**That Moses Thing**

*by*[*Mark J. Kelly*](https://www.catholicculture.org/search/resultslist.cfm?requesttype=docbrowseauth&resourcetype=1&catlabel=author&catid=735)

*All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks . . . some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask.* — Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, chapter 36

One of the great joys of teaching is learning from your students. Whenever I introduce a course on sacred Scripture, I usually begin with an exercise in practical typology, which involves viewing Scripture with Catholic eyes. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*describes the critical importance of typology:

"The Church, as early as apostolic times, and then constantly in her Tradition, has illuminated the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through typology, which discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefiguration of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son" (128).

The use of typology brings the Old Testament to light in the New Testament. In its basic meaning, a biblical "type" is akin to first building a shed so you are familiar with the concept before you build a full-size house (cf. CCC 129-130). When you learn to look at Scripture in a typological manner, all of holy writ begins to look Catholic. Below is an exercise that can help you begin building your own house of biblical understanding on a firm foundation (cf. Matt. 7:24).

Most of my students have little to no experience reading the Bible. To start them on their way, we begin with a familiar passage. We then reflect on its immediate and its extended meaning. What begins as a short exercise for my students suddenly grows. They soon catch the spirit of Catholic biblical interpretation and add many things I have never noticed before — until suddenly *I* become the student. Some of my pupils have named this exercise "That Moses Thing." When done right, it tends to leave an imprint that is filled in as the course progresses. In teaching typology, it is best to simply "do it" in a practical manner. Too much talk can lead you down the wrong path. The exercise gives my students an ancient and easy first step in addressing Scripture.

I begin my course in the Bible with a reading of chapters 1 and 2 of Exodus. This covers the birth of Moses, his being found as an infant in the reeds, his growth, self-discovery, exile, and marriage. I ask one of my students to come to the board and write his fellow students' observations. This is an exercise I take very little part in. The students tend to find great reward in their discoveries.

We read Exodus 1 and 2 without comment, and I ask them to form a picture in their minds of what this Moses looks like. Then I ask them to raise their hands and give a basic observation of any event in the life of Moses — even the smallest, least significant fact is acceptable. Students take turns saying Moses did this or he accomplished that or such and such happened to him. The students are responsible for the answers. I offer a minimum of assistance in adjusting the wording of what goes on the board. From reading Exodus 1 and 2 and anything else they know about Moses, they write facts on the board. My latest exercise in "primeval" typology looked like this:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Moses**  **• Evil king tried to kill him as a baby**  **• He was hidden from this evil king**  **• He was saved by women: his mother; Miriam, his sister; and Pharaoh's daughter**  **• Pharaoh's daughter, the princess, adopted him**  **• Therefore Moses was a prince**  **• Long period of silence from youth to adulthood**  **• He had a secret identity**  **• He saved Hebrews**  **• Went from prince to pauper**  **• Saved women at a well**  **• Saved Gentiles**  **• Became a shepherd**  **General Observations:**  **• Moses was a prophet**  **• Often rejected by his own people**  **• Led God's people from bondage**  **• Led to the Promised Land**  **• Gave a law to live by from a mountain**  **• Knew God better than anybody else** | **General Observations:**  **• Moses was a prophet**  **• Often rejected by his own people**  **• Led God's people from bondage**  **• Led to the Promised Land**  **• Gave a law to live by from a mountain**  **• Knew God better than anybody else** |

After this, I ask the students to take one last look at Moses and then on the right-hand side of the board I write in large letters the name *Christ.* "Tell me what you know about the life of Christ," I say. As the students respond, I inscribe on the right side of the board the corresponding connection, fulfillment, or parallel to the life of Moses from the life of Christ. In most cases, those calling out observations form their own insight, raise their hands, and ask, "What are you doing with this Moses-Jesus thing?"

Well before I answer the question of what they just saw and accomplished, they finish the simple side-by-side chart that eventually looks like the one on this page.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Moses**  **1. Evil king tried to kill him as a baby (Ex. 1:22)**  **2. He was hidden from this evil king (Ex. 2:2)**  **3. He was saved by women: his mother (Ex. 2:3); Miriam, his sister (2:4, 7-8); and Pharaoh's daughter (2:5-10)**  **4. Pharaoh's daughter, the princess, adopted him (Ex. 2:10)**  **5. Therefore Moses was a prince (Ex. 2:10)**  **6. Long period of silence from youth to adulthood**  **7. He had a secret identity (Ex. 2:11-12)**  **8. He saved Hebrews (Ex. 2:11 -12)**  **9. Went from being prince to being pauper (Ex. 2:15-19)**  **10. Saved women at a well (Ex. 2:16-19)**  **11. Saved Gentiles (Ex. 2:16-19)**  **12. Became a shepherd (Ex. 3:1)**  **General Observations:**  **1. Moses was a prophet**  **2. Often rejected by his own people**  **3. Led God's people from bondage**  **4. Led to the Promised Land**  **5. Gave a law to live by from a mountain**  **6. Knew God better than anybody else** | **Christ**  **1. Herod tried to kill baby Jesus (Matt. 2:16)**  **2. An angel said to hide the child (Matt. 2:13)**  **3. Mary saved and helped Jesus (Matt. 2:14, Luke 2:48), and other women helped Jesus (Luke 8:1-3)**  **4. Joseph adopted him (Matt. 1:25)**  **5. Was the Prince of Peace**  **6. Long period of silence from youth to adulthood**  **7. The Messianic secret — Jesus was the Son of God**  **8. Of course he did!**  **9. Went from being God to being man (John 1:1-3, Mark 6:3)**  **10. Saved woman at a well (John 4:6-7, 25-26)**  **11. Saved all Gentiles (Luke 2:29-32)**  **12. Is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11)**  **General Observations:**  **1. Jesus is the Prophet**  **2. His own people rejected him**  **3. Leads us from bondage of sin**  **4. Leads into the Kingdom of God**  **5. Gave the Sermon on the Mount**  **6. Of course he does!** |

I explain that what they have just seen is typology, a time-honored Judeo-Christian way of looking at the Bible. Scripture is best viewed as an organic, connected whole. "Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart" (CCC 112).

The individual books of the Bible may seem disparate and unrelated. So might the organs of a dissected frog. We may lay out all its organs and say, "Look — there is the liver, there is the stomach, there are the intestines. These things constitute a frog." The problem is, a dead frog catches no flies. We need to look at the living amphibian in order to see how the organs work together in order to give it life. Typology is an ancient and ever-new, organic way of looking at unified Scripture.

The exercise above not only teaches my students about typology but also has them participating in real Catholic interpretation. My students may never know Cyril of Jerusalem or even come close to correctly pronouncing his seminal work *Mystagogic Catechesis,* but they will be able to interpret sacred Scripture much like he did. Freshmen and sophomore high school students with little to no knowledge of the Bible made more than half of the christological connections listed on this page. They simply looked at the passage with Christian eyes. The exercise gives them a beginning in mining the depths of Scripture.