

1. Reading the Bible as an Icon (1985)

[4] In the Baptist tradition, icons do not play a significant role, unless of course, as some more liberally oriented critics would have it, the Bible itself becomes an icon. There is irony here: whereas some would accuse a good many Baptists of “bibliolatry,” or worshipping the Bible, these same Baptists would be quick to point the finger back at those who produce and make use of icons, accusing them of idolatry, or worshipping images. And though the language used in both cases is pejorative, there may be value in an attempt to combine these two negatives to see whether the result may somehow be positive.

My introduction to the field of iconography was a meditation by Henry Nouwen on “Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity” published recently in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*.¹ I was struck with how deeply Rublev’s icon spoke to Nouwen, and others as well, who have taken the time to enter deeply into its structure and symbolism. Let’s take a brief look at this remarkable work, considered by some “to be one of the most perfect achievements in the history of art.”² Nouwen was experiencing what he calls “a hard period of (his) life, in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible.”³ It was “a long and quiet presence to this Icon (which) became the beginning of (his) healing.”⁴

Rublev painted his icon in memory of St. Sergius, in a desire to bring fifteenth century Russia together around the name of God so its people would conquer “the devouring hatred of the world by the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.”⁵ He chose a moment in the Old Testament narrative of Abraham’s three heavenly visitors in Gen. 18 to portray the Trinity. Notice that “the three men” of the story become three women in the icon. And the table, which Abraham set for them beneath the oak of Mamre, becomes an altar on which the flesh of the freshly slaughtered calf is placed in a chalice. Two geometric forms shape the picture. On the one hand, the figures compose a circle with the chalice at the center and each of the three figures speaks by means of her right hand. For Nouwen the central figure is God the Father and his two fingers point to the chalice and to God the Son.

The message is clear. It is the message of the incarnation itself; and the Son, understanding its full significance, accepts that painful [6] task in the gesture of the hand. The Holy Spirit opposite extends a hand of blessing on the action thus signified and at the same time directs our attention to the peculiar opening beneath the chalice. It is here, according to Nouwen, that the viewer is drawn literally inside the icon itself in an upward direction—through the chalice, to God the Father, and then to a tree.

At that point the second structural pattern becomes clear. For together with the alignment of the three faces, we now have a cross, which speaks of the profound mystery of God’s self-revelation. As Nouwen put it,

“It is a mystery beyond history, yet made visible through it.

It is a divine mystery, yet human too.

It is a joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mystery transcending all human emotions, yet not leaving any human emotion untouched.”⁶

Is this a proper way in which to read the Old Testament? Are we permitted to use a single episode in a narrative complex in the book of Genesis as a window through which to view the whole of the Scriptures, as Rublev has done? I think so, in spite of the obvious tension such a reading creates with the historical critical method itself.

Then, the question of whether it is possible to press the analogy a bit further arises. Is it possible to read the Bible itself, as a whole, in a manner somewhat like Nouwen has read Rublev's icon? If we take the long hours necessary to contemplate the structural detail of the Bible taken as a whole, is it possible to see the hand of an artist at work in the formation and structure of the canon of sacred Scripture? And if so, is it possible that this contemplative insight may touch our emotions and ultimately transform us? Let's take a closer look and see.

It is possible to see two structural configurations in the canon of the Old Testament, which curiously seem to intersect and point beyond themselves to the same redemptive/revelatory act of God that Nouwen has seen in Rublev's icon. The first of these structures is concentric in nature and embraces what we commonly call the Law and the Prophets. At the center we have two groups of four books in the Hebrew canon:

/ Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy // Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings /

The first group appears at first glance to be the story of Moses, beginning with his birth (Exod 1-2) and ending with his death (Deut 34). A closer look at detail within Exodus and Deuteronomy will reveal further aspects of a concentric arrangement. There are two "Songs of Moses," Exod 15 and Deut 32, which in turn frame two great covenant ceremonies under Moses' leadership—one at Mount Sinai (Exod 19) and the other on the Plains of Moab (Deut 29-31). The first of these is concluded by the giving of the "ten commandments" (Exod 20) followed by the "Covenant Code" (Exod 21-23); whereas the second is preceded by a second giving of the "ten commandments" (Deut 5) followed by the "Deuteronomic Code" (Deut 12-26).⁷ And the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy seem to frame the two parallel wilderness books of Leviticus and Numbers. Edward Newing has investigated the concentric design of this section of the Pentateuch in some detail and argues that the very center is to be found in Exod 33 which he calls the "Promised Presence," where Moses gets a glimpse of the glory of YHWH.⁸

According to A. H. van Zyl, the so-called Deuteronomic History in the parallel group of four books also has a concentric design.⁹ We move from the conquest of the land under charismatic leadership (Joshua) to the loss of the land under monarchic government (2 Kings). In between we have the possession of the land under charismatic leadership (Judges and 1 Samuel) set over against the possession of the land under monarchic government (2 Samuel and 1 Kings). If I am not mistaken, this section too has a center, which consists of two parallel mountaintop experiences on the part of Elijah.¹⁰ In 1 Kings 18 Elijah calls down fire from heaven in the great contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. In the next chapter Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel, makes his way to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God's revelation to Moses where he too gains a glimpse of the glory of YHWH. But after each theophanic visitation the narrator is careful to comment that God was not present in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. This time God communicates His glory through the awesome silence of His absence. Needless to say, the confluence of these two encounters with God on that same sacred mountain seem to point beyond themselves to another mountaintop experience where Moses and Elijah are joined by a prophet greater than either of them through whom the glory of God is revealed in what the Gospel writers call the transfiguration of Jesus.¹¹

These two groups of four books focus on Moses, over against the subsequent succession of leaders in ancient Israel that extends from Joshua to Jehoiachin, the last king of Judah who is released from prison in Babylon. The stories of the "Fathers" (Gen 12-50) and the "Prophets" frame these eight books. Joseph Blenkinsopp has noted the structural parallel between Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the "Book of the Twelve" so-called minor prophets, on the one hand, and

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel, on the other.¹² The designation of Abraham in the book of Genesis as a prophet (Gen 20:7) who is the recipient of God's covenant promise now takes on a deeper dimension. In the words of the great classical prophets of ancient Israel, the old epic story receives a powerful new meaning. Here we meet another structure within the Old Testament canon, which points beyond itself as well.

The primary epic story of the Old Testament may be outlined in linear form in terms of a journey out of bondage in Egypt, through the waters into the wilderness, on route to the promised land. And though these terms are rooted in past events, however elusive they may prove to be to the historian, in the hands of the great prophets of Israel each of these symbols is transformed and projected beyond history into an eschatological dimension. The creation stories of Gen 1–11 anticipate a new *Opus Dei*,¹³ the city of God, which will be described as a "New Jerusalem." The people of God see themselves as once more in exile and bondage, awaiting a new deliverance, which will carry them through the waters and the wilderness of a New Exodus to a New Conquest that will become the Kingdom of God.¹⁴

Is it any wonder that Luke in his description of the transfiguration of our Lord, describes the conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus as focusing on "His Exodus," which was accomplished at Jerusalem (Luke 9:28–31)? As Rublev saw, in his own way, it is an empty tomb that draws each one of us inside the icon of sacred Scripture to discover the meaning of its curious structures. Those structures converge in a cross and a great circle, where the end is also the beginning.

{add picture of Rublev's "Icon of the Trinity"}
[which appears on p. 5 of original article]

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Rublev's Icon of the Trinity: A Reflection on the Spiritual Life," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 14:5 (June–August 1984), pp. 8–9.

² Sr. M. Helen Weier, O.S.C., *Festal Icons of the Lord* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1977), p. 45.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9, col. 1.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9, col. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9, col. 2.

⁷ On the close connection between the Ten Commandments and chs. 12–26 of Deuteronomy see Stephen A. Kaufman, "The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law," *MAARAV* 1 (1979), pp. 105–158, who argues that Deut 12:1–25:16 is in fact a literary expansion of the Ten Commandments on the part of a single author.

⁸ Edward George Newing, "A Rhetorical & Theological Analysis of the Hexateuch," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 22 (1981), pp. 1–15.

⁹ A. H. van Zyl, "Chronological Deuteronomic History," *5th World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 1 (1969), pp. 12ff.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the concentric structure of the Deuteronomic History which focuses on 1 Kings 18 and 19, see my article on "Huldah and the Men of Anathoth: Women in Leadership in the Deuteronomic History," *SBL Seminar Papers* (Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 399–404.

¹¹ Cf. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 227–36 and 422–28.

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 120–21 and G. Östborn, *Cult and Canon* (Uppsala, 1950), p. 44, which is cited by Blenkinsopp.

¹³ The term is borrowed from Samuel Terrien, *ibid.*, p. 380.

¹⁴ Cf. Isa 11:10–16 where all of these images appear.