WORLD MISSION

Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues

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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR ORAL CULTURES IN WORLD MISSION

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INTRODUCTION

What difference does biblical theology make among oral peoples? By "oral peoples," I refer to those for whom orality is their only or preferred means of communication. Therefore, this question not only concerns nonliterate tribes but also countless educated Westerners who hardly read except by necessity. The latter prioritize movies, television, music, and social media over books and newspapers. In fact, marketers, neurologists, social scientists, and even game designers in recent years have increasingly highlighted the power of stories and visual media to influence the human mind.

At the intersection of biblical theology and orality, we find story or "narrative." Broadly defined, a narrative is any genre that conveys a story. It represents a sequence of interrelated events or states forming a plot that conveys at least some meaningful ideas.[1] Narrative is the most common genre in the Bible. Typically, these narratives present an account of God and his people within some historical and cultural context. For simplicity, I will interchange "narrative" and "story" throughout this chapter.

In recent decades, narrative has played a prominent role in biblical studies. Proponents of narrative theology seek to counterbalance the

1. Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 159–61; David Rudrum, "From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use," *Narrative* 13 (May 2005): 195–204; Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 23.

traditional emphasis on systematic or dogmatic theology.[2] Narrative criticism has emerged as an approach to interpreting Scripture in a way that treats the Bible like other forms of literature.[3] Richard Hays suggests, "The framework of Paul's thought is constituted neither by a system of doctrines nor by his personal religious experience but by a 'sacred story; a narrative structure.' "[4] Hays's work has highlighted the importance of intertextuality and catalyzed rethinking of interpretative methodology. Among biblical scholars, major debates concern the influence of narrative on biblical theology. For example, volumes are written about role and shape of narrative within Paul's letters.[5] Much of N. T. Wright's Pauline theology stems from the conviction that Paul draws from an implicit metanarrative or worldview story that permeates the span of Scripture.[6]

Narrative (or story) is a fundamental aspect of our worldview.[7] One reason, as Paul Ricoeur argues, is that history has a "narrative character" about it.[8] Thus our view of the world is entwined with story, each influencing the other. As we attempt to discern meaning from our experience, our perspective will have a story-like quality. Inasmuch as biblical writers speak of God's work in history, so biblical theology takes on a narrative shape.[9]

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2. Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview," *Interpretation* 48 (1983): 340–52.

3. See Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*

4. Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

5. See for example Bruce W. Longenecker, ed., *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

6. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 456–537. A recent response to Wright's proposal is found in Joel R. White, "N. T. Wright's Narrative Approach," in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, ed. Christoph Heilig, Michael Bird, and J. Thomas Hewitt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 181–206.

7. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (Atlanta: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 38–44.

8. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1:91. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90–96; Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 291–311.

9. The point is sharpened when we account for ways the Bible's canonical form influences interpretation. Wright adds, "Indeed, until the narrative element has been recognized it is open to doubt whether one has yet fully understood what 'worldview' (in the sense I and others use the term) is all about. . . . Paul's worldview had a strongly implicit and frequently explicit narrative. Or rather, like most mature narratives, Paul's worldview had a

The Bible's historical character equips the church in practical ways. Biblical theology is better suited than other forms of theology to make disciples because it engages people at a worldview level. The story of the Bible claims authority over the various personal and social narratives that influence us daily. For N. T. Wright,

> The goal of Paul's theologizing was not to delineate belief systems but to bring about a transformation in the mindset of the believers in the communities of Christ followers he founded. Paul, in other words, wanted to effect what Richard Hays calls a "conversion of the imagination" in the minds of his hearers/readers that would, in turn, revolutionize their social interactions.[10]

Naturally, many authors note the importance of narrative for shaping Christian ethics.[11]

Therefore, this chapter explores how the church might apply biblical theology within oral cultures (and subcultures). Specifically, I will consider ways a biblical "grand narrative" can practically influence the church's ministry across a variety of contexts. Not everyone agrees the Bible has an overarching narrative (rather than simply being a set of collected stories). Nor do all agree about how to discern such a story. Accordingly, the first section suggests such a process. The second section then outlines a broad framework for understanding the grand biblical narrative. Finally, the third section demonstrates the significance of these findings for ministering among oral peoples.

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set of underlying stories whose tendency to interlock and overlap is not a weakness, but rather a sign that, as with a good novel or play, the subplots and secondary narratives not only illustrate but also materially effect key moments and key transitions in the main plot." N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 456, 461.

10. Summary by Joel White in "N. T. Wright's Narrative Approach," 184. White cites Richard B. Hays, "The Conversion of the Imagination: Scripture and Eschatology in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 45 (1999): 391–412.

11. See Graham Ward, "Narratives and Ethics: The Structures of Believing and the Practices of Hope," *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture* 20 (2006): 438–61; John Navone, "Narrative Theology and Its Uses: A Survey," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986): 212–30; N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2013); Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997). Crites even argues, "Ethical authority . . . is always a function of a common narrative coherence of life." See Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," 310.

ONE STORY TO RULE THEM ALL?

Many scholars acknowledge that the Bible has some sort of overarching story. To varying degrees, theologians throughout history have taken a narrative approach to the Bible.[12] However, contemporary writers have made a rigorous effort to identify more precisely the content of the biblical metanarrative, the authoritative "controlling story" of Scripture.[13]

Much debate focuses on Paul's letters, which do not explicitly use a narrative genre.[14] Even where writers disagree about details, one finds common ground. For example, Morna Hooker states,

> If . . . "narrative approach" means simply the recognition that behind Paul's theological arguments there is a fundamental belief in God's purpose for the world, and that this is inevitably expressed in the form of narrative, then that recognition can, indeed, act as "a necessary exegetical control." . . . Since Paul's theology is concerned with God's activity through history, it is clear that his interpreters should not ignore the role of "narrative."[15]

Similarly, David Horrell says Paul's theology

> has a narrative character; it is not simply a galaxy of symbols and beliefs, arranged in an overarching sky, but rather a story with some sense of temporal extension and direction. Paul's texts are not, of course, narrative in form. . . . Nonetheless, it can be shown

12. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen list examples such as Irenaeus, John Calvin, Herman Ridderbos, and James Barr. See Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 144–71.

13. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 42.

14. For scholarly perspectives on the matter, see Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*. Numerous people contend Paul relies on an underlying narrative, such as Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); W. A. Beardslee, "Narrative Form in the NT and Process Theology," *Encounter* 36 (1975): 301–15; Ben Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); N. T. Wright, "Israel's Scriptures in Paul's Narrative Theology," *Theology* 115 (2012): 323–29.

15. Morna Hooker, " 'Heirs of Abraham': The Gentiles' Role in Israel's Story," in Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, 85–96, esp. 96. The italics are original and refer to Bruce Longenecker's phrase in his "Sharing in Their Spiritual Blessings? The Stories of Israel in Galatians and Romans," in Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, 58–84, esp. 83.

> that a narrative underpins Paul's "theologizing": the story of God's saving act in Jesus Christ.[16]

Francis Watson is quite critical of efforts to reconstruct a scriptural metanarrative beneath Paul's theology, yet even he says Paul's "gospel must be correlated with 'the story of God and creation' and 'the story of Israel.' "[17]

If an overarching story exists, what method might we use to identify the framework for a grand biblical narrative? What passages mark the deeper structure underlying the Bible's story?[18] We first consider the nature of narrative before examining the biblical text.

FINDING THE BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Inherent in any historical narration is what Paul Ricoeur calls "emplotment." According to Ricoeur, "Emplotment brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results."[19] Its purpose is "to draw an intelligible story *from* a variety of events or incidents or, reciprocally, in order to make these events or incidents *into* a story."[20] In this way, writers and storytellers use rhetorical strategies to present narratives, which presuppose some historical reality.[21] Accordingly, structure is both *inherent* within and *imposed* on a story.

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16. David G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 93.

17. Francis Watson, "Is There a Story in These Texts?," in Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, 231–39, esp. 234.

18. Brueggemann states, "The Old Testament is not a metanarrative but offers the materials out of which a metanarrative may be construed," in Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 559. However, regarding the Old Testament as metanarrative could be justified either from a canonical perspective (and so interpreting the text as we now have it) or from the view of the divine author, whose mission in history is told across multiple subnarratives.

19. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:65.

20. Ricoeur, "Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 236–48, esp. 239, italics original. For characteristics of emplotments, see Anna Borisenkova, "Narrative Reconfiguration of Social Events: Paul Ricoeur's Contribution to Rethinking the Social," *Ricoeur Studies* 1 (2010): 87–98, esp. 94.

21. I say "some reality" since narratives, whether fiction or nonfiction, suppose a time-and-space world governed by certain norms, whether cultural or physical. In stories such

This observation leads scholars to distinguish two key aspects of narrative—chronological sequence and creative sequence.[22] The former is the linear "story line" or logical ordering of events.[23] It is a story's "deep structure" or the "large-scale narrative content."[24] The "creative sequence" refers to "a series of motifs . . . whose order is determined by the choices of the author from an indeterminate number of possibilities."[25] One creatively emplots events in order to establish or emphasize key ideas and themes.[26]

Identifying these two sequences enables us to discern the Bible's grand narrative. Wright claims that a writer's "implicit worldview" is found by noting the chronological (or "referential") sequence.[27] However, Joel White suggests a more rigorous approach "to draw out evidence of a common metanarrative behind" a variety of texts. He says,

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as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, "reality" includes characters who have extraordinary powers (compared to our own).

22. Writers sometimes use different terminology. Wendland distinguishes narrative and plot. See Ernst Wendland, " 'You Will Do Even More than I Say': On the Rhetorical Function of Stylistic Form in the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 79–111, esp. 84. Petersen separates "referential sequence" from "poetic sequence." See Norman Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR; Wipf & Stock, 2008), 48–52, 65–81. Via and Polak appropriate terms from Russian formalist narratology: *fabula* for "narrative" or "chronological sequence," and *syuzhet* for "plot" or "creative sequence." Dan O. Via, *The Ethics of Mark's Gospel: In the Middle of Time* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 41; Frank Polak, "Oral Substratum, Language Usage, and Thematic Flow in the Abraham-Jacob Narrative," in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writing: Ancient Literacy, Orality, and Literary Production*, ed. Brian Schmidt (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 217–38, esp. 218.

23. See Chris Baldick, "Fabula," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 93; Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL; Dalkey Archive, 1998), 170.

24. Via, *Ethics of Mark's Gospel*, 41; Polak, "Oral Substratum," 218.

25. Via, *Ethics of Mark's Gospel*, 41.

26. Ricoeur helpfully summarizes, "Any narrative combines, in varying proportions, two dimensions: a chronological dimension and a non-chronological dimension. The first may be called the 'episodic dimension' of the narrative. . . . But the activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events. . . . The art of narrating, as well as the corresponding art of following a story, therefore require that we are able *to extract a configuration from a succession*. This 'configurational' operation . . . constitutes the second dimension of narrative activity." See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 278.

27. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 463. He draws from Norman Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, who is frequently cited by contributors in Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*.

> If these texts have similar poetic [creative] sequences that refer, whether explicitly or implicitly, to the same aspects of the OT narrative, that would seem to constitute evidence of a "grand story," about which they are in agreement. If on the other hand, their poetic sequences differ from one another greatly, with major strands of OT tradition popping up in wildly different places for very different text-pragmatic reasons, then it would seem more likely that they are using the OT narrative for essentially illustrative purposes.[28]

This approach helpfully provides objective boundaries for seeking an underlying story spanning the biblical canon.

What is needed now is a compilation of ancient texts that summarize the biblical grand narrative. Many scholars have suggested passages that seem to serve as summaries within the Bible itself. Hood and Emerson's study likely provides the most comprehensive synthesis of such lists to date.[29] They include summaries of Israel's story as found in the Old Testament, early Jewish writings, the New Testament, and early Christian works. We can complement their research by surveying the work of others.[30]

An exhaustive list will not be duplicated here. Instead, I will highlight a small sample of significant biblical passages.

- Old Testament
  - Deuteronomy 26:5–9
  - Joshua 23–24
  - 1 Samuel 12
  - 1 Kings 8 (also 2 Chr 5:2–6:11)
  - 2 Kings 17
  - Nehemiah 9

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28. White, "N. T. Wright's Narrative Approach," 191. He notes Barclay's basic agreement in John Barclay, " 'Paul's Story' in Paul's Story: Theology as Testimony," in Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, 133–56, esp. 155.

29. Jason B. Hood and Matthew Y. Emerson, "Summaries of Israel's Story: Reviewing a Compositional Category," *CBR* 11 (2013): 328–48.

30. Two noteworthy essays not cited by Hood and Emerson include Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38–53, esp. 41; Paul House, "Examining the Narratives of the Old Testament," *WTJ* 67 (2005): 229–45, esp. 231. While these authors largely overlap with one another, Bauckham and House each add texts to Hood and Emerson's list.

  - Psalms 78; 105–6; 135–36
  - Ezekiel 16; 20; 23
  - Daniel 9
- New Testament
  - Matthew 1:1–17
  - Acts 7; 13
  - Romans 9–11
  - Hebrews 11

In these and other texts, we find substantial alignment between the chronological and creative sequences. The following outline traces the major stages within the grand narrative. Naturally, overlap increases as one moves forward historically through the canon since later texts recapitulate previous texts. The New Testament rehearses this broad narrative and culminates with Christ.

Grand Narrative

- Creation
- Abraham
- Israel
  - Exodus[31]
  - Canaan[32]
  - Monarchy[33]
  - Exile[34]
  - Restoration[35]
- Christ

31. "Exodus" refers to a range of events, including Israel's deliverance from Egypt, receiving the law at Sinai, and wandering in the wilderness.

32. "Canaan" encompasses the events from Joshua's leading Israel to settle in the promised land through the period of the judges. Various accounts intertwine the exodus with the settlement of Canaan.

33. Especially noteworthy are God's covenant with David, the building of the temple, and increased idolatry in Israel.

34. "Exile" includes the deportations of the northern and southern tribes.

35. "Restoration" perhaps could be conjoined with "exile." Various promises related to restoration from exile include Spirit (law within hearts), land, David, temple (see Jer 31; 33; Ezek 36–37).

Readers should recall that we are primarily concerned with the *sequence* of the many presentations. The precise content varies in certain texts; however, one consistently finds major areas of agreement, such as the reemphasis on God's promises to Abraham, the exodus, and so forth. The main transition points largely refer to the same aspects of the Old Testament narrative.

Two final comments clarify the above picture. First, ancient writers reiterate a common subplot whereby God shows kindness to Israel, who then rebels against God their king. Nevertheless, he shows steadfast love for his people despite their sin. Second, we see clues in the New Testament concerning how this narrative will be completed (although naturally, we cannot expect to find summaries about events that had not yet happened at the time of the New Testament writers). Specifically, we could postulate two final stages, which I will call "church" and "consummation." The former refers to the ingathering of God's people from the nations. The latter designation is meant to be general; it merely refers to all that is brought to completion with the final return of Christ (such as new creation and reconciliation).

A SUPPORTIVE SUBSTRUCTURE?

We have identified the macrolevel of the narrative; we now consider whether the Bible has a supportive substructure. In other words, if the above explanation is correct, we expect to find various strands of confirmation. An exhaustive treatment would require a lengthy essay or book. For now, I will simply note five types of rhetorical, theological, and historical evidence.

A story plot is bound together in part by various small-scale patterns, such as repeated wording.[36] These connections are most evident in the first two types of confirmation: *intertextuality* and *theological themes*.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Biblical writers frequently quote or allude to other passages of Scripture to establish or support an idea. Later Old Testament books use earlier

36. Polak describes these small-scale patterns as "microtext," the third level of narrative, which is interconnected with the "macrotext" (chronological sequence) and "plot" (creative sequence). See Polak, "Oral Substratum," 218.

texts, such as when Isaiah employs the exodus narrative.[37] Also, countless scholars have explored Paul's strategic use of the Old Testament.[38] People debate whether certain Pauline passages allude to the Old Testament; however, there is general agreement concerning his explicit quotations.[39] Not surprisingly, Paul routinely highlights passages related to the Old Testament events listed in the above outline. Thus, Paul famously appeals to Abraham in Romans and Galatians. His quotations draw extensively from prophetic texts concerning the exile (see, e.g., Rom 9–11).

Even where Paul and others do not explicitly quote the Old Testament, its influence is evident. Accordingly, the exodus unmistakably shapes the structure and argument of many Pauline texts (see 1 Cor 10:1–11; Rom 5–8).[40] Similarly, the Old Testament frames the four Gospels such that Jesus is variously presented as another Moses and Adam. In fact, some contend that Jesus' life effectively embodies or reenacts Israel's story.[41] In short, the interweaving of biblical texts reinforces the key emphases noted above.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Many theological motifs recur throughout the Bible. These themes depend on the major movements inherent in the biblical metanarrative.

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37. See Bernhard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 177–95. Note a further stage of biblical reuse of these Isaianic writings in Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, WUNT 88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

38. See Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*; and Stanley E. Porter and Christopher Stanley, eds., *As It Is Written: Studying Paul's Use of Scripture* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008).

39. A representative list can be found in E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 151–53. Regarding the task of identifying quotations, allusions, and echoes, see Stanley E. Porter, "Allusions and Echoes," in Porter and Stanley, *As It Is Written*, 29–40; Stanley E. Porter, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament: A Brief Comment on Method and Terminology," in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. C. A. Evans and J. A. Sanders (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 79–96.

40. See Daniel Lynwood Smith, "The Use of 'New Exodus' in New Testament Scholarship: Preparing a Way through the Wilderness," *CBR* 14 (2016): 207–43. On Rom 5–8, see N. T. Wright, "The New Inheritance according to Paul," *Bible Review* 14, no. 3 (1998): 16, 47; N. T. Wright, "New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Substructure of Romans 3–8," in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 26–35.

41. See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX; Baylor University Press, 2016).

For instance, the temple or sanctuary is a reoccurring image that spans from Genesis to Revelation. It is also a significant thematic device in John's Gospel. Redemption, particularly common in Pauline literature, is rooted in the exodus. Furthermore, the titles "Christ" and "Son of God" recall God's covenant with David.[42]

CANONICAL STRUCTURE

If the metanarrative outlined above is accurate, we would not be surprised to find suggestive clues built into the structure of the canon. In fact, as Jason Hood and Matthew Emerson write, "The canonical shape of the Psalter, Chronicles, and other canonical indicators reveals an interest in summaries of Israel's story."[43] The shape of the canon can indicate the theology of early compilers and perhaps ways we should interpret the Old Testament.[44] For example, Hendrik Koorevaar argues, "The subject of exile and return is present very strongly, both in *all seams within* the canon, and also *at the beginning* and *at the end* of the canon."[45] Subsections within the larger canon story arc feature significant figures and events, such as Adam-Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy) and Joshua-Jehoiachin (Joshua–Kings) as well as Adam-Cyrus (both within Chronicles and spanning Genesis–Chronicles).[46]

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42. See 2 Sam 7:13–14; John 1:49; Rom 1:1–4, among other texts.

43. Hood and Emerson, "Summaries of Israel's Story," 344. See also Jason B. Hood, *The Messiah, His Brothers, and the Nations: Matthew 1.1–17* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 39, 42, 48–56.

44. See Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Matthew Y. Emerson, *Christ and the New Creation: A Canonical Approach to the Theology of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

45. Hendrik Koorevaar, "The Exile and Return Model: A Proposal for the Original Macrostructure of the Hebrew Canon," *JETS* 57 (2014): 501–12, esp. 510. In contrast, see Greg Goswell, "The Order of the Books of the Hebrew Bible," *JETS* 51 (2008): 673–88; Goswell, "Two Testaments in Parallel: The Influence of the Old Testament on the Structuring of the New Testament Canon," *JETS* 56 (2013): 459–74.

46. Koorevaar, "Exile and Return Model," 507–8. Since Chronicles concludes the Hebrew canon, its internal reference to Adam-Cyrus reflects the macrostructure of the entire Old Testament canon. Another potentially fruitful approach includes John Goldingay, "Middle Narratives as an Aspect of Biblical Theology," in *Biblical Theology: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Carey Walsh and Mark Elliot (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 203–13. Goldingay appeals to "middle narratives," which refer to units of narrative text that conjoin many small stories but subdivide the metanarrative. In this way, middle narratives aid memory and organize the grand story. He identifies the first middle narrative as Genesis to Kings, which focuses

EXPLICIT GOSPEL STATEMENTS

From a New Testament perspective, the above metanarrative, if correct, should influence how the biblical writers discuss the gospel. In recent years, many have debated the precise scope of the gospel. For the present purpose, we simply consider passages that explicitly use the verb or noun for "gospel," whether in Hebrew or Greek.[47] Three major themes consistently emerge in explicit "gospel" passages: creation, covenant, and kingdom.[48] Interestingly, these three themes also appear in Wright's proposal concerning Paul's implicit metanarrative.

> We must ask: what are Paul's sub-plots, and how do they relate to the main, overarching plot itself? . . . The first sub-plot, I suggest, is the story of the human creatures through whom the creator intended to bring order to his world. Their failure, and the creator's determination to put that failure right and so get the original plan back on track, demands a second sub-plot, which is the story of Israel as the people called to be the light of the world. This is the level of plot at which the Mosaic law plays out its various roles. . . . Then, because of Israel's own failure, we find the third and final sub-plot, which is the story of Jesus, Israel's crucified and risen Messiah. His work, at the centre of Paul's narrative world, resolves the other sub-plots, and provides a glimpse, as we have just seen, of the resolution for the main plot itself, the creator's purpose for the whole cosmos.[49]

That many scholars affirm the importance of these three plot movements at least suggests that we currently are on the right track. Not surprisingly, creation, covenant, and kingdom shape the contours of the grand narrative sketched above.

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on "four key figures, Abraham (who can stand for the ancestors in general), Moses, Joshua, and David" (205).

47. That is to say, the verbal root בשׂר and εὐαγγέλιον/εὐαγγελίζω. While a biblical understanding of the gospel cannot be limited to such passages, any correct view of the gospel must at least cohere with explicit references to the gospel.

48. Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 40–46.

49. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 484–85.

CULTURAL PRACTICES

Finally, we expect that ancient Israel's cultural practices and traditions are often centered on the main points of scriptural metanarrative. After all, social rituals and festivals are tools to reenact and reinforce foundational cultural narratives. In the Old Testament, such practices include keeping the weekly Sabbath, circumcision, and celebrating the Passover. Similarly, the church in the New Testament commemorates Christ's death and resurrection through the Lord's Supper and baptism.

A FEW IMPLICATIONS AND QUESTIONS

Before turning to a few applications, we should consider a few implications of the biblical grand narrative highlighted above. It is commonplace for people to summarize the biblical metanarrative in four parts: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. In what it affirms, this outline is not mistaken. Practically, however, this sketch of the grand narrative hardly resembles the overarching story suggested by the Bible itself. Such summaries largely skip over the vast majority of the Old Testament, perhaps referencing Israel in passing.[50] Effectively, they "skip from Genesis 3 to Romans 3."[51] This conventional rendering of the grand narrative seems to be a contemporary adaption from systematic theology.[52]

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50. For examples, see Mark Dever, "God's Plan of Salvation," in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) 2501–3; "The Story," https://thestoryfilm.com (accessed January 23, 2018), which is explained further in George Robinson, "The Gospel as Story and Evangelism as Story Telling," in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Ashford (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 76–91; Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); Matt Chandler, *The Explicit Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); J. B. Snodgrass, "Mission to Hindus," in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Ashford (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 238–51. Israel's story is summarized with two pages in Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011).

51. Scot McKnight uses this phrase frequently, including in Ben Witherington, "Dialogue with Scot McKnight on 'King Jesus': Part One," The Bible and Culture (blog), September 10, 2011, patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2011/09/10/dialogue-with-scot-mcknight-on-king-jesus-part-one-2/.

52. Bouteneff notes, "Reading the Pentateuch (or even the whole Bible) as a linear account of 'creation-fall-redemption,' [is] a reading difficult to trace before the eighteenth-century notion of *Heilsgeschichte* but one that captured much modern theological and popular imagination." Peter Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 8.

Someone might object that Christians today ought to give more emphasis to the New Testament as the culmination of the Old Testament. I offer a few replies. First, even if one thinks truncated gospel summaries are strategically helpful for evangelism, that fact does not warrant representing them as the Bible's grand narrative, as though they reflect the story outline seen throughout the Bible (as well as in Second Temple Judaism and the early church).

Second, the New Testament writers demonstrably rely on a grand narrative derived from the whole of the Old Testament. Therefore, if people want to convey New Testament teaching in a way representative of the biblical authors' meaning, then they must account for the larger narrative that spans all the Old Testament (and not simply Gen 1–3).

Third, we risk creating a de facto "canon within a canon" by reinforcing an alternative grand narrative that outlines key systematic doctrines that rely on a narrow set of texts. Anyone who respects Paul's understanding of the gospel must account for passages such as Galatians 3:8, where Paul *equates* the Abrahamic covenant with the gospel. Paul states, "the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' " According to typical explanations of the gospel, Galatians 3:8 is incomprehensible, since the Abrahamic covenant is normally regarded as *background* to the gospel, not the gospel itself.

Fourth, we are left to ponder what subtle assumptions are imported into biblical teaching when we reframe the grand narrative in this way. By not allowing the Bible's own metanarrative to shape our gospel explanations, might one unwittingly minimize major aspects of God's revelation? Do people prioritize efficiency above all else? Might one settle for what is merely true while compromising the essence of biblical teaching?[53]

ISRAEL'S STORY AMONG GENTILES

In theory, most Christians agree the Bible should shape the church's teaching and practice. Even if some practices are specific to their original context, many can at least agree that patterns of behavior should be followed. Since ancient writers consistently use the narrative framework

53. For further explanation, see Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations*, 17–28.

outlined above, we naturally infer it should also serve as a model for contemporary ministry. In this section, I will answer two concerns and in the process suggest a few points of application.

First, whenever people hear me stress the importance of teaching Israel's story as a major part of the biblical grand narrative, they often raise similar objections.[54] In some form, I am asked this question: "The people in the Bible were already familiar with Israel's history, so why do I need to reiterate it for contemporary gentiles who are not familiar with this Jewish background?"

From an evangelical perspective, this question seems to cast God's wisdom in doubt since it contests the contemporary relevance of God's self-revelation in history. That is to say, since God in the Old Testament reveals himself in particular cultures, times, and places, Christians need not prioritize the Old Testament's teaching. This line of thinking could quickly veer into functional Marcionism in its consigning the Old Testament to irrelevance.

In contrast, evangelicals confess that the Old Testament is God's revelation. It records how God enters human history and into the concrete circumstances of life. This is precisely what makes the Old Testament relevant to every age and culture. Otherwise, one begins to present abstractly, as though God were distant from the world or were merely a philosophical idea.

Instead, the church should follow the biblical pattern in teaching Israel's story simply because it is the inherent story of the Bible. By adjusting or ignoring it, we subtly begin to turn away from the biblical text and allow (sub)cultural influences to frame our presentation. However, the church has no other overarching story than the one found in the Bible.

Other reasons encourage us to emphasize Israel's role in the biblical metanarrative. Doing so equips readers to interpret the Bible properly in context. Not only does Israel's history give us exegetical boundaries, but the Bible's natural organization simplifies the task of interpretation. One is not forced to speculate how to harmonize doctrines that emerge when philosophical suppositions are forced onto the text. The inherent

54. I do not subsume Israel within the broad category "redemption," per conventional summaries.

structure and content of the Bible—which includes Israel's story—help people internalize and understand its message. Paul's letters demonstrate how he prioritized teaching Israel's story even among gentiles. In addition to Romans and Galatians, passages such as 1 Corinthians 10:1–10 show that Paul presumes that his readers have significant knowledge of the Old Testament.

CRAFTING THE BIBLICAL STORY

We now turn to a second question. How do we apply these insights? First, missionaries who work in oral contexts would be wise to reconsider their approach to storytelling. On the one hand, the biblical grand narrative should influence how people craft evangelistic stories. For example, tools such as C2C (Creation to Christ) are designed to introduce the overarching story of the Bible. However, it largely skips from the garden of Eden to Christ. Also, it seems to use biblical stories to support underlying soteriological doctrines rather than vice versa.[55]

In addition, some missionaries need to reevaluate the story sets used to evangelize and teach. Some of the most popular strategies include Chronological Bible Teaching (CBT), Chronological Bible Storying (CBS), and Simply the Story (STS).[56] Depending on the tool, complete story sets often consist of thirty to sixty stories. These sets aim to cover the entire Bible and can require a year or more of study.

How do these story sets compare to the overall narrative seen in the Bible?[57] Consider a forty-two-story set used by Story Runners, which claims to "provide a panoramic overview, from Creation to the Return

55. For additional critiques of C2C, see Jackson Wu, "Critiquing Creation to Christ (C2C)," Jackson Wu, April 11, 2013, www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2013/04/11/critiquing-creation-to-christ-c2c/; Wu, "Taking the Context Out of the Bible?," April 9, 2013, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2013/04/09/taking-the-context-out-of-the-bible-contextualization-among-oral-peoples-series/.

56. For a historical survey of similar methodologies, see Tom Steffen, "Chronological Communication of the Gospel Goes from Country to City" (paper presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society, Southwest Region meeting, March 18, 2011). Also see James Slack, James O. Terry, and Grant Lovejoy, *Tell the Story: A Primer on Chronological Bible Storying* (Rockville, VA: International Centre for Excellence in Leadership, 2003).

57. For a sample of various story sets, see "Story Sets" online: orality.imb.org/resources/?t=13 (accessed January 23, 2018).

of Christ, of God's plan to redeem a people for himself."[58] It only uses nine to ten Old Testament stories.[59] Of these, the first four parts span the period from creation to the flood (Gen 1–9). However, part two ("The Spirit World") in fact does not come directly from the biblical narrative but rather is summary developed from systematic theology regarding the origin of angels and demons. Lessons five through seven briefly survey parts of Abraham's and David's lives. Within these forty-two stories, Israel's story does little to shape the overall narrative; at best, Old Testament passages are treated simply as bridges or predictions that could be removed with little loss to the narrative cohesion of the whole.

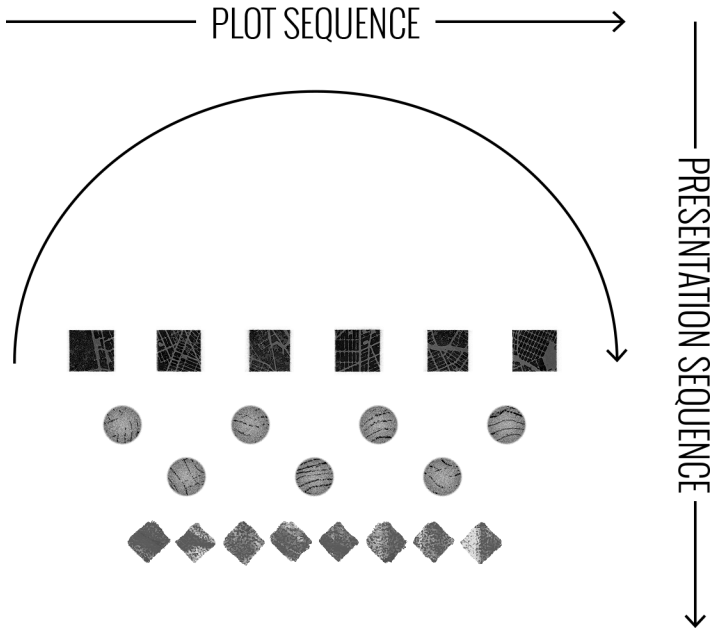
By contrast, missionaries and teachers should use the biblical grand narrative shown above to select passages that give proper weight to each major stage in the biblical story. Furthermore, biblical stories can be taught in a layered approach such that first-level accounts (such as creation, Abraham, Exodus, David, etc., conceptualized with the squares below) are emphasized first and frequently. Subsequently, one then could teach second- and third-level stories (represented by circles and diamonds respectively). They support the overarching narrative while reinforcing the first-level stories (squares).

On the graph on page 286, "plot sequence" refers to the order of events or persons within the biblical story. "Presentation sequence" refers to the order teachers use when sharing the grand narrative. When teaching stories within the Bible's grand narrative framework, trainers will first teach first-level stories (squares), followed by second-level stories (circles), then third-level stories (diamonds), and so forth. This layering sequence ensures that listeners have a firm understanding of the Bible's inherent narrative structure, not simply those texts that affirm one's preferred systematic theology. As we progress through successive plot stages, we have greater and greater freedom in selecting which stories and themes we focus on.

Our observations suggest a second application that is implicit within the chronological Bible storying methods mentioned above. When evangelizing or training disciples, churches and missionaries are wise to begin

58. For a complete list of stories, see storyrunners.org.

59. Stories 9 and 10 recall Isaiah's prophecies concerning Christ.



with the Bible's metanarrative since it provides the contextual framework for the rest of Scripture and all Christian doctrine. People tend to remember best what they learn first and thus what gets reinforced. Accordingly, truncated or reductionistic accounts potentially undermine learners' long-term ability to interpret the Bible and contextualize its teaching because they invariably filter all they hear or read through the key points first introduced to them when believing the gospel.

Some might complain that starting with the grand narrative, with its emphasis on Israel's story, casts one adrift from the so-called primary topic of salvation, that is, how an individual is saved through the forgiveness of sin. However, evangelicals have long affirmed that genuine conversion involves more than intellectual assent to doctrine. Being Christ's disciples entails a change of heart and mind. In effect, the gospel reorients a person's worldview, which requires that people understand the context and significance of the gospel message.

By understanding the message of Christ in light of the grand biblical story, a person better grasps the character of God, Christ's work, his mission for the church, and the cost of following Christ. The inherent

coherence of the biblical narrative is able to produce a consistent framework for seeing the world, others, and oneself.

We should also recall that the vast majority of gentiles who welcomed Paul's preaching were already familiar with the Jewish story in the Old Testament. "Full gentiles" (nonproselytes), however, were much slower to accept the gospel. Therefore, modern Christians have little biblical warrant to expect modern gentiles, who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament, to respond quickly to the gospel without understanding its broader context.[60]

Our observations remind the church of the need for patience and a big-picture perspective. Since modern gentiles, especially those from non-Christianized cultures, need time to grasp the gospel's implicit grand narrative, missionaries and Evangelists should adjust their expectations and approaches. For instance, they could make more use of "seeker studies," wherein a small group or individual spends a number of meetings simply becoming familiar with the biblical story. These surveys provide the mental categories and perspective to make sense of the gospel and its demands.

THE BIBLICAL STORY RESHAPES MISSION STRATEGY

We have seen that an accurate view of the Bible's metanarrative should prompt many missionaries, pastors, and teachers to rethink how they instruct their congregations or students. All preaching implicitly conveys some perspective concerning the Bible's grand story. Whatever leaders say about their theology, hearers can discern this story, often unconsciously, through the teacher's selection of topics and texts. The subjects that are most emphasized typically become the de facto framework that shapes one's view of the biblical narrative. Even when teachers draw from the Old Testament, they might consider whether those lessons reflect the function of those Old Testament texts in the Old Testament itself. If the Old Testament passages become mere illustrations for other

60. For elaboration, see Jackson Wu, "The Influence of Culture on the Evolution of Mission Methods: Using CPMs as a Case Study," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 12 (October 2014): 1–11.

points, then such texts in fact are relegated to a lower stratum of significance within the grand biblical story.

Furthermore, the observations in this chapter should cause the church and mission organizations to evaluate and develop training materials with the grand narrative in mind. Although numerous books and resources advance true theological propositions, they might not sufficiently emphasize or highlight the major pillars of the biblical story. Consequently, these materials reinforce ideas that are not primary within the narrative.

By "not primary," I do not imply "not important." Rather, the Bible's grand narrative, like any story, has a layered structure of events and explanation. If training materials largely underscore important and true doctrines yet do not reinforce the foundational narrative—including fundamental aspects of Israel's history—then people might unconsciously learn a collection of themes without understanding how the Bible itself links them through its narrative.

Why are people unwilling to share the gospel or nervous when talking about theology? Among countless reasons, one issue is this: many people cannot see how various texts and teachings fit together into a coherent whole. Apart from the Bible's intrinsic narrative structure, one is left to formulate theological systems in a piecemeal fashion. By grasping the grand story, believers can have greater confidence when reading the Bible and discussing it with others. As we have seen, the overarching story is a fundamental starting point for understanding the Christian message. However, people cannot use the grand story if they don't know it.

The discussion in this chapter carries special application for oral contexts. People often contrast the words "oral" and "literate" as though "oral contexts" refer mainly to illiterate tribes. As noted earlier, equating oral contexts with illiteracy is a mistake. With respect to the Christian teaching, many people functionally are oral learners. In practice, they only *hear* the Bible taught. They do not regularly read it, much less reflect rigorously on its content and meaning.

For oral-dependent learners, whether literate or illiterate, biblical interpretation is uniquely challenging. Imagine interpreting the Bible when one cannot (or does not) *read* the Bible. Such a person does not use a written text as a reference. One must then interpret and theologize *via*

memory. Accordingly, the structure of the biblical story plays an essential role in organizing information in the mind. When an alien theological framework is imposed on a narrative, listeners experience greater difficulty connecting ideas that reflect the logic of the original authors. However, the Bible's metanarrative has its own boundaries, hierarchies, and patterns. In this way, listeners discern how to relate and prioritize the information they hear.

Other implications no doubt follow from the observations in this chapter concerning the biblical grand narrative. For example, how might these insights influence the process of biblical translation? Might missionaries make different decisions about what books and stories first get translated? Might people need to show greater consistency in how they translate certain terms to ensure readers discern the intertextual connections? Our study also highlights still other potentially fruitful areas of research. For instance, how might studies in memory, oral tradition, and canon formation contribute to more fruitful ministry among oral peoples?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored two primary issues. First, to what degree does the Bible itself possess a grand narrative? We used a method suggested by many biblical and literary scholars and drew from numerous ancient summaries of the Bible. The chapter identifies a broad but distinct narrative that improves on popular notions about the Bible's grand story.

Second, what implications and applications follow from knowing the overarching story of Scripture? Although the biblical metanarrative should influence many areas of ministry, it carries special significance in oral contexts in which story plays an indispensable role. In the process, our observations reinforce the importance of biblical theology in shaping church practice, especially Christian missions.