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Ecclesiastes 12:12

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R. J. RUSHDOONY: SYMBOLIC THEOLOGIAN

by Gary North

R. J. Rushdoony is increasingly being recognized as the primary developer of the Christian Reconstruction worldview and a pioneer in several important areas of theology and social philosophy. He has blazed new trails in the fields of biblical law, apologetics, Christian education, and history. His fusion of postmillennial eschatology, Van Til's presuppositional apologetics, and biblical law made possible a unique new Christian worldview, one which I believe will become dominant over the next two centuries. He is probably the most important Christian thinker since John Calvin. But his vision is broader than Calvin's; he can more accurately be compared with Augustine.

One area where he has not received his due is the field of symbolic theology.¹ Even some of his disciples do not recognize the extent to which Rushdoony has used symbolic theology to set forth his case. As a postmillennialist and as a follower of Cornelius Van Til, there was no way that he could have avoided the use of symbolic theology. First, the postmillennial view relies heavily on interpreting Old Testament prophecies in terms of their underlying symbolism. Rushdoony's book on eschatology, *Thy Kingdom Come* (1970), offers page after page of historical and social conclusions that are based on his interpretation of symbolic language in Daniel and Revelation.

Second, Van Til's apologetic method also relies heavily on symbolism. All human thought, Van Til says, is **analogical**. Men are required to "think God's thoughts after Him." Ethical rebels attempt to escape this requirement, but Van Til argues that they cannot. We are all created in God's image, and therefore we must think analogically, not originally. Therefore, what Van Til is saying is that all created reality reflects the being of God. If this is the case, then **all created reality is symbolic of God**. Rushdoony's writings testify to the fact that he is fully aware of this implication of Van Til's thought, and that he is in complete agreement with Van Til on this point.

Rushdoony's Use of Symbolism

Rushdoony understands the importance of symbolism. The problem is that some of his more recently recruited fol-

lowers have not understood how deeply he has relied on symbolic theology, for he does not always call symbolism "symbolism." Sometimes he calls symbolism "typology." At other times, he calls symbols "images." (His early recruits have more frequently understood how important symbolism is to Rushdoony's theological perspective, and they have continued to apply and expand his pioneering efforts in this field. The one apparent exception to this rule is Dr. Greg Bahnsen, probably because his commentary on Revelation has not been published.) We therefore need to review Rushdoony's use of typology and images.

Rushdoony discusses **typology** in terms of Van Til's exposition of the doctrine of the ontological Trinity. "The biblical doctrine of the ontological trinity, as Van Til has shown, undergirds the equal ultimacy, reality, and unity of the one and the many; the doctrine of creation, with its Creator-creature distinction, gives the principle of interpretation, in that the Creator is also the source of meaning, all facts being God-given facts. *Typology* is an essential aspect of this interpretation, in that inter-relationship of the temporal and eternal, but without confusion, is asserted. Marriage, for example, has more than its physical and temporal nature and is typical of the relationship of Christ and His church, even as human fatherhood is an image of the eternal relationship of the ontological trinity of the Father to the Son."²

What Rushdoony is saying is that only through typological reasoning—a theological exposition based on biblical analogies—can we relate the temporal to the eternal. Such typological reasoning, he says, is "essential." Rushdoony has always defiantly criticized all Christian thinking which ignores the temporal (history), and nowhere does he criticize such thinking more harshly than in *Thy Kingdom Come*. It should not be surprising, then, that we find that it is in this book above all that he relies most heavily on symbolic theology.

We should also recognize the importance which Rushdoony attaches to symbols and symbolism in his teaching concerning **images**. There is no escape from images, he says; images are inescapable concepts. Men are made in God's image and reflect Him. But rebellious man wants to create his own images and symbols. "Man creates images, which are a projection of himself or some aspect of his being, and then bows down before them. In this he says that ultimacy rests where he is and where his mind functions. The images man creates represent his ideas of power and ultimacy, and, because he makes them, they also represent his power and control over them."³

2. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come: Studies in Daniel and Revelation* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1970] 1978), p. 99.

3. Rushdoony, "Images, Icons, and Pin-ups," *Journal Of Christian Reconstruction*, 1 (Summer, 1974), p. 141.

1. Technically and historically, "symbolic theology" is the study of creeds and confessions (see Philip Schaff, *Theological Propaedeutic*, p. 410). Theological science is generally broken down into four categories: systematic theology, historical theology (history of doctrine), symbolic theology (study of creeds and confessions), and biblical theology (study of the modes of revelations in Scripture). The study of Biblical symbolism and larger symbolic structures is part of biblical theology, but in recent years, in some circles at least, the phrase "symbolic theology" has come to be used for this. This semantic confusion is unfortunate, to say the least, but it is hard to "pin the blame" for it on anyone. At any rate, for this essay I shall be using the phrase "symbolic theology" not in its normal sense (study of creeds) but in a special sense (study of Biblical symbolism and symbolic structures).

Rushdoony rejects modern art because it self-consciously attempts to **destroy meaning by destroying the acceptability of Christian symbols**. Who but Rushdoony could have stumbled across Picasso's description of his own work? "A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions." Rushdoony rejects completely this revolutionary view of art: "But man himself is a creation of God, and hence man's total being is revelational of God's handiwork. For modern art to renounce God means therefore to renounce man also. The logical conclusion (and man, in spite of himself, is logical, and pursues ideas to their logical consequences) is that humanism ends by denying man and by seeking the destruction of man."⁴

How then must we restore man to ethical conformity to God? **By restoring the proper (biblical) use of images**. Far from wanting to destroy imagery—symbols—Rushdoony calls on rebellious men to abandon their destructive task and to return to biblical art, biblical images, **biblical symbolism**. In short, Rushdoony's theology rejects the possibility of avoiding symbols. The only question is: **Which symbols, reflecting which God?**

Rushdoony, the Symbolic Theologian

He warns theologians against the mistaken principle of interpretation which says that a symbol always remains the same in the Bible. On the contrary, he asserts: "To understand its meaning, we must realize that biblical symbols are fluid, not stereotyped; some maintain that the meaning of symbols never varies: this is definitely not so. For example, Satan is compared to a lion (I Peter 5:8), and Jesus Christ is also compared to a lion (Rev. 5:5)."⁵ This is why symbolic theology is a difficult task, even though it is mandatory.

Daniel 4

Rushdoony's exposition of Daniel 4 is necessarily analogical, for the king's dream was symbolic. He calls this chapter, "The Ritual Center of the Earth." He begins with a discussion of the **Tower of Babel**. The Tower was "an affirmation of the concept of continuity and an attempt, through societal and state unification and a program of self-righteousness, to reach up to heaven, to strengthen the continuity with heavenly powers by participation in the work of world redemption."⁶ This is a brilliant insight, and one which he has repeated for two decades. (See his essay, "The Society of Satan," originally published in 1964, and available in reprint form from the Institute for Christian Economics.) But we must bear one fact in mind: **not one word of Rushdoony's analysis is explicitly stated in Genesis 11**. It is all a creative, innovative insight based on Rushdoony's understanding of symbols and his understanding of pagan political theology in the ancient world.

He then goes on to discuss **shapes** as theological symbols: cubes, squares, and circles. He shows that pagans used these shapes to assert their continuity with God and power. But more important, he shows that **these shapes were originally sanctioned by God for His use**. "This concept of the true center has been set forth in the design of the tabernacle. The Holy of Holies was a cube. The Camp of Israel, the assembly and church of God, was a square, as Numbers 2 makes clear, with the tabernacle or throne of God in the center. This pattern, given by revelation on the mountain (Ex. 25:9, 40; Ezek. 43:10; Heb. 8:5; Num. 8:4), was designed both to affirm and set forth the true and transcendent center, throne, and sanctuary, and to attack all purely immanentistic conceptions thereof."⁷

4. Rushdoony, "Humanism's Prophet, The Artist," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, II (Summer, 1975), p. 130.

5. *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 174.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The reader can understand why David Chilton devotes so much space in his masterful book, *Paradise Restored*, to a discussion of the mountain imagery in the Bible, as well as other symbols, both biblical and pagan. It is clear why James Jordan has also discussed in detail just such questions as the shape of the camp in Israel. James Peters (as yet unpublished) has also called attention to the fact that at the center of the Tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant, and inside the Ark were the tablets of God's law. God's law was symbolically at the center of Israel. The "Tyler Group" is dedicated to extending and "fleshing out" the symbolic theological approach to biblical exposition which Rushdoony pioneered.

Daniel 5

Consider also his discussion of the image of the **scales**. He discusses Daniel 5, the words on the wall: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. He calls the chapter, "The Balance of Justice." "The image here is of the scales of Justice, that deity of antiquity who appears implicitly or explicitly in one religion after another, in Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, China, and Rome. The scales of justice appear also in the Church of Rome, in St. Michael the archangel, one of whose duties in the life to come is asserted to be the weighing of the souls of the departed on the scales of justice. . . . In every works religion, wherever the concept of self-salvation has the slightest foothold, the concept of the scales appears. It is the epitome of self-righteousness and of independence of God, a concept of merit which gains for man an absolution from God and His claims."⁸

See what Rushdoony has done. He begins with a revelation to a pagan king. He discusses the meaning of the words, "you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting." He uses his knowledge of a universal pagan symbol which underlies this manifestation of God's power. While he does not say so explicitly, he is showing why it was that Belshazzar would immediately recognize this symbol, for it is universal. "Now, in conformity to his own creed, Belshazzar is weighed and condemned by a sovereign God. Let a man lower his moral law as low as he will, he will still violate and destroy it." (It would have been appropriate here for Rushdoony to have introduced a discussion of Romans 2:12a: "For as many as have sinned without the law will also perish without the law. . . .") Then he argues that the reason why it is a universal symbol is that it is related to a works religion. Here is a very neat use of symbolism, in this case, **pagan symbolism**.

Now, I do not always agree with Rushdoony's use of symbols. For instance, why couldn't the image of the scales be converted to biblical use? After all, the pagans stole the center, square, and mountain images from God and God's people. Why can't we apply the principle of recapture to the scales? This was my approach in outlining the cover of Greg Bahnsen's book, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Institute for Christian Economics, 1985). The cover has a picture of the scales of justice with a scroll of the law weighing down one side. The implication? This is the standard man must attain. Only Jesus Christ attained it, Bahnsen's book clearly demonstrates. But this criticism of Rushdoony's exposition in Chapter Five of *Thy Kingdom Come* is based on my understanding of his exposition in Chapter Four.

666

I also disagree in another case. Frankly, sometimes Rushdoony overdoes it in his symbolic interpretations. He gets carried away. Consider the famous number in the Bible, 666. There can be little doubt that this was a numeric code

8. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

for Nero. The early Christians did not want to get caught by Roman authorities who might intercept and read their letters. So they used a code to describe Nero: 666. (David Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, pp. 181.) All we need to do to "break the code" is to use the letter-number system which was known to the whole ancient world; each letter had a numerical value. The specific values are available in some Bible dictionaries (e.g., *Inter-Varsity's New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edition, pp. 842-43) and are reprinted in *Paradise Restored* (p. 184). Therefore, I find the following exegesis overly strained and even a bit mystical, compared to Chilton's fairly straightforward interpretation. Rushdoony writes: "666 is the number of a man, the human number, raised to its highest degree. Seven is the symbol of totality, of divine fullness; six is the human number. Man was created on the sixth day. The number 666 represents the essence of man's messianic pretensions as well as their futility: at its highest, it constantly falls short of the divine totality and sovereignty. Neither 6 nor 66, nor 666 can ever become 7, or 77, or 777 in itself."⁹ This is too complicated for me! But it would be sinfully unfair to charge Rushdoony with "creeping Kabalism" or "demonic numerology." It is just a case of reading too much into numbers (or getting too much out of them).

Babylon

On the other hand, I agree entirely with his explanation of Babylon. This is "my kind of exegesis." This is just exactly the approach to biblical interpretation that we in the "Tyler Group" are attempting to promote. He writes: "What does Babylon stand for? Babylon has a key significance in Scripture's typology. It represents all attempts by man, since the Tower of Babel, to erect a world paradise without God, to establish human unity on the principle of revolt against God by men who try to be as God. Babylon is man's attempt to give to himself everything which God plans to give the redeemed man, but to deny God in the process and revoke His sovereignty."¹⁰

Christ and Moses

Another example: Rushdoony says that Christ compared Himself to Moses. "As John clearly reported, Jesus proclaimed himself the Moses who gave bread from heaven of greater power than manna. . . . The true exodus came in Christ, and the essential rebellion was against Him. Christ, as the representative man, broke the bands of slavery and the law, and achieved the true exodus (Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:14, 15), so that the true calling out of Egypt, of which Israel's was but the type and shadow, came with Jesus. He appears, therefore, in the center of the camp, the new Israel of God, in the midst of the lampstands, or church."¹¹ We can understand why such symbolic connections would enrage a Jew, but it is inconceivable that such use of biblical symbolism could be condemned by any serious Christian theologian. **This is biblical theology at its best!**

Crystal Sea

Another excellent example of Rushdoony's innovative theology is his discussion of the crystal sea of Revelation 4. "This is the cosmic sea, and, as it stands before the Throne, represents creation under the absolute authority and government of the Creator. It is also the necessary corollary of the altar." He then relates this sea to baptism. But he doesn't stop here. He goes on to show that the image of the sea teaches Van Til's philosophy. "The sea therefore is the cosmos, seen by apostate man as his ocean of potentiality, but seen by God and the people of God as His domain, absolutely transparent to Him, however dark and potential to man. In this inspired philosophy of creation, we are shown

the entire universe as governed from the Throne of God. Creation is not man-centered or nature-centered; it is God-centered. . . . This means that there are no brute facts in creation."¹² He has taken us from a mysterious image in the Book of Revelation to some of the fundamental themes in his own writings and in Van Til's writings. Let it never be said that Rushdoony makes no use of symbolic theology!

Eating and Communion

In his chapter on Revelation 19, he devotes much space to the imagery of eating and communion. "The goal of history is communion and community."¹³ He points to three symbols that are used in the Bible for communion: the city (which begins with Adam and Eve in the garden, the first city), marriage (the marriage supper of Christ and the church), and the communion supper. These words could have been written by James Jordan, Tyler's resident expert on the symbolism of eating in the Bible: "Eating together is an ancient symbol, as has been noted, of brotherhood and communion, and, in the context of the true City, the Jerusalem from above, on the occasion of the great wedding it represents communion, peace, and community to the highest degree."¹⁴ (This same sort of symbolic approach is found in my essay, "The Marriage Supper of the Lamb," in the fourth issue of *Christianity and Civilization*, published by Geneva Ministries, 708 Hamvasy, Tyler, TX 75701.)

Uncovering the Springs: From Sex to Politics

It is unquestionably possible for symbolic theology to get a bit "far out," as they say. This is especially true when theologians deal with the Bible's sexual imagery. Rushdoony is no shrinking violet when it comes to the creative use of sexual imagery. I think that as his books get wider circulation, hostile critics will get a lot of mileage out of certain somewhat dicey passages. But this does not mean that we should avoid symbolic theology. Rushdoony doesn't!

Consider Rushdoony's essay in the *Institutes of Biblical Law*, Volume I (1973), the book which best represents his most powerful and most mature thinking. The relevant essay is "Uncovering the Springs." Some people may find the subject shocking, offensive, and inappropriate, so Rushdoony rightly (and in self-defense) introduces his discussion with these words: "An unholy prudery prevents the church today from reckoning with many laws. An important example of this is the law concerning sexual relations with a menstruous woman, or with a woman not fully recovered from childbirth."¹⁵

The law in question is the menstrual law which is found in Leviticus 20:18, which reads: "And if a man shall lie with a woman having her sickness, and shall uncover her nakedness; he hath discovered her fountain, and she hath uncovered the fountain of her blood: and both of them shall be cut off from among their people." Rushdoony says: "The term *fountain* is an important one here. In the natural, literal sense, it is a natural source of living water, and it is the same word as 'eye' in Hebrew. The word is also used symbolically in Scripture of God (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 17:13) as the source of grace (Ps. 87:7). There are a number of such references to God and Christ. But *fountain* is also used of Israel as the father of a great people (Deut. 33:28); it is used of a good wife (Prov. 5:18) and of spiritual wisdom (Prov. 16:22; 18:4). Its usage in Leviticus 20:19 [misprint; the term is used in Lev. 20:18, not 20:19—G.N.] obviously combines graphically a literal and a symbolic meaning. To understand this meaning we must remember that a fountain is a source, a place on earth where living water comes forth. There is an obvious

9. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

15. *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 427.

analogy to the woman's ovulation. Equally obvious is the fact that there is a symbolic sense to the term here that is basic to the severity of the punishment."¹⁶

You can see how broadly he interprets the word "fountain." But what is the meaning of "uncovering a fountain,"? What is the biblical principle conveyed by the phrase? He thinks it must refer to **self-restraint under God's law**. "This meaning can be fathomed by stating the matter legally: it is forbidden to a man to uncover the fountain of a woman, and it is forbidden to a woman to uncover her fountain. This law thus placed the woman beyond the man's use for regular intervals of time; similarly, the woman had no right to commit herself to a man without limits or without reservation.

"Man is God's creature, and God is the ultimate fountain of life. Man cannot transgress on any area, because every area of life is bound and covered by God's law and is to be discovered or uncovered in Him. Man's lordship is under God, and man cannot therefore exercise an unreserved lordship over anyone or anything. There is thus in all things a private domain which man cannot transgress; the public domain of things and of people is that covered by God's law.

"No man can thus make a woman his creature, nor can any woman make herself a man's creature. Every man and every woman has those obligations of love and service to husband or wife, to parents and children, employers, employees, and neighbors, that God's law requires, but no transgression of the privacy of another person. Our fountains are in God; He alone therefore has the total right and power to unrestricted knowledge of us, and jurisdiction over us. No man can claim that right without striking at God. Even though we may love deeply a wife, husband, child, parent, or friend, we cannot have a total relationship with them, or transgress on their privacy or throw open ours without reserve."¹⁷

This seems reasonable enough. There are limits in marital life. But then Rushdoony extends the symbol of **sexual restraint to political restraint**: "Similarly, the state has no right to total knowledge over its citizens, or to attempt to transgress the privacy of its citizens. It must claim their obedience to law, but no more. No man and no state can claim the power to do with people as it wills. . . .

"If Scripture does not give the power to use a person apart from the law to a husband or wife, whose relationship is one of love, how much less does it permit any other to transgress on what is God's private domain in the life of man. If a husband cannot 'use' his wife apart from the law, or a wife give herself apart from the law, no other man or agency can transgress on the fountains of life without polluting the very earth and incurring judgment."¹⁸ We have therefore gone from sexual relations to political relations. All of this is accomplished by means of **symbolic theology**. You can imagine that statist commentators will cry "foul!"

It takes courage to do this sort of exegesis. Narrow-minded prudes and less creative, envy-dominated theologians will resent such exposition. There are some really vicious people who would be happy to pounce on a phrase such as "God is the ultimate fountain of life," and spend pages trying to prove that Rushdoony is a "**fertility cult theologian**." After all, the "fountain," is very specific sexually. Therefore, Rushdoony is equating God with menstruation. Therefore, Rushdoony is obsessed by sexual images and draws heretical conclusions. You may think to yourself,

"What Christian would make such accusations against another Christian?" You would be surprised. It is all too common. A serious scholar tries to come to grips with some difficult and symbol-laden passage in the Bible, and the next thing he knows is that he is being charged with heresy. He starts hearing rumors about his "sexually perverse speculations," and on and on. It is very discouraging. Even the best of Christian scholars can stoop to such nonsense. I have seen it happen. Envy is a fearful sin. But there is this small consolation: envy eventually destroys the vision and careers of those who indulge in it. Envy catches up.

Rushdoony uses symbolic theology throughout the *Institutes*. For example, his interpretation of the law prohibiting the removal of landmarks broadens its scope to include the (allegorical) "landmarks" of our social and cultural inheritance (pp. 328ff., 488ff.); he treats at length of the symbolism of the woman's head-covering during worship (pp. 347f.); he discusses the broad, symbolic aspects of the term *fornication* in minute detail (pp. 407ff., 422f.); and he quotes, with obvious approval, a highly symbolic interpretation of our Lord's writing in the dust when dealing with the adulterous woman (pp. 703f.).

Further, he examines the symbolic implications of Christ's "new Exodus" (pp. 710ff.); in an allegorical discussion of communion he declares that "all men outside the covenant are under the tenth plague," which is certainly not a "literalistic" approach toward either communion or the Egyptian plagues (p. 755); he cites the practice of naked baptism to show "how seriously the Biblical symbolism was taken by the early church" (p. 758); and he writes of baptism as the symbolic "recreation of the world" (p. 761).¹⁹

A Pernicious Rumor

At this point, I need to mention a peculiar rumor which is currently floating around, that Rushdoony opposes the use of symbolic theology. Whoever is circulating this rumor is clearly ignorant of Rushdoony's work. (The person who originated it is either ignorant or a liar.) The notion that Rushdoony disapproves of biblical theology is patently absurd; for if this preposterous accusation were true, **it would require Rushdoony to repudiate and recant some of the central themes of his own theology**. It would mean that Rushdoony has either lost his mind, or else that he has reversed his theology without publicly admitting that he had done so. It would mean either that Rushdoony is **mentally incompetent**, or that he is **morally incompetent**. Such nonsensical rumors should stop, right now.

While there may well be differences of opinion among Rushdoony's disciples as to the validity of his exegesis or application of particular texts, there can be no doubt that the members of the Tyler school of reconstructionism see themselves as self-conscious heirs of Rushdoony's broad hermeneutical approach in his major, published works, such as *The Institutes of Biblical Law* and *Thy Kingdom Come*.

It should be obvious that I admire Rev. Rushdoony for his valiant efforts to do pathbreaking (an analogy!) work in the field of biblical symbolism. There is little doubt in my mind that his efforts will be imitated and extended—not, perhaps, in ways that he would approve of in **execution**, but without doubt in ways that he would approve of in **principle**. After all, he set the controversial example!

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 428-29.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 429.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 429-30.

19. I am grateful to David Chilton for these insights.

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