

Making the Messiah Known – Through the Bible’s Big Story

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Is biblical story telling a neglected form of evangelism?

I remember it happened on the 6th floor of a London office block. A Sufi Muslim was video-interviewing me as we discussed what some people call the story of the prodigal son. He argued ‘If the father in the story can forgive the son without reference to the cross of Christ why do we Christians claim that blood of Christ is the only complete acceptable sacrifice for sin in the eyes of God?’ It looked set for us to walk down the well-trodden Christian-Muslim polemical path. Such sterile debates had, in the past, left me frustrated and hungry for authentic personal discussion. So I changed tact that day and simply asked him if he knew which story Jesus may have had in mind when he told the story of a father and two sons. He replied that he have never heard there was another story. When I told him the story of Isaac, Jacob and Esau he suddenly put down his video camera and started to share excitedly about the stories and what they may mean. It opened up genuine conversation and exploration about these two stories – and I was able to present a scriptural Jesus who was much more than just a prophet and claimed to be Messiah. We both went away from our conversation inspired and intrigued by what had just happened.

Sharing the bible’s big story as a means of understanding Jesus the Messiah is not always the most advertised way of doing evangelism. It may seem to be a long way round to getting to the point that Jesus lived, died and rose again for the salvation of all those whom believe in Him. Surely John 3:16, probably the most translated biblical verse in the world, is much more succinct, if not sufficient in and of itself. Why not present a string of related biblical verses to make our doctrinal claims and bring people to the knowledge of God? I have read many tracts, often with ingenious diagrams that do this. I have heard testimonies of those who received such tracts and come to a knowledge of the living God. However, is it the most obvious or helpful way to share our faith in Christ?

I have also been guilty of and have also witnessed people using biblical verses like spiritual rubber bullets – getting the message out. Such approaches often left people stunned but unenlightened, confounded rather than confused. They were never challenged to consider the meaning of who Jesus is in relation to their life, due to the fact that Christ had not been shared in a meaningful way. Perhaps bible storying can be much more subversive way of doing evangelism. Stories have been called “verbal acts of hospitality” (1). They can allow people to enter into them on their own terms. Drinking coffee with me one afternoon a friend said “when I hear the word story I think it is something that has just been made up” – stimulated by the caffeine perhaps, I quipped back “story is often the safest vehicle to convey truth.” This incident led me to consider further how does one “convey truth?” Jesus spoke often in story, riddle and parable and people loved listening to him. (Mark 4:33-34, Matthew 13:34-35). His life radiated grace and truth; his life is the embodiment of the biblical story, the word become flesh.

Ancient cultures and the attraction of story

Ancient cultures preserved and passed on their cultural heritage and wisdom in stories. Story is an art form that most cultures have deeply embedded within them. Our worldview, beliefs, values and customs are passed on through story or enacted story. Oral cultures developed careful and sophisticated ways of listening and ways of communicating their own cultural histories. Story can touch at the level of our societal and personal soul. Story can be ‘store-memory’ – the essence of our individual and corporate identities and sense-making. Narrative

memory roads are viewed through our rear-view mirror as we travel into the future. From early on in our childhoods we are able to learn from stories – our imaginations are stretched and all things are possible. Patterns, traditions and customs are also bottles of distilled stories ready for pouring at the right occasion. So why do we not make more use of story in evangelism?

Sacred story can function like tattoos by which we mark our body. Within Maori culture people tell their tribal and personal history (along with other uses) partially in tattoo - Ta Moko, which other Maoris can interpret. In the psychological thriller film Memento by Christopher Nolan the main character, Leonard Shelby suffers from an amnesia which renders his brain unable to store new memories. He faces the task of investigating who had killed his wife so he tattoos his body to remember significant discoveries – the whole film interplays present and past life and the film and its viewers work its way backwards to discover what happened. At the end of the film the past and present converge to create a realized clarity. In Christ the past and the present converge in a very significant way. The apostle Peter tells his ancient story in the powerful reality of the risen Lord Acts 2:32 “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, ^{AC 2:35} until I make your enemies your footstool." ' Later Peter and John declare “we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Within Jewish culture sacred stories of how God deals with his people are not simply retold – they are relived. Memory is not simply mental nostalgia but an act of discipleship, a commitment to walk in the faithlines of our spiritual or physical ancestors. The Jewish festivals themselves enable the whole community to engage in these events, - one of which is described partially in Exodus 13. “Moses said to the people, "Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the LORD brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten....” ⁸ You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' ⁹ It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.”

We too need to share the story. Recently at an Easter Celebration a friend shared the significance of Passover from Exodus, had a lamb meal and then followed up with communion. One attendee committed his life to Christ and another said I now understand why Jesus had to die – we have a powerful story to share.

Can we “remember” how to share the good news of God’s story? We need to discover afresh that our sacred story can be identity shapers that have power to instruct our way – not just for those who inherit the story but also for those who have “ears to hear” and listen. (Deut 29:4, Mk4:9)

Just after I had become a Christian I suggested to the church leader why not introduce a special service for seekers where we can focus on the gospel (rather than journeys through the scriptures). He replied the gospel is preached here every Sunday, and he refused to disconnect Jesus from his inherited context. He gave me a passion for the biblical sweep of the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation and that effective discipleship meant becoming familiar with the bible’s big story. He would rapturously extol the claim that Jesus is the

message of God, the Alpha and Omega, and everything in between those letters, for him Hebrews 1:1-4 was a living reality. God has fully articulated himself in Son, made known by the Spirit.

Post-modern cultures and the attraction of story

As film-makers know there is nothing more powerful than a good story filmed well. For example, I love the playfulness of the film Shrek, the greatest story never told – but the background to that story-telling is very sophisticated. Capture people's imagination and touch their soul and people will flock to enjoy a good story. Avery Willis and many others in the International Orality Network have espoused the benefits of chronological bible story telling; it assists in proclaiming the Messiah in oral cultures. What the pioneer Avery Willis also eventually realized was that even if the written bible is available in their mother tongue language, many from unreached people groups would still prefer to learn orally. Furthermore, Willis commented that American culture was becoming more oral in learning style as well. (see Mission Frontiers Jan-Feb 2011 p7 – www.missionfrontiers.org) There is a new 'digital orality' emerging in our culture and intensive digital cultures may prefer oral-orientated learning as more palatable and appealing. Post-literate show me/image/story/ learning preferences are leading to a morphed second-orality culture in digitalised cultures. This could have profound implications and also clues to how we can be effective in communicating the message and meaning of the Messiah. If such learning preferences become more the norm how much more important is it for us to know and share the bible's big story in an attractive, comprehensible and comprehensive manner. I have been really excited in inner city small bible study groups where hardly anyone has read the bible before and then read such stories collectively as in Genesis 1-3; you can see the light dawn on people's faces as they explore the story – people come to a living faith. I have been thrilled recently by media-savvy pioneers who want to share the bible's big story in new fused- media.

Which stories do we share?

How do we allow these stories to shape us and which ones do we choose to enter into our world? Do we stop with Chronicles or Revelation? As Christians we accept a canon of stories and whilst we may not have one undisputed canon – we do have consensus on the majority of the books/stories included in the canon. Even the apocryphal books for most of the churches history were read alongside the undisputed canonical texts and regarded as edifying . Ironically, it is only in modern times that these works have been so overlooked and bibles often printed without them – hardly literary progress. Can the bible be told as a continuous story or does that only lead to violating the integrity of the separate texts? Is it only a library of books or is there a threaded unity? How far should the text be tied to context and its community of faith through the generations? What authority is placed in the canon of the church and the inevitable questions – which canon and which broad church – Protestant, Orthodox or Roman Catholic? In spite of these issues Christians are called to know, share and live in the biblical story.

Passing on the big story?

Whilst suspicion of any meta-narrative is part of our post-modern culture the broader embrace of narrative is a healthy return to sense-making for today's world. Biblical narrative exegesis over the last 30 years has really helped along with the growing number of really useful informative guides to the biblical story. As Christians we do believe that God is acting within history and through Jesus in particular. However, we may often fail to grasp the ultimate significance of Jesus by our traditional methodologies for bible exposition and study. Can we quote verses from Isaiah 7 or 9 at Christmas but not grasp the flow of the book of Isaiah – complicated as it may be? Do we hand out pieces of the biblical jigsaw but fail to

give people the big picture? Within home group bible studies do people look more at the text like cross-work stitch than a patchwork quilt?

Harry Wendt is an ardent advocate and adult trainer for biblical literacy and over his lifetime has produced numerous biblical courses to train people in biblical discipleship which continue to be translated in many languages around the world. I am indebted to Harry Wendt of Crossways International for the following comments which are part of a longer foreword in his excellent introduction to the "Bible's Big Story – Our Story" course book. (2) Harry Wendt writes that Trevor McIllwain from New Tribes Mission was working among the Palawano people on Palawan Island. McIllwain tried to teach them basic doctrines encapsulated in "Five things you need to know in order to be saved. But he failed to get anywhere. He then tried teaching the people verse by verse through John's gospel but again the people did not seem to understand the message. He changed his approach to teach the biblical narrative as it unfolds in the Scripture and this was much more appropriate. The people began to be taught the Old Testament narrative as a developing story with a sequence of events. Harry Wendt then uses insights from Hans Rudi Weber, a missionary to Indonesia with the Reformed Church who drew up some "fundamental principles for communicating the Christian message." These included the necessity of teaching "the full sweep of the biblical narrative from Creation to the end-time with Jesus at the centre." Also very importantly that "Jesus the Messiah must not be de-Judaised lest He be de-historicised."

How does Jesus tell the big story?

Such a narrative approach can then lead to understanding biblical themes that emerge in different historical and geographical circumstances. Furthermore, this approach enables us to appreciate and understand the Messiahship of Jesus and the implications for our lives. Jesus the Messiah had to deal with the inherited story of his people and the biblical views and expectations that different groups held in his day.

In Luke 24 on the first day of the week, now commemorated as Easter Sunday, two disciples are depicted as walking away from Jerusalem to Emmaus a village about 7 miles away. Clearly the recent events were occupying their thoughts and conversations – Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word had been crucified. They were sad and disappointed for they had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Now they had heard from some women that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." The stranger that had met them on the way declared to them "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!"²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

In this passage Jesus is presented as the fulfilment of the Messianic story – the big bible story was connected to and focused on Jesus. Those followers still needed a fresh understanding of this radical Jesus and this occurred when the stranger took bread blessed it and broke it. They then returned to Jerusalem as witnesses to the other apostles about the risen Jesus. During this event Jesus appeared again to them ^{LK 24:44} Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of

these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

How does the Holy Spirit enable us to share the story?

His radical interpretation of that inherited story is of course, of extreme significance for all, not just Christians. According to John 14:26 "but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." and John 16:12 "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you." In fact, the Holy Spirit guides the church into understanding Jesus more fully and how Jesus tackles the biblical story.

It is thought that Jesus was drawing on the tradition of the meturgeman. The exile into Babylon had a significant effect on the transition of vernacular speech from Hebrew to Aramaic. Although it is hard to determine precisely when this happened, but the synagogue "weekly lesson from the Pentateuch and the Prophets was read by a member of the congregation, and the meturgeman had to translate into the vernacular the Pentateuchal lesson verse by verse; from the Prophets he translated three verses at a time.(3)" There were rules governing the meturgeman's translation - he must not raise his voice louder than the Hebrew reader and unlike the Hebrew reader he was not to look at the scriptures as he spoke (so no-one would mistake the written word and spoken translation). The meturgeman may also have been expected to bring explanation, recall relevant history and contemporary relevance. Perhaps in striking contrast to the tradition of the day, Jesus, as recorded in John's gospel, reframed this practice to indicate that the meturgeman's words were actually reliable interpretations of his own spoken words and it was the work of the Holy Spirit to make his words understandable and relevant for daily living. We understand the sacred story of the Messiah through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, we are to share the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in power of the Holy Spirit. The early church itself directed by the Holy Spirit focused on how Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection became a defining interpretative framework for not only understanding the biblical narrative but to witnessing to Jesus in the world. Believers became witnesses of this Jesus. The Emmaus experience leads to the celebrated adage that the Word of God must lead us to the God of his Word – information is not the primary aim of evangelism but revelation that leads to a dynamic relationship with the risen Messiah. Within Acts when Stephen appears before the Sanhedrin and accounts for his behavior by telling the bible's big story starting with Abraham Isaac and Jacob and his sons including Joseph, Moses and Aaron, Joshua, David and Solomon. Then as he recounts the rejection of the prophets so he charges the Sanhedrin with the killing of the righteous one. ^{AC 7:51} "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³ You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it." Furthermore Stephen's vision of Jesus as the son of Man the messianic figure standing at the right hand of God was too much for the Sanhedrin to tolerate and so they stoned Stephen to death, but could not silence his witness. The later follower Paul witnessed the incident and had his own encounter with the living God as revealed in the risen Jesus.

The New Testament writings are replete with references to the Old Testament either directly or indirectly and the living witness of the early church led to much reflection upon the existing biblical narrative. Within the book of Revelation the authority of the Messiah is asserted by such witnesses.

12:10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.

REV 12:11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

Clearly, the historical witness of the early church as given in the bible was not to a detached New Testament Jesus but one whom they regarded as "the Word became flesh and lived among us." (Jn 1:14) and made known through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Sharing stories within stories

Sharing the biblical story can really help people understand Jesus more. Stories of origin are fertile ground for sharing the good news. Gen1:1 in the beginning God is such a dynamic statement indicates that the story of the bible is about God and humanity's response to this God. We are made in his image not the reverse. These first stories in Genesis indicate that God wanted to share his living blessings with a large family in a cultivated garden environment. There is the sense of a personal relationship with God. Many people ask the existential question why are we here – what is life all about? How about sharing the stories of Genesis 1 and 2 with people? Allow people to consider what these stories mean to them. As we read on in Gen 2:4b onwards the text reveals that the relationship between God and Adam and Eve is strained as a consequence of their disobedience to God's stated ways. When Adam and Eve begin hiding in Eden from each other and God it is God who has to come looking for them and calling their name. "Adam where are you?" The bible does not seek to prove God but takes God as central to the human drama. God is presented as one looking for his people who are hidden even lost?

Does Jesus interpret this Godly behavior? In Luke's gospel in chapter 15 Jesus tells stories of sheep/coins/sons being lost? He describes his Messianic ministry as "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Lk 19:10) and also where he "calls his sheep by name and leads them out." (Jn 10:3) In the story of the Father and his two sons who is lost and who is found? Is this a reframing of the Isaac, Jacob and Esau story – can Israel's identity and purpose be tied up with a God who behaves so shamelessly? Is this the Father God that Jesus speaks about? Sure these are parables but ones with a context (Luke 15:1-2) and used with prophetic wisdom.

As we journey through the bible's big story we encounter a God who is committed to his creation. He commits in covenant love to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David their descendants and through his Son Jesus mediates a new covenant.(Heb12:24). We are shown in the biblical narrative what is wrong with the world (Gen 2:4b-Gen 11). Genesis 1-

11 acts as an overture of biblical themes which are played out throughout the following stories. From Genesis 12 we can tell the story of Abraham and the promises that God gives him and how they define the narrative direction, or how Abraham's dysfunctional descendants still cannot prevent God from fulfilling his purposes. In a world where families are fractured and under pressure these Genesis families may provide a useful point of empathy for many.

A strong defining motif can be shaped around the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who delivered the Israelites from Egypt and then provides a further covenant for his people. Thus the exodus event led to a rescued community being guided by instruction from God with its discerned 613 laws. A community with whom God is prepared to tabernacle amongst them provided there were appropriate holy boundaries, astonishingly, in light of the rebellious nature of many of the people. This covenant-exodus motif is re-invigorated as God promises to lead his people out of exile in Babylon back to the promised land in an Edenic state (Is chaps 49,53). It is further reframed in Jesus' day as he demonstrates the deeper significance of Exodus, a rescue, an escape from sin-slavery and evil and entry into the true freedom of the children of God. In the transfiguration stories Luke informs us that Moses and Elijah are speaking of Jesus' exodus and this motif is key to understanding the nature and significance of Jesus calling his followers to "Do this in remembrance of me." (Lk 22:19) The act of remembrance is one of living in the reality of the grace flowing from the supreme sacrifice of this Pascal Lamb. We are called to remember now not just the release from Egypt, not just the return from Babylon, but the rescue from spiritual oppression and slavery. Thus, for Paul he can proclaim now he is "in Christ." In my work with the global network ISAAC (International Substance Abuse and Addiction Coalition) I am aware of the great power of this gospel to liberate many thousands of people who are set free from destructive addictive patterns and find transforming power in Jesus, God to the rescue.

We can progress through the entire biblical narrative looking at how Jesus reframes the narratives and their relevance to discipleship today. The Joshua story is radically shaped through Jesus, his namesake in the baptism story as the new Joshua brings in a more comprehensive kingdom. As the book of Judges struggles with people caught in cyclical patterns of corporate behavior so we can glimpse the need not just for temporary Messiahs but a permanent one that can bring order to our lives and communities. As the emergence of kings is accompanied by prophetic warnings and blessings so we can trace how Jesus had to deal with the whole notion of authentic kingship and true prophethood. As the Holy Spirit fell on Saul and David so too we see the Holy Spirit coming on Jesus and remaining with him; as David becomes king at 30 years of age so Jesus assumes his public ministry when he was about 30 years of age – also the age of "commissioned" priests. (2 Sam 5:4, Luke 3:23, 1Chron 23: 3, Numbs 4:3). The biblical picture of the early kings who ruled over a united Israel were presented with their strengths and their flaws – and with David there was the covenantal promise of 2 Sam 7:11 "Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. " There is no doubt that Jesus sees himself as does the early church in the line of King David. Matthew 1:1 headlines with Jesus is the Davidic king! and reversing the order ensuing genealogy in order to make his point! Yet this King behaves differently is born in the restyled City of David – Bethlehem (Lk 2:4), is witnessed to in his baptism as a servant king (Is 42:1, Ps2:7) and has a glory far greater and different from that of Solomon (Jn1:41, Lk9:32).

Furthermore, Jesus also assumed the mantle of the prophet as the Spirit descended on him and did not leave him. He prophesied into his situation with stunning critique and devastating impact. In the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in Luke 9 the divine witness is the stunning assertion that Jesus is the One who is to come – Listen to Him (Deut 18:15). The prophet Moses prophesied would come has now been made known. Moses and Elijah disappear from that mountain top scene and now there is only Jesus left for the disciples. His prophethood is one of the most understated aspects taught about Jesus’ ministry in terms of shaping for discipleship and mission. Using a narrative approach with this text, for example, could lead to very interesting encounters with Muslims over such competing claims for prophethood. Our contemporary mission call as Bevans has indicated may well be to “prophetic dialogue” with other faiths or philosophies or alternative worldviews (4).

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is seen not just as fulfillment of a prophetic stream of stories but a definite interpretation of those former events making them meaningful to his contemporaries and paradigmatic for the church; the Christian story through the lens of the cross was deemed a scandal to many Jews and foolishness to many Greek Gentiles but it remains the wisdom of God. Likewise we are called to share this Wisdom, this way. The early church witness such as presented in the book of Hebrews provides one approach to continuity and an understanding of the inherited story dealing with sacrifice, priesthood and the walk of faith by followers of the one true and living god through the generations. Claims to the superiority and sufficiency of Jesus can be seen arrogant in today’s increasingly pluralistic societies but all such claims should be proclaimed with the humility and behavior of a Messiah that assumed the designated role of a gentile slave and washed feet. (5) Even when we may testify to the authority and glory of God in Heaven we cannot but witness at the centre of heaven is the lamb slain. Prophetic dialogue today will lead to sacrifice.

Proclaiming the Messiah in a narrative framework may ultimately open up invitation for people to place themselves in the story as they would wish. The witness of the early church was to speak of what they had seen and heard so too we must recognise the value of our personal testimony of how God has intervened in our lives. One Christmas my wife and I bought Adam, one of our sons, a storybook with his full name and address written into the text of the story. One night as was our pattern he started reading the book to us and shouted out loudly hey my names in this story- then a little later they know where I live...Adam was thrilled to be involved in the story – may we through knowing the story share the story so that many will be written in the book of Life! Amen.

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All quotations taken from Zondervan Reference software: New Revised Standard Version with Apochrypha.

1. Quoted from Michael Novelli Shaped by the Story Youth Specialities (Zondervan Mich.: Grand Rapids 2008) 56 Eugene Petersen, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a Conversation in Spiritual Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 2005),13.
2. Harry Wendt Crossways International The Bible’s Big Story p1.
<http://www.crossways.org/>
3. See Solomon Schechter Caspar Levias in
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=523&letter=M#ixzz1MsPPUBJL>

4. Constants in Context Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P.Schroeder chapter 12 Orbis Books Maryknoll NY 2004
5. Taken from reporter and editor Mark Kelly at Kainos July 15th 2007
<http://markkelly.wordpress.com/author/>