

## READING THE BIBLE AS ONE STORY

### *Human Life is Shaped by Some 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.<sup>1</sup> He imagines himself at a bus stop when a young man standing next to him says: ‘The name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus*.’ One understands the meaning of the sentence. But what on earth is he doing in saying it in the first place. This particular action can only be understood 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. 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 again he is 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.

Likewise 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?’<sup>2</sup> 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 human life. N. T. Wright says that ‘a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is*.’<sup>3</sup>

For those of us living in the West there are two stories that are on offer: the Biblical and the humanist. As Newbigin points out:

In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery of nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God’s election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. These are two different and incompatible stories.<sup>4</sup>

The humanist and Biblical stories are some degree irreconcilable; they tell two different stories. It will be evident that if the church is faithful there will be to some degree a clash of stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. (London: SPCK, 1992), 40. Italics added.

<sup>4</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 15-16.

## *The Bible Tells One Story*

The Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and humanity's fall into sin. As Wright has put it, the divine drama told in Scripture 'offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'<sup>5</sup>

When we speak of the biblical story as a narrative we are making an *ontological* claim. 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. It is in the language of postmodernity a 'metanarrative', or in the language of Hegel 'universal history.' Thus, the biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about a certain ethnic group or religion. It makes a *comprehensive* claim about the world: it is public truth. 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 must find a place in this story. Hans Frei makes this point when he quotes Auerbach's 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.'<sup>6</sup>

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

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.<sup>7</sup>

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—i.e. the humanist story—that shapes our lives.

## *The Bible as a Six Act Play*

In *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of the Bible* (Baker, 2004) Craig Bartholomew and I have attempted to tell the story of the Bible in six acts.<sup>8</sup> In Act One

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. *A Walk Through the Bible*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>8</sup> The website that accompanies [www.biblicaltheology.ca](http://www.biblicaltheology.ca) our book offers many resources to equip the church to read the Bible as one story.

God calls into being a marvellous creation. He creates human beings in his image to live in fellowship with him and to explore and care for the riches of his creation. In Act Two humanity refuses to live under the Creator's word, and chooses to seek life apart from Him. It results in disaster; the whole creation is brought into the train of human rebellion. In Act Three God chooses a people, Israel, to embody his creational and redemptive purposes for the world. Israel is formed into a people and placed on the land to shine as a light. They fail in their calling. Yet God promises through the prophets that Israel's failure will not derail His plan. In Act Four God sends Jesus. Jesus carries out Israel's calling as a faithful light to the world. But he does more: He defeats the power of sin at the cross, rises from the dead inaugurating the new creation, and pours out His Spirit that his people might taste of this coming salvation. Before he takes His position of authority over the creation he gathers his disciples together and tells them: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' Act Five tells us the story of the church's mission from Jerusalem to Rome in the first hundred or so years. But the story ends on an incomplete note. The story is to continue; the church's mission is to continue in and to all places until Jesus returns. We are invited into this story to witness to the comprehensive rule of God in Jesus coming at the goal of history. Act Six is a yet future act. Jesus will return and complete his restoration work.

This way of narrating the Biblical story shows our place in the story. In Act Five we live in a time when the kingdom of God is *already* here but *not yet* arrived. How can the kingdom be already here but not yet arrived? And what is the significance of 'already-not yet'?

First we have been given a foretaste of the kingdom. When the end comes we will enjoy the full banquet of the kingdom. In the meantime the church has been given a *foretaste*. A foretaste of the kingdom constitutes us as witnesses. The reason we have been offered a foretaste of the salvation of the end is so that we can witness to that salvation. Another illustration makes this clear. The people of God are like a movie preview or trailer. A movie trailer gives *actual footage* of the movie that is coming in the future *so that people will want to watch it*. The people of God are a kingdom preview. We embody the salvation of the kingdom which is coming in the future so that people will see it and want it. That is what the witness is all about. Our lives and words witness to the kingdom's presence and its future consummation. A biblical witness is a witness to God's rule over all of human life.

### *Heading Off Misunderstandings*

Saying that the Bible is one unfolding story could lead to misunderstandings. First by saying that the Bible is one unfolding story I am not saying that the Bible is a nice neat novel. In his discussion on the Bible as a metanarrative Richard Bauckham makes this point: '... 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 continues noting that major stretches of the main story are told more than once in divergent ways; there are a plurality of angles on the same subject matter (for example, the gospels). He points further to many ways in which there is a 'profusion and sheer untidiness of the narrative materials.' He concludes that all this 'makes any sort of *finality* in summarizing the biblical story inconceivable.'<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the Bible is not *only* a narrative document. There is much else in the Bible as well. While the Bible is essentially narrative in form it contains many other genres of literature—

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<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 92-93.

law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and so on. Yet, most basically, the Bible is a grand story and all other parts can be fitted into that narrative framework.

A third misunderstanding is tied up with the notion of story. In some approaches to narrative theology the notion of story enables the reader to ignore questions of historicity. Story may be only a linguistically constructed narrative by a religious community, and no more than that. Yet I use story to speak of an interpretation of history. It is important that these events really happened.

### *The Importance of Understanding the Bible as One Story*

The importance of understanding the Bible as one story can be seen by noting Newbigin's notion of a missionary encounter. A missionary encounter is the normal position the church assumes in its culture if it is faithful. It assumes two comprehensive yet incompatible stories. The Bible tells one story about the world and human life while another equally all-embracing story shapes our culture. Christian discipleship always takes cultural shape. So in the life of the Christian community there will be an encounter between two equally comprehensive stories. When the church really believes that its story is true and shapes their whole lives by it, the foundational idolatrous faith, assumed in the cultural story, will be challenged. Thus it offers a credible alternative; it calls for conversion. It is an invitation to see and live in the world in the light of another story. Our place in the story is to embody the end and invite others into that true story.

If the church is to be faithful to its missionary calling, it must recover the Bible as one true story: 'I do not 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.'<sup>10</sup> If the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits it can easily be absorbed into the reigning story of culture rather than challenging it. A fragmented Bible can lead to a church that is unfaithful, syncretistically accommodated to the idolatry of its cultural story, or in the words of Paul, a church 'conformed to the world' (Romans 12:2).

Much is at stake in reading the Bible as one story. Students who want to be faithful pastors or scholars would do well to master this story so that they might help others indwell it with them.

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<sup>10</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. 'Response to "Word of God?"', John Coventry SJ', *The Gospel and our Culture Newsletter* 8, 1991, 2.