

# STORY AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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## 1. Introduction

*Grand* or *Meta* narrative is an unlikely item on an agenda for biblical studies today. In our ‘postmodern’ era we have we have learnt to adopt an attitude of ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’<sup>1</sup>, and within academic biblical studies we have been trained to emphasise diversity and to be suspicious of attempts to read the Bible as a (unified) whole. Despite these hostile forces our contention in this chapter is that there is much to be gained from the recovery of reading the Bible as a grand narrative. Not only do we think this possible - and thus wish to commend it as a major way of doing biblical theology – but we also think it important if Scripture is to function as God’s Word in the life of his people.

At our St. Andrews consultation on biblical theology and biblical interpretation we participated in a lively evening discussion about biblical theology and teaching the Bible. The starting point for discussion was an early draft of our *The Drama of Scripture*, a telling of the biblical story for first year undergraduate students<sup>2</sup>. We contend that if we really want to recover the authority of Scripture in our lives then we urgently need to recover the Bible as a grand story that tells us of God’s ways with the world from creation to re-creation, from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem. Only thus will we see our way clear to indwell God’s story and relate it to all of life today. Consequently our book attempts to tell the story in some 200 pages from Genesis to Revelation.

Needless to say this approach to biblical theology did not go uncontested at the consultation! Debate was vigorous. We therefore welcome the opportunity presented by this volume to explore in more detail our proposal and its critique. Our case proceeds as follows: Firstly we take note of the burgeoning interest in narrative in philosophy and theology. Flowing from this is a concern

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<sup>1</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*.

with reading the Bible as an overarching story coming from various branches of theology – systematic, practical, ethics and missiology - but sadly not from within biblical studies. In the context of the literary turn within biblical studies from the 1970s onwards, a considerable amount of fertile work has been done on the Bible and its stories<sup>3</sup>. With few exceptions, however, this has not been extended to the Bible as a whole. The impetus in that direction has generally come from outside of biblical studies. This is not to say that the category of ‘story’ has been completely neglected by biblical theology. Thus we explore James Barr’s recent comments in this respect and take note of earlier emphases on story in the history of biblical theology. From this we move on to Tom Wright’s work as the rare example of a major biblical scholar in whose work story, in the grand sense, is central. We conclude by trying to answer some of the major objections to our approach.

## **2. The Impetus towards Narrative from Philosophy and Theology**

Recent decades have seen a veritable explosion of interest in narrative, and this across a variety of disciplines. In philosophy Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and others have taken up the theme of narrative with vigour. Ricoeur explores the way in which narrative is foundational to the world and how humans live in it. There is, according to Ricoeur, an ‘incipient “configuring” or “emplotting” process that is the experiential foundation of the human capacity to write literature and history.’<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre attends to the way in which all human life and thought is traditioned and he is well known for his advocacy of the Aristotelian tradition for contemporary ethics. MacIntyre believes that our life decisions are shaped and ordered by our sense of how they fit within a larger story or tradition<sup>5</sup> and insists that, ‘I can only answer the question, “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question, “Of what story do I find myself a part?”’<sup>6</sup>

In theology narrative has been appropriated in a variety of ways. One can distinguish between the following emphases in this respect:

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<sup>3</sup> One of the best examples is Sternberg, *Poetics*.

<sup>4</sup> Stiver, *Philosophy*, 137.

<sup>5</sup> See *After Virtue*, chapt. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

1. An emphasis on Scripture as *the* story.
2. An understanding of the importance of *our* communal *story* for theology. All our lives are storied by virtue of the cultural contexts in which we live and theology needs to take this cultural, communal context seriously.
3. Each of our lives is individually a story and thus *personal narrative* has theological implications.

Stiver discerns three major theological schools that have developed, each of which majors on one of the above three aspects<sup>7</sup>. The Yale school (1), associated with Frei and Lindbeck, emphasises the narrative shape of Christianity as a particular religion and asserts that Christians should appropriate this narrative and its language and allow it to ‘absorb the world.’<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas has stressed in comparable ways the importance of narrative for theological ethics<sup>9</sup>. The Chicago school (2), associated with Ricoeur and Tracy, is less interested in the particularity of the Christian narrative than in the philosophical and cultural relevance of narrative. This moves in the direction of general hermeneutics and ways of correlating theology with contemporary culture. The California school (3), associated with McClendon attends to the relationship between theology and personal narrative, and thus develops the importance of biography and autobiography for theology today.

All three of these approaches have implications for narrative approaches to biblical theology. For our purposes the Yale school is of particular interest, with its concern with the overarching Christian narrative. An example of work in this tradition is that of Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*. Stroup is excited about the possibility that narrative holds for a recovery of the gospel in the church. In the process of exploring the possibilities of a narrative theology he pays considerable attention to narrative and the Bible. He recognizes the diversity of the Bible; much of it cannot be described as narrative<sup>10</sup>. Even those parts of the Bible that fit the genre of

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<sup>7</sup> *Philosophy*, chapt. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Frei quotes Auerbach’s striking contrast between Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Old Testament story: ‘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’ (Frei, *The Eclipse*, 3).

<sup>9</sup> See Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and Hauerwas and Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?*

<sup>10</sup> Stroup, *The Promise*, 80 and 136ff.

narrative differ in form, structure and function<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, ‘At the center of Scripture is a set of narratives and these narratives are the frame around which the whole of Scripture is constructed. Apart from these narratives the Prophets would not be intelligible and without the frame of the Gospel narratives it would be difficult to understand the full meaning of the parables, epistles, creeds, and hymns of the New Testament.’<sup>12</sup>

According to Stroup there are good reasons why narrative is such a primary genre in the Bible. At a philosophical and sociological level the identity of a community or person requires the interpretation of historical experience and narrative is the best genre for this. And since God’s action is central to Christian faith it is not surprising that much of the Bible takes the form of narrative. Stroup explores Deuteronomy and Mark in this respect. He notes that, ‘The Christian community gives expression to its identity by means of a narrative that begins, “A wandering Aramean was my father” ... culminates in the confession “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” ... and continues in the narrative history of the church through the ages as it witnesses to the coming kingdom of God.’<sup>13</sup>

Stroup makes an admirable attempt to take the Bible seriously in his narrative theology. His work thereby foregrounds the fecundity of narrative for theological interpretation of the Bible as well as its complexity. Narrative figures prominently in the Bible but, from Stroup’s perspective there is considerable diversity among biblical narratives, and there is much material that is not narrative. Indeed there seems to be something of a tension in this respect in Stroup’s work – on the one hand Scripture seems to range from the wandering Aramean to the Christ and thus to have something of an overall narrative shape, while on the other hand Stroup confines himself to individual narratives. Stroup’s work is thereby an impetus for closer examination of the Bible and narrative as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 146.

### 3. The Impetus toward Narrative from Practical Theology and Theological Ethics

This impulse toward narrative comes, not only from theology and philosophy, but also from various branches of practical theology – specifically pastoral theology, ethics, homiletics, and missiology. All of these disciplines are in one way or another concerned to bring the Bible to bear on the concrete life of the Christian community. The significance of understanding the Bible as one unfolding story emerges, it would appear, when the focus is on how the Bible shapes our lives.

Central to this interest in narrative among practical theologians is the recognition that human beings interpret and make sense of their world through a story. That is to speak of story, not in literary categories, but as the essential shape of a worldview. As a pastoral theologian Gerkin says: ‘All things human are in some way rooted in, or find their deepest structural framework in, a narrative or story of some kind.’<sup>14</sup> Hence Gerkin wants to establish the practice of pastoral care on the solid foundation of a unified Biblical narrative.

This sense in which practical theological thinking is grounded in narrative is, of course, rooted in the faith that *the Bible provides us with an overarching narrative in which all other narratives of the world are nested*. The Bible is the story of God. The story of the world is first and foremost the story of God’s activity in creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world to fulfill God’s purposes for it. The story of the world is the story of God’s promises for the world. It is also the story of the vicissitudes of God’s gracious effort to fulfill those promises.

Gerkin qualifies the statement above in terms of the plurality of the stories of God’s activity in the Bible that leads to tension between biblical themes. Nevertheless, he insists that ‘the stories of the Bible taken together disclose a way of seeing the world and human life in the world as always held within the “plot” of God’s intentional purposes and direction. Life in the world is life nested within that overarching narrative.’<sup>15</sup> It is this narrative context in which pastoral theology must take place.

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<sup>14</sup> Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Gerkin, *Ibid.*, 49.

Similarly Stanley Hauerwas wants to situate ethics in the context of the biblical story. The first task of ethics is not to articulate ethical standards but to ‘rightly envision the world’ so that our life as a Christian community is consistent with the world as it exists.<sup>16</sup> To rightly understand the world we must attend to the biblical story. For Hauerwas too, story is fundamentally a worldview category.

My contention is that the narrative character of Christian convictions is neither incidental nor accidental to Christian belief. There is no more fundamental way to talk of God than in a story. The fact that we come to know God through the recounting of the story of Israel and the life of Jesus is decisive for our truthful understanding of the kind of God we worship as well as the world in which we exist.<sup>17</sup>

Like Gerkin, Hauerwas recognises that this story is a complex story with many different subplots and digressions. Nonetheless it provides an overarching narrative that enables the Christian church to understand its ethical calling.

In homiletics Greidanus, Clowney, and Goldsworthy underscore the importance of the biblical story for preaching: ‘. . . biblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview of biblical revelation. . . . If we allow the Bible to tell its own story, we find a coherent and meaningful whole. . . . If God has given us a single picture of reality, albeit full of texture and variety, a picture spanning the ages, then our preaching must reflect the reality that is thus presented.’<sup>18</sup> The quest for the big picture is important for two reasons. The first is *hermeneutical*: one cannot properly interpret the text to be preached apart from the context of the biblical story. Clowney highlights two aspects of biblical theology – progression and continuity. This leads to two dimensions of Biblical interpretation. Since the Bible is *progressive* revelation it has an epochal structure. One must interpret the biblical text in light of the particular epoch, the ‘immediate theological horizon’ or ‘total setting of the revelation of that period.’<sup>19</sup> Of course the total setting is not only theological but also historical, cultural, literary, linguistic, and so on. Since the Bible is a progressive *unity* a second dimension is required: the preacher must interpret

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<sup>16</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Hauerwas, *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Goldsworthy, *Preaching*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Clowney, *Preaching*, 88.

the text in light of the whole biblical story.<sup>20</sup> Likewise Greidanus believes that the interpreter must see the message of the text not only in its immediate historical-cultural context but ‘also in its broadest possible context, that is, Scripture’s teaching regarding history as a whole.’ That is because ‘Scripture teaches one universal kingdom history that encompasses all of created reality: past, present, and future. . . . its vision of history extends backward all the way to the beginning of time and forward all the way to the last day. . . . the biblical vision of history spans time from the first creation to the new creation, encompassing all of created reality.’<sup>21</sup>

The second reason for stressing the whole story is *homiletical*: the preacher’s task is to call God’s people to live in the biblical story. Newbigin suggests that preaching must ‘challenge’ the cultural story with the Biblical story.<sup>22</sup> Preaching calls God’s people to indwell the Biblical story: ‘Preaching is the announcing of news, the telling of a narrative. In a society that has a different story to tell about itself, preaching has to be firmly and unapologetically rooted in the real story.’<sup>23</sup> Preaching in this way ‘can only happen when the Bible in its canonical wholeness recovers its place as scripture.’<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. The Impetus toward Narrative from Missiology: Missionary Encounter between Two Stories**

Within missiology Newbigin is known for emphasising the foundational importance of understanding the Bible as one story<sup>25</sup> for mission and missions.<sup>26</sup> His notion of a missionary encounter illustrates how much is at stake in this respect. For Newbigin, a missionary encounter

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<sup>20</sup> Clowney, *Preaching*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> Newbigin borrows the term ‘challenging relevance’ from Alfred Hogg. Preaching must be relevant to the hearers by entering into their cultural story and discourse. But it must also challenge that story (‘Missions’, 335-336).

<sup>23</sup> In another place Newbigin, *A Word*, 204-205, speaks of his personal Bible reading, but his words could as easily be applied to his understanding of preaching: ‘I more and more find the precious part of each day to be the thirty or forty minutes I spend each morning before breakfast with the Bible. All the rest of the day I am bombarded with the stories that the world is telling about itself. I am more and more skeptical about these stories. As I take time to immerse myself in the story that the Bible tells, my vision is cleared and I see things in another way. I see the day that lies ahead in its place in God’s story.’

<sup>24</sup> Newbigin, ‘Missions’, 336.

<sup>25</sup> For a comparable emphasis see Walker, *Telling the Story*.

<sup>26</sup> For Newbigin ‘mission’ is the sending of the whole church into the world to bear witness to the gospel in life, word, and deed. In other words, all of life is mission! ‘Missions’ is part of that mission, specifically to take the good news to places where it has not yet been heard.

is the normal posture of every church in its culture when it is faithful to the gospel.

All of human life is shaped by some story: ‘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>27</sup> The only question is which one? In contemporary western culture there are ‘two quite different stories’ on offer as the ‘real story’ of the world – the humanist story that flows from the classical philosophy of Greece and Rome, and the story that is told in the Bible.<sup>28</sup> These stories offer two ‘incompatible’ ways of viewing the world. The primary difference between them is the location of reliable truth. The biblical story locates truth in the story of God’s deeds and words in history, centred in Jesus Christ, while the classical humanist story finds truth in timeless ideas that can be accessed by human thought. In the West that missionary encounter takes place between the story of the Bible as it is embodied in the church and the cultural story of the West.<sup>29</sup>

For Newbigin both the biblical and the rationalist-humanist story have to do with *history*, an interpretation of what really happened. One story begins in our evolutionary past and sees history in terms of the progressive development of human mastery over nature by science and technology that leads to a world of freedom and material prosperity. The other story begins with the creation of the world and ends with its renewal, and leads through a narrow road marked by Israel, Jesus, and the church. God’s work in Israel and in the church, and especially in Jesus, offer a clue to the meaning of history. The Bible tells the story of the coming of God’s rule over the whole creation. These stories are not mere literature or linguistically constructed discourses. They interpret past history and look to the goal of history. Consequently these stories are claims to *universal* history.<sup>30</sup> They offer answers to the origin and destiny of the whole world, and offer a clue to the meaning of world history and human life within it. The Bible is universal history: it sets forth a story of the whole world from its beginning to its end. It is the true story of the world and all other stories are at best partial narratives, which must be understood within the context of the Biblical story. Newbigin was challenged to see the Bible as universal history by Chaturvedi

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<sup>27</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 2; *Gospel*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent discussion on this theme see Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, chapter 4. He speaks of witnessing to the Biblical metanarrative over against the dominant metanarrative of global capitalism.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Universal history’ is the term Newbigin most often uses to point to the comprehensive scope of the biblical story. For disadvantages in the use of the term ‘universal history’ see Buss, ‘The Meaning of History’, 135-154.

Badrinath, a Hindu scholar of world religions, who 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.<sup>31</sup>

As universal history these stories make absolute and totalitarian claims on our lives.<sup>32</sup> They claim to understand the world as it really is, and interpret the true meaning of history. Thus the way we understand all of human life depends on what we believe to be the true story of the world. While the origin and authority of the humanist story is encapsulated in the phrase 'I discovered', the Biblical story finds its origin and authority in 'God has spoken.'<sup>33</sup>

A missionary encounter occurs when the church believes the Bible to be the true story of the world, and embodies or 'indwells'<sup>34</sup> the comprehensive claims of that story as a countercultural community over against the dominant cultural story. Since both stories make comprehensive and absolute claims, only one story can be *the* basic and foundational story for life. Newbigin charges that the western church is 'an advanced case of syncretism' because it has allowed the Biblical story to be accommodated into the more comprehensive Enlightenment story.<sup>35</sup>

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>36</sup> If

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<sup>31</sup> Newbigin, *A Walk*, 4. See also Newbigin, *Gospel*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> In the words of Loughlin, *Telling*, 37, the biblical story is 'omnivorous': it seeks to overcome our reality.

<sup>33</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Employing Michael Polanyi's terminology, Newbigin speaks of 'indwelling' the Biblical story. For more see *Gospel*, 33-38.

<sup>35</sup> Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Newbigin, 'Response', 2.

the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits (historical-critical, devotional, systematic-theological, moral) it can easily be absorbed into the reigning story of culture. Newbigin's recognition of this, and thus his passion for the importance of seeing the Bible as one story, comes from his missionary experience. In India he saw how easy it was for the Bible to be absorbed into a more comprehensive and alien worldview. The Bible as one comprehensive story in contrast to the comprehensive worldview of Hinduism was a matter of life and death.

Part of Newbigin's call for a missionary encounter in the West was to challenge biblical scholars to equip the church by helping to recover the Bible as one story.<sup>37</sup> He believed that, while historical-critical scholarship had brought much insight into Scripture, it also had capitulated to the Enlightenment story as the controlling story. While it claimed to be objective and neutral, in fact much Biblical scholarship was 'a move from one confessional stance to another, a move from one creed to another.'<sup>38</sup> Or as he put it elsewhere: 'The Enlightenment did not (as it is sometimes supposed) simply free the scholar from the influence of 'dogma'; it replaced one dogma by another.' The power of the Enlightenment story is such that it is difficult to convince modern biblical scholars 'to recognize the creedal character of their approach.'<sup>39</sup>

It is apparent from the above that the impetus toward the recovery of the Bible as one story has been polyphonic – voices in philosophy, theology, ethics, and practical theology push us in this direction. Where is biblical studies in all of this?

## 5. Story and Biblical Theology

Story has a long history in biblical theology, and we cannot review it in detail here. In Craig Bartholomew's introduction he notes that Irenaeus worked with a narrative understanding of the

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<sup>37</sup> Newbigin's response was twofold. 1) He sought to stir up discussion among Biblical scholars. He approached George Caird, professor of the interpretation of holy Scripture at Oxford. Caird told him: 'You are asking for a total revolution in the way biblical scholars see their job.' Nevertheless this initiative led to a group of younger biblical scholars beginning to discuss these issues. See Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 249. 2) He wrote a number of papers himself challenging the unrecognized faith assumptions that shaped critical biblical scholarship.

<sup>38</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 80

<sup>39</sup> Newbigin, *The Role of the Bible in Our Church*, 1.

Bible as a whole<sup>40</sup>. The redemptive historical approach to the Bible, stemming from Calvin and exemplified in Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos,<sup>41</sup> also works with an understanding of the Bible as one unfolding story, although it precedes the contemporary stress on literature and narrative<sup>42</sup>.

In his *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, Barr devotes a chapter to ‘story’ in which he notes that from the 1960s onwards he and others and others stressed the importance of story as a category in Old Testament studies. Story in this context is deliberately set against *history*, partly as a reaction to the emphasis on the acts of God in the biblical theology movement (BTM). Story embraces material that is historical as well as that which includes myth and legend, and above all divine speech. Story focuses attention on the beginning, the progression and the culmination as more important than the historical realities behind the text. Barr notes that G. Ernest Wright and others in the BTM had already indicated the importance of story in biblical theology but he asserts that they made little of the actual story character of the Bible so that story functioned in their works more as an idea<sup>43</sup>.

Barr continues to see great value in approaching the Bible as story, as long as we don’t set this against historical criticism. ‘That the story is a totality and to be read as such would seem to agree with the ‘holistic’ emphasis of many literary and canonical tendencies of today. But the fact that it is a totality does not mean that it has to be swallowed whole, uncritically.’<sup>44</sup> Barr, as

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<sup>40</sup> Loughlin, *Telling*, xii, mentions Augustine, Aquinas and Hamann as important figures in this narrative tradition.

<sup>41</sup> There is a ‘redemptive-historical’ school that developed in the Netherlands from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached its zenith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century between the world wars. This tradition is not broadly known but is rich in resources for biblical theology. It is a tradition that has had a formative influence on the authors of this article. We mention here only one more recent representative of this school, Herman Ridderbos. For a discussion of this redemptive-historical school in its historical development and its outworking in homiletics see Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*. A leader in this movement, B. Holwerda summarized this redemptive-historical approach in 1940s as follows: ‘The Bible does not contain many histories but *one* history—the one history of God’s constantly advancing revelation, the one history of God’s ever progressing redemptive work. And the various persons named in the Bible have all received their own peculiar place in this one history and have their peculiar meaning for this history. We must, therefore, try to understand all the accounts in their relation with each other, in their coherence with the centre of redemptive history, Jesus Christ’ (Holwerda, *Begonnen*, 80, translated and quoted by Greidanus, *Sola*, 41).

<sup>42</sup> See, for e.g., Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology; Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures; The Coming of the Kingdom; Paul: An Outline of His Theology*.

<sup>43</sup> It remains a relevant question as to the extent to which we can draw on the BTM in this respect today. See Bartholomew, ‘Introduction’ in this volume. For a relevant source of the BTM on story and biblical theology see Rhodes, *The Mighty Acts of God*.

<sup>44</sup> Barr, *Concept*, 352.

we will see below, defends taking the whole of the Bible as story. Making Genesis the starting point enables us to avoid past mistakes such as isolating the exodus from its broader narrative context. A story approach also connects with current understandings of communal and personal identity.

Childs is less positive towards story and biblical theology than Barr. He discusses narrative under literary approaches to biblical theology. His major concern with narrative is that, 'The threat lies in divorcing the Bible when seen as literature from its theological reality to which scripture bears witness.'<sup>45</sup> Barr, by comparison, finds a story approach to the Bible helpful theologically in that it alerts us to the Bible as the raw data of theological reflection. We will explore Childs' objection below. We find Barr's positive approach to story and biblical theology helpful, even if we disagree with him on the relation of the story to history. We agree with Barr that story is one way of doing biblical theology, and, like him, while we have no desire to rule out other approaches we think this approach holds real potential for biblical theology. In our view there is room for a whole smorgasbord of ways of doing biblical theology, although we suspect that the narrative shape of Scripture is fundamental and will need to be taken into account by all readings, even if it is not their central concern.

The fact remains, however, that there is little sign of this sort of biblical theology being written. For all the insights of older story approaches to biblical theology, things have moved on since then, and there would appear to be considerable scope for new work in this area if, as Barr asserts, story has a lot to offer biblical theology, not least in approaching the Bible as a whole. What would such an approach look like today?

## **6. Wright and the Recovery of Story in Biblical Studies**

N. T. Wright is a biblical scholar who believes there is much at stake in recognising the Bible as one story. In fact, the theological authority of the biblical story is tied up with its overarching

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<sup>45</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 723.

narrative form. He offers a rich metaphor to explicate this authority.<sup>46</sup> Imagine that a Shakespearian play is discovered for the first time but most of the fifth act is missing. The decision to stage the play is made. The first four acts and the remnant of the fifth act are given to well-trained and experienced Shakespearian actors who immerse themselves both in the first part of the play and in the culture and time of Shakespeare. They are told to work out the concluding fifth act for themselves.

This conclusion must be both consistent and innovative. It must be consistent with the first part of the play. The actors must immerse themselves in full sympathy in the unfinished drama. The first four acts would contain its own cumulative forward movement that would demand that the play be concluded in a way consistent and fitting with that impetus. Yet an appropriate conclusion would not mean a simple repetition or imitation of the earlier acts. The actors would carry forward the logic of the play in a creative improvisation. Such an improvisation would be an authentic conclusion if it were coherent with the earlier acts.

This metaphor provides a specific analogy for how the biblical story might function authoritatively to shape the life of the believing community. Wright sees the biblical story as consisting of four acts – creation, fall, Israel, Jesus – plus the first scene of the fifth act that narrates the beginning of the church’s mission. Furthermore this fifth act offers hints at how the play is to end. Thus the church’s life is lived out consistent with the forward impetus of the first acts and moving toward and anticipating the intended conclusion. The first scene of act five, the church’s story, begins to draw out and implement the significance of the first four acts, especially act four. The church continues today to do the same in fresh and creative ways in new cultural situations. This requires a patient examination and thorough immersion in what act four is all about, how act four is to be understood in light of acts one through three, and how the first scene of act five faithfully carries forward act four.

This divine drama, told in Scripture, ‘offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is

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<sup>46</sup> Wright, ‘How Can’ and *The New Testament*, 139-143.

public truth.<sup>47</sup> Thus it is to be normative: it is to function as the controlling story<sup>48</sup> for the whole life of the Christian community. The Biblical narrative is an authoritative worldview. A worldview expresses the deepest and most basic (yet often unconscious) beliefs through which human beings perceive reality. Worldviews operate at a presuppositional and precognitive level, and have to do with the ultimate concerns that grip people's lives. Worldviews function as a lens through which the whole world is seen, as a blueprint that gives direction for life, as a grid according to which a people organize reality, and as a foundation which, though invisible, is vital in giving stability and structure to human life. The Biblical and Western worldviews come in the shape of a grand story, a 'worldview-story.'<sup>49</sup> Some worldview-story will shape the life of a community. A culture is a community whose praxis and life is shaped by a controlling story. In the West, the Enlightenment and now its postmodern counterpart offer a public and comprehensive story that shapes Western culture.<sup>50</sup>

Both the Biblical and the Western worldview-stories claim to be public truth. The Christian community—including Biblical scholarship—is faced with a clash of stories: since both are comprehensive and claim the whole of one's life, loyalty can be given to only one grand story. Wright is concerned that Biblical scholarship often does not carry out its work under the authority of the controlling story of Scripture. Rather the Enlightenment, modernist, Western worldview-story is the lens through which many scholars view the Bible.

When this happens Biblical scholarship becomes reductionistic: Scripture is reduced to only a literary or historical phenomenon. One passes beyond these reductionist readings of Scripture,

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<sup>47</sup> Wright, *The New Testament*, 41-42.

<sup>48</sup> Wright speaks of the Biblical narrative as a 'controlling story' (*The New Testament*, 42). His use is similar to Wolterstorff's notion of 'control beliefs' (*Reason*, chapter 1). Wolterstorff speaks in the context of scholarship. Control beliefs are those fundamental beliefs which function foundationally to guide our theoretical work. For Wright a 'controlling story' is that foundational story that gives shape and meaning to our lives.

<sup>49</sup> Wright's term, *The New Testament*, 135. He uses this term to set off story as a comprehensive worldview from the various stories that express that worldview. The communal nature and narrative structure is important for Wright's understanding of worldview. This can be seen in what he does with Walsh and Middleton's four worldview questions. According to Walsh and Middleton all worldviews provide answers to four foundational questions: Who am I?, Where am I?, What is wrong?, and What is the solution? (*Transforming Vision*, 35). Wright turns these questions into the plural to indicate the communal nature of our worldviews. In *Jesus* he highlights the importance of story when he suggests a fifth question: 'What time is it?' He explains: 'Since writing *The New Testament and the People of God* I have realized that "what time is it?" needs adding to the four questions I started with ... Without it, the structure collapses into timelessness which characterizes some non-Judaeo-Christian worldviews' (*Jesus*, 443).

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *The New Testament*, 139.

Wright believes, by taking into account the worldview-story of both the original writers and readers of the New Testament, and the worldview-story of contemporary readers and interpreters. It is the worldview of the original writers that gives meaning to the events they narrate. Historical study is always a matter of event and interpretation, the outside-happenedness and inside-meaning of an event. The earliest writers of the New Testament believed they were narrating actual events that possessed ultimate significance because God was acting in a climactic way in history. But the Biblical authors and readers are not the only ones with a worldview: when the modern reader comes to the Bible, he or she does not come as a neutral and objective observer but also with a particular worldview lens.

A worldview-story is public and comprehensive: it offers a lens through which to view everything else including what adherents of other worldviews are ‘really’ up to. Biblical scholars, who may be unaware of their Western worldview lens,<sup>51</sup> or who have consciously embraced the Enlightenment vision as normative, look at the Biblical texts and offer an account of what the Biblical authors were ‘really’ up to. The Biblical authors believed that God was acting in the historical events they proclaimed. One must either believe those claims or reject them on the basis of other beliefs embodied in another story. If that story is the Enlightenment story, theological claims do not stand up well, and so they are dismissed. But to accept the authority of the Western story, and dismiss the theological claims of the original writers would be to abandon the comprehensive and public claim of the biblical story. Enlightenment modernism then subsumes Christianity within it and makes the biblical story one more private religious option.<sup>52</sup>

It is possible, though, to work the other way round: to embrace the biblical story as the true and comprehensive story, and to understand Enlightenment modernism and its postmodern reaction

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<sup>51</sup> A Chinese proverb highlights the difficulty in seeing one’s own cultural story and assumptions: ‘If you want to know about water don’t ask a fish.’ Newbiggin speaks of his experience prior to India before the ‘immense power and rationality of the Vedantin’s vision of reality’ enabled him to understand the formative power of Western culture on him: ‘My confession of Jesus as Lord is conditioned by the culture of which I am a part. It is expressed in the language of the myth within which I live. Initially I am not aware of this as a myth. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply ‘how things are’ . . . No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are’ (Newbiggin, *Christ and Cultures*, 3).

<sup>52</sup> Wright, *Ibid.*, 137.

from within it. Then the Biblical story becomes the controlling story for Biblical scholarship. This is how Wright wants to proceed. The task of biblical interpretation, then, will not be a matter of ‘purely literary’ or ‘purely historical’ study, divorced from worldview and theology. Rather it will be ‘possible to join together the three enterprises of literary, historical and theological study of the New Testament and to do so in particular by the use of the category of “story.”’<sup>53</sup>

Theological interpretation will be as important as the literary or historical. Theology is concerned with claims about God embodied in a worldview – whether there is a God, his relation to the world, and whether or not he is acting to set the world right.<sup>54</sup> The theological beliefs of the Biblical authors and its modern interpreters will be essential to Biblical scholarship: ‘. . . ‘theology’ highlights what we might call the god-dimension of a worldview. . . . As such it is a non-negotiable part of the study of literature and history, and hence of New Testament studies.’<sup>55</sup>

The recovery of the Bible as one controlling story is important for Wright because that story provides the true worldview context for Biblical scholarship, allowing all dimensions of the Biblical text—theological, literary, and historical—to find full expression.

An important part of the recovery of the Bible as one story will be the work of Christian theology. For Wright, Christian theology is not the abstract arrangement of timeless truths or propositions in some overarching system. Rather it is occupied with articulating the Biblical story. Christian theology claims to be telling the true story about the Creator and his world; it tell us what God is doing in history to restore his creation.<sup>56</sup> So Wright is interested in ‘working in line with some recent studies in narrative theology.’<sup>57</sup> Narrative theology or telling the story will be a necessary part of the church’s task as they live in ‘act five’ of the Biblical story: ‘the

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<sup>53</sup> Wright, *The New Testament*, 139.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>55</sup> Wright, *Ibid.*, 130-131.

<sup>56</sup> For Wright’s summary of the biblical story see, *The New Testament*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> Wright also wants to distance himself from a narrative theological approach that doesn’t take history seriously. He says: “Unlike most ‘narrative theology’, however, I shall attempt to integrate this approach with a historical focus. And this combined approach grows out of the analysis offered above of worldviews and how they work” (*The New Testament and the People of God*, 132).

retelling of the story of the previous acts, as part of the required improvisation, is a necessary part of the task all through.<sup>58</sup> Israel retold the story of creation and sin. Jesus retold the story of Israel in his parables. The gospel writers retold the story of Jesus. ‘This may suggest, from a new angle, that the task of history, including historical theology and theological history, is itself mandated upon the followers of Jesus from within the biblical story itself.’<sup>59</sup>

A narrative biblical theology can play a role in making the church—including Biblical scholars—aware of the grand story that ought to be shaping their whole lives. However, this approach is not popular among biblical scholars because of a number of criticisms that have been levelled against it.

## **7. Arguments against reading the Bible as a grand story.**

It will be obvious from the above that we believe there are compelling reasons for a narrative biblical theology. However, we are well aware that few biblical scholars agree or work in this way. In this final section we attempt to answer some of the major objections to our approach.

*a. There is a variety of genres and theologies in Scripture and they simply cannot be contained within the single genre ‘story’.*

While biblical scholars nowadays recognise the value of a narrative approach to the many stories in the Bible, most are still opposed to treating the whole Bible as a large story. After all, they say, Scripture contains a variety of genres such as wisdom, law and prophecy, which simply are not narrative, and a variety of theologies. Furthermore even the narratives in Scripture exhibit diversity – there are stories like Jonah and fourfold repetitions of the Jesus story like the gospels. How can all of these possibly form a single unfolding story?

This is an important argument because it is vital that any viable biblical theology do justice to the diversity of material in Scripture, both in terms of genre and theological interests, and not force a

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<sup>58</sup> Wright, *The New Testament*, 142.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *Ibid*, 142.

false uniformity upon the Bible. However, we do not think that a narrative reading of the Bible imposes a false unity on the Bible, provided one has an appropriate understanding of narrative and provided one takes note of the narrative contexts of non-narrative biblical writings.

We like Peterson's description of the Bible as 'a sprawling capacious narrative,'<sup>60</sup> because it resists a simplistic understanding of the Bible as a story.<sup>61</sup> Clearly the Bible is not a single volume, closely knit story. It consists of 66 books, each with its own history. Nevertheless an understanding of narrative like that of Peterson leaves ample room for reading this collection of books as a single story from creation to re-creation. Thus, Loughlin, for example, draws on the 'narrative mechanics' of Gérard Genette to explain how the four Gospels can fit within a narrative approach to the Bible. Central to Genette's approach is a distinction between the narrative account and the story of what actually transpired.<sup>62</sup> The difference between the order in which events occur in the story compared with the narrative Genette calls *anachrony*, and he proposes a trajectory of anachrony from full agreement between story and narrative to radical discordance. Genette calls the tendency for narrative to go back in time *analepsis* and suggests that the fourfold repetition of the Gospels can be understood as an example of repeating *analepsis*<sup>63</sup>. According to Loughlin:

The story is not given apart from its telling in narrative, but the narrative is not the same as the story. The order of the narrative can be different from that of the story; the narrative's duration is nearly always different from the story's duration; the narrative can tell many times what happened only once, and tell once what happened many times; and the distance between narrative and story can differ greatly, as also the instant of telling. Given these differences between story and narrative, we can see how the Bible can tell one story in various different ways. It does not narrate every part of the story – there are ellipses, as

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<sup>60</sup> 'Living into God's Story.' This article originally appeared on the website 'The Ooze: Conversation for a Journey' ([www.theooze.com](http://www.theooze.com)). It can be accessed at

<http://www.churchcrossing.com/articles.cfm?fuseaction=articledetail&122>

<sup>61</sup> After speaking of the importance of understanding the Bible as a non-modern metanarrative, Bauckham comments: '... 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' *Bible and Mission*, 92.

<sup>62</sup> See the distinction between history and history writing in Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 82-94.

<sup>63</sup> Repetition is, of course, a great characteristic of literature. See Sternberg, *Poetics*. It should also be noted that literature slows down at key points in the plot. In the biblical story there can hardly be a more important point than the Christ event – this is another way of accounting for the fourfold Gospel.

well as pauses; while other parts are told repeatedly, and from different instants of narration.<sup>64</sup>

Loughlin's account demonstrates well how contemporary theories of narrative provide adequate room for reading the Bible as a single story. But what of the variety of genres in the Bible such as law, prophecy and wisdom. It is quite correct that these are different genres to that of narrative, but in our opinion these writings in the Bible cannot be understood apart from the underlying narrative context<sup>65</sup>. All biblical law is embedded in a narrative context, as the Ten Commandments clearly demonstrate. They must be read in the context of 'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt ...' Of course, biblical law has a long history and reached the form in which we have it after considerable development, but nevertheless in its canonical form it is positioned in relation to the law given by Moses at Sinai – this is its narrative context in Scripture. Similarly with the prophets – the prophetic books are invariably linked into the story of Israel, indeed they cannot be understood apart from such links whatever we make of the development underlying the final form as we have it. The Old Testament wisdom books are also linked closely into Israel's story, most particularly through association with Solomon and the God of Israel, who is the creator God. The Psalms undoubtedly grew into its present form over a long period of time. Nevertheless in its final form it is associated especially with David and serves as a carefully edited volume to teach God's people how to respond to him through all the challenges of life.

We do not for a moment deny the value of a healthy historical criticism in reading the Bible.<sup>66</sup> However, we do wish to privilege the final form of Scripture as we have it, and we maintain that in this final form all the books, in one way or another are closely connected to God's unfolding story. As Newbigin says, '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.'<sup>67</sup> In this respect we find James Barr's comments very helpful:

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<sup>64</sup> Loughlin, *Telling*, 62.

<sup>65</sup> Loughlin, *Ibid.*, 62, suggest we think of law, proverbs, psalms and songs as narrative 'pauses.'

<sup>66</sup> See the relevant essays in Bartholomew, *Behind the Text?* As Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 29, says, 'The critical question here is, 'What *kind* of historical-critical method is applied to the Bible?'

<sup>67</sup> *Open Secret*, 81.

But 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, and this is done in the Hebrew Bible. Thus legal materials are inserted and appear, almost entirely, as part of the Moses story. In this case they are incorporated into the narrative. Others are more loosely attached: songs and hymns of the temple and of individuals, mostly collected in the Book of Psalms but some slotted into the narratives as in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. It does not matter much what weight we place on the ‘Solomonic’ authorship of Wisdom books: whether because they came from Solomon, or because they were general lore of Israel, they are part of the story also.

In the New Testament the letters of great leaders, and an apocalyptic book like Revelation, form part of the story, along with the more strictly narrative writings. Thus in general, 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.<sup>68</sup>

For these reasons then, we do not think that the variety of genres in the Bible militates against reading it as a grand story. Just as in Job the polyphonic voices contribute to the whole, so the diverse genres contribute to the unfolding of this sprawling and capacious story of God’s dealing with the world and his people, culminating in the new heavens and earth.

The issue of conflicting theologies in the Bible is a harder issue to deal with, and we can only make some initial comments here. For many biblical scholars it is perfectly obvious that the Bible is full of diverse and conflicting theologies and worldviews, often even within a single book<sup>69</sup>, whereas for most believers the Bible as a whole represents a unified perspective on reality<sup>70</sup>. Reading the Bible as a sprawling, capacious story helps us to an extent with this because it alerts us to the subtle unity of the whole and allows for considerable diversity among the sub-plots of the

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<sup>68</sup> Barr, *Concept*, 356.

<sup>69</sup> Davies, ‘Ethics,’ is a good example.

<sup>70</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, and Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, are helpful sources in beginning to tackle this issue.

plot. Different parts of the story come from and relate to different times and address different audiences and contexts. There is development in the story and so climax and dénouement occur at certain points which illuminate what comes before and cast it in a new light, and so on and so forth. Thus, for example, the fact that Old Testament wisdom literature does not articulate a strong eschatology does not, in our opinion, mean that it expresses a theology in contradiction to the historical books and Paul's epistles. Rather, with its limited focus on the order in creation and theodicy it contributes to the overarching story and biblical theology. In many ways the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and we suggest that a story approach to the Bible may yield a surprising sense of the coherence within which there is considerable movement and diversity.

b. *Reading the Bible as a story undermines its reference to God and what he has done in and through Jesus Christ.*

Brevard Childs levels this criticism against narrative approaches to biblical theology. In his *Biblical Theology* Childs includes narrative theology under 'Literary Approaches to Biblical Theology.'<sup>71</sup> Referring to Barr and Frei, he says that 'initially the appeal to the subject matter of the Bible as 'story' served to shift the focus away from the perplexing problems of historical referentiality . . .'<sup>72</sup> Later he criticises this narrative approach because it also sidesteps theological issues: 'many modern "narrative theologies" seek to avoid all dogmatic issues in the study of the Bible and seek 'to render reality' only by means of retelling the story.'<sup>73</sup> The problem can be seen, notes Childs, by the fact that liberals and conservatives agree on the centrality of narrative, but disagree on the nature of the Biblical story. Again he notes that 'it has become increasingly evident that narrative theology, as often practised can also propagate a fully secular, non-theological reading of the Bible. The threat lies in divorcing the Bible when seen as literature from its theological reality to which scripture bears witness.'<sup>74</sup>

We share Childs' concern with this sort of literary approach to the Bible<sup>75</sup>. Today the tendency is

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<sup>71</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 723.

<sup>75</sup> See in this respect George Steiner's devastating review of Alter and Kermode's *Literary Guide to the Bible*.

indeed to understand story and narrative in primarily literary terms. James Barr notes a shift in the paradigm of Biblical theology that moves from ‘revelation in history’ as the primary category to a ‘literary mode of reading.’<sup>76</sup> Story is then qualified in a literary way: narrative is a literary structure that creates a symbolic world. Or to put it another way, story is qualified in a linguistic way: the Bible offers a merely linguistically constructed narrative world. In this paradigm the historical and theological dimensions of the Biblical story are muted at best.

However, we do not think that attending to the narrative, literary dimension of the Bible of necessity take one in this direction. The Bible *is* literature, but also history and theology and a vital element in any literary approach to the Bible is how one relates the literary aspect to these other two, as Tom Wright, Sternberg and Thiselton indicate<sup>77</sup>. In our opinion a healthy story approach to the Bible opens up its theological witness to God in a powerful way because it does justice to the books in which God has revealed himself to us<sup>78</sup>. Through God’s story the true nature of the world and its creator and redeemer are shown to us and we are invited to participate in that story. In other words we wish to assert a narrative realism in terms of the relationship between *this* story and our world and its creator.

The underlying issue here, we suspect, is the relationship between the biblical story and our view of the world. In this respect it should be noted that we position ourselves somewhere between the Yale school and the Chicago school. We endorse the Yale school’s emphasis on the particularity of the Christian story and of our need to indwell that story and allow it to absorb the world rather than vice versa. However, we share with the Chicago school an interest in the relationship between the Christian story and the nature of the world and its ontology. Indeed we think that we know from Scripture *and* experience that the world and human life have a narrative shape that fits with the biblical story. Thus the shape of the Bible as story is perfectly designed to get us in touch with the true nature of reality.

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<sup>76</sup> Barr, *Concepts*, 351.

<sup>77</sup> Wright, *The New Testament*, Sternberg, *Poetics* and Thiselton, ‘Models.’

<sup>78</sup> Seeing the Bible as story challenges the reductionism that takes place so that ‘When the Epic of God is “pinned down and classified like a butterfly in a collector’s case” (JB Metz), the narrative quality of faith is dissolved into propositionalism.’ Fackre, ‘Narrative,’ 199.

It may also be important to note that it is unhelpful to think of ‘story’ as merely a *literary* category. Narrative is fundamental to history writing and, we suggest, to doctrine and theology. From our perspective story provides a way of approaching the Bible, which facilitates an integration of all three of these aspects of the Bible<sup>79</sup>.

In terms of the Bible as a grand story and theology, we should also draw attention to some of the insights that developed in our earlier dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan in *A Royal Priesthood*. A narrative, biblical theological type of reading of the Bible is fundamental to O’Donovan’s highly creative political theology in his *The Desire of the Nations*<sup>80</sup>. However, O’Donovan rightly points out that *sola narratione* is insufficient for theological analysis. We need to develop theological concepts normed by Scripture in order to do theological analysis. O’Donovan’s work is an excellent example of how reading the Bible in relation to its narrative shape may lead one to the theological realities it deals with rather than away from them.

*c. Reading the Bible as a story undermines the critical question of historical reference.*

For Barr the attraction of ‘story’ is that it sidesteps the issue of historical reference and enables us to proceed with an approach to the Bible as a whole<sup>81</sup>. Many scholars have similarly found a literary approach to the Bible refreshing in that it enables one to get on with creative readings of the Bible without always getting bogged down in speculative analyses of that which lies behind the Bible<sup>82</sup>. For others this very sidestepping is what is so disconcerting since there is much at stake theologically in God having acted *in history*. The issue of the Bible and historical reference is exceedingly complex at points and we cannot deal with it adequately here<sup>83</sup>. Some proponents of a narrative approach to the Bible are content to leave the issue of historical reference to one side. While we welcome their work on the Bible as a story, we ourselves think that the issue of historical reference remains important.

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<sup>79</sup> See our discussion of Wright above.

<sup>80</sup> See Bartholomew, Introduction.’ (2002)

<sup>81</sup> Sidestep but not ignore! – for Barr historical questions remain crucial.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. Ellingsen, *Integrity of Biblical Narrative*, who asserts that we should get on with preaching the biblical stories with the same flare and imagination with which they were written without insisting that they must have happened.

<sup>83</sup> Readers should consult Volume 4 of the SAHS, ‘*Behind’ the Text* in this respect.

Newbigin argues strongly for the importance of historical reference: ‘the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history’ and ‘it is of the very essence of the matter that the events and places which you read in your Bible are part of the real world and the real history—the same world in which you live . . .’<sup>84</sup> What is at stake, Newbigin asks, in defending the events of the Biblical story as something which really happened in history? His answer offers a highly nuanced discussion that cannot be reproduced here<sup>85</sup>, but at the heart of his argument is the contention that we can only understand our own lives as they are interwoven into the larger story of humankind. This story forms one single fabric of interconnected events. Is there meaning in that story? The Bible’s answer is that the meaning of history as a whole is given in certain events, which are also an inextricable part of that history.<sup>86</sup> Those events form a narrative continuity beginning in Israel running through Jesus and the church. In those particular events in Israel and the church, but especially in Jesus—in that historical story—God reveals the meaning and purpose of the human story as a whole. It is essential that those events, which give meaning to the whole, form a part of the history and world in which we live.<sup>87</sup> Our story is part of a story being enacted by God’s providential control and redemptive action in history. These events do not illustrate the truth about the world; rather in those events we find the truth about the world: ‘The Bible does not tell stories that illustrate something true apart from the story. The Bible tells a story that is *the* story, the story of which our human life is a part. It is not that stories are part of human life, but that human life is part of a story.’<sup>88</sup>

We agree with Fackre, Avery Dulles and many others who insist that if the biblical story is true then it requires ‘a reality that corresponds to it.’<sup>89</sup> This inclines us towards a maximalist

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<sup>84</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel*, 66,68.

<sup>85</sup> Newbigin, *Ibid.*, 66-79; *Open Secret*, 81-90.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Within the Christian tradition the Bible is received as the testimony to those events in which God has disclosed (“revealed”) the shape of the story as a whole, because in Jesus the beginning and the end of the story, the alpha and omega, are revealed, made known, disclosed.’ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 85.

<sup>87</sup> ‘The biblical story is not a separate story: it is part of the unbroken fabric of world history. The Christian faith is that this is the place in the whole fabric where its pattern has been disclosed, even though the weaving is not yet finished’ (Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 88).

<sup>88</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 82.

<sup>89</sup> Fackre, ‘Narrative Theology,’ 197.

understanding of the historicity of the Bible but it does *not* close down for us the thorny issues of *how* the Bible reached its present form in relation to the events that underlie the Biblical text<sup>90</sup>. Old Testament legal texts, to take one example, evidence a complex history and any approach to the Bible as a true story must take full account of this textual history.

Whichever view one takes in relation to the biblical story and history, it is important to note that reflection on the historicity of the biblical story needs to *first* wrestle seriously with the shape of that story. This is precisely what has *not* been done in biblical studies. Biblical scholars have too often leapt to diachronic analysis or questions of historicity without first attending closely to the shape of the texts in front of them. As the literary turn has pushed us to attend to the shape of the biblical texts in their final form we find inevitably that the historical questions look quite different in the light of synchronic analysis of the texts. Similarly we suggest that detailed attention to the Bible as a grand story should *precede* attention to the question of historical reference<sup>91</sup>.

*d. The Bible may well be able to be read as a grand narrative but it shares in this respect in the oppressive character basic to all metanarratives.*

‘Under’ historical criticism believing scholars had to struggle for some sense of the unity of Scripture<sup>92</sup>. Nowadays the battle has far more to do with ideology; even – perhaps especially - if the unity of the Bible as a story can be defended, the argument is that precisely as such a grand story it is deeply oppressive, as are all metanarratives. This critique of metanarratives, associated in particular with Lyotard and Foucault, has arisen as modernity began to unravel with the environmental crisis and the wars and holocaust in a century supposed to epitomise ‘progress.’ In

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<sup>90</sup> On the maximalist-minimalist distinction see Bartholomew, ‘Introduction,’ (2003) 5,6. For an example of a believing approach to these historical questions in relation to the ten commandments see Bartholomew, ‘Warranted,’ 75,76.

<sup>91</sup> This is what makes Sternberg’s comments about the historicity of the Hebrew Bible so interesting. See Sternberg, *Poetics*, 32-35. The typical strategy of biblical scholars in this respect is redolent of Lash’s, ‘When,’ 143, point that ‘In the self assured world of modernity, people seek to make sense of the Scriptures, instead of hoping, with the aid of the Scriptures, to make some sense of themselves.’ However, as Lash, ‘Performance,’ 42 says, ‘The performance of the New Testament enacts the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God.’

<sup>92</sup> See Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, for a sense of just how fragmenting historical criticism can be.

the process the grand narratives of science and progress have come in for scathing critique. In the process the pendulum has swung right across so that all grand stories tend to be regarded with acute suspicion; all we can tolerate are small, local stories.

Apart from the fact that the biblical story is a non-modern metanarrative, it remains questionable whether grand narratives can in fact be avoided. In our opinion ‘the postmodern’ suspicion of grand narrative – indeed its general neglect of narrative altogether – does not mean that it avoids taking a (grand) position on reality. It is possible that its rejection of grand story may conceal its own, coercive commitments. In our opinion grand narratives or worldviews<sup>93</sup> cannot be avoided – part of being human means indwelling and living out of some such basic narrative albeit unconsciously<sup>94</sup>. Unavoidably these narratives compete with each other and claim to tell the truth about the world in which we live, and undoubtedly some are much healthier than others. Thus, it is not a question of whether we indwell a grand narrative but of which one we indwell. Our contention is that the norm for the Christian story is the Bible, which itself has the shape of a grand story. Christian should therefore make every effort to allow their metanarratives to be normed by Scripture<sup>95</sup>.

Is the biblical story oppressive? This is a debate now developing in biblical studies, funded by the appropriation of post-colonial discourse, liberation theology, feminism, queer reading and so on. As Richard Bauckham rightly notes in his chapter in this volume on monotheism, once one has argued that monotheism is central to the whole Bible, one still has to attend to the ideological critique clamouring for attention. In our view it is vital to *first* attend to the shape of the biblical story as a whole before engaging ideological critique. Scripture is authoritative in its totality, and questions of ideology must be seen in the context of Scripture as a whole.

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<sup>93</sup> Perhaps the category of ‘worldview’ can help to express the foundational significance of the Biblical story. A worldview is the articulation of the most basic beliefs you have about the world, and through which you view everything else. Wolters offers the following definition of worldview: ‘a worldview is a framework of one’s basic belief about things.’ The Scripture offers a ‘*narrative* framework’ that offers a lens for understanding and a map for guiding us in the world. Story is foundationally a worldview category.

<sup>94</sup> In this respect see Wolters, *Creation Regained*.

<sup>95</sup> We recognize that in practice Christians will tell the biblical story in different ways. And we believe that all tellings of the Biblical story are contextual. For example, Kings tells the story differently during the exile than Chronicles after the exile. Their context determined their selection, arrangement, and interpretation. In this way different tellings can be mutually enriching. Our concern at this stage is to encourage Christians to get on with telling the story so that these differences can emerge and then enrichment and/or real debates can begin!

It is important to note that in the history of the church the biblical story has been used as an oppressive metanarrative. This has happened when the Bible was linked with coercive political and military power. However, this, in our opinion, is to betray the biblical story. The cross stands at the centre of the story and is the hermeneutical clue for the entire story. When one sees the cross as the central clue the Bible can again be seen as the liberating story we believe it to be. Newbigin argues that what makes any metanarrative inherently oppressive is that it looks to an intrahistorical triumph for its cause.<sup>96</sup> The biblical story is unique at just this point; it looks to an event, which points us to God's triumph beyond history. The cross points to the unique way in which the victory of God has been gained – through suffering and weakness and waiting for the final vindication of God at the end of history. Living in the Biblical story means following the same path, protecting a freedom that will allow a response to the gospel that is uncoerced.

## 8. Conclusion

Andrew Walker challenges us to face the fact that,

We are on the way to postmodernity, and already we are caught in an electronic field of blinding imagery and synthesized sounds. Where are our candles, smells and electric bells? Where are our images of light and shade, our music of splendour, our divine dramas, the sacred dance? We have a story but no one can see it. We tell the story, but no one can hear it.<sup>97</sup>

Our contention, however, is that in biblical theology we do not tell the story! There is, in our view, far too little energy directed towards telling the biblical story as a grand narrative. In practical theology, missiology and ethics there is a growing chorus of voices calling for such a reading of the Bible, and we think that an answer to that call is long overdue in biblical theology. In our opinion the objections to a narrative biblical theology do not stand up to critical scrutiny, and while we do not argue that this is the only way to do biblical theology, we think that it is an important approach. Some of the recent, creative trends in biblical interpretation such as literary and rhetorical methods position biblical scholars well to attend to the biblical story with creative

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<sup>96</sup> Newbigin, *A Word*, 204.

<sup>97</sup> *Telling the Story*, 197.

nance and detail – we long for scholars to move in this direction, and we agree with Newbigin and Wright that there is much at stake in this respect.

In our own *The Drama of Scripture* we have made an attempt to tell the story of the Bible. Doubtless our attempt is deeply influenced by our own theological traditions and inadequate in all sorts of ways. We acknowledge this openly, but would much prefer a response of multiple, better attempts to tell the story rather than a rehash of the arguments against such an approach. As Walker says, ‘in the act of telling the story, modern theologians cannot make people believe it. What they can do, however, is to stand up for the story, and learn again to tell it in the way it was meant to be told. ... It is the Church’s grand narrative, which is essential not only for its own identity but for the salvation of the world.’<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 53.

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