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Does the Bible Have a Big Story? Yes, for the Sake of Mission!

ALAN G. PADGETT

Even in our very visual and technological culture, stories still have the power to entice us, draw us in, and excite our imagination. As a community of faith we want to be able to connect our sacred writings with our lives and deepest values. Telling the stories of the Bible is one powerful way to create and sustain that connection, although it can be limited if we focus *only* on stories. We first introduce children to the biblical witness by telling simplified stories of the Bible, and this is wise. When we teach others about scripture as Christians, it is wise to introduce a big story of the scriptures as a heuristic device. People, young and old, easily relate to narratives. But does the Bible itself *have* one single story? Is narrative the dominant mode or genre of the biblical witness? My answer will be paradoxical. I first argue there is no such thing as the Big Story of the Bible; and then I will argue that there is.

When I first began to read the Bible as a new convert to Christianity, I was drawn to the teachings, parables, and wisdom sayings. It seemed to me that the narrative portions were interesting, at least sometimes, but not central to the meaning of the Bible for today. Over time, I realized just how narrow a view of the Bible that was! We need to value the stories in scripture in order to respect our full humanity. Narrative is not mere illustration of the important part, but a central and essential part of the biblical witness. We can learn a great deal about the biblical God or what it means to be human, for example, by paying attention to the narrative portions of Holy Writ. We learn about Jesus through stories, as well as songs and doctrines. All are important.

I now adopt a holistic view of the Bible when it comes to stories versus doctrine: no story, no teaching, and no genre provides a core or absolute center to scripture. They all contribute to a beautiful mosaic of diverse witnesses to the Messiah of Israel, Jesus the Savior. Thus, for the church at the highest level of authority stands not a creed, nor even Holy Writ, but a *living person*. Christ the Savior provides a key to interpreting his book, but he is neither a narrative nor a doctrine.

Granted the diversity of scripture, I do not think that the diversity of the written word of God is the last word. Given that there is no one single narrative of the

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Does the Bible Have a Big Story? Well, Only If We Don't Know the End!

DAVID E. FREDRICKSON

Just to be clear: it is not my intent simply to complain that practitioners of narrative theology reduce the many stories in the Bible to a single, master narrative. Some do; some don't. In any case, nothing I could here say will change the commitment readers in general have to frame Christianity with a beginning, middle, and an end. And that, really, is my beef.

I hope, though, that some readers are growing suspicious when they come across immodest phrases like “the story of God” or “the thread from Genesis to Revelation.” This would be a good thing, I think, since the future of Christianity hinges on its embrace of diversity. Still, my worry is that, having rejected the worst examples of reductionism, Christian leaders will fall back on a softer brand of narrative theology.

In spite of these reservations, I myself am close to getting on the narrative theology bandwagon. Years ago, I was a teaching assistant for Hans Frei, a patriarch of current practices of reading the Bible as story. He performed his hermeneutical theory and didn't just preach it. Each of his lectures over the semester on nineteenth-century philosophy and theology ended with a cliffhanger; no soap opera ever held my attention more than the story he spun of thought from Hegel to Barth. So I'm on board, provided that I am given one quite specific assurance: that the goal of narrative theology, stated or covert, is not assurance. The thing is, I like my stories open-ended. I want to be able to say, “Boy, I didn't see that coming!” I want to watch the storyteller herself light up in astonishment saying, “Neither did I.” I am teaching, after all, in an institution presumably dedicated to *faith*. “Don't dish up certainty!” ought to be our mission statement. We should be telling stories, indeed, but ones that we don't *know* the end of.

So, you can understand why, in spite of my pleasant, youthful encounter with the non-eclipse of biblical narrative, any fondness I might have for theology as story cools rapidly when I read Luke 1:1–4. Still, I have to read this passage, because it's one of the few places a biblical author discusses the term “narrative.” Luke-Acts is not ashamed of its Stoic understanding of history as the work of God who planned, managed, and perfected the crucial happenings of Jesus and the church.

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Bible, there do seem to be key events or happenings in the biblical witness that are essential to understanding the whole. But which ones—if any?

So I agree that *we* create any overarching narrative of scripture, but not out of nothing. Still, why bother to create such a unifying story? Why not just read the Bible itself? The short answer is twofold: the gospel and our callings in Christ. Telling stories is a powerful means to entice, draw in, teach, and excite the imagination of people, not excluding those seeking to know the Bible and follow Christ. We have excellent vocational reasons for seeking to retell the story of scripture as a whole in some kind of narrative coherence. What is more, the God of the gospel wants the good news to be enculturated again and again, in every tongue, time, and tribe. This missionary calling of Christian folk has meant the scripture is cherished, translated, and taught to young and old wherever this God is worshiped. So we have excellent evangelical and spiritual reasons to keep on telling a unified story of scripture, even though there is none in creed or canon.

But what about the Apostles' Creed or other confessions? Don't they provide this already in some ways? The simple, plain fact is they do not and were never meant to. Against some who complain that creeds and confessions are not proper summaries of scripture, such texts of our public and common confession are important *but not for that reason*. Our written ecumenical creeds were never meant to be Bible summaries.

We have cleared away some misunderstanding and obstacles concerning our common calling to teach, preach, and so *tell the story* of scripture. For me, there are eight key events in the biblical story: (1) creation and the spread of human evil; (2) the call of Abraham and Sarah; (3) the story of the exodus, Moses, and the founding of Israel; (4) establishing then dividing the Kingdom of Israel; (5) idolatry, the great prophets, the exile and return; (6) Jesus the Messiah (life, teachings, death and resurrection, and present reign); (7) birth and early history of the church, and (8) the promise of the return of the Messiah and the new creation. Even when we put these elements from scripture together, they do not form a unified story, of course. The details, and even the key events, are always open to discussion and revision. But there does seem to be a Big Story here in embryo, and telling the story anew is important for the church's mission and worship in every age and tongue. ⊕

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Moreover, this passage is a very sophisticated piece of writing deserving recognition since it exhibits the periodic style in which clauses are manipulated, tortured even, so that the most important word can be saved for the last word, in this case ἀσφάλεια. The word means assurance, certainty, non-slippage; in short, no surprises. But this word—the goal of Luke-Acts—spoils narrative for me. When it comes to stories, I want to be on board, not bored.

And it is not just the author's last word that drives toward certainty. Each word leading up to it reiterates the assurance that I (the writer of this piece, professor in an institution that promotes faith, of all things) need to avoid if I hope ever to become a faithful Christian. The ancient writer assures me that the previous attempts to order a narrative (whose attempts? the writer of Mark?) were carried out by hacks. What else could these πολλοὶ, these many, the vulgar mob be? Incompetent historians they were, dealing in one damn thing after another (πραγμάτων). They failed to see the *fullness* of events that I, O Theophilus, see—a fullness that spills over into consciousness as certainty, confidence. Stick with me, most excellent Theophilus, and I will tell the story in such a way that the things that happened to Jesus and the expansion of the church aren't just one thing happening after another but the unfolding of God's intention for the world.

But I have a soft spot in my heart for hacks, being one myself. The great thing about being a hack is the occasional surprise inexpertise brings. I wonder if the writer of Mark found this out, too: he or she didn't know (or didn't care) that the first half of Mark 1:2 is not anywhere to be found in Isaiah the prophet. But that is only the tip of the iceberg of non-knowing in the Gospel of Mark. Here is a real surprise. Even God doesn't know how the story will turn out, although God thinks so—or God perhaps is the slyest of ironists: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.’” “I” is God. “My messenger” is John the Baptist. “You” and “your” refer to Jesus. And what about “prepare”? Does John do it by preaching repentance or does he do it for the Crucified One by having his own head chopped off? What is God telling Jesus? What will his story be? Did you see that coming? Did God? ⊕

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