

## PERSPECTIVES

# Our Postmodern Moment, Part 2: The Biblical Metanarrative

## Theology



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This is part 2 of a three-part essay in which I've been invited to revisit the analysis that Brian Walsh and I made in our book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (InterVarsity Press, 1995). Although the book was written nearly thirty years ago, I have been asked to reflect on how our analysis back then might apply to our contemporary culture of toxic polarization.

To that end, I attempted in part 1 to diagnose the problem at the core of our current cultural situation. I focused on how our postmodern times both diverge from and perpetuate the assumptions of the modern project.

Although contemporary people find it hard to believe in any single, large-scale overarching Truth that makes a claim on us (famously articulated by Jean-François Lyotard as “incredulity toward metanarratives”), we haven't given up on the modern affirmation of autonomy. Rather, we have intensified our commitment to the centrality of the human self, asserting the preeminence and inviolability of our own desires—even to the detriment of Truth. We are in the situation of the third umpire, who claims, “There's balls and there's strikes and *they ain't nothin' until I call 'em.*”

## **The Ethical Problem of Our Postmodern Times**

Beyond denigrating Truth, this absolutizing of our point of view is also detrimental to the ethics of love and justice, since it typically results in the denigration of others and the perpetuation of violence against those thought to be outside the pale. Our arrogance toward Truth spills over into arrogance toward people. As W. B. Yeats insightfully put it: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” The result is our current situation, where “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

These quotations, from “The Second Coming,” written in 1919, just after the end of World War I (the most horrendous war the world had yet seen), seem to have had our contemporary cultural context in mind. In a sense, they did. Yeats predicted the rise of a new paganism detrimental to Christian values. He saw the beginning of the twentieth century with its atrocities as presaging a demonic second coming, which would radically conflict with Christian ideals. And so, he concludes the poem by wondering about “what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” (W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” first published in *The Dial* [November 1920].)

It is now time to explore the resources of Scripture for insight into how Christians might address this beast, the tribal polarization of our postmodern times.

## The Structure of Biblical Truth

I could, of course, cite ethical injunctions about loving our neighbor—and even our enemy—as Jesus clearly taught. But just as I attempted in part 1 to uncover the core assumptions of our modern inheritance and its fracturing in the ensuing postmodern context, which would help us understand the current cultural landscape, I am interested here in discerning the structure of biblical Truth, which would ground these ethical injunctions. Otherwise, these injunctions might remain at the level of pious moralizing. I want to clarify *how* loving our neighbor, and even our enemy, is a natural outflow of the normative biblical story.

In his important work on virtue ethics, Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre insightfully explained: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. [University of Notre Dame Press, 2007], 216). Moral action, MacIntyre argued, is not the result of consciously deliberating about every choice one makes (as many modern ethicists had taught), but rather flows from who we are (our identity and our character). And identity and character are shaped by the sort of narrative that we inhabit.

The question is, what sort of narrative is the Christian story? And, therefore, what sort of identity and character should it engender? What sort of action should it impel us toward?

## The Paradox of the Biblical Story: Challenging Our Assumptions

In part 1 of this essay, I noted that some reviewers thought that there was a contradiction between two central claims that Brian Walsh and I made in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*. On the one hand, we affirmed that the biblical metanarrative constituted a non-negotiable Truth that is normative for human life. We were, therefore, accused of being enmeshed in the absolutism of modernity. On the other hand, we tried to be open to the complexity and pain of the postmodern world, not dismissing other points of view, but exploring them for the valid points they could contribute to Christian understanding. We were, therefore, accused of buying into postmodern relativism. How could we hold these two positions together? The answer is the very specific nature of the biblical story.

On the one hand, the macro-story the Bible tells is a genuine metanarrative. It is a truly cosmic story, describing reality from creation to eschaton (beginning to end), encompassing the entire human race and all creation. This cosmic story is authored by God—the creator and redeemer—who is not a human construct, but who is the transcendent ground of all reality. Nor is the Bible itself merely a humanly constructed document; it is (as the church has always confessed) *revelation*. Though obviously written by human beings, from diverse social locations and perspectives, the Scriptures disclose the character of God, God’s creational intent and our failure to embody that intent, God’s

redemptive action through Israel and through Jesus the Messiah, and the telos or goal of history—with practical guidance for how to live in the present. The metanarrative revealed in Scripture thus constitutes a non-negotiable Truth that makes a normative claim on human life. We might say that this is what the Cartesian impulse imperfectly glimpsed and was straining to acknowledge.

On the other hand, the biblical metanarrative takes human subjective experience seriously. In one sense, this is obvious, since the biblical story is about God coming into history to meet human need, specifically to bring redemption to a fallen and fractured world—evident most fully in the exodus (in the Old Testament) and in the cross and resurrection of Jesus (in the New Testament). Both the exodus and the nexus of cross and resurrection signify God’s desire to release fallen and suffering people from their bondage (external and internal) and to restore them to the fullness of what they were meant to be. At the heart of the biblical story, therefore, we find a God who responds to the human predicament.

But beyond meeting human need, the God of the biblical story welcomes and encourages human agency; indeed, the human contribution is essential to the story. And this God also graciously hosts human disorientation, welcoming vigorous dialogue partners who voice their doubt and anger when the ideals of life’s goodness and meaning don’t match their actual experience. In other words, the biblical story is not a totalizing narrative, imposed on us in an authoritarian manner from the outside, but validates the importance of the human subject and our complex experience of the world. We might say that this is what the Baconian impulse imperfectly glimpsed and was straining to acknowledge.

The biblical story thus constitutes (as we put it in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*) an *anti-totalizing metanarrative*. I don’t think this is a contradiction, but it is certainly paradoxical and it challenges the assumptions both of many Christians and of many critics of Christianity.

## In the Bible, God Invites Human Agency

It’s important to note *how* the God of the Bible meets human need. God does this by inviting and incorporating human agency into the story. Indeed, the biblical story *depends* on human participation. Here are a few examples from Scripture.

### Creation: The Human Vocation

God creates human beings to be his image (*imago Dei*), gifting them with agency and commissioning them to be his representatives on earth (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15). Although God creates the world “very good” (Gen 1:31), it isn’t perfect, in the sense that it can’t be improved. That is precisely the human vocation, which involves the exercise of genuine power (“dominion” or “rule”) to develop the potentials of earthly life, in a manner that reflects and upholds God’s care for creation (for a fuller exposition, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* [Brazos, 2005]). Through this amazing gift of power, humans can develop cultural innovations and determine the course of history; no wonder they are described as “little lower than God” (Ps 8:5–8).

### Israel: The Abrahamic Mission

When humans misuse their power and go astray from God’s purpose, exercising the gift of agency selfishly and destructively (Gen 3–11), God doesn’t simply “fix” things directly, but appears to one man (Abram, later to be named Abraham), calling him to be the father of a new nation, whose purpose will be to mediate blessing to the other nations (Gen 12:1–3). This nation (Israel) is to be God’s royal priesthood, representing him to the world by the way they live (Exod 19:5–6)—essentially, a restart on the *imago Dei*. God clearly desires human participation in the unfolding story of redemption.

### **Exodus: The Role of Human Agents**

When Israel becomes enslaved in Egypt, subjected to the most powerful empire of the time, again God doesn't fix things directly, but commissions Moses at the burning bush to be his emissary to confront Pharaoh so that Israel might be freed from bondage. God is willing to use Moses (and Aaron, his brother) despite Moses's ambivalent wavering as he tries to weasel out of the mission (Exod 3:1–4:18). But Moses wouldn't even have been alive to meet God at the burning bush had not Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, decided *on their own initiative* (with no explicit commissioning from God) to resist Pharaoh's injunctions to kill male Israelite babies as they were being born (Exod 1:15–21). Although their action wasn't based on an explicit commissioning such as Moses received, they were responding to God's primal call for humans to exercise agency for good in the world. And God accepts their initiative and folds it into the story.

### **Tabernacle: The Contribution of the People**

On the journey from Egypt to the land of promise, God comes to dwell with Israel in the tabernacle, so he can be near them and so they can be in his presence. But God doesn't magically make the tabernacle appear. He empowers skilled craftsmen to work on the project (Exod 31:1–11; 34:30–36:5) and invites the people to bring materials for its construction out of their own generosity as they are moved (Exod 35:4–29). Indeed, there is such an overflowing of gifts that God has to instruct the people not to contribute anything more (Exod 36:6–7).

### **The Messiah: The Word Made Flesh in Galilee**

That is just a sampling from the Old Testament of God encouraging and embracing human participation. This emphasis on human participation continues into the New Testament. When God decides to become incarnate, he doesn't appear magically in Galilee of the first century, but sends a messenger to a young girl named Mary, giving her the opportunity to give birth to the Messiah (which she accepts). And her son Jesus lives with her and Joseph in a small Galilean village and grows from a child to a mature man (Luke 2:52), learning a trade from his father (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3) and working as a *tektōn* (a "craftsman" or "builder"), which probably meant he was a stonemason, though without excluding carpentry.

### **The Apostles: Entrusted with the Message of the Kingdom**

And at the age of thirty Jesus calls a varied bunch of Galilean peasants (including fishermen, tradesmen, a tax collector, and a zealot) to become his disciples—to learn from him as their rabbi. Then he sends the disciples out as his emissaries (apostles), entrusting to them the message of the kingdom he was inaugurating, as they go first to their fellow Jews (Matt 10:1–8), then to the gentile world (Matt 28:16–20)—thus fulfilling the Abrahamic calling of Israel to be a blessing to the nations.

### **Paul's Updating of the Jesus Story**

Then there is the significant role of Paul, without whom the Christian faith would have had a very different history than it did. The risen Jesus appears to this zealous Jewish Pharisee on the road to Damascus, changing his name from Saul to Paul and commissioning him to bring the gospel (the story of the Messiah) to the gentiles. Paul himself articulates that gospel story as he learned it, emphasizing the death (and burial) and resurrection (and appearances) of Jesus as its core pillars (1 Cor 15:1–11). Although in most of his writings Paul emphasizes the centrality of the cross (which is "the power of God" for salvation; 1 Cor 1:18), he also affirms the resurrection of Jesus as essential; without it, our faith is in vain and we have absolutely no hope (1 Cor 15:12–19). Yet while recounting this non-negotiable gospel of cross and resurrection, Paul boldly includes his personal story as part of the narrative, noting that the risen Christ also appeared also to him (1 Cor 15:8–10). Paul's updating of the Jesus story to include his own personal story illustrates well the paradox that the biblical metanarrative is not alien to our subjectivity, but is precisely about how our tangled stories are graciously incorporated into God's grand design.

## **In the Bible, God Hosts Our Disorientation**

The Bible also attests to God hosting our disorientation. Rather than shutting down our doubts and questions, our anxieties and anger, our laments and protests, God positively welcomes them. As I put it in *Abraham's Silence*, the God of the Bible actively desires vigorous dialogue partners. This is evident in numerous places throughout Scripture. (For more detail on the following examples, see Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* [Baker Academic, 2021].)

### **Abram's Honest Questions**

Early in the Abraham story (prior to his name change from Abram), God promises his servant protection and reward. But Abram's initial response is one of doubt, since God had earlier promised to make of him a great nation (see Gen 12:2), yet he has no children of his own. So, he forthrightly questions God. Instead of taking offense, God takes Abram's doubt seriously and shows him the stars in the night sky, promising that his descendants will be as just numerous (Gen 15:1–6). Then God mentions the land that he had previously promised Abram (see Gen 12:7), which generates Abram's question about how he might know if this promise will be realized. Again, God does not take offense, but asks Abram to prepare what is, in effect, an ancient covenant ritual, known as the “covenant between the pieces” in Jewish tradition. In this ritual, one covenant partner swears an oath that if he reneges on the promise he will be cut in pieces like the sacrificial animals (see Jer 32:18). Abram's part is to bring the animals for sacrifice, dividing the portions into two. Then in a mysterious vision, God passes between the divided animal sacrifices and pledges that despite a necessary delay, Abram's descendants will indeed receive the promised land (Gen 15:7–21).

### **Abraham's Outright Challenge to God**

Later, God tells Abraham (his name has been changed by this time) that he is going to investigate whether the city of Sodom deserves destruction for its sins. The way the story is told makes it clear that God is inviting Abraham's response. Given that Abraham's nephew Lot (along with his family) is living in Sodom, Abraham challenges God to do justice and not destroy the innocent with the wicked—starting with the possibility that forty innocent might be there and ending with the possibility of ten. God accepts every single proposal Abraham makes, although Abraham stops short of the actual number of Lot and his family (Gen 18:23–32). Nevertheless, out of mercy, God sends angels to rescue them, even though Abraham hadn't thought to ask for that (Gen 19:15–22, 29).

### **Israel's Groaning and Moses's Intercession**

Later still, the people of Israel groan in their bondage in Egypt and cry out for deliverance. God attends to their groaning, listens to their cries, and is concerned about them (Exod 2:23–25). This is given as the explicit reason why God sends Moses to deliver them (Exod 3:7–10).

After the exodus, when the people arrive at Mt. Sinai, they break the second commandment and construct a golden calf by which to worship YHWH (Exod 32:1–6). As with Abraham and Sodom, God informs Moses of the people's sin and his planned judgment in order to elicit Moses's response (Exod 32:7–10). Leave me alone, God tells Moses, so that I can get angry enough to destroy them and start over with you (Exod 32:10). But Moses, sensing an opening (God isn't angry enough yet), intercedes for the people and tells God to “repent” of the “evil” he planned to do. And without taking offense, God immediately agrees (Exod 32:11–14).

This is not the only time on the wilderness journey that God responds positively to Moses's challenge not to destroy the people. Indeed, according to later tradition, God “said he would destroy them— / had not Moses, his chosen one, / stood in the breach before him, / to turn away his wrath from destroying them” (Ps 106:23).

## **The Complaints of Job, Jeremiah, and the Psalms**

Then there is the book of Job, full of Job's complaints about his suffering, which God affirms at the end constituted right speech (Job 42:7–8). The prophet Jeremiah pours out his heart to God in anguished prayer about the treatment he has received for delivering God's message, even complaining on one occasion that God has deceived him and abused him (Jer 20:7–18). Over one-third of the psalms are laments, which complain honestly about suffering or question God about injustice, sometimes even accusing God of complicity in the suffering and injustice (see, e.g., Pss 22, 39, 77, and 88). The presence of these complaints and lament prayers in Scripture allows them to function as models for our own prayer in times of our disorientation.

## **Jesus in the Garden and on the Cross**

Jesus himself embodies the lament tradition in the garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his arrest. Facing his coming death, he pleads with the Father to “remove this cup” from him (Luke 22:42), and in his anguished praying “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Then, on the cross, in the midst of his ultimate disorientation, Jesus cries out in agony, quoting Ps 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). And the God who heard the cry of the Israelites in their bondage responds to the Messiah's lament. After three days God raised Jesus from the dead.

## **The Groaning of All Creation**

But Paul explains that the cross itself was God's response to the lament of all creation. Like the Israelites in Egypt, the entire creation has been groaning in its bondage to corruption, subject to futility, and yearning for redemption (Rom 8:19–22). And this groaning finds resonance in us, we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, as we ourselves groan inwardly, awaiting “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23)—that is, the resurrection.

## **How Might This Story Shape Our Lives?**

In multiple ways, then, the Bible signals that human subjectivity is not suppressed or overridden by the Christian story. Rather, this story discloses a God who acts to meet our needs, invites us to significant agency in the world, and graciously addresses our disorientation. Paradoxically, human subjectivity is incorporated into the very contours and shape of the biblical metanarrative.

What are the implications of this metanarrative for Christian identity and action in our postmodern world? Since identity (who we are) and action (what we are to do) are narratively formed (as noted by MacIntyre), how might we who inhabit this story address with integrity the sort of toxic polarization that we find in our current cultural context?

That's the topic of part 3 of this essay. Stay tuned.

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