

# THE224 Christian Narrative 2 Redemption

Reading 2

Goheen, “Reading the Bible as One Story”

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# READING THE BIBLE AS ONE STORY<sup>1</sup>

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## *Starting with the Gospel*

In this paper I would like to address the issue of reading the Bible as one story. It would be tempting to begin with the idea of story and then argue that the Bible conforms to this idea. I think one could proceed this way, although it would run the risk of starting with a category alien to Scripture and then fitting the gospel to that category. Perhaps it would be better to begin where all our thinking should start, i.e. with the gospel.

Jesus announced good news: ‘The kingdom of God is breaking into history.’ This is not the kind of announcement that could be relegated to the religion page of a newspaper. This is world news—front page stuff! This is headline news on CNN. It was an announcement that God’s healing power was invading history in Jesus and by the Spirit to restore the whole creation to again live under the gracious rule of God. His proclamation of good news stood as the climactic moment of a story of God’s redemptive work told in the Old Testament that stretched back to God’s promise to Adam and Eve. Jesus announced that the power of God to renew the entire creation was now present in Jesus by the Spirit. This liberating power was demonstrated in Jesus’ life and deeds, and explained by his words. At the cross he battled the power of evil and gained the decisive victory. In his resurrection he entered as the firstborn into the resurrection life of the new creation. Before his ascension he commissioned his followers to continue his mission of making the gospel known until he returned. He now reigns in power at the right hand of God over all creation and by His Spirit is making known his restoring and comprehensive rule through His people as they embody and proclaim the good news. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. But until then the church has been taken up into the Spirit’s work of making the good news of the kingdom known.

From this brief summary of the gospel, the following observations are important for our subject. First, the gospel is a redirecting *power*. It is not first of all doctrine or theology, nor is it worldview, but the renewing power of God unto salvation. The gospel is the instrument of God’s Spirit to restore all of creation.

Second, the gospel is *restorative*, that is, Jesus announces the restoration of the creation from sin. The most basic categories present in the gospel are creation, fall, and redemption. Jesus’ announcement declares a resounding ‘yes’ to his good creation and at the same time a definitive ‘no’ to the sin that has defiled it. The gospel is about the restoration and renewal of the creation from sin. In the history of the Western church redemption has often been misunderstood to be salvation *from* the creation rather than salvation *of* the creation. In the proclamation of the gospel Jesus announces that he is liberating the good creation from the power of sin.

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<sup>1</sup> The substance of two keynote addresses given at the ‘Inhabiting the Biblical Story’ conference at the Victorian University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand, 16 July 2005.

Third, the gospel is *comprehensive* in its scope. The gospel Jesus announced was a gospel of the kingdom. Surprisingly even though this was the central category of Jesus' proclamation and ministry it has often disappeared into obscurity. The result has been a greatly reduced scope of salvation, limited to humanity, even human souls. Scripturally, the kingdom is about God's reign over his entire creation; the kingdom stresses the all-encompassing nature of the salvation Jesus embodied, announced, and accomplished. The gospel which forms the lens through which we look at the world is the *power* of God through which the exalted Christ, on the basis of his death and resurrection, *restores all of life* by His Spirit to again live under His authority and Word.

The fourth observation is central to our topic: Jesus and the good news that he announces is the fulfillment of a long *story* that unfolds in the Old Testament. Jesus' arrival into history is into a Jewish community who was looking for the ending and climax of a long story of God's redemptive acts. All Jews knew that this story was leading up to the grand culmination when God would act decisively and finally to redeem the world. They disagreed on who would do it, how it would be done, when it would happen, and how they were to live until it did. But they all recognized that the story of God's redemptive acts was moving toward a consummation. Jesus announces that he is the goal of this redemptive story. So, on the one hand, if we are to understand the gospel of Jesus we must see Jesus in the context of the Old Testament story (cf. Luke 24:25-27). On the other hand, if we are to properly understand the Biblical story, we must see it through the lens of Jesus and the gospel (cf. John 5:36-57; Luke 24:44-45). But not only is Jesus the climactic moment in the story, he points forward to the end. The end has not yet come (Acts 1:6-7). Thus attending to Jesus points us back to a story told in the Old Testament, and forward to the end of the story.

There is a final observation: the church is essential to the gospel. That is, Jesus did not make provision for the communication of the good news through history and in every culture until the end of the story by writing a book as did Mohammed. Rather he formed a community to be the bearer of this good news. Their identity is bound up in their being sent by Jesus to make known the good news of the kingdom. The story of the Bible is their life.

### *Human Life is Shaped by Some Story*

All of human life is shaped by some story. Consider the following event: A fox compliments a crow and tells it that it has a lovely voice. He asks it to sing a song. What is the meaning of this event? It is not too difficult to see that the meaning of this event can only be understood in terms of some story. Perhaps the fox wants to eat the crow and this compliment is a ploy to get the crow to drop its guard. Perhaps the fox is a kind-hearted fox that simply wants to encourage the poor crow. Perhaps the fox is a tone-deaf choir director seeking to begin a choir among the forest animals. Clearly these three stories would give the event different meanings. In fact, this event is part of an Aesop's fable. There is a famine in the forest and the crow sits perched in a tree with a piece of cheese in its mouth. The various animals try to get the cheese with different methods. The fox compliments the crow and the foolish bird opens its mouth to sing. The cheese falls out and the fox runs away with it. The moral of the story is don't be deceived by flattery.

This little exercise illustrates that an event can only be understood in the context of a narrative framework. So it is with our lives. Lesslie Newbigin puts it this way: ‘The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part?’<sup>2</sup> What Newbigin is referring to here is not a linguistically constructed narrative world that we choose to live in. Rather it is to speak of story as the essential shape of a worldview, as an interpretation of cosmic history that gives meaning to human life. Story provides the deepest structural framework in which human life is to be understood. There is no more fundamental way in which human beings interpret their lives than through a story. N. T. Wright says that ‘a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is*.’<sup>3</sup> It is because the world has been created by God in a temporal way that story can help us understand the way the world is. Brian Walsh says that ‘because the world is temporal, in process, a worldview always entails a story, a myth which provides its adherents with an understanding of their own role in the global history of good and evil. Such a story tells us who we are in history and why we are here.’<sup>4</sup>

If one lives in a culture shaped by the Western story there are two stories that are on offer: the Biblical and the humanist. Newbigin points out that

In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery of nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God’s election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. These are two different and incompatible stories.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of things that can be said about both of these stories. (1) Both of these stories claim to tell the true story of the world. They are in the language of postmodernism ‘metanarratives’ or in the language of Hegel, claims to be ‘universal history.’ (2) Consequently both of these stories are comprehensive. That is, they claim the whole of our lives—social, cultural, political, and individual. (3) Both of these stories are embodied by a community. They are not simply the fruit of individual experience and insight but stories that shape whole communities. The Western cultural community is shaped by the humanist story. The church is the new humankind that is shaped by the Biblical story. (4) Both of these stories are religious; they are rooted in faith commitments or ultimate assumptions. Contrary to the claim that the humanist story is ‘neutral’ or ‘secular’ while the Biblical story is ‘religious’, both stories are rooted in ultimate commitments or beliefs. (5) As both stories claim to tell the true story of the world, they issue an invitation to all hearers to come live in the story, and pursue its goals.

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<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N.T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*, London: SPCK, 40. Italics added.

<sup>4</sup> Walsh, Worldviews, Modernity, and the Task of Christian College Education, in *Faculty Dialogue* 18 (Fall 1992), 6.

<sup>5</sup>Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 15-16.

The humanist and Biblical stories are to some degree incompatible; they tell two different stories. It will be evident that if the church is faithful to its story there will be to some degree a clash of stories.

### *The Bible Tells One Story*

The Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and humanity's fall into sin. As N.T. Wright has put it, the divine drama told in Scripture 'offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'<sup>6</sup>

When we speak of the biblical story as a narrative we are making an *ontological* claim. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is. There is no more fundamental way to speak about the nature of God's world than to speak of it in terms of a story. Nor is the biblical story to be understood simply as a local tale about a certain ethnic group or religion. It makes a *comprehensive* claim about the world: it is public truth. The biblical story encompasses all of reality—north, south, east, west, past, present, and future. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. It, therefore, makes a comprehensive claim; our stories, our reality must find a place in this story. As Loughlin has put it: The Biblical story is 'omnivorous: it seeks to overcome our reality.'<sup>7</sup> Hans Frei makes the same point when he quotes Auerbach's striking contrast between Homer's *Odyssey* and the Old Testament story. Speaking of the Biblical story he says: 'Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history . . . Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.'<sup>8</sup>

This insight has been gaining ground in various areas of philosophy and theology. In philosophical ethics Alasdair MacIntyre states that I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story do I find myself a part?"<sup>9</sup> In practical theology, for example, C. V. Gerkin says 'This sense in which practical theological thinking is grounded in narrative is, of course, rooted in the faith that *the Bible provides us with an overarching narrative in which all other narratives of the world are nested*. The Bible is the story of God. The story of the world is first and foremost the story of God's activity in creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world to fulfill God's purposes for it.'<sup>10</sup> In theological ethics Stanley Hauerwas contends that 'the narrative character of Christian convictions is neither incidental nor accidental to Christian belief. There is no more fundamental way to talk of God than in a story. The fact that we come to know God through the recounting of the story of Israel and the life of Jesus is decisive for our truthful understanding of the kind of God we worship as well

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<sup>6</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 41-42.

<sup>7</sup> Loughlin, G., *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, 3.

<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981, 216.

<sup>10</sup> Gerkin, C.V. 1986. *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 49.

as the world in which we exist.<sup>11</sup> Sidney Greidanus believes it is important for preaching to hold that ‘Scripture teaches one universal kingdom history that encompasses all of created reality: past, present, and future. . . . its vision of history extends backward all the way to the beginning of time and forward all the way to the last day. . . . the biblical vision of history spans time from the first creation to the new creation, encompassing all of created reality.’<sup>12</sup> Newbigin states further the importance of story for preaching: ‘Preaching is the announcing of news, the telling of a narrative. In a society that has a different story to tell about itself, preaching has to be firmly and unapologetically rooted in the real story.’<sup>13</sup> And finally, in Biblical studies N. T. Wright wants to proceed with a method that joins ‘together the three enterprises of literary, historical and theological study of the New Testament and to do so in particular by the use of the category of “story.”’<sup>14</sup>

And yet it is the case that often Christians do not see the Bible as one story. A Hindu scholar of the world’s religions once said to Lesslie Newbigin:

I can’t understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.<sup>15</sup>

We have fragmented the Bible into bits—moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way there is no comprehensive grand narrative to withstand the power of the comprehensive humanist narrative that shapes our culture. The Bible bits are accommodated to the more comprehensive cultural story, and it becomes *that* story—i.e. the cultural story—that shapes our lives.

### *The Bible as a Six Act Play*

In *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of the Bible* we have attempted to tell the story of the Bible in six acts.<sup>16</sup> In Act One God calls into being a marvellous creation. He creates human beings in his image to live in fellowship with him

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<sup>11</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley. 1983. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Greidanus, Sidney. 1988. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 95.

<sup>13</sup> In another place, Newbigin (*A Word In Season*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, 204-205) speaks of his personal Bible reading, but his words could as easily be applied to his understanding of preaching: ‘I more and more find the precious part of each day to be the thirty or forty minutes I spend each morning before breakfast with the Bible. All the rest of the day I am bombarded with the stories that the world is telling about itself. I am more and more skeptical about these stories. As I take time to immerse myself in the story that the Bible tells, my vision is cleared and I see things in another way. I see the day that lies ahead in its place in God’s story.’

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Newbigin, 1999, *A Walk Through the Bible*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 4. See also Lesslie Newbigin, 1989, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 89.

and to explore and care for the riches of his creation. In Act Two humanity refuses to live under the Creator's word, and chooses to seek life apart from Him. It results in disaster; the whole creation is brought into the train of human rebellion. In Act Three God chooses a people, Israel, to embody his creational and redemptive purposes for the world. Israel is formed into a people and placed on the land to shine as a light. They fail in their calling. Yet God promises through the prophets that Israel's failure will not derail His plan. In Act Four God sends Jesus. Jesus carries out Israel's calling as a faithful light to the world. But he does more: He defeats the power of sin at the cross, rises from the dead inaugurating the new creation, and pours out His Spirit that his people might taste of this coming salvation. Before he takes His position of authority over the creation he gathers his disciples together and tells them: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' Act Five tells us the story of the church's mission from Jerusalem to Rome in the first hundred or so years. But the story ends on an incomplete note. The story is to continue; the church's mission is to continue in all places until Jesus returns. We are invited into this story to witness to the comprehensive rule of God in Jesus coming at the goal of history. Act Six is a yet future act. Jesus will return and complete his restoration work.

We might ask how this story might be authoritative for our lives. N. T. Wright believes that the authority of the biblical story is tied up with its overarching narrative form. He offers a rich metaphor to explicate this authority.<sup>17</sup> Imagine that a Shakespearian play is discovered for the first time but most of the fifth act is missing. The decision to stage the play is made. The first four acts and the remnant of the fifth act are given to well-trained and experienced Shakespearian actors who immerse themselves both in the first part of the play and in the culture and time of Shakespeare. They are told to work out the concluding fifth act for themselves.

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

This metaphor provides a specific analogy for how the biblical story might function authoritatively to shape the life of the believing community. Wright sees the biblical story as consisting of four acts – creation, fall, Israel, Jesus – plus the first scene of the fifth act that narrates the beginning of the church's mission. Furthermore this fifth act offers hints at how the play is to end. Thus the church's life is lived out consistent with the forward

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<sup>16</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. We are dependant on N. T. Wright for the metaphor of a drama. He explicates the Biblical story in five acts ('How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?', *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991) 7-32; and *The New Testament and the People of God*. London: SPCK, 1992, 139-143). Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton add a sixth act (*Truth is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995, 182). We follow Walsh and Middleton, and use the latter structure. See our website [www.biblicalthology.ca](http://www.biblicalthology.ca) for resources on using the book including a seven page summary of the Biblical story.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, 'How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?' and *The New Testament and the People of God*, 139-143.

impetus of the first acts and moving toward and anticipating the intended conclusion. The first scene of act five, the church's story, begins to draw out and implement the significance of the first four acts, especially act four. The church continues today to do the same in fresh and creative ways in new cultural situations. This requires a patient examination and thorough immersion in what act four is all about, how act four is to be understood in light of acts one through three, and how the first scene of act five faithfully carries forward act four.

This view of the authority of the Biblical story assumes a clear understanding of our place in the story. It is important not only to understand that the Bible is one cosmic story of the world but also where we are at in the story. The Old Testament looked to a time when the kingdom of God would be ushered in in fullness. This was the goal of God's redemptive work. When Jesus emerged he announced the arrival of the kingdom yet it did not come as expected. Examining the gospels and listening to Jesus we hear that the kingdom of God is *already* here but *not yet* arrived. What can this mean? If my wife tells me that our guests from out of town are already here but not yet arrived I would wonder what on earth she is saying. How can the kingdom be already here but not yet arrived? And what is the significance of the 'already-not yet' time period of the coming kingdom?

First we have been given a foretaste of the kingdom. The gospels often compare the kingdom to a feast, a banquet. When the end comes we will enjoy the full banquet of the kingdom. However, the church has been given a *foretaste* of that kingdom banquet. A foretaste of the kingdom constitutes us as witnesses. The reason we have been offered a foretaste of the salvation of the end is so that we can witness to that salvation. Let me offer another illustration. The people of God are like a movie preview or trailer. A movie trailer gives *actual footage* of the movie that is coming in the future *so that people will want to watch it*. The people of God are a kingdom preview. We embody the salvation of the kingdom which is coming in the future so that people will see it and want it. That is what the witness is all about. We are a sign that points to the coming of the fullness of the kingdom in the future. We witness to its presence and its future consummation. A biblical witness is a witness to the kingdom, to God's rule over all of human life.

The worldview significance of our place in the story can be illustrated by N. T. Wright's reflection on worldview. In their popular book on worldview, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh argue that the Bible provides a worldview by answering foundational questions that shape our lives. Those questions are: Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the remedy?<sup>18</sup> Wright follows Walsh and Middleton in his masterly discussion of the importance of worldview for New Testament studies.<sup>19</sup> Four years later in his second volume he writes that there is a fifth question that needs to be added to the other four, a question that is fundamental for human life. That question is 'what time is it?' He says: 'Since writing *The New Testament and the People of God* I have realized that 'what time is it?' needs adding to the four questions I started with (though at what point in the order could be discussed further). Without it, the structure collapses into timelessness which characterizes some non-Judaeo-Christian worldviews.

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<sup>18</sup> Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1984, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, N. T., *The New Testament and the People of God*, 29-144.



## *Heading Off Misunderstandings*

Saying that the Bible is one unfolding story could lead to misunderstandings. So it would be good to say a few words to head off some of those misconceptions. First by saying that the Bible is one unfolding story I am not saying that the Bible is a nice neat novel. It is not a single volume but a ‘sprawling, capacious narrative.’<sup>20</sup> In his discussion on the Bible as a metanarrative Richard Bauckham states that the ‘Bible does *not* have a carefully plotted single story-line, like, for example a conventional novel. It is a sprawling collection of narratives along with much non-narrative material that stands in a variety of relationships to the narratives.’<sup>21</sup> He continues that major stretches of the main story are told more than once in divergent ways; there are a plurality of angles on the same subject matter (for example, the gospels). He points further to many ways in which there is a ‘profusion and sheer untidiness of the narrative materials.’<sup>22</sup> He concludes that all this ‘makes any sort of *finality* in summarizing the biblical story inconceivable.’<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, the Bible is not *only* a narrative document. There are many other genres of literature in the Bible as well. Newbigin states that while the ‘Bible is essentially narrative in form’ that ‘it contains, indeed, much else: prayer, poetry, legislation, ethical teaching and so on.’ Yet, he maintains, ‘essentially it is a story.’<sup>24</sup> James Barr differs radically with Newbigin (and me) on what exactly story means. Yet he too sees the overall shape of Scripture as a narrative within which other genres of Scripture fit. Here is how he puts it:

... in my conception all of the Bible counts as ‘story.’ A people’s story is not necessarily purely narrative: materials of many kinds may be slotted into a narrative structure, and this is done in the Hebrew Bible. Thus legal materials are inserted and appear, almost entirely, as part of the Moses story. In this case they are incorporated into the narrative. Others are more loosely attached: songs and hymns of the temple and of individuals, mostly collected in the Book of Psalms but some slotted into the narratives as in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. . . . Wisdom books: whether . . . they came from Solomon, or because they were general lore of Israel, they are part of the story also. In the New Testament the letters of great leaders, and an apocalyptic book like Revelation, form part of the story, along with the more strictly narrative writings. Thus in general, although not all parts of the Bible are narrative, the narrative character of the story elements provides a better framework into which the non-narrative parts may be fitted than any framework based on the non-narrative parts into which the story elements could be fitted.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Peterson, Eugene. ‘Living into God’s Story.’ This article originally appeared on the website ‘The Ooze: Conversation for a Journey’ ([www.theooze.com](http://www.theooze.com)). It can be accessed at <http://www.churchcrossing.com/articles.cfm?fuseaction=articledetail&122>

<sup>21</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Bauckham, Ibid, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 81.

<sup>25</sup> James Barr. *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, 356.

A third misunderstanding is tied up with the notion of story. In some approaches to narrative theology—in fact, in Barr’s understanding above—the notion of story enables the reader to ignore questions of historicity. Story may be only a linguistically constructed narrative by a religious community, and no more than that. Yet I use story to speak of an interpretation of history. It is important that these events really happened. The Bible requires ‘a reality that corresponds to it.’<sup>26</sup> The historicity of the narrative matters: ‘. . . it is of the very essence of the matter that the events and places which you read in your Bible are part of the real world and the real history—the same world in which you live . . .’<sup>27</sup>

### *The Importance of Understanding the Bible as One Story*

The importance of understanding the Bible as one story can be seen by noting Newbigin’s notion of a missionary encounter. A missionary encounter is the normal position the church assumes in its culture if it is faithful. It assumes two comprehensive yet incompatible stories. The Bible tells one story about the world and human life while another equally all-embracing story shapes out culture. Christian discipleship always takes cultural shape. So in the life of the Christian community there will be an encounter between two equally comprehensive stories. When the church really believes that its story is true and shapes their whole lives by it, the foundational idolatrous faith, assumed in the cultural story, will be challenged. As the church challenges that story it offers a credible alternative; it calls for conversion. It is an invitation to see and live in the world in the light of another story. Our place in the story is to embody the end and invite others into that true story.

If the church is to be faithful to its missionary calling, it must recover the Bible as one true story according to Newbigin: ‘I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives – both personal and public.’<sup>28</sup> If the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits it can easily be absorbed into the reigning story of culture rather than challenging it. Newbigin’s recognition of this, and thus his passion for the importance of seeing the Bible as one story, comes from his missionary experience. In India he saw how easy it was for the Bible to be absorbed into a more comprehensive and alien worldview. The Bible as one comprehensive story in contrast to the comprehensive worldview of Hinduism was a matter of life and death in India. In the West it is equally serious. A fragmented Bible, then, can lead to a church that is unfaithful, syncretistically accommodated to the idolatry of its cultural story. Or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, a church without a comprehensive story to withstand the power of the cultural story will be ‘conformed to the world’ (Romans 12:1-2).

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<sup>26</sup> Fackre, Gabriel. *Narrative Theology from an Evangelical Perspective*, in Yandell, K.E., ed., *Faith and Narrative*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 197.

<sup>27</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. ‘Response to “Word of God?”’, John Coventry SJ, *The Gospel and our Culture Newsletter* 8, 1991, 2