



The unfolding story of Scripture



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Bible Society recently tasked me with writing a paper to answer the question, 'What is the Bible?' My challenge was to develop a theology of the Bible that reflected Bible Society's commitment to generous orthodoxy across Christian traditions. Most importantly the paper was to be useful, a model that could inform Bible Society's work internally and helps us communicate the Bible externally. This article gives a brief overview of the model I developed and then unpacks one particular element of it – the unfolding story of the Bible.¹

A threefold model

1. Literature

Most obviously, the Bible in its material form is a collection of writings. The word 'Bible' comes from a Greek word (*biblia*), which means 'books'. It is plural because the Bible is a diverse multi-volume work collated by the Church in order to preserve her history, identity and message. This much is a matter of fact rather than a statement of faith. Considered simply as a book, the Bible is an irreplaceable piece of world-shaping literature. So our task is not to edit the content or control the reception but to boldly curate the Bible, translating and publishing it for the world.

2. Story

Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible is not a random collection of pious sayings and moral lessons. The anthology of literature is woven together to form an overarching story with a coherent plotline from start to finish. The narrative

arc of Scripture incorporates both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament. It covers long stretches of ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean history. Despite many paradoxes, tensions and digressions along the way, these two Testaments bear witness to one fundamental story – the God of Israel has raised Jesus the Messiah from death. Therefore, our task is not only to curate the literature but also to narrate the overarching story of hope that centres on Jesus Christ.

3. Revelation

Considered as Christian Scripture the text of the Bible is also an act of divine self-disclosure. The human words it contains are in some sense also the Word of God. Perhaps the clearest statement of this is found in Paul's second letter to Timothy: 'All Scripture is breathed out by God' (3.16–17; ESV). Though distilled in human words, the Scriptures ultimately derive from the creative, dynamic and performative breath of God. The Bible is therefore a site of revelation and experience.² It calls the reader beyond an appreciation of the literature and an understanding of the story to a profound encounter with God: 'As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts"' (Hebrews 3.7; ESV). We therefore curate the literature, narrate the story and seek to facilitate moments of revelation through the Holy Scriptures.

At a headline level, this threefold model helps us respond to the honest question, 'What is the Bible?' The rest of this article will consider in more detail what it means to say that the Bible is an unfolding story.

NOTES

1. Visit Bible Society's webpage to see a popular video: 'What is the Bible?' www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/

2. As John Goldingay notes: 'The biblical text has generative power to summon and evoke new life'. See his, *Models for Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), p. 252.

3. R Bauckham, 'Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story', in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (EF Davis & RB Hays eds; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 39.

4. For a helpful introduction to this distinction and its relevance to biblical interpretation see G Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1996), pp. 52–62.

5. See C Bartholomew & M Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our place in the biblical story* (London: SPCK, 2006).

6. NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK: London, 1992), pp. 41–42.

7. Cartoon by Peter Steiner in the *New Yorker*, July 1998.

8. For a helpful guide to what this might mean for our reading of Scripture as a whole, see R Hays, *Reading Backwards* (London: SPCK, 2015).

The drama of Scripture

From Genesis to Revelation, the biblical writings are structured by sequences of historical events and theological reflections, which together comprise the unfolding story of God's action in the world. Of course, the Bible contains large sections that are non-narrative in form – the ceremonial laws in Leviticus or the wisdom teachings in Proverbs. However, as Richard Bauckham has argued, while not all Scripture is generically narrative, 'The story Scripture tells, from creation to new creation, is the unifying element that holds literature of other genres together with narrative in an intelligible whole.'³

Referring to Scripture as 'story' needs to further qualification in order to avoid two unhelpful extremes. A form of liberalism can reduce biblical stories to fictional tales or folklore: 'Are you sitting comfortably?' However, 2 Peter 1.16 insists that the Scriptures bear witness to real history, not 'cleverly devised stories'. An opposite danger is a form of literalism that ignores the layers of editing and interpretation by biblical authors themselves. With this in mind, I have found helpful the distinction made by the literary scholar Gerard Genette between story (what occurred) and narrative (how it has been told).⁴ For example, the four Gospels do not give CCTV-style reporting of the life of Jesus, as if to objectively reconstruct what happened. Instead, the four evangelists draw creatively on eyewitness sources in order to narrate the story of Jesus as a form of testimony: 'These things are written that you might believe' (John 20.31).

With this in mind, perhaps the most useful way to grasp how the whole Bible forms an overarching story is through the idea of a drama or play, comprising several acts. This metaphor nicely conveys a dynamic sequence of scenes and acts that together form one coherent performance. Though the playwright remains out of sight, their purpose and intent plays out through the characters on stage. The application of this metaphor to the Bible has been given fresh energy in recent decades by the likes of Lesslie Newbigin and Tom Wright. More recently, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen have provided a helpful approach that structures the drama of Scripture in six acts:⁵

<i>Act 1: Creation</i>	God establishes his kingdom
<i>Act 2: Fall</i>	Rebellion in the kingdom
<i>Act 3: Israel</i>	The king chooses a covenant people
<i>Act 4: Christ</i>	The coming of the king
<i>Act 5: Church</i>	Spreading the news of the king
<i>Act 6: New Creation</i>	The return of the king

Taken as a whole, this drama encompasses God's action in the world as creator and redeemer, which in turn gives rise to a sacred history and a covenant

people who bear witness to it. Consequently, in order to safeguard a collective memory of 'the wondrous works that God has done' and to 'make known his deeds among all peoples' (Psalm 105.2, 5), the Bible provides an authoritative testimony to salvation history. Christianity is in essence not an ethic or a philosophy but a gospel story – the message of what God has done.

Understood this way, some striking features of the story of Scripture become apparent. Allow me to highlight three.

1. A universal story

The beginning (Genesis 1.1) and ending (Revelation 21.1,5) of the Bible frame the whole story on a cosmic scale – from the creation of the world to its ultimate consummation. Even when the horizons of the plot seem to shrink to a middle-eastern tent-dweller (Abraham), somehow the whole world is still in view – 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12.3). Throughout Israel's chequered history, key characters (e.g. Joseph, Ruth, Jonah), dramatic symbols (e.g. Solomon's Temple embroidered with creation imagery) and expansive prophecies (e.g. Isaiah 49.1–7; Micah 4.1–5) keep reframing Israel's story in the light of a cosmic vision. In particular, monotheism and election form two central tenets – Israel's God as the sovereign creator chose Israel for a larger redemptive purpose. In the New Testament, this vocation is revitalised in the Messiah's life, death and resurrection in order that the saving grace of God may once again go global to 'all nations' (Matthew 28.19).

The Bible therefore stakes a claim as universal history that encompasses all of created reality – past, present and future. The drama of Scripture 'offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'⁶ There is no larger story. International politics, scientific discovery and environmental catastrophe all fit within and play out of the larger narrative that Scripture contains. Whilst it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with the Bible's account and prefer alternative metanarratives (of which there are plenty), it is not possible to reduce the Bible to a mere court of appeal for religious matters or a pietistic handbook for the faithful. The very structure of the Bible defies such reductionism.

I listened to an episode of *Desert Island Discs*, that featured the English comedian Lee Mack. When he learned that the Bible came as standard on the imaginary island, his instinctive reply was fascinating: 'I would definitely take the Bible. After all, if aliens landed on planet earth and asked what's life all about, I'd say, "Well there's this book that purports to have the answers. He went on to admit: 'I've not actually read it. Isn't that crazy!' I think Lee Mack has a better understanding of the Bible than many religious people. It is not just a collection of pious sayings and moral rules. In its own unique way, the Bible purports to make sense of human life on planet earth. It is a universal story.

2. A messianic story

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* portrays someone inquiring about the location of a title at the counter of a large book store. The assistant searches on the computer and then replies: 'The Bible? ... That would be under self-help.'⁷ Contrary to popular culture and perhaps a few too many sermons, Scripture does not provide a neat set of DIY instructions. Instead, the whole story hinges on human the intervention of the Messiah. Understood from a Christian perspective, the entire Old Testament leans forward and anticipates the 'anointed one' who will embody Israel's vocation and redeem humanity. By the close of the Old Testament Israel is pregnant with promises that she herself cannot deliver. But as the virgin gives birth, ancient prophecies find their fulfillment: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given' (Isaiah 9.6; NIV). The Gospel writers depict this 'son' as a man in a particular historical context – a radical teacher and demonstrator of the kingdom of God whose words and actions redefine previous expectations of the Messiah.

However, only after the resurrection do the authors of the New Testament piece together the clues and reach an astonishing conclusion: the one who played the decisive role in the drama was none other than 'mighty God'. The playwright has indeed entered his own drama and walked on the stage of human history in the person of Jesus Christ. From the perspective of the resurrection, the story of Scripture bears witness to Christ who is the centre of gravity. As the risen Jesus demonstrated on the road to Emmaus, the Bible must in some sense be read back to front (Luke 24.25–27).⁸

The very plotline of the biblical drama therefore refutes every counter-narrative that asserts human autonomous action as the solution to the world's problems. The modernist grand narrative of human progression has become dominant in Western culture. It manifests itself in films, novels and box-sets that depict humans as the heroes who gain mastery over the world through their own ingenuity. However, the Bible has more in common with plotlines from fairy stories where humans face forces of chaos and evil beyond their control and require supernatural intervention to secure a happy ending.⁹ In the drama of Scripture, only the gracious intervention of God is sufficient to overcome the curses of this fallen world: 'while we were still weak ... Christ died for the ungodly' (Romans 5.6). The Christ event is, therefore, the definitive guide to the entire landscape of the Bible. As the medieval theologian Hugh of St Victor concluded: 'All divine scripture is one book, and this one book is Christ, speaks of Christ and finds its fulfillment in Christ.'¹⁰

3. An unfolding story

Across the front cover of a book I recently published there is an illustration of the entire Bible story. Toward the end, a modern-day character is depicted receiving a message on their mobile phone: 'You are here!' The drama of Scripture is still unfolding and

we are now immersed in its plotline with a part to play. Of course, within the Bible itself, the end of the story has already been secured and heralded from afar. The book of Revelation concludes with visions that anticipate the ultimate hope of a restored creation: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and he who was seated on the throne said "Behold, I am making all things new"' (Revelation 21.1,5). However, whilst the end is foretold and the canon of Scripture is closed, the actual story remains open and in play.¹¹ God's people are now called to embody the redemptive action of God in the world. The church inhabits the 'last days' within the drama during which the Spirit of the Messiah empowers his followers to bring hope to the world.

The Bible plays a crucial role in equipping God's people for action. To consider how this works, we return to the helpful analogy of a play. Tom Wright suggests we imagine a company of actors who discover a long-lost Shakespeare play.¹² It originally had six acts but only five have survived. The fifth act is missing. Even though the play is incomplete, it is generally agreed that it should be staged. To complete the play, the actors must work out the fifth act for themselves. To achieve this they must immerse themselves in the inner logic and heartbeat of the rest of the play, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time. Then through *faithful improvisation* the actors can perform the missing fifth act in keeping with the whole.

Conclusion

The Bible is a divine account of our human story, stretching back to the dawn of time and forwards into eternity. By immersing ourselves in the story, we can faithfully act it out in our modern context. Though the Bible does not directly address genetic engineering, gender dysphoria or Artificial Intelligence, we can confidently respond to contemporary scenarios through a process of faithful improvisation. This is now our task. The purpose of Scripture must not be reduced to a doctrinal backstop or therapeutic pick-me-up. The Bible provides a narrative framework that God's people are called to inhabit, a charter for our ongoing mission. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his Apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

The light of Christ needs to illumine every area of human life: the family, schools, culture, work, leisure and the other aspects of social life ... The word of God reaches men and women through an encounter with witnesses who make it present and alive.

Unlike a visit to the theatre, God's people experience the drama of Scripture not as spectators in the crowd but as actors on the stage. We must immerse ourselves in the story of the Bible in order to daily situate our fragile lives within this grand narrative. Then, we will have confidence not only to embody the plotline but also to share its message of hope with our world.

9. This point was made by CS Lewis and it underpins the narrative framework he developed in his fictional works. It is further elaborated by R Bauckham in, *The Bible in the Contemporary World: Hermeneutical Ventures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

10. *De Arca Noe*, 2.8.

11. This eschatological framework ensures we read Scripture as a narrative whose outcome is certain and yet also as an unfolding story that refuses closure and is never exhausted. Instead, the Bible story requires prophetic readings and creative retellings in every generation to respond to any given moment.

12. See NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to read the Bible today* (London: SPCK, 2013). Tom Wright uses the analogy of a five act play: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. The missing fifth act is the Church. By using the analogy of the six act play, I am adding a final part, New Creation, as discussed earlier in this article.