

**Christ the Center of the Universe:  
Jonathan Edwards and Typology in the Old Testament**

John Abraham Sullivan

REL 319: Eighteenth-Century Theology

Prof. Don Westblade

April 26, 2021

Jonathan Edwards emphasized typology in his exegesis. Throughout the Old Testament, he saw types and figures of Christ, people and events which pointed forwards to the eventual revelation of Jesus. In this, Edwards followed standard Reformed interpretation. Yet he went further than his Calvinist predecessors, also seeing references to nature as types of Christ. In doing so, he built a holistic understanding of nature and Scripture, believing both to be created for the same purpose: the glory of Christ. In order to understand this, we will discuss Edwards's Old Testament interpretation, conduct a detailed consideration of two representative sermons, and incorporate these findings into his greater view.

Edwards's preaching has only recently gathered renewed interest in the scholarly world, as academics recognize its centrality to his ministry.<sup>1</sup> Edwards may have been a genius, and much of his literary output may have been aimed at the world of the university, but Perry Miller's theoretical Edwards was not that experienced by the man in the pew.<sup>2</sup> Few of Edwards's parishioners would have known in detail his ideas on free will or justification, but they would all have been familiar with his biblical interpretation. Douglas Sweeney has pointed out that exegesis was the center of Edwards's life, evinced not only in his 1,200 sermons but also in his many private notebooks. Even his planned *magnum opus*, *A Harmony of the Old and New Testaments*, was a project in biblical interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David P. Barshinger, "Making the Psalter One's 'Own Language': Jonathan Edwards Engages the Psalms," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 4

<sup>2</sup> Perry Miller, the Harvard professor of the early twentieth century, dominated Edwards scholarship in his day and helped to shape the American perception of the New England divine. He pointed out Edwards's genius, seeing him as an original thinker far ahead of his time; but Miller's view overemphasized Edwards's mind while ignoring his practical work of ministry. See Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 85-86.

Edwards's interpretation of the Bible was a distinctly Christ-centered one. His unfinished masterpiece, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, divides the history of the world into three periods, each centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Edwards wrote, "God wrought many deliverances for his church and people before Christ came; but these were only so many images and forerunners of the great salvation."<sup>4</sup> Later, Edwards identified the life of Christ as "the most remarkable article of time that ever was or ever will be," and said that the eternal counsels of the Trinity all pointed toward this moment.<sup>5</sup> Even all of history since the ascension of Jesus "is taken up in bringing about the great effect or success of Christ's purchase."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Glenn Kreider summarizes, "Christological typology provides a ... concise and accurate label for Edwards's hermeneutical method."<sup>7</sup>

David Barshinger proves precisely this point in his major study of Edwards and the Psalms. Other theologians of Edwards's day tried to sever the connection between David and Christ, using literary criticism to focus on reading documents in their historical context. While Edwards was willing to adopt this approach to some degree, he also differentiated between the human and divine intent behind each passage. Thus a set of verses could have a meaning applying not only to David, but also to Christ.<sup>8</sup> Edwards's understanding of the unity of the Bible required that the latter be given prominence in textual interpretation. "For Edwards the Bible was unified by the history of redemption, which provided him the exegetical framework for reading

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 536.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, 572.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, 583.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David P. Barshinger, "Making the Psalter One's 'Own Language,'" 5. Barshinger is quoting from Glenn Kreider, *Jonathan Edwards's Interpretation of Revelation 4:1-8:1* (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 289.

<sup>8</sup> David P. Barshinger, *Jonathan Edwards and the Psalms: A Redemptive-Historical Vision of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46.

the Psalms. From this theological vantage point, Edwards highlighted the person and work of Christ in the Psalter because he is the central figure in the history of redemption.”<sup>9</sup>

This prefiguring of Christ, this playing out of Gospel truths in Old Testament texts, fit very well with Edwards’s view of God. If God, as an infinite being, had to communicate infinite ideas with finite creatures, he would necessarily have to reduce them to finite ideas, images compatible with the limited capacities of the human brain. Thus “types are employed by God first because of their pedagogical value.”<sup>10</sup> For example, in order to teach humans the concept of substitutional atonement, God introduced the Mosaic law to foreshadow the work of Christ. In his treatise *Types of the Messiah*, Edwards wrote that “there is abundant evidence, even in the Old Testament, that the things that belong to that law are typical of the things of the Messiah.”<sup>11</sup> Hence the sacrificial system prefigured the sacrifice of Christ; the laws regarding clean and unclean shadowed the greater reality of sin and redemption; even the illustrious garments of the priest and trappings of the temple revealed the gloriousness of God. Edwards concluded that God instituted these things, not because of any inherent value in them, but because “they did resemble or shadow forth those correspondent spiritual things that have a real value and excellency in themselves in his sight.”<sup>12</sup> To Edwards, typology reflected the incarnation of Christ: God was bending down to the human level, in his mercy, to help them understand divine things.

Thus far, Edwards stood in the great stream of Reformed thought. Yet Barshinger notes that Edwards went further; he “made more connections between the Psalms and Christ than his

---

<sup>9</sup> Barshinger, *Edwards and the Psalms*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Types of the Messiah*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 11, *Typological Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance, Jr., and David Waters (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 305.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, *Types of the Messiah*, 307.

Reformed predecessors” and “was more exploratory in his use of types.”<sup>13</sup> These remarks apply not merely to Edwards and the Psalms, but also to his entire Old Testament interpretation.

Edwards’s worldview led him to an understanding of biblical typology which was different than many of his Reformed forebears. He departed from traditional Reformed interpretation in his use of types from nature, which took a surprisingly large role in his preaching. The Yale edition of the *Works of Jonathan Edwards* includes six Old Testament sermons that in their totality deal with Jesus Christ. Of these, two are expansions on allegorical interpretations of nature. Only one deals with a more traditional typological understanding, the sacrificial system and the sacrifice of Christ. None deal with Old Testament men. This is, perhaps, surprising: Edwards more frequently used the pulpit to consider *natural types* than *human types*. Such an emphasis goes against the standard Reformed line, which might view such interpretation as irresponsible and even dangerous. In order to better understand Edwards’s practice, we must survey in detail two Old Testament sermons which emphasize natural types of Christ.

The first sermon, remaining to us in outline form only, is Edwards’s consideration of Psalm 1:3: “He shall be like a tree planted by rivers of water.” Edwards presumed that the “rivers of water” are symbolic of Christ, and spent the sermon discussing the aptitude of this comparison. Edwards was not trying to sketch the line of sacred history by showing how something which happened earlier is similar to that which happened later. Rather, he was as it were defending the biblical author’s use of language—why would the Psalmist describe Christ like a “river of water”? What does the nature of a river have to do with the nature of Christ? Edwards was trying to draw a vertical line between the earthly shadow and the heavenly reality, not a horizontal line between antecedent and event.

---

<sup>13</sup> Barshinger, *Edwards and the Psalms*, 217.

Therefore, at the beginning of his sermon, Edwards said, “As the waters of a river run easily and freely, so the love of Christ. [He] came freely into the world.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, “Christ is like a river in the great plenty and abundance of his love and grace.”<sup>15</sup> There is enough abundance in him “to supply the roots of a multitude of trees; so, for all saints.”<sup>16</sup> This abundance will never fail, just as “waters of a river don’t fail; [it] flows constantly, day and night.”<sup>17</sup> The mighty flow of the river means that the tree does not have to fear a drought. “When the death comes, that comfort and happiness shall continue. When the end of the world comes, yet their comforts shall still be like a river that shall not be dried up.”<sup>18</sup> Just as the roots of the tree soak up water, internalizing it, so the soul will unite with Christ as it feeds upon him by faith. Christ will be the refreshment, the nourishment, the full satisfaction of the saint.

Edwards went on to application, asking whether his hearers knew these truths, personally and internally. He warned that the true believer must find nourishment only in Christ, and “not trust in themselves, their own strength or righteousness.”<sup>19</sup> Such religion is like “puddles after a rain [that soon] dry up.”<sup>20</sup> Edwards posed the question, “Is Christ sweeter and better than the

---

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Christ Is to the Heart like a River,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25, *Sermons and Discourses, 1743-1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 602.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, “Christ Is to the Heart like a River to a Tree Planted by It,” 603.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Edwards, “Christ Is to the Heart like a River to a Tree Planted by It,” 604.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

sweetest food, better than all the things of the world?”<sup>21</sup> For those who could not answer in the affirmative, he starkly warned, “All your streams will fail you.”<sup>22</sup>

The sermon on Psalm 1 took something not explicit in the text and dilated on it. The Psalmist never indicates that the rivers of water symbolize Christ, nor is this information found elsewhere in the Bible. Yet Edwards found the similarities between this aspect of nature and Christ so significant that he made it the focus of an entire sermon. Scripture, nature, and divinity were all connected.

Another sermon which illustrates the same principle is “Christ the Spiritual Sun” from Malachi 4:1-2. In this sermon, Edwards took a prophecy, “the Sun of righteousness [shall] arise with healing in his wings,” and referred it to Christ. In this, he followed a standard Christian interpretation. Indeed, Edwards went no further than any theologian when he said, “The times of the Old Testament were as time of night in comparison of the times of the New Testament ... for though the Old Testament times were not left wholly without gospel light, yet what light they had was like the dim light of the stars in comparison of the light that was afterwards in the gospel day, when Christ the Sun arose.”<sup>23</sup> Thus Christ was represented as a fuller revelation of the mysteries of God, hidden in part from the believers of old.

Yet Edwards did go further in the rest of his sermon. Rather than expounding this original point, he went on to show in what sense the sun is a fitting representation for Christ. “Christ is as it were the Sun of the spiritual [ world] on the account of the glory of his person,” Edwards said. This was meant in two senses. First, Christ is the sun by virtue of his light, spiritually

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Christ the Spiritual Sun,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 22, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742*, ed. Harry Stout and Nathan Hatch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 51.

enlightening the darkness of the world. Second, Christ is the sun by virtue of his heat, without which the soul will wither. This light and heat is transferred to the human through the sun's beams: namely, the Word of God, the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, the "effects of Christ's power," and "all manifestations of his attributes whatsoever."<sup>24</sup> Each of these things "are the shining forth of his glory, as the glory of the sun shines forth in his rays."<sup>25</sup>

Edwards considered how these beams affect both believers and unbelievers. For believers, the sun enables them to experience divine things—the soul remains in darkness until Christ shines into it. The rays refresh and comfort the Christian. "How comfortable and pleasant is the warmth of the sun when he returns after a cold winter," said Edwards. "How does the face of the Earth seem to rejoice!"<sup>26</sup> Just as plants "that have grown in shady and cold places appear sickly and languishing," so the believer who has little of Christ in his life will be weak. He who grows strong in Christ, on the other hand, will bear much fruit. Christ's beams cause believers "to flourish and increase and bring forth fruit."<sup>27</sup> When the believer does become weak, Christ will bring resurrection life, "as there is a kind of universal resurrection in the spring of trees and plants, after they seemed to be all dead."<sup>28</sup> To unbelievers, on the other hand, the rays of the sun are deadly. This symbolizes the fact that "their enjoyments of the gospel and means of grace will turn to their greater and more terrible destruction."<sup>29</sup> To them, the beams of the sun will be withering.

---

<sup>24</sup> Edwards, "Christ the Spiritual Sun," 54-55.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, "Christ the Spiritual Sun," 56. Exclamation point added.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, "Christ the Spiritual Sun," 57.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, "Christ the Spiritual Sun," 56.

<sup>29</sup> Edwards, "Christ the Spiritual Sun," 58.

Edwards brought his sermon to a culmination by considering the final revelation of Christ at the Last Judgment, when this sun metaphor becomes particularly fitting. “He shall shine with a brightness far exceeding the brightness of the natural sun, even so much that the sun shall be turned into darkness before it.”<sup>30</sup> For believers, this will be a glorious day. “It will be a thousand times more refreshing to them than ever was the sight of the rising sun to them that have wandered in a wilderness, through the longest and darkest night.”<sup>31</sup> To unbelievers, it will be horrible. “Every ray of that glory that Christ shall then appear in will be like a stream of scorching fire, and will pierce their hearts with a keener torment than a stream of fierce lightning.”<sup>32</sup> Thus the beams of Christ will prove the dividing line between the saved and the damned.

Edwards’s sermon, like that on Psalm 1, expanded a biblical idea beyond the customary use of typology. While the “Sun of righteousness” *is* ordinarily taken to refer to Christ, most preachers would link this passage to the birth of Jesus. Here, however, Edwards was not concerned with connecting the Old Testament to the New, but with connecting nature to divine realities. Edwards felt justified in doing so; he said at the beginning of the sermon, “I would [not] at all strain the similitude or metaphor beyond what is naturally signified by it.”<sup>33</sup> What made Edwards so comfortable with venturing beyond his Calvinist predecessors?

The answer lies in Edwards’s philosophy of the universe. Everything, according to Edwards, is bent towards the revelation of the glory of God. This is the ultimate end of creation, something Edwards explicated in his treatise *The End for Which God Created the World*. Indeed,

---

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, “Christ the Spiritual Sun,” 60.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, “Christ the Spiritual Sun,” 53.

creation is for Edwards merely the emanation, the overflow, of God's internal glory. The whole story of the Bible plays a part in this plan, moving towards that goal. "The whole world is put in subjection to Jesus Christ," Edwards wrote. "The glory of God is the ultimate end of the work of redemption."<sup>34</sup> Because of this, there is no distinction between the purposes of general and special revelation. Thus Edwards feels comfortable with blurring the line between the two, using the revealed words of Scripture to inspire a discourse on the world of nature. Other Reformed theologians would find this approach unbiblical, worried that errors could thereby be introduced into the text; Edwards's holistic conception counters such claims. Both the Bible and the Earth were created to show forth God's glory, and since the sermon's purpose is to stir up the affections of the congregation toward that glory, either one can be used for explication.

This idea is fleshed out in more detail in *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, a work which links items in nature to spiritual realities. In page after page, Edwards ingeniously connects the smallest details to a cosmic understanding. Thus, for example, "the waves and billows of the sea in a storm ... have a representation of the terrible wrath of God."<sup>35</sup> "Hills and mountains are types of heaven."<sup>36</sup> "Lightning more commonly strikes high things ... which may signifie [*sic*] that heaven is an enemy to all proud persons."<sup>37</sup> In an ultimate example of Edwards's unification of all things, he wrote, "The whole material universe is preserved by

---

<sup>34</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 111.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Images and Shadows of Divine Things*, ed. Perry Miller (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 49.

<sup>36</sup> Edwards, *Images and Shadows*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards, *Images and Shadows*, 71.

gravity or attraction ... This is a type of love or charity in the spiritual world.”<sup>38</sup> Edwards saw the spiritual and the physical as intimately intertwined.

It is for this reason that Edwards did not leave his empirical examples in the classroom, but introduced types of Christ from nature into the pulpit. For him, nature and Scripture were not disconnected; they did not inhabit different spheres. This is what made his typology so broad: Edwards’s contribution is in unifying the natural, the spiritual, and the historical. For him, everything points to Christ, because everything was created for this purpose. The telos of the universe is the glory of God—and so, Edwards understood what it meant to say, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen!” (Romans 11:36, ESV)

---

<sup>38</sup> Edwards, *Images and Shadows*, 79.

## Bibliography

- Barshinger, David P. "Making the Psalter One's 'Own Language': Jonathan Edwards Engages the Psalms." *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 3-29.
- Barshinger, David P. *Jonathan Edwards and the Psalms: A Redemptive-Historical Vision of Scripture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "Christ Is to the Heart like a River." In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25, *Sermons and Discourses, 1743-1758*, edited by Wilson H. Kimnach, 602-604. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "Christ the Spiritual Sun." In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 22, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742*, edited by Harry Stout and Nathan Hatch, 50-62. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *A Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*. In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, 94-121. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *A History of the Work of Redemption*. In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, 532-619. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *Images and Shadows of Divine Things*. Edited by Perry Miller. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *Types of the Messiah*. In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 11, *Typological Writings*, edited by Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance, Jr., and David Waters, 157-328. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- McClymond, Michael J. and Gerald R. McDermott. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1949.
- Sweeney, Douglas A. *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.