

“Christotelic Preaching:” Reflections on Daniel Block’s Approach

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It is an honor to be asked to evaluate Dan Block’s essay, since I was a colleague of his at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and we enjoyed many long hours affably debating interpretation of the Scriptures over the years. There is much that deserves comment in Block’s essay, but there is not space to address all the issues that he raises.

In general, I found Block’s position and presentation a bit confusing and conflicted. Several examples can be given without getting bogged down on issues of lesser importance. The difference between Christocentric and Christotelic proclamation was not clear in spite of a diagram to aid the explanation. His comments on “making a beeline for the cross” (p. 19) were amusing, yet he does appear to be concerned with **how** we get from a passage in the Old Testament (OT) to what it may instruct us about Christ.¹ This is a central issue, indeed, and he does well to make it so.

One of the problems is that the manner in which he adduces evidence to support statements is frequently selective and difficult to substantiate.

Block claims, “in the Scriptures Jesus is much more common as a designation for the second person of the Trinity than the title Christ” (p. 8). When one speaks of the second person of the Trinity, the designation that comes to mind first is “Son.” Moreover, names and titles given to the incarnate Lord have to be treated in an interlocking network of meaning and not pitted one against the other. Any grammar of biblical Greek will note that while *χριστός* begins as an epithet and is usually articulated, later in the New Testament (NT) it becomes equivalent to a name or proper noun and is no longer articulated.² One must also consider compound names like Jesus Christ.³ Why does Paul prefer “Christ Jesus” in his final letters (Timothy and Titus)? Why stop at Matthew 10:42 in adducing evidence from this gospel for the name Jesus? And why couldn’t a gospel begin by focusing on his personal name? What exactly does this kind of data prove?

Block claims that “the epithet *ὁ χριστός* functions as a narrow technical term for the eschatological messianic son of David.” “If we are honest,” he says, “and if this is what we mean by ‘messianic,’ we could count all the relevant texts in the First Testament on our two hands and two feet” (p. 8). This amounts to asserting that the importance of the topic is indicated by the number of times the term *מָשִׁיחַ* (messiah) is used. Yet fundamental to literary skill is the ability to discuss someone or something without always employing epithet or name. Stephen Dempster’s masterpiece *Dominion and Dynasty* concludes that the entire OT is focused on a coming king.⁴ The genius of the book of Esther is that God is the central character without once being mentioned.

In the same vein, Michael Heiser states:

The identity and purpose of the messiah are unknowable from a Bible verse—and even many Bible verses. The profile proceeds along conceptual trajectories that eventually merge into a portrait. And so Jesus’ question (Luke 24:26) to the two men on the road to Emmaus makes eminent sense: “Was it not necessary that the Christ suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Yes, of course it was. It’s just hard to see that unless you know what you’re looking for. The messianic portrait can only be discerned by assembling a hundred terms, phrases, metaphors, and symbols, which themselves take on meaning only when their patterns and convergences are detected.⁵

At the heart of the matter is the Christian interpretation of the OT, the

typology employed by Jesus and the apostles, and the larger metanarrative of Scripture. The epithet Christian was first used for followers of Jesus in Antioch, not long after the church was born (Acts 11:26). The term is a diminutive, meaning “little Christ.” What it implies for our hermeneutical approach to the OT is that if we are to have a *Christian* interpretation of the OT, we must follow the teaching of Jesus and his authorized agents, the apostles.

In this regard Block makes an important comment on Luke 24:27: “and beginning with Moses and from all the prophets, he explained to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” Block contends that “the evangelist did not say that all the Scriptures speak of Christ, but that he explained those texts that spoke of him from all the Scriptures” (p. 12). The adverbial prepositional phrase “in all the scriptures” modifies “he explained” and the phrase “the things concerning himself” is the objective content of the “explanation.” The question is whether or not “in the scriptures” is to be qualified to mean only directly messianic prophecies, so that only some OT passages are in mind, or whether “in all the scriptures” is unqualified and in some way means “all the scriptures” in the sense of every OT passage. Block prefers the former, apparently believing that Jesus has in mind only “explicitly or implicitly royal messianic texts” (p. 15; I wish he had defined “implicitly”). He does not explain, however, why he prefers this. He believes that to “make every text about Christ” is to “pay no attention to what the divine and human authors originally intended,” which results in “hijacking” the Jewish Scriptures (p. 17). Block’s view that only explicit or implicit royal messianic texts are in mind in Luke 24:27 is not sufficiently inclusive, since it does not take into consideration OT texts that are not messianic texts but are historical narratives, which are seen by Luke and the other gospel writers as typologically pointing forward to and fulfilled in Christ (e.g., Luke 8:9; 20:17; Acts 1:16-20; 4:11; 28:25-27; likewise Matt 2:15-18; 12:40; 13:45; 15:7-9; 26:47-56; 27:9-10). In addition to direct or implicit messianic prophecies, Jesus would most likely have had these kinds of historical narrations also in mind in his statement in Luke 24:27. So, there is much more included in Jesus’ reference to “all the Scriptures” than mere direct or implicit messianic prophecies.

This raises the issue of typology. Block attempts to demonstrate that Joshua is not a type of the coming king according to the intent of the text

of the OT. At the same time, he does not clearly define typology. He seems to think that Jesus and the apostles are operating by hindsight and that the typological teaching is not the intent of the divine or human authors of the OT.

In previous publications, Steve Wellum and I have labored to describe as accurately as possible the notion of typology *as employed by the authors of Scripture*.⁶ We have noted that typology is grounded in *history*, the *text*, and *interbiblical/intertextual development*. First, typology is a feature of divine revelation rooted in history and the text.⁷ It involves an organic relationship or analogical correspondences between “persons, events, and institutions” in one epoch (“type”) and what they anticipate, or their fulfillment, in a later epoch (“antitype”). Second, typology is prophetic and predictive and thus divinely intended. In other words, God planned for the type to point forward to its fulfillment, or antitype, in a later epoch of redemptive history.⁸ For this reason, typologies are recurrent patterns pointing forward to and culminating first in Christ and then applied to or appropriated by Christ’s people, the church. Typology is best viewed as a subset of predictive prophecy, not in the sense of direct verbal predictions but more “indirectly” in the sense of predictions built on models/patterns that God intends, which become unveiled or more clearly seen as later OT authors reinforce those patterns, with the goal of anticipating their fulfillment in Christ.

In my book, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, I discuss typology and the factors that determine correct interpretation: what is a type and what is not a type.⁹ In brief, typology is governed by four factors.

The first is correspondence between events, people, places, etc., of one time, and events, people, places, etc., of a later time. This correspondence is due to the fact that God in his providence sovereignly controls history, and he is consistent in his character so that there are repetitive patterns to his works in history.

Second is escalation from type to antitype so that the later event, person, or thing that can be said to be the fulfillment of the type is much better and greater than that which foreshadows it.

Third is biblical warrant. For something to be considered a type, there must be exegetical evidence in the original text that indicates that what the text is dealing with is intended to be a model or pattern for something to

follow in history. Norbert Lohfink shows from *Exodus 15* that the deliverance through the Red Sea was intended from the start to be a model for future salvation.¹⁰ Thus, when the Major Prophets predict a future salvation through the work of a coming king, they are right to speak of it as a new exodus and to describe the coming salvation in the language of God’s great deliverance in the past. They are right, because they have correctly understood Exodus 15 as intended by divine and human authors. In this regard, Isaiah employs the term לָאָה, (“to perform the duty of nearest relative,” “to redeem”) for the forgiveness of sins in Isaiah 44:22. He specifically transfers the term from the economic realm of the Exodus to the realm of our broken covenant relationship with God in the New Exodus. Was the exodus event intended by God and Moses as a model for future salvation so that all readers could understand this? Block says, “no;” Isaiah says, “yes.” This shows, also, that Block’s discussion of expressions for “redeem” in the OT is too selective.

The fourth factor is that the progression of the covenants throughout the narrative plot structure of the Bible both creates, controls, and develops the typological structures across the canon of Scripture. For example, in the covenant with creation, Adam is portrayed as a king-priest who must be an obedient son in relation to God and a servant king in relation to creation. This role is taken up by Noah in the covenant with God that reaffirms the covenant with creation. Next, in the covenant with Abraham the king-priest role devolves upon him.¹¹ In Exodus 19, we see how Israel as a nation is called to be an obedient son and servant king, functioning in a priestly role in relation to the nations of the world. In the Davidic covenant, this role is narrowed from the nation as a whole to the king in particular. Finally, in the new covenant, Jesus the Messiah fulfills these roles adequately and fully.¹²

The end of Block’s essay focuses on the interpretation of Genesis 15:1-6. He concludes that nothing in this passage points “to a future eschatological Messiah” (p. 30). His first reason for arguing this is that the quotation of Genesis 15:6 in Habakkuk, Romans 1:17, and Galatians 3:11 (see also Heb 10:38) is different from the meaning of Genesis 15:6 (“then he believed in the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness”). Habakkuk changes Abraham’s “belief” to God’s “faith.” Romans and Galatians, too, in the immediate context, views Christ as the object of faith. Block concludes that

the meaning of Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, contains “alien elements” in relation to the “original,” and that “we may not force onto earlier texts meanings that were irrelevant to the original situation.” Genesis 15:6 provided Habakkuk, Romans, and Galatians “convenient verbal instruments for communicating new and [a] quite different message,” which has a “polemical purpose” (p. 26). Block believes that the statement that Abraham will have an heir (Isaac) whose seed will be multiplied into an uncountable host, at least in this context, does not include Christ (Gen 15:4-5). He contends for this despite his acknowledgement that Matthew’s genealogy presents Jesus as the climactic seed of Abraham (p. 30). But he apparently thinks that since Jesus did not physically come from the loins of Joseph, that in some sense this nullifies or significantly qualifies what Matthew’s genealogy says about Jesus’ Abrahamic descent (though in the same sentence, he says Jesus is the climactic seed of Abraham, p. 30). But Matthew’s point about Jesus as part of Abraham’s “seed” stands on a legal genealogical basis (as most commentators agree), so that the “seed” mentioned in Genesis 15:5 would include the individual royal seed, as would Galatians 3:16: “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “and to seeds,” as referring to many, but to one, “and to your seed,” that is, Christ.” Many believe the promise about multiplying Abraham’s “seed” likely refers collectively, at least, to the following texts: Genesis 13:15-16; 15:5; 22:17-18; 26:4; 32:12.¹³ Included in these collective seed promises (such as Gen 15:5) would be the coming individual royal seed, which Genesis 22:17-18 and Psalm 72:17 demonstrates (the latter alluding to the “seed” in the former). Acts 3:25-26 also cites the promise of a seed from Genesis 22:18 and applies it to Jesus. Accordingly, Block concludes his section on Genesis 15:1-6 by saying, “I see no hand here pointing to a future eschatological Messiah” (p. 30).

In addition, Block’s description of righteousness is skewed. Why jump to Deuteronomy 6:25 to explain Genesis 15:6? It certainly is not “the closest analogue to Genesis 15:6 in the First Testament.” The connection is inappropriate because the referents in Deuteronomy 6:25 are already in the covenant. Since no space can be given to discuss this in detail, I may refer the reader to the exposition by Stephen G. Dempster.¹⁴ Unlike Block’s overly narrow “grammatical-historical” treatment of the text, Dempster is able to treat the *textual* horizon and move to the *epochal* and *canonical*

horizons of the text without setting the textual horizon of Genesis 15 at variance with later authors of Scripture.¹⁵ Why is Block concerned to show in the epochal horizon Abraham’s roller coaster ride between doubt and faith but not allow the same epochal and canonical horizons to govern interpretation of the seed? The occurrence of the word with singular pronouns and verbs in Genesis 22:17-18 shows that the narrative is focusing on a single seed amongst the multitude (as stars in the heavens). Why does Block ignore the focus on faith in the narratives of the Pentateuch between the blocks of legal material?¹⁶ Why does Block not address the connection between righteousness and salvation in the canonical horizon of the OT long before we get to the NT?¹⁷

Finally, what I have learned from the last thirty years in which *Kingdom through Covenant* was hatched is that the metanarrative we have of Scripture limits our interpretation of any individual text. Block’s essay on the covenants¹⁸ indicates a different understanding of the metanarrative, which, in truth, accounts for different ways of approaching the Christocentric reading of Scripture. I would contend that the basic metanarrative of Scripture is already clear before one is finished reading the Pentateuch or Torah of Moses. In the future, fruitful discussion could focus on this point.

SUMMARY REFLECTION

Block’s essay raises a host of issues. I have focused on only three. First Block affirms that “later revelation cannot correct, annul, or contradict earlier revelation.” What he means is that later authors cannot contradict his “grammatical-historical exegesis” of the OT. In my view, the problem is that Block tends to do his exegesis independently of Jesus and the apostles, which is problematic.

Second, I am convinced that Block does not do justice to a biblical use of typology, which is another large area of disagreement in our Christological reading of the OT. In this regard, Peter Leithart’s comment is apt:

Liberal interpretation of the Old Testament can, in fact, be understood as the product of an exclusive reliance on the grammatical-historical method, and evangelical biblical study often has the same narrow focus. Interpretation of the Old Testament must be

grounded in grammar and history, but if it does not move to typology, it is not Christian interpretation.¹⁹

Finally, the metanarrative on which Block's approach rests limits the epochal and canonical horizons of his exegetical enterprise, which has critical implications for the preaching task.

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1. See Peter J. Gentry "The Atonement in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)," *SBJT* 11/2 (2007): 20-47 where I attempt to show how one may interpret Isaiah 53 according to the literary macro-structures of the OT to arrive legitimately at fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.
 2. James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Vol. 3 *Syntax*; Nigel Turner, ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 167.
 3. It must be noted in regard to Block's discussion of "The Narrator's Designations for God" that El-Shadday is a compound name. *Pace* Block, Abraham did not know God as Shadday, but only as El-Shadday. Since Gen 49:25 is poetry, compound names may be split over parallel lines.
 4. Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (NSBT 15; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
 5. Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 248.
 6. See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 129-137 and chapter 5 of Peter J. Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).
 7. The historical and textual dimensions are important. Types are not symbols of spiritual ideas but are real historical people and events, and in God's plan, he intends for them to point forward to the antitype.
 8. See Earle E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 127; Paul Hoskins, *Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Temple in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 21.
 9. Stephen Wellum devotes chapter 3 of Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* to a discussion of typology. See also Peter J. Gentry, "The Significance of Covenants in Biblical Theology," *SBJT* 20.1 (2016): 9-33.
 10. See Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, 71-92 and Norbert Lohfink, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament* (R. A. Wilson, trans.; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1968), 67-86.
 11. See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).
 12. This last point is based on Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*. There we argue that the succession of covenants in scripture (Creation, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David, New Covenant) are the key to the plot-structure of the Bible. Typology, then, in terms of events, persons, and places foreshadowed, are all be tied to the covenants because these are the Bible's own categories for structuring its message.
 13. We have not included "seed" texts that promise possession of the land, since that does not appear to be in mind in Gal 3:16 or anywhere else in the epistle. Among the above-cited Genesis texts, Gen 22:17-18 may be most in mind, since the first mention of "seed" is collective but the second and third mention of "seed" is singular, referring to a royal individual descendant of Abraham. Gal 3:16 appears to have in mind this promised individual seed of Gen 22:17b-18. See C. J. Collins, "Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete was Paul?," *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003): 75-86 and idem "A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3.15): Is the Woman's Seed Singular or Plural?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 48/1 (1997): 142-144. Also noteworthy is Jason S. DeRouchie and Jason C. Meyer, "Christ or Family as the 'Seed' of Promise? An Evaluation of N. T. Wright on Galatians 3:16." *SBJT* 14/3 (2010): 36-49.
 14. Stephen G. Dempster, "He Believed the Lord!: The Pedigree of Justification in the Pentateuch," in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical and Pastoral Perspective*

- (Matthew Barrett, ed.; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 37-93.
15. For an explanation of the categories described by Richard Lints, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 118-129, 656-657.
 16. See Dempster, “He Believed the Lord,” 56-57; John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); idem, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); Hans-Christoph Schmitt, “Redaktion des Pentateuch im Geiste der Prophetie: Beobachtungen zur Bedeutung der ‘Glaubens’-Thematik innerhalb der Theologie des Pentateuch,” *VT* 32, no. 2 (1982): 170-89.
 17. Dempster expounds the connection between righteousness and salvation from Genesis on in to Isaiah, see *op. cit.*
 18. Daniel I. Block, “Covenant: A Whole Bible Perspective,” Unpublished Paper, Wheaton, 2011.
 19. Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 27.