, when God commissions the prophet Samuel to *anoint* a king over the nation, the anointing colors the king with a hue that previously shaded only the priests. This doesn't establish that Israel's king is a royal priest, but it does strongly associate him with the priesthood, as does the way Solomon would build the temple with his own house attached (1 Kings 10:5, KJV).

King David also wore a linen ephod, a priestly garment, when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (1 Sam 6). David's sons are referred to as *cohanim* (כהנים) in 2 Samuel 8:18. While the CSB renders this “chief officials,” the ESV does the line as “David's sons were priests.” These priestly overtones, then, join with the indicators of royal priesthood associated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Israel, to inform the things that David said about Melchizedek in Psalm 110. Psalm 110, moreover, has significant links with earlier Scripture.

This way of thinking about Psalm 110 would not lead anyone to view the Psalm as a lightning bolt out of nowhere, but that is precisely how much Old Testament scholarship has seen it. For instance, John Goldingay writes of Psalm 110,

There is no indication that it speaks of a future king, nor any necessity to reckon that it would be interpreted messianically . . . some of its verses are applied to Jesus . . . though as a whole it does not fit him, and most of its application to him in the NT requires it to be understood in a way that would not correspond to its meaning in any OT context.<sup>2</sup>

Goldingay has also rejected the canonical context and Davidic authorship of the Psalm. Against the evidence of the superscription and the way Jesus identified David as the speaker of the Psalm, Goldingay writes, “The speaker is unidentified,” then goes on to claim regarding the Psalm as a whole, “Any theory about its background is an inference from circumstantial evidence. We will never know its origin.”<sup>3</sup> We will not know its origin if, with Goldingay, we reject the superscription and refuse to read it in canonical context! Nor if we ignore the authoritative interpretation of the text found in the Spirit inspired NT on the lips of Jesus himself (see, e.g., Matt 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44).

The author of Hebrews, on the other hand, seems to view Psalm 110 in relationship not only to earlier Psalms, chiefly Psalms 2 and 8, but also in light of the rest of the OT and the hopes it generated.<sup>4</sup>

### **THE NARRATIVE UNDERCURRENT**

I want to turn now to the narrative undercurrent the author of Hebrews seems to assume as he makes his statements to his audience. My contention is that this storyline adapts and applies the OT’s schema to the new covenant life of faith.

#### ***What Story Did the Author of Hebrews Take for Granted?***

The statements made by the author of Hebrews reflect an assumed storyline, a salvation historical narrative that begins at creation and stretches to new creation, with the OT’s paradigmatic narrative foreshadowing the new covenant situation in which his readers find themselves. He begins with assertions about the revelation God has now made in the last days by his son (Heb 1:1–2). This son is identified with God, ruler of the world, and the one who has made purification for sins (1:3a). Having fulfilled his mission, he has been installed at God’s right hand in fulfillment of the Davidic hope for

a Psalm 110 King-Priest (1:3b), and he is also the new Adam, new Israel son of God addressed in Psalm 2:7, promised to David in 2 Samuel 7:14 (1:5). He is the anointed King, identified with God himself, addressed in Psalm 45 (1:8–9), and through him all things were made, both the original creation and the expected new creation, as declared in Psalm 102:25–27 (1:10–12). He will reign at God’s right hand until God puts all his enemies under his feet (Ps 110:1; Heb 1:13).

The author of Hebrews views the old covenant revelation as having been completed (1:1), with a last days revelation begun in Christ (1:2), continuing in the ministry of the eyewitnesses (2:3), and ongoing in what God says through him in his letter: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking” (12:25). The time of the old covenant has been completed, the new covenant has been inaugurated (Heb 8), and the author refers to the yet future new creation in his quotation of Psalm 102 with its description of the changed garment (1:12), along with when he speaks of “the city that has foundations” (11:10).

Within the outer boundaries of creation (Heb 11:3) and new creation (11:10), when the cloud of witnesses will be made perfect with the author’s audience (11:40), the events in the old covenant portend what will take place in the new.

The author of Hebrews maps the mediation of the Mosaic law through angels, the disobedience of the Israelites, and the consequent punishment right onto new covenant experience in the warning of Hebrews 2:2–3,

For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape ...

The author’s next words similarly set the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in parallel with the salvation his audience has experienced:

... if we neglect such a great salvation? (Heb 2:3a)

The signs and wonders the people experienced in the attestations given to Moses, the plagues visited upon Egypt, and the Spirit on Moses and the seventy elders likewise seem to find fulfillment in the signs and wonders that accompany the new covenant salvation:

while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Heb 2:4).

The gifts of the Holy Spirit given to Moses and the 70 elders (Num 11) find parallel in the way the Spirit fully endowed the ministry of Jesus and was then poured out upon his followers (Acts 2).

The author next moves to the subjection of the world-to-come to the Psalm 8 new Adam, new David son of man (2:5–8). Then follow statements about the fulfillment of what David and Isaiah typified: just as they stood in solidarity with the believing old covenant remnant, so Christ stands in solidarity with his followers (2:11–13).

Having presented Jesus fulfilling what was typified in David and Isaiah, the author presents points of historical correspondence and escalation between Jesus and Moses in 3:1–6, as he again presents Israel in the wilderness as a typological warning for Christians. With Jesus the new and greater Moses, Christians take on the role played by the wilderness generation, with an opportunity to enter rest where they failed (3:7–15).

Hebrews 1 presents Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophecies and patterns, and Hebrews 2 places Christians in the role of those delivered from Egypt. This continues in chapter 3, where Jesus is the new Moses and Christians are urged not to fail as the wilderness generation did (3:16–4:3).

The repeated references to “building” and the “house built” in Hebrews 3:1–6 seem to connote creation, tabernacle, temple, church, and the fulfillment of all these in the cosmic temple of the new creation. Creation comes specifically into view in 4:3, and the entrance into the land seems to have been an attempt to regain rest in God’s new creation, which the wilderness generation failed to attain (4:4–5). David then urged his generation to enter that rest and overcome where the wilderness generation failed (4:6–7). David’s urging shows that what Joshua accomplished did not bring about the full realization of the promised rest (4:8–9). David perhaps places himself in the role of Joshua, with his people in the place of the conquest generation. When the author of Hebrews picks up the language of Psalm 95, he seems to put Jesus where Joshua and David were, with those who follow Jesus in the place of the people.

The author of Hebrews then seems to move his discussion from the exodus–wilderness–conquest sequence of events to the way Christ fulfills



what was typified in the “Leviticult” [*sic*].<sup>5</sup> Dr. Fanning has ably shown how the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek fulfills and replaces the ministry of the descendants of Aaron (Heb 5–7). We might also again note the implied relationships in this typological presentation of Jesus as the new and greater priest and sacrifice: where the priests and the offerings stood, we now have Christ and his death on the cross. This understanding would also seem to suggest that whereas under the old covenant we had the Israelites who brought their offerings to the priests to be sacrificed, in the new covenant we have those who persevere by faith in following Jesus.

This typological relationship between the priest, the sacrifice(s), and the worshipers would seem to point to the new covenant church as a typological fulfillment of old covenant Israel. Further, just as only those who confess their sin and make sacrifice for atonement benefit from the old covenant priests and sacrifices, it would seem that only those who turn from sin and trust in Christ benefit from the ministry of the High Priest of the new covenant and the sacrifice he offered for sin.<sup>6</sup>

The new priesthood of Jesus likewise brings about the new covenant (Heb 8–9). It seems that when the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10, with reference to the assumed timeline reflected in his statements, he has his readers “in the land.” The exodus has been fulfilled. The wilderness has been traversed. And now the people are in the land. Just as Joshua’s generation experienced fulfillment but not ultimate realization of what had been promised, so Christians experience an already-not yet inauguration of what yet remains to be consummated.

Having discussed the new covenant and the superior sacrifice of Christ (10:1–18), the author urges his audience to draw near, hold fast, and spur one another on (10:19–23). The discussion of the priesthood, the covenant, and the offering dominated chapters 5–10. Prior to that the author established the identity of Jesus (Heb 1–2) and then took his audience on a symbolic journey that began at the exodus from Egypt and continued through the wilderness to the land of rest: “we who have believed enter that rest” (4:3).

The Hebrews 5-10 discussion of the priesthood, the covenant, and the offering seems to presuppose life in the land. That setting is taken for granted in the warning at the end of Hebrews 10 as well (10:26–39). The one who dies on the evidence of two or three witnesses for setting aside the Torah of Moses in 10:28 would appear to envision an Israelite living in the land

between conquest and exile. The plot points on the author's assumed narrative seem to go:

Exodus – Sinai – Wilderness – Conquest – Jerusalem/Kingdom

God's intention to establish his kingdom, as discussed by the author in what we call chapters 3-4, seems to have entailed the conquest of the land for the establishment of Edenic-New Creation Rest. But Joshua did not give them rest. Instead, the people set aside the law of Moses and were exiled. The implied New Covenant plot points on the author's assumed narrative seem to go:

Cross – Zion – Wilderness – New Conquest – Jerusalem/Kingdom

Israel failed in the wilderness, and the author of Hebrews urges his audience not to repeat that mistake in 2:1-4. Israel also failed in the land, and the author seems to urge his audience not to repeat that mistake in 10:26-31. The OT faithful in Hebrews 11 model the kind of already-not yet perseverance the author urges on his audience.

The race set before the letter's audience (Heb 12:1) has been run by the OT faithful (Heb 11), and they typified the one who fulfilled the patterns, Jesus (12:2). The author exhorts his audience to consider Jesus' suffering and endure discipline (12:3-17; cf. 2:10).

The author seems to return to his symbolic parallel narrative in 12:18-24. Israel came out of Egypt and met God at Sinai. Christians have been redeemed by Christ, who accomplished his exodus in Jerusalem, and they have come not to Sinai but to Zion, fulfillment of Sinai. There seems to be an already-not yet dynamic at work with the Zion to which believers have come. Believers have come to Zion, but the earthquake at Sinai awaits a yet future fulfillment when once more God will shake heaven and earth, leaving only things that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:25-27). The parallels seem to work as follows:

Exodus from Egypt – Sinai

Cross of Christ – Zion (Holy Place? Heb 9:9)

Return of Christ – Future Zion/New Jerusalem (Holy of Holies? Heb 9:9)

It seems that the author assumes that just as Israel entered the land and sought a rest in a kingdom they did not realize, so Christians have already entered into the new covenant rest seeking a not-yet kingdom rest that will

be consummated when Christ comes. Accordingly, as Moses gave Israel instructions for life in the land, the author of Hebrews gives believers instructions for life in the land (Heb 13:1–9). Old covenant Israel engaged in the “Leviticult,” but new covenant believers in Jesus partake of the new covenant, eating from an altar from which those who persist in the ways of the old covenant do not benefit (13:10–16). The author seems to set participating in the Lord Supper across from old covenant Israel’s celebration of her feasts.

## CONCLUSION

God did not dictate to the author of Hebrews what he was to say to his audience. The author engages in an interpretive exercise in which he powerfully brings to bear both his understanding of the OT and his application of that reading. He spoke from God as he was carried along by the Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), but he used his brain, his language, his patterns of speech. He interpreted the OT.

We today have the joy of tracing out the interpretive perspective of the biblical author that we might embrace it for ourselves. That perspective entails understanding the story he assumes, knowing how the symbolism and imagery interpret and explain the story, and discerning the patterns that repeat across the story. If we understand this perspective, it will be because God’s word has been effective: God’s promises create people who understand the import of what has been written, can apply it to our own lives, and know the type of thing God will do in the future because we have seen the type of things he has done in the past.

These things are written for our instruction, that we too might rightly divide the word of truth. I am thankful to have been taught by Prof. Dr. Fanning, and I am thankful for this opportunity to join him in the august task of interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews.

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1. This article was originally presented as a response to Buist M. Fanning in the Invited Session of the General Epistles Section at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 14, 2018. Dr. Fanning presented on “Typology in the Book of Hebrews,” and my assignment was to respond to his presentation.
  2. John Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 292.
  3. Goldingay, 291, 292.

4. See further James M. Hamilton, *Psalms*, 2 vols. (Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary; (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, forthcoming); and Matthew Habib Emadi, "The Royal Priest: Psalm 110 in Biblical-Theological Perspective" (PhD Dissertation, Louisville, KY, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015).
5. I was attempting to type "Levitical cult," but erroneously keyed in the happy typo, "Leviticult," which I like and so keep here in the text.
6. On this point, see Stephen J. Wellum, "The New Covenant Work of Christ: Priesthood, Atonement, and Intercession," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (ed., David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson; Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 517-539.