

The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story

Abstract: This article argues that it is urgent for the church to recover the Bible as the one true story of the world. The first section explores what it means to confess that the Bible is one story. The second section argues that reading the Bible as one story is urgent for three reasons: it is only in reading the Bible as one story that we can understand the Bible's authority, that we can understand our identity as God's people as missional, and that we can counter other meta-stories that compete for our allegiance. The last section responds to the postmodern charge that all grand stories are oppressive.

Recently Bob Webber and Phil Kenyon issued a clarion call to the church that has garnered widespread involvement and support by Christian leaders. It is a summons to growing faithfulness amid huge threats to the gospel at the beginning of the twenty-first century. After briefly setting the stage by noting the myriad of global challenges facing the evangelical church, they say, "Today, as in the ancient era, the Church is confronted by a host of master narratives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: *who gets to narrate the world?*"¹ Webber believes the three leading contenders are the Muslim story, the liberal capitalist story, and (somewhat surprisingly) the Marxist story. Over against these three contenders Webber and Kenyon say, "In a world of competing stories, we call Evangelicals to recover the truth of God's word as *the* story of the world, and to make *it* the centerpiece of

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1. Bob Webber and Phil Kenyon, "A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future" (2006), prologue. This document can be found at the following Web site: http://www.ancientfutureworship.com/afw_wkshps.html.

Evangelical life.”² Thus, the first section is titled “On the Primacy of Biblical Narrative.” Getting this straight, they believe, is the first order of business.

I agree, and in this article I want to address the urgency of reading the Bible as one story today. I will briefly unfold the confession that the Bible tells the true story of the world. Then I will discuss the issue of why it is so important to grasp this truth. Finally, I will offer a brief answer to the postmodern charge that all grand stories are necessarily oppressive.

The Bible Tells One Story

All of human life is shaped by some story. Alasdair MacIntyre offers an amusing story to show how particular events receive their meaning in the context of a story.³ He imagines himself at a bus stop when a young man standing next to him says, “The Latin name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus.*” One can understand the meaning of the sentence, but what on earth is the young man doing in uttering it in the first place? This particular action can be understood only if it is placed in a broader framework of meaning, a story that renders the saying comprehensible. Three stories could make this particular incident meaningful. First, the young man has mistaken the man standing next to him for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked, “Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?” Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who is helping him deal with his painful shyness. The psychotherapist urges him to talk to strangers. The young man asks, “What shall I say?” The psychotherapist says, “Oh, anything at all.” Or he is a Soviet spy who has arranged to meet his contact at this bus stop. The code that will reveal his identity is the statement about the Latin name of the duck. The meaning of the encounter at the bus stop *depends on which story shapes it*. In fact, each story will give the event a different meaning.

It is like that with our lives: “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part?”⁴ What Lesslie Newbigin is referring to here is not a linguistically constructed narrative world that we fabricate to give meaning to our lives but an interpretation of cosmic history that gives meaning to

2. *Ibid.*, “On the Primacy of Biblical Narrative.”

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 210.

4. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15.

human life. N. T. Wright says that “a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.”⁵

The Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and humanity’s fall into sin.⁶ But I want to say more: the story it tells claims universal validity. Chris Wright puts it this way:

That the Old Testament tells a story needs no defense. My point is much greater however. The Old Testament tells its story as *the* story or, rather, as part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative.⁷

Or as N. T. Wright correctly notes, the divine drama told in Scripture “offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.”⁸

Thus, when we speak of the biblical story as a narrative, we are making a normative claim: it is public truth. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is. Thus, the biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about a certain ethnic group or religion. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. It, therefore, makes a comprehensive claim; our stories, our reality—indeed all of human and nonhuman reality—must find its place in this story.

In his *Mimesis* Erich Auerbach makes the striking contrast between Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Old Testament story. Speaking of the biblical story, he says:

Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. . . . Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.⁹

5. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 40.

6. One could argue for the narrative unity of Scripture on three bases: (1) formation of the canon, which presupposes the narrative unity of a collection of books; (2) the tradition of the church reading Scripture as one story; and (3) warrant from Scripture itself. Of course, the last is most important. An excellent summary of that scriptural authorization can be found in Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 40–47.

7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 54–55.

8. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 41–42.

9. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 15.

Normally when we read stories like the *Odyssey*, we suspend our disbelief and enter its world for a time. We emerge on the other side, exit the story and its world, and resume our daily lives. Hopefully we have learned something or been entertained or enriched in some way by the story, receiving something we can take into our “real” world. It is not that way with the biblical story; we are to remain in its world, find the meaning of our lives there, and fit our lives into its narrative structure. It claims to *be* the real world. In the words of Gerard Loughlin, the biblical story is “omnivorous”: it seeks to overcome our reality.¹⁰ Auerbach finds this understanding of the Old Testament to be “tyrannical” because of its insistence that “it is the only real world.” While I would part company with Auerbach on his charge of tyranny, he does have it right that the Old Testament claims to be the only real world.

And yet it is often the case that Christians do not see the Bible as one story. A Hindu scholar of the world’s religions once said:

I can’t understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.¹¹

We have fragmented the Bible into bits—moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way, there is no comprehensive grand narrative to withstand the power of the comprehensive humanist narrative that shapes our culture. The Bible bits are accommodated to the more all-embracing cultural story, and it becomes *that* story—the humanist story—that shapes our lives.

Stressing the narrative character of Scripture is not, of course, to deny the other genres of literature that make up our canon. Newbigin rightly says that “the Bible is essentially narrative in form. . . . It contains, indeed, much else: prayer, poetry, legislation, ethical teaching, and so on. But essentially it is a story.”¹² Or as James Barr notes:

10. Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

11. Quoted in Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 4.

12. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 81.

In my conception all of the Bible counts as “story.” A people’s story is not necessarily purely narrative: materials of many kinds may be slotted into a narrative structure. . . . Although not all parts of the Bible are narrative, the narrative character of the story elements provides a better framework into which the non-narrative parts may be fitted than any framework based on the non-narrative parts into which the story elements could be fitted.¹³

Speaking of the Bible as one story is not to say that it is like a single volume with a tightly woven story line with no loose ends, like a conventional plot in a novel or a modern work of history. Richard Bauckham observes that “the Bible does not have a carefully plotted single story-line, like, for example a conventional novel. It is a sprawling collection of narratives along with much non-narrative material that stands in a variety of relationships to the narratives.” He points to the fact that there are divergent ways of telling the story, a plurality of angles on the same subject matter, the profusion and sheer untidiness of narrative materials, and more. All of this means that “any sort of finality in summarizing the biblical story is inconceivable.”¹⁴ Yet in its basic overall structure the Bible does tell an overarching story.

While finality in telling the story is inconceivable, it is important to tell the story. As Bauckham says, “Summaries of the biblical story are more or less essential.”¹⁵ N. T. Wright agrees: An essential part of our theological and missional task today is to “tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to subvert other ways of telling the story of the world.”¹⁶ An important part of our task today, then, is to tell the story so we can find our place and live faithfully in it.

Reading the Bible as One Story Today

Recovery of the Bible as one story is of primary importance, even urgent, if the church is to be faithful in today’s world. There are at least three reasons for this. The first is that since this is what the Bible is by its very nature, we can understand its authority only if we receive it as an all-embracing story. The Bible carries divine authority and it must shape our lives. The problem is that there are many models of biblical authority functioning among those who agree with this confession, some of which diminish scriptural authority and others which actually undermine it. N. T. Wright’s work on this has been

13. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 356.

14. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 92–93.

15. *Ibid.*, 93.

16. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 132.

instructive.¹⁷ In his well-known essay “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” he notes that Christians have often found the authority of the Bible in timeless truth and principles, or as a witness to primary events, or in its timeless function. Wright comments:

The problem with all such solutions as to how to use the Bible is that they belittle the Bible and exalt something else. Basically they imply—and this is what I mean when I say they offer too low a view of Scripture—that God, after all, has given us the wrong sort of book and it is our job to turn it into the right sort of book.¹⁸

The book that God has given us is, as Eugene Peterson puts it, “an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative” or “a vast, over-reaching, all-encompassing story—a meta-story.”¹⁹ How can this kind of story function authoritatively? Wright answers by offering us an analogy. He imagines that the script of a “lost” Shakespeare play is somehow discovered. Although the play originally had five acts, only a little more than four have been found—the first four acts and the first scene of act 5.²⁰ The rest is missing. The play is given to Shakespearean actors, who are asked to work out the rest of act 5 for themselves. They immerse themselves in the culture and language of Shakespeare and in the partial script that has been recovered. They then improvise the unscripted part of the fifth act, allowing their performance to be shaped by the trajectory, the thrust, of Shakespeare’s story as they have come to understand it. In this way they bring the play toward the conclusion that its author has indicated.

Something like this may help us to understand how biblical authority can shape our own lives now. The biblical drama of redemption unfolds in five acts: (1) creation, (2) the fall into sin, (3) Israel’s story, (4) the story of Jesus Christ, and (5) the story of the church, leading to the consummation of God’s plan of redemption—an act not yet complete. We also know the Author of the story; in fact, the divine “Playwright” has given the gift of his own Spirit to the “actors.”²¹ Now, given the trajectory of the story as it has been told to this

17. N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” in *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7–32; Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 139–43; Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

18. N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” 13.

19. Eugene Peterson, “Living into God’s Story.” This can be accessed under “Articles” at <http://www.biblicaltheology.ca>.

20. In my book coauthored with Craig Bartholomew, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), we have adapted Wright’s model of five acts to six by adding the consummation as act 6.

21. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 143.

point, and especially knowing that we have been entrusted to perform the continuation of acts 4 and 5—the mission of Jesus and the early church—how are we to live our lives today? How can we play our part so as to allow the story to move forward toward the conclusion God has already written for it? Wright speaks here of “improvisation,” as actors seek to work out in the fifth act of their play the meaning of the first four acts:

This “authority” of the first four acts would not consist—could not consist!—in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, containing its own impetus and forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in an appropriate manner. It would require of the actors a free and responsible entering into the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could be appropriately drawn together and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with *both innovation and consistency*.²²

Innovation and consistency: this captures what it means to live in act 5. Consistency means that our lives will be shaped by the substance and trajectory of the story of Israel, Jesus, and the early church. We pore over those earlier acts to understand them well so we may live in consistency with the story’s essential narrative impetus, yet with innovation: faithfulness means living creatively and imaginatively in a new redemptive-historical era and in new cultural and historical situations into which God leads us.

The first reason it is important, therefore, to read the Bible as one story is that this is the way the Bible’s authority is known. If God’s word is to shape our lives, we must receive it and hear it as it really is—one story. Loss of narrative unity greatly truncates the Bible’s power and erodes its authority.

A second reason it is important to read the Bible as one story is that it enables us to understand our identity as God’s people as we see our role in the story. The Bible renders our identity as a missional identity, our role to participate in God’s redemptive mission. Chris Wright offers a biblical hermeneutics that “sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God’s people) as a framework in which we can read the whole Bible. Mission is a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture.”²³

The Bible tells the story of God’s mission to restore the entire fallen creation and the whole rebellious life of humankind to again live under God’s gracious

22. *Ibid.*, 140; italics mine.

23. C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 17.

rule. Israel is taken up into God's missional purpose. Against the backdrop of creation and human rebellion, God chooses Israel to bring redemptive blessing and reveal himself to the nations. From the beginning when God chooses Abraham, God does not reject the nations but chooses Abraham precisely for the sake of the nations (Gen 12:1–3). The culminating clause in Abraham's call is "that all the families of the earth shall be blessed."²⁴ When God meets Israel at Sinai (Exod 19:3–6) he summons them, in the words of John Durham, to be "a display-people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people."²⁵ To use the later language of Isaiah, Israel is to be a light to the nations. William Dumbrell captures the significance of this call for the rest of Old Testament history: "The history of Israel from this point on is in reality merely a commentary upon the degree of fidelity with which Israel adhered to this Sinai-given vocation."²⁶ The remainder of the Old Testament narrates how faithful Israel is to this call. When Israel fails, Jesus takes upon himself Israel's missionary vocation to bring salvation to all nations. He gathers and restores Israel to its missional calling in the world. To this newly gathered group he says, "'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'" (John 20:21). This nucleus of renewed Israel is to continue the mission of Jesus to the ends of the earth, gathering all nations into God's covenantal blessing. This time between the times is characterized by the mission of the church to the ends of the earth. In fact, to miss this is to misunderstand biblical eschatology fundamentally. Newbigin comments:

The meaning of this "overlap of the ages" in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is—so to say—held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.²⁷

Chris Wright summarizes the biblical narrative in this way: "The whole Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their

24. See William Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 55–72; Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 28–36; Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 185–207.

25. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 263. See further Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80–90; Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 36–41; Wells, *God's Holy People*, 27–57, 208–40.

26. Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80.

27. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, American ed. (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 153–54.

engagement with God's world for the sake of God's whole creation."²⁸ Thus, the mission of the people of God is "our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation."²⁹ Our identity as God's people comes from that missional role in the biblical story.

What is clear from this understanding of mission is that it is much more than evangelism or taking the gospel to other places. Mission is not just one more task of God's people, but it is our very identity: we are sent with the good news to embody in our lives, demonstrate with our deeds, and announce with our words God's end-time salvation. This defines the meaning of our entire lives. A biblical witness is a witness to God's rule over all of human life. As the contemporary testimony *Our World Belongs to God* eloquently puts it:

The Spirit thrusts God's people into worldwide mission.
He impels young and old, men and women,
to go next door and far away
into science and art, media and marketplace
with the good news of God's grace. . . .

Following the apostles, the church is sent—
sent with the gospel of the kingdom. . . .
In a world estranged from God,
where millions face confusing choices,
this mission is central to our being. . . .

The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world.
To follow this Lord is to serve him everywhere,
without fitting in,
as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling world.³⁰

Note the phrase, "this mission is central to our being." Yet the church in the West does not comprehend its missionary identity as it should. And we will not recover our missional identity unless, both in the church and in the academy, we recover Scripture as one story in which we are called to find our true place.

There is a final reason that reading the Bible as one story is urgent; it is the other side of what has just been said. Understanding our missional identity, our role to embody God's purpose for the world, will mean that we are not to "be

28. C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 51.

29. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

30. *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987). It can be accessed online at http://www.crcna.org/pages/our_world_main.cfm.

conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2). Paul here refers to human culture as it is shaped by idolatry. Faithfulness to our identity as God’s missional people means we may not be conformed to cultural idolatry. Understanding the Bible as one story will enable us to resist our idolatrous cultural story.

N. T. Wright, Newbigin, and Bauckham all make this point, albeit in different ways. Wright speaks of subversion: it is necessary to hold fast to the Bible as a grand story to subvert rival stories and visions of the world. I quoted Wright above to this effect: an essential part of our theological and missional task today is to “tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to subvert other ways of telling the story of the world.”³¹ In another article he illustrates what this means by showing how the biblical story subverts various competing narratives or views of the world in our day: paganism and neopaganism, philosophical idealism, the nonstoried world of postmodernity, all pagan and neopagan political power structures, and all rival eschatologies.³² So the only way to avoid being swept into another story is by challenging and subverting those rival stories by the biblical narrative.

While Wright speaks of subversion, Newbigin employs the notion of a missionary encounter. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Lesslie Newbigin was tireless in calling the Western church back to a missionary encounter with its culture. He believed that the Western church was in an “advanced case of syncretism.”³³ Over against syncretism Newbigin summoned the Western church to a missionary encounter. In contemporary Western culture there are “two quite different stories” told as the “real story” of the world: the humanist story and the story that is told in the Bible.³⁴ A missionary encounter is a clash of stories; it occurs when the church believes the Bible to be the true story of the world and embodies or “indwells” its comprehensive claims as a witness in the face of the dominant cultural narrative.³⁵ Newbigin charged that the reverse has taken place: the Western church has allowed the biblical story to be absorbed into the more comprehensive Enlightenment story. An essential ingredient in reversing syncretism is to recover Scripture as a true grand story: “I do not

31. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 132.

32. N. T. Wright, “The Bible for the Post Modern World,” Latimer Fellowship, Orange Memorial Lecture, 1999. This paper can be accessed in the “Articles” section at <http://www.biblicaltheology.ca>.

33. Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67; Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 23.

34. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2; Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 15.

35. Employing Michael Polanyi’s terminology, Newbigin speaks of “indwelling” the biblical story. For more, see his *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 33–38.

believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives—both personal and public.”³⁶ If the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits, it can easily be domesticated by the reigning story of culture.

Bauckham makes the same point in yet another way. He argues that the only way the church can keep from being co-opted into the “very powerful, late-modern grand narrative of consumerist individualism and free-market globalization”³⁷ is by countering that narrative with the biblical one.³⁸ The story of globalization is a tidal wave of homogenization that is sweeping away the diversity of the world. In spite of its rhetoric of freedom, it brooks no rivals. Bauckham believes that the story of economic globalization is a dangerous story because it is “surely blatantly guilty of impoverishing and vandalizing God’s world” on at least three fronts: it exacerbates and contributes to poverty, it ravishes the nonhuman environment, and it destroys traditional cultures.³⁹ Postmodernity exposes these metanarratives as totalizing projects of power and domination, and in place of their universalist pretensions opts for particularity, diversity, and relativism.⁴⁰ But postmodernism offers no cogent or effective resistance to the story of global capitalism precisely because postmodernity has no counterstory to withstand it. In fact, it is worse; postmodernism is complicit in the injustices of global capitalism, since its relativism is easily assimilated into the economic pragmatism necessary for the kind of individualist consumer culture that feeds economic globalization.⁴¹ In this global context Bauckham asks, “What do we really need in order to recognize and to resist this new metanarrative of globalization? Surely a story that counters the global dominance of the profit-motive and the culture of consumption with a powerful affirmation of universal values.”⁴² For Bauckham the only way forward for the Christian, the only effective resistance, is to affirm the metanarrative of Scripture over against economic globalization.

36. Lesslie Newbigin, “Response to Word of God?” *Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter* 10 (1991), 2.

37. Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” 46.

38. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 103–10; “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” 46–47.

39. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 94–96.

40. *Ibid.*, 7.

41. “It is hard to acquit much postmodern theory of unintentional or intentional collusion with this [global capitalistic] metanarrative. Postmodern relativism offers no cogent resistance to this metanarrative, which is not threatened by diversity so long as its overarching framework of alleged economic reality goes unchallenged.” Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” 46.

42. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 97.

But this can happen only if the Christian metanarrative does not become a tool of the forces of domination.⁴³ It may not be domesticated by and absorbed into the bigger global capitalist metanarrative. “If it [the church] is to remain faithful to its Lord, it dare not let itself be co-opted by other interests and become the ideology of any of the other forces at work in this world.”⁴⁴ This is possible only if the Bible is seen in its canonical unity as telling a grand story that is an alternative to the story of global capitalism.

Is the Bible an Oppressive Metanarrative?

At least two objections are made against reading the Bible as one story. The first is made by biblical scholars. They point to the tremendous diversity of Scripture that seems to belie any confession of unity.⁴⁵ While that legacy remains powerful today, it is the critique of postmodern critics that raises new problems about Scripture as a story: if the Bible is a grand story, it is necessarily oppressive, as are all metanarratives. This critique of metanarratives, associated in particular with Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault, arose as modern stories of progress began to unravel in the twentieth century. In the process, all grand narratives have come in for scathing critique. All metastories tend to be regarded with acute suspicion; all we can tolerate are small, local stories with no pretense to universal truth.

The primary criticism is that all metanarratives are “narratives of domination and oppression, dressing up the realities of exploitive power in claims to divine authorization and universal benefit.”⁴⁶ The universalization of one’s values is necessarily oppressive because it is a tidal wave of homogenization that sweeps away all local stories and eliminates freedom and diversity.⁴⁷ Moreover, metanarratives are often violent in enforcing their claims and exploiting others for their own benefit. While this critique has been made primarily of modern stories of progress, it has been extended to the biblical story as well. Can the Bible withstand such a critique? Can the Bible answer the charge of narrative imperialism in which “the church universalizes its own story, foists it on oth-

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, 112.

45. “In part because of specialization and the narrowing of horizons that it entails, much recent scholarship has tended to exaggerate biblical diversity.” Bauckham, “Scripture as a Coherent Story,” 43.

46. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 4–5.

47. This image of a tidal wave is from Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 53.

ers, subjects others to it, suppresses their own stories and deprives them of the opportunity to write their own stories?⁴⁸

Sadly, it cannot be denied that the biblical story has been misused in this way in our history. We have only to remind ourselves of the lamentable way Constantine reversed the meaning of the cross when he hoisted up a military standard with the Chi-Rho sign and conquered in the name of Christ after, according to legend, seeing a vision of the cross with the words “In this sign, conquer.” Or consider the way the eighth-century Frankish king Charlemagne “converted” and “baptized” the Saxons at the point of a sword. Or consider perhaps the seemingly more innocent way that well-meaning missionaries of the nineteenth century attempted to westernize the cultures to which they were sent. Yet acknowledging this regrettable history leaves open the question of whether or not oppression is intrinsically characteristic of the biblical narrative itself.

The first thing that may be said is that the Bible does not look for an intrahistorical victory. The Muslim story, the progress stories stemming from the Enlightenment, and the current story of economic globalization all arguably seek a victory for their cause within history. Yet the Christian looks to the return of Christ as the final victory. Newbigin has stated this well:

We can point to one feature of our story that is unique. All the other stories look to an end within history. They look to the intrahistorical triumph of their cause. They are therefore inherently imperialistic. The Church has sometimes acted in precisely that imperialistic way, but that is to betray her gospel. What is unique about the Christian story is that its crucial turning point is the event of Calvary and Easter, when we learn that triumph of God is an event beyond history that gives meaning to all history.⁴⁹

Focusing on the cross takes us to the heart of the issue. The cross reveals to us how God accomplishes his purposes for the world. Jesus’ witness to the kingdom of God was one of nonconformity: Jesus lived as a countertestimony to the idols of Rome and Israel. But when in the clash of stories his claim was resisted and oppressed, he did not coerce but meekly offered up his life as a witness to the truth. And it was in that suffering witness on the cross that the victory was gained—a victory confirmed by the resurrection that remains largely hidden until the final day.

48. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 89.

49. Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 204.

The cross casts its shadow over the church's mission as it moves toward God's universal triumph when Christ returns. Bauckham puts it well when he says that the cross is not only a critical test of the content of the church's witness but also a critical test of the form of the church's witness. As with Jesus, the church's witness will be a witness of nonconformity—a refusal to be co-opted into the death-dealing powers of the dominant story. Moreover, it will be a noncoercive and suffering witness as it faces opposition and rejection. The church announces and embodies the final victory of God, a victory that remains hidden until the final day. It is a witness of hope that God will finally reveal that triumph, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until then the church's witness will take the form of Jesus' witness, whose power was manifest in love, weakness, and suffering.

There is one more thing about that witness that answers the charge of the biblical story as an oppressive metanarrative. The gospel has moved from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and on through the Roman Empire to the remotest parts of the earth. As it has done so, it has taken on different cultural forms. Far from being a tidal wave that sweeps away diversity and particularity, the gospel enhances the best of cultural diversity, celebrating the splendor and treasures in all local stories.⁵⁰ The gospel stands only against the idolatry that befouls local cultural stories, refining and purifying everything in them that is commendable. Chris Wright puts it this way:

[The Bible] is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. . . . It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular cultural variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories.⁵¹

If the cross stands for suffering witness, and the resurrection for a hidden victory yet coming, it is Pentecost that signifies the cultural diversity of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

The question is not whether the whole of our lives will be shaped by some grand story. The only question is which grand story will shape our lives. For

50. According to Hendrikus Berkhof, Rev 21:24 indicates that "the cultural treasures of history" will be brought into the New Jerusalem. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 520, 539. See also Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1966), 188–92.

51. C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 47.

the one who has heard Jesus' call to follow him, the call comes with a summons to enter the story of which he was the climactic moment—the story narrated in the Bible. It is an invitation to find our place in that story.

The issue is urgent: only then can we submit to Scripture's authority; only then can we understand our missional identity; only then can we resist being absorbed into the dangerous idolatries of our time. The church needs pastors and leaders, and the academy needs scholars and teachers, who are in the grip of this story and who discharge their task in a way that calls church members and students to find their place in the true story of the world.



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