

THE BOOK AND THE STORY

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In the last edition of TransMission, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin wrote about the importance of recovering the whole biblical canon as a source of objective authority and truth in contemporary culture. Any church concerned with mission will be aware that there are different, conflicting world views between the Christian faith and wider society which must be faced and engaged with. Here, Tom Wright explores the nature of the over-arching biblical narrative and how it subverts and challenges the world view of our surrounding culture. It is adapted from the opening address given at The Open Book consultation “Imagining Tomorrow” at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, January 1997.

In the Christian canonical Bible there is a single over-arching narrative. It is a story which runs from creation to new creation. The great bulk of the story focuses quite narrowly on the fortunes of a single family in the Middle East. They are described as the people through whom the creator God will act to rescue the whole world. The choice of this particular family does not imply that the creator has lost interest in other human beings or the cosmos at large; on the contrary, it is because he wishes to address them with his active and rescuing purposes that he has chosen this one family in the first place. Even if we were to rearrange the Old Testament canon (adopting the normal Jewish order, for example, in which the Prophets precede the Writings, ending with 2 Chronicles instead of Malachi) we would still be reading a story in search of an ending, in which the people chosen to bring the creator’s healing to the world are themselves in need of rescue and restoration.

First and Last

The New Testament declares with one voice that the over-arching story reached its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the early Christians believed to be the promised Messiah of Israel. The followers of Jesus saw themselves as royal heralds, claiming the whole world for its new king.

Although it is rightly said that the first Christians saw themselves as living in the last days, it is even more important to stress that they were living in the first days of a new creation that dawned when Jesus emerged from the tomb on Easter morning. In other words, they saw themselves living within a story in which the decisive event had already occurred and now needed to be implemented. That is the implicit narrative which informs and undergirds all the epistles. The four canonical gospels, in their very different ways, are only comprehensible if we understand them to be telling how the story of God and Israel reached its climax in Jesus. Even if we were to rearrange the New Testament canon, this implicit story-line would emerge at every point.

Community

From this brief sketch it is possible to see how the Bible (Jewish or Christian) does not exist, and does not offer itself to us, as a detached set of writings or as a book-in-a-vacuum. It is our window on a reality which is decidedly extra-textual – a complex community stretching from Abraham to the early apostles. In particular, the Christian Bible is a window on a particular extra-textual reality, the human being Jesus of Nazareth, whose followers came to believe in an astonishingly short space of time that he was the living, human embodiment of the one true God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The New Testament is not free-standing. It is what it is because it points away from itself, to the One God of Jewish monotheism who is now known in Jesus of Nazareth and the events of his life, death, resurrection and the outpouring of his Spirit on his followers. If the Bible, Jewish and Christian, does not refer to these extra-textual realities, it fails in its whole object. The biblical writers referred to the actual story of the creator and his world, focused on the story of the creator of Israel, on the story of Jesus and Israel, and on the story of Jesus' followers and the cosmos. In other words, whatever view of the Bible you take, if you are to be in any way obedient to the Bible you cannot make the Bible itself the centre or focus of your attention. It points away from itself.

From the Christian point of view, the centre of attention can never be merely the Bible; it must always be Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Lord of the World.

A Clash

This point is reinforced if the situation of the early Church is considered in the days before there was such a thing as the New Testament. The expansion, development and consolidation of early Christianity did not take place primarily through writing (Paul's letters are, perhaps, a partial exception). They took place through people, through a community which worshipped the God of Israel and recognised him in the human face of Jesus. This community ordered their lives and their symbolic universe on the basis that they were not only the renewed Israel but also the renewed human race.

The conflict that this community experienced, both with Jews who did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah, and, more especially, with pagans who saw the proclamation of Jesus as Lord to be a threat to their status quo, can be explained in terms of a clash of narrational and symbolic universes. This clash, and the ways in which Christians engaged in dialogue and mission, was much greater than merely a clash between their writings (or those writings which became the New Testament) and their surrounding culture. It was a clash between a community with its entire symbolic and narrational world view and other, surrounding communities with theirs. In focusing on the Bible and its interface with contemporary culture we dare not forget that it is part of, and indicative of, a wider whole.

Once we grasp this point about the clash of world views, it is easy enough to understand how the interface between the Bible and our own contemporary culture still bears a good deal of family likeness to the interface between early Christianity and its surrounding milieu. When we read the Bible in its own terms, as an overarching story, we soon discover that this metanarrative challenges and subverts several other world views.

A Challenge to Paganism

From creation to recreation, from the call of Abraham to the New Jerusalem, what the Bible offers presents itself as the truth of which paganism is the parody. Paganism sees the glory of creation, and worships creation instead of the creator. The grown-up version of this, of course, is pantheism, whether Stoicism in the ancient world or the varieties of New Age belief in the contemporary world. The mirror image of this is dualism, the belief that creation is the work of a lesser god or an anti-god. One of the remarkable things about the Bible is the way in which, from Genesis to Revelation, these options are systematically refused. There is One God, the creator; creation is good, but it is not God; the reality of evil in the world is not to be explained in terms of either an evil creation or an evil god, but as an intrusion into the good creation, which is dealt with through the story of the chosen family.

This biblical challenge to paganism and dualism is huge and basic, and is presupposed in all that follows.

A Challenge to Idealism

The biblical metanarrative challenges and subverts the world view of idealism, in which historical events are mere contingent trivia, and where reality is to be found in a set of abstractions, whether timeless truths or absolute values. Any attempt to see the biblical story in this way is confronted by the biblical text itself, in which the opposite is the case. The love, justice and forgiveness of God are not invoked in the Bible to draw attention away from the historical sphere, but rather to give it meaning and depth. When Israel invokes the justice of God, she wants to be liberated from her enemies. When the early Christians spoke of the love of God, they were referring to something that had happened in recent history, and which had changed the way the real world – not just their real world, but the real world – actually was.

A Challenge to the Aphoristic World

The biblical metanarrative also challenges and subverts the non-storied aphoristic world of The Gospel of Thomas as well as contemporary post-modernity. Those who are most anxious to deconstruct what they see as the oppressive narrative and theology of the canonical gospels end up with a Jesus who functioned like a wandering Cynic. The whole *raison d'être* of such a Jesus was simply to utter striking, paradoxical and challenging aphorisms, challenging the socio-cultural order, but simply offering a do-it-yourself way of constructing either one's relation to the outer world or one's inner religious world. This is, of course, the reflection of the post-modern emphasis on deconstructing all metanarratives, and on the individual doing his or her own thing. In neither case does this reconstructed Jesus announce the Kingdom of God as a new fact bursting in upon the public world.

The biblical metanarrative insists that there is a public world. It acknowledges that there are all sorts of problems in this public world. But instead of allowing the problems to dictate the terms, ending in deconstruction, it insists that the problems have been addressed and defeated by the creator himself. This is not, please note, a Christian version of the modernist rejection of post-modernity. The biblical metanarrative invites us to go through the post-modern critique of post-modernity (Christian modernity included) and out the other side into a new grasping of reality.

A Challenge to all Pagan Power Structures

That the biblical metanarrative challenged, from the very beginning, all pagan political power structures is implicit in the meaning of the word "gospel" – both in its Old Testament and New Testament uses. Isaiah spoke of the good news that YHWH had overthrown the idols of Babylon and had thus broken Babylon's grip on Israel. The New Testament, firmly rooted in the Jewish world of Isaiah, addressed the greco-roman context with the news that Jesus of Nazareth was the new, true ruler of the world, whose accession to supreme power was the good, liberating, healing news for which the whole creation had been waiting. This was either a statement of public truth or public falsehood. The one thing it could never be was a statement of private truth, a belief which involved the speaker's religious interiority but nothing else.

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God in the Jewish world of his day, he must have meant a reality which would challenge decisively the kingship of the existing authorities, which partly explains (both historically and theologically) the events which led to the crucifixion. When Paul spoke of the Lordship of Jesus, he was using language about Jesus which explicitly and obviously evoked the Lordship of Caesar. There cannot be two Lords of the world.

A Challenge to all Rival Eschatologies

The biblical metanarrative is where the story of God and the world develops, takes shape, and points to or reaches a climax, and it challenges all rival eschatologies. Consider the various

political eschatologies that are advanced from time to time, like the belief advanced by some in Augustus' court that, with the establishment of the Roman Empire, a new Golden Age had begun. More recently, the story of the development of democracy is told as though the establishment of one-man-one-vote would usher in the new Golden Age. Part of the reason for the deep cynicism of Tacitus, Juvenal and others at the end of the first century, and for the deep cynicism of many commentators at the end of the twentieth, was, and is, that the Golden Age has let us down. We pressed all the buttons and the toy didn't work.

A Challenge to the Non-Christian Jewish Metanarrative

The early Christians believed that the story they were telling was the true Jewish story: how all the promises had come true, of the moment when God had remembered his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and had himself become the light to enlighten the gentiles and the glory of his people Israel. What happened, of course, is that contemporary Judaism has lived (and is living) in the uneasy tension between a non-narrative view of Judaism in which what really matters is a set of great ideas to which Jews should be loyal, and a narrative view of Judaism in which the promises, long delayed, began at last to be fulfilled after the horrendous events of the Holocaust with the establishment of the modern State of Israel – and the absolute imperative to take over the entire land promised by God to Abraham and, perhaps, more importantly, to Joshua.

If Christians and Jews in the contemporary Western world are in any way to look to the Bible for help in making common cause on issues that affect us both, we cannot ignore this deep cleavage. Non-Christian Jews are convinced that the fulfilment of God's promises to his people did not happen in the first century of the common era (and some are convinced that this time has now begun to arrive in the establishment of the Jewish State). Christians, including Jewish Christians, believe that the time of fulfilment arrived with Jesus of Nazareth, even though it didn't look like what his contemporaries had expected.

The Christian Bible, in claiming that the Hebrew scriptures tell a story which reaches its climax in Jesus, challenges non-Christian Judaism head on. One sometimes hears Christian advocates of closer ties between Christianity and Judaism urging that Christianity should rediscover its Jewish roots. I'm all for that, but the rootedness of early Christianity in Jewish soil is not about Christianity simply sharing some abstract Jewish ideas, but about Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish hope. There are many things on which Christians and non-Christian Jews can agree and on which they can work together in glad harmony. But, precisely because Christianity and Judaism have so much in common, you cannot ignore the fact that at their heart they make claims which simply cannot be reconciled.

A Challenge to Other Religions

The biblical metanarrative challenges the view of Christianity, or biblical Judaism, as a "religion" in the post-enlightenment sense, and I suspect that many Muslims, Hindus and others would want to do the same. Insofar as post-enlightenment thought suggests that truth lies in Deism, and that all "religions" are different humans expressing their own ideas about or experiences of the one distant and unknowable god, most genuinely religious people and groups are bound to object. Once that point is grasped, it becomes clear that if the biblical narrative is true, the Muslim one is not, and vice versa; and the same for Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. The more open we make the Bible, the more we must expect that dialogue with our friends and neighbours of other faiths will include the clear statement of radically different world views.

Once we are clear about this, we must also affirm that, precisely because the Jewish and Christian scriptures have as their central theme the active love of the creator God for the whole creation, and especially those made in his image, it is vital that we investigate and build on the things we have in common as human beings. Nothing I have written here should imply an isolationist stance. As with Christians and Jews, so with people of other faiths, there is a great deal we hold in

common, which can and should form the basis not only of dialogue and mutual understanding, but also common action in the community. Yet we owe it to one another as partners in such enterprises to be gently but firmly honest about the world views we hold, and the distinctive metanarratives in which these come to expression.

For All Its Worth

By opening the Bible and reading it for all its worth the Church will be unable to avoid the fact that it challenges and subverts other world views. An integrated missionary strategy, which takes the Bible seriously, will need to become increasingly clear about these challenges. For, when we begin to face and engage with these challenges, we can move from a position of largely groping in the dark towards an effective placing of the biblical narrative in the public arena as a source of truth and hope for our world.