

Book Reviews

Boss, Rob. *Thunder God, Wonder God: Exploring the Emblematic Vision of Jonathan Edwards*. Dallas: JESociety Press, 2023.

The present volume is Boss's expanded edition of his 2015 work, *God-Haunted World: The Elemental Theology of Jonathan Edwards*.¹ In *Thunder God, Wonder God*, Boss provides readers with an up-to-date treatment of Jonathan Edwards's typological interpretation of nature, as well as the latest scholarly work on this aspect of Edwards's thinking. Boss has also added an entirely new section in "Part Two." This section categorizes the notebook of Edwards's "Images of Divine Things" systematically—in a way that Edwards himself did not—and places them alongside other similar emblem works from his contemporaries. This, Boss believes, gives the reader "a deeper understanding of Edwards' emblematic world and an opportunity to compare his thought to other emblem writers" (vii).

Thunder God, Wonder God provides an important scholarly contribution to the field by showing how this often-mysterious aspect of Edwards's oeuvre was "substantially inspired by Scripture," and was part of the mainstream of the "emblem book genre" from the Renaissance era forward.² In addition, Boss takes the scholarly conversation on Edwards's

1. Boss, *God-Haunted World: The Elemental Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Dallas: JESociety Press, 2015).

2. An emblem book, Boss notes, is a "collection of emblems produced in book form for devotional, political, or entertainment purposes" that unfolds the "associations and significances [between] the created order and the spiritual realm" through "visual devotional aids with meditative verse." The emblem itself is a "type of 'combined art' in which a verbal phrase or slogan is coupled with a visual image, followed by a subscription." Such works, Boss notes, spring forth from a "world view [that] considers nature to be rich in moral and spiritual truths that are expressed symbolically or hieroglyphically." Creation, therefore, is a place of

natural typology a step further by providing a “systematic scriptural study” of Edwards’s “Images of Divine Things.” He does this through an “in-depth analysis of [its] precise doctrinal content.” Boss’s research concentrates on the “history, analysis, and hermeneutics of Edwards’s ‘Images of Divine Things’” (16).³ The central thesis of *Thunder God, Wonder God* is that “Edwards rehabilitated and refined the Renaissance emblematic view of the world through the emblem book genre in order to reinscripturate creation, and that the central text of his program of reinscription is his emblem book ‘Images of Divine Things’” (33).⁴

To accomplish this task, Boss separates his work into two parts: “Edwards’s Emblematic Vision” (Part One), and “Language and Lessons of Nature” (Part Two). Part One is taken up with the book’s weightier material that describes the development of this imagistic world view from its origins in medieval symbolism through the Renaissance to its demise during the Enlightenment. Part One situates Edwards and his “Images” notebook within this story over six chapters.

The first chapter introduces the reader to Boss’s argument and provides an introductory survey of the book’s content. The second chapter provides context for Edwards and his typological worldview by tracing the rise and decline of this worldview from the Renaissance through the Protestant Reformation and into the early modern period. Boss also examines the evolution of the emblem book genre. The third chapter treats the symbolic worldview of several early evangelicals, in addition to their employment of the emblem book. Boss discusses Joseph Hall, Ralph Austen, John Bunyan, Benjamin Keach, and Cotton Mather. He argues that their imagistic

“signs, symbols, and emblems that serve as windows to spiritual reality.” God designed these worldly inscriptions for humans to interpret and enjoy (x, 4, 13, 21, 29).

3. One can find Edwards’s “Images of Divine Things” in his *Typological Writings*, vol. 11 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Wallace Anderson, Mason Lowance, and David Waters (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 50–142. This private notebook is comprised of 212 entries in which Edwards mused over the religious and moral messages that he believed God wrote into the natural world. Boss argues that Edwards’s secret, but “true design” of this notebook was to serve as the seedbed for a “systematic exposition and defense of his emblematic world view, which had as its central thesis that God designed all creation to ‘represent spiritual things’” (28).

4. By “reinscription” Boss means to “express Edwards’s recovery and reassignment of scriptural relevance to the particulars of the natural world that had been *de-inscribed* during the Enlightenment. Edwards felt that the created order possessed an inherent linguistic element; just as the Bible is an inscripturated record of God’s spoken revelation, so is the world that was spoken into being” (17).

theology has the “same goal and scope” as Edwards’s “Images” notebook—differing only in their comprehensiveness and style (32). The fourth chapter then documents the similarities and differences between Edwards’s own “Images” notebook and the similar writing of these other early evangelicals. Boss does so with an eye toward Edwards’s intertwining of Scripture and Christian doctrine to interpret nature in concert with Scripture. In the fifth chapter, Boss reconfigures and simplifies Edwards’s “Images” notebook into theological groups to “illustrate the doctrinal precision and scope of his vision and ambition” to “reinscripturate the world” (33). Boss contends that while Edwards did pursue the Renaissance’s quest “for meaning through discovering the poetic aspects of the world,” his project was far more “doctrinally comprehensive” and operated on a “much larger scale” than his evangelical contemporaries, this being the case even as he was “doing the same thing in principle” (176). The sixth chapter draws Boss’s work to a close with a summary of his argument that Edwards’s “Images” notebook is a refined and robust take on the Renaissance emblem book genre. Boss underscores that Edwards’s secret project was unique in his thoroughly biblical and “reinscripturated” interpretation of how “the Book of Nature is replete with analogies and correspondences that echo and illustrate the Book of Scripture” which itself interpretively shapes the former (177). But, with that in mind, Boss underscores that Edwards’s project is astonishingly similar to “Hall, Austen, Bunyan, and Keach’s emblematic work” (179). In Part Two, Boss provides a categorical reconfiguration of Edwards’s reflections in his “Images” notebook under various subject headings. In this reconfiguration, the reader finds over 180 different entries. Examples range from objects like “bowels” to “furnaces” and from “tears” to “winter,” or actions like “ascending a hill” or “kindling a fire in the morning.” With each entry, Boss provides a modernized paraphrase of Edwards’s musings from his “Images” notebook. And, when possible, Boss also provides one, or more, similar meditations from another writer of the early modern era. Boss does this that the reader might appreciate Edwards’s private reflections in their proper context.

Boss’s *Thunder God, Wonder God* is a splendid volume and makes an important contribution to Edwards studies in two respects. First, Boss’s volume overwhelmingly shows that Edwards’s typological worldview as embodied in his “Images” notebook was not “innovative” (35). Going back to Perry Miller’s introductory essay and publication of the “Images” notebook in 1948, Miller contended, along with several other scholars in the twentieth century, that Edwards’s nature typology was “original” and

untraditional—as compared to his biblical typology which was unoriginal and “quite traditional.” Miller argued, as did others following his lead, that Edwards led a kind of “typological revival in America” through “his effort to extend [typology] into nature and history,” an effort which, up until that time, had not been attempted or contemplated.⁵ Boss’s volume, however, puts to rest this notion that Edwards’s typological thinking evidenced in his “Images” notebook was without any historical or theological precedent. Boss amply shows that Edwards’s thinking is squarely in line with the emblem book tradition dating back to the Renaissance. Boss concludes that “the notion that Edwards is wholly novel is mitigated by the fact that Hall, Austen, Bunyan, and Keach all expanded typology beyond Scripture into the natural world (106).⁶

Boss’s *Thunder God, Wonder God* is also an important scholarly contribution given his argument that Scripture thoroughly informed and supported Edwards’s “reinscripturation” of nature. As Boss shows throughout his volume, “Edwards’ emblematic world view is based on scriptural precedent and is subject to its authority... Edwards adhered to the authority

5. Miller, “Introduction,” in *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, ed. Perry Miller (Yale University Press, 1948), 1–41, 6, 27. For other authors who describe Edwards’s natural typology as “original,” see Mason Lowance, “‘Images or Shadows of Divine Things’ in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards,” in *Typology and Early American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (University of Massachusetts Press, 1972): 209–44, 209–10; Wallace Anderson, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Typological Writings*: 32–33; Thomas Davis, “The Traditions of Puritan Typology” (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 1968); Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 1979); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (Yale University Press, 1975); Sang Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Expanded Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Ursula Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology*, trans. John Hooglund (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 86–108; Rowena Revis-Jones, “Edwards, Dickinson, and the Sacramentality of Nature,” *Studies in Puritan American Spirituality* 1 (Dec. 1990): 225–53; Conrad Cherry, *Nature and the Religious Imagination: From Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Diana Butler, “God’s Visible Glory: The Beauty of Nature in the Thought of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 13–26.

6. For other authors who argue, like Boss, that Edwards’s natural typology did not lack the kind of historical precedent that Miller claimed, see Margaret Batschelet, “Jonathan Edwards’ Use of Typology: A Historical and Theological Approach” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1977): 89–90; Gerald McDermott, *Everyday Glory: The Revelation of God in all Reality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 1–16, 45–62; Avihu Zakai, “The Theological Origins of Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of Nature,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009): 708–24; Thomas Holbrook, “The Elaborated Labyrinth: The American Habit of Typology” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1984), 3–4.

of Scripture throughout his vast typology of nature.” It is the Scriptures that supply Edwards with his “governing paradigm,” for “outside the interpretive authority of the Bible, nature has no clear voice” (126–127). Boss helps to put to rest the scholarly notion stretching back to Perry Miller that “Lockean empiricism” and “Newtonian physics” drove Edwards’s “reinterpretation” of nature—rather than the Holy Bible.⁷ In the words of Vincent Tomas, Edwards’s “master was the Bible, not Locke.” For “the Bible directed his notions of typology.”⁸ Boss’s *Thunder God, Wonder God* powerfully seals this sentiment.

Boss’s volume is an important work with which serious scholars of Edwards’s typology and exegesis cannot fail to interact. But beyond the typical Edwardsean specialist, *Thunder God, Wonder God* will also prove fruitful reading for those who are interested in how Edwards viewed nature as a “God-haunted” place, informed and assisted by his reading of Scripture. Discerning God’s revelation in nature is not only a lively conversation for Christian theologians, but an important theological topic that supports life in the local, Christian church. For this reason, Boss’s volume is a valuable resource for scholars, pastors, and students alike.

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7. Miller, “Introduction,” 23, 25, 28; see also his “The Rhetoric of Sensation,” in *Errand into the Wilderness*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Harper and Row, 1956): 167–83, 180. One also sees this thinking in Mason Lowance, “Jonathan Edwards and the Platonists: Edwardsean Epistemology and the Influence of Malebranche and Norris,” *Studies in Puritan American Spirituality II* (Jan. 1992): 129–52; and Griffin Black’s “‘Spectator’ of Shadows: The Human Being in Jonathan Edwards’s ‘Images of Divine Things,’” *Jonathan Edwards Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2018): 82–95.

8. Vincent Tomas, “Edwards’ Master was the Bible, not Locke,” in *Edwards and the Enlightenment*, ed. John Opie (Lexington, Mass.: Heath Publishers, 1969), 36–38. For those who draw the same conclusions, see Cameron Schweitzer, “See Notes On’: The *Blank Bible’s* Contribution to Edwards’s *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*,” in *The Jonathan Edwards Miscellanies Companion: Volume 2*, ed. Robert Boss and Sarah Boss (Dallas: JESociety Press, 2021): 227–60; Stephen R. C. Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards’s Bible* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 88–89; Brian Fehler, “Jonathan Edwards on Nature as a Language of God: Symbolic Typology as Rhetorical Presence,” in *Religion in the Age of Reason: A Transatlantic Study of the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kathryn Duncan (New York: AMS Press, 2009): 181–94, 181, 190; Jennifer Leader, *Knowing, Seeing, Being: Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and the American Typological Tradition* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 23–24; Diana Butler, “God’s Visible Glory: The Beauty of Nature in the Thought of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 13–26.