



JOHANNES OECOLAMPADIUS
(1482-1531)*

* Engraving by H. Robinson, in *History of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*, by J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, trans. David Dundas Scott, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1844), vol. 2, opposite p. 34.

TYPOLOGY AND CHRISTOCENTRICITY IN THE HERMENEUTICS OF JOHANNES OECOLAMPADIUS

VERN S. POYTHRESS

The commentary on Isaiah (1525) by Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531), Reformer in Basel, participant in the Marburg colloquy, shows fascinating hermeneutical affinities to twentieth-century developments in Vosian biblical theology and in typological interpretation. In particular, Oecolampadius devotes attention to analogical and typological parallels, which lead to Christocentric interpretations and pastoral application.

How do the interpretations of Oecolampadius work, and how might we appropriate his commentaries for biblical interpretation today? We confront a challenge due to terminology. Oecolampadius sometimes mentions “allegorizers” and “allegories” without following their trails. But he also uses “allegory” as a positive category to describe his own meditations on the text. Modern biblical interpreters often associate the word *allegory* with arbitrariness or with the imposition of meanings not connected with the original circumstances of writing. But when Oecolampadius speaks of allegory in positive terms, it is closer to what is now called *typology*. He attends to whole-canon themes and analogies. His interpretation is guided by immediate literary and historical context, by redemptive history, by fulfillment in Christ, by typological heightening, and above all by his familiarity with Scripture as a whole. Whether he uses the label “allegory” or (at other times) no label at all, he provides worthy examples for today. It appears that in his positive expositions, “allegory” refers to a two-level structure of meaning, whose “other” layer is not generated by fancy, imagination, or mere tradition, but by attention to divine intention as revealed in patterns of biblical themes. Oecolampadius’s typology uncovers *relational* aspects of meaning, by reading specific verses in relation to redemptive history and fulfillment in Christ. His approach suggests how typology can be scripturally guided and responsible about meaning, and at the same time rich and robust. He also gives us an example of a major Reformer who did not let the interest in *sensus literalis* undermine a sensitivity to biblical depth.

Vern S. Poythress is Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Biblical Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary. An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nov. 15–17, 2017, in Providence, RI, on Nov. 15 in the Convention Center Rotunda.

Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531) was the major first-generation Reformer in Basel, Switzerland.¹ He was a contemporary of Luther and Zwingli, and was one of the four principal participants in the Marburg Colloquy. Though not so well known today, he was recognized in his own time, and wrote commentaries, tracts, and translations of the church fathers.² He was recognized for his outstanding knowledge of Hebrew. His theology, church order, and OT commentaries influenced Martin Bucer, John Calvin, and others.³

Of particular interest hermeneutically are his OT commentaries. He did not follow the fourfold method of the medieval period, but positively developed the use of typology, with sensitivity to redemptive history and the climax of fulfillment in Christ. His typological interpretation shows that he interpreted with historical sensitivity but was not content to remain merely with a single narrow meaning applying only to the original audience and circumstances. This approach characterizes even the earliest of his commentaries, the one on Isaiah.⁴ This commentary was based on lectures delivered in 1523. The earliest edition for the printed text is 1525.⁵ We will focus on this commentary, partly because it is so early, and partly because it contains explicit comments

¹ Ernst Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1939); Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1927; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971); Staehelin, *Das Reformationswerk des Johannes Oekolampad* (Bern: Gotthelf-Verlag, 1932); Diane Marie Poythress, "Johannes Oecolampadius' Exposition of Isaiah Chapters 36–37" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992), 6–176; Poythress, *Reformer of Basel: The Life, Thought, and Influence of Johannes Oecolampadius* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011); E. Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth, 1969; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 3–46; Theophil Stähelin, *Johann Oekolampad, der Reformator von Basel* (Basel: Verlag christlicher Schriften, 1864); English translation: Theophil Stähelin, *John Oecolampadius: The Reformer of Basel*, trans. Timothy Matthew Slemmons (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016); Johannes Oecolampadius, *An Exposition of Genesis*, trans. Mickey L. Mattox (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013), 8–17; Jeff Fisher, *A Christoscopic Reading of Scripture: Johannes Oecolampadius on Hebrews* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 14–27. Oecolampadius's works are available in digital form at http://www.prdl.org/author_view.php?a_id=436, accessed July 5, 2017.

² Poythress, "Johannes Oecolampadius' Exposition," 105–21; Ernst Staehelin, *Oecolampad-Bibliographie*, 2 vols. (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1973).

³ Poythress, "Johannes Oecolampadius' Exposition," 125–47; Poythress, *Reformer of Basel*, 38–40, 46–55.

⁴ Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam prophetam HYPOMNEMATON, hoc est, Commentariorum* (Basel: Cratander, 1525), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-1772>, summarized in Staehelin, *Lebenswerk*, 191–213. Hereafter, citations by page number in the text refer to this commentary.

⁵ See Staehelin, *Oecolampad-Bibliographie*, 53, nos. 109, 110; Staehelin, *Lebenswerk*, 191; Poythress, "Johannes Oecolampadius' Exposition," 35, 39, 120, 762; Poythress, *Reformer of Basel*, 13–14, 147. Poythress, *Reformer of Basel*, 35, seems to imply that Oecolampadius's Isaiah commentary was published in 1523, but what is probably meant is that he produced the lectures that formed the contents of the commentary, first published in 1525. Staehelin, *Lebenswerk*, 190, indicates that Oecolampadius was still engaged in lecturing on Isaiah in the summer of 1524; the printer Andreas Cratander began preparing for publication even before the lectures were concluded (p. 191).

on typological interpretation. I suggest that much can be seen that is relevant today. It fits well into the framework of Geerhardus Vos's conception of biblical theology as a historically oriented discipline taking into account progressive revelation as well as the divine authority of the whole canon of Scripture.⁶

I. *The Meaning of "Allegory"*

We should first deal with a challenge concerning terminology. As we shall see, Oecolampadius sometimes uses the word "allegory" (Latin *allegoria*) in describing what he is doing, but in modern terms his positive use should be classified as typology.⁷ In Oecolampadius's vocabulary, "allegory" is a general term describing any interpretation involving a second level of meaning. Oecolampadius is well aware of the possibility of abuse in connection with a second level. But he also judiciously affirms a second level when he thinks it is justified by redemptive history and by relations with other parts of the canon.

1. *Principles*

Oecolampadius's Isaiah commentary is all the more valuable because in the preface and the exposition of the first few verses he sets forth general hermeneutical principles that justify the subsequent particular interpretations. The preface focuses mostly on reading with spiritual preparation of the heart. In this connection, Oecolampadius sets forth the general principle that the OT is about Christ⁸ and the Christian life:

In vain therefore they waste all labor, who in the prophets seek anything except Christ and Christian life. (p. 2r)

And we, let us not be similar to them [those reproached in Isa 29:10–13], but having forever said good-bye to worldly things, let us attend to Christ himself and the things of Christ, and claim from the Lord wisdom: and I may dare to promise that Christ on account of his mercy will refuse nothing to pious prayers. (p. 2r)

In commenting on the first few verses of Isaiah, Oecolampadius again mentions principles for interpretation. He stresses the knowledge of language and historical circumstances (p. 5r, Isa 1:2). This work with language and history must form the foundation for any second level (p. 5r).⁹ In this context

⁶ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), especially the introductory discussion of the nature of biblical theology, 3–18.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 144–48.

⁸ See further Fisher, *Christoscopic Reading*, 29–30, 53.

⁹ For the larger context in the history of interpretation, see *ibid.*, 34–37; Richard A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald McKim, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 22–31; Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Oecolampadius distinguishes between justified and unjustified second level meaning: “which [allegories] you should beware either of despising universally, or inopportunately bringing forward. For both alike are unworthy of Scripture” (p. 5r).¹⁰

In the preface Oecolampadius already gave biblically based reasons for the conviction that the OT is about Christ. In addition to this general conviction, he supplies in his comments on Isa 1:2 several reasons why we may sometimes be justified in finding a second level of meaning: first, apostolic examples of OT use; second, Rom 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:11, which explicitly indicate that the OT was written for us; third, the example of Num 21:4–9, alluded to in John 3:14. After thinking through the historical record in Num 21, and affirming its relevance to the generation in the wilderness, he concludes with respect to typological use:

That we should imitate the faith of the fathers, and as they, believing in the word, fled for refuge to the bronze serpent, so we also should not doubt that we are saved in the cross of the Lord. You see at least how these things are written for us? So also in our Isaiah, first let us hear what he said to his generations, and then we may search for what through it [i.e., through what is said] is introduced secretly for us. (p. 5v, Isa 1:2)

Note how Oecolampadius appeals to “the faith of the fathers.” There is continuity in faith, as affirmed in Heb 11. Oecolampadius is thinking in terms of the continued pattern of salvation in the whole history of redemption.

The same justice of God is for all ages, the same mercy also. Therefore God threatens no less evils through these [what is written] to those who followed Isaiah, and who are in our estate, than to his contemporaries. (p. 5v; also 6r, Isa 1:2)

This continuity in history, not arbitrary production of a second level, guides his interpretation, along with explicit examples of NT types (as in 1 Cor 10:1–11 as well as John 3:14). At the same time, he understands a distinction between old and new, between type and antitype. So his thinking is shaped by the history of redemption, with its epochal distinctions.

2. *The Example of Babylon*

We can see an example of his reasoning when he treats the prophecy concerning Babylon in Isa 13. He first underlines the importance of beginning with the historical reference to ancient Babylon: “This prophecy is not to be expounded concerning other things [i.e., allegorically], for the prophet explains himself, saying: Behold, I will raise up against them the Medes, who seek neither silver nor gold [Isa 13:17]” (p. 104r, Isa 13:1). Oecolampadius takes into account the historical environment in which Isaiah writes, anticipating the rise of the

¹⁰ Fisher, *Christoscopic Reading*, 62–63.

kingdom of Babylon. He also appeals explicitly to the literary context. The reference to the Medes in Isa 13:17 shows that the discussion of Babylon earlier in the same chapter deals with the Babylonian kingdom of OT times.

But then Oecolampadius adds a second level of meaning: "However, *symbolically* the destruction of Babylon teaches also the destruction of the world" (p. 104r, Isa 13:1; italics mine). In favor of this second level Oecolampadius cites earlier interpreters, such as Augustine, Tertullian, and Jerome. He also cites the NT witness in Rev 17 (p. 104r, Isa 13:1). In addition to the typological use in Rev 17, Oecolampadius points to a broad redemptive-historical pattern of judgment on God's enemies, manifested in Gen 11:4, Jer 50–51, and in generalizing ("verbal hyperboles," p. 104v, Isa 13:1) language in Isa 13 itself. He is therefore able with confidence to see many manifestations of the theme of the destruction of the worldly city:

Therefore, understand by Babylon the kingdom of the world, in which indeed there is much confusion, and whose captivity many experience. What if you say that it is also [!] Romish tyranny.... Again, how greatly it pertains to faith and hope, that once Babylon was devastated by Christ, and all liberty was restored, for he says: Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world [John 16:33]. And through him every day we conquer Babylon in ourselves. However, a full and true overthrow of the world will take place at the end of the ages of this world. (p. 104v, Isa 13:1)

Thus the principle applies as a general pattern to various instances: the fall of Babel in Gen 11, the fall of Babylon to the Medes under Cyrus (which Oecolampadius sees as the immediate historical reference for Isa 13), the defeat of the world by Christ in his death and resurrection (John 16:33), the daily defeat of worldly passions by Christian believers, the defeat of Romish tyranny, and finally the comprehensive defeat at the return of Christ. Oecolampadius has a particular application relevant to Reformation circumstances:

Likewise, when Christians guard the freedom of the Spirit, the power of the tyrant, even the Antichrist, will not prevail in keeping us from our true country and throwing us back into foul slavery, whenever ceremonies and externals are concerned. For saints also in Babylon do not worship idols, and by a divine miracle they are preserved unharmed in the fiery furnace [Dan 3]. (p. 104v, Isa 13:1)

But shortly after showing this thematic and typological connection, Oecolampadius again discusses historical details with respect to historical Babylon. Commenting on Isa 13:2, he says:

These are the words of God calling the army of the Medes and Persians to conquer Babylon, which is here called a high mount, on account of its uncommon and wonderful buildings. By Pomponius Mela it is called a city of wonderful greatness; by Pliny, the greatest city and capital of the Chaldean people. For it obtained first place in such a way that the remaining part of Assyria and Mesopotamia is called Babylon after it. Several writers say that the circumference of its walls was about

360 stadia, their thickness 32 feet. The distance between towers was 50 cubits, and the height of a tower 60 cubits. The path on top of the fortifications was so broad, that four horses could easily run abreast along it. It also has hanging gardens. (See Strabo book 16 [i.e., *The Geography of Strabo*, now in the Loeb classical library]). Not in a mountain but in the plain it is situated, as testifies Herodotus [*Herodotus*, now in the Loeb classical library]. (p. 104v)

Oecolampadius is dealing with a historical and a symbolical meaning that are related to one another typologically. Consistent with these two levels of meaning, the “consecrated ones” of Isa 13:3 are first interpreted historically in reference to the Medes and Persians, as those carrying out the work of God. Then, second, as an additional level of meaning, Oecolampadius uses the general principle of God’s judgment and applies it to those who destroy the kingdom of the world through the word of God: “with how much eagerness and constancy should the announcers of the word of God proceed to root out the offenses of the world, and Babylon” (p. 105r, Isa 13:3).

3. *Restraint*

At the same time, when we look at other places in the Isaiah commentary, we may note that Oecolampadius is aware of the need for restraint in exploring a second level of meaning. When Oecolampadius finds a second level, it is because of contextual evidence and thematic evidence from the rest of Scripture. The second level must not be fanciful, as is illustrated by Oecolampadius’s rejection of “allegory” in connection with some details.

For example, when Oecolampadius comes to interpret “the fourteenth year” in Isa 36:1, he affirms the historical meaning. He says, “The carefulness of the number shows the certainty of the history” (p. 194r). He also rejects an allegorical meaning that might attach to the number fourteen: “let us abandon allegory, as somewhat too superstitious, to those who would play games” (p. 194v, Isa 36:1).

Similarly, commenting on Isa 40:4, he avoids “allegorizers”: “I omit here what allegorizers say” (p. 211r). Concerning the four rivers in Gen 2:10 Oecolampadius again rejects allegories:

There are some who try to bring in different allegories for these rivers. Some bring forth the four evangelists, others the four doctors of the Church. Avoid such trifles.¹¹

4. *Other Examples*

Other examples, where Oecolampadius does find a legitimate second level of meaning, confirm that he is operating in a way that in our time we would describe as typological reasoning. For example, Oecolampadius sees

¹¹ Oecolampadius, *Exposition of Genesis*, 133.

the miraculous deliverance by the angel of the Lord in Isa 37:36 as part of the larger pattern of deliverance of God's people. In commenting on Isa 37:36, he lists other parts of Isaiah that follow the same pattern: 9:4; 10:26; 16; 17:13; 25:4–6; 28:21; 29:5–6; 31:4; 33:1 (cf. 10:32) (p. 203v–204r, Isa 37:36). He then cites the Passover in Egypt: “these things were done on the night of the Passover in which the army of the Egyptians was submerged” (p. 204r, Isa 37:36). He sums up:

We have often had to do with allegory because these things were fulfilled by Christ, who by His own death conquered the world and delivered us from the devil's bondage, things which are typified for us by the submerging of the Egyptians in the mystery of our baptism. (p. 204r, Isa 37:36)

In effect, Oecolampadius sees that there is a larger redemptive-historical pattern of deliverance, with many exemplifications, and then a climactic deliverance through the death of Christ. This climactic deliverance operates on a second plane, which is symbolized by the earlier physical deliverances.

Next let us consider how Oecolampadius deals with the narration in Isa 36–37 concerning the attack on Jerusalem and its divine deliverance. This case might seem to be more doubtful as a type. But Oecolampadius introduces it with a helpful explanation:

And although now history clearly is being narrated, it is nevertheless itself also a type pregnant with great mysteries, just as the history of the bronze serpent which Moses lifted up is true, and we are not able to confess but that the serpent itself also was no less a figure of Christ. (p. 194r, Isa 36:1)

Note the affirmation of the historical reality of the events, which is the starting point. The typological meaning is built on that initial reality. Then Oecolampadius continues with the typological meaning:

Thus also here our Jerusalem is, I say, the true Church of God of which we are made citizens through true faith in Christ; and it has its own Sennacherib and its own Rabshakeh, whom you may take as the antichrist, who takes care of the business of the king [i.e., Sennacherib is a type of Satan, and Rabshakeh a type of the antichrist]. They, in fact, scheme to conquer the church by various methods, and they try to drive us away from the true worship of God, which is in faith, into servitude to them. However, God through his own messenger Jesus Christ wore away the adversarial powers (without our death) by his own power in the cross. It remains that first we have faith in Christ and in us he will triumph over demons and his servants. And finally he will triumph completely when he will have abolished death and when all things will be subjected to him [1 Cor 15:25, 28]. (p. 194r)

Now let us consider how Oecolampadius derives the typological correspondences. In parallel with his comments on Isa 1:2 (p. 5v), discussed above, he appeals to the episode with the bronze serpent and the corresponding typological use in John 3:14. That sets the pattern for typological reasoning. He also appeals to a correspondence between Jerusalem and the church.

Oecolampadius does not explicitly tell us how he gets that correspondence. But the answer is fairly evident. It is justified partly by the unity of the people of God in the OT and NT, and partly by explicit texts in the NT, such as Gal 4:26–31 and Heb 12:22. It is reinforced by what Oecolampadius says in expounding Isa 37:36, concerning the repeated pattern of God delivering his people from their enemies. The opponents of God's people in the OT are analogous to the chief NT opponents, Satan and the antichrist.

The correspondence does not depend merely on verbal similarities, but on broad redemptive-historical themes (opposition and deliverance), and on parallels in function. Sennacherib functions like Satan in trying to overthrow the people of God. Rabshakeh functions like an antichrist by being the mouthpiece of Satan and trying to deceive the people with enticing words and threats and material inducements.

In this passage just quoted, Oecolampadius also speaks explicitly about the climactic events of redemptive history in the work of Christ. "God through his own messenger Jesus Christ wore away the adversarial powers (without our death) by his own power in the cross." He concludes his introductory thoughts by another redemptive-historical reflection. Christ's death has accomplished victory. But now that victory is being gradually applied "in us." It will be consummated when he returns: "he will triumph completely when he will have abolished death and when all things will be subjected to him." It is clear that Oecolampadius has in mind a timeline, according to which redemptive-historical events in the OT foreshadow climactic redemption in the NT. In the NT, redemptive history has three fundamental stages: (1) the work of Christ on earth, (2) the time of application of redemption to the church, and (3) the consummation when Christ returns. (Oecolampadius does not make it explicit, but his language seems to imply an amillennial understanding, according to which the return of Christ is followed immediately by final events of judgment and the final conquest over death.)

II. *Principles*

Both near the beginning of Isaiah (p. 5r–5v, Isa 1:2) and in the introduction to a new section in Isa 36–37 (p. 194r, Isa 36:1) Oecolampadius discusses some of the principles for his typological interpretation. But he is mostly content to practice such interpretation. He does not fill in all the justifications from the larger context of Scripture. Yet a thoughtful study shows that such justifications can be found. Oecolampadius knows how to interpret. But he does not have the degree of focus on method that might characterize a scholar of the twenty-first century. His short explanations leave modern students with questions.

First, what is the difference between justified and unjustified "allegory," to use Oecolampadius's generic term? I believe that it is found in Oecolampadius's consistent use of context—linguistic, historical, and canonical. But Oecolampadius is not as explicit as we might expect to find in a treatise focused on method.

Second, what are the “secret” things that we can derive from the OT? In the passages considered, Oecolampadius does not directly discuss the question of whether these secrets were not known at all in OT times, or whether they were there in shadowy form, that is, they were partially disclosed, but not to the extent and with the depth that we now have with the NT (Eph 3:5). It is an interesting question, but I think one that Oecolampadius does not have in focus. As a pastor, he is more interested in what God says to us than a perfectly precise reconstruction of what was retrievable by an original audience. Yet he does pay attention to the original historical circumstances, as the foundation for all second-level meanings. This insistence on the original context hints that the answer would have the form of progressive unveiling of secrets, always linked to original communication.¹²

Third, is there a difference between an analogical correspondence and a typological correspondence with OT events? In the passages considered, Oecolampadius does not make an explicit distinction. That may be because such a distinction is not rigidly found in the text itself. The NT people of God are related to the OT by analogy, but also the events that happen to the OT people often deal with physical deliverances that correspond symbolically to NT spiritual truths about climactic deliverance in Christ.

III. Conclusion

Finally, we can consider Oecolampadius’s treatment of Isa 6:6, where the seraph takes a burning coal from the altar:

Christ is the altar on which we offer our sacrifices of entreaty, in order that he may commend us to God the Father. In whom [i.e., Christ] also are burning coals, because in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God are hidden [Col 2:3]. And from his plenitude we all receive [John 1:16]. The burning coals are his words, which kindle the heart of the two disciples on their journey [Luke 24:32]. (p. 60v, Isa 6:6)

Oecolampadius often adopts the style he uses here, of alluding to verses of Scripture and themes of Scripture without explicitly noting the allusions. (I have filled in with brackets some of the allusions that he does not mention explicitly.) His mind and heart are clearly filled with Scripture, and are filled with wonder at the grace of God and the person and work of Christ. That partly explains his ability to expound typologically without arbitrariness.

To some modern readers, Oecolampadius’s words about Isa 6:6 may seem to be a stretch. But he pays attention to the function of items in context. The altar has a mediatorial function for OT worshipers approaching God. It follows that Christ is the final mediator fulfilling that function. The burning coals,

¹² Fisher affirms that Oecolampadius believes in a meaning already present in OT times: “Oecolampadius argued that Hebrews must be read from the perspective that the Old Testament had *already* been pointing to Christ” (*Christoscopic Reading*, 53; italics mine).

which are found on the altar, function to cleanse Isaiah. Christ's words and the wisdom found in him function to cleanse us (John 17:17). Oecolampadius also takes up the function of fire in kindling fire. Christ's words kindle the hearts of the two disciples, in a manner parallel to the stirring of Isaiah's heart that can be inferred as part of the process of sending described in Isa 6:8–9. The parallels are not exact. But they are not intended to be. The climax in Christ is necessarily different from the shadows that precede it.