

Biblical Foundations for Chronological Bible Storying

The Bible as a whole is "the greatest story ever told." In its parts, it is composed of multiple stories that, when considered chronologically, presents the "greatest story ever told" in a panorama that encompasses all of the peoples of the world and all of time--past, present and future. Many of the greatest stories that people, religious and secular, remember, treasure, love to tell, and used in teaching are found in the Bible. Some of the most significant teachings in the Bible are housed within stories. The Bible is God's storybook, for it is grounded in revelatory history that tells "His Story." At least two-thirds of the Bible is written in a narrative format.

When one reflects upon lessons learned from the event of the fall in Genesis, one does not reference the teachings of Adam and Eve, but the "story of Adam and Eve." Great events of the Bible often focus on a story. For instance, there is the story of Israel's King David, who, during a war, with his leading "general" and patriot Uriah on the front lines in the midst of the battle, took Uriah's wife and then tried to cover up his sin, which ultimately resulted in David's command to allow Uriah to be killed in battle. God summoned his prophet to go to David and confront him with his sin. Nathan went as he was told and chose to use a story as his tool in confronting David with his sin. He told the story of a poor shepherd with only one lamb, the pride and joy of his family, which a wealthy neighbor coveted to the point of taking for himself. David, as King, passed judgement on the man in the story and determined that the man must be punished, only to hear from the mouth of the prophet, and thus from God, that "thou art the man." The story does what no amount of exposition, precepts and teachings could do. In fact, with every reading, it seems that previously unseen precepts and teachings flow out of the story. Is there a limit to what can be stored in a story?

As the early church was forming and as the leaders of the first church in Jerusalem became the initial evangelists and the early targets of persecution, one finds Steven (Acts 6:8-8:1) literally drug before the Council for quick judgement and one last chance to "speak his peace" before being stoned to death. Steven did not outline, exegete or run through proof texts concerning Christianity and Christ's teaching as a last testimony to his hearers, the political and religious leaders of Israel. Instead, he told them a story that he began with Abraham and carried chronologically through the Old Testament to the prophets, with every intention, it seems of laying more foundations by moving on through the rest of the Old Testament to the story of Jesus. However, in the telling of his story, once he linked Jesus, the "Just One" with the host of Israel's great ones, the Council cut off Steven's testimony and stoned him immediately. Enough of Steven's story was told for the Holy Spirit to use it to forever impact Saul, later called Paul, a man who held Steven's clothes. Steven, and ultimately the Lord, won, for we find Saul later totally rearranging and retelling his story of salvation to include Jesus Christ. Once the Holy Spirit brought spiritual life to Paul, he forever told his stories in harmony with the stories as Steven told them.

Steven named eleven individuals in his narrative: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Hamor's sons, Shechem, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, and "Jesus," the Just One.

The great "faith chapter" of the Bible, Hebrews 11, is another example. The foundation for Hebrews is a series of Old Testament stories that begin with creation in chapter 1 and move to Jesus Christ. The entire book is an attempt to harmonize the Christian story with the Jewish story of Israel. Chapter 11 of Hebrews is almost a summary before the end of the book. In an effort to explain and illustrate faith, the author starts with creation and moves

through the Old Testament chronologically to Jesus Christ. In fact, the author does not get to Jesus until, what is now our Bible's chapter 12, verse 2, which, is the greater, or better promise. The Hebrew list of names contains many of the same names as does Steven, but each list has its own distinctions. The list each used was chosen to fit the occasion as determined by the hearers. There were nineteen persons named in the faith chronology: Abel, Cain, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and Jesus Christ.

When discussing storying and its Biblical basis, one sooner or later asks about Paul's position and materials. It seems to some that Paul's writings are very Hellenistic, filled with Aristotelian type logical progressions and foreign to a story format. It has already been mentioned that it was a story, or a series of stories, that impacted Paul as he heard Steven's testimony. Numerous scholars have explored Paul's writings from this perspective, and increasing numbers are continuing to explore Paul's communication styles and approaches. N. T. Wright is one of those scholars, and he quotes others in his book, *The People of God*. He reminds us that each person possesses a worldview as to what is right, wrong, and how things should function in every day life for their world to be normal. This worldview, for each individual, is housed in stories deep within, and as individuals are challenged by circumstances and people, the last line of defense are those stories. Wright says that one can tell the battle has reached its most serious point when the combatants pull out their stories in a last attempt to win. He says you can tell, if anyone did win, and who among the combatants did win by listening to their stories after the battle is over. The one who lost is the one who rearranged and retold their stories to include the perspective of and to harmonize their stories with those of the adversary. The one whose stories impacted the worldview of the other, won. Stories are the last frontier in a fight between worldviews. The sooner one gets to the basic stories, the sooner the chance of victory arises, that is, if their stories are effective. Wright does not see the stories as a brash, frontal attack, but a more tactful approach. He says: "Where head-on attack would certainly fail, the parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favor which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety. The Lord promised in Isaiah that His word, His stories, if you please, will not come back empty of impact and victory. Wright says: ". . . the subversive story comes close enough to the story already believed by the hearer for a spark to jump between them: and nothing will ever be quite the same again."

Wright claims, along with others, that Paul's "teachings" are nothing more than extensions of the Old Testament stories that he had in mind as he wrote his letters to the churches and to leaders of the early churches.

But what about Paul? Surely he forswore the story-form, and discussed God, Jesus, the Spirit, Israel and the world in much more abstract terms? Was he not thereby leaving behind the world of Jewish story-theology, and going off on his own into the rarefied territory of abstract Hellenistic speculation? The answer is an emphatic no. As has been recently shown in relation to some key areas of Paul's writing, the apostle's most emphatically 'theological' statements and arguments are in fact expressions of the essentially Jewish story now redrawn around Jesus. This can be seen most clearly in his frequent statements, sometimes so compressed as to be almost formulaic, about the cross and resurrection of Jesus: what is in fact happening is that Paul is telling, again and again, the whole story of God, Israel and the world as now compressed into

the story of Jesus.

Paul does give his own opinion about the use of Biblical stories. Through a study of I Corinthians 10, Paul's views concerning the Old Testament are evident. In verse 6 he says: "Now these things (references earlier to events that occurred in the wilderness) became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted." He says that the Old Testament stories were given by God for us to learn and hold up as examples concerning how God works, His attitude toward people's actions and reactions to the events of daily living. The stories are examples, or patterns for us to explore and use in knowing and following God. As if that were not enough said about the place of Old Testament events and the stories that tell us about them, he comments on them again in verse 11. He says: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come." This verse is even more explicit and informative concerning Paul's position on stories and storying. He says that the Old Testament events, in this case the wilderness wanderings, happened not just for the people involved, but happened and were caused to be written for all who followed after that time. They are to serve as examples and admonitions until the end of time. In fact, Paul says the end of the ages are founded on truths and events coming out of those days.

This should make it easier for us to understand what is meant when N. T. Wright and other scholars tell us that Paul's writings are based upon Old Testament stories that he had in mind as he penned them.

The ultimate example is the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The question is: "How did he look upon stories and their value in communicating His Gospel?" The place in the New Testament where Jesus' position is more clearly presented and understood, happens to be within a passage that is also controversial. The controversy is not should the text be included. The controversy has centered on the meaning of what Jesus said at one point in the passage about some of those in His audience. Some might rightfully be a bit nervous concerning the use of that passage to establish Jesus' position on stories and storying.

In Mark 4:1, Jesus, who is residing in the northern part of Palestine at the time, is beside the sea addressing increasing numbers of people who live in that region. Verse 2 tells us that "He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: . . ." First, in verses 1 and 2, Mark says that Jesus is "teaching." Teaching, as understood in this passage came by means of "parables." Therefore, from Jesus' perspective, teaching is "storying and storying is teaching". This perspective was underlined later in the passage when Mark says in verses 32 and 33, which are beyond the controversial verse 11, "And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples." Here Mark says that stories, or parables, were the main vehicle that Jesus used in communicating truth to the common people and to His disciples. In fact, Mark says that Jesus would not teach without using a parable, a story, as the focus of the message.

Brooks is quoted by Joseph S. Exell in *The Biblical Illustrator* as saying: "He (Jesus) could have expressed Himself at a higher rate than any mortal can; He could have soared to the clouds; He could have knit such knots they could never untie. But He would not. He delighted to speak to His hearers' shallow capacities (John 16:12)." Exell continues by quoting Guthrie who said: "With matter Divine and manner human, our Lord descended to the level of the humblest of the crowd, lowering Himself to their understandings, and winning His way into their hearts by borrowing His topics from familiar circumstances and scenes around Him. And later, he quotes T. L. Cuyler who said: "I have generally found that the most intellectual auditors prefer to hear a simple scriptural and spiritual preaching. The late Judge McLean, of

the United States Supreme Court once said to me, 'I was glad to hear you give that solemn personal incident in your discourse last night. Ministers now-a-days are getting above telling a story in a sermon; but I like it.'

Richard Trench also addressed the issue of the power of a story, a parable, when he said:

Had our Lord spoken naked spiritual truth, how many of his words, partly from his hearers' lack of interest in them, partly from their lack of insight, would have passed away from their hearts and memories, and left no trace behind them. But being imparted to them in this form, under some lively image, in some short and perhaps seemingly paradoxical sentence, or in some brief but interesting narrative, the aroused attention, excited inquiry, and even if the truth did not at the moment, by the help of illustration used, find an entrance into the mind, yet the words must thus have fixed themselves in their memories and remained by them.

After Jesus told the story of the sower and the soils, the disciples were confused by it, and asked Jesus to explain it to them. Ignoring, for the time being, the controversial verse related to reason why understanding on the part of the people existed, and focusing on the disciples, it is observed that Jesus took the disciples aside and "explained" the story, the parable, to them. It is very important to notice that Jesus did not shift to an expositional format or style of presentation, but followed carefully the parable, providing the identification of the different characters in the parable. The integrity of the story was maintained throughout as the focus of Jesus' "explanation" to the disciples. This is said not to argue for storying, and against expository types of teaching or preaching. It is to argue that: as the audience is composed of oral communicators, one should follow the lead of Jesus and communicate to them in compatible formats. Expository preaching works well with literate audiences, but not with oral ones. The controversial verse may be involved in all of this and just might be understood, not only by the Old Testament reference (Isaiah 4:9-10) upon which it is based, but also on Jesus' statement in verse 33 . . . "as they were able to hear it." This is not the place or the time to go into that issues. Out of integrity in this presentation, the controversial nature of the passage needed to be recognized. Joachim Jeremias, in *The Parables of Jesus*, addresses the controversial verses and topic by suggesting that, rather than the problem being a providential refusal to let them in on the truth, it was because "to the outsiders the words of Jesus remain obscure because they do not recognize his mission nor repent. Thus for them the terrible oracle of Isaiah 6:10 is fulfilled. Yet a hope still remains: 'if they repent God will forgive them.'" It is important that one not think that the vehicle, the parable, was the reason why the hearers could not receive the truth.

It seems that the very foundations of chronological storying are highlighted in this passage. First, Jesus matched His presentation style with the communication preference of His hearers. They were oral communicators and he therefore chose a story as the vehicle He would use in teaching them. Second, He gave them only as much as He determined that "they were able to hear." Third, in order to explain the first story to the common people and to His disciples, Jesus did not depart from the story format, but gave them other parables. He said that "all things would come to them in parables." He even chided the disciples about their inability to understand the parable of the sower and the soils. He asked them "How will you understand all the parables?" He knew that during His entire ministry He would be communicating through parables. He also asked: "Or with what parable shall we picture it.?" Jesus was constantly looking for and using parables to picture the truths He was sharing. Fourth, there was a process, a sequence in His giving of the truth. The passage says: "And

with many such parables . . ." Jesus communicated with His hearers what He wanted them to understand. On other occasions He said that they were not ready for information, but that it would be revealed to them later. There were foundations to be given before other truths could be presented. Jesus kept referring back to the Old Testament as He asked on various occasions: "What saith the Scripture?" Fifth, in Mark 4:3-9 and 21-32, Jesus employed the techniques of model, memory and mimicry through the mnemonics He employed.

This brief look at various Biblical settings and persons, leads to a discussion of illiteracy and literacy in the New Testament era. A majority of the common people were oral communicators, illiterates, with very few functional illiterates, semi-literates or literates among those who were listening to him. This was even true of Jesus' disciples. However, some have not thought of the people of Palestine as being illiterate, and have assumed that literacy was common. Numerous scholars have researched literacy within the Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Palestinian peoples during this period of history. William V. Harris, in *Ancient Literacy*, says:

There was without a doubt a vast diffusion of reading and writing ability in the Greek and Roman worlds, and the preconditions and the positive causes of this development can be traced. But there was no mass literacy, and even the level which I have called craftsman's literacy was achieved only in certain limited milieux. The classical world, even at its most advanced, was so lacking in the characteristics which produce extensive literacy that we must suppose that the majority of people were always illiterate. Hence the institutional lacunae which would have impeded any movement towards mass literacy--above all, the shortage of subsidized schools--were confronted to no more than a slight extent.

Harris also says in his book that: "Thus the scholar who has published the most detailed research on literacy in this particular milieu is not among those who have given high estimates of the extent of literacy in the Roman world." In another place he says: "At all events, a consideration of all the relevant texts, including the papyrus texts, is plainly essential and ought to lead, even by itself, to a rejection of optimistic conclusions."

Rosalind Thomas, a lecturer and researcher of ancient history at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College of the University of London, concurs with the other writers that have been quoted and says:

Greater understanding of oral communication and tradition are in some ways now modifying these assumptions of the superiority of literacy. Oral communication and oral tradition have more positive associations, and the term 'orality' has been coined to avoid the obvious negative connotations of 'illiteracy.' . . . For classical Athens had written records, yet it also relied heavily on oral tradition, and indeed the very organs of the radical democracy used oral communication extensively. Athens was in many respects an 'oral society.' . . . In addition, the written histories from Greece were largely derived from oral tradition, so again we need to pay attention not merely to the written texts but to the nature of the oral sources they reflect and the possible influence of

one on the other.

Greater understanding of oral tradition and literacy by anthropologists, and of the workings of memory by psychologists, now make it particularly urgent to approach these problems with more sophistication . . . Through his study (Milman Parry's work on oral poetry) of contemporary oral bards in Yugoslavia, he produced the startling and now widely accepted theory that Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, our earliest Greek literature, were in fact essentially oral poetry:

. . .

The most optimistic range of literacy that has been established by these and other scholarly researchers of literacy in the era of New Testament Christianity was from four to ten percent. Some of these say that it could have been as low as three percent.