

THE BIBLICAL STORY FOR EVERYONE

The Bible as a meta-narrative

The importance of Narratives (Stories) for our lives

Stories help give us a sense of place. They stir our imaginations and help us to experience love, betrayal, hatred, and compassion that might be otherwise foreign. They prepare us for experiences like love, or help us process things like sorrow and suffering. The way that we understand our lives, our relationships, our past and future is all tied up in story. Your past is not only a set of facts. It's also a story you tell... your future, too, is a story, but it isn't built upon memory. It's a story of anticipation, of hopes or fears that seem imminent and likely.¹

We actually live our lives in terms of stories. Everyone has at least two key, interrelated stories:

1. Personal, individual stories

This story is not just 'history', it shapes who we are, how we think, and how we live.

2. Larger, universal stories ('worldviews' or 'meta-narratives')

Whether we are conscious of it or not, these stories have a profound effect on our lives. For example, people who have different meta-narratives will have different responses to various 'controversial' topics.

I would argue that the Bible itself is a meta-narrative which offers a way of making sense of the world.

An Overview of the Biblical Narrative

Bartholomew and Goheen (and others) suggest that it is possible to think of the biblical narrative in terms of a dramatic play that consists of six distinct acts. The form or pattern this story takes is quite common in (western) story telling.



¹ Mike Cosper, *The Stories We Tell*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2014), 27-28.

THE BIBLICAL STORY FOR EVERYONE

Act One (Genesis 1-2): Creation

- Provides us with the essential background information
- There is a God who sovereignly creates the universe and has a purpose for his people

Act Two (Genesis 3-11): Rebellion

- Introduces the conflict/crisis that will require resolution throughout the story
- Although created by God, humans turn their back on their maker and go their own way

Act Three (Genesis 12-Malachi): Promise

- This is where the main action of the drama takes place
- The beginning of God's plan to deal with the problem of sin is the story of Israel
- The people called to be part of the solution are human and thus part of the problem, so things get fairly messy

Act Four (Matthew-John): Redemption

- The climax and turning point of the story
- It is the incarnation, life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus which leads to the defeat of evil, and resolves the problems created by human sin and disobedience

Act Five (Acts-Revelation 20): Mission

- The resolution, in which the implications of the climactic act are worked out for all the characters who have been involved in the drama
- The story of the church from its beginnings right through to today
- This is where we come into the story

Act Six (Revelation 21-22): Renewal

- The stability that began the drama is restored
- The whole of creation will be renewed and restored - see Revelation 21: 3-4

Act 1: Creation

Genesis 1-2 as Introduction

In these chapters we are introduced to the key characters: God, Human Beings, Animals; and the setting: Earth.

The *central* character is God: What is God like?

- Sovereign: powerful; engaged with all He has made
- Speaking: self-revealing; relational
- Orderly: purposive, creating to fill

1.	4.
2.	5.
3.	6.

The other major characters are human beings. What are human beings like?

- Valued by God: He provides for the physical needs and invites them to participate in “rest”
- Made in God’s image: Our calling/responsibility is to ‘image God’ (verb)
- Created for relationships: with God; with all creation; with one another

Genesis 1-2 as Polemic

The Genesis creation account was written in order to critique the claims of other religions and offer an alternative view of reality e.g. Enuma Elish, Atrahasis, Enki

These other accounts almost all include:

- Many gods
- Theogonies (how the gods came to be)
- Supernatural elements in creation e.g. sun, moon
- Creation by struggle, chaos
- Human beings as slaves to the gods

In this context, Genesis 1-2 is counter cultural and subversive

- Yahweh is the Creator
- Yahweh is, before creation
- Sun, moon, stars etc. are created by Yahweh
- Yahweh creates by his Word and with purpose
- Humans are valued and have purpose

The text offers an alternative view of reality. Not just which narratives will you choose to believe, but which narratives will you choose to live in?

THE BIBLICAL STORY FOR EVERYONE

Genesis 1-2 as Doxology

The account was written in order to call forth worship and praise of Yahweh, creator of heaven and earth. The desired response is not primarily understanding, but worship.

- Genesis 1 calls the reader to fall on their knees before a sovereign, creative, powerful God.
- Genesis 2 calls the reader to embrace a loving, giving, relational God.

As Act 1 in the whole biblical narrative, Genesis 1-2 functions to:

- Set the scene for the whole story
- Introduce the stability that the central conflict (Act 2) will threaten/undermine
- Provide the foundation for the promise (Act 3) to call for a return to
- Fix the parameters that the climax (Act 4) will work within
- Imagine the scope in which the implications/mission (Act 5) will work out
- Provide a baseline that the ending (Act 6) will exceed

Act 2: Rebellion

Many great stories are driven by a key problem or crisis that requires resolution. The key problem of the biblical narrative is the marring of God's good creation by the entrance of sin into the world and its terrible consequences.

- The human beings set themselves up in the place of God
- This desire for autonomy is a form of idolatry
- Essentially, idolatry involves putting anything in creation, including ourselves, in the place of God

The consequences of sin

Four relationships are distorted

1. God-humans
2. Within the human (intrapersonal)
3. Human-human (interpersonal)
4. Human-created order (see 8:19-23)

The rest of the biblical narrative is about God's mission to restore the relationships which have been distorted by human sin. This has contemporary implications for our ministry and the restoration of all kinds of broken relationships.

Satan

Many great stories have an antagonist. Key questions: what do we know about Satan *for sure*? And what is just speculation and guesswork?

THE BIBLICAL STORY FOR EVERYONE

What we can be sure about:

- Satan exists
- His primary *modus operandi* includes temptation, accusation and deception
- In the present, Satan possesses a certain degree of power over the world
- Satan is defeated. NB: *We do not defeat Satan*

What we can't be sure about: Satan's origins

- Three key texts: Isaiah 14: 12-14; Ezek 28: 12-17 and Luke 10: 17-18
- The biblical text simply takes his existence as a given but doesn't seek to explain this

Questions for discussion

What stood out to you from the session?

What is the importance of story in getting to know someone? How is story better than a list of "facts"?

Does the world have a story? What different stories are told about the world? What is the basic story of the world told by typical members of modern Western secular culture?

The Bible claims to be the *true* grand story of the world and of our lives. Do you agree? What are the implications for how we live if this is true?

How have you heard Genesis 1 and 2 talked about? What do you think of the idea that these chapters function as introduction, polemic, doxology?

Where do you see the brokenness of the four relationships play out in your own life and in the world around you?

What questions are you still pondering

Resources for further study

This series of lectures are based on the work of Bartholomew and Goheen in their book, *The Drama of Scripture*. This is a great starting place for anyone wanting a little more information.

For those wanting a deeper dive:

The Bible Project videos and podcasts on Ancient Cosmology, Sabbath, Image of God, Tree of Life and the video: Genesis 1 Visual Commentary.

John Walton's books *The Lost World of Genesis 1*, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*.