

The Butler Did It: Preaching the Mystery When You Know the End (2/2)

Dr. Justo L. González | Dr. Catherine G. González



Southern Seminary
Louisville, KY

The Butler Did It: Preaching the Mystery When You Know the End (2 out of 2)

Justo: As we read the book of Revelation, we must keep in mind something that we often forget: the churches to which this book was originally addressed had a Bible. It was not exactly the same as our Bible. It was much more like our present Old Testament. In other words, the early church, from its Jewish background, inherited the Hebrew Scriptures. It was to those Scriptures that early Christians turned when they debated theological issues with more traditional Jews. It was to those Scriptures that they turned when heretics denied, for instance, the doctrine of creation. And it was to those Scriptures that they turned in times of difficulty and of persecution, in order both to be comforted and to seek to understand what was happening to them.

Some of the Hebrew Scriptures could be interpreted as fundamental moral laws that all should obey. That was the case, for instance, of most of the Ten Commandments. Other parts could be interpreted as prophecies referring to Jesus or to the church. We all know the classical prophetic texts that have traditionally been interpreted as referring to Jesus.

Yet, it is clear that the vast majority of the Hebrew Bible could be interpreted neither as moral law nor as prophecy. Much of it is the history of kings and of prophets, of migrations and of invasions. And much is regulation of Temple worship, or of festivities which Israel was to celebrate. How, then, is one to interpret that vast majority of the Hebrew Bible, which can be

read neither as moral law nor as prophecy?

One possibility was to interpret such texts as vast allegories. Christians did not have to invent this method, for Hellenistic scholars had long been using it in order to interpret the ancient myths of the gods. And Jewish scholars in Alexandria had also used it in regard to the Hebrew Scriptures. Allegory had the decided advantage that, through allegorizing it, any text in the Bible could be found to be relevant. But it had the even greater disadvantage that, since allegory is an uninhibited flight of the imagination, the biblical text finally lost its own authority, its own otherness vis-a-vis the interpreters, who could find in it anything they wished.

Although most of the far-flung allegorizing that was typical of earlier times is rare today, there are other ways in which modern preachers make use of similar methods—for instance, by turning historical texts into moralizing tales, or into excuses for lessons on psychology.

Generally, the church interpreted the Bible which it had inherited from Israel in a third way, one which does not have the free rein of allegory, not the limitations of moral law and prophecy.

This third way, which was the most common in the ancient church, and which we unfortunately have generally forgotten, is typology. This method is discussed by Justin Martyr, who compares it to prophecy: “For the Holy Spirit sometimes brought about that something, which was the type of the future, should be done clearly; sometimes He uttered words about what was to take

place, as if it was then taking place, or had taken place.”

In this brief passage, it is important to note the contrast that Justin makes between “words” (logoi) and “types” (typoi). The first refers to what we usually call “prophecy”: there are words in the sacred text that refer to future events—particularly to the events of the life of Christ and the birth of the church. In the “types,” by contrast, what the Holy Spirit directs is not the actual words of the writer, but the events of which the writer speaks. Both point to the future; but in one case what points to the future is the text itself, and in the other it is the event of which the text speaks.

This may be clarified by means of some examples from Justin himself:

The mystery, then, of the lamb which God enjoined to be sacrificed as the passover, was a type of Christ; with whose blood, in proportion to their faith in Him, they anoint their houses, i.e., themselves, who believe in Him.

And the offering of fine flour, ... which was prescribed to be present on behalf of those purified from leprosy, was a type of the bread of the Eucharist, the celebration of which our Lord Jesus Christ prescribed.

Hence also Jacob, ... being himself a type of Christ, had married the two handmaids of his two free wives, and of them begat sons, for the purpose of indicating beforehand that Christ would receive even all those who amongst Japheth's race are descendants of Canaan, equally with the free, and would have the children as fellow-heirs.

In these three quotations, Justin actually uses the word “type.” What he means by this is that there are past events and commandments ordained and ordered by God so as to point to a future event—most often, to Jesus Christ and the Christian life.

To a modern reader such interpretations may seem as far-fetched as the most capricious of Origen's allegories. To the ancients, however, there was an important difference: while an allegorical interpretation does away with the historical meaning of the text, a typological interpretation sees the meaning in the earlier event itself, whose historicity it does not deny. Justin does not say that the Jews were not supposed to sacrifice the paschal lamb, or that to understand the passage in the OT as referring to an actual lamb is a misinterpretation. On the contrary, he asserts that God commanded that the paschal lamb be sacrificed, and that God did this in order to have that lamb point to Jesus and his sacrifice. This was what the ancients meant by "typology," and they often insisted that it was very different from a mere allegorical interpretation.

In typology, the stress lies on the event itself—and not on the words—prefiguring other events. This was stated quite clearly by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons late in the second century: "It is not by means of visions alone which were seen, and words which were proclaimed, but also in actual works, that He [Jesus] was beheld by the prophets, in order that through them He might prefigure and show forth future events beforehand."

Although some of Justin's typological interpretations of events and commandments in the OT, as quoted above, may appear artificial and even capricious to most modern readers, they are in fact based on a coherent view of history. Justin does not believe that he is bringing to the text or to the biblical narrative an element foreign to it, but rather that he is uncovering the

relationship of that narrative to the entire course of human history, ever since creation. For Justin, as for Irenaeus and other early Christians, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not merely the result of historical circumstance. They are not even God's last-minute remedy to the human condition. They are rather the very goal of history, for which God had planned from the beginning, and to which all of creation and all of history point. Thus typology involves an entire view of history and of the Gospel within it—as do also prophecy and allegory, the other major forms of traditional interpretation. Allegory tends to look for eternal, perennial meanings in a text. Its interest lies, not in history, but in eternal truth. It therefore reads the text as a shadow or a sign of changeless realities beyond—much as Platonism looks at the physical, changing world as a shadow of the intellectual, changeless world. Prophecy focuses on the historical fulfillment of a text, and in this sense places history closer to the center; but it still sees no meaning in past history except as the occasion on which someone was guided by the Spirit to speak words relating to the future. Typology, however, goes beyond prophecy in that it focuses on events at both ends of the equation: it is a matter of events pointing to events. Although past events did point to Jesus Christ—or to the life of the church—they did have meaning in themselves, for they were part of God's guidance of history towards its goal.

Thus, a single passage from the OT might be interpreted by various Christians in ways that differ from each other, while still relating it to their own situation. Take for instance the well-known passage from Isaiah 53: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb before the shearer." If one interprets this passage prophetically, it clearly refers to Jesus and to none other.

Before the time of Jesus, it had no meaning or applicability, except in pointing to the future. After the time of Jesus, its only significance is in confirming that Jesus is indeed the one announced by the prophet. If one interprets it allegorically, one tries to find hidden meanings in words such as “lamb” or “slaughter,” and one may come to the conclusion that the passage means, for instance, that true virtue, like a sheep, does not defend itself, but is rather willing to give of itself to others, as a lamb goes before the shearer in order to give up its wool, which will warm and comfort others. If one interprets the passage typologically, one will agree that the passage refers to Jesus, but that this is so because God has so ordered history that the just are repeatedly killed and persecuted for the redemption of others. On this basis, it is quite possible that the passage, although correctly applied to Jesus, originally referred to the prophet himself, or to Israel, or to a particular leader. Also, since history continues along the same pattern, it is also possible to apply the passage to ourselves without thereby denying that it refers primarily to Jesus: when the church suffers, the pattern of which the prophet spoke, and of which Jesus is the supreme instance, appears once again.

These three methods of biblical interpretation—prophecy, allegory, and typology—were widely used in the early church. Practically every ancient Christian writer made use of prophecy, both because it was fairly simple and straightforward, and because there was a tradition of such interpretation. Prophecy, however, did not apply to most of the OT, and therefore ancient Christians had recourse in varying degrees to both allegory and typology.

Of these two, the most common in the very early church seems to have been typology, which appears repeatedly in the NT. Even some passages that at first sight appear to be cases of prophetic interpretation could also be typological in nature. For instance, when Matthew declares that the flight into Egypt took place in order “to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son,’” does he mean that the words were exclusively prophetic in nature, with no reference to the Exodus, or does he mean rather that there is a typological relationship between Israel’s flight to and return from Egypt, and similar events in the life of Jesus?

Catherine: With this discussion of typology as a background, let us look again at the book of Revelation. There are several typologies that occur within the book, but there is one overarching typology that those Christians who originally read this work would have understood very readily. This is the typology of the original Passover, the circumstances surrounding the Hebrews leaving Egypt.

For both Israel at the time of bondage in Egypt and the early church under the Roman Empire, the oppressive force was a very powerful political entity, far beyond the power of God’s people, individually or collectively, to end. Life had to be lived in the midst of this political reality that affected every aspect of the society. It was very difficult for the people of God to worship properly. Persecution by neighbors, idolatry by the faithful, both were serious possibilities.

When Moses approached the pharaoh, he requested permission for the Hebrews to go out to the wilderness in order to worship God. He did not directly ask for freedom from bondage as an end in itself. He asked for the freedom to worship God. Moses required that the worship take place outside of Egypt because of the expectation that the Egyptians would be offended by the Israelites' worship and would stone the Hebrews. Nor would Moses be with only the Hebrew men being able to worship. All of the people—men, women, and children must be allowed to go and worship.

For the book of Revelation, the issue of proper worship is also the major issue. It is not simply a matter of the right ritual or ceremonies. For both Israel and the church, proper worship is not limited to time in the sanctuary. It involves living out the right relationships with neighbors, seeking truth and justice. The people of God are a covenant community, and the commandments are part of that covenant. The ten commandments govern our relationship to the neighbor and the rest of creation, not only our relationship with God. This is very clear in the whole tradition of the prophets, who constantly remind Israel of the need to relate the worship of God with the duties to the neighbor.

Yet the first commandment is crucial. There is the constant possibility of idolatry. For Revelation, everyone who takes part in the wider society—especially in the economic sphere—is forced to commit idolatry. We read: “[The beast] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or

sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name” (13:16-17). All Christians are called to worship God only; yet in the society in which they lived, even the poorest and most insignificant person was easily involved in idolatry. For the Christians, there does not seem to be a wilderness to go to as there had been for Israel in Egypt. (Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that once the church and the Roman Empire did become closely intertwined in the time of Constantine, there were many Christians who felt the church was indeed fatally compromised with idolatry, and they left for the wilderness as the monastic movement began.)

For both Israel and the church, the lifting of oppression is for the sake of proper worship, not an end in itself. Yet there is a connection. In Revelation it is clear that oppression and idolatry are closely interwoven. Tyranny is idolatry, and it will always oppose the worship of the true God because that worship by its very nature undercuts the worship of the powers that refuse to be subject to God. Think of the book of Daniel—another apocalyptic writing—in this regard.

In Exodus, Moses was called to lead the people to the place where they could worship God and lead the life God had called them to lead. Essentially, the whole plot of the book of Revelation is very similar. How can God's people worship God truly? So much stands in the way: the idolatry in which they are enmeshed in the culture of the Roman Empire. A new exodus needs to take place, led by another Moses. But this exodus is from a power far greater than Egypt's. It is far greater than Rome's—though Rome is the “front” the ultimate power of evil is using at the

time. It will have to be someone far greater than Moses to lead this exodus. But the goal is the same: to make it possible to worship the true God truly, which includes leading life outside the sanctuary in a manner that is faithful to the covenant. To remove the issue of worship from Revelation would be to cut the whole work into unrecognizable pieces.

Pharaoh would not let the people go in order to worship God. And so the plagues came: water turned to blood, swarms of frogs, gnats, flies and locusts, death of livestock, boils on the Egyptians and their animals; darkness for three days, terrible thunder and hail. In Revelation, the disasters and plagues are let loose on the earth by the heavenly beings: rivers of blood, pestilence, the world darkened, plagues of locusts, sores, foul spirits like frogs, lightening, earthquakes and hailstones, and all of this on a scale far greater than anything Egypt saw. The whole earth—not one Empire—is involved.

The final plague in Egypt was the killing of the first born. The Israelites were to slaughter an unblemished lamb, put the blood on the doorposts, and stay inside the house, feasting on the lamb, while the judgment of God raged outside, killing the first born of those who were not in houses so marked. No foreigner was to join in the feast, and no bone of the lamb was to be broken.

When Revelation picks up this typology, it is obviously joining a long line of Christian interpretation of the Cross. Jesus is the lamb of God. Even at the cross, no bones of this lamb

were broken. He is the first born. It is his blood that is put on the faithful as a mark so that God's wrath can pass over them in the judgment. Christians are not only marked with the blood of the lamb in baptism but in the Eucharist, in some way, they gather as those marked to feast on him as well. Paul can write: "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast."

Even as the Israelites finally were allowed to leave Egypt so they could worship God in the wilderness, so Christians will finally be freed from all that now makes their worship difficult. That will be in the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. Jesus is the new Moses who leads them there. The cross is the beginning, the sacrifice of the lamb. In heaven, the final victory has come, though on earth the battle still goes on.

When Moses led the people to the mountain, a covenant was made there between God and Israel. God called them to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." In the beginning of Revelation we read these words: "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." And when the Lamb opens the scroll, these words are sung: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God."

A new exodus is occurring, but it is not yet complete. The goal of this exodus is, on a cosmic scale, the same as that earlier exodus: that the people of God may worship and therefore live truly. Those people and structures that prohibit this worship will be judged. Those that join in this worship will be redeemed by the Lamb. We stand in the time when idolatry is still strong and even expected. We stand in the time when faithfulness is difficult and costly. That is exactly where John of Patmos stood.

The central event in Israel's history—the Exodus and the covenant that followed—became a liturgical event in the life of the people of Israel from then on—the celebration of Passover. It was more than a holiday of remembrance; it was a ritual event, a way of joining in the ongoing event of redemption, with new people added by birth or conversion joining in this celebration.

The founding events of the church's life also became liturgical events. Baptism and the eucharist are inextricably linked to the cross and the resurrection: Jesus, the Lamb of God, sacrificed for us; baptism the sign of his blood marking us and freeing us from judgment; his body offered for us in the feast. The sacraments let us participate in the event that offers us redemption and make us a kingdom of priests to worship God.

The passover may be the dominant typology, but there is another that also links Revelation with the Old Testament in very significant ways. That is the typology of the Temple—another theme closely related to worship.

When the Temple in Jerusalem was completed, King Solomon offered a prayer of dedication.

This is part of it, as recorded in both Kings and Chronicles:

But will God indeed reside with mortals on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you. May your eyes be open day and night toward this house, the place where you promised to set your name, and may you heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. And hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; may you hear from heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

The Temple was holy because God had promised that his name would be there; that there would be a presence there that Israel could count on.

Ezekiel, in his visions that have many similarities to those in Revelation, sees the bright cloud—the sign of God's presence—depart from the Temple before Jerusalem is destroyed. The sin of Jerusalem is idolatry. When the judgment has come, and the Exile has begun, Ezekiel has a vision of the great restoration of the Temple, when the glory of God will return to it.

The Temple is the sign of God's presence in the midst of the people. To Solomon's question, "Can God indeed dwell with mortals on earth?" The New Testament has the surprising answer of "Yes," and points to the incarnation. The Temple—and the tabernacle before it—are types of the incarnation that was to come. In the New Testament Jesus refers to himself when he says that if the Temple is destroyed he will raise it up in three days. God can dwell with mortals on earth. But the cross shows what mortals do when God does dwell with us. The Resurrection

shows that our response is not the last word.

The book of Revelation closes with the vision of the new Jerusalem—part of the new earth. And there it is said: “The dwelling of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them as their God and they will be his people.” It is also said that there was “no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”

Justo: You may have noted that many of the examples Catherine has given have to do with worship. This is crucial in order to understand how typology can function properly as a means of interpreting Scripture. When Christians interpreted the crossing of the Red Sea in connection with baptism, or the manna in the desert in connection with communion, this was not a purely intellectual interpretation that some individuals thought up while reading the Bible in private. This was the interpretation that was lived in the worship of the church. The church interpreted the crossing of the Red Sea, or Noah in the ark, as types of baptism, because the church baptized, and because in that baptism it reenacted the experience of liberation in the Exodus, or the experience of being saved through the cleansing floods of Noah, or the experience of water coming from the rock, or the experience of crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. Today, we think that the best place to interpret Scripture is in the pastor’s study. In the early church, Scripture was actually interpreted in liturgy. And it was not interpreted in purely intellectual terms. It was interpreted that through liturgy the believers came to be participants in an act that was typologically connected to Jesus, the center of all typology. If Israel’s being

brought through the waters of the Red Sea was a type which looked forward to Jesus being brought through the tomb to new life, a Christian's being brought also through the waters of baptism was a type which looked back to Jesus, to his death and resurrection. If the manna in the desert was a type which preenacted communion, communion itself was a type which preenacted the heavenly banquet.

It was to such a church that John wrote the book of Revelation. John wrote it, not so that some feverish mind in Ephesus in the first century, or in Tulsa in the twentieth, might decipher it, but so that the church in Ephesus, and in Laodicea, and in Tulsa, and in Atlanta, and in Louisville, might worship the Lamb, and know that our worship, already prefigured in the paschal lamb of old, is itself a figure of the worship of the Lamb which goes on in heaven, and in which we shall all join.

In other words, the book of Revelation is written to a church that is sorely persecuted, and perhaps even puzzled by the events of its life. To that church, John's vision has a clear message: you who worship and serve the Lamb, and who for that reason are in difficulties and even persecuted, know that your worship rings true in heaven, where the twenty four elders, and the angels, and the four beasts, and the stars and the moon, all worship the that was slain!

And the same is true of us today. If we wish to understand the book of Revelation—to understand it in the deep sense of making it really part of our experience—we must begin by

worshiping the Lamb! And this, not just for the obvious theological or intellectual reason that the book is intended for those who have faith in Christ; but also and above all because our worship here on earth is sign and a type of the worship that takes place in heaven.

Our worship occurs because we believe that “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah.” We need to know this “end of the story” in order to live faithfully now. Those who know the end cannot help but worship.

