Allegory in the Old Testament

A big issue with Christians today, especially those of evangelical background, is the literal view of the Bible. While some of the fundamental Christians have insisted on reading everything in the Bible in a literal sense, we find that the early church used both literal interpretation, when it was appropriate, but in general it used an allegorical interpretation for most of the old testament.

This is a very brief overview of how the Bible used symbolism which gives support to the use of such method when reading the Bible and in particular, reading the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.

Two points

1. Symbolism in the Old Testament
2. Bible commentaries and the early Church Fathers

**Symbolism in the Old Testament**

The New Testament states that the

All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: (2Ti 3:16 KJV)

Scripture here refers to the Old Testament, as the New Testament was not written (collected) yet.

In the New Testament, we find that the Lord refers to events and characters in the Old Testaments as things that foreshadow what He will do for our sake. The Apostles understood the Old Testament as a shadow/symbol for the New Testament.

Just to mention few examples from the New Testament itself:

**Christ said:**

*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up*: (Joh 3:14 KJV)

As you can see, the Lord is quoting an event from Numbers 21 and indicating that it pointed to His Cross.

*For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Mat 12:40 KJV)*

Again, the Lord is using a character from the Old Testament to foreshadow His coming death and resurrection. That is why OT characters are used to explain the various aspects of Christ’s redemptive act.

**Christ as a Lamb**

In the gospel of St. John, John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God

*The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (Joh 1:29 KJV*)

The role of the Lamb as a substitutional sacrifice if the OT is very clear from the Passover lamb, to the various sacrifices mentioned in the Book of Leviticus.

St. Paul explicitly descries the Lord Jesus as our Passover Lamb

*Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: (1Co 5:7 KJV)*

**Christ and characters of the Old Testament**

The Apostles saw the characters and events of the OT as examples of what Christ did for us.

St. Paul describes the resemblance of **Adam to Christ**

*For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. (1Co 15:21-23 RSVA)*

St. Paul compares the Lord Jesus to Adam, he goes as far as calling the Lord Jesus: The last Adam (1 Co 15:45), The Second Adam (1Co 15:47)

In the letter to the Hebrews, St. Paul resembles **Christ to Moses** (Hebrew 3). It is not just St. Paul who does that. Moses prophesized about Christ in Deu 18:18

*I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.*

*(Deu 18:18 KJV)*

In the gospel of Matthew, the resemblance of Christ to Moses is very obvious. Christ gives the law of the new kingdom on the mountain as Moses did receive the commandments and the law of the first kingdom on the mountain (Math 5-7, Exodus 19-20). Christ walks on water and allows one His followers to do the same similar to Moses crossing the Red Sea (Math 14:24-32 , Exo 14), and Christ feeds the multitude in the wilderness as Moses fed the people of Israel in the desert (Math 14:15-21, Exo 16).

St. Peter likens **Noah** saving eight people in the ark to Christ’s baptism (1 Pe 3:20-21).

Again, in the letter to the Hebrews St. Paul likens Christ to **Melchizedech** in Hebrew 5 & 7

Again, these are just samples and not a complete summary.

**Other examples of allegorical presentations**

* All the parables that the Lord used when teaching the crowds used one thing to describe another. The Lord Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of heaven, but not a single time that He descried what it is, but rather always likened it to something else.
* St. Paul likens the Israelites journey in Sinai to Christian’s life.  
  *Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. (1Co 10:1-4 KJV)*Here St. Paul relates the Israelites crossing of the red sea to baptism. There are a lot more examples of symbolism
* In Colossians 2 St Paul links circumcision to Baptism  
  *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, (Col 2:11-13 RSVA)*
* St. Peter describes us as lost sheep (1Pe 2:25)
* St. Peter also resembles us to living stones and Christ to the corner stone (1 Pe 2:6-8)

**Bible commentaries and the early Church Fathers**

Reading the New Testament carefully reveals that the Apostles understood the Old Testament in the light of the events of the New Testament. As they described above, they especially saw most of the Characters of the Old Testaments as symbolizing Christ (Adam (1Co 15:22), Noah (1Pe 3:18-21), Melchizedek (Heb 5, 7) , Jonah (Mat 12, Luke 11), Moses (Hebrew 3) …. ).

Even in the Old Testament, the Lord used symbolism multiple times (Isaiah 5, Isa 27, Jer 2, Song of Songs, Psalms, ...)

It is important to see how the Fathers of the church read and understood the Bible. Any Orthodox commentary must be based on the writings of the early church fathers and not on just an individual effort or a personal interpretation.

“*The Fathers of the church based their exegesis on affirmations made in faith about the Bible. For the Fathers, understanding the Scriptures is a grace and a gift for which the interpreter needs to pray*.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

As part of their gifts to us, they have passed on their understanding of the Bible.

The fathers have seen a lot of meaning in every event, character, name, and number in the old testament. As an example:

“*Readers of this volume will be struck, for example, with the frequency with which Joshua is identified with Jesus, made easy by the fact that both names were spelled the same in Greek. The assumption, of course, was that the Holy Spirit had something to tell us when this name was invoked.*

*Fascination with numbers was almost universal. To give only a few examples: the number one reminded the Fathers of God, two of the two Testaments or the two great commandments, three of the Trinity, four of the Gospels, five of the senses or the books of the law, ten of the commandments, twelve of the apostles, forty of fasting and Lent, fifty of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, seventy or seventy-two of p xxx the Lord’s disciples, and so on.*” [[2]](#footnote-2)

It is important to understand these symbolisms to get a better understanding of both the old and new testaments

As an example, a quick overview of their writings on Exodus reveals that they have seen slavery of the Jewish people in Egypt as our slavery to the devil.

Moses was a type of Christ:

Just some examples

1. Moses saved the people of Israel from slavery, Christ saved us from the slavery of the devil.
2. Moses led the people of Israel across the Red Sea, Christ leads us through Baptism.
3. Moses led the people of Israel in the desert for 40 years, Christ leads us through our lives.
4. Moses gave the commandment, Christ gives us the instructions on how to enter into the kingdom of heaven
5. Moses fed the people in the desert Manna,, Christ gave us His own flesh and blood (John 6:49-50)
6. Moses gave the, water, the Lord gives the living water (the Holy Spirit).
7. Moses intercedes for his people lest God destroys them after the built the golden calf, Christ interceded for us with the Father by carrying our sins.

After that point Joshua is the type of Christ who leads the people into the Promised Land (Paradise).

Similarly, other parts of the Old Testament are taken as directly pointing to Christ (example: sacrifices in Leviticus, Tabernacle in Exodus, Passover lamb, ..).

A nice study is to see how each character in the Old Testament represents the Lord Jesus Christ. No one person can represent all the work that Christ will do for us, understanding how each character resembles Christ will give us a more comprehensive picture of the work of salvation by our Lord Jesus.

1. Lienhard, J. T., & Rombs, R. J. (2001). *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 3. (xxvii). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lienhard, J. T., & Rombs, R. J. (2001). *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 3. (xxix–xxx). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)