

READING THE BIBLE . . . AND ARTICULATING A WORLDVIEW

The story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is—a normative claim, a public truth. But it needs to be understood as one single unfolding story; if reduced to a collection of moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits, it can easily be absorbed into the reigning story of culture instead of challenging it. Then, of course, the Christian's basic beliefs in the biblical story must form the blueprint through which s/he sees human existence and the cultural task. In other words, articulating a worldview is the natural

answering of life's most foundational questions. Here's how.

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by Michael Goheen

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Human life is shaped by some story

All of human life is shaped by some story. Alasdair MacIntyre offers an amusing story in [After Virtue](#) to show how particular events receive their meaning in the context of a story. 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.

It is likewise with our lives. In his [The Gospel in a Pluralist Society](#), Lesslie Newbigin writes in that "(t)he 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?" What 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 in that a story is "the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is*" ([The New Testament and the People of God](#)). 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.

The humanist and biblical stories are to some degree irreconcilable. They tell two different stories. If the church is faithful, to some degree there will be a clash of stories.

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 put it, the divine drama told in Scripture "offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth."

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. It is, in the language of postmodernism, 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 for all people and all of human life. 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. Therefore, it makes a comprehensive claim. Our stories, our reality must find a place in this story. Hans Frei makes this point in his [The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative](#) when he quotes Erich 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. And yet it is the case that often Christians do not see the Bible as one story. As Newbigin relates it in [A Walk Through the Bible](#), a Hindu scholar of the world's religions once said to him:

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.

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.

The Bible as a six-act play

In [The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of the Bible](#), Craig Bartholomew and I attempted to tell the story of the Bible in six acts. ([The website that accompanies our book](#) offers many resources to equip the church to read the Bible as one story). In Act One, 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 sets out on

the long road of redemption to renew the whole creation. He 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, He rises from the dead inaugurating the new creation, and He 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 one 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 future act, yet to unfold. 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. 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. . . . (32)*

*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 . . . (44)*

*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. (45)*

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 in [Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World](#): "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 notes that major stretches of the main story are told more than once in divergent ways. There is 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."

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 genre of literature: law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and others. Yet, at its core, 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-embrasive 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 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 to live in the world in the light of another story. Our place in the story is to embody the end and to 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 agree with Newbigin, who wrote in [The Gospel and our Culture Newsletter](#) 8 (1991):

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.

If the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits it can be easily absorbed into the reigning story of culture instead of 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](#)). So, much is at stake in reading the Bible as one story.

The need for articulating a worldview

Recognizing that the Bible is one story is not sufficient to bring the Bible to bear on public life in a formative way. An example from Oliver O'Donovan's highly creative work of political theology [The Desire of the Nations](#) is helpful. In this book, reading the Bible as a single narrative is fundamental. However, O'Donovan correctly points out that *sola narratione* is insufficient for Christian analysis. A grand story provides the most comprehensive context and meaning for human life. But something more specific is needed to provide more specific guidance for public life. We need to develop, says O'Donovan, concepts normed by Scripture in order to do analysis in the area of politics. O'Donovan is correctly looking for a way to bring the biblical story to bear on public life which avoids the problem of dualism, which sees no place for Scripture, and the problem of biblicism, which forces the Bible to answer contemporary questions it was never intended to answer. But it all hinges on what is meant by "concepts normed by Scripture."

I find helpful the model that elaborates the biblical story in terms of a worldview, and theoretically deepens that worldview in terms of a philosophy which is brought to bear on public life. This is not the place to develop this model. Yet some comments about worldview are appropriate.

It is instructive to look at the very reason the term "worldview" arose and has become so popular in evangelical circles. Key to this historical development was the threat the church perceived to its faith from its cultural story. The modern, scientific worldview, which came to maturity at the Enlightenment, was a coherent and comprehensive way of understanding the world that stood in opposition to the Christian faith. In response to this threat the church succumbed to modernity by reducing the comprehensive claims of the gospel and relegating its faith to a private or religious realm. Thus, the gospel did not speak to much of created reality. The confession, "Jesus is Lord," certainly did not reflect the comprehensive scope of His reign in a way faithful to the original gospel. The mission of the church was thus misunderstood and narrowed in keeping with an emaciated and reductionistic gospel. The term, "worldview," offered a way of speaking that expressed that the Christian faith is also a comprehensive and coherent way of understanding the whole world. The Gospel is good news that God's redeeming work is as broad as creation. This understanding of the Gospel offers a much more comprehensive understanding of the church's mission in the world. Indeed, it provides an impetus for *Christian* involvement in the public square.

Worldview articulates and develops the most basic, the most fundamental, most comprehensive beliefs of the biblical story.

It is important to clarify here the relationship between story and worldview. A story is the fundamental shape of a worldview. In his [The New Testament and the People of God](#), Wright calls this a "worldview-story" or a "controlling story." These worldview-stories "are the basic stuff of human existence, the lenses through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and, above all, it is the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are." Worldview-stories are "like the foundations of a house: vital, but invisible. They are that *through* which, not *at* which, a society or an individual normally looks; they form the grid according to which humans organize reality." These stories function at a presuppositional and precognitive level. Entailed in these stories are basic beliefs and answers to the deepest questions of human existence. Worldview articulation, then, may be the exposition of the fundamental beliefs or an explication of the answers to the most foundational questions of human life that are entailed in the story. Wright suggests that our basic beliefs are "shorthand forms of the stories which those who hold them are telling themselves and one another about the way the world is."

The biblical story has been condensed or elaborated in shorthand form in two ways. In the first, the most basic beliefs of the Bible's teaching on creation, fall, and redemption are explicated. This has been done marvellously well in Al Wolters' [Creation Regained](#). In this book Wolters

elaborates the biblical story in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. Another way to get at the same issues is to elaborate the biblical answers to life's most foundational questions, answers that shape the entirety of human life. This is the approach of Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton in [The Transforming Vision](#). The biblical narrative answers fundamental questions of human identity: the kind of world we live in, the problem with our world, and the remedy for that problem. Careful study of these two books, and others like them, provides several examples of the way the biblical worldview can help the church to be more faithful in its calling in the public square.

Worldview, thus, can equip the church for its missionary task in the public square by mediating between the Gospel and human life. Worldview plays this mediating or channelling function by unpacking the basic categories of the biblical story, clarifying their relationship, defending the gospel against error, and by providing light for the church's cultural task. (This has been elaborated in my inaugural address [The Power of the Gospel and the Renewal of Scholarship](#), 12-14). Seeing worldview as a mediating category enables us to struggle with the relevance of the biblical text to cultural life, yet to read the Bible with integrity. By articulating the Bible's teaching in a worldview, the Bible does not offer ready-made answers, but it provides the light by which answers can be

found. As [Stuart Fowler](#) put it in *The Place of the Bible in the School* (1975):

The place of the Bible in our task of studying the creation is not to give answers, but to guide us in our search for the answers, to be the light by whose illumination we will find the answers in the creation itself.