

Typology in Hebrews 8:1-10:25

The writer of Hebrews makes clear that the Law which governed the cultus in Israel “was a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (8:5a). From this perspective, there is a movement in history from the ideal to the earthly—the true, heavenly tabernacle (which preceded that of Israel) is the type (v. 2), and the earthly tabernacle erected under the jurisdiction of Moses is the antitype (v. 5b). From this, the writer proceeds to state that there was a defect (μ μ) in the old covenant associated with the earthly tabernacle. While the earthly is in one sense an antitype of the heavenly, it is also a type which anticipates the inbreaking of the heavenly on the earth. By virtue of the fact that the old covenant constitutes a mere copy, it (1) is inherently incomplete, and (2) necessitates that it be swallowed up by what is complete and unmarred by imperfection (the heavenly). In this way, the old covenant itself is a type looking forward to a second, “better covenant” (vv. 6-7) that is able to bridge gaps where the old fell short.

God’s sovereignty is also highlighted in 9:7-8. After describing the earthly tabernacle in detail, the writers states that the high priest could only enter the Holy of Holies once per year. On this annual event, the priest would offer a sacrifice for this sins both he and the people had committed in ignorance (v. 7). Verse 8 declares that the Holy Spirit speaks a distinct message through this annual ritual:

The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not been disclosed

In directing Israel to erect a copy of the heavenly tabernacle, God deliberately built theological significance into the type. The defect of the type determines, by divine intent, the nature and function of the antitype (viz., to disclose the way into the holy place, which has been accomplished through Christ according to the subsequent verses).

We see this phenomenon also in the repetitive nature of the sacrifices made under the old covenant. Since the articles of the earthly tabernacle were copies, they by nature required continual sacrifice in order to be cleansed (9:23). But Christ entered the heavenly prototype (v. 24). Moreover, the sacrifice of his own shed blood contains a potency that forever eclipses the sacrifices offered by the priests in the earthly tabernacle. Therefore the repeated slaughter and offering of animals in the Old Testament cultus (type) anticipates a “once and for all” slaughter and offering (antitype) which is realized in the sufferings of Jesus Christ (v. 26).

Typology of this sort demonstrates God’s sovereign hand orchestrating history, most directly through His own covenant people. Although typology usually signifies a movement in history from the earthly to the heavenly, it also reflects the nature of heaven to reach out to the earthly (most notably in the condescension of the Lord in the incarnation).