

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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COULD WE IMPROVE THE BIBLE? WHY THE BIBLE WORKS: NARRATIVE THEORY

John Sommerville

A lot of people have wanted to improve the Bible because it is not what they expected a holy book to look like. Not too long ago *Reader's Digest* offered an abridged edition, and many years ago Thomas Jefferson cut one up and pasted the parts he agreed with into a scrapbook. And, to be honest, a lot of us who have tried to read it from cover to cover, might sympathize with these attempts to improve the Bible.

Maybe you've wondered whether the Bible, the sacred book of Christians, might have taken a different form. Other sacred books have been entirely different. Are the differences all in the Bible's favor? Actually, humanly speaking, it might appear that the Christian scriptures are the most successful in the world's history, if we can go by the number of adherents today. There are almost twice as many nominal "Christians" in the world as the next religion (1.94 billion to 1.16 billion Muslims in 2000, according to the *World Almanac*) and that number is growing. What is even more impressive is that Christianity has spread primarily by evangelization. Islam has spread mainly through other means, and its holy book, the Quran, only works among those who understand Arabic. Or that's what they themselves claim, and why they have forbidden the use of translations. (These generalizations are solid despite exceptions.) And

yet the Bible must appear to outsiders to be something of a hodge-podge, with all its different genres and languages, and written over so long a period. Can we think why the Bible has worked so well, given its somewhat ramshackle appearance?

We could start by agreeing that the Bible is basically a large history. It has other elements mixed in, like songs, laws, proverbs, prophecies, letters, visions. It is about God, of course. But it is also about people. And it is largely narrative – that is, the Bible is primarily composed of stories and perhaps is best understood as a large story made up of smaller stories. This is especially noteworthy in an age when narrative and narrative theory are making a comeback.

We now see that narrative is actually an intellectual method. It is true that our universities are mostly still under the impression that the only real intellectual method is analysis. Most textbooks strive to be analytical, except history texts.

Analysis is the universal method in the sciences. We take things apart, by analysis, to find out how they work. But we are just emerging from that understanding to realize that there are subjects that are best studied by narrative, not analysis. In the last half-century or so, scholars have become very interested in narrative and theory.

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That the Bible is largely narrative, therefore, is a very important point. Basically, narrative is the only real way to talk about people. You can analyze our physical bodies. But if you want to understand us as actors and persons, narrative is the only useful approach. We haven't always known that. Throughout most of the 20th century, scholars favored analysis over narrative. They thought that societies should be analyzed by structure and function. They thought ethics should be studied by analyzing situations. They thought mind should be reduced to matter, because we think we know how to analyze matter. We like to freeze things in time for our analytical study.

We now realize, however, that all these approaches leave out the most essential thing about us, which is that we experience time. Other things persist in time, but they do not experience time. So analysis leaves out the absolutely most important dimension of our being. Everything that differentiates humans from the rest of nature has to do with this experience of time. During the 1930s, philosophers like Martin Heidegger realized this and began to explore ideas of Being that took time into consideration. The existentialists tried to explore the aspects of human being that were a result of our sense of existing in time, like death, concern, freedom. These were the things that had always baffled science.

Christian intellectuals saw an opportunity here. Theologians like Karl Barth quit apologizing for the fact that our religion was originally in the form of stories. They stopped taking the Bible apart to fix it and started looking at how it fit together and how it worked. The larger framework of narrative theory has made Christian intellectuals much more confident about theology in the form of narrative, and therefore, more willing to use the Bible's own concepts and means of expression.

What we've said so far is that the only thing humans can really understand, from the inside, are other humans. Our own experience, in time, gives us the key to understanding others like us. We can't understand cheese in the same way, for example. We only know about cheese. We don't have a sense of the inner meaning of cheese. But

when we talk about understanding ourselves or others what we really mean is that we sense their purposes, plans, hopes, loves, goals. These are all things that unfold in time. And they are things that cannot be conceptually "reduced" to hydrocarbon characteristics. Any meaningful discussion of these things, our defining human characteristics, must take the form of narrative.

It is true that we got our medical knowledge about humans from objective and empirical analysis. There is no reason to quit that. But we have also become aware that there is more to treating patients than that. Even doctors are now learning to take their patients' stories into consideration when they treat them.

In short, narrative theories emphasize that there is a better approach to understanding "us" than analysis. Analysis takes things apart to understand the parts. That doesn't work well for anything that might die under dissection. Narrative describes the way things develop. And it appears that everything in the universe develops.

This new appreciation of narrative is beginning to penetrate the academy. There are some famously Christian philosophers, like Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Milbank, who have shown how narrative gives us a better approach to ethical theory. Social scientists are beginning to use narrative methods in their studies.

The most surprising of these developments is that even science is beginning to understand itself through narrative. The old-fashioned history of science just connected the dots between discoveries that were currently thought to be true and important. But that was not how science had developed. Scientists had fought and argued and been mistaken and wasted time and had breakthroughs that had nothing to do with logic. All this had been ignored in the old triumphalist histories of science. The new understanding of science, that began around 1960, was born of a sense that science is a human enterprise, not simply a rational progression. We used to think of science as essentially logical, but now we find that it is a thoroughly human enterprise, and might have developed by a very different route. That is why historians now speak of

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scientific revolutions that change the entire direction of science.

It is interesting to see contemporary thinking coming around to where Christianity has been all along, and now it seems that Christian thinking is taking a lead in our intellectual life. That is because Christianity has always expressed itself in narratives more than in analytical propositions. The Bible is what gave Western Civilization its basically historical understanding of the world, which is finally penetrating philosophy itself. Asian world-views are different. They think of the world process as cyclical or repetitive or chaotic and as something to be escaped entirely. Accordingly, many eastern sacred books are not mainly narrative, which is an important difference. So it is not surprising that so many of the narrative theorists are basically Christian in their orientation. Heidegger began as a Catholic theology student. Paul Ricoeur, the major narrative metaphysician, and Michael Polanyi, who brilliantly showed the narrative character of scientific research, had a similar attraction to Christian thought.

But we need to bring all this down to you and your Bible. What it tells us is that narrative is a better expression of ultimate truth than propositions or analysis can be. When we say that Jesus is the truth, we mean that his life, his narrative, reveals truth better than any formula about him. The formulas come later. To say that the Bible is truth implies the centrality of narrative, since most of it takes that form. And incidentally, it means that scholars are just now discovering what Christians have always sensed, that truth is found in history and only approximated in philosophies. Narrative has a magical quality. It has a way of pulling us into the story, so that our lives become part of a bigger and truer story.

This is our most important point so far, so I'll repeat it. The Bible works because it offers us the universal human story. The Bible would not be nearly as gripping if it were only epigrams, rules, propositions, scientific laws and

philosophical proofs. We find ourselves in the plot of its larger story, and we can even extend the story, add to it. The Church is composed of those who recognize their story in the Bible. The story continues through us. Think of that.

Furthermore, the fact that the Bible becomes our story explains why the Gospels are often our favorite part, or the part we start with anyway. Christians relate to the person of Jesus, not just to his teachings. We relate to the other people in his life and to what we know or can imagine of their stories. It would not have been successful just to have a book of Jesus' sayings. The reason is that Jesus didn't just have a message. Jesus was a message. Jesus was the truth about God; and Jesus was the truth about us.

But Jesus was also a teacher as well as an example. Did he have the usual reliance teachers place on propositions and analysis? As you remember Jesus' style as a teacher, you immediately

think of how puzzling he was. Why did he proceed by questions? Why parables? Why not the same formula for every audience? What exactly was he trying to get across?

We could probably agree that Jesus was mainly interested in making people understand themselves in relation to God. If he was trying to create faith in his hearers, he had to find out what was holding them back from that. When he began with a question, as he often did, it indicated that he thought they already knew the answer and were resisting it somehow. They did not need more information so much as a new perspective on their lives.

And of course, Jesus modeled the life of faith. He modeled a self-giving life, a life of faith in the Father, and the triumph of that way of life. Jesus' life and teaching, embodied in the Gospel narrative, was the most radical change in values ever. The world is still trying to absorb it, still trying to learn the lessons of radical love. Preaching it was fine, but living it was even better. It helped us to visualize the Kingdom. And it has helped artists to portray it, which has always seemed an advantage for Christianity over religions that want to be entire-

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NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

JANUARY EVENTS AT THE CENTER

“SOLOMON SPEAKS TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY”

Solomon never had to worry about a book contract or haggle with the publisher over whether his ideas would be marketable. As a result, he was free to write what he had to say, and since he also is said to be the wisest man who ever lived, his books have turned out to be rather enduring. As we approach the tri-millennial celebration of his birth, he continues to have a lot to offer that is both profound and practical. Over the course of this twelve-week class, we will consider:

- **One word** that's exasperating in the book of Ecclesiastes
 - **Two Psalms** from one son of David to another
 - **Three lovers** who have a problem in the Song of Songs, and
 - **Four Proverbs** that can make all the difference if you will let them.

The class begins Monday, January 12th at 7:30 pm. (If you are interested in a day-time version, please let us know.)

“TALES FROM THE MADHOUSE”

This fascinating film series speculates in creative and imaginative ways on the fate of several characters who met Jesus. Set in a Victorian asylum, these fifteen-minute, one-person dramas feature the stories of people who encountered Jesus and found their lives were changed – not always for the better. Whether you are a Christian or just curious, these thought-provoking vignettes will force you to think about the consequences of encountering Jesus. Led by Dr. Jay Lynch, these discussions will meet on Tuesday evenings at 7:30 pm beginning January 13th.

“COLLEGE BIBLE STUDY” THE FIRST EPISTLE BY THE APOSTLE PETER

Ever wonder what a reactionary 1st century fisherman named Peter might have to say that relates to life in the modern world? Join us in our study of 1 Peter as we explore the Apostle Peter's instructions to this peculiar people, and unpack his commands to “live your lives as strangers here” (1:17), in an alienating world that has itself become terribly alienated from the Maker and Redeemer of all things. Led by James Walden, assistant pastor at Creekside Community Church, the study will meet at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesdays beginning on January 7th.

LOOKING FOR MOVIES?

They are on the way. Stayed tuned, watch the web site (www.christianstudycenter.org), and visit the Study Center in the new year for details.

NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

COMING IN THE SPRING SEMESTER

CULTURE SEMINAR READING GROUP ON THE WRITINGS OF LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

Just last month Leszek Kolakowski received the \$1,000,000 Kluge Award from the Library of Congress for life-time achievement in the Human Sciences. Having begun his career as an anti-Catholic Socialist in Poland several decades ago, Kolakowski has traveled far, and in the process he has written in a way that challenges Socialists and Communists, Western democrats and capitalists, moderns and postmoderns, and secularists and people of faith. He has also reflected deeply on the place of Christianity in the modern world and on the possible contributions it might have to offer. The Kluge grant, of course, has gotten him the attention of a great number of people, but he attracted our attention several years ago with a book entitled, *God Owes Us Nothing*. This is not the sort of title one expects from the major philosophical publishing houses, and like Kolakowski's other work, it is extremely rewarding. We will be reading a portion from this work as well as several essays from his well-known *Modernity on Endless Trial*. As in the past, our reading groups will meet monthly on Mondays at 9:00 p.m. and on Wednesdays at noon. Books will be available at both Goerings Books locations.

COLLOQUIUM ON FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Once again InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and the Christian Study Center will work together to bring the third annual Colloquium on Faith and Scholarship on March 20, 2004. Serving faculty and graduate students throughout the state of Florida, the colloquium will draw on talent from several campuses and will feature Dr. Wilfred McClay, Professor of History at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. For information on the Colloquium, please contact the Study Center or Jay Woodham (IVCF at FSU) at 850-575-9395.

“THE SUMMER INSTITUTE ON FAITH AND THE UNIVERSITY”

On May 23-26 the Study Center will be hosting our second annual institute for undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to welcoming Felicia Song from the University of Virginia, and several speakers from the University of Florida, we are very pleased to have Dr. J. Budziszewski, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas, as our keynote speaker. Dr. Budziszewski is the author of *How to Stay Christian in College* as well as numerous, scholarly books, articles, and papers. The institute will run for three days from Sunday evening through Wednesday lunch, and students from across the country are welcome. If you are interested, please get your registration in early. We know this will be a popular event. Information and registrations will be available at the Study Center and on our web site at christianstudycenter.org in the new year.

You might also be interested in knowing that on February 21st Dr. Horner will be speaking at the Cambridge Study Center in Lakeland Florida. His topic will be: “Tattoos, Body Piercing, and More: Finding Meaning in Modifying Our Bodies.” For information please contact the Cambridge Study Center at 863-686-4862.

————— RESOURCES FOR REFLECTION AND OUR —————
CHRISTMASTIME GREETING

Recovering the Holy of the Christmas Holiday

Todd A. Best

As we find ourselves in the busy-ness of the holiday season, we want to encourage our readers to resist the cultural pull to do so many holiday-related things that we miss reflecting on the significance of the “holy day” that Christmas should be for the ourselves and the world.

Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, we modern Christians know all about Jesus coming (“advent”) into our world, yet sometimes it seems to have become mundane. For us the mystery and wonder of Jesus’ life and work, both when he was on earth and as he continues it now, often eludes us as we settle into our rituals and routines of the season. We suggest that in order to adequately think about and celebrate the incarnation we don’t simply view the season as activities and festivities leading to a single day of celebrating on the 25th of December, but rather, we should intentionally ponder and celebrate the implications of the incarnation throughout the entire Advent season.

To assist in this, we want to recommend a resource that could spark deeper consideration of the Advent season. *Watch for the Light, Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Plough Publishing House, 2001) is just the kind of thing that can center our thoughts on Christ’s incarnation throughout the season. As a collection of daily readings, reflections, and poetry from a broad stream of Christian thinkers and writers over the centuries, *Watch for the Light* can help us remain grounded in the true historic meaning of Jesus’ coming into the world. Also it can move us toward present implications of the mystery of God taking on human flesh to identify with our frailties – one of these implications being the ways we can participate in God’s redemptive purposes in our world. Though most of the season will have passed by the time you receive this, we can think of no better way to continue reflecting on the season than to read through this thought-provoking collection at the start of the New Year.

And from all of us at the Christian Study Center, we wish you the merriest Christmas and a very happy New Year.

Todd Best is Editor of *Reconsiderations*.

from *Watch for the Light*

*Light of lights! All gloom dispelling,
Thou didst come to make thy dwelling
Here within our world of sight.
Lord, in pity and power,
Thou didst in our darkest hour
Rend the clouds and show thy light.*

*Praise to thee in earth and heaven
Now and evermore be given,
Christ, who art our sun and shield.
Lord, for us thy life thou gavest,
Those who trust in thee thou savest,
All thy mercy stands revealed.*

St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)
Medieval theologian and philosopher

Continued from Page 3

ly transcendent. All this points to a certain cunning in the way the Bible works. If the point of the Bible is to create faith and to give shape to our lives, it was written in the right way. It's encouraging to me to find that even scholars have begun to see the point of a narrative approach, so that we can quit second-guessing the Bible or thinking that we need to improve it.

I saw an article recently written by a Gen X'er, on how to get the Gospel through to her contemporaries. She was saying that they were always suspicious of authoritative pronouncements, but they really have no defenses against narratives. They are a gullible generation, and there's a danger that they believe too much from their entertainment culture, but there's also an opportunity for the Church. She thought this gave the Gospel an opening, and she is right. Her peers don't know how needy they are, or how unattractive their lives are, until they see themselves in the story of fall and redemption. Christianity is a very compelling story if it's left in its own terms.

The conscious discovery of the power of narrative has happened before. It is how the Renaissance started. Medieval universities had tried very hard to reconcile Christianity and philosophy, on philosophical terms. They used Greek logic and a propositional approach. They tried to treat the Bible as a collection of proof texts, to build their own theological structures. But they discovered that there are no self-validating rational principles, and reacted by falling into skepticism. What they had discovered was that logic doesn't take you down to bedrock, but only to assumptions. It made them begin to doubt the God of their own philosophical creating, a God they couldn't pray to. The most exciting thing for Erasmus and the Renaissance was the way Scripture came alive again after one gave up trying to make it into a philosophical system and allowed it to be the living narrative that it is. The Reformation built on that. Who knows, maybe this will happen again, or is happening now.

John Sommerville is Professor of History at the University of Florida.

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The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

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